

# CATCHING BABIES

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A NOVEL BY J.D. KLEINKE



From the author of *Bleeding Edge* and  
*Oxymorons: The Myth of a US Health Care System*

Web excerpt of *Catching Babies* © J.D. Kleinke 2010



# SCARS

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JAY LEANED DOWN to study the sutures he had made across the new mother's abdomen, moving in close enough to smell her blood. He stiffened up and started another stitch, matching the yank and give of muscle and fat just below the skin on either side of his incision, so her wound would heal together and not against itself. He had been awake and working on his feet for most of the past 30 hours, and had every excuse to sew her shut quickly, but as his blood-soaked fingers and the curved suturing needle did their familiar dance back and forth across the cesarean-section wound, Jay imagined Adrianna Gomez years from now, the scar scowling at her from just above her thicket of pubic hair, she in turn scowling at her noisy little boy with a sudden bitterness.

A clatter of metal instruments into a basin, and Jay was jolted back to the weave and pull of his gloved hands on her glistening abdomen. Another standing, functioning sleep, his fingers robot digits in their latex, viewed from a distant corner of the operating room, a waking dream, but one with a living baby and bright red blood.

"Still doing okay, Ms. Gomez?" Jay asked her, his tired voice as disembodied as his hands had just been.

"*Estoy bien,*" she said, her large black eyes cloudy with exhaustion and sedative. Her mix of English and Spanish sounded punch-drunk from the ordeal of sudden labor, and from the stress of fighting back contractions on a crowded bus ride from work to the University Hospital for an emergency version of the c-section scheduled for the following Monday.

Jay blinked, cocked his head sideways and brushed his masked chin across his shoulder, blinked again and went back to work. His fingers reached the end of the incision, and he tied off the last suture with three tiny loops, rather than the single large one everyone but Katie used, knowing this is where the patient's scar would be thickest.

Jay had delivered 63 babies by c-section since his residency in obstetrics and gynecology had begun almost four years ago, counting the large, glistening boy he had just lifted out of Adrianna Gomez. Hers had been a breech, his tiny feet burrowed into the sides of her uterus, as if he had been trying to crawl further up into his mother instead of falling down into the world. Twenty-six of the others

Jay had delivered with scalpel and scissors instead of his hands had been twins, all of them clinging to each other in the sudden, garish light of the operating room; a dozen he had pulled out from under tides of fat inside obese women he had to wrestle open; a dozen more had been breeches like Ms. Gomez' new son; and seven he had lifted gingerly out of HIV-positive women, whose glowering blood seemed to sneer and snarl at him. Every time, after making a delicate slice across the bottom of the mother's uterus, there was the shock of the baby, folded into a perfect ball and gleaming with amniotic fluid, like an astronaut tucked into a space capsule designed perfectly for the harrowing journey that ended in blood, light, noise, and a stranger's hands. And always, when Jay unfolded the baby from the inside of its mother, there was that bloody rim of flesh, ragged and slack with the baby gone, pouting, angry. He was always careful as he closed a mother's wound, no matter how exhausted he was or how many other women were waiting for him down the hall, remembering once again the fury in his own mother's voice when he was a boy, as she showed him her own c-section scar, thick and ugly as old rope running from her navel down into her pants.

*Look what they did to my body to get you out*, she would scream at him, her eyes flaring and jaw clenched. *They ruined me forever!*

Jay had stumbled onto this surreal memory during his intern year, the night of his very first c-section. In the three years since, between the all-night howls of laboring women in rooms a hundred feet away and bloody messes in the emergency room four floors down,, Jay had spent hundreds of nights alone in the six-by-ten-foot prison cell of his call room, stumbling onto other fragments from his early childhood, trying to talk himself past each, and into a dreamless sleep. Most of his fellow OB/GYN residents, especially his fiancé Tracy, could turn sleep on and off as easily as flipping the switch to the call room light; Jay, like Rebekah and Katie and a handful of the others, could not. He could not sleep, he could not relax, he could only fidget and fantasize about life after residency with Tracy, or about baseball, the only two things that could take his mind off the two things that occupied him the rest of the time: the fates of the 286 babies he had delivered into a world most of their mothers were ill-equipped to navigate; and his own mother, with her lupus and psychosis, and how she might be holding up. He would let out a long sigh, crawl out of bed and flip on the light; then he would go check all his patients again, wander the halls and read the bulletin boards, and then go back to the call room, where he would spend the night looking through medical journals, watching the day's sports

highlights one more time, searching for the re-broadcast of an earlier baseball game, leaving voice mails for med school friends on the west coast.

Jay finished the suturing and pulled off his bloody gloves. “Good job, Ms. Gomez,” he said, bending over her and placing the exposed palm of his hand along her sweat-glistened forehead. “You have a beautiful new—”

His pager erupted into a shrill, steady, “Beep, beep, beep.”

Jay reached around and flicked it off, then stood, looked down and saw the four-digit extension for the gynecology unit, followed by a “\*-9-1-1.”

“I have to go now, Ms. Gomez,” Jay said, backing away from the table and slipping out of his bloody surgical gown. “But I’ll be back to check on you later.”

“Thank you, Doctor *Hay*,” she struggled to look up and say, but he was already gone.

Out in the scrub room, Jay took off his mask and surgical cap, washed his hands carefully, then splashed water over his face and ran his wet hands through a headful of thick black hair that grew over his ears and down his neck. He could never find time to cut it, or so he told his fiancé, Tracy; but he actually liked his hair long. At 34, he was four years older than every other resident except Dan and Jen who, like Jay, had to work their way through college. Long hair made him feel, if not look, like the fun young guy he had never once had the chance to be.

Jay pulled his white labcoat over his green scrubs as he hurried down the hall to the gynecology unit’s nursing station. He was tall and wiry and mostly legs, like one of the two kinds of big league pitchers, he liked to think—the unshakable gawky looking ones he admired as much as he did the better surgeons who had trained him these past four years. But his eyes were not hard and steely like any of those men on the pitching mound or in the OR; his were large and brown and warm, set deep in a calm face that, along with the unruly hair, made him look more social worker, or hippie preacher, or poetry teacher than the doctor he was becoming. He always looked straight into a patient’s eyes, his own wet and warm with empathy, and his patients would look away quickly but tell him everything. To many, he was like their best friend’s older brother, the quiet one they could talk to about their most intimate problems because he was somehow familiar, and trustworthy, and would not judge them. At the same time, there was still the air of the would-be baseball player about him, a calm masculine power that made his patients feel safe, looked after, protected, even as he described the potential disasters looming up within their

bodies, named the nightmares inside of them, and explained how they would deal with them together.

Jay swept around the corner and saw Katie Branson at the counter of the nurse's station, a phone propped under her chin, writing furiously into a chart propped next to a basket of plastic colored eggs and Easter candy. Katie's lab coat hung off a wiry frame—all bone and sinew and barely perceptible curves, her long, delicate swan's neck rising from a collarbone sticking out across the v-neck of her baggy green scrubs, her body cut from too much work and exercise, and too little food and sleep.

She saw Jay approach, nodded, and gave him a nervous wince of a smile, still listening and writing. Her face, framed by strawberry blond hair pulled into a tight little ponytail, twitched with its usual energy, her bright blue-gray eyes searching for the image of what she was hearing. An attending OB/GYN only three years out of her own residency, Katie was already the assistant chief of the obstetrics department, and one of Jay's favorite teachers. Jay pushed his hands into the pockets of his labcoat and studied her, wondering how bad the emergency might be: she was shifting from foot to foot and pursing her lips, but she was always like that, more energy than mass, a gathering of light that was a laser beam in the OR or soft incandescence at a patient's bedside.

"Got it, thanks, take care," she said in a blur, and hung up the phone. "A little complication," she said, still writing, but addressing her words to Jay. "Out at St. Joes. Sounds like a full uterine rupture after a successful VBAC, coming in by ambulance." She glanced up quickly, scanned his face, then looked back at the chart.

"They didn't try to open her?"

"They were afraid to," she said. "Her crit's too low and they were running out of units. They pushed everything the hospital had—her type, all their O-neg, PLs, the works— and packed her for the ride in."

"Shit." Jay took a look at the chart. "She still bleeding?"

Katie's eyes darted across the chart, narrowing with worry. "Not when they left. But that was half an hour ago. And the doc and EMT in the ambulance are afraid she's about to bleed through the packing again."

"But they'll have her here in a couple minutes."

Katie looked up and studied his bloodshot eyes. "When did you get here?"

"Yesterday morning," he sighed, feeling his tiredness again. "I was about to leave."

"We've been having a major ice storm since noon. The Interstate is shut down, except for the cops and this lady's ambulance."

“So they can’t fly out for her either.”

“No.”

“And we have to get more blood out to her.”

“Yes,” Katie said, studying his face, the charcoal-colored smudges under his eyes, his sunken shoulders. “Were you up all night?” He nodded. “Damn,” she said, reaching into the crammed pocket of her labcoat for a tattered printout of the OB/GYN residents’ call schedule for the month of April. “Rebekah and I are in-house tonight. We’ve got three in labor, and two consults backed up in the ER. Do you know who’s on back-up tonight?”

“Tracy is,” Jay said. He remembered the terrible fight they had had a few nights earlier when Tracy came home, angry and exhausted, from her own sleepless call night and full post-call day in the OR. She was in the middle of her gyn-onck, or gynecological oncology, rotation, an emotionally grueling six weeks on the cancer ward when the residents worked their normal nightly call schedule, while putting in twelve-hour days helping to make desperately sick women even sicker with scalpels, radiation, and poison. “But she’s having a shitty week.”

“How shitty?”

“Gyn-onck shitty.”

“Oh.”

Jay looked at the clock over by the nurse’s station—7:08 pm. “I’ll go,” he sighed.

Katie looked hard into his glassy, reddened eyes. “You sure?”

“Sure, I’m sure,” he said, rubbing his eyes and straightening his back.

Her eyes went blank as she ran through a calculation that was all variables and no hard numbers, and finally said, “Okay, good. The ambulance is ready to roll with 20 units. See if you can clamp her cervix.” She bit her lower lip. “If she has any left.”

“What else do I need?” he asked as his right hand unconsciously checked the stethoscope in the pocket of his labcoat.

“I don’t know,” Katie sighed. “There isn’t exactly a protocol for this.”

“I guess not.” He headed toward the elevator and pushed the button.

“You sure you can do this?” Katie called over to him. “After thirty hours on?”

“Sure,” he said, taking a deep breath, forcing himself to stand up straighter and squeezing out a half-smile. “Who do you think taught me how?”

Five minutes later, Jay was hanging onto the lurching bench in the back of an ambulance as it hurried out of the city on an Interstate glazed with ice and snow. His knees gripped a cooler heavy with bags bulging with blood. The blast of cold air and sleet between the doors of the ER and the back of the ambulance had shot him full of icy electricity, and he shuddered as he twisted his arms into the fireman's jacket someone had thrown over his labcoat. A jumble of diagrams, data, and lecture notes filled his head, and he remembered a few shards of text from a case report on a nearly fatal uterine rupture case from his third year of med school. A uterine rupture, or tear in the uterus, is a rare but dangerous complication of childbirth. Most occur among women who have VBACs, or vaginal births after previous c-sections. The ruptures can be minor, and involve small amounts of bleeding that can be repaired easily with needle and suture; they can be serious but still fixable with a radiological procedure to stop the bleeding and save the uterus; or they can be catastrophic, the uterus disintegrating into a mass of tissue and blood, requiring an emergency hysterectomy to save the mother's life. Jay could scarcely imagine how bad this one had to be if an ambulance loaded with blood units was racing toward another ambulance on a highway shut down with winter weather.

The emergency medical technician riding shotgun up front was talking on shortwave with the EMTs in the ambulance headed toward them, the radio turned all the way up so Jay could hear in the back. The woman's blood pressure had plummeted to the point where they could not measure it. She had been unconscious for the past ninety minutes.

The landscape of Jay's exhaustion was flooded with adrenaline. His mind's eye raced around the gray inner cavern of a uterus, a place he had ventured a thousand times with light, instrument, and finger. He saw the high narrow walls and widened back end of the uterus, running with blood, and the shreds and tears that must be causing the patient's bleeding, and the arteries that fed the tears, each wrapped around ligaments like red, pulsating vines.

"I see you, University," squawked the radio.

Jay felt the ambulance grab its brakes and skid, then stop with a lurch. The back door flew open and Jay grabbed the cooler and jumped down into a stinging burst of sleet and snow. Strobes of red and blue lights from two ambulances and a police car colored the pelting sleet. Jay started toward the other ambulance, icy air slapping at his face and streaming through the fireman's coat, filling his scrubs. He climbed in alongside the gurney and saw a ghostly white woman in

her late 20s, with long brown hair matted to the side of her face. The shadow of a dark red stain soaked through the blanket covering her midsection.

The ambulance lurched toward the city, and Jay fell onto the bench opposite an EMT, a wide-eyed skinny guy about his own age, and the patient's doctor, a plump white woman in her early 40s. She looked as tired as Jay felt.

"Joan Schmidt," she said without taking her eyes off the patient, her voice peppered with urgency and anguish. "Family practice in Middlefield."

"Jay Schwartz, fourth-year OB at the Uni," he said as he reached into the cooler and pulled out two units of blood. "She's Type B, right?"

"What's left of her, yes," Joan grimaced, standing and grabbing the units. She fought the lurching of the ambulance, hanging the blood from hooks on the ceiling and connecting the first to a catheter running into the patient's arm. "Come on, vein," she said as she stood and squeezed the unit through the open IV.

Jay studied the patient's face: it was the color of cold gray marble, her eyes motionless, her lips blue. He looked up and saw the EMT studying his own face.

The first unit of blood ran into the patient in less than a minute, and Joan switched to the other.

"Pressure!" she barked at the EMT.

The ambulance lurched forward, almost throwing Jay from the bench. He forced himself upright and watched the EMT pump up the pressure cuff. He looked back at Joan, who was forcing the rest of the second unit into the IV, and he pulled a third unit out of the cooler.

"Pressure's back up," the EMT said, listening to the patient's blood pressure through a stethoscope. "80 over palp."

"Christ," Joan muttered. "Never thought I'd *want* to hear '80 over palp.'" She took the third unit from Jay and hung it from the pole, allowing it to run into the patient at full volume, but without additional manual pressure.

"So," she said, turning to Jay. "You want to—uh—see if you can do anything else for her?"

"Yes," he said, standing up and moving down to the patient's feet.

He braced himself against the rocking of the ambulance, pulled off the firefighter's coat, and fished a pair of latex gloves out of his labcoat pocket. He knelt at the end of the gurney, his back against the icy door of the lurching ambulance, and took a deep breath.

"Can you swing that light down here?" he asked the EMT, pointing at a retractable light attached to the ceiling. "Uh—"

“Mike Romano,” the EMT said. “You want it this way?” he pointed with the light.

“Yeah, thanks,” Jay said as Mike positioned the light to shine back upward along the patient.

Joan carefully rolled the blanket away from the bottom half of the patient; it looked like a bomb had exploded in her lap. A pool of blackening blood covered her entire pelvic area, spreading upward onto her abdomen and down onto her thighs. A large gauze dressing, protruding from a vulva swollen from a delivery two hours earlier, was crimson wet with fresh new blood and dripping.

“Shit!” Joan said. “She started bleeding again.”

“How many times have you packed her since the bleeding first started?” Jay asked.

“Three.”

“Okay then. Give me a fresh one,” he said to Mike. “The biggest wound dressing you have.” He looked up at Joan. “The gory details?”

“VBAC successful after seven hours’ labor, epidural, with a second-degree tear,” Joan rattled off the facts of the case, her voice tense, officious, almost angry. “The baby was fine. I was tractioning the placenta when the goddamn hemorrhage started, and it just kept coming. We pushed fifteen units of B, platelets and cryo, everything we had inhouse, and then four more O-neg.”

Jay stared at the dressing, trying to visualize what lay beyond. “Check for origins?”

“All uterus. Cervix in tact, no vaginal lacerations.”

“Good. I guess,” Jay said, wondering if her uterus had ruptured all the way through. “Think her serosa’s in tact?”

“I don’t know.”

“Baby descended without a problem?”

“Yes.”

Jay thought about it a few seconds. If the uterus had ruptured all the way through, its contractions would have pushed the baby out into the woman’s abdomen, not down the birth canal.

“I called in my back-up OB, but before he could get in, her crit and pressure were crashing. We would have opened her up there and done a hyst. But the blood—” Joan’s voice faltered, “it just kept coming.”

“Any more sedation?”

“No, just the epidural,” Joan said, looking at her watch. “She’s been unconscious for the past 100 minutes.”

“What’s her name?”

“Jill MacGregor.”

“Okay then,” Jay said, taking another deep breath. “You have suction on board, right?”

“Yes,” Joan answered, grabbing the plastic tube leading out of a port in the ambulance wall and joining him at the end of the gurney.

Jay reached into his labcoat and took out a speculum, a device used to hold the vagina open for exams and procedures. He tore off its plastic wrapping, and placed it on the sheet between the patient’s legs. From the same pocket he pulled out a vascular clamp, a large one with a wide flat mouth designed to hold aortas and other major blood vessels shut during surgery.

“Okay Jill,” he said, slowly pushing her ankles back, bending her knees and opening her legs.

“What are you thinking?” Joan asked.

“If her uterus didn’t rupture all the way through, we can stop the bleeding by clamping off her cervix,” Jay said. “If the uterus fills up with enough blood to distend, it might tamponade some of the rupture.”

*“If her uterus didn’t rupture all the way through.”*

“Yes.”

She stared at him, unconvinced. Mike looked from one to the other, wide-eyed.

“Stopping her bleeding is the priority,” Jay said. “I read a case report on it.”

*“A case report? From when?”*

“From a long time ago,” he sighed, looking up from Jill. “You have anything better?” he asked, wishing she did and knowing she did not.

Joan grimaced and let out a long breath. “You’re the one training for this.”

“No one trains for this,” he said, gently pushing Jill’s knees further up and outward. “Each of you hold a leg for me, back this far, and no farther.”

Jay ducked down into position, readying the speculum with his gloved left hand. He paused, his hands ready, for the adrenalinized moment that was only a moment but stretched off to eternity, before diving into a woman’s bleeding and broken body, a pause for courage against the terrifying recognition of the strangeness of what he was about to do. He cocked his head sideways and brushed his whisker-stubbed chin across his shoulder, and then, with his right hand, he carefully removed the gauze.

As it pulled free, a whelp of blood shot out of Jill, splattering the gurney and the front of Jay’s lab coat and scrubs.

“Okay suction,” he said, ignoring the blood trickling down the inside of his scrubs, his voice eerily steady as he pushed the speculum into the river of blood and grabbed the suction from Joan.

Through the gush of blood, he suctioned out Jill's vagina, moving upstream in a circular motion, looking for any sign of whatever cervix she had left after the delivery and rupture.

Mike looked up at him. "Her pressure's dropping."

"Come on," Jay coaxed, out of his trance. The blood rushed out of her as fast as he could suction it.

"No pressure."

Then her cervix emerged, a loose, puckered mouth blurting out a bright red stream of blood.

"Pull the speculum laterally," Jay said to Joan. "I'm losing visual."

Joan leaned over Jill's abdomen and held her open with the speculum while Jay kept suctioning with his right hand. His left hand found the clamp and brought it up into her vagina. He slipped it alongside the suction tube, and locked it down over Jill's cervix.

"Got it," he said.

He took a deep breath and stared at the clamped ends of her cervical opening, adjusted the clamp, and studied it a moment longer. The cervix bulged, but held against the blood flow.

"Pressure's back! 83 over palp."

Jay breathed out and blinked. "Got it," he said again, mostly to himself, jolted from his trance. He reached for the speculum. "Here," he said, taking it from Joan with his left hand. He went back in with the suctioning tube with his right hand, suctioned out the rest of the blood, and slowly, carefully, withdrew, letting the swollen folds of Jill's vulva gather around the long bloody handles of the clamp.

"Push another unit," he said.

"You got it, Doc," Mike said, scrambling for the cooler.

A sudden burning filled Jay's eyes, and he tried to blink it away. He felt the ambulance lurch, and saw scrambling in the shadows beyond the gurney, and the terrified eyes of a middle-aged woman a few inches away, and he wondered for a fleeting moment if this was really happening or if it was just another dream, conjured up from a mix of exhaustion, anxiety, and the constant, gnawing fear that he was hurting a woman he was trying to help.

"Doc?"

Jay looked up and saw Joan and Mike staring at him, each of them holding a side of blanket aloft over Jill's pelvis.

“Keep her in this position for the rest of the ride,” Joan was asking him. “Right?”

“Yes,” he said, helping them pull the blanket up and over Jill’s propped up legs.

“She out of the woods, Doc?” Mike asked.

“If she doesn’t wake up,” Jay said, reaching over and moving the matted hair out of Jill’s eyes. “If she does—“ his voice trailed off, because he knew that they all knew she would be out of her mind with pain, and none of them dared say it aloud.

“And we can’t give her any pain meds before the OR,” Joan finished the thought.

“No,” Jay said.

They rode all the way into the city and the University Hospital in the same position, Jay and Joan on their knees across from each other, holding Jill’s legs in place. Mike scurried around them, checking her blood pressure and pulse, and changing units of blood and saline hanging from the hooks. When he was done, Mike held the radio handset up for Jay, and he rattled off for Katie back at the Uni what he had done with the clamp and Jill’s latest blood pressure and pulse, which were finally stable but still dangerously low.

“One more thing, Katie,” Jay said into the radio. He looked at the clock on the wall of the ambulance: 8:22 PM. “Can you call Tracy and let her know what’s going on? She’s probably worried about where I am. Over.”

“I already did,” Katie’s voice crackled back. “Over.”

Jay sat back against the swaying ambulance bench, still holding Jill’s right leg in place, his head swimming.

“I don’t know how this happened,” Joan said, across from him, her voice trembling for the first time. “I’ve been doing VBACs for fifteen years. This is the first time—“

“Uterine ruptures are rare,” Jay said, going back to the tables and figures he had called up in his head on the ride out. “Less than one percent of successful VBACs - and five percent on those that fail and go back to sections. The only contraindication is a classic uterine incision from the prior section.”

“I know all that,” Joan let out a long sigh.

“Was her previous a classical?” Jay asked.

“Who the hell knows,” Joan muttered. “She moved up here from Georgia, we couldn’t get the chart from her old hospital, and she didn’t have a clue about her uterine scar. I tried to explain the extra risk of not knowing the type,” she paused and looked up at Jill’s face, “but she wanted a VBAC. And her health

plan was pushing for it, of course, because it's a thousand bucks cheaper. That should have been the biggest red flag of all."

Jay noticed for the first time the deep lines in Joan's face, and the black circles under her eyes. "Were you up with her all night?" he asked.

"Yes. And I had a funny feeling about her labor. She got to second stage fast, but then stalled."

"Did you pit her?" he asked, referring to pitocin, a hormone used to speed up labor.

"Yes."

"That might have had something to do with the rupture."

Joan shrugged. "Or not."

"Or not," Jay sighed. "The studies all contradict each other."

Joan looked at him and said, with a hint of a smile, "Fourth year, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds like you're ready to practice," she said.

"How's that?"

"Sounds like you figured out that nobody knows what the hell they're doing half the time."

Back at the hospital's ambulance bay, Jay met Katie and Gina, the petite young OB nurse with big black eyes who seemed to know more about medicine than most of the residents. The chief anesthesiology resident was standing by, pushing at his wire-framed glasses. All three were dressed for surgery. Jay rattled off what had happened on the ride as the three of them rushed after Jill's gurney through the labyrinth of the hospital's corridors to an OR readied for an emergency hysterectomy.

Katie had Jill opened up in eight minutes, and her shredded uterus out in twelve more. Jay tried to watch the surgery, but the room started spinning. He had been up and working for nearly 32 hours, and the hallucinations were starting. He was standing next to the table, watching Katie's thin strong hands tie off each blood vessel feeding what had been Jill's uterus, and the vessels started turning into little mouths, and Katie's blood-streaked fingers turned into little people, and the little mouths started yelling at the people to stop hurting them, and Jay was jolted awake when he heard his name.

"Go, already!" Katie said to him through her mask. "Go home and get some sleep, Jay. You're doing it again."

Jay did not move; he was fixated on the little mouths and people, mutating from waking dream back into blood-glistening tissues and Katie's gloved fingers.

The fingers paused and Katie looked up at him, smiling through her mask. "She's going to be fine."

"Sorry," Jay said, backing away from the table and pulling off his surgical gown. "You're right, I'm toast."

"And just for the record," Katie said, her blue eyes fixed on her hands as they knitted their way through Jill's open abdomen. "Clamping her cervix probably saved her life. Good work, Doctor."



# ICESTORMS

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**A**PRIL, JAY THOUGHT, zipping his coat and crossing the empty, snow-covered street in front of the University Hospital. The storm had blown over, but the city was still quiet. The streetlights buzzed with warmth in the midnight hush. With the lingering adrenaline from the ambulance mixed into his hallucinatory exhaustion, Jay walked toward the loft apartment he rented with Tracy in the building around the corner from the Uni where half their class lived, remembering a similar walk seven years earlier. It had been his first surgical rotation of med school, and he had scrubbed in on the heart transplant of a woman he remembered so well he could round on her today: Pam Carrollton, 43, kindergarten teacher, two children aged 16 and nine, congenital cardiac hypertrophy since 39, bed-ridden 17 months. Jay had been with her all day and most of the night of the surgery, going back and forth between the OR and the waiting room with the surgical residents. He had helped comfort her parents, brothers, uncles, aunts and son, whom he had gotten to know during the month; and he had stood next to the table and held one of Pam's lungs aside with a retractor while the surgeons cut out her enormous, flaccid heart and stitched in a new one half its size. But Pam died anyway. Right there on the table, in front of all those brilliant people, with all their brilliant technology. She was the first patient he had wept for since his clinical rotations had started eight months earlier. When he got home, he kept crying into the lap of his then-wife Elaine, until he fell asleep; and when he woke up several hours later, Elaine was still there, Pam Carrollton was still gone, and he was still crying.

Jay turned the corner to his and Tracy's building. Pam Carrollton had died seven long years ago, at the other end of a lifetime of joys and sorrows in half a dozen hospitals. Since then, he had seen and smelled death a thousand times; had chased it down with needle and blade; had used electricity and radiation against the malignancies that rage inside the bodies of women; had once lifted death from a mother's womb in the form of a baby whose immune system had gone to war against the mother's and lost. But Pam Carrollton had prepared him for all of it, because she had taught him that they were fighting only for time, and sometimes they lost, and when they did, it was alright to cry. Elaine, his wife through most of college, all of med school, and the start of residency,

had also taught him it was alright. She was a nurse and knew how to let him cry, brood, and rage, the way she had known how to let patients and families and other doctors cry, brood, and rage; and when the worst of it had passed, she knew exactly how to hold him.

Jay stumbled up to his building, careful not to slip on the icy sidewalk, and fumbled for his keys. Elaine was out of nursing now, hard as it was to imagine. She was married again, with a new baby, according to the little note she had tucked into the Christmas card she sent Jay last year. And now Jay was getting married again too, this coming summer to Tracy, after they finished the ordeal of their residency. An ordeal, yes, Jay thought, but as nights like this had proven, there was still elation, and power, and mystery in all of it. Tonight, he had saved a woman's life. He had been strong, and courageous, and useful; he had been all those things, one more time, that his father had never been, not once. And now, with his head spinning as much with exultation as exhaustion, he was going home to Tracy, a woman as unlike his mother as he was unlike his father.

When Jay got up to their loft, he found Tracy by the washing machine, lifting a wrinkled pair of scrubs from the dryer and slipping them on. She shot him a hot, sharp dart of a look, and brushed by into the living room section of their loft.

"What's up?" he asked, following her and crumpling onto the old couch at one end of the big, mostly empty space. They hadn't had any time or urge to decorate since moving in together the summer before; the apartment was just someplace to sleep, eat, shower, and, if their call schedules accidentally coincided, have sex, in between days, nights, and weeks on end at the hospital a few blocks away. The open floor plan didn't encourage much decorating, especially because they didn't have any money to decorate with.. Voices bounced around in the space like an empty theater, and they would be moving out when residency finished anyway.

"I have to head in," she said, her voice tinged with anger. "They're getting slammed."

"Yeah, I know," he said, twisting himself free of his overcoat.

He stood and watched her tie the bottoms of her scrubs, pulling the knot too tight, frowning down at it, and re-tying it. Even when she was angry with him, which was more frequent these days, Tracy glowed with a raw sensuality accentuated by her tomboy disinterest in her own appearance. She had pale, freckled skin unadorned by any make-up, high small breasts, and a mass of unkempt brown hair. Her belly bulged slightly over the drawstring of her scrubs,

thrust outward by a long curving lower back that flared into the sway hips of a woman unashamed of her womanhood. Jay knew that patients felt comfortable with Tracy because she looked comfortable with herself, her scrubs hanging on her hips the way old sweatpants hung on their own hips during their days off.

“Wild night, huh,” Tracy said, still not looking at him.

“Yeah.”

She pulled on her overstuffed labcoat, then walked into the kitchen area, opened the fridge, closed it again. Jay crawled to his feet, nearly falling over from the dizziness, and squirmed out of his own labcoat and scrubs. They were crusted and stiff from the gush of Jill’s blood.

Tracy poured coffee into a travel mug for her midnight walk to the hospital.

“A little too wild,” he said, shivering in the cold loft. He walked over toward their bedroom area, fished a sweatshirt from the pile of dirty laundry along one wall, tossed the bloody scrubs onto the same pile, and pulled the comforter off their unmade bed. “You’re not going to believe what—”

“I don’t have to believe,” she cut him off from the other end of the loft, looking at him for the first time. Her eyes were green or gray or blue, depending on the light in the room; and when she turned her head, the color changed. In the center of her eyes, however, were small black irises, hard dots that did not change. They stared out at the world, from within the soft changing colors of her pupils, always from far away, farthest of all when she got angry. “Katie called and told me about the hairball with the rupture.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, walking back to the couch, his thoughts gone, his mind turned to mush. “It was a—”

“So hairball,” she cut him off “you thought you’d snake it from me, huh?”

Jay was snapped awake. “What?”

“I’m on backup call. I should have gone out with those units for that lady, not you.”

“I thought you could use the night off,” he said, collapsing onto the couch. “You’re in the middle of gyn-onck, for Christ’s sake! I thought I was doing you a favor.”

“Ho-ney,” she said with the scolding tone he resented more than anything else she ever said or did. “Don’t give me that.”

“But—”

“I have to go,” she said, coming back out from the kitchen area, pulling her winter coat over her labcoat.

Jay rubbed his eyes. “No, wait a minute. I need you to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“That I was trying to cut you a break.”

She picked up her coffee and started for the door.

“Ask Katie,” he said. “I was—”

“All I understand,” she said, opening the door, “is that you snaked a bitchin’ case from me.”

And she was gone.

Jay sat back on the couch, his head hot and swimming, wondering if he had heard Tracy right. Did that just really happen, or was it like the little mouths and Katie’s fingers? He wrapped himself in the comforter and heard, off on the horizon, the rise and fall and rise again of an ambulance siren, as his body sank into the bottomlessness of the couch.

A cell phone rang, and the loft was flooded with daylight. Jay heard the ringing from the bottom of an ocean of exhausted sleep. But before he could swim to the surface and answer, the phone stopped ringing and Jay sank back to the bottom of the ocean.