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First Edition

First Printing, 2014

ISBN 978-0-9909432-0-4

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*The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and
the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown.*

-H.P. Lovecraft

Chapter 1

The last nine years of his life shrank in the rearview mirror. Michigan, medical school, and everything north of the Mason-Dixon Line would be past tense in less than a day. He looked over at Julia, and she smiled back at him. “Are you excited?” he asked.

She fidgeted with the radio. “You know, it’s not too late to just dump all of this and go to New York instead.” She’d mentioned it at least ten times.

Cat Stevens blared from the speaker loud and proud, and she leaned back in her seat.

“And let our baby grow up in educated luxury? I forbid it.”

She shook her head and rubbed her pregnant belly. “I can’t wait to see Little Ben.”

Only a few weeks until they were parents. He couldn’t believe it. For that matter, neither had Julia’s parents when they heard the news. Engaged was not married, or so they had informed them numerous times. Old-school Catholics had very specific ideas about *that* kind of thing.

Eddy, ever the consummate best friend, had asked if Ben was sure it was his kid. “She’s just too good for you, brother.”

“You have the map, right?” Julia asked for the fifteenth time that morning.

“Yeah, it’s right—” Ben reached to the center console of his new 1972 Sportwagon. A gift from Julia’s father. Perfect for a new family. “I just had the darn thing.”

“Are you serious?”

He smiled big and pulled it out from under the seat. “Kidding.”

She slapped his shoulder.

“We aren’t going to get lost. It’s a straight shot down I-75 and then a turn onto I-24.” The highway went all the way down to Florida. Eddy called it the run from the freezer to the grave.

“I worry, that’s all. I’ve never done a cross-country move before.”

“Worrying’s my job, sweetheart. You’re the brains of the operation.”

The morning Ann Arbor traffic gave way to the bustle of the Interstate. Vacationers and students were off the road, and the September traffic turned light and then non-existent as they sped south toward their new home in Tennessee. The moving truck lagged behind, but that was to be expected. They’d arrive a few hours after Ben and Julia and unload everything into the new apartment in Umber Gardens.

“Did you call ... What was his name?”

“Dr. Howerton. And yes, I called the Home and let them know we were leaving Michigan.”

“Are you nervous?”

He was, but he wasn't going to tell her that. On the phone, Howerton hadn't sounded like the nicest guy, but new doctors were taught to expect a cool reception, especially psychiatrists. Knowing that hadn't helped Ben sleep over the past few weeks. “Of course not, darling. You know me. Nerves of steel.” He waggled his eyebrows at her.

Michigan passed by quickly, and within two hours, they were back in Ben's home state of Ohio. The views didn't change much. Open fields, endless road, and blue skies forever. Cat Stevens gave way to Bob Dylan and the Beatles, the music lulling Ben into an almost hypnotic trance. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and took a sip of the Tab they were splitting.

Halfway through Ohio, Julia poked him in the arm. “If you're tired, I can drive.”

The idea appealed to him, but he thought better of it. “You shouldn't even be in the car when you're this pregnant. You'll mess up the upholstery if you have that kid in here.”

She laughed and rolled her eyes as the countryside moved by.

Morning turned to afternoon, and by evening, they were through Kentucky and into Tennessee. Knoxville rolled by out the windows. After that, it was all open road and trees as the highway climbed up into the mountains. By the time they reached I-24, the evening had given way to night.

Stars already shone overhead when they turned off I-24 and into Umber Gardens. The city appeared in the hills as swiftly as a mirage. Buildings twelve stories or more rose up from the forest like brightly lit giants. The city's bustle was noticeable, even from a distance.

“That's gorgeous,” Julia said. “Maybe it won't be as bumpkin as I thought.”

Ben rubbed his eyes for the third time in twenty minutes. “Hey, little lady. I'm a bumpkin. You've got the son of a bumpkin kicking around in your belly.” He arched an eyebrow at her in mock seriousness. “You better be careful with talk like that, city girl.”

“Yeah, but you escaped the bumpkin life of a coal miner, and now you're going to be a world-famous doctor.” She grabbed one of his hands and kissed it.

He smiled at her. He doubted he'd ever make waves in the medical community, but he didn't care. That place, the Umber Gardens Home for the Mentally Unstable—the Home—paid new doctors what only surgeons made. Jean Piaget and Philip Zimbardo could keep their front-page pictures. Ben wasn't going to be poor anymore, and that was enough for him. Those thoughts danced through his head as they hunted downtown for their apartment.

Twelves stories tall and not more than a few years old, the building might have been out of place in another small Tennessee city. Not here though. Here it was just another up-and-coming project in an up-and-coming city. New York fancy, as Ben had come to think of it. Good enough for Julia, who was accustomed to the finer things in life. He parked the car and made his way around to the rear to grab the paperwork.

“Shall we, Miss Kent?” He offered her a hand as she got out of the car. She took it, and they walked through the double glass doors and into the lobby.

A security guard sat behind the small desk near the elevator and the door to the stairwell, poring over a book. He looked old enough to be a grandfather.

“Hey, there.” Ben walked up to the desk. “I’m Dr. Benjamin Kent.” He savored the word he’d worked over nine years to get. “We’re supposed to be moving into 4A today.”

The guard put the book down and smiled. “Well, welcome to UMBER Gardens.” He scratched at his chin and squinted as if he’d heard something funny. “You folks from up north?” That accent came out thick enough to cut through. The slow, southern way of drawing out every syllable made even up north drip gentlemanly charm.

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Ben set the paperwork he’d been mailed in front of the guard. An agent for the rental company in town had already taken care of everything. A few weeks of playing mail tag and their new home was waiting for them when they showed up.

The guard took the packet and thumbed through it. “It’s a nice little town we got here, and Tennessee is a helluva place.” He opened a drawer and pulled out a pair of keys. “But y’all look beat, and it’s late. Why don’t I show you up?” The man started to stand, but Ben put up a hand.

“We can find it just fine. I appreciate it though.” Ben looked over at Julia and smiled. “This is our first place together.”

“Young love, huh?” Coming from someone who didn’t look about ninety, it might have been nose-y. “Y’all gonna need a hand moving your stuff?”

“I think we’ll be fine. We hired movers. They should be here in an hour or two.”

“When they get here, I’ll send them up.” The man stood up anyway and extended a hand to Ben. “My name’s Harry.”

Ben shook it. “This is my fiancée, Julia. You can just call me Ben.”

“Well, Ben.” He sat down. “If you two ever need anything, you let me know. Maintenance and everything else is handled right through this desk.” Harry tapped on the wood.

“Thanks, Harry. We will.” Julia and Ben walked to the elevator as Harry returned to his book. The door slid open silently, and they entered.

“Let me press it.” Julia barely contained the laughter in her voice.

Ben stepped aside and gestured, ‘*Be my guest.*’ Julia ran her fingers down the buttons from twelve and stopped at four, pressing it. The doors closed, and the box took them up to their new life.

“Did that guard look like he was about to keel over?” Ben asked once the elevator started moving. She slapped his shoulder and laughed as it took them.

The doors opened onto a short pastel hallway with four apartments. The lights illuminated the golden signs etched with numbers. They walked to 4A, and Ben pulled the keys out of his pocket. “You want to do this one too?”

She thought about it for a moment. “It’s your turn.”

He smiled and put the key into the lock, turning it. Before he could get his hand around the knob, she grabbed it and twisted it open.

“The lock was your turn,” she said with a smile.

“Oh yeah?” He tried to grab her for a kiss, but she danced away and into the apartment, laughing. He followed her, wondering how she could still be that graceful nine months pregnant.

They took it all in as his shoes echoed across the hardwood floor.

“The living room is bigger than my dorm was.” Ben closed the door and looked around. A living room with a breathtaking view of the mountains, an open dining room, and a cozy kitchen took up half the apartment. A short hallway led to a bathroom and two small bedrooms, with a larger master bedroom and bathroom in the back, all of it painted in an awful pastel green that had to go.

“This is amazing!” Julia said with delight, running up and showering him in kisses.

He returned the last one and put his arms around her. “I think this place is going to be pretty great.”

Ben spent the next half hour lugging stuff from the car to the apartment. The first thing he brought up was the folding chair he’d hidden away for Julia before they left. He set it in the living room. “I figured you might want to take a seat while we waited for the movers.”

She shook her head and smiled at him as she sat down, trying to keep her balance. “You just think of everything don’t you, Dr. Kent?”

He couldn't afford to lose the rest of the stuff he pulled from the car, so he hadn't chanced putting it in the moving truck. His paperwork for the new job, family photos, and the antique lamp Julia's grandmother had given her for her birthday two years before. The little knickknacks, trivial until someone lost them.

In the back of the trunk, in a big black case, was the revolver that Julia's father had insisted they buy. Ben didn't want it. He'd grown up in the country, and was more than familiar with how they worked, but guns made him comfortable. He didn't like killing tools, especially now that he was a doctor. The idea of preparing to end a life while saving them every day struck him as more than a little hypocritical. Still, when daddy paid for everything, daddy got what he wanted, and so Ben had caved and bought the damn thing.

After Ben's third trip, Harry looked up from the book he was reading. "You need a hand there, Ben?"

"No," Ben said over an armful of paperwork as he walked by the desk. "This is the last of it."

Julia and Ben spent the next hour looking around and planning while they waited for the movers. The couch went there; the desk went there... A new start in a new town, a new life in a new place. The movers knocked on the door shortly, and by eleven that night everything from Michigan was in the apartment. Ben thanked the movers, tipped them more than he probably should have, and closed the door.

He surveyed his new domain. "So what do you think?" He spread his arms out to indicate everything they'd accomplished.

She'd been messing around with dishes in the kitchen, despite insisting they not unpack until morning. She walked over to the couch and sat down slowly, letting out a long sigh. "I think I'm beat."

He had to admit, he was too. "Well, what do you say we test out the shower and hit the hay?"

"That," she said, "sounds like a great idea."

He helped her to her feet, and they went into the master bathroom. She took her clothes off and stepped into the tub, Ben just behind her. He loved showering with her. Not in a crude sexual way—although he liked that too—but because of the vulnerability. To stand naked in front of

someone without fear of judgment touched something in him, something he hadn't known with anybody else.

"Little Ben just kicked," she said as the water splashed over them.

He put his hand on her belly, waiting to feel their son acknowledge that he too was a party to that moment. After a few seconds, he did. Ben leaned down as the water ran over his face and kissed the top of Julia's head. "I love you."

"I love you too." She put her arms around him and leaned her head against his chest.

Ben laid down to sleep that night as he had every other night over the last few weeks— full of trepidation. Julia turned the bedside light off and said goodnight.

Throughout the last month, something had changed. Sleep that once came easy now came slowly, if at all. He rolled over, trying to put it out of his mind.

If I keep turning sleep into a battle that needs to be won or lost, I'm never going to catch it.

He believed it. He knew it. It didn't help. Two hours after Julia began to snore, he was still staring up at the ceiling, waiting for the night to carry him away. When it finally did, his dreams chased him down dark corridors. Fingers pressed against glass, and shadows shifted in the dreaming nowhere land. His dead mother whispered something to him, warning him. Afraid of whatever it was that no longer allowed him peaceful sleep, he ran. Unfamiliar voices screamed at him. Things reached out, trying to drag him down into the dark.

He found no rest.

They ate the last of their lunch from the day before for breakfast. When they finished, he moved furniture around while she unpacked boxes, the two of them speaking only to make suggestions about the new home. "Grandma's lamp should go here, don't you think? The key holder needs to go by the door. Don't you think we should put the baby in the closer room so we can hear him cry?" By the time afternoon rolled around, they'd done most of the unpacking.

"Do you want to go grab a bite to eat?" Ben asked as he surveyed his kingdom. A nice rug covered the floor, and a picture of him with Julia and her family hung on the opposite wall above their record player. Most of the furniture was a gift from Julia's father. *God knows they've got the money to spare.*

"That sounds great," she said. "Why don't we go shopping?"

And they did. The security guard, who looked about as ancient as Harry, informed them a Piggly Wiggly was just up the block. They drove down the street and discovered that yes; Piggly Wiggly was in fact a real place. That gave both of them a good laugh. By the time they'd finished shopping, they had everything they needed to get through the first week in a new place.

"I guess all that's left now is to check out the town," Ben said as they got back into the car. He wanted to see it all, do it all. They had time, sure, but they'd watch it fly out the window once the baby came.

"Ugh! Not today. I can't handle anything that doesn't involve sitting on the couch." Julia leaned her head against the seat.

Instead, Julia cooked an early dinner while Bessie Smith told them how hard it was to love someone who didn't love you back. Night cast itself over UMBER Gardens. The long day of unpacking wound down into dinner on the couch.

"Looking forward to tomorrow?" Julia asked as the blues soothed away the day's troubles.

"Yeah, of course." Not a lie per se, but not the truth. His stomach did a few flips thinking about it. A new place, new friends, new co-workers.

He drifted away in thought as Julia looked over at him and smiled. "Good." She leaned against him.

He didn't want to be poor anymore. He didn't want to work to the bone so his family could eat dinner every night. *This is it. This is the good life now. I'm there.*

But he didn't feel there.

Chapter 2

He crawled out of bed when the alarm went off at seven. Another night, another nightmare. As Julia rolled over in her sleep, he walked into the bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror. *Just nerves. First day of the rest of your life jitters.* He let out a sigh and scratched the stubble on his face. *Nobody walks into the hospital day one without thinking they're about to look like a jackass.* He slapped shaving cream onto his face, shaved, and proceeded through his morning rituals. Sit-ups and pushups until his muscles burned, buttered toast, and a shower to ease his mind. He wished he didn't look so tired.

By the time he stepped out, Julia was just waking up. "Good morning, Doctor," she said as she stretched in bed.

"Morning." He stepped into the closet to grab his suit. Had to look good on the first day. You never got a second chance to make a first impression. Or as his mother once said, "*You never get to screw it up twice.*"

Julia picked up on his apprehension. "Shake off those first day blues, baby. You'll be fine." She scooted over to the side of the bed and stood slowly, her big pregnant belly making it into a balancing act. "Why don't I make you breakfast?"

"Already ate."

She cocked her head and yawned. "Why don't I make me breakfast, then?"

He didn't mean to be terse with her. Not only was she wonderful, but taking out his nervousness on someone else showed a stunning lack of character. He mentally chastised himself. "Coffee would be great though," he called as she left the room.

He finished dressing and checked himself out in the bathroom mirror. *Not bad.* He adjusted his tie and walked into the dining room, picking up his mug and taking a sip while she put some eggs into a pan. "Mmm. Good stuff. Just how I like my coffee and my ladies, hot 'n' sweet."

She brandished her spatula like a weapon. "Dr. Kent, if you're going to be vulgar..."

He held his hands up in mock surrender. "Only the truth passes these lips."

"I'll feel a lot hotter when I don't look so round," she said, returning to her cooking.

He almost added, "*I like my women round too,*" but thought better of it. "I'm not sure what time I'll get home tonight. Might not want to wait up for dinner just in case." The clock in the kitchen told him it was almost eight ten. "I should go. This place is out a ways."

She set down her utensil. “You be safe today.” She kissed him before re-adjusting his tie. “And try not to be nervous. You’ll be fine.”

He kissed her back. He’d be careful, but not being nervous probably wasn’t going to happen. A little voice in the back of his mind reminded him that top of the class didn’t mean he’d make a good doctor.

“I’ll live, I’m sure.” He grabbed his paperwork off the table. “See you tonight.”

The downtown traffic wasn’t as bad as he expected. His only other experience with a city had been Ann Arbor, and that place was gridlocked until ten. The heart of Umber Gardens didn’t extend more than a dozen blocks in any direction. Past that were small suburbs and industrial complexes. He reached the city’s eastern edge, where the lonely road that would take him to work stretched into the distance. Fields and pastures passed by as he did his best to keep his thoughts blank.

Yes, sir and no, sir. Keep up eye contact. Smile. Don’t ask too many questions. Make sure they’re the right ones. He mentally reviewed every technique he could think of for looking good on the first day. After a few minutes, he laughed. “And don’t drill yourself like you have a stick up your ass,” he said aloud.

The forest on his right loomed closer, the darkness of the woods absolute even in the sunlight. Old growth, the kind of forest that almost said it was there before you and would be there after. He shuddered a little and shook it off.

The road climbed a gradual hill. At the top, the exit for the Home appeared on his right. A semi passed him going the opposite way as he turned, and the forest moved in to swallow him.

The morning light vanished behind the trees. The effect, from the beautiful morning outside to a primordial overcast inside, stunned him. Perpetual dusk lived in these woods.

“Wow,” he said, awestruck. He’d grown up in the hills and wilds of Ohio, but he’d never seen anything like this. *Eyes on the prize*, he reminded himself as the car sped along. *Plenty of time to stare slack-jawed at the flora later.*

Five minutes in, he thought he might have taken the wrong road. Halfway there he became certain. Just as he decided it would be best to turn around and call for directions, the road curved slightly. Past the curve, a large gate and a huge stone wall appeared out of the gloom. *Must be the place.*

Not a speck of rust marred the gate, but Spanish moss and cracks covered the stone wall like something out of a history book. The surrounding trees created an almost fairytale scene. Julia wasn't going to believe him when he told her about it.

Two men in white uniforms stepped out of the gatehouse. One looked to be in his mid-sixties; the other couldn't have been more than twenty. They stepped into the road in front of the gate and waited for Ben to approach. Ten feet away, he opened his door to step out.

"Please stay in the vehicle, sir," the older guard said. His expression made it clear it wasn't a request.

Ben shut his door and rolled down his window. "Hey there," he said as the young man stepped around to the driver's side. "My name is Dr. Benjamin Kent, and I'm supposed to start working here today."

The young man leaned against the car, placing his arm over the open window. Ben suppressed a wave of annoyance at the thought of someone putting fingerprints on his car, dirty from a cross-country drive or not.

"You got anything to prove it?"

Not a great first impression on your part either, Home. "Yeah, I've got all the paperwork right here." Ben handed the stack over to the kid. He walked back, and the pair conferred for a moment before the younger man unlocked the gate.

The older man came to the window. "Howdy, Doctor. Sorry about that, just a formality." He gave the paperwork back.

"No problem at all." *As long as you don't put your fingers on my paint too.*

He didn't. "Go ahead and pull through to the door. Someone will park your car for you."

The road continued for another fifty yards through the forest before veering to the right. The Home's grounds opened up before Ben. A stately, almost regal manor dominated the center of a huge open area. The gardens and walking paths on the property were empty, but Ben barely noticed. The manor itself drew his complete attention.

Châteauesque. The word came to mind from some long forgotten undergrad course. The three-winged building stood four stories tall. The road led up to a traffic circle with a portecochere on the far end and a huge fountain in the middle. The light gray stone and blue steeped roofs rose into points dotted with weathervanes and chimney stacks. The whole thing came right out of a Victorian romance paperback.

Or a horror novel. A chill ran up his spine. Daylight didn't touch the open estate's gardens, and the red cobblestone road under his tires was conspicuously silent. The trees remained still, as if they weren't alive at all, just drawn onto the scenery. The lack of people made everything desolate. A motif of angels from heaven fleeing from a dragon below decorated the portecochere. *What the hell is that?*

He put the thoughts out of his head as he approached. First day jitters, nerves and stress.

Two guards stood outside the building's doors. Ben pulled around the circle and stopped in front of them. He took a deep breath and let it out before grabbing his paperwork and exiting the car.

"Good morning, sir. Can we help you?" The guard on the left asked. He had about thirty years on the other one.

"I'm Dr. Kent. I'm supposed to start working here today." Ben stuck out his hand to shake with the guard when the paperwork slipped out from under his arm. The younger guard quickly stepped on the folder before anything had a chance to fly away. *Smooth move, Ben.*

"Hey, that was a close one." The guard bent to pick up the papers.

"Thanks." Ben dusted off the folder. *Auspicious start.*

"Dr. Howerton is expecting you," the older guard said. "If you head up to the desk, they'll take care of you." He moved aside and swung open the ornate front door.

The reality of his situation settled over Ben. The rich marble floor, patterned in black and white, shone. Hallways spread out in every direction, both on the ground floor and the second story balcony. A massive white and gold chandelier hung from the engraved ceiling. It didn't just say wealthy, it said obscene, decadent. The kind of money Ben hadn't dared dream of in medical school.

A desk dominated the space between two sweeping staircases at the far end of the room. The middle-aged nurse sitting there said something to the orderly leaning against the counter. Judging by the look on her face, it wasn't very polite. They cut their conversation short as Ben entered the lobby and the doors shut behind him. His shoes made an outrageous amount of noise as he approached.

"Hello. I'm Dr. Kent." He flashed a smile and extended a hand to the nurse. "I'm supposed to be starting today."

She smiled back and shook it. “Welcome to the Home.” Her New York accent could have come from one of Julia’s sisters. “My name’s Regina.” She looked at the man nearby, and her smile faltered. “This is Scott, one of our orderlies.”

Her smile could have melted butter. Nothing fake about that one, and Ben thought himself something of a pro on picking them out.

The smile on Scott’s face, however, held no such warmth. “I can introduce myself just fine. Scott.” He extended his hand, and Ben shook it.

“I was told to meet with Dr. Howerton. Is he available?”

“Yes, Doctor.” Regina’s practiced tone did nothing to mask her accent. “But first, we need you to fill out some paperwork. You should have received a packet in the mail.”

Ben placed the folder on the desk.

“Great.” She opened a drawer, pulling out a separate stack of papers and placing them in front of her. “Dr. Howerton asked that you take care of all of this as soon as you came in. He’s tied up in a meeting right now.” She set a pen on top of mountain of loose leaf. “There’s a waiting room just over there where you can have a seat and fill this out.”

Being a doctor required endless paperwork; another thirty sheets wasn’t going to dampen his spirits. “Thank you, Regina.”

That smile flashed again. Scott said nothing. Instead, he did his best to look interested in something by the door.

Ben turned toward the waiting room she’d pointed out when Regina spoke up behind him. “Oh! I’ll need your keys too.”

He stopped. It struck him as an odd request. “My keys?”

“Yes, Doctor. It’s an access control precaution. One of the waivers you’ll need to sign gives the staff permission to search you or your car when you leave.”

Ben pulled them out of his pocket. Something about handing them over felt like giving up a lifeline, going past a point of no return. He set them on the desk without a word and turned back toward the waiting room.

As he walked away Scott mumbled something to Regina. “We’ll talk about this later.”
Hospital drama. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same.

He crossed the lobby and pulled the door open. His apartment looked like a tree fort in comparison to the waiting room. A fireplace dominated the far end. Landscape paintings

decorated the walls. Tasteful red couches and chairs lay near mahogany tables. Decadent wasn't even the right word. Ben sat in the nearest chair and started the paperwork. He knew the place catered to a rich clientele, but seeing was believing.

Until that letter had arrived in the mail three weeks before graduation, he didn't know places like this existed. They had asked for Ben through U of M. The letter said a lot about new blood and fresh ideas. The Home had to stay on top to continue catering to the high caliber of patients to which it was accustomed. He'd filled out the paperwork, certain they'd pick someone else. Nobody he spoke to had ever heard of the Home. Nobody paid the kind of money they talked about in the correspondence; it just wasn't done. But it carried on long past the point of joking. Letters of recommendation were written and signed, question after question was answered by mail, and finally, a phone interview by Dr. Howerton sealed the deal.

And now I'm here. He finished the paperwork in half an hour then walked back into the lobby. Regina still sat behind the desk, but now three older gentlemen were chatting nearby. They all stopped to look at him.

Judging by the tallest man's hawk gaze, Ben guessed he was Dr. Howerton. The other two were equally old but didn't possess his look of authority. "You must be Dr. Kent," the man said.

"I am." Ben approached the trio. "Are you Dr. Howerton?"

The man stuck out a hand. "Yes. Welcome to Umber Gardens." An iron grip, a no-bullshit kind of man. "This is the mayor of our little city, Tyler Carter." Howerton gestured at the shorter, slightly rounder man next to him.

Ben shook his hand and smiled.

"And this is our local police chief, Brian Richards."

Ben shook his hand as well.

"We try to keep the local authorities apprised of our goings-on here."

"This place draws a lot of water in our town. We're glad to have it here." Mayor Carter winked at Dr. Howerton. "I trust you'll contribute to its sterling reputation?"

"Of course, sir." Ben faked a smile he didn't feel. Day one and the mayor was standing before him. A sudden certainty that he'd gotten in over his head overcame him.

"They were just stepping out, and I hate to keep them." Howerton turned his hawk gaze on Regina. "Take Dr. Kent to my office, please." He turned back to the mayor, shutting Ben out of the conversation. "The dinner will be next Wednesday."

Ben took the cue and turned his attention to Regina.

“Follow me, Doctor.”

Behind the sweeping staircase, a long hallway opened. Regina navigated the hall, Ben in tow. As he walked off, the mayor spoke behind him. “I’m very much looking forward to it.”

The cavernous hallways leading away from the lobby gave way to smaller ones. Huge wooden arches, lovingly detailed, hung overhead. Posh decorations and paintings of landscapes like those in the waiting rooms lined the walls.

“This is quite the place,” Ben said.

“Yes. It takes a little getting used to. It’s pretty high-brow stuff.”

“If I didn’t know better, I wouldn’t think this was a hospital.”

She looked over her shoulder and flashed that smile again. “The west wing is where the patients stay.”

He hummed an acknowledgment and continued to eye the scenery. *You could fit a hundred trailers in this place and still have room left over.* The two-bedroom doublewide he’d grown up in would have fit into one of the hallways.

Regina rounded a few more turns and stopped in front of a door with a golden plate decorating the front. Dr. Richard Howerton. She opened the door. “This is his office. Do you need anything?”

“No, I think I’m fine.” He stepped in.

She winked at him as she left. “Good luck.”

Ben wasn’t sure exactly what she meant by that, but it didn’t sound promising. He couldn’t help but think that the kind of guy with an office bigger than his living room probably didn’t get there by being nice. He took a seat in one of the two high-backed chairs in front of the desk. The window behind it offered a view of a large floral garden and the mountains and forests beyond.

He didn’t wait long. The door opened, and he stood as Dr. Howerton entered the room. He moved with authority, the kind of man who didn’t ask for things and didn’t like to hear the word no. “My apologies for that, Dr. Kent. It’s a very busy morning.”

“Of course, sir. I understand.”

Howerton stepped around to the other side of the desk. “Take a seat.”

Ben did as instructed. “This is quite the place, sir.”

Howerton crossed his legs and looked at Ben. Looked at him wasn't accurate, more like looked *through* him. That stare could peel paint. "It's the best in the world. Both for quality and care."

Ben smiled at that, but Howerton didn't smile back.

"Our fees to care for the loved ones of wealthy families are substantial. They expect the absolute best in all things. We are uniquely able to give them that because of our accommodations."

Accommodations hardly fit. This was palatial, magnificent. "I'm glad you've given me the opportunity to be a part of it, sir."

Howerton leaned back in his chair and appraised Ben. The silence stretched on for one minute, then two. Ben sat quietly, trying not to shift in his seat. Staring across the desk while his boss mentally picked him apart was the last thing he wanted on his first day. "What is it you're hoping to get from your time at the Home?"

He hadn't walked in expecting another interview. He reached for whatever answer came to mind first, unnerved somewhat by the long silence. "Experience, sir. I look forward to working with a staff that has years of knowledge." Trite, but he thought it would do.

Howerton waved that answer away and shook his head. "We brought a young doctor in for fresh ideas. Give me something more than that, Dr. Kent."

Ben didn't like being under the spotlight. Howerton would have fit right in with the medical boards that sat for psychiatrists certification. Those men had the same no bullshit expressions, and the same ability to ruin a career with a word.

"It's a good opportunity for me and my family, sir." Honesty might have been a bad choice, but it was already too late. "I didn't grow up wealthy. The Home will let me provide for my family better than anywhere else out there. I intend to give back just as much."

Howerton raised his chin a bit and looked down his nose. The image of a hawk eyeing a rabbit couldn't have been more spot-on. "Tell me about your family."

They'd covered all of that in the phone interview, but if Howerton wanted to hear it again, Ben would give it to him. "I have a fiancée and a baby boy on the way. He should be coming any time now."

A small smile spread across his face. Not mirthful, but hard, like everything else about him. "I like people who have something to lose. People with something to lose work hard. They care

about their jobs and the things that come with them.” Howerton placed his arms on the desk. “Too many young medical students do it for recognition, or because it’s what their family insisted on.”

“You won’t have that problem with me, sir.”

Life growing up had been tough and poor, but back then he’d only had to deal with other poor folk. The mix of idealism and conservative American values at college had turned his stomach. “*Unions killed American freedom.*” He’d love to see a world where blue-collar workers were left to fend for themselves.

His sarcasm had been lost on them. It went beyond that though. His classmates honestly saw themselves as pioneers in a brave new world, young men who were going to cure crazy one patient at a time. Hell, give ’em time; they might just fix death too. In medical school, entitlement went past the point of reason and straight to stupidity.

“That’s good to hear. Very good, actually. Things are done a certain way here, and it’s a way that works. If I can be frank, Dr. Kent, we aren’t here to cure people.”

Ben might not be looking to change the world, but being turned into a well-educated medication dispenser hadn’t been in the cards either. Years of medical training amounting to nothing but a smile and a handshake while a nurse did all the work was the reason he hadn’t gone the family medicine route. “Sir?”

“Our patients are all long-term. Schizophrenics, hyper-delusionals, the criminally insane— Wealthy families send us their dirty laundry so they don’t have to deal with it. In turn, we provide a high standard of care so there isn’t a burden on those families’ conscience.”

A lockup then, not a hospital. “What will my duties be, exactly, sir?”

Howerton drew in a deep breath. “You will see patients, attempt therapeutic dialogue, and prescribe the necessary interventions. Standard fare for this sort of job. We have a small patient population, and it shouldn’t be overly taxing.” He leaned over the desk. “But you will treat the ladies and gentlemen here as ladies and gentlemen. We aren’t some slipshod state hospital.”

“I understand, sir.”

Howerton stood up. “Today I’d like to take you on a tour, get you familiar with the building.”

“I have to admit, this place is fascinating. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Howerton left the office, Ben behind him. “There aren’t other places like this. In the 1800s when this place was built, it was one of the largest homes in the United States. It was donated to the state as a hospital building at the turn of last century.” They passed a pair of nurses walking down the hall. Both smiled at Dr. Howerton but didn’t as much as look at Ben. “It was a general hospital until the early thirties, then it was unused until the mid-forties. I’m proud to say we’ve built quite a reputation around here.”

They moved through the tangle of halls and back into the lobby. “We remodeled the east wing to be more like the original house. We use it for social functions, or guest space if a patient’s visitors wish to stay the night. The west wing is the patient care wing. All of their rooms and facilities are there. The central building is used for staff and administration.” They passed into the west hallway. Windows lined the wall on their right, offering a view of the front property. “There is a basement as well, but it’s off limits to everyone but maintenance workers. Am I understood on that?”

“Yes, sir.”

Howerton stopped and faced him square. “That isn’t a rule to be taken lightly. The basement hasn’t been renovated in years, and it could be dangerous down there.”

Ben made eye contact this time. “I understand, sir.”

“Good.”

They continued walking. Two massive doors dominated the far end of the hall, and a pair of orderlies opened them as they approached. “Security checkpoints are set up at the entrance to the west wing and at the landing on each floor. We take security very seriously here.”

Ben heard him but didn’t respond. The smaller lobby on the door’s far side looked more impressive than the central section of the building. *This* was a home. Red carpet, red drapes, and the kind of plush furniture that cost more than his mother had made in a year.

“The third floor is residence for the mild patients, and the fourth is for the dangerous ones. This floor is administration.”

A feeling of trepidation hung over the place. Ben chalked it up to first day anxieties, but he couldn’t shake it. The shadows in the deep-set doorways were darker than they should have been.

Howerton showed him the kitchen and the dining room for the staff, and then the pharmacy. Ben couldn’t relax, and his attention kept drifting. The phantom sensation of something watching

him from those doorways wouldn't relent. He glanced behind him, expecting to see a staff member watching at him. They weren't.

Nurses and orderlies passed by them occasionally, but the halls were largely unpopulated. "What's the staff size? I expected to see more people when I saw this place from the outside."

"Sixty people. You, myself, and Dr. Vitalie are the only doctors on permanent staff."

Fewer than Ben would have guessed. "How many patients?"

"Twenty-two." Howerton climbed the stairs to the second floor.

The amount they must have charged to keep a place like this open with only twenty-two patients made Ben's head spin, especially in light of what they were paying him. He'd found the goose, and all the patients were the golden eggs.

Howerton appeared to read his mind. "As I said, Dr. Kent, we sell peace of mind to wealthy families. Exclusivity is part and parcel of that."

Ben grunted an understanding. He stood on the other side of the looking glass, worlds away from the trailer park, in a place where people paid inordinate amounts of money for peace of mind. That kind of place didn't exist where he came from.

"The second floor is common rooms, libraries, and the space where Dr. Vitalie does the occasional group session. We have a small movie room set up for the patients as well. Violent patients aren't allowed on this floor at any time."

"How does supervision work?"

"Look around, Dr. Kent."

Orderlies sat at the end of each hallway that branched off of the main one. A nursing station was set up at the entrance to the stairs. *Eyes on everything around here.* "Will I receive privacy for my patient sessions?"

"Of course. Patient meetings are generally done on this floor. At least weekly, unless the patient requests a more intensive schedule." He looked back at Ben as he walked. "None of them ever do."

Howerton turned down a dark hallway with an elevator at the end. New, not some ratty old thing left over from the Stone Age. No windows let in light this far into the building, and the hallway's darkness unsettled Ben. "Are some of the bulbs out in here, sir?"

Howerton eyed the light fixtures and glanced back at Ben. "I think it's your imagination, Dr. Kent."

They continued down the hall. The hum of the elevator moving drew their attention. It set into place on the second floor, and the doors clicked open. The lights flickered overhead as the elevator revealed one small man inside, staring at the floor. He couldn't have been older than twenty-five. He wore a dark gray outfit that made it clear he was a patient. He had both of his hands behind his back, holding something.

"Robbie. Good to see you. How are you feeling today?"

Robbie didn't respond. He stepped off the elevator, and the doors slid closed behind him. The lights flickered again. Apparently, it wasn't Ben's imagination.

"Are you okay, Robbie?" Dr. Howerton asked. Robbie shuffled closer, but stayed out of reach.

Something wasn't right. Ben's head swam as the light bulbs continued to dim and brighten again. He rubbed his eyes. The first aching pain of a headache settled inside his skull.

"Robbie? What have you got?" A note of caution entered Howerton's voice.

"You aren't supposed to be here." Robbie peaked up at Ben as he spoke. His voice barely registered above a whisper. "You can't be here."

"Robbie. This is Dr. Kent. He's a new doctor here." Howerton took a step toward Robbie, and Robbie stepped back in kind. "Are you feeling well today? Did you take your medicine?"

"They get you here."

The volume of his voice rose with each word.

"You can't be here. You have to go."

The words bounced off the walls around them.

"Bad place."

By the time he finished, he was yelling.

Ben had worked plenty of hospital rotations during his years at school. He'd seen unstable in all its forms, from delusions of grandeur to murderers sent by God. Nothing much got under his skin anymore.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Robbie." Ben tried to ignore the buzzing that started to rise and fall with the flickering lights. He extended his hand for a shake. *Treat every patient like a person.*

"You can't be here."

Still yelling.

"They'll get you here. They get you here every time."

“That’s enough, Robbie.” Something subtle and threatening came across in Howerton’s tone. “Maybe we should get an orderly to take you to your room.”

For the first time, Robbie looked up. The unadulterated terror in his eyes startled Ben. He’d never seen anything like that. The eyes of a deer about to meet its maker on the front of a car. Ben stepped back.

“She won’t let you have him!” Robbie screamed.

He lunged forward, the sharp handle of a broken broom suddenly in his hands; reaching with it for Howerton’s chest.

Ben grabbed the middle of the stick, his own coordination and speed surprising him, as Howerton screamed for assistance.

Fear and determination stared out from Robbie’s eyes. “You aren’t supposed to be here!”. He let go of the stick and jumped onto Ben. The sudden weight knocked Ben back before he fell to the floor, landing hard enough on his back to force the wind from him. Howerton screamed something, but Ben didn’t hear.

Robbie, still straddling Ben, bit down hard on the muscle between his shoulder and neck. Howerton hollered something again as Ben struggled to remove Robbie, grunting with panic. A patient had never attacked him before. Ben didn’t want to hurt him, but his own animal instinct took over. His fingers found Robbie’s face, and he sank his knuckles into the soft spot behind the ears, trying to do a thrust to unlock the teeth from his neck.

Robbie howled in pain, letting go with his teeth, as two pairs of hands reached under his arms and pulled him off Ben.

The real world reasserted itself as the sudden altercation came to an end. Orderlies stood over Ben, Robbie struggling and screaming in their arms. *That was fast.* He chuckled at the absurdity of the thought as he sat up.

Dr. Howerton appeared above him and offered a hand. “Are you all right?”

Ben hardly heard him. A nearby nurse stared at his neck where Robbie had sunk his teeth in. Ben reached a shaking hand up. It came away bloody.

“Just hold pressure on it.” Howerton put Ben’s hand back over the wound and pressed it down. “We’ll take care of that.” He guided Ben by the shoulders down the hall, away from the elevator into which the orderlies were taking Robbie.

Ben looked behind him one more time before they rounded the corner. Robbie, Ben's blood covering his jaw, screamed down the hallway. "They get you! Shouldn't be here!" The sound followed Howerton and Ben down the corridor until the elevator doors closed.

Ben's heart beat hard in his chest as they walked toward the stairs. "I've never seen Robbie violent," Howerton said. "He's been with us for years."

"It's fine." But it wasn't. The look in that man's eyes as he bit Ben wouldn't go away. Robbie hadn't just been agitated or scared. "He looked terrified."

"Well, Dr. Kent. That's sometimes one of the more unfortunate side effects of psychosis."

If Howerton cared that someone attacked Ben on his first day, it didn't show. They made their way down the stairs as blood seeped between Ben's fingers and onto his shirt. A medical office sat near the pharmacy. They walked in, Howerton ordering the nurse to retrieve sutures and a local anesthetic from the supply closet. Ben sat on the table.

"Move your hand." Howerton poked around, stretching the skin and examining the wound. "It doesn't look deep. I'm going to stitch it up." He turned his attention the nurse busy placing the supplies on a medical cart. "You can go."

Howerton opened the sutures and dug around in the drawers for what looked like a tiny pair of pliers. When he'd set up the needle holders, he retrieved the local anesthetic and injected it around the bite.

"What's that patient's diagnosis?" Ben asked.

"Extreme manic-depressive illness and paranoia."

"How long has he been here?"

"Five years." Howerton started stitching the wound before the anesthetic had fully set in.

Ben jumped as the needle pierced his skin. He did his best to suppress a wave of annoyance. He'd just been attacked, for fuck's sake. "Do people often get attacked on their first day?" Ben asked, his tone a little harder than it should have been.

"No." A note of irritation crept into Howerton's voice as well. "And you are expected to keep your composure even when such things happen." He pulled harder than he needed to on the suture, and Ben jumped again. "Am I clear?"

Ben wasn't sure how to respond, so he went with acknowledgment. "Yes, sir." He didn't think he'd lost his composure, but another tug on that suture and he might. "It won't happen

again, sir.” If that were any day but his first, Ben would’ve been tempted to tell the guy to fuck off. He kept that to himself.

“The staff here will look up to you as an example. Don’t disappoint.”

Howerton’s hands were deft, and it didn’t take long until the last stitch was and tied it off. A knock came from the door as Howerton covered the site with a bandage. “Come in.”

A short, portly man with a large mustache and combed-over hair stepped in. He looked about Howerton’s age. “Hello, there,” he said.

“Dr. Vitalie, this is our new doctor, Dr. Kent. Dr. Vitalie is the other staff psychiatrist.”

“I’d shake your hand, but…” Ben held up his blood-covered appendage.

Vitalie laughed, but it never touched his eyes. “I see, I see. Who got you?”

Ben didn’t like that smile.

“Robbie,” Howerton said. The way he said it implied it was expected.

Vitalie’s mouth opened as if to reply. He glanced at Ben and then stared at Howerton. They held one another’s gaze for a moment. “Oh. I see.”

“Did you foresee problems with him?”

“I told you, Dr. Kent, he isn’t violent.”

Ben would have liked to point out that the man had lunged at Dr. Howerton with a sharp stick but thought better of it. He washed his hands in the medical sink as Dr. Vitalie spoke. “We’ll have to take care of that. Isolate him.”

“Yes, we’ll deal with Robbie,” Howerton said. “But for now I think we should just deal with our new friend here. How’re you feeling, Dr. Kent?”

Terrible and sleepless, but he wouldn’t say that. “My legs are a bit rubbery, sir. But I’m fine.” Blood stained the front and side of his suit. He looked gruesome.

Howerton examined him up and down. “I think under the present circumstances, perhaps we should allow you the rest of the day to recover.”

Ben didn’t disagree. The three men walked out of the medical office. “We should have a nurse for you tomorrow,” Vitalie said. “She’ll have the files for the patients we assign you sent up to your office.” He looked over at Ben’s neck. “Unless something equally unfortunate happens, then I don’t see any reason why you couldn’t meet your patients tomorrow.”

“Do you know how many I’ll be assigned?” The unreality of asking something so casual while covered in his own blood made his head spin. He didn’t belong here, even the patients knew as much.

“We were thinking six. Just until you’re more familiar with our family here.” Vitalie laughed as if he’d told a joke, but again it didn’t touch his eyes. “We have twenty-two, but seven are catatonic, or near so, so it’s more like fifteen. Of those fifteen, six are held on the fourth floor permanently.” He glanced over at Ben. “We’ve only given you one of those. The fourth floor can be a little... unsettling.”

It couldn’t be much more unsettling than being attacked. “I understand.” They reached the lobby. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stick around for the day, Dr. Howerton?”

Howerton looked him over again. “You look like a butcher. You’ll have all the time in the world to get to know the place, Dr. Kent. It wouldn’t be a terrible idea to keep a spare suit in your office.”

That it might not be the last time a patient attacked him dampened Ben’s mood further. Part of the job, maybe, but that didn’t make the prospect any less frightening. Ben shook Howerton’s hand, then Vitalie’s. “I look forward to working with you both.”

Howerton nodded and said nothing. Ben decided then that he didn’t like the guy. It didn’t actually matter how he felt about him—his boss was his boss—but they weren’t going to be drinking buddies anytime soon.

Dr. Vitalie laughed that humorless laugh again. “You’ll never work at a place quite like this again, I promise you that.”

Ben wasn’t sure they’d be friends, either.