

Chapter 1

Danger Dead Ahead

I knew it was cancer the minute I saw it.

It was a huge polyp, like a giant black mushroom, and it blocked the way forward. The surface was irregular and coated with thick green mucus. I washed it with water and suctioned off the debris. The mucus coat quickly dissolved, revealing a raw crimson lining with twisted blood vessels. I washed it again, slowly, so as to avoid damaging the blood vessels.

I was alarmed. I studied the polyp after cleaning it.

The top of the polyp was definitely malignant, but the stalk was smooth. It was possible that the cancer had not invaded the stalk. All I had to do was to cut the base of the stalk; I could remove the cancer before it had a chance to infiltrate down the stalk and spread. Cutting the base of the stalk could solve the problem and save my patient an operation.

The malignant mass had to be removed, and I had done many similar cases before. But those cases had been in Houston and London. Now I was in a remote part of Texas with no backup. Could I do it safely? A large growth like this could have robust arteries in the stalk that might bleed ferociously. What if I cut the polyp and couldn't stop the bleeding?

We were in an operating room in Hotspur, Texas, performing a colonoscopy. Our patient, Emily Trueblood, was sedated and lying on her left side, and the endoscope was in her colon, her large intestine. The interior of the colon was displayed on a grainy screen. The nurse, Penny Fulbright, and I gawked at it. The growth wobbled with the irrigation. I stopped flushing, suctioned the water out, and pumped in carbon dioxide gas to stretch the colon open. I inched closer to the growth and suctioned again. My mind raced.

Dare I cut this massive polyp?

The suctioning suddenly wrenched the polyp against the tip of the endoscope and everything went red. I washed again and re-inflated. The polyp fell back and rotated. I saw the other side of the head. It was irregular, with two smaller lobes. The gas I had just pumped in moved out abruptly and the lining of the colon collapsed around the polyp like a shroud. I pumped in more gas, but the patient expelled it out again. I kept pushing in more gas but the colonic lining remained collapsed. I called out in frustration.

“I can't do anything if I can't keep it open!” I cried.

Penny was agitated. She shook her head and waved her hands in frustration.

“I don’t know what to do! What’re you going to do, Doc?” Penny asked. “And, anyway, how’re we going to keep it open?”

I calmed myself and remembered what I had done in the past.

“She’s lying on her side, I bet that’s compressing her sigmoid colon. Let’s roll her onto her back,” I decided.

Penny jumped into action. We straightened our patients’ legs and rolled her onto her back. I inflated again. Penny rubbed Emily’s ankles soothingly.

“Bless her heart, that polyp looks like vile corruption on top of vile corruption,” she declared.

I racked my brain furiously.

In Houston or London, I would have had no hesitation removing that polyp. Had it bled, I would have injected adrenaline or clamped it with a metal clip. And I could have called a surgeon to bail me out, if necessary. But we were in Hotspur, sixty miles from the closest ICU!

I took a deep breath.

“It looks really bad,” Penny said.

I nodded.

I could withdraw the scope and send her to a gastroenterologist in Abilene, that might be the safest option. But that would mean I had not examined the rest of the colon, and I had left my patient with a cancer that was poised to spread.

There was something else.

And it would appear that I was unsure of my abilities. Word might get around that I wasn’t able to handle anything complicated.

That bothered me.

“Let’s get the heck out of here before we get our asses whupped,” Penny declared, with a shudder. “It just looks meaner than evil. Bad deal!”

But if I didn’t do what I was trained to do, I would lose credibility.

I took a deep breath.

“It looks bad,” I agreed, “But it does have a smooth stalk that looks uninvolved. Give me a snare, Penny. I’m going to cut that stalk!”

Penny was aghast.

“What? Doctor, are you *serious*? Are you going to mess with that monster?” she asked, alarmed.

I didn’t know what to say. I reconsidered my options quickly.

Was I jeopardizing my patient out of vanity? I could just take a biopsy and abandon the procedure. Or I could remove the polyp and complete my examination, like a real specialist.

I put my hand out.

“Snare, please,” I said.

Penny jumped back and shook her head vigorously.

“Oh, no! No, no! You’re really going to cut it, aren’t you? Don’t do it!” she pleaded.

I bristled. I never like being told what to do, even if it’s undeniably sensible. Most doctors, I like to think, have brittle egos and hate being held back. We keep pushing the limits and often take chances when we’re not sure of success or failure. We call this *experience*. So I gazed at the screen and ignored Penny. I thought again, not as a regular physician, but as a *specialist*.

“Doctor, please just pull out now! Don’t risk it!” Penny pleaded.

What I heard was, *you can’t do it*.

That stung.

True, I could just take a biopsy and pull out and send her to a bigger hospital. That would be the safest thing to do. But it would prolong the process by days or weeks. Or I could use my skills and cut it out and resolve the whole matter right now.

I maneuvered the instrument. Penny hopped around in agitation.

“What are you going to do?” she asked. “I’m terrified!”

“Calm down. I’m just taking a better look at it,” I said.

“Doctor, I know you’re used to working in big hospitals in Houston and London. But this is little Hotspur, Texas,” she pleaded.

“I know.”

“We’re a *tiny* yee-haw hospital in the middle of *nowhere*, Doc!”

“I realize that, Penny.”

“Doc, what if you cut it off and she bleeds? You know we ain’t set up for someone bleeding! We got no blood bank in our itty bitty hospital.”

“We have two units of O negative blood,” I grunted.

“That’s *all* the blood we have in the whole county! You got to be real careful. Don’t bite off more’n you can chew!”

I moved the tip of the scope from side to side at the base of the polyp.

“If she bleeds like crazy she could have a heart attack,” Penny went on.

“I realize that.”

“Or a stroke. She could have a stroke.”

“Very unlikely.”

Penny crossed her arms and glared at me.

"I'm sorry, I don't fancy doing CPR here or in the ambulance to Baptist Hospital. She could bleed out!"

"You think I don't know that?"

"She could *die*. People have *died* from medical mistakes. Why are you pushing the scope around?"

"I'm checking to see if the stalk is smooth all around. That would mean that the cancer on the top has not invaded the stalk," I explained.

"The stock?"

"No, I mean the stalk, the smooth tube which connects the cancer to the lining of the colon."

"Oh, a *stalk*? You mean, like the stalk of a flower?" Penny asked, and stepped closer to the screen.

I nodded. She shook her head and stepped back.

"Doctor, I have no experience in doing these procedures, none whatsoever, none, nada, zip," she protested.

"The *stalk*. This polyp has a decent *stalk*. So we can cut it," I said, with clenched teeth.

"Sometimes, I don't even understand what you say, your accent. I'm just an average surgical nurse, and that looks like a big, fat cancer. So I say, just leave it alone. Ship her to Abilene or Dallas, Doc," Penny pleaded.

I adopted what I thought was a reassuring tone.

"Don't worry, I realize this is our first week of doing colonoscopies in Hotspur. I'm going to guide you through it," I said.

"You're taking a mighty big chance," she muttered. "I guess it's good that you got confidence."

"I do have experience," I admitted.

"Bet you were top of your class!" Penny said.

I remembered my program director. "Mathur's not the best, but he's not the worst either. If it was my family, I would pick someone else over Mathur," he had said.

I decided to change the subject quickly. I pointed to a packet on the table.

"That's the snare forceps. Open it and hand it to me."

Penny did so reluctantly.

"I'm just checking it, getting a better assessment," I said, soothingly.

"Okay, then," Penny smiled.

"Good. Now I feed the tip of the snare into the scope at this end and you'll see the tip come out the other end. Watch the screen."

The tip of the snare emerged promptly.

"So the snare is inside her now?" Penny asked.

"Yes. The *tip* of the snare forceps is inside her, in her sigmoid colon. The sigmoid colon is in the lower left side of the abdomen."

“I *know* that, Doctor.”

I poked the head of the polyp with the tip of the snare. It buckled and bled a little.

“Ow! Ow! Don’t do that! You made it bleed!” Penny recoiled.

I prodded the top of the polyp. It toppled backwards and slipped away, revealing the thick white cord.

“Is that thick white tube the stalk?” Penny asked.

“Yes.”

“Looks pretty thick, about a quarter inch, you reckon?”

“Yes.”

“Is that good or bad, that it’s got a stalk?”

“It’s good. *Very* good. It looks like there’s a pretty good stalk. Maybe we can cut it off with our snare,” I said.

Penny was horrified.

“Whoa! No, no! You said you were just checking it!”

“I know. I was checking it out to see if it had a stalk, to see if I could safely cut it.”

Penny shook her head emphatically.

“Cut it? Cut that huge, nasty thing? Are you crazy?” she shrieked.

“It’s got a decent stalk. I can cut it off.”

“But what if there’s an artery inside that stalk?”

“Inject it with adrenaline.”

“Will that work?”

“Yes, it does.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“I’ve done this procedure hundreds of times, Penny. I can handle it.”

“Doctor, we haven’t done this sort of procedure here in Hotspur. Maybe you did those things all the time in Houston and London but this is Hotspur! I refuse!”

I was angry, but I held back.

“I understand your reluctance,” I said. “But I’m a specialist. I’ve done these procedures many, many times. I know how to deal with it.”

Penny was still unconvinced. She held up her hands and shook her head vigorously. She took a step back.

“We’ve got no ICU, no surgeon, no fancy equipment, no nothing!” she said.

I hesitated. I looked at the screen again.

“No back-up, no anesthesia, no CT!”

“I realize that.”

“We’re out in the sticks with nothing, but *nothing* to help us! I’m scared!”

Penny was bubbling with agitation. She took another step back. I panicked. I needed her help.

"I know, I know. But I really think I could cut that polyp out. I've done it so many times, on even bigger polyps."

"No! Don't do it, Doctor! Don't do it!" Penny urged me. She did not return to my side.

A familiar voice growled behind me. I jumped.

"She's right, Einstein. Don't do it," it advised. I turned around and peered into the darkness.

"Karl! What are you doing here?" I said.

"Question is, what are *you* doing here?" Karl countered.

"Obviously I'm doing a colonoscopy. She's got this big polyp and I think it's malignant."

"Swell. So you made the diagnosis. Now get the H E double hockey-sticks out of there and pack her off to Abilene!" Karl thundered.

"I can remove that polyp!" I protested. "I've done lots of polyps like this one."

"Sure you have, O Grand Piano, but this is not your fancy-ass Royal Hospital of London or the Houston medical city, savvy? You cut that polyp, she bleeds like a stuck pig, then we got only two units of O negative to get her to Abilene with."

"She won't bleed much, I'm pretty sure."

"You realize she's also a Board member?" he added.

"Yes."

"One of your biggest supporters?"

"Yes."

"So why are you taking a chance? Why are you trying to be a hero?"

"I'm a specialist. I can do this," I repeated.

"You mess with her, you'll get sued, Einstein."

I was silent.

"Didn't think of that, did you? She's royalty around here. She's going to sue the pants off you, I'll bet the judge'll be her uncle and the jurors all go to her church and you'll be out on your ass."

I exhaled. Karl was right.

"Give up, man. You're taking a shitload of risk and what does it get you? Nothing!"

Karl shook my shoulder.

"Don't be an idiot. Get your ass out of there," he advised.

My mouth parched and my heart raced. I didn't know what to say. Karl sensed my hesitation.

"The rest of the Hospital Board will nail you to the wall if you screw up!" Karl added, his voice strangely cheerful.

I gritted my teeth and glared at him. Karl laughed.

"You are a real piece of work!" he declared.

"I *can* remove that polyp. I've done it before many times, really, and some even bigger."

Karl shook his head.

“Negative. First rule of medicine is, cover your ass,” he said.

“It’s got a decent stalk,” I reasoned.

Karl sighed and shook his head.

“Yeah. Decent stalk with a decent artery that’s gonna bleed like stink.”

“I can stop the bleeding, if it happens.”

Karl shook his head.

“Listen, moron. No one would like to see you fail more than me. And I’m telling you, just forget it,” he advised.

His advice had the opposite effect on me. I *had* to prove myself.

“I *can* do it,” I repeated, grimly.

Karl stared at me in astonishment. He shrugged.

“It’s your funeral, man. Don’t say I didn’t tell you,” he said.

I washed the polyp again and photographed it. I weighed my options. I wished Karl would leave. I looked back at Penny.

“Lost your nerve?” Karl inquired, pleasantly.

“No,” I replied.

“Sounds like you’re scared.”

I cleared my throat.

“No, I’m not. I can do this. I’m trained in this and I have the experience.”

“Yeah, that’s going to really impress the jury,” Karl said. “You complete moron.”

“Doctor, don’t let Dr. Karl push you!” Penny blurted.

“Who asked you, Nurse Ratchett?” Karl snapped.

“Open the snare, Penny,” I ordered.

“But I agree with Dr. Becker!” Penny added, hastily. “Don’t do it!”

“I *can* do this. Open the snare!” I said.

“I’m warning you, Doctor!” Penny repeated.

She operated the snare reluctantly. A large metal lasso appeared. I tried to wriggle it over the top of the polyp, but it kept slipping off.

“Your hands are shaking, brother!” Karl pointed out.

I twisted the endoscope from side to side and jiggled the snare over the top of the polyp.

“Penny, connect the snare to cautery,” I ordered.

“We got some problems with our cautery, Doctor,” Penny mumbled.

“*What?* Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“I didn’t expect you would actually want to *do* anything. Figured you were just going to look and then come out.”

“I want to snare this big polyp and I want to cauterize it so it doesn’t bleed. And you’re telling me the cautery doesn’t work?”

“Let me check the dang cautery,” Karl snorted.

He fiddled with the buttons and turned the power off and on.

“This cautery unit is a piece of junk,” he declared.

He disconnected the wall plug, then re-connected it.

“Try it again,” he said.

Penny inserted the snare electrode into several slots, one after another. She checked the monitor anxiously. It remained silent.

“The monitor has *not come on*, Penny,” I snapped.

“I am trying, Doctor, I’m a-trying!” she said, flustered.

“This is going to be a complete disaster,” Karl smirked. He pulled up a stool and sat down. “A real dumpster fire!”

“Switch it off and try again!” I ordered.

Penny complied. We waited a minute then tried all the possible connections again.

“It’s still not working, Penny!” I repeated.

“I can’t help it, Doctor! I don’t know what to do.”

“How am I supposed to remove a polyp if there’s no cautery?”

“I’m sorry, Doctor. I just don’t know what else to do,” she wailed.

Karl snorted.

“Give up, Einstein. This just isn’t your day.”

I gazed at the screen. The polyp bobbed back and forth victoriously, glazing over with blood and mucus.

“Get me adrenaline, ten cc of one in ten thousand adrenaline!” I ordered.

Penny opened her mouth but said nothing.

“We don’t even have adrenaline?” I asked, astonished, “We don’t have cautery, and we don’t even have adrenaline?”

“Told you. You’re up shit creek without a paddle. Literally,” Karl snorted.

“We don’t have adrenaline here in the room. But it’s in the pharmacy. Be right back,” Penny said, and shot out of the room.

“What good’s that going to do when you don’t have cautery?” asked Karl.

“One alternative to cauterization is to cut the base without cauterization, and inject the area with adrenaline before and after cutting it.”

“So you’re going to just slice it off without burning the stump?”

“Yes.”

“*Seriously?*”

“Yes. I plan to put a clip as well, to pinch the tissues together afterwards, like a staple.”

Karl exhaled loudly.

“Listen, Einstein. Like I said, no one would be happier than me to see you get your royal ass kicked out of here, no one, okay? But even I can’t let you do this. Give it up! You made the diagnosis. Cover yourself in glory! But now, go home. Ship her off to Abilene, and be done with it!”

I started sweating. My mouth dried up so much I could barely talk.

Karl stood up.

“Listen up, Einstein. Specialists belong in big cities, not in little po-dunk towns like Hotspur,” he said.

I swallowed and licked my lips.

“I’m going to try,” I croaked.

“Why?”

“Because I am a specialist. I’ve got the training. I think we should do as much as we can do safely right here. Good for the patients and good for the hospital,” I said. “Makes us look credible.”

Karl snorted.

“Screw credibility. If something happens to her, its going to be really bad for you!” he warned. “Remember, she’s on the Board. Imagine the headlines, *Hospital Board Member Killed By Overzealous Doctor!*”

He had a point. I remained silent.

“I know you, oh great Member of the Royal College of Physicians of London. Usually, you’re so cautious! This isn’t you! Why are you trying to be a hero? Give up already! This is way beyond you, okay?”

I was glad it was dark so Karl couldn’t see me tremble. He stood up and hissed in my ear.

“Your funeral, man! Your damn *funeral!*”

Penny returned with the adrenaline drawn up in a ten cc syringe.

“Got it!” she said, waving it triumphantly.

Karl ambled to the door.

“I just came here to tell you that your pal, Dell Clawsom, is in the clinic. He’s my patient, but wants to see you for some reason. So whenever you get done with this catastrophe, after you sign her death certificate and nail up her coffin, come on over to the clinic.”

Karl slammed the door and left.

I changed my mind. I decided that Karl was right, and I had no stomach for a lawsuit. I decided to give up and waved to Penny to admit defeat. But Penny was transformed.

“Yes! Let’s do this!” Penny enthused. She slammed the adrenaline into my palm.

“What? I thought you were dead against it!” I exclaimed.

Penny grabbed my wrist forcefully.

“I believe in you, Doctor. You’ve got all that fancy training in London and Houston, and I believe you when you say you can do this.”

I was taken aback.

“You’re a specialist!” Penny whooped.

I didn’t know what to say.

“I believe you. You can do this without hurting sweet Emily.”

I coughed nervously.

“You know how to do this without her bleeding to death,”

Penny said, brightly.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, my voice an octave lower.

“Go on, then!” Penny urged.

I peered at her, confused.

“What happened to you?” I asked, as I removed the snare from the endoscope and replaced it with the injection catheter.

“I’m tired of seeing Dr. Karl push you around, Doctor.”

“He means well,” I said, defensively.

“Nah. You’re this little brown dude and he’s this good old white boy who’s way bigger than you, just busting your chops all the time,” Penny declared. “But you’re finally standing up for yourself, like a real Texan, so I’m behind you all the way!”

I had always seen our conflict as a clash of titans. Apparently, it did not look like that to everyone.

“Oh,” I said, crestfallen.

“You’re a true blue ballsy Texan now,” Penny declared.

“Oh,” I repeated, further deflated.

“I’m ready to inject the adrenaline!” Penny chirped, waving the syringe.

The tip of the injection catheter emerged on the screen. My medical career balanced on it. I took a deep breath.

“Needle out!” I ordered.

Penny pushed the steel needle out of the plastic sheath. I guided the tip of the needle to the base of the stalk and jabbed it in.

“Inject two cc.”

Penny injected. Adrenaline squirted from the base.

“Slowly! Slowly!”

“Yes, Doctor.”

I repositioned.

“Again! One cc first, then another, but very slowly!”

My voice was becoming high-pitched.

“Yes, Doctor. Sorry for injecting too fast.”

We injected again.

“Watch the polyp. It should turn pale as we constrict the blood supply.”

The polyp looked exactly the same. We waited another minute. And another.

“The polyp seems to be shrinking a little, Doc.”

“I’m going to complete the rest of the exam and then come back to it.”

I maneuvered the endoscope past the growth and slowly advanced it all the way to the other end of the colon. No more masses. I sighed with relief.

“Now you’re going to pull back, Doctor?” Penny asked.

“Yes. Very slowly. We often see polyps on the way out.”

But there were no others. And when we returned to the sigmoid colon, the polyp had shrunk further.

“Well done, Doctor!” Penny said, “That looks much smaller!”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Adrenaline tightens the blood vessels. The polyp looks pale and shrunken. Now I can slip the snare over it.”

I passed the snare forceps through the instrument and watched the tip emerge on the screen.

“Open the snare all the way.”

Penny obeyed.

I looped the snare over the top of the growth like a garland and slid it down to the bottom of the stalk.

“Okay, close the snare. But do it slowly, very slowly!”

Penny closed the snare. The loop tightened around the bottom of the stalk and the polyp shuddered.

“Good position! Close it! Close!” I barked.

“It won’t close, Doctor!” Penny reported.

“Give it a little force.”

“I’m closing as hard as I can!”

The polyp started swelling and turned maroon.

“Okay, open the snare!”

“Open it?” Penny was surprised.

“Yes. I’m going to change my angle.”

I repositioned the snare, moving a fraction higher.

“Now close again!”

Penny struggled.

“It still won’t close completely, Doctor.”

“Penny, try harder.”

“I am trying, Doctor!”

“I’m going to jiggle the tip to help you,” I said.

“It’s not helping. It’s not working!” Penny wailed.

The polyp swelled up to its original dimensions but remained purple.

“It’s big again, Doctor!”

“I can see that, Penny,” I grimaced.

“I can’t get it any tighter, Doctor.”

“Try to connect to cautery again, then. Power setting should be fifteen watts, not twenty.”

Penny let go of the snare. The loop opened up and slid right off the growth. I groaned. She threw her arms up.

“Sorry, but I can’t do two things at once, Doctor.”

Penny fumbled with the cautery machine.

“I can’t see anything. I’m going to turn the lights back on.”

Penny turned the lights on and tried all the connections again.

“It’s still not working, Doctor,” she sighed.

I was at a loss. I realized that I was failing badly. I was not able to sever the polyp stalk and if I pulled too hard, it could cause the tissue to rip off and create a giant wound. Pulling and cutting would produce more trauma and more bleeding.

Karl kicked the door open and strode in.

“Just spoke to Emily’s daughter, Gwen. Guess what she said? She said her mother is an easy bleeder. Bleeds from the smallest cut.”

Karl chuckled. I exhaled and mentally rehearsed my surrender speech.

“Bleeds like a dang pig,” he added, slapping me on the shoulder. “Ain’t you the lucky one!”

He looked at the screen.

“It won’t cut?” he guessed correctly.

“No,” I admitted.

“This is great, Einstein. You got a VIP patient, you got a mother of a polyp, you got no cautery, your snare won’t cut it and if you do manage to rip the darn thing off, she’s an easy bleeder. I love it,” Karl enthused. “You’re a dead man.”

“Open the snare fully!” I ordered.

I tried to slide the snare over the polyp, but it kept snagging on the back. I twisted the scope and changed the angle of the snare, but it didn’t help.

“Are you going to get the snare on it sometime today?” Karl asked.

I said nothing. I stopped moving the snare. I had given up.

“Giving up?” Karl grinned.

“He’s not giving up! He’s going to try again,” Penny said, enthusiastically. “Just you see, Dr. Becker.”

She switched off the lights and grasped the snare forceps. I tried one last time. It slid over the head of the polyp and stopped at a perfect site just a little below the head, at the top of the stalk. Karl was astonished.

“What the heck?” he gaged.

“Yo! Let’s do this!” Penny cried out.

I opened my mouth to tell her to stop. Karl moved in closer.

“All right, Royal Physician to the Queen of England! Show me your stuff!”

I closed my mouth. I tugged the snare like a fishing line. The polyp came closer, into full view.

“Whoa! That’s a mean mother!” Karl hooted. “I’m telling you, it’s dangerous. Leave it and get the heck out of there!”

I remained silent. The position was ideal. The colon was not moving. There was full insufflation; the colon was well distended. I watched, astonished and grateful.

“We’re in good position,” I croaked, suppressing my surprise.

“Whoa! Smooth!” Karl said. “Smooth moves, man! Great technique!”

I shrugged, projecting nonchalance.

“Close snare,” I ordered.

Penny tightened the snare and the polyp swelled up and turned purple. A few beads of blood dripped off.

“Whoa! It’s going to bleed! Stop!” Karl yelled.

“No! Cut it!” I insisted. My heart was beating like a drum.

Penny closed the snare completely. It sliced through the stalk and the polyp immediately slumped over. A trickle of blood crept from the stalk. My heart was still pounding and my head throbbed painfully. For a minute, there was utter silence in the room.

“Amazing!” Penny whispered.

It was perfect. The stump was tiny and pink, and the polyp had fallen on its side like a tree. There was no further bleeding. We all stared at the screen in awe.

“Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit!” Karl declared.

“That looks good,” I allowed. My voice was raspy.

“Good? Man, that was *awesome!*” Karl enthused. “That was the best damn polypectomy I have ever seen!”

My mouth was so dry that I just nodded.

“Look at you, man! Cool as ice!” Karl whooped.

The only parts of me that weren’t shaking were my shoulders, so I shrugged.

“*Iceman!* You’re a dang iceman!” Karl said, reverently.

A trickle of blood emerged from the stump. I turned to Penny.

“Adrenaline!” I whispered.

I injected adrenaline into the stump again. The bleeding stopped. We waited anxiously.

No more bleeding.

My heart slowed down and I swallowed again.

“That was awesome,” Karl said, “Hey, Dale Clawsom is still waiting. He doesn’t like to be kept waiting.”

Karl walked out.

“Penny, I’m going to put the snare back in to grab the polyp that we just cut. It’s way too big to suck out through the scope,” I said.

“Do you think we need any more adrenaline?” Penny asked.

“We need to watch for bleeding. She could still bleed.”

I re-introduced the snare. Before I could grasp the polyp, the tip of the snare jabbed the stump, and it started spurting. The screen rapidly turned crimson. My mouth dried out completely and my heart raced.

“Doctor! It’s bleeding! Bleeding a lot!” Penny shrieked.

“I know. Remove the snare! Give me more adrenaline, now!”

We furiously exchanged the snare for the adrenaline injector.

“Get ready to push the needle out! I need to inject the stump while I can still see it!”

Blood gushed out of the stump. Within seconds, it was covered up.

“Gwen was right, her mother is an easy bleeder,” Penny said.

I flushed with water but the bleeding was profuse.

“I can’t see anything,” Penny said. “How do you know where to inject?”

“I’ll have to go blind,” I said grimly. I advanced the needle towards my last sighting of the stump.

“Needle out!” I ordered. Penny pushed the tip of the needle out. I thrust it into my target.

“One cc now,” I instructed. I saw the lining swell up with the injection.

I removed the needle and reinserted it a few millimeters to the right.

“Inject again, one more cc,” I said.

“Doc, I’m out of adrenaline.”

“What? You’re out of adrenaline?” I was shocked.

“That’s why I was asking if you needed any more.”

“Of course I need adrenaline!” I shouted. “What were you thinking?”

“I only brought one syringe and I lost some of it when I was flushing the injection catheter.”

I bit my lip.

“What more could possibly go wrong?” I howled.

“I’m so sorry!” Penny wailed.

I flushed with water. I couldn’t see anything. There was blood everywhere.

“Should I run down to the pharmacy and get some more adrenaline?”

“No, we don’t have time. Just draw up ten cc of saline right now, stat!”

“I left the sterile saline in the pharmacy too!” Penny cried.

“I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry!”

“Then draw up ten cc of saline from the patient’s IV bag!”

She did as ordered.

“Now we’re going to inject saline into the stump. Get ready.”

Penny attached the syringe of saline to the injection needle.

“So we’re going to inject saline instead of adrenaline?”

“Yes. It’s not perfect but it will put pressure on the stump just long enough for me to put the clip.”

I guessed the location of the stump and injected saline repeatedly in that area. Slowly, the bleeding slowed down and I was able to see the stump again. Drops of blood kept forming and dripping.

“The clip! *Now!* Give me the clip!” I shrieked.

Penny was a blur. She tore open the package, pulled out the clip forceps, straightened it out, and slid it smoothly into the scope. It popped out the other end and appeared on the screen.

“Excellent! Open the clip! I’m in a good position!” I cried.

She opened the jaws of the clip. I hovered right above the dripping stump.

“Close! Close hard!” I ordered.

Penny slammed the clip shut. The clip pinched the tissue at an angle and the dripping stopped immediately.

We watched the screen anxiously. The stump turned pale. I reintroduced the injection forceps and waited.

“I’m injecting one more time, as a precaution. Give me another two cc of saline now,” I said.

I injected both sides of the clip. I washed the area with water. The stump remained dry. I exchanged the injector for the snare forceps and grabbed the cut polyp with it, and dragged it out. I withdrew the endoscope completely and we both exhaled.

“Oh, my goodness!” Penny gasped, “Just look at the size of that polyp!”

Emily moaned and passed a large blood clot.

“Oh no!” Penny wailed, “She’s bleeding again! She’s bleeding!”

As if to confirm her worst fears, the patient obligingly passed another, even larger, clot.

“What are we going to *do*, Doctor?”

I wasn’t sure.

“Do you want me to get some O negative blood?”

I hesitated.

“It didn’t look like that much bleeding. Maybe that’s just old blood.”

“It looked red, Doctor.”

“Well, she only stopped bleeding a few minutes ago. Could be old stuff.”

“So you’re sure there’s nothing to worry about?”

I hesitated.

“Let’s look again.”

I wiped the endoscope and re-inserted it. I reached the site and washed it.

It was not bleeding.

“It’s not bleeding,” I said, trying to sound confident.

I waited for a few minutes. It did not bleed.

“Not bleeding but I want to be safe. Give me another metal clip.”

Penny had it ready, and handed it to me quickly. I passed it through the endoscope and clipped the stump at right angles to the first clip.

“I see the base of the polyp and I’ve put a second metal clip there,” I explained.

“Each clip costs the hospital three hundred dollars,” Penny said.

“ICU admission costs far more,” I countered.

Penny nodded.

“That should hold it nicely,” I said, keeping my voice steady.

“We sure don’t want her bleeding to death,” Penny declared. “She scared the holy crap out of me, Doc. Pardon my French.”

I removed the endoscope for the second time and wiped it down again. I handed it to Penny.

“You look a little shaken,” Penny said. “I guess that kind of scared the crap out of you, too, huh?”

I shrugged and removed my mask and gown.

“No, no. Done it before in Houston and London,” I croaked.

“But not in Hotspur,” Penny beamed. “I bet you’ve never done anything like this before!”

“I’m going to my office to write my operative note,” I said, keeping my voice steady. My legs were weak and I desperately needed coffee and fluids.

“Yes, Doctor. Good job!” Penny sang out.

I nodded and walked out stiffly, turning the lights on as I left. Out of Penny’s sight, I staggered across the corridor quickly. I steadied myself on the doorframe before entering the clinic. I overheard Karl talking to the office staff.

“There he was, that little dude, cool as ice, and he just chopped off that humongous polyp like it was *nothing!*” he recounted incredulously.

I was grateful that the room had been dark.

“Man, he was cool as ice! Didn’t even break a sweat!”

I waited for the pounding on my chest to slow down and the moisture to return to my mouth. I tested my voice before I sauntered in.

“There he is!” Karl announced, “There he is! The man of the hour! Mr. Cool Hand Luke! Man, that was something else! You’ve got some freaking nerve!”

“Some nerve? About what?” I feigned ignorance.

“About what? About that monster polyp, that’s what!”

I nodded, as if trying to remember the incident.

“Oh, that polyp? Yeah, that was kind of a big polyp,” I acknowledged.

“*Kind of?* It was a freaking mother of a polyp!” Karl thundered. “A freaking mother!”

“Dr. Becker, language!” Tracy scolded.

“You took a little time to wind up after I left,” Karl noted, “Did you have any problems?”

I shrugged and sauntered over to the coffee machine and helped myself. Karl wouldn’t find out the details for another thirty minutes, so I basked in the admiring gazes of Tracy, Ginger, Kendra, and two patients checking in at the window. I choked down a mug of hot, black liquid and took a deep breath.

“Yeah. Little bit of bleeding, yeah. Nothing much,” I declared, airily. “The ones I did in Houston and London, you should have seen *those*. This was nothing. Didn’t stress me at all.”