

Brain Chicane

Alan Maisel, MD



From Le Jacq Medical Fiction

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by
Alan Maisel, MD

To Marcy, who has, in unexpected ways, afforded me the opportunity to explore the core of my soul in ways I never imagined possible.

~Alan Maisel, MD

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Prologue

Her sweaty palms stained the graffiti-strewn concrete wall in the sixteenth-floor stairwell of Chicago's Washington Street Projects as she attempted to steady herself against the dizziness racking her body. Using all of her rapidly waning strength, she struggled to breathe through pursed lips, but the stingy amount of air she could inhale barely kept her conscious. She fixated on the empty syringe lying at her feet, the image surging nausea into her belly.

"Lordy, let me breathe," she prayed, "Let me breathe and I promise I'll stay clean."

"Did God have a limit on broken promises?" she wondered. She struggled to stay upright against the wall, but wobbled, lurched, and slammed to the floor, rivets of pain thundering through her elbow. Man, she'd find the bastard who sold her this shit. She stared at the dusty blue hue that had settled like the night in her nail beds.

The stairwell door opened suddenly. She thought it could be Selma, but was too weak to manage more than a guttural moan which was drowned out by the thumping bass of Gangsta rap music.

"Oh, God, let it be Selma," she thought. She saw large pointed boots and gazed upward at the shadowy figure standing over her. He was tall. "Maybe it's Leroy," she hoped, but then squinted for a better look. "No, he's white. And smilin'. The mutha fucker's smiling." Her eyes focused on his gloved hand - the shimmer of a needle cut through the darkness. Her chest heaved while she struggled for air. She tried to nod.

"Help me, please, I promise to get off the smack," she pleaded.

The stranger straddled her, bending close enough for her to smell the vapors of stale onions and beer and she gagged. Meanwhile, his hands found her inner thighs and pried her legs apart. Instinct told her to do something, scream, gouge his eyes, and kick him in the crotch. She was too weak. She merely winced as he ripped off her panties and then smothered her face to cut off her air. Still conscious, however, she felt his mouth vor-

ciously exploring her belly. Almost instantly, he pulled his mouth away and spat out part of a tooth that had caught on her belly ring.

"Shit!" he roared. "That cap was brand-new!" She tried to scream, but managed only to whimper. She felt warm blood pool in her navel. The price of health care is high in the projects.

"Bitch!" he muttered. She heard a belt buckle clank and endured the pain he inflicted, accentuated by his concluding, and finally heard him moan. It was over.

"Save me, sweet Jesus," she prayed. "Won't tell nobody what happened. Just give me that shit that makes you breathe again." She thought of her four-year-old daughter, Lizbeth. "Gotta get home. That girl, she needs me."

The rapist stood over her now, syringe in hand. "Hurry!" she squeaked. With her last bit of strength, she lifted her right arm and pointed to her last usable vein.

The man sneered. "Don't need your vein. This is going someplace else."

Uncapping the syringe with his teeth, he quickly probed the tissue planes of the left side of her neck. When he located the pulsation, he injected the solution.

Liquid warmth coursed quickly through her body, causing her right leg to twitch uncontrollably, flopping like a freshly caught fish just released from a hook. When the motion ceased, she heard him talking — to someone else.

"Sixteenth-floor stairwell; one black female. Tandra Robinson."

He must be radioing for help. Rapist turned savior? But wait. How did he know her name?

"Pupils fixed and dilated. Ready to commence CPR. Alert transplant team," he continued.

She realized she was dying, and he was laughing. A strange sense of calmness overcame her. She gazed down at her chest. It wasn't rising anymore. She couldn't care. She looked up at the broken ceiling lights, felt her body being lifted through the roof into a patch of blue sky. She saw the playground below, the kids playing. She was an astronaut; she had always wanted to be the first black woman in space. And then, as if her wish suddenly had been granted, her body rose higher and higher toward the stars and planets, and a sense of peace filled her.

The last words Tandra Robinson heard were: "Sleep tight, nigga."

Part I

Revivification

Chapter 1

The crescent moon hung low in the summer darkness, its luminous smile an unrecognized warning to Stanley Ruben as he stepped into Chicago's Sinai Hospital emergency room on the first shift of an internship he had postponed for an entire year. Stanley fought back waves of nausea, unsure whether he was suffering the jitters common to all new interns or whether his stomach was reacting to the slab of Miss Piggy's 'hell hath no fury' spareribs he had ingested just two hours before. Swallowing hard, he entered the ER lobby.

"Ready or not," he muttered.

Two steps past the doorway, Stanley ducked as a huge Reebok high-top hurled toward his head. The screaming infants, wailing ghetto blasters, and noxious body odors assailed him as he continued through the lobby. He ran his fingers through his sandy brown hair, which was damp with perspiration, wondering how the hell he was going to survive the night, much less an entire year of internship. The doctors said he had recovered and was "fully capable of coping with society." "What did a medical internship have to do with society?" he wondered.

Scanning the overcrowded waiting room, he saw a sea of faces, mostly black, probably fifty of them crammed into a room meant to seat ten. Some held soiled rags to bloody foreheads or extremities; others gripped their bellies, moaning from the pain. Family members silently glared at him.

"Doctor."

Stanley turned to find a middle-aged, redheaded nurse speaking to him and extending her hand in greeting. "Doctor. Oh yeah, that's me," he reminded himself, before accepting her welcome. She guided him into the triage area.

"Here's where we handle most of the cases, ingrown toenails, colds, and illnesses they'd normally go to their family doctor for—that is, if they had one," she mused.

Stanley hated to think of what remained for him. Toenails and colds he could handle. Everything else was a giant question mark.

She led Stanley toward the main ER, eyeing his open white shirt, khaki pants, and bare feet strapped into Birkenstocks. "You know, it's customary for interns to wear a tie to work," she said with motherly concern. "Especially your first night."

"Can't," Stanley answered, following her through the lobby to the main nursing station.

"Hypersensitive vagus nerve." He outlined the space between his damp cotton shirt and his throat. Nurse Phillips rolled her eyes.

It had taken years to figure out that any untoward pressure on Stanley's neck caused his vagus nerve to trigger a rapid slowing in his heart rate and a marked drop in blood pressure, causing him to pass out on the spot. Eight years old, at his grandfather's funeral, Stanley, wearing his first necktie, leaned over the casket for a look and fainted, falling right on top of the old man. The next time he wore a tie was his bar mitzvah, where he collapsed during his "Today I am a man" speech. Doctors assumed these were simply cases of angst, and did no further testing. Thus, it was not until Stanley's third year of medical school, when wearing ties became routine, that the underlying cause of his fainting episodes was diagnosed. While listening to Nurse Phillips' ER 101 lecture with one ear, Stanley angrily recalled his neurology class, where the professor, who had diagnosed his condition in his private office, ridiculed Stanley in front of his entire class by rubbing his own neck, then crashing to the floor in cruel imitation.

Chip Charleston, senior resident in charge of the emergency room, stood knee deep in charts at the central nursing station, sipping reheated coffee and cursing his luck at the back load of patients waiting to be seen. It was only 11 p.m., which meant the bars were open for three more hours. Worse, this was July. "Damn, didn't the public realize that a hospital full of newly untrained interns could significantly shorten one's lifespan, not to mention exacerbate his own chronic ulcer condition?" he thought.

Dr. Charleston turned and looked down his six-foot frame to find his latest addition to the ER. He read the nameplate: Stanley Ruben, MD. Without so much as a nod of recognition or a limp handshake, Charleston laid into Stanley.

"Where the hell is your tie, Ruben?" He moved so close to Stanley's face that his glasses fogged over.

"Hypersensitive vagus nerve syndrome," Stanley said, his voice a quiver. "I can't wear anything tight around my neck or I pass out." Stanley wrapped his hands around his neck in mock demonstration.

Charleston backed up and shook his head. He recalled that Ruben was the guy who had taken last year off for personal reasons. Charleston scratched at his caramel-colored skin, thankful that he had at least one good intern working with him. Griffin Randall. That man was ready. Randall had arrived two hours early for his own midnight shift and, before Stanley had gotten acquainted with his surroundings, had already worked up a dozen patients.

Ruben, his mentally fragile intern, was sure to be one major fuck-up. "So," said Charleston, "what are you standing there for?"

Stanley shrugged.

"Let's get on with it, then." Charleston pointed his unusually long index finger in Stanley's face for emphasis and continued, "Don't waste time taking an extensive history. Your job is to determine whether someone is too sick to go home. It looks bad when they come back dead."

Charleston withdrew his finger when he saw Stanley's eyes widen in terror. He spoke more softly as he continued, "Don't order lab tests that aren't critical. Results take an hour and we'll be backed up all the way to Lake Michigan by morning."

His lecture over, Charleston went about other business leaving Stanley to ponder the resident's initial wrath and then the subtle turn in his voice. Stanley guessed that his resident had been forewarned to handle him with care. Damn, he wanted no special treatment, certainly no pity, just because of what had happened.

He was about to grab his first chart, when he felt a pair of hands on his shoulders. He turned and gaped at a towering Chicago cop, two hundred and fifty pounds of all-beef policeman with an upper torso that overshadowed his lower, reminding Stanley of some genetic anomaly he had once studied. Stanley glimpsed his badge: O'Brien. He cringed, wondering briefly whether this had something to do with his accumulating collection of parking tickets. Each day, he parked in a space falsely promised by managers of his apartment complex that was directly across from the hospital, and each day, another citation appeared on the windshield of his Toyota. Officer O'Brien tightened his grip. "Need you to follow me," he said, chomping on a wad of Bazooka bubble gum.

Stanley nodded. "What for?"

"You'll see."

They walked through the main ER corridor, past the waiting area, where the stench of urine, blood, and vomit had so putrefied the air that Miss Piggy's spareribs lurched closer to his throat. The intern quietly gagged.

"First day?"

Stanley nodded as they left the building and approached a paddy wagon parked against the curb leading to the ER entrance.

"Hop in."

"You're busting me for parking tickets?" said Stanley.

O'Brien blew a bubble half the size of his egg-shaped head. "This is Chicago, son. We use parking tickets for toilet paper." He smiled at his own sense of humor. "I need you to pronounce a stiff. A person is never officially dead until one of you stethoscope suckers says they're dead."

Exhaling in relief, he hopped up into the van, silently thanking the crescent moon and stars above for landing such a simple first assignment. He found irony, however, in the notion that in four years of medical school he had been taught to take care of living patients, and now, here he was in the real world, taking care of a dead one.

His exuberance diminished instantly when he inhaled the sour odor of vomit and blood.

"Jesus." Suppressing another gag, he vowed no more takeouts from Miss Piggy's.

O'Brien aimed his flashlight on the filthy horse blanket, beneath which lay a crumpled figure.

"Tandra Robinson. Black female, late twenties. Shooter from the projects."

Nonchalantly, he whisked the blanket off Tandra Robinson, revealing a rigid figure lying on her back, eyes vacuous snowdrifts of emptiness. Stanley moved closer, knelt down, and saw that her skirt had been ripped. O'Brien's flashlight outlined her left inner thigh, where semen had dried in a worm-like dribble. Stanley then noticed that her right leg was grossly flexed like a broken chicken wing, yet when he ran his hand over it, there was no discernible fracture present. Well, let the coroner figure it out, he told himself backing up. He had had enough.

"Going somewhere?"

"Patients are waiting. Live ones."

"You're not done yet." O'Brien picked up a clipboard. "I can't finish my paperwork until you pronounce her dead."

"She's dead, okay?"

"You can't pronounce her dead till she's been examined."

Stanley's neck tightened against his damp shirt collar. Was O'Brien serious or just being a prick? "She's dead, okay. Four years of medical school make this an easy call, O'Brien. Now if you don't mind..."

O'Brien's arms blocked his exit. "You might come from a good school, Doc, but down here, a doctor examines a stiff before pronouncing 'em dead." He tapped his clipboard. "Just for the record."

Stanley's only encounter with a corpse had been in medical school when a pathologist let him stick a needle into the pericardial space of a dead man, just for practice. His inexperience didn't bother him, and though he preferred live patients to dead bodies, he understood the drill. Pronouncement came with the job. Nevertheless, a sudden, familiar panic gripped him and pain seared his chest. The last time he was called to see a dead person was to identify him.

One year ago.

His father.

Stanley's mind was unable to stop the replay of events from that dreadful rainy night in Ann Arbor, just days before his medical school graduation, when a drunken driver hit his parents' car head-on. First, the phone call: Stanley's father, his twisted body extricated from the wreckage, dead at the scene. His mother, her brain bloated with edema, lingering on life support. The decision to disconnect her from the machine weighed on him like his own execution, although he knew there was no hope. Their deaths left him all alone to keep company with his grief and his guilt and the newly won medical degree he wasn't sure he'd use. The demons continued spinning through his brain: his collapse at graduation, the ensuing

hospitalization and slow recovery. Just how shaky was he? The year away had exorcised some of the pain, but obviously not all. He was on the verge of another breakdown. He had to get through this. As he saw it, his sanity and his future were both on the line at this moment.

Stanley took a deep breath and pulled a penlight from his pocket, lifted Tandra's eyelids and aimed the beam at her pupils.

"Fixed and dilated." he muttered. Hell, anyone who watched *ER* knew that line. Stanley started to rise, but O'Brien's heavy hand pressed on Stanley's shoulder.

"The heart, Doc. Check for a pulse and heartbeat."

Stanley shone the light under Tandra's chin to look for any visible carotid pulse. A small patch of dried blood had affixed itself like a scab to the inner fold of her neck, yet there were no knife wounds or scratch marks. Where did that come from? He felt for her carotid pulse—nothing. His fingers pressed deeper only into cold, fatty flesh. Perspiration clouded Stanley's glasses. The tightness in his neck increased. He told himself to relax. He sure as hell didn't want to pass out here, in front of O'Brien.

"That's it," Stanley said. "No pulse."

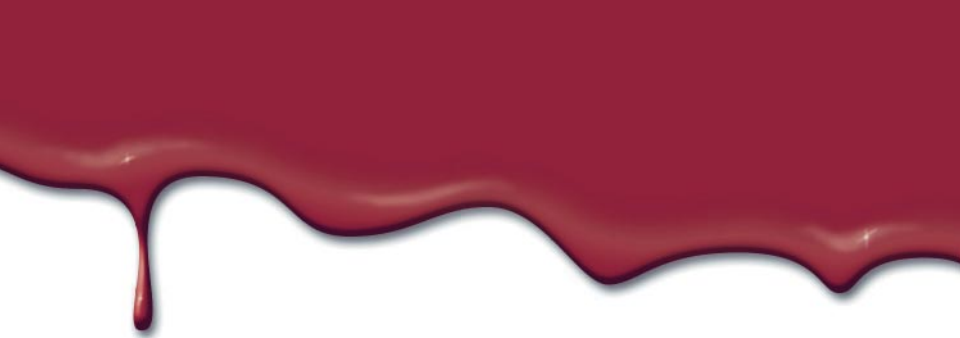
O'Brien pointed to his stethoscope. "Listen for a heart beat, Doc."

Stanley swallowed back bile. "No, it's over."

"Last thing, Doc. I promise. Just the heart."

Stanley sighed and fumbled with the buttons on Tandra's blouse. He never had been good with women's blouses. He found irony in the fact that Iris Bernstein, his first college girlfriend, had once laid on Stanley's bed as cold and still as Tandra the first time he had tried to unbutton her blouse.

Stanley's vagus nerve gripped his neck like a vise. Sensing doom if he didn't get the hell out of the damn paddy wagon, he quickly cupped his stethoscope over Tandra's breast. Silence, or so he thought until he heard a soft, but definite thumping in his earpiece. Wait a minute. His heartbeat or hers? The cadence slowed, but the intensity grew louder with each beat. Stanley grew more nauseous and lightheaded. A heart beat? His head was swirling. She can't be alive, that's impossible! A heartbeat. But whose? His father's? His mother's? Tandra Robinson's? All of them alive! Suddenly Stanley was bombarded with thumping heartbeats from his father's corpse, then his mother's brain-dead body. The cacophony was too much to bear. He tried to get up. Instead, he staggered as if he were punch-drunk and then barfed up Miss Piggy's spareribs before collapsing in a heap on top of Tandra Robinson's corpse.



ABOUT THE BOOK

Brain Chicane is a novel about Stanley Ruben, a young and idealistic physician working at the premier multiple-organ transplant hospital in Chicago. Motivated by his compassion for the disenfranchised, Dr. Ruben investigates overdose cases that are not totally kosher. Through twists, turns, trickery and deceit appearing at all levels of the hospital's seemingly humanitarian bureaucracy, Dr. Ruben uncovers a wicked plot designed to inflate the careers, wallets and egos of a few surgeons and administrators who have no regard for life, the ethics of medicine or the trust placed in the medical community by its patients.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alan Maisel, MD, attended medical school at the University of Michigan and spent his internal medicine residency at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. He did his cardiology training at the University of California, San Diego, where he currently serves as Professor of Medicine and Director of the Coronary Care Unit and Heart Failure at the Veterans Administration Hospital, San Diego. In addition to patient care, Dr. Maisel has an active research program and has published over 100 scientific articles. Dr. Maisel is a world famous cardiologist, dedicated teacher and has earned over a dozen medical student and resident teaching awards.

His first book, *Beside Manners*, sold thousands of copies, achieved critical acclaim and is being prominently featured at book fairs across the country. He is hard at work on his third novel, tentatively entitled: *Dying To Go To Medical School*. He is married with five children and resides in Solana Beach, California.

