

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# Miracle Cure

Michael Palmer

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## About the Book

Dr. Brian Holbrook was the most gifted cardiologist of his generation. But that was before he became addicted to painkillers. Now he's back on track, and ready to start again.

Boston's most prestigious heart unit offers him the chance to become involved in the clinical trials of a new drug that could save countless lives. *Vasclear* seems to be able to reverse some killer forms of heart disease, and could be the revolutionary cure so many people yearn for.

So why are patients who have made startling progress suddenly dying?

Why has a respected doctor disappeared?

Why is Brian told to get out while he can?

And why does he know that digging too deep and guessing too much could be the quickest way to the morgue?

## About the Author

Michael Palmer, M.D., is the international bestselling author of nine novels, including most recently, *The Patient*. His books have been translated into twenty-six languages and have been adapted for film and television. He trained in internal medicine at Boston City and Massachusetts General Hospitals, spent twenty years as a full-time practitioner of internal and emergency medicine, and is now involved in the treatment of alcoholism and chemical dependence. He lives in Massachusetts.

*By the same author*

The Sisterhood  
Side Effects  
Extreme Measures  
Natural Causes  
Silent Treatment  
Critical Judgement  
Flashback  
The Patient

# Miracle Cure

Michael Palmer



arrow books

To Judith Palmer Glantz

For your talent as a mother and your grace as an ex

and

In loving memory of my father.

We miss you, Pop.

# Acknowledgements

My name is on the cover of this book but it was hardly written in a vaccum. My deepest gratitude goes once again to my tireless editor, Beverly Lewis, assistant editor Christine Brooks, and my incomparable agents, Jane Rotrosen Berkey, Don Cleary, and Stephanie Tade.

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The people named above have contributed mightily to the color and flavor of this novel. Any errors or other misrepresentations of fact are purely mine.

M.S.P.

*THERE ARE THREE KINDS OF UNTRUTHS: LIES, DAMN LIES, AND STATISTICS.*

*- ATTRIBUTED TO BENJAMIN DISRAELI BY  
MARK TWAIN*

## Prologue

It took every bit of her strength, but Sylvia Vitorelli managed to force a third pillow under her back. She was nearly upright in bed now. Still she felt queasy and hungry for more air. It was the dampness and the mould, she told herself. If she were in her apartment in Boston rather than her son's farmhouse in rural upstate New York, this would not be happening. Not that her breathing had been all that great in Boston, either. For months her ankles had been badly puffed and her fingers swollen. And now, over the past few weeks, she had been experiencing increasing trouble catching her breath, especially when she lay down.

Sylvia cursed softly. She should never have agreed to make the trip to Fulbrook. She should have told Ricky that she just wasn't up to it. But she had really wanted to go. The ghost of her husband, Angelo, had made living in their apartment a constant sadness. And the dust and noise surrounding construction of Boston's central-artery tunnel had made living in their part of the North End unpleasant. Besides, her daughter-in-law, who had always acted as if her visits were an inconvenience, had actually made the call inviting her to spend almost two weeks away from the city. *The kids ask for you all the time, Mama, she had said. And autumn is so beautiful up here.*

Sylvia checked the time. Ricky, Stacey, and the children would be at church for another half hour or so and then were going to stop by to see some friends. She had begged off going with them, citing a headache. The truth was, she didn't feel as if she could even get dressed. She should try to get up, maybe make something to eat, watch Mass on TV,

but when she tried to move, she suddenly was seized by a violent, racking spasm of coughing, accompanied by a horrible liquid sound in her chest.

For the first time, she began to panic. The dreadful gurgling in her lungs persisted. Now she was gasping for breath. Sweat began to pour off her forehead, stinging her eyes. Her purse was right next to her on the bedside table. She fumbled through it for her pills with no clear idea of what she would do once she found them. Her fingers, which lately had remained somewhat swollen most of the time, were now stiff, obscene sausages, bluish and mottled.

The air in the musty room seemed heavy and thick. An extra fluid diuretic pill might help. Maybe one of the nitroglycerins, too. Desperately, she emptied her purse out onto the bed. Alongside several vials of pills was an appointment card from the clinic at Boston Heart Institute. Drops of perspiration fell from her face onto the ink. Her next appointment was a week from tomorrow. In order to fly to Ricky's for the eleven days, she had had to skip a Vasclear treatment – the first one she had missed in almost a year. But the missed medication couldn't possibly be the reason she was having so much trouble breathing now. She was down to only one treatment every two weeks, and was due to drop to one a month before much longer. Besides, her cardiologist had told her when she called that it was perfectly okay for her to go.

*Oh, my God*, she thought, as she frantically gulped down one pill from each of the medication vials. *Oh, my God, what's happening to me?* Suddenly she remembered that the nitroglycerin, which she had not had to take since the early days of her Vasclear treatment, was supposed to be dissolved under her tongue, not swallowed. She tried to get a tablet into place under her tongue, but her hands were shaking so hard that she spilled the tiny pills all over the bed and onto the floor.

Her left ring finger was beginning to throb. The gold band she had worn for over fifty years was completely buried in her flesh. The finger itself looked terribly swollen and dark violet, almost black in color. *Oh, please God, help me. . . . Help me!*

Drowning now, she struggled to force air through the bubbling in her chest. A boring, squeezing pain had begun to mushroom outward from beneath her breastbone and up into her neck - angina, just like before she had begun the treatments. She had to get Ricky on the phone. Or was it better to call 911? She had to do something. Her nightgown was soaked with sweat. She was breathing and coughing at the same time, getting precious little air into her lungs. There was no telephone in the guest room.

Gamely, she pushed herself off the side of the bed and lurched across to the bureau. Her feet were like water bottles, her toes little more than nubs above the swelling. Another spasm of coughing took away what little breath remained. She clutched the corner of the bureau, barely able to keep herself upright. The cough was merciless now, unremitting. Perspiration was cascading off her. Her head came up just enough for her to see that the mirror was spattered with blood. Behind the scarlet spray was her ashen face. She was a terrifying apparition. Her hair was matted with sweat. Bloody froth covered her lips and chin.

Seized by fear unlike any she had ever known, Sylvia turned away from her reflection, stumbled, and fell heavily to the floor. As she hit, she heard as much as felt the snapping of the bone in her left hip. Sudden, blinding pain exploded from that spot. Her consciousness wavered, then started to fade. The agony in her hip and chest began to let up. *Ricky . . . Barbara . . . Maria . . . Johnny. . . .* One by one her children's faces flashed through her thoughts. The last face she saw was her Angelo's. He was smiling . . . beckoning to her.

Part One

Two Years Later

# Chapter 1

## THE BOSTON GLOBE

### **Jungle Drug Holds Promise for Heart Disease**

Researchers at Boston-based Newbury Pharmaceuticals are heralding what they say may be a major breakthrough in the treatment of heart disease, now America's number one killer. . . .

'YOU CAN'T THROW the seven of hearts, Brian, I just picked up the eight of hearts three cards ago.'

'I'm betting you've got eights.'

'Okay . . . Bad bet. . . . Gin.'

Brian Holbrook watched his father score up gin plus nineteen and sweep the cards together with practiced ease. The hands that had once been thick and strong enough to crush walnuts were spotted from sixty-three years in the sun and bony from almost a decade of infirmity. But they could still handle cards.

Jack Holbrook - *Black* Jack Holbrook to many for as long as Brian could remember - wasn't a professional gambler. But he dearly loved to bet. He called it wagering, and he would do it on anything from the Super Bowl to whether the next car coming around the corner would be foreign-made or domestic. Two bucks, ten, a hundred - it really didn't matter to Jack. The game was the thing. He was, and always had been, the most fiercely competitive man Brian had ever known.

Careful not to let his father see, Brian glanced at his watch. Three o'clock. They had been playing gin for almost two hours. At a penny a point, they kept a running score

until one of them, invariably Jack, reached ten thousand. Brian was currently down over seventy dollars.

‘How about we quit and watch the ball game?’ he suggested.

‘How about we ride into Boston, have an early dinner, and see that new Van Damme movie?’

‘I’ve got to be at the club at nine.’

‘There’s plenty of time. I don’t remember the last time we spent a whole day together like this.’

Jack was right about that. With two jobs and his weekly supervised visitations with the girls, Brian was usually either on the move or dead asleep, facedown on the bedspread. The club was Aphrodite, one of the Day-Glo rock spots on Lansdowne Street, across from Fenway Park. Brian was a bouncer. At six three, 215, he fit the part well, though at thirty-eight he was a bit long in the tooth for the work. Then, of course, there was the matter of his education. An M.D. degree with board certification in internal medicine and cardiology made him an oddity among the bouncers. But without a license from the Board of Registration and Discipline in Medicine, those certifications were useful only for the bottom of a birdcage.

It was a rare totally free Sunday afternoon for him. Becky and Caitlin were away for the weekend at Phoebe’s parents’ place, so his weekly visitation was postponed until Tuesday. And for some reason, his boss at Speedy Rent-A-Car hadn’t noticed that he failed to slot Brian for yet another Sunday in the office. A career man at Speedy, Darryl loved exercising power over people – particularly the new college grads who used the agency as their entry into the job market. He hadn’t found out until well after Brian started work at the place that he was an M.D., but since then, Darryl had done his best to make up for the lost time.

Bouncer . . . car-rental gofer . . . supervised visitations with his daughters . . . living with Dad . . . Brian knew that after eighteen months of hard work – counseling, Narcotics

Anonymous meetings, and endless hours with his NA sponsor, Freeman Sharpe, a building maintenance man with twenty years of recovery from heroin addiction – his internal demons were pretty much under control. But his external life still left a lot to be desired.

Brian's Saturday-night stint at Aphrodite had ended after three, so it wasn't until ten that he had gotten up. He had planned to go for a run, and then maybe hook up with some of the kids playing touch football in the park. They loved having him in their game, especially when he sent one of them deep and threw a fifty- or sixty-yard bullet spiral to him. But one glance at Jack had changed his mind. The man who had been Brian's football coach from Pop Warner to high school and on to college was wrapped in an afghan in his favorite chair, where he had been sitting up for most of the night. On the table next to him were several cardiac medications and others for pain. He looked drawn and in need of a shave.

'Got any plans for the day, Coach?' Brian asked.

'Yeah. The sultan of Brunei is supposed to stop by with his harem. I told him just three for me, though.'

'How about I make you some breakfast?'

Jack's gray crew cut, chiseled features, and lingering summer tan helped him look younger, *and healthier*, than he was. But Brian knew that his cardiac condition was worsening. Portions of his six-year-old quintuple bypass were almost certainly closing. Brian picked up the small vial of nitroglycerin tablets and checked inside. More than half were gone.

'How many of these did you take yesterday?' he asked.

Jack snatched the vial away and put it into his shirt pocket.

'To tell you the truth, I don't remember taking any.'

'Jack, come on.'

'Look, I'm fine. You just tend to your business and let me tend to mine.'

'You are my business, Jack. I'm your son and I'm a cardiologist, remember?'

'No. You're a bouncer in a bar. That and a car salesman.'

Brian started to react to the barb, then caught himself. Jack was probably operating on even less sleep than he was.

'You're right, Coach,' Brian responded, willing his jaw to unclench. 'When I'm back to being a cardiologist again, then I can give advice. Not before. Let me toast you a bagel.'

The living room of the first-story flat that Jack had owned for the ten years since his heart attack was, like the rest of the place, devoid of a woman's touch. There were sports photos on the walls and trophies on almost every surface that would hold one. Most of the awards had Brian's name on them. They were the trappings of a man who needed gleaming hardware and laminated certificates to pump up his self-esteem. When Brian had first moved in, being surrounded by all those trophies had been something of a problem for him. But Freeman Sharpe had helped him deal with his issues. *Remember, your dad loves you and he always wanted more for you than he ever wanted for himself. And if he pushes your buttons, just tell yourself that he's a master at doing that because he's the one who installed them in the first place.* And in the end, as with so many other things that had seemed like a big deal, the trophies meant nothing more than Brian chose to make them.

As he headed into the small kitchen, he glanced at one of the photographs on the wall by the doorway. It was the official photo of the UMass team taken just before the start of his fateful junior season. He was in the middle of the next-to-last row. Number 11. Then, for the first time that he could remember, his eyes were drawn to a face at the right-hand end of the very last row. Dr. Linus King, the team orthopedist. Brian had looked at the photo any number of times before - where it hung, he had no real choice. It was curious that he had never noticed the man until now. Over

countless therapy sessions and countless recovery meetings, Brian had come to accept responsibility for his addiction to prescription painkillers. But if there was anyone else who bore accountability, it was King.

Brian repressed the sudden urge to slam his fist into the photo. Over the year following his reconstruction of Brian's knee, Linus King, a sports-medicine deity, was always too busy to conduct a thorough reevaluation of his work, to say nothing of sitting down to talk with his patient about persistent discomfort in the joint. Instead, he had preached patience and rehabilitation, and had prescribed hundreds of Percocets and other painkillers. Finally, a repeat MRI had disclosed a previously undiagnosed fracture. A cast and three months of rest took care of the cracked bone, but by then Brian had acquired a string of harried doctors, each willing to dash off a prescription in exchange for not having to listen. His addiction was full-blown and well-fed years before he violated the law and his own principles by writing the first prescription for himself.

'Jack, do you really think you're up for a trip into the city?' Brian asked now.

'I don't know. I think so. I'm going slightly stir-crazy, son. And beating you at gin isn't what I'd call the most challenging activity in the world.'

'I'll tell you what. I'll cut cards with you. You win, it's Jean-Claude and the restaurant of your choice.'

'And if I lose?'

Brian could tell his father knew what was coming.

'You lose and we still go into Boston. But you've got to promise me you'll go back and see Dr. Clarkin.'

'I'm fine.'

'You're not fine. It's been six years since your operation. Clarkin can revise those grafts or replace them.'

'No more Clarkin, no more surgery. I've told you that a thousand times. I've had my last catheter and my last tube.'

As often seemed to be the case with a physician or a physician's kin, everything that could have gone wrong postoperatively for Jack did. Heart failure, infection, graft revision, reinfection. A total of eight miserable weeks in the hospital which, in the era of managed care, spoke volumes as to how spectacularly ill he was. For many of those weeks, he literally begged to die. True, Blackjack was more stubborn than most. But having seen the man every one of those fifty-six days, Brian could hardly blame him for taking such a hard line against any return to the OR.

'All right,' Brian said. 'But I've never seen you chicken out of a friendly wager before.'

'That's because I have a reputation for always paying up on my losses. And I know I'd end up welshing on this one. Tell you what. How about one cut: the seventy-one bucks you owe me versus you treating for dinner and the movies.'

'Deal.' Brian turned over the queen of clubs. 'Hey, maybe my luck is changing.'

Jack cut the three of diamonds. He stared at the card for a few protracted seconds.

'Maybe mine is, too,' he said.

He pulled on his favorite sweater, a frayed orange cardigan Brian's mother had given him just before her death nearly thirteen years ago.

'You gonna be warm enough if I put the top down?' Brian asked.

'Sure. . . . Um . . . son, there's something I gotta get off my chest before we leave.'

'Go ahead.'

'I . . . I was out of line saying what I did this morning about you not being a cardiologist.'

'Don't worry about it. Besides, I never paid any attention to anything you ever said before. Why should I start now?'

'I'm frustrated, that's all. And I don't understand how you could have let this happen.'

'I know, Pop. I know. Sometimes we have to hit bottom before we figure out how to really enjoy life.'

'I'm sure something will come along.'

Brian looked away.

'I'm sure it will,' he said.

Actually, he was reasonably certain it *wouldn't*. The Board of Registration in Medicine had determined six months ago that he was in good recovery and ready to resume practice, but it was their policy in drug and alcohol cases to insist on a physician having a work situation in place with tight on-the-job monitoring and random urine testing before a license would be issued. No job, no license. It was the board's immutable law. Brian had argued that in Boston, with three medical schools and a plethora of teaching hospitals, cardiologists were more plentiful than cod. Why would anyone take a chance on hiring someone without an active license?

Two children and Jack's shaky medical situation made a move too far away from eastern Massachusetts out of the question. So Brian had done what he could, responding to ads in the cardiology press and the *New England Journal of Medicine* and sending out at least two dozen resumes. He had networked until he had absorbed more than his quota of rejections, and had seen colleagues he thought were his friends turn away. He had even placed an ad himself.

**Former chief of cardiology and cath-lab director at Boston-area hospital seeks group practice in eastern Mass, Rhode Island, southern New Hampshire.**

No job, no license. No license, no job. Catch-22.

Now, for the past month, he had simply stopped trying. He had stepped back and begun to mull over other directions in which his life might be ready to go. The process hadn't been easy, but there was one saving grace. Rarely, in all these frustrating months of rejection and disappointment, had he thought about drinking or taking pills.

'You ready, Pop?'

'You go on and get that top down. I'll be right there.'

Jack Holbrook headed slowly toward the bathroom. When he heard the front door open and close, he quickly braced himself against the wall, fighting to slow his breathing as a skewer of pain bored up to his jaws from beneath his breastbone. He fumbled the vial of nitroglycerin from his shirt pocket and dissolved one under his tongue. Half a minute later, the pain began to subside. He wiped beaded sweat from his upper lip and took a long, grateful breath.

'Jack, everything okay?' Brian called from the front steps.

'Yeah, fine, Brian. Everything's fine.'

The Towne Deli was a trendy little place on Boylston with a fine salad bar and nine-dollar sandwiches. Brian dropped his father off in front and spent ten minutes finding a parking space. Jack's condo was in Reading, a working-class suburb that straddled Route 128 northwest of the city. The ride in, beneath brilliant late-afternoon sun, was as much of a joy on Sunday as it was a nightmare during the typical morning commute. And Brian's three-year-old red LeBaron, by far the best thing he retained after the divorce, was the perfect car for the day.

During the drive, Brian knew that Jack wanted information. Any job prospects? Any new word from the board? Any interesting women? But perhaps in honor of the warmth of the day and the peace between them, his dad kept his thoughts to himself. Brian, too, avoided the inflammatory topic of his father's health. Instead, they alternated between sports and silence.

Brian entered the Towne Deli and spotted his father at a small table in the corner. For a few seconds, he stood by the front door, studying what remained of the man who had so dominated the first two decades of his life. From almost the day Brian took his first step, Coach was there, monitoring his diet, social life, and workouts, creating what he believed

would be one of the great quarterbacks. And save for one play, he might have succeeded.

Jack sat motionless, staring down at the menu. Then, almost subconsciously, he began rubbing at his chest and up toward his neck. Brian hurried across to him. Beneath his tan, Jack was ashen. His eyes were glazed.

'Jack, what's going on? Are you having pain?'

Jack Holbrook took a breath through his nose and nodded.

'Some,' he managed in a half-grunt.

Brian checked the carotid pulses on either side of Jack's neck. They were regular, but thready. A sheen of sweat had formed across his forehead.

'Jesus,' Brian whispered. 'Jack, do you have your nitro?'

Jack produced the bottle from his shirt pocket.

'Shouldn't have come into Boston,' he said hoarsely.

'Nonsense,' Brian said, sensing the strange, paradoxical calmness that for many years now had been his response to a medical crisis. 'It wouldn't have made any difference. Come on, Pop. I'm going to sit you over here on the floor and give you one of your nitros. Do you still have that aspirin I put in your wallet? Good. Let me get it out.'

Either Jack was having a bad angina attack - not enough blood flow to a portion of his heart - or he was having a full-blown coronary: a myocardial infarction in which the heart segment was getting no blood at all. If the problem was an artery obstructed by a clot, the extra aspirin might help dissolve the blockage before there was permanent damage.

'Is there a problem, sir?'

Brian looked up at the balding restaurant manager. *Of course not, I always put my father on the floor in restaurants.*

'He's a heart patient and he's having chest pain,' Brian said instead.

'Should . . . should I call an ambulance? Ask if there's a doctor here?'

'I *am* a doctor,' Brian said, for the first time in a year and a half. 'And I think an ambulance would be an excellent idea.'

Silently, Brian cursed himself for giving in to the Boston trip. Jack's internist, cardiologist, surgeon, and all his records were at Suburban Hospital, way on the other side of Route 128. It was an excellent hospital, well known for its orthopedics, rehabilitation medicine, and in some circles, for a former chief of cardiology named Brian Holbrook.

He checked Jack's pulses once again and mopped his brow.

'How's your pain, Jack? One to ten.'

'Six. The nitro's helping. What are the odds it's a coronary?'

'Fifty-fifty.'

'Bad odds.'

'Just hang in there. The EMTs'll get a little oxygen going and give you some pain medicine, and you'll feel much better.'

'Ten bucks says one of the EMTs in the ambulance is a woman. Deal?'

'Deal. Just stay cool. Do you want to lie down flat?'

'I couldn't.'

In the distance, they could hear an approaching siren. Brian kept a constant check of the pulse at Jack's wrist. The perspiration, so typical of a cardiac event, seemed less heavy.

'Everything's fine, Pop. How's the pain now?'

'Ten.'

'The pain is up to a ten?'

'No, you owe me ten.'

Jack nodded toward the door, where a young brunette in blue EMT coveralls was on the pulling end of a stretcher. Brian introduced his father and gave a capsule summary of the situation and the limited treatment he had instituted.

'You a doctor?' The young woman asked immediately.

‘A cardiologist. Brian Holbrook.’

‘Well, we got no pride on this team, Dr. Holbrook,’ she said, doing, it seemed, a dozen things at once, and doing them all well. ‘If there’s anything we overlook, just call it out.’

‘Thanks. Jack’s a patient at Suburban Hospital.’

‘Well, in a few minutes he’s going to be a patient at White Memorial. That okay with you?’

White Memorial was not only the best hospital in the city, it was the home of Boston Heart Institute, one of the foremost centers of its kind. Brian flashed on the interview he had blown when applying for cardiology training there. The subsequent rejection letter was hardly a surprise. Given all that had happened to him since then, he mused, it seemed the interviewer had shown pretty good judgment.

Brian noted Jack’s immediate improvement with a bit of IV morphine and some oxygen.

‘Actually,’ he said to the young EMT, ‘Boston Heart is precisely where I was going to ask to have him taken.’

## Chapter 2

BRIAN SQUEEZED INTO the ambulance for the short ride from Back Bay to White Memorial. His father's pain was down to a two or three by the time they left the Towne Deli. Still, throughout the ride Brian kept a watchful eye on the monitor. The absence of extra beats was a good sign, but the shape of the cardiogram wave pattern strongly suggested an acute coronary.

Jack's cardiologist at Suburban was Gary Gold, one of Brian's former partners - the only one of the four partners who had believed that Brian was recovering from an illness and should be readmitted to the practice as soon as he was ready. Silently, Brian cursed himself for not insisting that Gary be more aggressive with Jack in pushing for a repeat cardiac catheterization and surgical evaluation. But then again, with Jack so adamantly against repeat surgery, what was there to do?

White Memorial was an architectural polyglot of a dozen or more buildings crowding four square blocks along the Charles River. All around, as with most large hospitals, there was construction in progress. Earth movers and other heavy equipment were as much a part of the scene as were ambulances, and two towering cranes rose above all but the tallest building. A new ambulatory care center, one sign proclaimed. The twenty-story future home of the Hellman Research Building, boasted another. Like the patients within, the hospital itself was in a constant cycle of disease and healing, decay and repair, death and birth.

The vast ER was in noisy but controlled disarray. The two triage nurses were backed up, and the waiting room was

full. Brian took in the scene as they rushed Jack to a monitor bed in the back. The drama and energy of the place were palpable to him – his element. Merely walking into the ER made him feel as if he had been breathing oxygen under water and had suddenly popped through the surface. He had anticipated heightened emotions at reentering this world, but he was still surprised by the fullness in his chest and throat, and the sudden increased moisture in his eyes. Not that long ago he had been part of all this and his own actions had caused it to be taken away. Now, there was no telling when, or even *if*, he would ever get it back again.

‘How’re you doing, Jack?’ Brian asked, taking his father’s hand as they waited for a clean sheet to be thrown over the narrow gurney in room 6.

‘Been better. The pain’s gone, though.’

‘Great.’

‘Two bucks says I don’t get dinner.’

Brian glanced at the monitor. The elevation in the ST segment of the cardiographic tracing was less striking – definitely a good omen.

‘If this place serves typical hospital food,’ he said, ‘you stand to win twice.’

He helped the team transfer Jack to his bed, then stood off to one side as a resident named Ethan Prince began his rapid preliminary evaluation. Brian grudgingly gave the young man high marks for speed and thoroughness. Then he remembered where he was. Suburban was a decent enough hospital, but not one of the interns or residents there would ever get a call-back interview at White Memorial. Slip below the top ten percent of your medical school class and you didn’t even bother applying.

‘You know anybody here?’ Jack asked Brian.

The resident, listening through his stethoscope, shushed him.

*I hope not*, Brian thought.

‘I don’t think so,’ he whispered.

As if on cue, he heard his name being called and looked over at the doorway. Standing there, hands on hips, was Sherry Gordon, not much older than Brian, but a grandmother several times over. She was right up there with the sharpest ER nurses Brian had ever worked with.

'Hey, you're a Suburban girl,' he said, crossing to her and accepting a warm hug and kiss on the cheek. 'What're you doing here?'

'Cream rises to the top. They'd had my application on file for years. Openings don't come too frequently in this place.'

'You like it?'

She gestured to the chaos and smiled.

'What do you think?' She studied him intently. 'So, how about you? Are you okay?'

Brian held her gaze.

'It took three months in a rehab,' he replied, softly enough that only she could hear, 'and about a billion AA and NA meetings, but yeah, I'm okay.'

'I'm happy to hear that, Brian. Real happy. That's your dad, right? I remember that nightmare he went through at Suburban.'

'Six years ago. He had an MI four years before that, then gradually his angina became too severe to bear and we went for the surgery. And you're right. It was a nightmare. And to make matters worse, the bypass wasn't even that successful. He's probably having a small MI now.'

'Well, he's got a crackerjack resident going over him. Kid reminds me of you.'

'I wish.'

'Tell him to look into getting your dad put on Vasclear. Everyone around here has started talking about it. Listen, I've got to get back to help Dr. Gianatasio. He's got a real sick lady down the hall.'

'Phil Gianatasio?'

'That's right. You know him?'

'From years ago, when we were interns, then residents, together. I had no idea he was even in Boston. This is like old home week for me. Please tell him I'm here, Sherry. I'll stop by when I'm certain my pop's stable. Would that be okay?'

'I don't see why not. Got to run. Good luck with your dad.'

*Vasclear*. Brian knew next to nothing about the drug, and most of what he did know he had learned from the newspapers. He wasn't as medically current as in the days when he was attending cardiology rounds twice a week and reading or skimming a dozen different journals. But he had kept up fairly well through tapes and two courses, and *Vasclear*, the latest in a long line of experimental drugs aimed at reducing arteriosclerosis, simply hadn't been written about widely.

Ethan Prince freed his stethoscope from his ears, reviewed Jack's EKG again, then passed it over to Brian. Brian accepted it calmly, consciously trying to keep his eagerness and gratitude hidden from the younger physician. There was still a persistent two-millimeter elevation in the ST segment in several of the twelve standard views in the tracing.

'Looks like some persistent anterior injury,' Brian said.

'I agree. I'll get the wheels in motion for his admission. Meanwhile, we've got to decide whether to attempt to melt the blockage. Before we do that, I'll try and get him a cardiologist. Dr. Gianatasio is on first backup, but he's got all he can handle with a very sick woman in four. I'll have to find out who's on second call.' He turned to Jack, whose color had improved significantly. 'Mr. Holbrook, it appears you're having a very small blockage, and as a result a part of your heart is not getting enough blood.'

'A heart attack,' Jack said. 'It's okay. You can say it.'

'Actually, we won't be certain it's a full heart attack until we see some blood tests and another cardiogram.'

'Two bucks says it is.'

'Pardon?'