

**TRACE SHERER
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FACELIFT



A NOVEL

ARE YOU DYING TO LOOK GOOD?

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BOSTON



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1

RICHARD WILKEN AWOKE from the nap that followed his fabulous orgasm. *This kind of sex should be illegal.* Not because he was engaged to someone else or because the attractive brunette beside him was married to another man. Their chemistry was so rare it felt deliciously wrong and almost unfair to the rest of humanity. Besides, fucking a man's wife in his own bed was a power game that gave Richard the ultimate high.

He could picture Dr. John Landry, stiff as the corpses under his scalpel, working night shifts. Would Landry's blood warm up a bit if he caught his wife cheating? The risk increased Richard's excitement, and to make his life easier, the Landrys' street had no security cameras, and he and Sally Landry could sneak in and out as they pleased.

Still laughing, Richard turned to Sally and whis-

pered, “Wake up, pretty. I’ll heat up that pizza.” Top of their class since Harvard Medical School, he and Sally were currently finishing their specialization in plastic surgery. Equally adventurous, with the same love for mixing booze, cocaine, and rough sex, they tried to match their schedules to be together twice a month.

Their escapades were becoming as dangerous as they were thrilling. That evening, as in their previous three dates, they had been drinking, snorting, and having sex in the Landrys’ home.

“Come on,” Richard said in regular volume. Sally was a heavy sleeper, particularly when she was drunk. “We need to change these linens.”

He reached out to shake his lover, and her irresponsible body made him jump.

The room was only partially illuminated by the bathroom lights, and Richard turned on the bedside lamp and checked for Sally’s pulse. Nothing. He first assumed it was an overdose, then saw the purple marks on her neck and realized their usual strangling game had gone too far, too close to his climax. As they were both deeply intoxicated, Sally did not protest, and he’d squeezed harder than intended. It wasn’t the first time they had fallen into deep sleep right after their sexual marathons, and he didn’t notice anything strange.

Shit! Richard liked Sally. A shame she was now trying to ruin his life.

John Landry had in his job a perfect alibi, and the police would know someone else had been with his wife. Richard’s medical mind began to picture an autopsy.

They would find cocaine, whisky, and *his* semen. Sally took the pill, and he never wore a condom. That once convenient detail could put him behind bars. Richard was also aware of how discreet they had been and that a semen match would only be required if he became a suspect.

Trained to think quickly, Richard made a choice. Even if he could prove it had been an accident, that would be an irreparable stain on his reputation. All would have been in vain. His efforts to go to Harvard, to be number one in his program, and mostly, to gain the heart of a millionaire's daughter about to open the doors to his wildest dreams.

He was only thirty-three, awfully young to become a martyr. Sally's death had to be the product of a robbery gone wrong.

Richard found a pair of rubber gloves under the kitchen sink, some paper towels, and bleach. He cleaned every surface, including the knobs of every door he had passed through. Even if he couldn't recall his steps to that bed, he focused on eliminating any traces of the unfortunate journey.

He kept moving fast. Deliberately, he broke two reading lamps in the living room. Three cactus pots landed on the floor, spreading earth on the rug and creating an immediate sense of chaos. Back in the bedroom, Richard opened drawers and spread their contents around the bed and vanity table. He took a few paintings off the walls, simulating a thief seeking valuables. The Landrys owned no safe; that was just

to look professional. Sally's watch, wedding ring, and wallet would go with him. They would sink easily in the Charles River and there would be evidence that something had actually been taken. The final touch to avoid suspicion that Sally had allowed the murderer in was to find a tool kit and break the door lock.

Another twenty minutes would elapse before Richard was done with the place and ready for the hardest part of his coverup. Having seen enough victims of rape, he knew exactly how Sally's body should look like.

2

THE STREETS WERE wet following the first snow of the year, and the January wind threatened to freeze Richard Wilken's face as he hurried to Beth Israel Hospital that morning. On days like this, daydreams of becoming a famous plastic surgeon often warmed him more than his Burberry coat, the lapels of which were up to his ears.

At nine years old, Richard already knew he would become a doctor like his father and grandfather. Both cardiologists had introduced the human body to Richard as a fabulous machine whose engines were cared for by the smartest, most devoted men. Whenever possible, Richard's father took him to home visits. Most patients were regular people whose lifestyles resembled their own. Families who lived in the suburbs of Westchester or in small apartments in Manhattan. That was Rich-

ard's middle-class world and he barely noticed there was anything beyond it. They lived in Dobbs Ferry, and that Saturday morning Richard's father took him to the city. The plan was to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art after his father checked on a patient recovering from a heart attack.

Mr. Bloom lived on Fifth Avenue across the street from Central Park. As they stepped into the lobby, Richard found a wonderland of gloved doormen, concierges, crystal chandeliers, and enormous flower arrangements. A golden elevator led them straight to Mr. Bloom's door and Richard whispered, "Does he own the entire floor, Dad?"

"That's correct."

A uniformed maid opened the door, and the apartment was like Richard's beloved museums. Head turning in all directions, he took in the high ceilings with elaborate molding, the paintings, the sculptures. How could his father's patient afford such fabulous things?

Finally, Richard caught sight of an old man sitting by the window and started to follow his father, his eyes never leaving the breathtaking views of the park.

"Wait here," his father said halfway through. "I won't take long."

"I wanna talk to him."

"No, son. This patient needs privacy."

"Bring the boy over, Dr. Wilken," said the hoarse voice across the long wooded-paneled room. "I love kids."

Richard smiled and rushed forward. He was shy

with no one. “Thank you for allowing me to observe, sir! I’m Richard Wilken and I wanna be a doctor.”

The old man found that very amusing. “Good for you!”

“May I ask what you do? You seem to make a lot of money.”

“Richard!” His father’s face was flushed with embarrassment. “That was rude. Apologize to Mr. Bloom.”

“Sorry.”

Mr. Bloom did not mind at all. The boy’s ambition was fascinating. “That’s all right. A young man needs to plan his career.” Mr. Bloom’s laughter was genuine, contained by something sore inside his chest. “I was an investment banker. A nerve-racking job that’s highly responsible for my heart condition. This is my son’s home. He’s a plastic surgeon and makes money all right.”

That day, Richard realized his father and grandfather were doing something wrong. Twenty years later, he knew exactly what. They had been the nice doctors who did pro bono work and accepted every shitty insurance plan. They knew nothing of luxury and barely paid their mortgages before dying.

One doesn’t need over a decade of studies to do charity. Richard had worked hard, and if he played his cards well today, wealth and power would be finally within his grasp. He just needed to survive this Sally Landry issue.

By now, Sally’s husband must have found her. The news would hit the hospital any minute if it hadn’t

already, and the police might show up to ask questions. The hospital façade came to sight and, unlike most men in his position, Richard calmly walked those final steps to the revolving doors going through his mental script. It wouldn't be his first time lying about serious matters or being interrogated by the cops.

He found five of his colleagues in the locker room. Two males and three females from different specialties. While Richard recognized all the faces, the only name that mattered to him was the black man's, Phillips, a genius in neuro. He always addressed the rest as "doctors" without their last names.

The group's distressed-looking conversation and the whispered words *crime* and *robbery* hinted they already knew about Sally. "Good morning, doctors!" Richard said as he headed to his locker.

"Have you heard about Sally?" asked the male resident beside Phillips. He was specializing in anesthesiology. Not particularly memorable, the man constantly found excuses to approach Richard.

Richard offered an expression of concern. "No. Is she all right?"

"She was murdered."

"God, what happened?"

"We're not sure. The rumor's just started to spread."

Richard shook his head and, facing his locker, began replacing his regular coat with a white one. "I can't believe it. Sally and I were taking last night off, and I joked that she should sleep for twelve hours like I would."

He turned back to study his colleagues' expressions. His comment landed with no suspicion, and if needed, he could repeat it to the police.

"Apparently Sally took your advice and stayed home," said a female resident from cardio. "I heard someone broke in and she was badly beaten. Maybe raped."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Phillips said. "The hospital's making a formal statement soon."

Dr. Barclay was the attending physician for the plastic surgery program. An extremely skinny man with hollow eyes and very accentuated cheek bones, he supervised Richard and Sally in their patients' care, and behind his back, residents called him "Skull." It'd been a joke since their introductory class, where the man stood beside a real skeleton on display. It took enormous effort from the residents not to laugh at the resemblance between the two.

Barclay looked even bonier that morning standing in the residents' lounge to deliver the news of Sally Landry's murder. "This hospital's administration can't describe the sadness we all feel for Dr. Landry's unacceptable fate." He talked about Sally's flawless character, her great accomplishments since medical school, and how much patients and hospital staff liked her.

Listening to Barclay, Richard almost believed Sally was that saint. The two of them were also alike when it came to their professional ambitions. He could still

hear Sally say, “It’s exhausting playing the nice doc! Thank goodness I’m a great actress.” She laughed and licked Richard’s chin. “If I can fake orgasms to keep a happy hubby, I can fake anything for my dream job.”

As they made their rounds during that final year, Richard and Sally discovered the types of fools who would become their ideal patients: wealthy men and women with terrible self-esteem.

One day, before checking a woman’s nose job, done for the third time simply to achieve perfection, and another’s facelift, trying to trick nature in twenty years, Sally whispered to Richard, “Look at these two. We can make millions and never have a patient again!”

He fought a smile. “In theory, they are patients, Dr. Landry.”

Sally’s eyes told him, *You know what I mean*, and she entered the room beaming at the women she had just mocked.

Richard did know what Sally meant and he agreed. With the exceptions of those with deformities or victims of accidents, patients doing plastic surgery should not even be called *patients* or their doctors. Those were cosmetic procedures. As Sally defined them, “haircuts performed with a scalpel.”

Richard would miss Sally. In an alternate universe where they didn’t need money to achieve their goals, they could have been a perfect couple. Sally had made only one mistake Richard wouldn’t: marrying out of love. His mother had left when he was little, and Sally

herself was banging another man under her husband's roof. Richard knew how love ended.

Dr. Barclay was now talking about the murder, and Richard tuned in to find out how the police had read his staged crime scene.

"Someone broke into Dr. Landry's home while her husband was at work."

Check.

"The intruder was looking for valuables and took all he could find."

Check.

"The police still don't know whether Dr. Landry was home when they broke in or walked into the scene and was attacked by the intruder."

Check.

Richard started to relax. Next should be talking about the rape. There would be gasping and murmuring, and some women always started to cry. Everything was so straightforward that maybe the police wouldn't even show up at the hospital.

Then Dr. Barclay added, "Dr. Landry's husband would have only found her this morning when he returned from work, but he got an anonymous call urging him to rush home last night. He arrived shortly after nine thirty, and it was already too late."

What? Richard had left Sally's place at nine fifteen after ensuring there wasn't a soul around. Who would have placed that call, and what would they have heard or seen?

"Lamentably," Dr. Barclay proceeded, "This pos-

sible witness still didn't show up. The police are investigating the case and may wish to talk to some of you. Be ready to cooperate."

The meeting was over and despite the buzz of lingering conversation, the residents dissipated to begin their rounds. Richard remained frozen until the guy in anesthesia who had delivered the news materialized beside him again. "Piece of shit, huh? What do you think happened?"

Richard wished Dr. Nobody would leave him alone. "Hard to say. I'm so shocked."

They merged into the small crowd waiting for the elevators, with Dr. Nobody blabbing. Richard registered his final sentences. "Sally was great. Will definitely be missed."

The two men stepped into the elevator and on the second floor went separate ways.

Richard's first patient was a burn victim from a car crash. The man had had multiple surgeries, was on heavy painkillers, was always irritated, and asked too many questions. Richard headed to the men's room to calm his nerves first. He locked himself in a stall and sat on the toilet. The police would come, he had no doubt, and he needed a tighter script than the one he had initially prepared. What if someone had seen him? How on earth could any excuse be remotely believable?"

You got this. In medical school, Richard had discovered a nerve-taming technique to block his emotions. It consisted of controlling his heart rate as he lied to

people. He had applied it to anyone from hospital staff and colleagues to friends and lovers until he mastered it. After a while, truth and lies felt the same to him, and even though he had never tried, Richard was confident he could trick a polygraph.

He took a deep breath and focused on the small engine beating inside his chest. Another deep breath and a black screen appeared on his mind. He kept breathing in and out and his heart started to slow down. His mind found a door on the black screen and he walked through it.

He was twenty-three years old.

Medical school.

Theresa Dawson's alleged suicide.

The detective interrogating him.

Richard relived scene after scene, line after line, as if they were part of a movie in which he was acting. He did it twice. After a moment in silence, he opened his eyes with the serenity of a man who could foresee his future.

Someone was standing by the sink, and Richard flushed the toilet. He and the stranger exchanged nods, and Richard washed his hands and headed out to start his day.

By lunchtime, the police were already interviewing residents and hospital staff. Around three o'clock, Richard was paged and went to the designated conference room where a female detective sat at the head of the table.

She was around forty years old, her brown hair

pulled back, taking any softness out of her face. She wore a gray suit and black shoes that made her look masculine. Perhaps intentionally. “Good afternoon,” she said, indicating where she wanted Richard to sit down. “Dr. Richard Wilken, right?”

“Yes. How can I help you?”

“I’m Detective Berman. I’m investigating the murder of your colleague, Sally Landry. I’m sure you’ve heard.”

“Yes. Still hasn’t sunk in.”

“You’re in her program. How well did you know her?”

Richard’s greatest lesson from when Theresa Dawson died was that being evasive or playing dumb during an investigation just made detectives more suspicious. “I knew Sally pretty well,” he said. “We often discussed our patients’ issues, and I highly valued her opinion. She was a wonderful colleague and very bright.”

Detective Berman looked down to take notes. Eyes on Richard again, she asked, “Did you talk about personal subjects as well?”

“Sometimes. I’m engaged and Sally was married, so I remember once she warned me about the challenges of starting a family being a doctor.”

“Will you miss her?”

“A lot.” Richard’s eyes never wandered, and his facial expression reflected honest pain. “Sally was one of my favorite colleagues. Had we had more time, we could have become close friends.”

Detective Berman took more notes and casually asked, “Were you attracted to her?”

Richard knew that was coming. It always did. “Sally was an attractive lady, detective. I think most men in this hospital found her attractive.”

“Would that include yourself?”

“Yes. But we never flirted. I’m in love with my fiancée.”

“And did Dr. Landry seem happily married?”

“She never told me otherwise.”

“Dr. Wilken, she had a considerable amount of alcohol and cocaine in her blood. Do you know if she had a drug habit?”

“I don’t believe she did. Sally wouldn’t see patients until this morning. If she was drinking or taking recreational drugs last night, I guess she was just trying to relax.”

“Do you also do cocaine, Dr. Wilken?”

“On rare occasions.”

“Do you know whom Dr. Landry used to socialize with?”

“I can’t say I do.”

Detective Berman slid a sheet of paper across the table. “According to this list provided by the hospital, you were off last night as well. Do you mind telling me what you did?”

“Not at all. I was planning to see my fiancée, but she was busy with her functions at the Harvard Art Museums, so I took the evening to catch up on my sleep.”

“Thank you for your cooperation. Here’s my card. Please call me if you think of anything else.”

“Of course, Detective.”

When Richard was halfway to the door, Detective Berman said, “One more question.”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever been to Dr. Landry’s home?”

Richard hoped the police wouldn’t ask that question. Either Detective Berman was fishing, or she already knew the answer.

“I never had the pleasure. Sally suggested having dinner when both our partners were available. But her husband worked night shifts and it never happened.”

Richard waited, aware that if someone had seen him, he would leave the building in handcuffs.

Detective Berman seemed satisfied and concluded the interrogation.

At seven p.m., Richard and several of his colleagues watched the local news about the murder. Two reporters took turns relaying the case. “It seems a robbery followed by a fatal attack claimed the life of Dr. Sally Landry in East Boston last night. A mysterious individual warned her husband about an emergency while he was at work. The individual remains unknown.”

The other reporter jumped in. “The call came from a pay phone close to the Landrys’ home. What doesn’t make sense is why the caller didn’t dial 911. And if they knew the victim’s husband well enough to call him, why not reveal their name?”

A devastated John Landry appeared on the screen. “I didn’t care who called me. My wife wasn’t picking up the phone and I rushed home.”

The reporter continued, “The hospital operator who received the anonymous message on Dr. John Landry’s behalf said the caller seemed to be a man, but the voice wasn’t deep enough for her to be sure. The police will continue to investigate, and we’ll bring you updates.”

Still staring at the TV, Richard replayed the scene of his leaving Sally’s house through the back door after shutting off all the lights in the yard. There wasn’t a soul on the street, and the neighboring houses on both sides and across from Sally’s were too distant for someone to make out a face in the dark, so who was this caller?

Richard’s thoughts were interrupted by his colleagues’ various speculations.

“The reporter’s right. Why would someone doing a good deed remain anonymous?”

Another resident shouted. “It was probably one of the gang members trying to screw his partners.”

“I hate to say it,” said a third resident, “but they won’t find this guy. If the caller was able to identify the murderer, by now a police sketch would be circulating.”

Richard found some solace in this final observation and left the TV lounge. His body and mind were craving the twelve-hour sleep he told everyone he had enjoyed the night before. After the past surreal twenty-four hours, Richard had no desire to see his fiancée. Unfortunately, that was nonnegotiable. He had spent two years cultivating that cash cow and couldn’t risk

losing the marriage so near the finish line. Most importantly, in case of a deeper investigation, he needed to get his story straight so Constance wouldn't accidentally contradict what he'd told the police.

After his long shift, Richard changed and left the hospital. In the cab heading to Constance's home, he recalled how he had met her.