

Heart Novel

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A cardiac surgeon can fix other people's hearts but not his own.



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Heart Novel : Chapter 1

Chapter 1

The stretcher slammed through the doors that led into the operating room. The surgical tech pushing the guerny took a sharp left into operating room #3.

I had already gotten the emergency page and was scrubbing down outside OR #3. I walked into the room in my greens with my mask and my hands over my head.

The surgical nurse opened the sterile package with a plastic glove inside. I thrust my hand into one glove, then another.

"Death Cab for Cutie!" I yelled out. One of the techs scrambled to shove a cd in the cd player.

I approached the patient lying on the operating table. Surrounded by green scrub sheets with a square of open skin in the middle of the chest.

A nurse reached out with a plastic bin of brown betadine liquid solution. A sponge floated in the middle, its handle hanging over the side.

I picked up the sponge by the handle, and slowly massaged the chest in circular motions, starting from the middle.

Dropping the first sponge in the trash, I picked up the next and started again, repeating the ritual.

Then I picked up a clean cloth and wiped away the brown fluid, again moving in a circular motion, starting from the center.

When I was done, I held out my right hand. The handle of a scalpel snapped into my palm. I leaned over the square of skin.

The Atlantic was born today, and I'll tell you howâ ;

The blade of the scalpel touched the skin, and for a moment there was tension as the surface of the skin bowed below its weight.

The clouds above opened up, and let it outâ ;

A thin stream of blood oozed out below the blade. I pushed it in farther. I could see the pink glimmering of the muscle tissue open up

I was standing on the surface of a perforated sphere, when the water, filled every hole.

The body opened up suddenly, like an oyster, when the knife finally pops it free, and it yields its glimmering and quivering contents

And thousand upon thousand made an ocean, making islands, where no island should go.

I drew the blade vertically down toward the abdomen, making a perfect incision

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Ohhh oohh no.

A nurse started the circular saw. She placed it in my right hand

Those people were overjoyed, they took to their boats.

Starting from the bottom of the sternum, I cut through the bone up toward the chest.

I thought it less like a lake and more like a moatâ ;

As the blade moved up through the chest, a pungent smell of burning flesh filled the room.

The rhythm of my footsteps crossing flood lands to your door have been silenced forever more.

With a single quick motion, I cracked open the chest. "Ice!" I called out.

The distance is quite simply much too far for me to row. It seems farther, than ever before.

The heart lay open before me now. Beating in its rhythmic movement. A pale red. It looked like a piece of liver.

Ohhh, noâ ;

The fluid on the beating heart glistened, and reflected the light of the fluorescent lights of the operating room.

I need you so much closerâ ;

The nurse poured ice over the heart. It pulsated.

I need you so much closerâ ;

I inserted a plastic tube into the right atrium that was connected to the heart-lung bypass machine. Then I clamped the aorta.

I need you so much closerâ ;

"Bypass is on!" I called out. I held out my right hand. The handle of another scalpel was slapped into my palm.

I need you so much closerâ ;

I bent toward the heart, now layed out before me like a nude model in an artist's studio. Vulnerable, but waiting for my craft.

I need you so much closer...

My blade pierced into the soft tissue of the heart.

I need you so much closerâ ;

It was easy, and there was nothing, or better yet noone, to stop me

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I need you so much closerâ€” !

The nurse had the graft ready. I sutured it in bypassing the clogged coronary artery that had caused the patient to have a cardiac arrest.

I need you so much closerâ€” !

I gave the order to take the patient off bypass, and watched as the tissues filled with blood, reddening.

So come on onnnnnnnnnnn. So come on. onnnnnnnnnnnâ€” !

I sutured the heart, then pulled the two sides of chest incision together and began to suture up the chest.

So come on onnnnnnnnnnn. So come on. onnnnnnnnnnnâ€” !

Holding the suturing pliers in his right hand, I pierced the skin, pulled through to the other sideâ€” !

So come on onnnnnnnnnnn. So come on. onnnnnnnnnnnâ€” !

â€” and pulled the thread all the way through to the other side, making my tie, all in rhythm to the music.

So come on onnnnnnnnnnn. So come on. onnnnnnnnnnnâ€” !

Then I did it again, taking pride in my skills and craft.

So come on onnnnnnnnnnn. So come on. onnnnnnnnnnnâ€” !

I left the resident to finish closing up. Exiting the operating room, I pulled off his green surgical gown and dropped it in the hamper. then I pulled off my gloves and surgical cap and dropped them in the trash. I felt a heavy fatigue as I moved toward the sink.

Getting up a good lather I scrubbed for several minutes, then put my hands under the running water, watching the brown soap run down the drain. Then I walked out of the OR and through the door that led straight into the surgeons lounge. A couple of the guys were lounging around on the leather sofas.

Reading the paper or a medical journal, waiting for their surgical suites to open up. Mahogany lined the walls.

Tony Coreolo was lying back on a sofa with his feet resting on a table, staring at his blackberry. He looked like he hadn't gone to bed the night before. When I walked into the room he perked up, like a dried out house plant that had just been given some water.

"Hey, Charlie!" he said, rolling over from the slouching position he took on the couch.

"How's it going, buddy?"

"I had to go back and salvage another one of these fucking Corshield stents," I said.

"The second one this week."

"Why, what happened?"

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"The fucker clogged only a month after it was placed. We had to do an emergency bypass operation. I'm starting to wonder if this is a coincidence. So what have you got on the docket?"

"I've got three scheduled CABGs. First one's 20 minutes behind schedule. How about you?"

"Yeah I've got three more routines as well. Wanna get a beer afterward?"

"Yeah, sure."

Tony got a call that his next suite was open and walked back in to scrub again. After a couple of more routine CABG surgeries he returned to the surgeon's lounge. He drifted off to sleep and was awakened by my gentle shaking of his shoulder.

"Hey buddy. Ready for that beer?"

"Sure, let's go."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2.

Tony and I drove from the hospital in my BMW convertible. As we drove up along GA I-75/85 the drone of a million frogs drowned out the sound of the mechanized vehicles that slid along the 16 lane mechanism of death. Giant billboards declared the benefits of eating chicken over beef in pidgeon English. Another one burst out the details of the Georgia Tech football game in electronic bursts of light.

Walking into the Buckhead bar "Paradox" with Tony the music hit us like a blast of hot air on a hot Georgia night. I walked up to the bar with Tony, checking out some of the hot blondes and trying to remind myself that I was officially married.

After ordering we grabbed beers from the bar and headed for a booth. The loud noise of the music made it hard to talk. The gyrating bodies of some of the women on the dance floor was distracting.

"So how's Candace?" Tony said.

"Oh, you know. The usual thrills of married life."

"Ever think about branching out?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You know, play the field a little bit?"

"No. I'm married, in case you forgot."

"You shouldn't be so uptight, Charlie."

"How do you think Candace would feel about it?"

"She wouldn't have to find out."

"Oh, come on."

"I mean, when was the last time you guys did it?"

"I don't remember."

"Look around you, Charlie. Look at all these hot women. They love doctors, especially surgeons. They're ready to banged, no strings attached."

"Can't you get off this already?"

"Are you hung up?"

"What's with you?"

"Is your marriage satisfying?"

"What are you, some kind of fucking psychoanalyst?"

"I mean, do you do it with her? Like... ever?"

"Not lately."

"So how long has it been?"

"I don't know. A while."

"Like... weeks? months?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Hey, look, man! There's Candace on the TV!"

We sat back and watched her on the screen. The music was blaring, so all you could see was her face and animated gesticulations as she went on about some potted plant. As I sat and watched her I felt oddly detached, like she had nothing to do with me.

"Let's get out of here, man," I said.

We rose from the booth. Everything seemed to slow down. The sweat gleamed off the backs of the people as they danced to the booming music. We left the club. The darkness from the outside poured into the club and permeated everything with its message of death. I guess we all have to die sometime, but I didn't want to think about it right now.

We moved out onto the street. The brunt weight of the Georgia night hit us in the face. I breathed in the must of the young people as they waited in line to be let into the club. I wondered if any of the younger females found me attractive. They didn't pay me much attention, though, and we moved on to the parking lot.

I said good bye to Tony, and drove home.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Candace was late as usual for her filming of the Home and Garden Show. As she came into the studio, Lanny peered out the door, anxiously waiting for her.

"Did we get the Azalea guy?" she spit out as she came in through the door.

"Yes, he's in the waiting room," said Lanny. He turned and followed anxiously behind her.

"It's Springtime. Atlantans want to hear about their fucking Azaleas. I count on you to help me get the word out about that."

"Yes, Candace," Lanny said. "He's here. Don't worry. We'll get out our message about the Azaleas."

"We'd better. Or your ass is grass. What's his name?"

"Consere. Dr. Michael Consere. He's a professor of botany at UGA, he came down from Athens--"

Candace power moved into the room. Lanny stumbled backwards, barely getting out the way.

"Hello, professor. Thanks for coming down on such short notice."

Consere looked up from the stool where he sat in the studio. His face showed a mixture of surprise, confusion, and maybe a bit of fear. A couple of azaleas were strategically placed behind him.

"Thanks for having me. I'm always happy to talk about my favorite topic."

"And that, I would presume, is Azaleas, Professor?"

"Yes, it is, as a matter of fact."

"Well our listeners always want to hear more about Azaleas. We're going live in 30 seconds. Ready, Scotty?" "I'm on line."

"OK, here we go. Doctor, thanks for coming on. I understand you are an expert on Azaleas?"

"I'd like to think so."

"We're so glad to have all your expert knowledge. What are the most interesting things you can tell us about this most interesting shrub?"

"Well, Azaleas are in the same family as the Rhododendron family. In Japan, there are Azaleas that live for hundreds of years, even though the plants remain small in size like small shrubs."

"Most Azaleas flower for two weeks in the Springtime, although other Azaleas can flower at other times of the year."

"I love it when our Azaleas bloom in the Spring," Candace said. "It gives me goose pumps. See?"

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She held out her arm to the professor.

"Yes, I see. I appreciate your enthusiasm for Azaleas," he said.

"I don't think I could call myself an Atlantan if I didn't have an appreciation for Azaleas."

"I can see your love for Azaleas."

"It's been really great having you on the show. I hope you come back and see us sometime."

"Thanks for having me on the show."

"OK, that's a wrap." Candace stood up.

"Thanks for coming down, Doctor."

"I always like to talk about Azaleas."

"We love hearing about them, Doctor."

The Doctor walked out of the studio. Candace slumped in her chair.

"I can't deal with this bullshit anymore."

"What's the problem, Candace?" Lanny said.

"Always trying to scrape something together for the show. Trying to get someone who will be interesting for our Buckhead air brain bitches. I can't take it anymore. I really can't."

"You can't take all of the responsibility on yourself."

"I know. I guess I know. I don't know what I know anymore."

"Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"I don't know. Isn't there more stuff to do?"

"You've done enough for today, Candace. Go home now."

"OK, I guess. Too bad there won't be anyone to meet me there."

"Get out of here, Candace."

"All right."

Candace walked out of the studio. She dialed a number on her cell phone. Charlie answered.

"Hi, it's me," Candace said.

"Oh hi there me."

"I'm taking the afternoon off."

"Oh, that's nice."

"What are you doing?"

"I have a surgery this afternoon."

"Oh. OK."

"I guess you're saying that I should cancel it and spend time with you."

"I never said that."

"And that if I don't cancel what I'm doing that means that I don't really care about you."

"I never said that, either. You're putting words into my mouth."

"Well you might as well have said that. Just by calling me you're implying that I don't care about you."

"Isn't that a little paranoid?"

"You know that I'm operating this afternoon-"

"I didn't deny that-"

"Just by asking me these questions you're implying--"

"I never said that I think that you don't care about me."

"So, do you want me to cancel my surgery now?"

"Oh, goodbye."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Ermilio and Esteves Gonzales, both in their late 60s, waited nervously in the waiting room of the Northview Hospital Cardiology Clinic. Esteves anxiously held her husband's hand. He stared ahead without expression. After twenty minutes Samantha Jenkins, a nurse in her early 30s, walked out into the waiting room.

"Mr. Gonzales?" she asked.

"Yes, that is us," Esteves said.

Holding Ermilio's arm they slowly walked toward the nurse who held the door open for them that led to the interior of the cardiology clinic. She opened a door to one of the examining rooms.

"The doctor will be with you shortly," Samantha said.

They entered the room and sat down. Esteves sat there holding Ermilio's arm. After 15 minutes Charlie walked in.

"Dr. Bishop, we're so grateful to you for what you did for my husband," Esteves said.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Gonzales?"

"This pain came in my chest and went into my arm," Ermilio said. He made motions with his arms to demonstrate.

"He couldn't breathe well," Esteves said.

"You had a small blockage in one of the arteries of your heart," Charlie said. "We put something in the artery to open it up again. It's called a stent. It's like a small tube-"

"You saved his life," Esteves said.

Samantha re-entered the room.

"We're so grateful to you, Doctor," Esteves said.

"He's a brilliant surgeon," the nurse said. "The best."

"You shouldn't say that, Samantha," Charlie said.

"Sit up here on the examination table, Mr. Gonzales, and let me listen to your hear and lungs."

Mr Gonzales obediently lay on the examination table. His wife anxiously watched from her chair. Charlie carefully ascoltated his heart and lungs. He couldn't hear any murmur that would indicate a failure of one of the valves that connected one of the four chambers of the heart to each other, or tell-tale signs of fluid in the lungs that would indicate a failure of the heart. Of course there could be all kinds of things going on in his heart tissue or blood vessels that he would have no knowledge of. He was focused on finding out out if there was anything obviously life threatening that could be prevented right away.

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"Everything looks fine, Mr. Gonzales," Charlie said.

"Thank you, Dr. Bishop," Mrs. Gonzales blurted out. Mr. Gonzales said nothing.

"You can get dressed."

Charlie left the room. Samantha followed him.

"They seemed happy," she said.

"They think I saved his life," he said

"They're probably right."

"They're good people. They deserve it."

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

Charlie drove his Mercedes convertible up Georgia 400 with the 90 degree temperature and the sound of the frogs or the cicadas or whatever the hell they caracatted away as he drove on through the sweat and the fatigue.

He exited the highway and drove toward the Buckhead neighborhood of Atlanta. Leaving the car with the valet of the Gold Club he saw Tony standing near the entrance, waiting for him.

"Hey man."

"Hey, how's it going?"

"Great. The Corline people already went inside."

The sweat flows down his neck and he meets his friend Tony who joins him on the sidewalk and together they walk into the strip joint where the music is pulsing out an assault upon the senses. They sit down and there are a few isolated stragglers assaulted by the scantily clad strippers who finished their acts and are looking for some extra tips. Charlie and Tony are accosted by a random stripper when Derek and Ursula motion to them to come over to their booth and the stripper moves on. Ursula Banzcik, the Corline rep, is a perky strawberry blonde in her late 30s. Dr. Derek Townsend, the clinic head, is balding and in his late 40s. Nothing new here.

"Hi guys," Derek said. "You know Ursula, don't you?"

"Yes, we've met," I said.

"Right," said Tony.

"Charlie never goes to places like this," Derek said.

Ursula grinned. A naked woman spun around a pole. Cheesy strip club pop music played loudly.

"Ursula's working closely with us on the new cardiac center," Derek said.

"That's great," I said.

"We've got a great partnership with Corline."

A new woman walked onto the stage.

"You see the value of partnering with the private sector, don't you, Charlie?"

"Oh, of course," I said. "We both stand to mutually benefit."

"Charlie's got a good point there," Ursula said.

"There you go," said Tony.

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"Excuse me, I'm going to try to find the rest room, if they have one for women in this place, that is," Ursula said. She got up and walked toward the rest room.

"Is she flirting with you?" Tony asked me under his breath, out of Derek's hearing.

"Hopefully."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Boredom maybe."

Tony smirked. Ursula walked toward the bathroom. I watched her slink away and then looked down at my drink.

Ursula came back to the table. She launched into her pitch. "We're sponsoring a series of lectures on the treatment of myocardial infarction and acute coronary syndromes."

An attractive blonde with white pumps walked out onto the stage and did a swing around the pole.

"We want you guys to be members of the Speaker's Bureau."

My attention wavered between the woman on stage and Ursula. I turned my back on the stage and focused on Ursula.

"What's in it for us?" I said.

"Teamwork," Derek said.

"Charlie isn't a team player," Tony said.

"Maybe he should start," Derek said.

"That was a joke, Derek," Tony said.

Ursula ignored the back and forth. "We've got a cardiology journal lined up to publish an issue on medicated stents. You guys will get a stipend for writing articles. You'll get some help from our editorial team."

"Sure," I said.

"We think you guys can really help us get our message out," Ursula said.

"This is going to be win-win," Derek said.

"Yeah," said Tony.

"Like to help," I said.

"Can I stop by your office sometime to go over our plans?" Ursula said to me.

"Sure," I said.

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"Glad to see you working with the team," Derek said.

We didn't have much left to talk about. Derek made a move to get up out of the booth. Tony and I followed. We exchanged cards out on the sidewalk. It seemed weird after watching a series of women doing pelvic thrusts while spinning around a pole for the past hour or two. Especially when the woman in our group was hot enough to take a spin or two around the pole herself without having any sense of shame.

Chapter 6

The Druid Hills Golf Course had past roots in the institutional racism that was a part of the Atlanta elite, but neither Tony or I cared. We came from the outside and didn't give a rat's ass about the Old South or the Confederates in the attic or any of that shit. Fact is, in spite of what William Faulkner said, people in Atlanta never talked about the past. A culture where everybody put their head in the sand about the past and focused on making money in the here-and-now was fine with us.

The morning sunlight filtered through the pine trees onto the green of the fairway.

"Those were some pretty hot babes at the Gold Club last night," Tony said.

He set up his tee.

"You can look but you better not touch," I said.

Tony drove his ball straight down the fairway.

"The joys of married life," Tony said. " Did you tell Candace where we went?"

"No fucking way. She doesn't need to know about that shit."

I hit a clean drive. The white ball sailed away, neatly piercing the pine trees that framed the bright green fairway with the bright blue sky beyond.

"Ever wonder if she's screwing around on you?" Tony said.

"I don't know. Who gives a shit?" I said.

"You."

"Whatever. She isn't interested in sex anyway."

"Yeah, right. Maybe not with you," Tony said.

"I've always got you babs," I said.

We walked down the course. The brilliant sun blinded me temporarily.

"So how's the new Porsche?" I said.

"Great."

"Babe magnet."

"Mmm."

My beeper went off.

"Oh, shit. I guess that's it for the day," I said.

"Hospital?"

"Yeah, just when we were starting to have some fun."

"You can make it up to me this weekend."

Chapter 7

I drove to the hospital and got my white coat out the trunk of the car and put it on while walking inside. When I entered the building through the automatic glass doors the temperature dropped about 20 degrees as the air-conditioned air hit me with a blast of cold after coming out of the 90+ Atlanta afternoon. I turned the corner and saw Mrs. Gonzales in a chair in the hallway. She looked anxiously in my direction.

"Mrs. Gonzales, what are you doing here?" I said. "You were just here yesterday."

"Ernesto had another of his chest pains," she said. "We had to call the ambulance."

"Where is he?"

"They took him in there." Mrs. Gonzales pointed toward the door. "I'm so scared." She said.

"Don't worry, I'll find out," I said. A sick feeling settled into the bottom of my stomach.

I pushed through the doors to the operating room. Several doctors stood around a stretcher. Tony eyed me. It was the end of a resuscitation attempt. Going through the motions at the plus 15 minute time point when everyone knows the guy is dead.

"We're calling it," Tony said. I couldn't believe it. I just stood there, stunned.

Tony walked over to me.

"I know he was a special patient for you," he said.

"I can't believe it," I said. "I just put that stent in a few weeks ago."

"Shit happens. You can't control everything."

"But these stents were supposed to be better than the older ones."

"You can't save them all, Charlie. You've got to move on or it'll make you crazy."

"I always talked a good game about how much I cared. But the bottom line is that I never really gave a shit. It was always more about what people thought of me."

"You're excellent at what you do."

"Is that all that matters. Whether people think you're any good or not?"

"Come on, buddy-"

"--OK, I'll tell his wife. She's waiting outside."

I walked back into the hallway. I was filled with dread about the idea of having to tell Mrs. Gonzales that her husband was dead. He had been with her only minutes before and she had put all of her trust in me. She was anxiously looking in the direction of the door where her husband had last disappeared. She turned her face to me and when she saw my expression I could see her face change. She knew.

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I approached her. Inside I felt nauseated and afraid. I didn't want to let that on to her, though.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs Gonzales."

Her face dropped.

"How could that happen?" she said. "You just fixed his heart a few weeks ago."

"I'm not sure what happened. We'd like to do an autopsy to find out what went wrong. We need your permission for that."

"Of course, Doctor."

I stood there for a moment, not knowing what to say. She looked down at her lap, silently weeping.

"Let me know if there is anything I can do for you," I said. Then I left.

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