

CHAPTER 1

January 20, 2010

Dr. Jenna Reiner's Land Rover fishtailed as she turned into the parking lot of St. Augustine Hospital, nearly striking a cement post. Inside the relative safety of the parking garage, she felt relieved to have finally escaped the icy roads. Little did Jenna know, things would have been much simpler if she would have had the good fortune to slide off the road and into a ditch on her drive to the city. Unfortunately, life dealt her a different fate. She arrived safely at work and began the day that would change her life forever.

The clock on the dashboard read 7:12. Time was against Jenna. She had only eighteen minutes before her first case was scheduled to start. "Dammit," she muttered, as she rushed to gather her things from the back seat. Lassoing her stethoscope around her neck with one hand, she unloaded her briefcase and extended its handle with the other. Trudging across the parking lot, wheeling her bag behind her, she had to dodge a minefield of chunks of dirty, sloppy snow.

Entering the main lobby of the hospital, Jenna felt a rush of heated air. In order to make up for lost time, she nearly sprinted down the narrow, dimly lit hospital corridor toward the elevators. The rubber soles of her operating room clogs were wet from the grime of the parking lot. With each step against the worn, discolored tile of the hospital hallway, Jenna's shoes let out a series of high-pitched, relentless squeaks that echoed behind her.

Jenna approached the elevator, and the doors opened spontaneously. She breathed a sigh of relief, jumped in, and punched the button for the third floor. Only a few feet away, Jenna spotted a couple of patients and hospital workers advancing toward her. She knew she did not have the luxury of wasting time waiting for the stragglers, nor did she have any particular desire to be overly polite. Pretending not to see them, Jenna repeatedly pressed the close button, and the doors shut before the others could enter. The elevator reached the third floor, and she anxiously glanced down at her phone. It was

now 7:18, which allowed her barely enough time to meet her patient, prepare the operating room for anesthesia and, God willing, get one last chance to use the restroom.

She strode toward the main doors of the operating rooms and frantically swiped her identification badge in front of the sensor pad. The sensor's light switched from red to green, and the double doors swung open. Jenna bolted inside with her bag trailing in a wild track behind her. Passing the assignment board, she located her designated operating room. She grabbed a blue surgeon's cap, tied it snugly in place at the back of her head, and carefully tucked her ponytail of brown hair inside. Glancing in the mirror, she nonchalantly pulled out a few wisps of hair from in front of each ear – just enough to look more feminine, but not enough to get her in trouble for having exposed locks. Grabbing a mask, Jenna secured it over her face. Her deep, blue eyes were her only visible facial feature, and they stood out well against the cap and mask. Satisfied with her appearance, Jenna headed off to her operating room.

Upon opening the door to OR 2, Jenna was chilled by the familiar, yet always unpleasant, draft of frigid air that emanated from the operating rooms. The Talking Heads' song, "Once in a Lifetime," blared from the operating room speakers. The lyrics somehow seemed appropriately matched to her mood.

Inside the operating room, Hillary, the scrub tech, and Rebecca, the circulating nurse, were busy counting surgical equipment. Hillary, dressed in a sterile surgical gown and gloves, fingered each item as Rebecca stood by and checked them off from her count sheet. Jenna walked in to hear Hillary identifying each item on her table, "Ten ray techs, five laps, two blades, one hypo . . ."

The women paused when they saw the doctor enter the room.

Rebecca spoke over the music. "Dr. Reiner, I just wanted to let you know that Dr. Hoover's caught in traffic, and she's going to be at least thirty minutes late."

One of Jenna's biggest pet peeves was to be running behind schedule, but now that it was the surgeon's fault and not hers, she was grateful for the delay.

"Rebecca, you're a life saver," Jenna said as she smiled underneath her mask and slowed down her hectic pace. She made her way past the tray of surgical devices and toward the head of the operating room bed, where her equipment and medications were located. Clumsily, she wedged her briefcase into the only crevice not taken up by

anesthesia gear. Jenna then devoted her attention to performing her routine check of the ventilator, monitors, and equipment. Like a prima ballerina performing on stage, she floated through her routine.

During Jenna's preparations, she discreetly reached into her bag and pulled out a Diet Pepsi. Rebecca caught sight of Jenna's indiscretion and glared at her, but the doctor knew better than to take Rebecca's feigned scorn seriously. Looking Rebecca directly in the eye, mocking innocence, Jenna asked, "What?" Then, defiantly, she opened her forbidden soda. The cracking of the metal tab and the small explosive release of carbonation resonated throughout the room. Rebecca shook a disapproving finger at Jenna, but the twinkle in her eyes indicated otherwise.

Hillary winked at Jenna and said, "Hey, Doc, we've all got our vices. Your secret's safe with us."

Thrown off guard by Hillary's gesture, Jenna blushed and quickly turned her back on the scrub tech.

Rebecca and Hillary resumed their count, and Jenna was ready to check out narcotics for her first patient. She stepped in front of the Accudose machine, entered her personal identification code on the keyboard, and pressed her index finger over the red, illuminated biometric sensor. After confirming a fingerprint match, the automated machine came to life.

Grabbing the surgical schedule taped to her anesthesia machine, Jenna scanned it for her patient's name. Her first patient was Michelle Hollings, a twenty-two-year-old female scheduled for breast augmentation. Just another routine case, Jenna surmised, as she proceeded to enter the patient's name into the machine. Under Michelle Hollings' account, Jenna typed "Fentanyl" and touched the screen to select the 5 cc ampule from the menu. One of the small drawers sprang open, revealing a bin containing six glass vials filled with the drug. Jenna took one, verified the initial count, and closed the drawer.

She was about to retrieve Versed when Rebecca asked, "Hey Dr. Reiner, I'm guessing you haven't seen the patient yet?"

"No, Rebecca. I'm hoping she's young and healthy, so it shouldn't take me more than a couple of minutes."

“Well, since Hillary and I are done with our count, I’m gonna go see the patient and then hopefully score some coffee before Dr. Hoover shows up.”

“Go for it. I’ll be right behind you,” Jenna replied, without looking up.

Rebecca scurried off to meet the patient, leaving Jenna and Hillary alone in the operating room.

Jenna finished checking out a 2 cc vial of Versed. With her narcotics in hand, she exited the Accudose machine. The machine clattered as its drawers automatically locked.

For several minutes, both Hillary and Jenna quietly went about their respective tasks. The silence made Jenna uneasy. She barely knew Hillary, who was relatively new to St. Augustine. They had worked together only a few times. While Jenna had to concede the newcomer always conducted herself professionally in front of the surgeons, she also saw an element of “white trash” in the scrub tech. Hillary had bleach-blonde hair with black roots, brown eyes encircled with heavy eyeliner and mascara, and an excess of tattoos and facial piercings. However, her impression was based upon more than Hillary’s physical appearance. Hillary’s manners were unrefined. She pictured Hillary more as a bartender in a seedy watering hole than as a healthcare professional. If Jenna had to choose two words to describe the scrub tech, they would be “dark” and “scrappy.” Hillary had the air of someone who had lived a hard life.

There was something else about Hillary that put Jenna on edge. She had not noticed it until the two of them were alone. Jenna had a disconcerting feeling that Hillary was watching her. Yet, every time Jenna glanced at Hillary, the scrub tech was looking in another direction. The sense of paranoia made Jenna feel foolish. She tried to put it out of her mind as she engaged Hillary in small talk.

“So,” Jenna asked, “how do you like St. Augustine so far?”

“You know, it’s been fine. Everyone’s been pretty cool. I’m not used to your winters, though. What’s up with all the snow and ice? I was sliding all over the place on my way in. It scared the crap out of me.”

“Well, you get used to it, I guess. Where’d you come from?”

“I just moved here from California. I’ve been going through some pretty rough shit lately. I have a little girl who lives with her dad in San Francisco. I’m just trying to

get my life back on the right track so I can regain custody. I haven't seen my daughter in over a year.”

The fact that this person Jenna hardly knew would divulge such intimate, sordid details about herself left her feeling anxious to leave. She glanced up at the clock, which read 7:45.

Jenna moved over to her anesthesia cart. The cart was nothing more than a glorified, multi-drawer tool chest containing non-narcotic drugs and anesthesia supplies. She drew up the remaining intravenous medications needed for the case. Per her routine, Jenna took all of her syringes, opened the bottom drawer of her anesthesia cart, and concealed them in a bin beneath bags of intravenous fluid. After stashing her medications, Jenna took one last glance around to make sure everything was in order for the start of her first case. Satisfied, she grabbed her stethoscope and headed out of OR 2.

On her way out, Jenna told Hillary, “Well, I hate to cut things short, but I need to go see the patient. Good luck with everything, and I really hope things work out for you.”

“Thanks, Doc. Think I have enough time to break scrub and go get some coffee?”

“I can't imagine why not. My guess is we won't be bringing the patient back to the room any sooner than fifteen minutes from now.”

By the time Jenna walked out of the operating room, Hillary had already ripped off her sterile surgical gown and threw it into the waste bin.

Jenna could not shake the eerie feeling she got from being alone with Hillary. The woman conveyed a sense of danger.

Hillary was finally alone in the operating room. Unfortunately, Jenna's suspicions were correct. The scrub tech had been secretly watching Jenna as she hid her drugs and knew exactly where to look. Hillary opened the bottom drawer and lifted the bags of IV fluid. Immediately, she found what she craved. She plucked the 5 cc syringe filled with clear fluid and labeled with a blue “Fentanyl” sticker from the pile of other medications. Slipping two fingers into her breast pocket, Hillary pulled out an identically labeled syringe filled with saline. Swapping one syringe for the other, she covered the drugs, and closed the drawer of the anesthesia cart. Everything was exactly as Jenna had left it. Hillary smiled as she headed to the locker room.

CHAPTER 2

Jenna reached the preoperative patient area, which was bustling with surgeons, anesthesiologists, residents, nurses, and lab technicians, all in constant motion. Ignoring the chaos, Jenna maneuvered her way toward the dry-erase board that served as the OR schedule. She searched the board for her patient and darted off to room four. Jenna delivered three rapid knocks on the door and entered.

She grabbed Michelle Hollings' chart from the table at the foot of the bed. After confirming she had the right patient, Jenna introduced herself.

"Hi, Michelle. I'm Dr. Reiner. I'm going to be your anesthesiologist for your breast augmentation with Dr. Hoover today. It's nice to meet you."

Jenna shook Michelle's petite hand. Moving in closer, Jenna noticed that Michelle's fingernails were decorated with hot pink polish and little, sparkly flower decals. Jenna also caught a glimpse of Michelle's diamond nose ring.

"Nice to meet you, too," replied Michelle. "This is my boyfriend, Bradley. He's the one footing the bill."

Jenna turned her attention to an attractive man in his forties seated at Michelle's bedside. Dressed in a black suit and sporting a Rolex watch, Bradley seemed like an unlikely match for Michelle Hollings. He looked up from his Blackberry and grinned.

Jenna smiled politely at the boyfriend. "So is this a present for you or her?"

As Jenna asked the question she noticed the gold band on Bradley's left ring finger. There was no corresponding ring on Michelle Hollings' hand.

In response to Jenna's question, Bradley's expression transformed into a guilty sneer.

At the same instant, the patient and her boyfriend blurted out, "Both," and started laughing. Jenna chuckled as well, trying to hide her distaste for Michelle's choice in men.

On the other hand, Jenna could appreciate Bradley's interest in Michelle. The young woman was extremely attractive. She had long blonde hair, beautiful green eyes, and a perfect body. Jenna glanced at Michelle's vital signs, mostly because she was dying to know Michelle's height and weight. Exactly as Jenna suspected, Michelle had

ideal dimensions, standing at 5 feet, 10 inches tall and weighing 115 pounds. Jenna, who stood 6 inches shorter and weighed 15 pounds more than her patient, was inwardly envious.

“All right then,” said Jenna, as she reviewed Dr. Hoover’s history and physical from the chart. “From what Dr. Hoover has to say about you, you have no health problems, you don’t take any medications except birth control pills, and you have no allergies. Is all that correct?”

“Yep, pretty much.”

“And no smoking, drugs, or excessive drinking?”

“Nope.” Michelle shot Bradley a conspiratorial grin.

“I see they did a pregnancy test on you this morning, which was negative. Have you had any problems with anesthesia in the past?”

“Nope. Usually, I do pretty good.”

“I assume you’ve had nothing to eat or drink since midnight, right? You didn’t stop at Starbucks for a latte on the way in?”

Michelle giggled nervously. “Unfortunately, no. No latte, or anything else for that matter. But it does sound damn good right about now.”

“Well, I thank you for being a compliant patient. I have only one last question. Do you have any loose, missing, or chipped teeth? Anything in your mouth that’s not permanent?”

“Just my tongue ring,” said Michelle, opening her mouth and proudly displaying a silver stud.

“That will have to come out before we take you back,” Jenna said firmly. “Any other piercings will also need to be removed.”

“I was afraid you’d say that,” pouted Michelle. “Does that also include my piercings . . . down there?” Michelle dipped her head in the direction of her crotch.

Jenna tried to sound unbiased. “Yeah, even the ones down there.”

Over the course of the next few minutes, Jenna performed a quick physical exam. She peered into Michelle’s mouth and assessed her airway. Next, Jenna listened to Michelle’s heart and lungs, which sounded completely normal.

After Jenna finished examining Michelle, she said, “Now’s the time where we have to go through the risks associated with anesthesia, and then I need to get you to sign the anesthesia consent. Even though I have to tell you all the things that could go wrong, I want to start by reassuring you that I do not anticipate any problems.”

Michelle sat up straight, signaling Jenna to continue.

“The most common complaints after surgery are nausea, vomiting, pain, and a sore throat. I will give you anti-nausea medication to help prevent you from feeling sick and narcotics that will hopefully allow you to wake up pain free. However, the nurses in the recovery room have more medicine, if you need it. If you get a sore throat, lozenges help, and it should resolve in a few days.”

Jenna paused for a moment. She could see the glazed-over look in Michelle’s eyes. After giving Michelle a moment to process the information, Jenna continued.

“It’s rare, but sometimes we can have serious complications from anesthesia. For this procedure, I have to intubate you, which means that I put a breathing tube down your throat and into your windpipe while you’re unconscious. Then I use a ventilator to help you breathe during the surgery. That was why I looked in your mouth and asked about your teeth. Those things help tell me if it should be easy or hard to get the tube in place. Based on my assessment, your airway looks very easy. However, there is a small chance that I could chip a tooth, cut your lip, or damage a vocal cord while trying to place the tube.

“There is also a possibility that you could have an allergic reaction to any of the medicines that I give you. If I see any indication that something like that is happening, I have other medications in the room to treat you.

“The most serious complication, and this is true for any patient, any surgery, and any type of anesthesia, is a serious and potentially life-threatening heart or lung complication.”

With the mention of the possibility of death, Michelle Hollings clutched tightly to Bradley’s hand, but otherwise maintained her composure. From what Jenna could tell, Bradley did his best to look interested and concerned, but she also caught him checking his Blackberry several times.

“Michelle,” Jenna asked, “do you have any questions about the anesthesia or the risks?”

“No. I’m just ready to get on with it. I’m looking forward to my new rack,” Michelle grinned.

“Me too,” said Bradley, a bit overly enthusiastic.

With that, both Dr. Jenna Reiner and Michelle Hollings signed the appropriate lines on the anesthesia consent form. Jenna left the room and ran into Rebecca in the hallway.

“Dr. Reiner,” said Rebecca, “Dr. Hoover just got here. She said she already got surgical consent from the patient in her office yesterday, so she just needs to pop in and say a quick hello. Is there anything you need, or are you okay if we head back to the operating room in about five minutes?”

Jenna was already halfway down the hallway. She called back over her shoulder, “Just make sure the patient takes out all her piercings and gets some Versed before you come back. Otherwise, I’m good, and I’ll see you back there. Thanks!”

CHAPTER 3

Jenna returned to her operating room to find it unoccupied. She found it odd that Hillary was not scrubbed back in and standing watch over the surgical equipment before the patient arrived. A critical part of Hillary's job was to ensure the integrity of the sterile surgical instruments – something that required her physical presence.

Approaching her area at the head of the operating room bed, Jenna opened the bottom drawer of the anesthesia cart and retrieved her stockpile of drugs. Each syringe, with the exception of Propofol, contained a clear liquid. If it weren't for the preprinted labels Jenna had affixed to each syringe, it would be virtually impossible to distinguish one medication from the other. Ritualistically, Jenna arranged the syringes on the silver tray of the anesthesia machine in the exact order that she intended to administer them to her patient – Versed, Lidocaine, Fentanyl, Propofol, and Rocuronium.

At 8:15, Jenna was still the only one present. It had been well over ten minutes since she left Rebecca in the hallway. With all of her drugs laid out in the open, she was forced to remain in the room until the patient appeared. Pulling out her phone, she engaged in a quick round of Solitaire. After several more minutes, she finally heard the sound of voices approaching the operating room doors. Jenna waited as Rebecca maneuvered the cumbersome hospital gurney, with Michelle Hollings onboard, into the room and lined it up next to the operating room table.

Overly bright and cheery, Rebecca quipped, “Hey, Dr. Reiner. Here's our friend, Michelle. Michelle, this is the operating room. I'd introduce you to the rest of the gang, but they don't seem to be back yet.”

Rebecca's last sentence was said with reproach, as she cocked her head in the direction of the surgical equipment and glanced inquisitively over at Jenna. Jenna correctly interpreted Rebecca's expression and tone, as both women questioned Hillary's whereabouts. Outside the view of her patient, Jenna shrugged her shoulders and shook her head disapprovingly.

“So, Michelle,” asked Jenna, “how's that cocktail treating you?”

Completely lucid, Michelle responded, “What cocktail?”