

Holding Back

The patient, like all patients, was a living biohazard; and so the staff were well protected. No one approached without scrubs, gloves, cap, and mask. These were the knight's armor of the operating room, a shield against microorganismal tyranny; and if the other surgeons even bothered to notice them after years of habituation, it was probably with some degree of appreciation.

To Dr. Kevin Richmond, they were suffocating.

The operating room was all white tile, cold metal, and mint-green draping. Its centerpiece was the patient, a man in his forties, already under anesthesia. They had lashed him to the table on his side and draped him, so that nothing was visible but his head and the square of flesh that Richmond was about to cut into. Surgeons and scrub nurses hovered around the table—scrubbed in, sterile, and nearly indistinguishable from one another.

Richmond was on the wrong side of the table; he couldn't see the man's face. He wished that he could. It was always easier that way.

Dr. Mallory was assisting. Richmond liked her, admired her effortless honesty and the way she stood out in a crowd. It always bothered him to see her in scrubs, with her maroon-dyed curls concealed by her cap.

She gave him a thumbs up. It was time to begin the surgery. Richmond swore to himself, as he always did, that his patient would survive.

"Electrocautery," he said, and the tool materialized in his hand. He breathed in, slowly, and breathed out again. *Pull yourself together.*

Everyone in Richmond's life had asked him, at one time or another, why he'd chosen to become a surgeon. He always gave the answers he thought they expected: "I wanted to make a difference." "I wanted to save lives." "I felt it was my calling." All of that was true.

What he didn't tell them was that it was *also* because of the moment of the incision. To see the skin splitting, to slice through layers of fat and muscle, to breach the body's defenses and expose the slick insides—this thrilled him in a way that made him sick with shame. He didn't tell people this at hospital functions; he didn't tell his rare dates. He'd never told anyone.

He watched his hands as the electrocautery burned through flesh. They were steady—they always were—but the pounding of his heart made him feel as if they should be shaking. Dr. Mallory reached in with the suction tip, clearing away the blood that welled up in the wound, and Richmond's gratitude mingled with resentment.

Layers of tissue separated cleanly beneath his skilled hands. The electrocautery was clean, precise. He tried not to imagine what it would be like to grab the scalpel from the mayo stand, to bring it down and gouge—

To his relief, Mallory interrupted his thoughts. "So, Kevin, when do you think you'll start training with the laparoscope?"

"I don't know," he said, handing the electrocautery to one of the nurses. "I'm concerned about the transition period. I don't want to lose a patient because I'm still getting familiar with the equipment."

The anesthesiologist cleared her throat.

"Why am I not surprised that you're anxious about it?" Mallory said, her eyes crinkling with a smile. She inserted a retractor into the incision, pulling back the marbled yellow fat to expose the kidney.

“You make a valid point, but it's better for the patients. The smaller incision means a faster recovery, less danger of hemorrhage...”

“I, er...” He examined the kidney as he crafted his reply. It was important to minimize damage to the healthy tissue of the organ. He couldn't hack into it, couldn't carve out meaty chunks and crush them with his fingertips, couldn't tear off his mask and—He forced himself to refocus. “I suppose if you look at it that way, it's for the best.”

But not for me, he thought. It would be one more barrier between him and his patient's insides, one more layer to his daily self-denial.

“They'll probably start requiring the course soon any—”

The anesthesiologist harrumphed again, and Mallory rolled her eyes. “Lighten up, Candice.”

Richmond could picture Dr. Harper's lips pursing behind her mask. “I have very little margin for error here,” she said, “and your chatter is distracting. I'd appreciate it if you would be more considerate.”

As Richmond clamped the blood vessels that fed the kidney, his teeth clenched. *Why is she always like this? Is she TRYING to break me?* The rational part of him knew that it wasn't fair to blame her. She had no way of knowing how badly he needed these distractions. She had no way of knowing what he might do, if left too long alone with his thoughts.

He hated her anyway. He always had, for all his attempts to reason himself out of it. If the bleached-white walls of the OR had a human counterpart, it was Candice Harper. Cold, pragmatic, and as unyielding as the protocol to which she so strictly adhered, she was anathema to him. Since the moment he'd met her, Richmond had wanted to make her scream.

She reminded him, too, of his greatest mistake. Years ago, he'd convinced himself that he was meant to be a surgeon. All the years of guilt; all the Sundays trapped in church with head bowed and teeth clenched, waiting for lightning to strike him; all the awful moments spent sobbing into the bloody fur of broken bodies, begging for forgiveness—for a while, they had all made sense. If his violent urges had led him to medicine, if performing surgery could bring him joy, then surely that had been God's plan for him. He'd believed that, because it was easier than thinking himself evil.

Now, he knew better. To wield his scalpel according to a script, to cut along a dotted line, to endlessly repeat this mockery of violence...it tantalized, but never satisfied. It would never be enough.

He and Mallory were silent for a while, as they worked to excise the tumor with agonizing precision. Richmond longed, and despised himself for longing, to tear out the kidney whole. He wanted to widen the incision with his teeth. He wanted to plunge his forearm into the abdominal cavity, to feel the sticky heat on his bare skin.

He fought to stay calm. The thought of giving in horrified him. If he ended this man's life, he would never forgive himself. But the thought of *never* giving in, of dying with his fantasies unfulfilled, made him want to weep with frustration.

He'd never know what it was like to reach into a man's chest and grasp his beating heart. To feel it beating against his palm. To be so close—so rapturously close—to the motor of life itself.

He realized that he was clutching the scalpel with tense, rigid fingers. His eyes bulged with the effort of holding himself back. If he could only see the man's face—but there was another way.

"Uh...Mallory," he said, trying to sound casual despite the tightness in his throat. "What's this guy's name? Do you remember?"

"Hmm." Her eyes flicked to the ceiling. "I want to say...Stuart something?"

“Stuart Evans,” said Harper, from her post beside the man’s head.

One of the scrub nurses piped up, “I’ve seen him coming in for chemo. He’s got a real sweetheart of a wife. This might be the first time I’ve seen them apart.”

A name, a wife—these were things Richmond could hold on to. If he could keep thinking of his patient as a person, he might make it through the surgery.

“Forceps,” he said, and the nurse handed them over.

As he extracted the tumor from the kidney and deposited it on the tray, he wove stories in his mind. He pictured a younger Stuart Evans nervously reciting his wedding vows; Evans and his wife in an Italian restaurant, laughing over drinks; Evans’ wife driving him home from the hospital, feigning cheer to keep his spirits up.

When that wasn’t enough, he pictured the wife weeping at Evans’ grave. Familiar guilt rose up like a tide, dampening the urges until he could bear them.

The excision of the tumor had left openings into the collecting duct. Richmond sewed them shut, using two pairs of forceps to manipulate the threads. There were always so many degrees of separation between the surgeon and his patient, he thought. The tools, the gloves, even the anesthesia that walled the patient off from the pain.

He wondered why he had ever thought surgery could fulfill him. What he craved was not bloodshed, but intensity.

What he wanted—he thought, as he repaired the damage his scalpel had done to the kidney—was to shock himself and his victim out of the dispassion of ordinary sensation. He wanted Evans awake, and hysterical with fear. As he explored the man’s body inside and out, he would tear off his masks,

searing away layers of dignity and self-delusion until only the raw self remained. He himself, stripped of his illusions of humanity, would bring his own inner savage into the light. Baptized in blood, incapable of deception, they would be closer than lovers.

Richmond struggled to stay rational. He *couldn't* kill the man now, he reminded himself, as he unclamped the blood vessels. There were too many people here to stop him. Mallory might hesitate, unbelieving, but Harper and the nurses would bring him down within seconds. He'd only get one strike, one wound to treasure while he fought his restraints in another white-walled room where he'd never get a second chance...

Damn it! Tears welled in his eyes, and he blinked rapidly to clear them. *Is this what I'm reduced to? It's not enough that he's a human being—I have to threaten myself with the consequences? Is that all that's holding me back?*

It sickened him to realize that even that wasn't enough. As he accepted the surgical needle, preparing to sew up the incision, his mind was already building a new scenario to accommodate for the presence of his coworkers. Evans was insensate, but *they* could act as Richmond's audience. They could feel the horror, the betrayal, the agony meant for the man on the table.

Richmond's fingers tightened around the needle holder. If he were to reach over the table and plunge it into Evans' eye—

“Something wrong, Kevin?”

—and pull it out again, what would it look like? And if he then snatched a scalpel from the mayo stand—

“Doctor? Are you all right?”

—then perhaps his coworkers would hesitate to approach. And if he ripped off his mask (he thought, his breath coming in ragged gasps), and stared into Candice Harper’s eyes and grinned—

“Are you going to sew up that incision sometime today? I don’t want to keep him under longer than I have to.”

—then surely she would scream. That dry, wrinkled face would twist in horror; that infuriating impassiveness would finally break. It would be magnificent. It would be his greatest victory. It would be worth losing his license, worth imprisonment. He took a step toward the head of the table—

“Doctor!”

The hand on Richmond’s shoulder startled him into awareness. He nearly dropped the needle holder as he spun around.

One of the scrub nurses stood there, glaring. Richmond watched him stalk away to change his glove.

“What’s the matter with you?” Mallory asked. “You’ve just been standing there staring at your hands. We’ve been trying to get your attention for three minutes. You look pale; are you all right?”

“I, um...” Richmond swallowed, trying to relieve the dryness in his throat. “It’s nothing. I’m sorry. I just haven’t been getting enough sleep lately.”

They all nodded at that, even Harper.

“You’ve got to take better care of yourself,” Mallory said, and that was that.

As he sewed up the incision—penetrating the flesh as protocol demanded, pulling the threads just so—he let the shame settle over him, seeping into his pores.

He'd come so close to losing control, so close to becoming the monster he'd fought in himself for so long. As hard as it was to admit it to himself, it was thanks to the stabilizing presence of his coworkers that Stuart Evans would leave the operating room alive. Richmond couldn't rely on his self-control any longer.

He doubted that he would make it through many more surgeries. If he could barely control himself now, then the added frustration of the laparoscopic method was sure to break him. He should turn in his resignation, he thought; he should leave the hospital and never look back. He had to make that choice now, while he could think clearly enough to have any choice at all.

He stared down at the sewn-up incision. If he left now, he'd never make another one. Surgery was torture; but the banality of a bloodless life would be intolerable.

Tomorrow he would drive to the hospital as he always did, he would scrub in as he always did, and he would walk into the operating room, knowing that it meant gambling his patient's life.

His gloves were slick with Evans' blood. When he left the OR, he would peel them off, and anyone watching would think his hands were clean. Richmond knew better.