

The Search of Grace

A novel

by

James Gottesman

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The Search of Grace

Prologue

1994, Seattle, Washington

Seattle Med School Library Archives – early morning

The immense, windowless archives were silent and dark, except for the soft rhythmic whooshing of overhead fans and a sliver of ambient light from the hallway.

Grace started most every weekday the same. She checked that housekeeping had not moved her chair behind the counter, and then closed the door.

Dead dark.

She shut down the fans.

Dead silent.

She felt her way around the counter and sat. She would not close her eyes.

Grace thought mostly of the orphanage, Sarah and Jodie, and Ezekiel Watkins.

She sat longer if her nightmares had been too vivid.

She sat until her thoughts weren't so heavy.

She sat until she didn't have to think about breathing.

Chapter 1

Seattle, Washington

God, I hate being used.

Alex Gordon entered the medical library at 8 a.m. and approached the main desk. Anger had changed his confident stride to a semi-stomp.

The reference librarian, a number two pencil going through her hair like an arrow that just missed, looked up from her computer screen and asked, "Doctor, how may I help you?"

"I'd like to find as many of these ancient references as possible."

The librarian scanned the list. Finishing only half, she stopped. "Good luck with any of these. They would all be in the archives, somewhere, but none are catalogued."

"Where are the archives? Hopefully not in Kansas," Alex asked.

The librarian smiled. "The archives are on the fifth floor, southwest elevator. Be prepared, the archives are bigger than the Kingdome and we have only one person up there. She's been with us a short time, and is a bit unusual. She'll help you."

Alex wasn't sure what 'unusual' meant. He rode to the fifth floor and exited to a long hallway which had a solitary door with a sign that read "*Medical Library Archives - Restricted to Authorized Users Only*". He entered to find the room dark. He could see from the hallway's light that the room was huge, and standard 48-inch fluorescent fixtures, all off, lined

the ceiling. Alex ran his hand up and down the wall near the door trying to locate a switch without luck. He then looked, unsuccessfully, outside the door for a switch. He re-entered the room and walked in a few steps, only to take a jab to the groin from a counter edge.

"Ouch. Damn it."

A soft voice from the darkness arose, "May I help you?"

Alex, startled, and seeing no one, queried to the dark and cavernous room, "Is someone here, or is there a camera and a speaker?"

A calm voice said, "I'm a few feet from you."

"This is freaking me out. Do you mind turning on the lights?"

At once, rows of fluorescent fixtures pinged and crackled like lightning popcorn, and there was light.

Alex was speechless. A woman occupied a small chair behind the counter, in left profile, not five feet from him. Alex thought she might be young. She wore a plain black one-piece sack dress, almost Amish in appearance. Her hair was in a tight bun except for one long loose strand down the left side of her face. She continued to look away, purposefully not trying to make eye contact, her hands clenched and folded in her lap.

"May I help you?" the woman repeated.

After a few seconds, trying to decide whether to run or stay, Alex spoke up, "You're the librarian?"

"I wish I were a librarian. I'm a file clerk,"

Alex, confused, said, "I was told a librarian worked the archives. I need some old references pulled."

The woman, still frozen, said, "I'm the only one here. Do you have a list?"

"Sure, here." Alex extended the list in his hand over the counter towards the woman and held it for a moment. She made no attempt to move off her chair, so Alex circled the counter and handed the list to the woman/lady/girl, *whatever she was*.

"Thanks." The woman, still making no attempt at eye contact with Alex, scanned the list. As she scanned, she twirled the loose strands of hair with her left hand and then slid down the strand to straighten her twirl. "Hmmm. Some easy, most not. When do you need them?"

"My chief wanted them yesterday." Alex smiled at the little bit of intended humor. He finally got a reasonable look at her face. *Definitely less than thirty. Nice features. Odd demeanor.*

The woman, sans smile, monotoned, "I'll work on it. You'll have to come back."

Alex, knowing the difficulty of the search, said, "Sure. I can come back, maybe a couple of hours."

"Maybe a couple of weeks. We'll see."

"I don't think my chief wants to wait that long. Do what you can. I'm curious, tell me, why were the lights off?"

"Habit."

This is one weird person. "I'll be back at 11 a.m."

"Suit yourself."

Alex, unamused, took on a sarcastic tone, said, "Will the lights be on when I get back?"

Ignoring the sarcasm, the woman replied, "Don't know. Depends how many of these I've found."

Alex, realizing that being rude wasn't going to help locate any of his articles, retreated, with a modicum of sincerity, "Hopefully some. Thank you."

"Please close the door," the woman said as Alex started to leave.

Alex exited and closed the door. Approaching the elevator, Alex's curiosity got the best of him. He returned to the door and opened it just a crack.

A voice from inside returned immediately, "Yes, the lights are still on."

Alex closed the door. *I've got to stop drinking so much coffee in the morning.*

*_*_*_*

Alex Gordon was having a God-awful day. For the second time in his first week at Seattle General, the Chief Resident in Urology, Carleton Holland, his immediate boss for the next year, had not assigned him any surgical cases. Instead, Holland gave Alex a research assignment to find medical articles from the distant past on obsolete treatments for kidney stones. The chief was apparently writing an article or giving a talk.

Either this a test to see if I'll lose my cool, or he's decided he doesn't like me and doesn't give a shit how I react.

Alex ran into Sid Croft, another first year Urology

resident, who was between cases.

"Hey, Alex. How's it going? Holland said something this morning during our first case that he hopes you'll dig up some references for him. Sounds like a bullshit job to me."

"Ain't that the truth." Alex said. "I had forty references I'd hoped to find, most written before 1900 and more than half in German and some in French and Italian. I went up to the archives this morning and the librarian up there is a total whacko. I'll be lucky to find four or five of the articles. I'm on my way there now."

She's missing a screw. The lights were on but nobody's home. Three cards short of a full deck. Alex mused clichés, certain that the strange girl would find nothing on his list. He could sense Dr. Holland's vengeance awaiting him on patient rounds that evening. *"Gordon, you did shit all day. I'm keeping you on the patient floors and library duty for the rest of the year."*

Alex re-entered the archives with his laptop in hand. The lights were on, but the area behind the counter was empty but he could hear what sounded like a copier whirring in a small office. He followed the sound and entered a small room. The sack-dressed young woman was facing the copy machine trying to compress a large book down on the copy plate. She had not heard Alex enter.

Alex spoke over the din of the machine, "Hey, how are things going?"

The woman jumped and lost the book onto the floor. The old binding split and pages of fragile yellowed paper spilled everywhere around the room.

The woman, hands on her hips, had still not turned towards her intruder, but said, "Damn, you scared me. Look at this mess. And look at the book."

Alex couldn't tell whether she was angry or scared or both. Alex, realizing his abrupt intrusion, said, "I'm so sorry."

They both went down to the floor picking up loose pages.

Alex got his first close look at the woman. *She's younger than I thought, maybe twenty-three or twenty-four, at the most. She's stunning, but doing everything she can to hide it.* The loose strand of hair was still the only aspect of her appearance out of place. He stopped gathering papers and watched her. She glared at his stare and Alex's eyes and hands jumped back to the papers on the floor.

"I'm sorry for startling you," Alex repeated. "I didn't mean it. Hey, we're even for the lights being off this morning and me running into the counter. I'm too young for a vasectomy."

She responded sourly, "Not funny."

"Maybe a little funny," Alex said.

"Not," she said, "if I had been holding a baseball bat instead of an old book, a vasectomy sounds better than a crushed skull."

"Ouch. Urologists and librarians must have strange senses of humor."

"Hmmm. I'll think about it," she said, as her posture softened. "I was so happy about finding the references and making copies that I wasn't listening for someone to enter. Not like me to be caught unaware. I'm madder at myself. By the way, I am not a librarian. I'm only a file clerk. I know because I am paid minimum wage."

Alex, not understanding the total gist of her comments, said, "You've said that before. To me, if you work in a library, you're a librarian. Did you find a few of the references?"

"You're a bit dense, but have it your way. You can call me anything you want. As to the articles, almost all. Turns out, someone must have done a similar search, three or four years ago. All the work just sat in a file. I thought I had seen something like your request when I started here full-time a few months ago, but I'd never gotten around to cleaning out those cabinets. Your lucky day. I would have thrown all this away," pointing to the neat stacks of copied articles. She continued, "Anyway, sure enough, thirty-five of the forty were there already. Found three more on the shelves. I was making three copies of everything. One for you, one for your chief and one for the library. I figure someone else will come in asking for them. Things happen in threes, so they say."

Alex, instantaneously in a better mood, asked, "I'd be impressed if you could tell me who 'they' are."

The woman, for the first time, smiled, "Touché."

After picking up the mess, she said, "Leave the loose pages on the counter. I'll put it all back together. Simple paste holds these old journals together. They fall apart if you look at them funny. Here are the folders for you."

Alex looked through the folders. "Incredible,... awesome.. I had a shit day until...," Alex hesitated, "Oh, excuse me, I didn't mean to swear."

"Fine by me."

"Anyway, I had a down day until now. If the chief doesn't like this, he's either plain mean or crazy. I need to do

a little perusing of this stack. I can't read German or French but I'll try to muddle through."

"I can read both," The file clerk said. "There are some Italian papers, too. I can muddle through Italian as long as it's technical jargon. There, we both used the word 'muddle'."

"Really."

"Really, what?" she asked. "Using 'muddle' in a sentence?"

"Really, can you read German and French?"

Still smiling, she said, "I lived with nuns. There's a table over there. I'm going to work mending this old journal but if you need some translating, let me know."

Alex sat down. *Nuns? Who lives with nuns? What did that have to do with speaking German or French?* He started reading the English papers, keying notes into his laptop as fast as he could. After finishing the English references, he was ready to tackle German.

"I'm done with the English, so I'd like to start on the German papers. Can you help?"

Without comment, the young woman sat in a chair beside Alex. He stared, again, at the eccentric file clerk-librarian, who was in the process of saving his ass, figuratively. She had large brown penetrating, expressive eyes, a strong clefted chin and ebony colored hair. From her light olive complexion, he thought she might be Mediterranean, but doubted that she ever sat in the sun. She wore no makeup. As before, her glare back caused Alex to shift attention to his papers.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"First, I need your name. I'm Alex Gordon, and I'm a third year resident, but in my first of four years in Urology."

"I'm Grace."

"Oh, like the charm and loveliness Grace, or the benediction or blessing Grace?"

"Just Grace...and I don't feel comfortable with you playing with me."

"No last name?"

"Grace is enough for now. You don't need to know my whole name."

With a slight shake of his head, Alex said, "Let's start with these German papers. Maybe you can tell me the title of the paper, and read the conclusion. It's too bad some of these old papers don't have abstracts at the beginning like modern articles do."

Grace read aloud all twenty-two titles and conclusions, in German followed by English. As she read, she returned to twirling the loose strands of hair with her left hand and then sliding down the strands to straighten the twirl. Alex tried hard to concentrate on the translations, although he was semi-fixated on her hair twirling. When he lost concentration watching her, he'd ask her to repeat what she had just read. If the article seemed relevant, Alex would place the paper in a separate pile. When done, Alex picked up the short pile and asked, "Any chance we could go through these 5 in depth? Maybe not today, if you don't have time, but soon."

Grace responded, "I'm okay for time. How long do you have?"

Alex thought for a moment and said, “The chief and two other residents started a five hour surgery at 10:00. They won’t likely be done until 3:00, 3:30. Then we’ll make rounds. So I’ve got until 3:00. I’ll call down to the OR at 2:00 to see how things are going.”

Grace wrinkled her mouth and nose, took the top paper and started to read in muted German, "*Überprüfung der Nierenstein Chirurgie*," and then followed in English in regular voice, "*Review of Kidney Stone Surgery*," twirling all the while.

Alex was able to help Grace understand some of the advanced technical medical jargon in the conclusions, which he could understand by the context of the article. She read and he keyed the information onto his laptop. From the German, they switched to the first of the four French papers.

“Examen de la chirurgie de la lithiase rénale. Review of Nephrolithiasis Surgery.”

Alex Gordon couldn’t help himself. This mysterious polyglot, hair-twirling librarian, who wasn't a librarian, fascinated him.

As 2 p.m. approached, Grace asked, “Don’t you have to call and see how the surgery is going?”

Alex looked up at the clock and realized that he had lost all track of time. “Wow. Time flew.”

Alex called the OR and talked for less than thirty seconds. “They’ll be done at 3:15, rounds at 3:30. We have another hour or so. I’m sorry; did I make you miss your lunch break?”

"No, not really," Grace said, and turned back to the stack of papers and the two Italian articles. She looked at the

title for a moment.

“I haven't read much Italian lately, but I'll get the hang of it. *Policlinico Universitario Agostino Gemelli - Recensione di nefrolitiasi chirurgia. Review of Nephrolithiasis Surgery at the Agostino Gemelli Teaching Hospital or University.*”

At 2:45, Grace had finished all the papers Alex needed.

Alex, again, found himself staring at this mysterious young woman. “You are amazing. How lucky was I to find you? Is there a way that I can print out what I've typed so far?”

“Sure.” Grace rose and went to her desk and pulled out a formatted 3.5" floppy disk from the drawer. “Copy your stuff onto this and I'll print it here.”

As the library printer was spewing out papers, he reiterated, “You are amazing. How lucky was I to find you?”

“I think you said that once already,” Grace responded. “You tend to repeat yourself. Is there anything else you need?”

“Absolutely. I need to pay you back,” Alex said. “You wasted a whole day, missed lunch, and did all this, just for me. How about I buy you lunch?”

“No, no,” Grace responded quickly. “Not necessary.”

Alex's curiosity didn't budge. He responded, “You're not getting off that easy. My treat in the hospital cafeteria.” Alex, now smiling, continued, “The food's crap, but the location is to die for.”

“No. I don't go to the cafeteria. I don't ever go there.”

Alex, persisting, said, “Okay then, next time I have a free lunch hour, I’ll bring up some food.”

“I know for a fact that we’re not supposed to eat in the archives,” she responded.

“Grace, if that’s your real name, we’ve been here all day and not one soul has come through that door. I don’t think anyone will ever know if you eat something here.”

She said nothing, which, he assumed, meant yes.

“I’ve gotta go,” Alex said, “and get ready for rounds. I’ll be back. I promise.”

Grace said, “Call first. Dial the main library number and ask for the archives. I’m not always here. And my name is Grace.”

“Grace, isn’t there a direct number into here?”

“No, you have to go through the main library.”

As Alex was leaving, he turned and asked, “Lights, on or off?”

Grace, turning away, said, “I’ll take care of the lights.”

As he exited, Alex noted a phone sitting on the counter. He saw a number above the key pad, 54003, and made a mental note. Alex knew that the main library’s extension was 54000.

Alex walked to the elevator, laptop and papers in hand, in a much better mood.

He couldn’t help thinking about the librarian or file clerk, whatever she was. *How lucky was I?*

When the elevator arrived, he put down his laptop and added *Grace the Librarian*, and *54003*, to his contact list.

The next morning, Alex dialed the main library number and then asked for the archives. After four rings, it jumped to voice mail.

The message, in Grace's voice, was of no help. "The archives are open from 9 to 5, Monday to Friday and closed on weekends. If you have a list of articles, then fax the list to 206 – 232 – 8207, or email the list to archives@seattlemed.edu. Voicemail is not available for the archives." The line disconnected.

Alex tried the direct number and got the same message. He emailed Grace at archives@seattlemed.edu. 'Grace. Just wanted to thank you again for yesterday's help. Would like to bring you lunch as a thank you. Alex Gordon, MD.'

Twenty-four hours later, Alex had received no response. *I don't think she'll ever respond.*

Alex's last surgical case of the day finished at 3:30 p.m. Rounds were at 4:15. He had scut work to do, but decided to complete his tasks after rounds. He dialed the archives one more time but received the same canned message. He wrote and sent a cryptic email. *Grace, I don't know if you're there. It's 3:35 and I'll be there in five minutes.* He headed up to the archives. As he approached the door, he wondered, *lights on or off?*

The lights were off as Alex entered. "Hello? Anyone here?" Without an answer, he stepped, carefully, into the room and found the light switch behind the counter.

Ping, crackle.

Grace was sitting in her chair, back against the counter,

softly crying. She said, between sobs, “Why can’t you leave me alone... I don’t want any friends... I don’t need any friends... Friends hurt you, every time.”

Alex found a chair and slid it to face the crying Grace.

Alex sat for a moment. When Grace stopped crying, he said, “Grace, please, listen to me. I am new here. I don’t know anyone in the medical center. My chief resident admitted that he didn’t like me at first. The stuff you did for me blew him away. Anyway, he’s been nice to me since, and unless I screw it up, my first year here will be good. I owe that to you.”

Grace responded, “I did nothing and I don’t want or need accolades from you or anyone.”

“That’s not true. You did something; you helped me. I will be here for four more years and was hoping to do some research and paper writing. To me, you’re the greatest resource I could have ever found. I don’t need to be social friends with you but, ... but I’d like to be able to work with you. That’s it. business friends. Yep, just business friends.”

Grace hesitated, then said, “...Okay. Business friends.”

“Great. I still owe you for your help. It’s the way I work. I have to be able to pay you back. Tomorrow at noon, I will be here with lunch. No locked doors. No ‘*Sorry I Missed You, Back at 2:30*’ signs.”

Grace nodded yes.

“I’ve got clinic at 1, so I’ll need to leave by 12:45.”

The following day, Alex entered the archives at noon. He placed a tray on the counter with a chicken Caesar salad, a plate of macaroni and cheese, a Diet and a regular Coke,

and a bottle of water.

Alex, nodding hello to Grace, started, “Sorry, I didn’t ask if you had any dietary hang-ups. I asked the cafeteria staff and they said these were the two most common dishes served. If you are a vegan, I’m in trouble.”

Smiling, Grace said, “I’m not.”

“Great, you can have one or the other or we can share both.”

“Uh, well...,” Grace said, pointing to the right side of the counter with her thumb.

Posted on the wall, a new sign, in big red letters, that read, ‘No Food in Archives!’.

Alex realized that inside the veneer of seeming indifference, a sense of humor did exist. He said, “We’re safe. If Mac and Cheese on a Styrofoam plate is food, our society is in big trouble.”

Grace smiled and said, “Je suis d’accord. I’ll have the salad.”

Eating at the worktable, Alex watched the Grace approach her salad. Both arms semi-surrounded the salad, as if she was protecting it from wolves. *She has to have a story.* Alex thought to himself.

“Grace, I’ve already seen a case that’s worthy of reporting. Have you ever heard of Ehlers–Danlos syndrome?”

“No. I’m not a doctor.” But Grace’s eyes and tone were not dismissive. “What is ‘Air...uh,. whatever?’”

"Ehlers–Danlos. There are many different types. The most common is Type III, which causes joint hypermobility or what’s called being ‘double jointed’. I’ve seen a few and it’s astonishing to see someone put their leg behind their neck, but that’s not what I saw today. Type IV causes disintegration of the blood vessels in young adults..."

Alex droned on for another five minutes.

"...From what I could gather, the patient will likely close off all his large vessels in the next few days or weeks and will die. Anyway, I’d like some information on Ehlers–Danlos syndrome so I can present something at Saturday’s grand rounds."

"How do you spell Ehlers–Danlos?"

"E-H-L-E-R-S, Dash, D-A-N-L-O-S."

Grace wrote but said nothing.

Alex asked, "Can I come back at 6, after clinic, and pick up what you’ve found?"

"We close at 5."

"Uh oh. So what do we do? I’ll call if I can’t get up here before 5."

"Don’t call. I won’t answer the phone," Grace said. She hesitated and thought for a second, then continued, "If it’s after 5, I’ll lock up and leave the papers under the door. Housekeeping doesn’t get here til 10 p.m. or so. That’s all I can do. My bus leaves at 5:15, so I can’t stay."

As Alex left for clinic, Grace, said, "Please close the door on the way out."

And thank you for lunch, but Alex kept that thought to himself.

At 6 p.m., Alex returned to the archives to find the door locked and a treasure trove of printed information on Ehlers–Danlos syndrome in a folder peaking out under door. Inside the folder was a 3.5" floppy disk with pictures, references and articles, already in PowerPoint format.

After his presentation at grand rounds the following morning, the Chairman of the Department of Urology, Harold Kauffman, approached Alex. "Wonderful presentation, Alex. That case came in two days ago. Impressive amount of research. Great work."

Alex emailed Grace's library account, "You are gold! Thank you. Lunch Tuesday noon."

Over a hamburger and Cobb Salad, Alex again told Grace how valuable she had been. Again, she refused to accept any credit.

As they sat and ate, Alex tried his best to get Grace to open up.

"So where'd you learn to speak all those languages?"

"Just around. The nuns."

"What's that mean?"

"Just here and there."

"Grace, that isn't an answer."

"I don't like talking about myself."

"Most people don't speak multiple languages. It's

unusual. Where'd you learn to speak?"

"You're not going to stop asking are you?"

"Nope."

"Growing up. Two nuns. One spoke German, one French. Happy?"

"No. You're not even finishing the sentences. Where were the nuns, at school?"

"In an orphanage. I grew up in an orphanage. Sister Greta spoke German; Sister Claudette spoke French. I showed interest and they taught me to speak and read. I read everything they gave me. I rarely talked to them in English. I took a few free courses in Italian in Missoula. I can't tell you why, languages come easily to me."

"Missoula, that's in Montana, right? How'd you get to be a librarian?"

"You're prying. I'm not a librarian; my title is 'file clerk'. I'd need a college degree to be an actual librarian. It was a job. And, yes, Missoula is in Montana."

"I'm not prying. I'm being inquisitive. How'd you end up here in the archives?"

"God, you're nosy. I started filing in the main library. When people would want something pulled from the archives, I seemed to be the only one who could find things. Actually, most of the librarians hated coming up here. They thought it creepy. The head librarian, Mrs. McPherson, asked if I wanted to work up here full time and I said yes. I liked the quietness. I liked not having people poke into my life." Grace stopped for a moment to let her statement sink in. Then restarted, "I learned how to re-bind broken journals, so

I spend a good deal of time up here doing that."

"Grace, you're not going to tell me much about yourself, are you?"

"No. I don't talk about myself...to anyone. I did tell you how I learned German and French and how I ended up in the archives. Be happy that I told you that."

"Grace, I have clinic every Tuesday at 1 p.m. and we seldom have significant cases on Tuesday mornings. How 'bout we say that I'll bring lunch next Tuesday, unless I call and say I can't make it."

"That's not necessary. Besides, I may have things to do on Tuesday."

"Grace, uh, uh, I don't buy it. You've had nothing to do on the last two Tuesdays. You can call me if you're busy; otherwise, I'm coming up with lunch. You're worth every Styrofoam container."

"Now there's a compliment."

"That didn't come out right. Sorry."

Something about Grace piqued Alex's curiosity. He'd see a chicken burrito, *would Grace like that?* He'd hear about an interesting diagnosis like xanthogranulomatous pyelonephritis, *could Grace help me research that? I may never understand her but she's like no one I've ever met.*

Alex had his third and fourth lunches with Grace on consecutive Tuesdays. Alex talked about his education, Lowell High School in San Francisco, UCLA undergrad, UCSF med school and two years of General Surgery back at UCLA before coming to Seattle Med for Urology. Grace wouldn't bite when Alex asked, "How about you?"

"Here and there," was all Grace could offer.

After lunch, Alex threw a curveball to Grace, with a huge smile and a Clark Gable voice, an octave lower than normal. "Grace, we can't go on like this anymore. I can't take it."

Grace's eyes widened, but she said nothing, waiting for the next sentence.

"You have to let me take you out of the hospital for a meal."

"No, I don't think so. I don't do those things."

"Please. If I have to go back to Mac and Cheese again, I'll hang myself. You'd be responsible."

Grace said, "Go for it. I doubt you'll hang yourself."

Alex repeated, "Please."

"I'll have to think about it. That's all I can do right now."

"Grace, I'm going to go out on a limb right now. I'm guessing you don't have any friends here, for whatever reason. I think you are unique and I'd like to be friends. I'm still not sure what you have against being friends with me. So I'm going to ask you again and this time I'd like you to say 'Sure, I'd love to go.'"

Alex hesitated and said, "Grace, we can't go on like this anymore. I can't take it. You have to let me take you out of the hospital for a meal."

Grace was twirling her hair strand in double time. A bead of sweat balanced between her brows as Alex waited