

# Rumors of Deception

The O.R. level of the Trauma Center was dramatically different from the Emergency Department. Unlike the ER, which was often cluttered with equipment and patients, the hallways of the O.R. were generally neat and orderly. In addition, the overall pace of the doctors and nurses was somewhat more subdued, and the noise levels were considerably lower. These were the conditions that Bradford preferred over the chaotic environment that functioned two floors below.

In a large white operating room, Bradford stood amongst several other doctors and nurses, performing surgery on a young woman. A large observation window exposed the room to outside observers, and a small sign reading *Authorized Personnel Only* stood in one corner of the glass.

Bradford was in the process of removing a sea urchin-like tumor from the young woman's brain. A section of the skull plate had been removed to expose the patient's cerebrum and Bradford was simultaneously manipulating several surgical instruments, attempting to extract the tumor without damaging the surrounding brain tissue. Wright stood outside the room, peering through the observation window with a look of astonishment on his face. He was not as impressed with the procedure as he was with Bradford's unwavering ability to weave in and out of the delicate tissue without causing any discernible damage. A small video monitor, magnifying the delicate operation, sat above the operating table.

Wright periodically switched between the monitor and Bradford to get the best angle on the procedure. He gasped as Bradford finally extracted the marble size tumor from the young patient's head and placed it onto a large glass dish. Several minutes passed and Bradford signaled for another surgeon to close the woman up.

With the procedure finally complete, Bradford headed toward the exit. As he emerged he was genuinely surprised to find Wright standing before him.

"Jack, what brings you up here?" he said officiously.

Wright ignored his taunting quip and responded. "I've considered your offer and decided it would be in my best interest to take it."

Bradford was a little taken by the response and immediately suspected a deception, but decided to play along.

"Well, I'm glad that you finally came to your senses. With the Neurology Department—namely me—backing you, you will take leaps and bounds toward completing your Delta wave research. And together, my young partner, we will present your findings to the medical community. No one will be laughing at you with Doctor Everett T. Bradford standing beside you."

Wright fought to maintain his composure as Bradford spouted his nauseating discourse. The contempt and hatred he felt for this man was more intense than ever, but Wright just stood there taking every blow with unusual restraint.

"Although, there is one thing I'd like to request." Wright politely intervened.

Bradford raised a brow, speaking slow and deliberate. "Yes Jack. What is it?"

"I've had some very peculiar readings in the past few days and I'd like to process the data before transferring my

research over to the neurology building,” Wright injected cunningly.

“I see,” Bradford retorted with a look of puzzlement. “How long do you need to finish processing these data?”

“It’s hard to say, but I think it’ll take me at least a week to properly compile the results.” Wright smiled coyly.

Inside, Bradford was becoming a raging inferno. If he could have shot flames from his mouth, he probably would have incinerated the other man where he stood. He knew that Wright was just stalling for time, but he continued to maintain a cool, calm demeanor and gave a reassuring nod.

“Of course Jack, take all the time you need. No one expects you to break off midstream and interrupt the flow of your research.”

Wright smelled an even greater deception than the one he was perpetrating, but responded earnestly. “Thank you Dr. Bradford. I knew you of all people, would understand my dilemma. I’m looking forward to the move up. It will truly be an honor to work with such a great man as yourself.” Wright had to stop himself. He was becoming nauseated from his own words.

“Fine, fine. Then I’ll be seeing you soon Jack,” Bradford retorted. Wright nodded and headed down the corridor. As he disappeared around the corner, Bradford uttered viciously under his breath, “Sooner than you think.”

Wright found Merritt back in the ER, conversing with another doctor. He advanced slowly to avoid being intrusive, but the other doctor noticed him and terminated their conversation abruptly. Wright approached Merritt with a look of confusion. “Do I smell or something?” he queried.

Merritt chuckled and responded. “No, but you’ve become somewhat of an enigma around here. I overheard a couple of staffers calling you *Jack the Reaper*.”

Wright was momentarily confused by the statement, but quickly made the connection. He shook his head in disgust.

“Don’t worry. I’ve made it very clear that I won’t tolerate that kind of behavior. It’s hard to believe that trained professionals can act so immature sometimes!” Merritt reflected on his statement for a moment.

“Anyway, don’t let it bother you. Most of the staff could really care less,” Merritt said reassuringly.

Wright considered his friend’s advice for a moment and then motioned towards the ER lounge with an open hand. Merritt acknowledged his request and both men shuffled into the room.

Within the lounge, a couple of nurses were laughing near the coffee machine while waiting for their coffee. Noticing the two men, they ceased their frivolous activities, but continued to talk. Wright looked to one of the women and inquired, “Do you think I’m *Jack the Reaper*?”

He imposed the question upon her, but the woman was gracious and responded cheerfully, “No hon, we all have bad days and you were just havin’ one of them yesterday.”

Her partner affirmed her response with a simple nod. Merritt looked to Wright as if to say, “I told you so” but never actually spoke the words. Wright relaxed a bit. They watched the two nurses leave the room and then Merritt turned to Wright.

“So what’s going on?” Merritt asked, with an inquisitive gesture.

“Well, let’s see.” Wright paused for a moment as if he were actually thinking about what to say. “Cass came back from the dead and you were rooting her on.”

“Oh, this one sounds interesting, and I was even in it this time.” Merritt responded in jest.

“Just shut up and listen,” Wright snapped and continued. “I was dreaming about her again and this time it was the day she died. At first I thought I was going to be able to change the course of events, but it was more like I was outside of myself watching the situation unfold. The whole thing happened again just like it did the first time, except for one thing.”

Merritt shifted back in his chair, listening intently.

“After she died, I began telling her how sorry I was and how I wouldn’t let death come between us and that’s when she jumped at me.” There was a notable increase in Wright’s tone.

“Jumped at you? After she died?” Merritt queried.

“Yes, and that’s not the worst of it. She was prematurely decomposing and her eyes were completely black again. Then there was this ominous voice that warned me to stop running the transmission experiments, but the words that really stood out in my mind were *leave it alone*. It’s not the first time I’ve heard those words.”

He stopped for a moment, visibly shaken by his own account. Merritt gave him a consoling nod and he continued.

“What’s really disturbing is that she spoke again in her own voice, still all decomposed, and asked me for a kiss. There was this disgusting black liquid coming from her mouth. I was horrified and tried to stop her from kissing me and that’s when you came into the room.”

Merritt interceded. “And that’s when I jumped in and stopped her, right?”

“No. Actually you said something like, *Isn't this what you wanted? Cass is alive. Give her a kiss!* I remember thinking at the time that you were...” Wright finished the sentence with a series of grating remarks and obscenities.

“I suppose if I were in your shoes I might feel the same way. I'll tell you one thing. It sure changes my outlook on open casket funerals.” Merritt attempted to lighten things up.

“I appreciate the humor, but this is really starting to eat at me. I feel like my own mind's being invaded by something viciously evil. To be honest with you, it's scaring the hell out of me.”

“Well, look Jack, we're in the home stretch and soon this whole thing will be nothing more than a bad dream. If you want, I can prescribe something that might help you sleep a little more soundly.” Normally, Merritt wasn't very liberal about prescribing medications, but under the circumstances he felt it was warranted.

“Yeah, perhaps that would help,” Wright responded somberly and stood up, heading for the coffee machine. After dispensing two cups of coffee, Wright returned to the table and the two men continued to talk. They broke off momentarily as Brighton entered the room and the conversation shifted to a more general topic.

“Hey guys, don't mind me.” Brighton injected thoughtfully.

“So what did Bradford have to say about your proposal?” Merritt inquired surreptitiously, avoiding any specific references.

“He seemed very enthusiastic about collaborating with me on the Delta wave project. I really think this venture is going to open some new doors for this kind of research. In fact,

I think Bradford and I are going to get along just fine,” Wright exclaimed with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Brighton stood there with a cup of hot coffee in his hand, completely baffled by the exchange. Finally catching on, he interrupted. “Come on guys, you don’t have to play it up on my behalf. I know how you feel about Bradford. Personally, I think the guy could use a healthy enema,” he quipped, laughing at his own statement.

Merritt and Wright eyed one another and then Merritt spoke. “Look Jerrod, we appreciate your honesty, but there are just certain things we’d rather not have circulated throughout the gossip pool.”

“I understand, but at the same time I might be able to help you. Being the young naïve intern does have its advantages sometimes, and I’m not as young and naïve as you might think,” Brighton retorted keenly.

Wright, intrigued by the offer, spoke frankly. “Thank you Jerrod. We’ll keep that in mind the next time Bradford tries to execute one of his little schemes. In the meantime, just keep your eyes and ears open and let us know if you hear anything unusual, especially from Nurse Hardcourt.”

“Sure thing guys,” Brighton replied and walked off gleefully as if he had just been given some top-secret assignment.

“Do you really think that was wise Jack?” Merritt posed the question.

“Sure. If he’s on the level, maybe we’ll get some inside dirt on Bradford. Otherwise, we’ll just keep the poor kid guessing,” Wright uttered shrewdly.

The two men resumed conversation for several more minutes. Wright eventually glanced at his watch, noting that it was almost two o’clock. “Well, I’ve got some data to process

before the next shift. I'll see you in the ER." As he began to rise, Hardcourt came through the door looking as if a rabid animal had infected her. She took a couple of deep breaths and then spoke in a harsh angry tone.

"Look here Wright! I've heard some of the things you've been saying about me and I'm just not going to tolerate anymore of your crap. I have been an ER nurse for twenty-five years and you're not even a doctor. You don't belong here and if it weren't for your partner over there, you would have been expelled from this hospital a long time ago. I try so hard to maintain the respect of every nurse in this facility and I don't need some hot shot engineer making a fool of me!"

Wright interjected, "Nurse, you'll have to forgive me for my ignorance, but what the hell are you talking about?"

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. Ever since you started working here, you've been mocking me and saying things behind my back. Now I find out that you've been telling the entire ER staff that you and I—we—well you know what I'm trying to say. I shouldn't have to spell it out." Hardcourt began to blush.

Wright wore a look of sheer disgust on his face and retorted callously. "You've got to be kidding. Do you really think I'd want anyone to think that I'd have anything to do with you? No offense nurse, but you're not my type."

"Oh don't act so smug. You probably did it just to make me look bad in front of the other nurses. And you're no prize yourself," Hardcourt barked in retaliation.

"That really hurts coming from a cold-hearted, high riding, militant..." Wright finished with the worst possible expletive.

Merritt stood by watching as the two continued firing vicious insults at one another. The intensity of the argument gradually increased over several minutes as Hardcourt and

Wright began shouting at one another. Merritt finally decided to interject as several faces appeared through the small window on the entrance door.

Merritt spoke in Wright's defense first. "Nurse Hardcourt, I can assure you that Jack has no interest in either besmirching or disrespecting you. He is..."

Hardcourt cut in abruptly. "Dr. Merritt, I would expect a little more cooperation on your part. As a fellow member of our medical team it is your job to..."

"Damn it Nurse, I know what my job is. Now just shut up and listen for a moment. Jack is not only a man of integrity and professionalism, but he's a man who continues to mourn the death of his wife. He's the last man I'd suspect for starting such a ridiculous rumor. Perhaps you can tell me why you think he was the one who started it."

"Because, who else would make up a rumor like that?" she responded uneasily.

Wright reflected for a moment. The answer bothered him. He knew he hadn't started the rumor and was now trying to ascertain why someone else would. In his mind he began replaying the conversation with Bradford, focusing primarily on Bradford's overly cooperative demeanor. Just as he had stalled Bradford, he thought, perhaps Bradford was now attempting to stall him. He glanced at his watch again. It was a quarter past two. Wright was becoming suspicious and decided to speak up.

"When did you hear this rumor?"

"About twenty minutes ago. I overheard a couple of nurses talking. You can't imagine the embarrassment I felt when I heard it." Hardcourt was looking for sympathy, but the two men were apathetic to her plea.

“Something’s going on Chris,” Wright barked, “I have a bad feeling about this.” Wright pondered for a moment and then bolted out of the room.

“What’s he talking about?” Hardcourt prodded inquisitively, but Merritt just stood there eyeing her with contempt.

Wright ran down the hallway, arriving at his small makeshift office. He stood there for a moment gawking at the empty room. All of his Delta wave research, computer equipment, and even the furniture had been removed. The little black box that had been concealed in a locked desk drawer was now missing. The first thought that came to mind was that of Hardcourt. He ran back down the hallway and reentered the lounge.

“Alright Nurse, what the hell happened to my office?” he demanded.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about and I really don’t care. As far as I’m concerned you can take your research...”

Wright grabbed her by the arms and shouted in her face. “If you don’t tell me what happened to my office, I’ll...”

Hardcourt chimed in calmly. “You’ll what? Hit me? Slap me around? Don’t you dare threaten me! I’ll have you slapped with an assault charge so fast it’ll make your head spin!”

Merritt quickly stepped in between the two. “Jack, you need to calm down. Tell me what happened.”

“They cleared out my office! Everything is gone! And she had something to do with it!” Wright shouted frantically.

“Okay Jack, just calm down. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation for this and we *will* get to the bottom of it,” Merritt said in a calm rational tone.

Turning to Hardcourt, he looked her straight in the eye. “Nurse Hardcourt—Gayle, I’ve known you for quite a while.

And in all the time we've worked together we've been pretty honest with one another. So, if you have any information about who might have stolen Jack's property, I'd consider it a personal favor if you'd tell me."

Hardcourt took a deep breath and spoke in a more pleasant tone. "Honestly Doctor, I have no idea what happened to his office. I was genuinely upset because of the nasty rumor that started circulating. I merely wanted to let him know that I have feelings and didn't appreciate the humiliation."

Wright wasn't convinced of her story and responded abrasively. "Yeah right, give me a break lady."

Merritt placed both hands up as if to signal a cease-fire and spoke judiciously. "Now hold on a minute. I think you've both been played here. Didn't you say that Bradford was surprisingly cooperative when you requested the additional week's research?" Merritt looked to Wright.

Wright responded with a single nod and Merritt continued.

"And you," he motioned to Hardcourt, "don't know who actually started the rumor, right?"

This time Hardcourt nodded as Merritt continued to construct his hypothesis.

"Well then, I think it's quite obvious what's happened here. We know that Bradford had something to do with this, but you can't go marching up to his office making accusations. Obviously, someone was following your movements Jack, and I believe the rumor was created as a diversion while that *someone* was clearing out your office. Whoever started the rumor took a calculated risk, hoping Nurse Hardcourt would respond the way she did."

Hardcourt looked shocked. "Are you saying that Dr. Bradford was the one who created this whole mess?"

Wright was still not convinced of Hardcourt's innocence and retorted sarcastically. "Oh gee—I suppose you knew nothing about this nurse."

Hardcourt turned to Wright and made an earnest statement. "I really don't know anything about this. You know that I've been fighting to get you out of the ER, but I've always gone through official channels. I would never resort to stealing or have any part in such a plan. And I will be the first to apologize for accusing you of starting the rumor."

Wright was momentarily stunned. Nurse Hardcourt was too shrewd a woman to apologize just to maintain a front. In fact, this was the first time he had heard her utter the words. He thought for a moment and spoke cautiously. "Okay, so maybe you didn't know anything about this, but I still don't trust you."

"Nevertheless, I intend to have a little chat with Dr. Bradford. Nobody comes into my ER and stirs up vicious rumors about me," Hardcourt exclaimed angrily and left the room.

Merritt turned to Wright and spoke candidly. "Well Jack, I think you need to pay Dr. Bradford a visit. Perhaps he'll be able to shed some light on the situation. But whatever you do, don't just outright accuse the man. You do that and I guarantee this project will be over."