

CHAPTER 10

REX AND TRISSY ARRIVED at work on time with their minds free of the early morning self-induced haze. Unlike most couples, they truly enjoyed working together and insisted on being scheduled for the same shift. As they entered the emergency room, they could see and feel the fatigue surrounding the night shift. However, the usual chaos had been replaced with a calm, eerie quiet. They immediately sensed that they were in the eye of a category-five hurricane.

Trissy walked over to Patty Carlock, RN, to receive report and relieve the watch.

“Good morning, Hanz. How was your night?” Rex barked with enthusiasm as he approached the weary physician.

“The shift was miserable, absolutely miserable!” Hanz responded, his monotone voice dry and deep. “It was out of control all night, but about five a.m. everything unexpectedly calmed down.”

“Well, what patients do you have remaining?” Rex inquired, thankful that the morning would start off slow.

“Unlike the mess I inherited at the start of my shift, only two patients remain,” Hanz concluded before giving report.

“Damn fine job, Hanz!” Rex said as he patted his fellow doc on the back.

Hanz attempted to generate a smile, which was accompanied by some sort of snorting sound as he walked off.

“Where’s Wanda today?” Rex asked.

“She’s splitting the shift with Big Dog,” Trissy responded, her apprehension based in reality.

“Oh, Lord!” Rex blurted, rolling his eyes. He thought the world of the young male nurse, Big Dog. However, his tall tales of life in the country were so bizarre, Rex never knew which ones were real. In any case, what was assured was a rousing shift filled with plenty of laughter.

“I’m sure we’re in for a real sumptuous treat,” Trissy said with a smile, “and he’s late, as usual. I’m going to buy that boy an alarm clock for Christmas.”

Suddenly, the silence of the ER was broken by a loud “Yeah, boy!” There was no doubt that Big Dog had arrived.

Alan Moreau, the infamous “Big Dog,” was from nearby Marksville, a town where inbreeding was considered a fashion statement. To him, everything was big. He owned the biggest dog, had shot the biggest squirrel, and damn near married the biggest, homeliest girl! However, “Big Dog” never did marry and refused to find his own pad. Always overly enthusiastic and exceedingly energetic, his mystique was only embellished with the tall stories he shared in his thick Cajun accent.

“How are you doing today, Big Dog?” Rex asked.

“I am doing well, Dr. B. But yesterday was another story,” Big Dog responded.

Down the hall, Boom Boom and Dr. Leadbury were engaged in conversation. Out front, the waiting room had been quiet. Debby Flat was back at her post at triage and her keen eye caught site of an elderly gentleman apparently being wheeled in

by his granddaughter. He was gagging and grabbing his chest as he moaned.

"My husband is having chest pain!" the beautiful young lady proclaimed.

The patient was pale and sweaty. Debby immediately realized the urgency of the moment. She grabbed the wheelchair and rushed the patient to the back.

"Chest pain!" Debby yelled as she passed through the locked doors and into the emergency room. Instantaneously, the patient slumped over and became unresponsive.

The morning solitude had been shattered. The brief truce with the public was over and a new day's battle for survival was now underway.

"Room six!" Sheila shouted, watching Debby struggle to keep the patient from slithering out of a wheelchair. "Dr. Bent, I believe your services are needed!" Sheila said loudly as she pointed toward the patient who appeared to have gone into cardiac arrest.

Foxxman rushed to Debby's assistance, followed by Trissy and Big Dog. All four grabbed the arms and legs of the lifeless body and struggled to lift him onto the stretcher.

"He so sweaty that I can't get a good grasp!" Big Dog complained as the patient kept slipping from his hands.

"Here we go, on three!" Rex instructed, reaching over the stretcher and grabbing the patient by the belt buckle. "One, two, three!" Rex shouted as the team provided enough lift. The unresponsive elderly gentleman landed on the stretcher with a thud.

"He's not breathing!" Trissy shouted as the patient suddenly became cyanotic.

"Get an ambu bag," Rex instructed, feeling for a nonexistent pulse. "Foxxman, get the crash cart. Trissy, start bagging him. Big Dog, get us a line," Rex ordered as he began chest compressions.

Foxxman immediately turned on the defibrillator. Debby ripped the patient's shirt open and placed the orange rubber electrical conduction-enhancing sticky pads over his heart. Rex grabbed the defibrillator paddles and placed them on top of the sticky pads as Big Dog and Trissy rushed to carry out their tasks. Rex looked at the monitor as the electrical signal from the patient's heart came into view.

"He's in V-tach. Charge the defibrillator to two hundred joules," Rex ordered. A high-pitched whining was heard as the machine began to charge.

"Stand back!" Rex shouted. The machine beeped, announcing that it had been fully charged to the requested power of two hundred joules. "Everyone clear?" Rex increased the pressure on the paddles placed on the patient's chest.

"Yes!" Big Dog, Trissy, and Debby shouted in unison, stepping back from the stretcher.

Rex immediately depressed the discharge buttons and a loud thump could be heard as a high-voltage electrical shock was delivered. The patient's limp body was momentarily lifted from the stretcher and his arms flailed.

"Charge to the defibrillator to three hundred joules," Rex ordered, pressing the paddles against the patient's chest, ready to deliver an even greater amount of power in a desperate attempt to restart his heart.

"Three hundred joules it is," Debby responded calmly.

Again, the machine started to whine as it began to charge.

Suddenly, the cardiac monitor indicated that the patient was in a normal sinus rhythm. Rex removed the paddles from the patient's chest.

"Bag the patient, Trissy. Big Dog, check for a pulse," Rex ordered.

"Yeah, boy! I have a strong carotid pulse," Big Dog announced.

"Good job, gang," Rex praised.

"We have a blood pressure of one hundred over sixty, and a pulse of one hundred thirty," Foxxman proclaimed with great satisfaction.

"Big Dog, run in one hundred and fifty milligrams of Amiodarone over ten minutes and then put him on a drip," Rex ordered. "We need an EKG *stat*. Run a cardiac workup and let's get ready to intubate," Rex barked. "Sheila, call radiology for a portable chest X-ray to confirm tube placement. Also, let the lab know we need an arterial blood gas in thirty minutes," Rex requested as he walked out of room six.

"Rex, the patient is a Mr. Kevin Barr from Healdsburg, California. He's in the wine business. His wife, Linda Barr, is in the family room," Sheila notified Rex.

"Where in the hell is Healdsburg?" Rex wondered aloud. "And what in hell is he doing in this buzzard-infested swamp?"

"I understand that he and his wife were visiting Mr. Barr's inebriated cousin," Sheila replied.

"That's possible," Rex replied, knowing the Cajuns' love of flammable fire water.

"Now, Rex, let me warn you that Mr. Barr's wife is quite a bit younger than he," Sheila said, issuing yet another warning.

"Obviously, then, Mr. Barr and I have a lot in common. We both love grapes, and we both married beautiful, younger women," Rex said, winking at Trissy.

"Aren't you nice?" Trissy replied, kissing her husband on the cheek.

"That's where you're wrong. He's a billionaire gentleman farmer, and you're a decrepit, debt-ridden, dirty old man," Sheila giggled in a very sinister manner.

"Sheila, there just happens to be a fine line between being a billionaire and being penniless. I just happened to have grown up on the wrong side of the tracks," Rex uttered in his own defense.

“Yeah, right,” Sheila chuckled.

“Bed six’s EKG,” the technician said, handing Rex the electrical tracing.

“Thank you,” Rex said. “Sheila, get in touch with the cardiologist on call. Mr. Barr is having an MI. There are tombstones in all leads,” Rex said with urgency.

“Big Dog, get Mr. Barr ready for a trip to the cath lab. Bolus him with five thousand units of heparin and start a drip at one thousand units per hour.”

“Yeah, boy,” Big Dog replied, springing into action.

“Rex, please go see Mrs. Barr. And remember, she’s his wife and not his granddaughter!” Sheila yelled as she issued her fourth warning.

“Alright, alright, stop nagging!” Rex insisted as he continued on his mission.

“I’m not nagging,” Sheila growled. “Trissy, please go with your husband and see that he doesn’t put his foot in his mouth again!” Sheila shouted.

Minutes later Rex and Trissy left Mrs. Barr and stepped back into hell.

“My God!” Rex gasped as he observed the pandemonium in the ER.

In the blink of an eye, the ER had crossed the fine line dividing controlled chaos from uncontrolled madness. A sea of humanity had suddenly descended upon Carencrow Regional’s emergency room. Rex and Trissy successfully dodged their way through the traffic and made their way back to the counter.

“For God’s sake, Boom Boom, this place is out of control,” Rex complained.

“Stay focused, Rex,” Boom Boom replied. “Your mission is to survive the shift, and the shift is now half over.”

"What a miserable morning, and the afternoon will probably be worse," Rex moaned.

"Cardiology is on line two!" Sheila shouted.

"Don't worry about the mule, just load the wagon," Boom Boom muttered as Wanda arrived to relieve Big Dog.

"Rrrrex, surgery is coming down to examine the patients with cholelithiasis and acute appendicitis. Also, our bipolar plastic surgeon is aware of the young man with the thumb amputation," Sheila reported, adding, "I think his lithium level is low."

"Great."

"Also, Rrrrex, Debby called from triage and needs help. She has six very sick patients with nausea and vomiting that need beds. Debby must be low on Crown Royal and hallucinating, because she describes the patients as being distant cousins of the blue-footed boobies," Shiela announced.

"I'll bring them to the back, Rrrrex," Trissy insisted, jogging toward triage.

"Big Dog, help Trissy fetch the patients," Rex requested.

"Yeah, Boy," Big Dog responded enthusiastically as he raced to catch up to Trissy.

"Rrrrex, I'm here to relieve Big Dog," Wanda announced.

"Great, we could use the extra hands."

"Wanda, Foxxman, we need your help, pronto!" Trissy shouted, as she and Big Dog wheeled what looked like a lifeless body toward room fourteen. The patient was mumbling incoherently. He was so weak that he had to be lifted onto the stretcher.

Suddenly the smell of death permeated the room.

"He's still breathing, but his pulse is weak and thready," Trissy announced after a quick assessment, before slapping electrical leads onto the patient's chest and starting an IV as Big Dog wrapped the blood pressure cuff around the patient's arm, and Foxxman placed a pulse oximeter on his finger.

“We need all hands on at triage ASAP. Debby has five more critical patients!” Trissy shouted.

“Oh, that smells like a GI bleed. Trissy, what in the world did Debby tell you about this patient?” Rex gasped, and gagged as he entered the room to examine the patient.

“She said that a van pulled up to the entrance and unloaded six patients, all with the same complaint of nausea and vomiting. Whoever dropped them off spoke in broken English and quickly took off. Debby believes she understood that the patients were crew members on a ship, which recently arrived from Asia,” Trissy replied as Rex felt for the man’s radial pulse.

“I’m Dr. Bent. What is your name?” Rex asked, but the patient only moaned.

“Are you hurting anywhere?” Again, there was no response.

Rex then rubbed the patient’s sternum with his knuckles hoping that this physical irritation would elicit a response. The patient moaned a little louder and appeared to move his arms and legs but otherwise did not respond.

“What in the world could have happened?” Rex asked as thick layers of skin sloughed off wherever he touched.

The patient’s skin was blue with large blisters and massive denuded areas.

“Damn sure looks like a snake crawling out of his skin,” Big Dog observed as Trissy connected the IV tubing and bolused the fluids.

“His pupils are round and reactive, but his eyes are divergent and keep oscillating back and forth,” Rex said as he continued his exam. “Wow, even his lips are blue, as is his entire mouth. Mucus membranes are dry, no JVD, trachea is midline, heart tachycardic without murmurs, lungs are wet, abdomen distended and tense, extremities cool and pale without palpable pulses,” Rex added.

“What a bizarre presentation,” Wanda whispered.

"Bolus him with two liters of normal saline, start bagging him, and get ready to intubate," Rex ordered while pumping up the bed, depressing the red handles that enabled the head be tilted downward, ensuring an increased blood flow to the patient's brain.

"Already in progress," Trissy replied, and she hung a second liter of fluid.

"The patient has large blisters on the palms of his hands but not on the soles of his feet; now that's an unusual finding," Wanda noticed.

"Maybe he burned his hands while trying to extinguish a fire onboard his ship," Trissy suggested as the automatic blood pressure cuff cycled, struggling to determine a blood pressure.

"His blood pressure is seventy-over-forty, heart rate one-sixty, respiratory rate thirty and O-two saturation eighty-five percent," Trissy announced.

"Wanda get me a hemocult card," Rex requested as he checked the patient's rectum. "Belay that order!" Rex shouted. His finger was coated in a thick blue/black tar-like gel with a smell that would wake the dead. *There was no doubt he had a GI bleed, but why the blue color on his lips and in his stool,* Rex wondered.

"His rectal temp is one hundred and four," Trissy said moments later.

"Trissy, get two blood cultures and order three-point-three-seven-five grams of Zosyn IV. Foxxman, get us a Tylenol suppository, place ice bags to the axilla, and find a cooling blanket," Rex ordered.

"Yes, sir."

"Sheila, we need four units of O-negative blood *wikiwiki*, and call an ER Code *blue*. We have five other patients fighting for their lives!" Rex shouted. "Big Dog, start two more lines with normal saline wide open," Rex ordered.

“If you’re waiting for me, you’re already behind, and I’ve already sent all the appropriate labs,” Big Dog replied with great pride.

Suddenly, the patient started retching uncontrollably. Massive amounts of blue vomit gushed several feet in the air.

“Oh boy, it looks like Old Faithful just erupted,” Big Dog said as Rex turned the patient onto his side, while Trissy suctioned his mouth to prevent the sailor from aspirating.

“Code Blue ER, Code Blue ER, CODE BLUE ER” loudly reverberated throughout the hospital.

Seconds later the patient was intubated.

“Good God, I’ve never seen anything like it. Call the code. Great job, everyone.” Rex said fifteen minutes later.

“Time of death, nineteen-eleven,” Wanda announced sadly.

Within minutes all of the patient’s shipmates had met the same fate.