

Chapter One

An easy mistake to make. Easy, not forgivable.

“No,” Dr. Peter Jenson said. “I am not okay. *We* are not okay. Her tumor is on the right side of her brain, and we are drilling holes in the left side of her skull.”

Nobody moved; nobody spoke. The only sounds were the beeping heart monitor and the wheezing respirator.

“I’m sorry, Doc,” Carl, the scrub tech, said. “We didn’t know. The schedule said left.”

Nancy, the circulating nurse, confirmed. “The schedule said left.” She tapped the printout hanging on the door. “In the time-out we all agreed to the left side. The procedure line on the consent form . . .” She swiped on the computer tablet until a copy appeared. “. . . says ‘temporal lobe tumor.’ We didn’t read the X-ray reports, but that’s not our job. We just brought the images up on the monitor.”

“You set the room up wrong,” Jenson said. “Look at the MRI. Here’s the tumor. Here’s the right-side marker. We’ve made the wrong incision.”

Nancy stood from her stool and put her hands on her hips. “We set the room up like it said on the OR schedule. You booked the case and filled out a consent without a specific side. We had a time-out, Doctor. If there was a mistake on the OR schedule, you had a chance to fix it.”

Archie Davis, the anesthesiologist, looked up from his place on the other side of the drapes. “Nancy’s right, Pete. *We* didn’t make the wrong incision. You did.”

The room went silent again, except for the monitors. Peter’s gut tightened and heat rushed to his face. His hands started to shake, the embarrassing visible sign of his distress. He

checked himself to keep from screaming. He wanted the mistake to be Carl's fault, Nancy's fault, Archie's fault.

Or Joe Bell's fault.

Bell, the chief of surgery, had motivation and opportunity. Bell had delayed Peter's case for an "emergency" that was really seniority privilege, snatching away an earlier surgery start time. Bell even might have engineered the delay. After all, they had argued bitterly about it, and afterward he'd seen Bell leaning over the scheduling secretary, touching her and pointing at something. He could have been getting her to mess with Peter's OR schedule.

If Bell hadn't delayed his case, Peter would not have rushed. He would have caught the error before it was too late. If he hadn't been in a hurry, if the schedule or permit had been more clear, if he'd used the navigation equipment . . . if, if, if. But the scalp lay open before him with holes drilled in the wrong side of the skull. His incision, his responsibility.

The consequences would belong to him, too. To him and one other. He deserved the consequences, but she, Megan Kaiser, the anesthetized woman beneath the drapes, did not.

Guilt tempered his rage and brought him back from his panicked paralysis. He broke the silence, erecting a wall between his feelings and his actions.

"Fine," he said, "but *we* still have the same problem we did when we walked into this room. The patient still has a brain tumor. We have done her a disservice by a wrong-side incision, but we will do her another disservice if we don't get her tumor out."

Nancy and Carl both stiffened at his use of the term *we*, but Carl reorganized his instruments. Nancy notified the control desk of the delay and filled out the reports required when things went wrong.

Peter held out his hand and asked for sutures, needle holders and forceps. His right hand shook visibly.

“You all right, Doc?” Carl stared down at his hand. “Take a break? Sit down, maybe.”

“I won’t be all right if you don’t hand me the suture right now. Let’s get this thing fixed.”

“Sure, Doc.”

Peter began closing the long scalp incision. Action tranquilized his stress. With each stitch, his hand tremor lessened, and his breathing steadied. Recriminations would come later. This was how he approached problems—by working harder, faster, longer. But he still felt this one in his gut.

The room remained quiet. He reviewed what excuses he could make for such an egregious error and came up with nothing. Everyone else in the room was no doubt distancing themselves from the mistake, and from him.

With the first incision closed, Peter removed the drapes and repositioned the body and head. He shaved the right side of her head, leaving a ridiculous haircut and regretting the reassurances he had given her about her post-op appearance.

A new skin prep and drape, another incision, another operation. This one was textbook pretty, with neat incision lines, precision bone cuts and dural openings, and a nice, clean resection of the right temporal lobe that gave the widest safe margin of resection.

The tumor was sent to pathology. Peter could have gotten a preliminary report, but he knew without the report that it was likely malignant. Today’s troubles had been enough. Tomorrow would be soon enough to receive the official report.

He wrapped her head in a turban dressing that covered both incisions. At least she looked as if everything had gone according to plan. Technically speaking, Megan’s surgery was

successful. The tumor was resected. Biopsies would lead to a definitive diagnosis and the best treatment plan. But “technically successful” was little comfort.

Archie extubated Megan and supervised her transfer to the anesthesia recovery room. “These things have a way of working out,” he said on his way out.

Peter nodded, hiding his total disagreement in silence. He stripped off his bloodied gloves and surgery gown, deposited them in a biohazard container, and washed the glove powder and sweat from his hands. The many hours of surgery were over, but recrimination and blame lay ahead. Good news travels slowly in hospitals, but bad news spreads faster than the limits of physical science. By now everyone—including the janitors just coming to work and food service workers isolated deep in the kitchen—knew he had made a mistake in the operating room. The risk manager would be waiting in the recovery room. Bell would be gloating.

Everyone knew except Megan Kaiser.

And Ellen, his wife. Peter now allowed himself to look up at the OR clock. Six p.m.—too late to meet her, too late to call. Too late for his marriage.

Megan en route to the recovery room, he sat alone on one of the steel stools in the OR, surveying the carnage: discarded drapes stuffed into biohazard containers, bloody towels on the floor, and urine collection bottles in the corner. The coppery scent of blood and acrid smell of burned flesh still hung in the air.

He put his elbows on his knees, his head in his hands. He said softly to no one, “Oh, Jesus.”