



The Third Conspirator

Book 17

S. E. Grosskopf

PREVIEW

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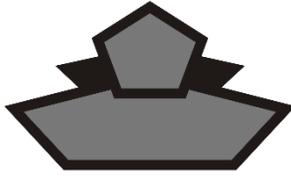
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Chapter I

Friday, May 15, 1931

“I’m not supposed to be here,” Marx said. In the chair beside Dr. Everston’s desk, he stretched out his leg and rubbed his knee. The office on the hospital’s second floor was cramped with overflowing bookshelves and filing cabinets. “Captain Kramer said I’m off today, no matter what comes up.”

Lowan felt the echoes of Marx’s pain, the result of jumping out of a truck and landing badly two nights before on another hectic case. He settled carefully into the chair beside Marx and glanced across the desk at Dr. Everston. “You called about Guido Genovesi?”

“Yes.” Everston moved a file across his desk. Framed certificates and dusty bookshelves lined the wall behind him, and blinds blocked out the sunlight. Amber jars of odd specimens glinted in the shadows. “He passed away this morning. Lieutenant Marx said you were familiar with the case.”

“He had been shot.” Lowan focused, sensing something more. Everston’s manner remained professional and reserved, but deeper thoughts troubled him. “Was that not the cause of death?”

Everston glanced at the closed door and lowered his voice. “I don’t think so. People die in hospitals, but given how well he came through the surgery, he shouldn’t have. The fact is, several other recent deaths have also been . . . suspicious.”

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“Describe suspicious.”

“People who seemed to be stable taking an unexpected turn for the worse. Sudden respiratory failure and cardiac arrest, even when they had been undergoing treatment for unrelated injuries like a fractured hip. The fact is, I can think of three. None had any family, so there was no call for investigations.”

“And you would like an investigation now?”

“Yes. I don’t have enough evidence to accuse any of my colleagues, and my work keeps me far too busy to handle this matter alone. Do you have any suggestions?”

“I do.” Lowan paused. What he had in mind wasn’t his first choice, but it was the most logical one. “My neighbor is a retired nurse, but I believe she keeps all of her qualifications current. Do you know Jane Maplewood?”

“Yes.” Everston brightened at the mention of her name. “One of the most efficient and competent nurses I’ve ever worked with. She picked up a lot of her skills during the war.”

“She can be trusted, and she would be far less conspicuous of an investigator in this setting. If you have no objections, I would like to share the details of the case with her.”

“I can put her on the schedule, if she agrees. We can always use another night nurse.” He looked at his watch and stood. “I have to return to my rounds in a few moments. When I have a chance, I’ll bring out the files on the other patients who died unexpectedly.”

“Thank you.” Lowan offered to shake his hand. The brief grasp left him sure of Everston’s honesty and good intentions, despite the stress of overwork. “I will speak with Jane about coming in tonight.”

Marx stood, easing his weight onto his knee. He limped toward the door and winced.

“Are you sure you don’t want that looked at, Lieutenant?” Everson asked.

“I don’t need a doctor to tell me I have a bruise,” he said quietly. “I’ll just go home and put ice on it. That’s what I was

supposed to do yesterday, before this mess with Genovesi came up.” He held the door for Lowan and then followed him out.

Everston stepped out behind them and locked the office. “Feel free to take a look around.”

While Everston’s footsteps echoed in the opposite direction, Lowan stood back and glanced down the hallway. The overhead lights hummed. Linoleum floors had been scrubbed to a dull shine, but showed wear down the middle of the hall. Nurses moved efficiently, barely glancing in their direction. “Which room was Genovesi’s?”

“212.” Marx took the lead. “I’m going to push for an autopsy.”

“Last night, Genovesi’s fear of the hospital . . .” Lowan let Marx set the pace. The air smelled faintly of bleach and something metallic. The walls were pale institutional green, and the color quickly became nauseating. “Maybe he was not acting as irrationally as I assumed.”

“You think the third member of the insurance racket is here?” Marx glanced down the hall. On Monday, during another case, they’d tracked down a list of names. Three men who had committed large-scale insurance fraud and covered their crimes with murder. In the past four days, they’d tracked down two of the men. The third, Raymond Mercer, was still at large.

“It is possible. Genovesi said the third conspirator changed his name again. If that is true, the list from Wagner’s print shop will no longer help,” Lowan said. Genovesi had been the second member of the group, and a reluctant participant in their crimes. He’d agreed to cooperate and testify against his co-conspirators, but his sudden death prevented him from giving them any further information.

“If he changed his name again, that would explain why we weren’t able to find much of anything about the third name on the list. Maybe he never used it.”

“That would complicate matters.” Lowan tried to piece together the fragmented details from the night before. Genovesi had been terrified of something in the hospital. If other patients had

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also been murdered recently, all with similar symptoms, it could be related.

Marx paused and leaned on a doorway, taking the weight off his knee. He looked inside. Genovesi's body had already been removed. An orderly stripped the bedding. "Officer Mackay was outside the door the whole time, and he said nobody went in but the hospital staff."

"Jane will be able to more efficiently mingle with them, without drawing suspicion." He found himself already counting on her help. The misery around him soaked into his senses, the swarming aggregation of pain and despair emanating from nearby rooms. He felt it as his own.

The orderly stepped out, carrying a bundle of linens.

Marx moved aside to let him pass. Footsteps echoed. "There's not much else I can do until the autopsy report comes back. Maybe then, I'll have more of a case."

"That may not be for several days." Lowan's senses itched with the feeling of being watched. An auburn-haired nurse, her bun neatly pinned, stared at them from farther down the hallway. When he made eye contact, she quickly turned away.

Marx limped toward the stairwell. "I'm looking forward to a day off. Detective Schneider should be on today, and since he was also on the Genovesi case yesterday, he might be the one to talk to if anything comes up."

"I hope that nothing more happens." Lowan watched the nurse again.

After retreating farther down the hallway, the same nurse glared at them with the unblinking focus of a cat until they reached the stairs. Something rotten lingered beneath the antiseptic smell.



Chapter II

The scent of fresh oatmeal cookies lingered, gathering at the end of the hallway like a sugar cloud. Lowan stopped in front of the last door, the apartment beyond his own. As much as he tried not to think about her cookies, his mouth watered. Inside the room, he sensed movement. Jane was in a good mood, as usual when she was baking.

He knocked.

Footsteps rushed toward the door. She pulled it open and smiled at him, her short blonde hair framing her face. Flour stained her apron and smudged her nose. “You must have smelled the cookies. I was just about to take them out of the oven.”

“I came about another matter.” He stepped inside, took off his hat, and closed his eyes. Her living room never caused less than total sensory overload. Shelves of bric-a-brac lined every wall, clocks, model ships, ceramic animals in bright colors, not completely hiding the red and white vertically striped wallpaper. Mismatched patterned rugs covered the floor. A small gray tabby peered out from under a red and yellow floral sofa.

“Come in, come in, make yourself at home.” She urged him toward the sofa. Despite being uncomfortable to look at, it was comfortable to sit on. “I’ll bring you some tea.”

She hurried to the kitchen before he could object. He settled onto the sofa and waited, listening to clinking kettles and pans. The

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cat, Jingles, brushed against his ankle, then leapt onto his knee and kneaded. He set his hand on it, feeling the rattling purr.

As hectic as the last few days had been, taking a moment to enjoy the uncomplicated presence of a contented animal restored his ragged nerves. He focused on breathing slowly and releasing tension from his shoulders that he hadn't realized he'd been carrying. The smell of sugar thickened.

Jane carried in a heaping plate of cookies and set them on the coffee table, her presence full of bluster and excitement. "The tea will be ready in a few minutes. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"I only wondered if you had a moment to discuss another matter." He glanced at the cookies, but pretended not to be enthusiastic. Taking too much of an interest might give her the wrong impression.

"Something else?" She plopped into the chair across from him, her hands folded in her lap to keep herself from fidgeting with her apron. Her thoughts drifted into romantic territory, warm and fuzzy.

"Business," he said quickly. The cat flinched and stretched. "Another case, which may be more in your area of expertise than mine."

Jane leaned forward, disappointed but interested. "Rita mentioned something about a friend of hers wanting to start a bakery . . ."

"No, this is unrelated. A problem at the hospital. A man related to a police case died in a way that was possibly not due to the injury which had sent him there." He explained the situation briefly, watching her reactions. Her interest never waned. "Dr. Everston asked me to look into it quietly."

"You want me to help you on a case?" Her voice rose. Any reason to spend more time with him appealed to her. "Undercover?"

"Yes." He quietly gritted his teeth and focused on petting the cat for another moment. "Dr. Everston said he could arrange a place for you as a night nurse."

“And what will you be doing while I’m playing detective?”

“I will be looking into the problem from other angles.” Angles that he hoped would keep him as far away from her as he could manage. At least for as long as her romantic imaginings continued. Jingles moved and showed his claws when the petting became too firm.

“You need a cover story, too,” she objected. “Pretending to be a doctor wouldn’t last more than five minutes in any medical situation. But if you go in complaining about chest pain and dizzy spells, they’d keep you overnight without too much fuss.”

“I should pretend to be a patient?” He almost knocked the cat off his lap. Pretending to be a doctor would be easy enough, since he could mentally absorb and repeat any necessary medical knowledge from those around him. As a patient, he’d be more likely to find himself in the awkward position of explaining why his vital signs were far from normal and his heart wasn’t in the expected location. Any laboratory technician who tried to determine his blood type would assume the sample had been mixed up with one from a veterinarian’s office. “I think I would make a fine doctor.”

“We’ll see what Dr. Everston says about that.” She stood and brushed off her apron, her thoughts twisting into a more conniving pattern. Her eyes gleamed. In the background, the teakettle whistled. “And if you want my help, there’s one other condition. We’ll stop someplace for lunch together first.”

That thought made his stomach lurch. The cat dug its claws into his leg.



“Three files.” Dr. Everston pushed them across the desk and reached for a half-empty coffee cup. The blinds threw striped shadows across the room. “All within the last six months. Sudden respiratory failure and cardiac arrest, with no prior history of heart or lung conditions. None of them had any family.”

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Jane sat in the opposite chair, with her nurse's bag at her feet. She reached for the files. "They were all in the same ward."

"That does narrow it down," Lowan said. He stood beside the desk, glancing down at the files in Jane's hands.

"Second floor, late at night or early morning," Everston said. "That's where you'll be working." He faced Lowan. "And, you . . ."

"I think we should get him in as a patient." Jane flipped the top file shut and checked the next one.

"I would rather be a doctor," Lowan said, trying to steer the conversation in his preferred direction. "I would have access to records and could walk the halls without suspicion. I can be very good at acting a part."

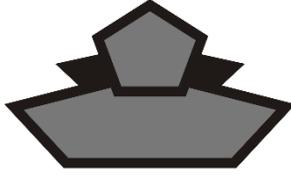
"And if a real emergency came up?" Everston shook his head. "I can't put you in that position. Jane's qualifications are genuine, and she's known here. A new doctor with no credentials or experience. . . . You couldn't get away with that even on the nightshift. It would be much easier to make arrangements for you as a patient. Besides, you would practically be invisible. No one questions a man in a hospital gown."

"One other thought," Jane added, turning to face Lowan. "If there is someone killing patients who have no family, making you fit their preference might have interesting results."

"I dislike that thought immensely." He crossed his arms. "And Genovesi did have a family, so either we have made a false assumption about the situation, or the killer is not strict about this pattern."

"Chest pain and dizzy spells." Jane set the files on the edge of the desk. "We'll say you're here for cardiac observation overnight."

"Hospital gowns are drafty." Lowan pulled his coat closer, already uncomfortable. "And I object to being horizontal in enemy territory."



Chapter III

Early afternoon, the hospital's reception area felt dim and shadowy despite the orangish wall sconces. A fan hummed, but didn't move much air. The receptionist, a middle-aged woman in a starched blouse and wire-rimmed glasses, spoke on the telephone. Forms and papers cluttered the desk, along with a ledger book and an ink blotter.

Jane, already dressed in her nursing uniform, prodded Lowan's arm and nudged him closer to the desk. He set an overnight bag on the floor and waited.

The receptionist set the receiver down and reached for a pen, without looking up. "Name?"

"John Smith." Lowan watched her record his information in the ledger, sensing her boredom.

"Date of birth?"

"April 3rd, 1882." He hoped the randomly chosen date sounded reasonable. It was several hundred years off, and traveling between planets that used different calendars left him with no way to reconcile exact dates.

Her pen scratched. "Reason for admission?"

Jane stepped in. "Dr. Everston ordered cardiac observation. Mr. Smith has been experiencing chest tightness and fainting spells."

"Ah, yes, Dr. Everston telephoned a moment ago to let me know you would be coming. You'll be in Room 212. The nurse will take your vitals and get you settled in."

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“I’ll show Mr. Smith to his room,” Jane said. She nudged his arm again and motioned for him to follow.

He picked up his bag. They navigated the halls together and ascended the stairs again. Genovesi’s former room had been cleaned, the bed freshly made. Small, with little more than a single iron-framed bed, a dresser with two drawers, a narrow bedside table, one chair, and a washbasin in the corner. The window didn’t offer much of a view.

“Not exactly luxury accommodations.” He set his leather bag on the chair.

Jane looked at the clipboard at the end of the bed. “I need to check your temperature and blood pressure.”

“Invent something.” Lowan sat on the edge of the bed and crossed his arms again, hoping that the stance was discouraging. “Choose numbers that would justify a hospital stay, but without being dire enough to cause a significant amount of extra attention overnight.”

“Fair point.” She added numbers to the chart. “There, your blood pressure is a little high. And I added that you have no next of kin. I don’t officially start for another few hours, but I’ll check back when I can. Since I’m going to be working all night, I might go home for a quick nap before my shift starts.”

Lowan nodded, also expecting a long night. “In the meantime, I would like to take another look at the patient files in Dr. Everston’s office.” He stood again. “Find out what you can about the other nurses on your shift.”

“That should be easy enough.”

“Nothing is ever as easy as we assume,” he warned. After she left, he stood, took off his coat, and left it on the bed. Traffic flowed through the hallway. Nurses, patients, visitors, an orderly pushing a cart of supplies. Pain emanated from several nearby rooms. He followed the current and stepped aside at another hallway. Dr. Everston’s office was locked.

Lowan waited, listening to the nearby sounds, squeaking wheels, footsteps, call bells, whiny shouts for a nurse. A janitor moved past, spreading the overpowering lemon scent of

disinfectant. Dr. Everston appeared a moment later and reached into his pocket for his keys.

“I don’t like to leave my office unlocked, but I have a spare key I can let you use.” He pushed the door open and went to the desk. “I hardly have a moment, but if you need to use a private telephone . . .” He took a key from a drawer. “How are you settling in?”

“I have been assigned to Room 212.” Lowan added it to his keyring and sat in the opposite chair. “I would like another look at those files. What would cause a patient to unexpectedly die of these symptoms?”

Dr. Everston’s chair creaked, and he exhaled slowly, looking past Lowan. “Chloral hydrate. It’s a common sedative. But in high doses, or mixed with something like morphine, it depresses the central nervous system. Breathing slows, and the heart stops.”

“Would it show up in a postmortem?”

“Not unless you were looking for it. And no one was.”

“And is this also consistent with Genovesi’s death?”

“Yes. I’ll make sure that Genovesi’s body is tested for chloral hydrate. I’ll also check our inventory. Everything is supposed to be carefully logged. If any amount is missing . . .” He let out his breath again, his mood darkening. “It’s hard for me to believe that anyone here would do that kind of thing. It goes so completely against everything a hospital stands for.”

“Who works on this floor overnight?”

“Dr. Ellis. His wife, Margaret Ellis, is a nurse. They’ve both been here for over a year. There is a newer nurse, Evelyn Tren, who started about six months ago. She seems quiet but dedicated, and the three of them get along well, as far as I know.” He glanced at the clock. Shadows darkened the window. “My shift ends in a short time, but you’re welcome to use my office for any relevant files and the telephone. Just make sure to lock up. I’ll check back with you in the morning.”

Everston slipped out of his white coat and hung it on a rack, exchanged it for an ordinary overcoat, and stepped out. Closing the door left an echo.

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Lowan switched on a lamp and spread the files on the desk, studying each one. Three people, alone in the world, who shouldn't have died. He reached for the telephone and dialed the police station. Not Marx's office, but the main number.

"Milford Falls Police Department, Sergeant O'Leary speaking."

"May I speak with Detective Schneider?"

"Just a minute."

He waited, listening to the line click, muffled voices, distant footsteps.

"Detective Schneider speaking."

"This is Lowan. I am at the hospital to look into the death of Guido Genovesi—"

"I thought he died of a gunshot." Schneider almost sounded offended. He'd been present during the shooting.

"The doctor has some doubts about that. He died of respiratory failure and cardiac arrest, which may not have been related to the shooting. Furthermore, there have been three other patients in the past six months who died of the same symptoms, unrelated to the reasons that brought them here. I would normally share information like this with Marx . . ."

"He's off today, and we're not supposed to bother him."

"Earlier, he told me to call you if anything came up. I would like to give you three names."

"What do you expect me to do about it?"

"Find out if there is any connection. If nothing else, put this on Marx's desk for tomorrow. Albert Kessler was here for a fractured hip, Clara Duvall came in for a routine surgery, and George Hanson was under observation for headaches. All three died of respiratory failure and cardiac arrest. All three had no family, so there was no push for an investigation. Dr. Everston believes the symptoms are consistent with an overdose of chloral hydrate."

"Somebody slipped them a Mickey Finn in the middle of a hospital?"

"He said it is a common sedative, but dangerous when mixed with morphine. There are three members of the night staff who

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may have had the opportunity. Dr. Mark Ellis, Nurse Margaret Ellis, and Nurse Evelyn Tren.”

“It’ll take a while to run down that many names, and unlike the lieutenant, I don’t work twenty-four hours a day. If nothing else, I’ll have him get back to you tomorrow.”



Chapter IV

Jane held her bag under one arm. Her footsteps echoed down the shadowy corridor, the scent of antiseptic lingering in the air. The wall clock ticked. The nurse's station on this floor was a modest desk with a clipboard rack, a telephone, and a small lamp. Beyond it, the ward stretched into quiet rooms and dark corners.

A tall man stood nearby, wearing a white coat with his name embroidered over the pocket. He studied the schedule and glanced at her. "You're the new night nurse?"

"Dr. Ellis." She introduced herself boldly and offered to shake his hand. "I'm Jane Maplewood. Dr. Everston arranged for me to fill in for the week."

He accepted her handshake with some initial hesitation, then tightened his grip. His eyes flicked to the two nurses beside him. "I wasn't informed of a change. What kind of experience do you have?"

"I started with caring for an invalid husband before the turn of the century. Then came the war, which I spent in a field hospital in Belgium. After returning to Milford Falls, I worked here until I mostly retired a few years ago, likely just before you started, so I already know my way around this hospital. I keep all of my qualifications and licensing current, as Dr. Everston can confirm."

"Welcome to the team." He squeezed her hand again, with more respect the second time, though something in his steady eye contact gave her the impression that he felt threatened. She'd been

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treating the mangled victims of war long before he was old enough to attend medical school. “The nightshift might be a little dull after Belgium.” He motioned to the two nurses. “This is Margaret Ellis and Evie Tren. Margaret is my wife.”

Margaret Ellis wore her auburn hair in a neat bun. She set her clipboard aside and offered to shake hands. Her fingers felt cold and damp, and her smile didn’t reach her eyes. “We usually manage fine with two nurses. But I suppose extra help is welcome.”

“That’s why I’m here.” Jane smiled back.

The second nurse, Evie Tren, looked slightly older, with tired eyes and a quiet voice. Her uniform was immaculate, but her posture drooped. Rather than offer to shake hands, she nodded. “We’re glad to have you. It’s been a long week.”

“You can take Rooms 201-212,” Dr. Ellis said, pointing to a chart of room assignments on the desk. “Only six of them are occupied at the moment. Evie, go over some of the details with her to get her settled in.” He gave a dismissive wave and stepped aside to speak quietly with Margaret.

Evie motioned for Jane to follow. Her footsteps tapped lightly, giving her a somewhat ethereal quality that seemed at odds with the strength and fortitude that the job required. Her eyes never settled in one place.

“Room 202.” Evie paused at the first occupied room at the end of the hall. “Mr. Harold Klemens, age 78, recovering from a minor stroke. He’s stubborn and hates being fussed over. Across the hall in Room 205, Mrs. Lillian Hames, age 89. Her family brought her in after a bad fall, but she also seems to be losing her mental faculties. She needs a lot of supervision.”

Jane memorized the names and details, peering through each doorway as they passed.

“Room 306, Tommy Rivas, age 32 and recovering from a motorcycle accident. Watch out for his hands; if you’re female, you’re his type. Well, maybe at your age . . .” she choked a little and looked away. “You might not have as much trouble with him as Margaret and I do.”

“If you ever have a man like that bothering you, just leave him to me,” Jane said firmly. “He won’t get very far.”

“Room 210, Sister Agnes, sweet old lady. She’s here for pneumonia. She tries not to ever bother you for anything, even when she does need help, so be sure to check on her regularly. She’ll wet the bed before she rings her bell.” Evie moved to the opposite side of the hall. “Room 211, Mr. Evan Chan, chronic pain, no known cause. He has *not* been prescribed morphine, no matter what he says. If he wants to argue with you about it, refer him to Dr. Ellis.”

“Ah.” Jane nodded.

“Last, Room 212, *John Smith*.” She said the name like she didn’t believe it and gave Jane a sideways glance. “He just arrived this afternoon, but I saw your signature on his chart, so I’m guessing you’ve already met.”

“Yes, I was here earlier to speak with Dr. Everston, and I stepped in to help with admissions for a few moments.”

“Oh.” Her lips pressed into a thin line. She gave Jane a second squint, then moved away without another word, her shoes making quiet clicks on the scuffed linoleum.

Jane started for Lowan’s door.

Somewhere down her section of the corridor, a bell rang. “Nurse!”



Lowan lay in bed, awake, but with his eyes closed. By now, it must be after ten o’clock. A draft blew through the room. The mattress was worn, but not terribly uncomfortable. As tired as he was, he could have fallen asleep anywhere, but he would have liked another blanket.

The thought of a murderer stalking the halls kept him wide awake.

Tension clung to the edges of his nerves. He cleared his thoughts and telepathically reached beyond his room, sensing the presences of nearby patients. Nurses moved back and forth. Jane’s

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presence was the most familiar, and therefore the easiest to recognize.

Across the hall, Jane argued with a man about morphine. The words carried at an inaudible mumble, but Lowan felt their meaning from a distance. He didn't feel enough pain to justify the drug. Footsteps tapped and echoed. Jane moved away, then returned with another man. The heated discussion resumed. She stepped back to let Dr. Ellis handle it.

Another moment, and he felt Jane approaching his door. He sat up.

The door opened. Jane glanced down the hall, then slipped inside. "I didn't think I'd ever get away. They're keeping me so busy with nursing that I'm not sure I'll have time to do any investigating."

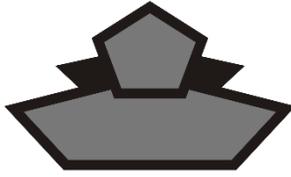
Lowan nodded. "I was at least able to give several names to Detective Schneider, but he may not have any information until tomorrow. What is your impression of the other medical staff?"

"Dr. Ellis is polite, but he likes to be in charge. He doesn't like that I showed up unexpectedly, and I think he feels threatened that I have so many more years of experience than he does, but he takes patient care seriously."

"And his wife, Nurse Margaret?"

"Also polite, but territorial. She guards the med carts, the patient charts, even the storeroom key. I don't think anything would get past her. And then there's Evie. She's quiet, but nervous and unfriendly. I didn't particularly like any of them, but it's been hard to get to know—"

The door opened, and light from the hallway poured through. Dr. Ellis stepped into the room, wearing a stethoscope looped over his neck. He gave Jane a discouraging glare that made her back away from the bed. "Still awake, Mr. Smith?"



Chapter V

“I was just checking his vitals, Doctor,” Jane said. Her face looked flushed, and Lowan felt her nervous surprise.

“Thank you.” Dr. Ellis stepped closer, edging Jane farther back. “I finished my discussion with Mr. Chan and was just continuing my rounds. I thought I’d take a look for myself, since I haven’t had a chance to meet Mr. Smith yet.”

“Yes, of course.” Jane gave Lowan one last glance and hurried out.

Sitting up in bed, Lowan scooted back against his pillows. The hospital gown left him feeling undressed, even when covered by a blanket. “I did not expect to receive so much attention.”

“Chest pain and dizziness? That’s a serious matter.” He offered to shake hands. “I’m Dr. Ellis, and I’ll be looking after you overnight.”

“Good.” Lowan accepted the brief handshake, sensing something threatening in the doctor’s presence and manner. Maybe just his imagination, amplified by the dim lighting and Dr. Ellis’s position over him. “At the moment, I feel fine. The problem seems to have passed.”

Ellis checked the chart at the end of the bed, flipping through the pages. “Your blood pressure was a little high earlier. No family history and no prior episodes? Curious.” He slipped the stethoscope over his head. “I’d like to listen to your heart.”

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“I feel fine.” Lowan kept his eyes on the stethoscope and scooted backwards until his back was pressed against the headboard. “There is no need for any further examination.”

“This won’t hurt.” He popped the stethoscope into his ears and approached with the other end. “Are you going to be difficult about this? Let me see your chest, and we’ll get it over with quickly.”

Lowan untied the front of his hospital gown while calculating how to most easily hypnotize Ellis into thinking that everything was normal. The end of the stethoscope gave him enough of a cold shock to make him flinch.

“I can’t seem to . . .” Ellis frowned and tried another position, then moved it again. “Well, obviously, your heart must be beating if you’re alive. I just can’t seem to locate it.”

“Perhaps your stethoscope is faulty.” Lowan pushed Ellis’s hand away.

Ellis tapped on the end and winced at the loud echo in his ears. “It’s working fine.” He grabbed Lowan’s wrist instead, gripping with his fingertips. “Your pulse is a bit fast, but I am at least relieved to know that you have a heartbeat.”

“My pulse is only fast because I have been disturbed in the middle of the night.” He jerked his arm away. “I would like to sleep. If I feel dizzy, I will call for the nurse.”

“Fair enough.” Ellis looped the stethoscope over his neck, still wearing a puzzled expression. “I’ll check in on you again later.”



Jane strode down the hallway, looking back and forth. For the moment, the rooms appeared quiet. Mr. Chan glared through his open doorway, half hidden in shadows. A faint light came from Room 210. Jane stepped closer.

Sister Agnes sat up in bed, the lamp switched on beside her. An open notebook was spread across her knees, and she clutched a rosary. Her white hair looked thin and fragile, like spiderwebs. The hospital gown, rather than a black habit, made it difficult for Jane to imagine her as a nun.

“It’s almost midnight,” Jane said gently. She approached the bed, glancing at the spidery handwriting on the pages. “You should be resting. Do you need anything?”

“I couldn’t sleep.” She motioned with the rosary twined around her fingers. Her voice was hoarse and scratchy, and her breathing sounded effortful. “So, I pray. It’s the one thing I can still do, even here.”

“What are you praying about?” Jane tried to sound respectful and interested. If anything happened out of the ordinary, Sister Agnes was in the perfect position to observe. “Something at the hospital?”

She nodded. “A lot of things here need prayer.”

“Like what?” Jane leaned over the notebook. “You make notes about your prayers?”

“So I don’t forget anything.” Her voice scratched again, and she reached for a glass of water on the bedside table. “The man who died this morning in the next room. Yesterday morning? I prayed for him. Earlier, I heard Dr. Everston say he would be fine. And then . . . he wasn’t.” She shook her head. “Something didn’t seem right.”

“I see. What else do you pray for? Have you seen anything else that didn’t seem right?”

“I pray for the doctors and nurses. Poor Evie always tiptoes around like the floor might give out under her. Dr. Ellis seemed unusually upset yesterday, too.”

“Because of the man who died?”

“No, before that.” She flipped through the pages. “After Mrs. Mercer came to visit. I see her here often, but never at night.”

Jane studied the pages upside-down, thin and loopy handwriting, some passages crossed out, others underlined and marked with margin notes. “May I see?”

“These are prayers.” She turned the book around.

The ink was blotchy. Jane flipped through several pages, noting Mrs. Mercer’s name more than once. Other mentions of Dr. Ellis didn’t go far beyond what Sister Agnes had already given, but she seemed to like Dr. Everston better. Patient names filled the

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margins, along with descriptions of their ailments. “Who is Mrs. Mercer, and why is she here so often? Is she a patient?”

“I think she’s on the hospital board, now. I met her several years ago at a city event, but she wasn’t with the hospital then.”

“Oh.” She handed back the notebook. “Thank you for sharing this with me. Can I get you anything?”

“A cup of tea would be nice.” She set the notebook aside and finished her glass of water. “If it isn’t too much trouble.”

“I’ll be right back with some tea.” Jane left the room. The teapot and coffeepot were in the tiny staff lounge. No tea was prepared, so she made some. The water took a few minutes to boil. When it was ready, she brought it back, got Sister Agnes settled under the blankets, and switched off the bedside lamp.

At the nurse’s station down the hall, Dr. Ellis spoke with Margaret. From a distance, their discussion held the undertone of an argument. Evie stood several yards away, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Dr. Ellis and Margaret glanced in her direction and hushed their discussion.

Jane edged beside Evie. “Do you know why Mrs. Mercer was here last night?”

“Who?” One of Evie’s eyebrows shot up, the most expression she’d displayed all night.

“Mrs. Mercer. She’s on the hospital board. Sister Agnes told me she’s here frequently, usually during the day, but she was here late Thursday night.”

“There’s no Mrs. Mercer on the hospital board.” Evie wrinkled her nose, either confused or annoyed, and turned away.

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Other Books by S. E. Grosskopf

Book 1: Lowan's Checkmate

Lowan, a private detective and telepathic alien, teams up with Detective Lieutenant Marx, an introverted underdog, to catch a clever jewel thief terrorizing Milford Falls.

Book 2: Shamrock Hunt

When a famous Celtic medallion—the prize for a charity raffle—is stolen, Lowan competes with a rival private detective to find it in time for the St. Patrick's Day parade. Meanwhile, Marx investigates the murder of a history professor and faces off with a lifelong enemy.

Book 3: Murder on Harrisonville Road

After writing a newspaper story about the crimeless village of Harrisonville, Tom Nanning is ambushed and left for dead. When Lowan investigates, he finds himself trapped in a small town with a murderer hidden among its quirky residents.

Book 4: Orchid Hunter

While Marx investigates a murder committed via April Fool's prank, which renders alibis useless, Lowan dives into the black market orchid trade to recover the main attraction stolen before the Easter flower show. Both investigations lead to a thirty-five-year-old tiger attack in the jungles of Borneo.

Book 5: The Great Flamingo Robbery

When the mangiest flamingo is stolen from the zoo, Lowan is called in to investigate. He never expected to get mixed up with a beautiful ruby thief or a South American dictator.

Book 6: The Unicorn Staff

The murder of an archeologist and the theft of a staff made from a unicorn's horn lead Lowan and Marx on a wild quest for answers.

Book 7: Lowan's Circus Tricks

Lowan's search for Eloise Meer leads him to a traveling circus in dusty Dry Creek, Kansas. But the only Eloise at the circus is a ring-tailed monkey. Hunting for clues, he joins the circus and promptly finds himself framed for murder.

Book 8: The Starmaster

The Starmaster is hunting for aliens—and he's after Lowan.

Book 9: Murder in the Script

A movie is being filmed in Milford Falls. The script might solve an old crime for which an innocent man was framed, if the real murderer doesn't stop the production first.

Book 10: Murder at Woodward Retreat

Lowan and Marx take a vacation at a cabin in the woods. But their plans are disrupted when the woman in the next cabin claims that she saw her husband kill a man.

Book 11: The Pigeon Wing Murders

A wounded carrier pigeon with a coded message, a train robbery, and a stolen racehorse add up to one of Lowan's strangest cases yet.

Book 12: The Mattison Matter

When Tom Nenning is framed for murder, Lowan must work quickly to clear his name. He finds himself enmeshed in a case of corporate espionage involving the radio company he works for, and misused city funds linked to the mayor's office.

Book 13: The Unicorn Curse

When a madman starts killing the remaining members of the *Bearance* crew with a harpoon, Lowan and Marx begin to suspect that Teddy Bear hadn't been aboard the ship when it sank. To find the truth, Lowan goes undercover at a secret million-dollar auction aboard the killer's luxury yacht.

Book 14: Emerald Deception

After an attempted purse-snatching, a frightened woman goes to Lowan for help. Two men are following her, and she wants to know why. The strange emerald found in her purse might provide a clue—until it's appraised as fake. Why does everyone want it so badly?

Book 15: The First Chase

The three members of the insurance racket are still at large, and the last case ended with three new leads. Tracking down the first one brings Lowan and Marx to an illegal greyhound track outside of the city limits, race fixing, and murder.

Book 16: The Second Course

Lowan and Marx track down the second member of the insurance racket, and he's nothing like they expected. Caught between a case of mistaken identity and a prestigious banquet at his restaurant, he agrees to tell them everything he knows—if the killer doesn't get to him first.

Book 17: The Third Conspirator

The third and final member of the insurance racket proves to be the most elusive and dangerous of them all.

Book 18: The Unicorn Heist

The unicorn staff is going on display at the museum, and Lowan is hired to guard it. When Poseidon escapes and Mori returns, both intent on stealing the staff, the fundraiser gala might turn deadly.

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