

INHERITED

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SEVENTEEN

HOSPITAL

After almost three weeks of working days—with no word from Romano—my new boss, Ravi, considers me capable and responsible enough to handle nights. Until then, I have been restricted to basic tasks on the lower levels of the hospital, not anywhere near Leblanc's room on the sixth. He tells me that nights tend to be quieter, but when the emergencies explode, there are inevitably fewer porters around to deal with them. What could start as a peaceful shift can quickly spiral into a nightmare, with everybody needing you simultaneously.

The upside is that I am as good as invisible with what they have me kitted out in. Besides black trousers, Ravi has offered me a choice of uniform; a light blue or white polo shirt worn beneath a navy blue short or long-sleeved pullover. I opted for the latter to cover my wrists. He has also loaned me a pair of steel-capped boots which, he tells me, has saved him from broken toes on more than one occasion. I will often wear personal protective equipment such as gloves, a facemask, and sometimes even perspex goggles or a face shield when dealing with toxic items.

Even so, I follow Mrs Bellacci's advice and always store a disguise in my bag. I also keep an eye out for props that might come in handy. I found a set of light blue scrubs with a tiny ink stain from a leaky pen on the breast pocket dumped into a laundry bin. Unfortunately, the doctor's white coat I had my eye on had the physician's name embroidered on the pocket.

"You're always punctual," Ravi tells me when I report for duty on my first night shift. "I like my guys to be punctual. You're starting work when someone's done a full shift and ready to drop. And, as a newbie, you do not want to piss your tired colleagues off. As usual, when your assistance is called for, report to the scene in fifteen minutes, which means getting a shift on if you're at the other end of the hospital. Don't give the nurses attitude. They're only doing a job. Security takes care of any nighttime incidents, but you might be called upon to help in some cases. And we're told not to talk to the patients but take that with a pinch of salt. Many are bored and can't sleep, and some don't even get visitors. They welcome a chat. The nurses won't mind as long as you're not taking advantage."

I find comfort in the work, which is physically but not often mentally demanding. During the day shift, I speak only when asked a question and become a listening ear when my colleagues want to vent. Most of the time, it's moans and groans about the job or their lives. Everybody seems to be working towards something else, their real calling being just around the corner. Stories tend to centre around lucrative finance schemes, joining family members abroad or breaking into the entertainment business. Ravi rolls his eyes after he comes to fetch me and chances to overhear a colleague's rant. Accompanying me to another ward to move a patient, he tells me most of his team, those who

talk up their prospects the loudest, are the ones who have been with the hospital the longest.

On the second day of working nights, I am sent to clean up the secure areas of the sixth floor. My pass gets me through the double security doors, and just as Ravi instructed, I head to the nurse's station before anything—keep them sweet, he told me—to ask the nurse on duty if there is anything I can do or any priorities that need my attention. After that, I'm left alone to empty bins and tidy furniture along the corridor and in any vacant rooms. He told me that occupied rooms are off-limits because we would be in deep shit if we woke any patients.

That night, I peer through the glass pane of room 640, where Sylvie Leblanc is recovering. Lights are dim inside, but a spotlight above the bed illuminates her face. She is propped up and has her eyes closed, looking peaceful if a little gaunt. Wires and nasal cannulas lead from her head into machines, and apart from the pale complexion, she appears otherwise unharmed—externally, at least.

I step back when a nurse's face appears in the window frame, and she opens the door inwards.

"Hello, my love. I'm Anna, the night nurse. I do weekday nights. Don't suppose you could give the room a quick once over, could you?"

I nod, unsmiling, and introduce myself before parking my mobile cleaning station and scoping out the room. Anna sits on the left side of the bed. She likes to talk and grumbles about the quality of hospital cleaners and things getting worse during and after the coronavirus. Even though it's not my job, I clean all surfaces, including the shelves, beneath the array of get-well cards and vases of flowers. I notice a television fixed on the wall in one corner and a camera trained on the bed in the other. Anna's attention is drawn

when something comes on the screen, and she stops talking. When she comments about the host's deliciousness, she watches an episode of the docuseries called Marshall's Law. All the time, Sylvie is asleep or unconscious. I fetch my broom and give the dusty floor a sweep. I decide to leave after that and try another night, but I notice a commercial break and decide to ask a question.

"Why does the hospital leave a nurse here but not in other rooms?"

Anna has been reaching over to adjust the tubing beneath Sylvie's nose. She chuckles when she hears my question.

"I don't work for the hospital, love. Not anymore. I'm with a private nursing agency. We're hired to take shifts to care for Miss Sylvie around the clock. Feed her, keep her clean and call the hospital staff for assistance, if needed. Lightens their load, but also means someone's always on hand. Apparently a friend of hers is footing the bill. Wish I had friends like that, I can tell you."

"Yes, that would be nice," I answer, concentrating on sweeping dust beneath the bed. When I straighten up, I notice Nurse Anna smiling at me.

"Nice job, love. The bloke you've taken over from didn't know one end of a broom from the other. Said sweeping weren't his job anyway. I was gonna complain to them out there, but what's the use? Are you permanent?"

"No, temporary."

"Shame. Hospital needs good staff."

"What happened to the lady?" I ask, nodding to Sylvie before emptying the bins and providing new liners. I let Anna tell her version of events which sounds very similar to what the newspapers reported. What's new is that although Sylvie is conscious for much of the day, she is constantly

tired and unable string sentences together, speaking only in single words. Even when she is released, Anna tells me, a full recovery will be an arduous uphill struggle. In all the time I'm there, which is not long, Sylvie does not stir. I decide to withdraw for tonight and concentrate on the rest of the floor.

I clock off at four that morning, handing over to another guy who will work until midday. With nothing better to do with my time, Ravi agreed to let me work sixteen-hour shifts. Now I have eight hours free to eat, sleep and recharge, which is more than enough. The only sacrifice is my evening swimming exercise at the heavily chlorinated public swimming pool a tube ride away. But if I wake early enough, I might head there before my midday shift. I walk the darkened streets, wondering what Lorenzo is doing. Not far from my flat, there's a cafe open twenty-four hours, where I buy coffee and food to take home. I had always thought of myself as a loner, but I find I miss the company of Mrs Bellacci and especially Lorenzo.

In the early evening of the next day, I am strolling through the unusually empty waiting area when a voice rises above the general hospital noise, singling me out.

"Excuse me. Excuse me. Yes, you," calls a voice I recognise. Albert's sister, Victoria, sits stiffly on one of the plastic seats, a magazine open on her knees and a mobile phone clamped to her ear. She appears as impatient as I remember her.

"Do these bins ever get emptied? They're becoming a health hazard."

She stares straight at me and clearly has no idea who I am. I nod my acknowledgement but say nothing as I pull on my utility gloves. Noticing my response, she turns away and continues her call.

"Hammond-Clyde deals in family law, darling. She would be eaten alive with something like this. Which is why we need somebody big league. Edward knows it will cost, but he wants it done."

I slow what I'm doing. Is she talking to someone about Eagle House? Are they trying to reverse Albert's gift to me? I go over, pull a thick nylon cable tie from my pocket and secure the trash bag in the bin. She continues talking when I lift it from the container and move past her to the cart.

"Prime commercial real estate in the heart of London? What hotel chain wouldn't want to snap up something like that?"

Callico House. She is talking about them selling Callico House. I pull out a clean sack from the cart, together with a disinfectant spray and cloth, and return to the bin area. When I spray the insides of the container, I notice Victoria irritably wave a hand in front of her nose.

"Those inheritance caveats were imposed over a hundred years ago. Surely there are loopholes that can be found? Other listed buildings seem to be granted changes of use all the time."

Once I have finished, I pass her again and indicate the cleaned area. In true Victoria style, she purses her lips and nods dismissively.

"You've been there. It's a draughty monstrosity. Edward says he doesn't want to spend another bloody penny on its upkeep. And on that point, I am in complete agreement."

I push the cart out of her line of sight, around the corner from where she is sitting, and pretend to rearrange the contents in the top basket.

"Good. As soon as you give me the green light, I'll get Hammond-Clyde to send you the property file. No, I'm at St Thomas hospital. Coleman insisted on visiting a patient

before we go meet his tiresome friends for dinner. As if I haven't had enough of these places to last a lifetime. What do you mean, why? Who was it a month ago who was dragged to the morgue to identify her dead brother? Not Edward. He palmed that particular pleasure off to me because he had a work thing. Seeing Albert laid out like that was too awful for words. I'm not sure I will ever recover. Death is so undignified. Will I see you Sunday? Well, do your best, darling. Love you, too."

An upside of my previous impromptu visit to the sixth floor is that Anna knows who I am, and when I turn up just after midnight, she beckons me in. I guess she must be lonely because, once again, she rambles on without waiting for me to respond. There's not much to clean in the room, and Sylvie is still asleep, so I finish quickly and offer an olive branch.

"I am done here, Anna. Can I get something for you? A coffee from the machine?"

Anna looks up hopefully then, pulling a packet of cigarettes from her pocket and flashing the cover at me, ensuring her back is to the room CCTV.

"I don't drink coffee, my love, but I wouldn't mind stretching my legs. The duty nurse sometimes covers for me while I get some fresh air. Would you mind keeping an eye on the patient?"

"I am not supposed to—"

"It's okay, Janis, my love. I promise I won't be no more than ten minutes. If you need help, push the call button and the duty nurse will come. But I'll be back before you know. If anyone comes, which is highly unlikely, tell 'em I've gone to the powder room."

Left alone, I consider checking through the bedside drawers but am conscious of being caught on camera.

Instead, I clean surfaces below the CCTV where I can check things without being filmed. I am aware of not spending too long there and return to the bed, where I take Anna's seat. I notice a breaking news story on the television screen and reach for the remote to increase the volume.

"News just coming in. A reporter at the Daily Herald alleges to have received documentary proof that calls into question the legitimacy of the medical trials and the effectiveness of what was being heralded as a new super drug. We understand that a press conference has been hastily arranged for early this morning with the project team including the team leader, Professor Puchinsky."

As I go to replace the control on the bedside cabinet, Sylvie's eyes open wide, and she stares at me horrified, before grabbing my wrist. At that exact moment, I hear the door to the room click open.

"Gah. Gah. Ga-ga-ga." Sylvie sounds as though she is choking. I jump from the seat, but Sylvie's grip tightens on my wrist.

"No, no, dear," says Anna, gently but firmly pulling Sylvie's hand away. "It's alright, my lovely. He's here to collect rubbish. He don't mean you no harm."

With her free arm, Anna pushes me behind her. Beeps grow faster on one of the machines. When I check my hands, I realise my sweater sleeves have risen, and my tattoo is exposed. I pull them down and look over at Sylvie, who is still trying to stare in my direction. I am unsure what to do at that moment, so I raise my forefinger and press it to my lips. Sylvie appears to get the message because she closes her eyes and melts back into the pillow. Moments later, the machine slows.

"I should go," I tell Anna, and she nods.

The following day on the way to work, as I buy a coffee

from a local convenience store, I notice one or two of the daily newspapers are running stories about the controversial new super drug, with one of the tabloids having the single title, Professor Bullshitsky, splashed across the front page. From what I can tell, the only paper with the full exclusive story is the Herald. Naturally, the news is the talk of staff at the hospital, but, as always, I just listen. From what I can tell, the press conference did not go well and left a lot of unanswered questions.

When I reach the sixth floor that night, I open the door to room 604 and find Anna but no Sylvie. Before I can say anything, Anna explains.

"She's in the operating theatre. She got wheeled away at eight. One of her legs is not mending properly so they're pinning the bones again. How are you tonight?"

While I start work, we share a few words, mainly about her day. I am finished in no time and see no reason to hang around, but she stops me at the door.

"Before I forget. Miss Sylvie managed to say a few words earlier. She wanted to apologise to the poor man she terrified last night and to give him this little box of cookies. It's just a re-gift, my love. Someone bought them for her and she's not a fan. Thought they might as well go to a good home."

"Please thank her for me and tell her I'm sorry for frightening her."

"She's woken in a state a couple of times. Bad dreams, bless her. Not your fault. She's not used to opening her eyes to anyone but me or the staff nurses. Funny though. Echoes, she said, just after you left. Shouted the word three times at the door. Echoes, echoes, echoes. Seemed pretty riled up before her drugs kicked in. No idea what she meant."

Echoes? Sylvie definitely recognised me the night

before. What could that mean? I wonder if Sylvie will be more coherent tomorrow night.

"Tomorrow is my last shift working nights, Anna. And probably my last in the hospital. The other worker will return from sick leave and I'm not sure if the boss will keep me."

"He'd be a fool not to."

"Thank you. I will come by and say hello anyway, if that's okay?"

"Course it is. Been nice chatting."

A prickly feeling comes over me not long after I leave the hospital grounds and enter the darkened back streets on the way to my apartment. I never ignore these moments of intuition. They served me well on the streets. Someone is trailing me. When I turn a corner and step into a shop doorway, I wait for ten minutes, but nobody passes. Still, I can't shake the feeling that I am being stalked. As a precaution, I take the long route back to my lodgings, stopping at an all-night fast food chain. When my take-out order is served, I emerge onto the street, but this time I no longer sense a presence.

Back in the flat, I empty the contents of my rucksack onto the table before eating. After showering, I slip into sweats, ready to grab a few hours' sleep, until I notice the box of cookies on the table. When I fold back the cardboard lid, a sweet sugary smell rises from the top layer. The cookies are contained in a plastic moulded housing that I lift out because I am sure there is more to this gift. Unsurprisingly, I find two interesting items on the bottom. The first is a business-type contact card for Dr Maurice Leblanc—someone related to Sylvie, perhaps? There is also an unsent letter addressed to Albert. I carefully unfold the page and read the beautiful handwriting. A few lines are about her

frustrations at the interim results of the clinical trial she is involved in. The letter is dated around a month before the minibus crash, and I wonder why she never posted the letter. Maybe she had already spoken to Albert by then. Towards the end, a paragraph jumps out at me, one that refers directly to me.

"I know your reasons for doing what you must, and I also understand if Gabriel feels the need to uncover the secrets of his childhood, but you know my feeling in this matter. Sometimes we're better off not knowing. Nobody can change what happened. But if he does, as I know you believe he will, he needs to be assured that he had no free will in the matter, no choice or control over what he was made to do. That is my main concern. My understanding is that the eight fabricants simply carried out orders. Those who gave the commands are the ones who should be held accountable, whoever they may be. Moreover, you must not let any future he has be overshadowed by anger, regret and self-hatred because of past manipulations.

More practically, where will you begin? I informed my uncle, who told me he wants no part in this, and I don't blame him after all he's been through. And is the Hartfield Institute still standing? Do we know? My guess is that any incriminating case notes and field research were either destroyed or moved to a secure location. I would not be surprised if the research facility has been levelled and replaced by a car park or some other innocuous municipal building.

I am sorry I cannot be of more assistance, but as you know, I am leading a crusade of my own right now. That does not mean I will not help if you need me. We cannot correct these past wrongs, but we can and must do everything in our power to ensure they never happen again."

That final night, I push through the double doors carrying my backpack and report to the sixth-floor duty nurse. Maybe I can entice Nurse Anna to go for a cigarette again because, if Leblanc is awake and coherent, I need to find out more about the card and letter. When the duty nurse looks up and sees me approaching, she begins chuckling.

"You lot are keen tonight, aren't you? They've already sent someone."

"Have they?" My guard is up instantly. I make sure to keep my expression neutral. "Do you know who?"

"New chap. Bit rude, actually. Didn't even wish me a good evening." I am the only new person on the team. This confirms my suspicions. "Why? Should I be worried? He flashed me his ID."

"No, no," I reply, waving down her concern and checking my watch. "We have had more new people starting. Boss probably forgot to tell me. I have much work on the open ward down on the third, so he's doing me a favour. Let me go check anyway. Do you know where he is?"

"Probably gasbagging with Anna in 640. You know how she likes to natter."

On the way to the room, I search for anything I can use as a weapon. Tucked in a crevasse behind a fire exit, I remember seeing a discarded iron bar, probably left after the fire doors were upgraded. I also grab the utility knife from the cart and tuck that into my back pocket.

When I reach 640, I lean the bar against the door frame, then stand frozen still and peer through the glass panel to assess the situation. Nurse Anna is slumped in her chair. Her head has lolled to one side. Sylvie has her eyes closed and appears peaceful. An athletic figure dressed as a porter stands on the other side of the bed. He removes air from a

syringe of clear solution, holds the tube up to the light, and lets a squirt of liquid spring from the hypodermic needle.

Propped against the wheelchair outside the room, there is an aluminium crutch. I grab the cuff end, twist the door handle and enter the room.

"What are you doing here?" I ask calmly, kicking a door wedge in place to prop the door open. "This is my shift."

After glancing briefly at Sylvie, he gently places the syringe on the bed before looking up, smiling, and walking casually to my side of the room. I notice a hand move behind him to his waistband. A flash of silver slices the air between us. Automatically, I swing the crutch to block the knife attack and follow up with blows to his head and torso—the way Lorenzo taught me with taekwondo escrima sticks. The lightweight metal does not do any critical damage, but the surprise counterattack knocks him off-balance and gives me a chance to drop the crutch, change weapons and kick the door closed.

When we face each other again, I see the doubt morph into determination in his eyes, like a predator who has underestimated his prey and now reassesses the fight. He gains his composure quickly and turns to confront me. From the efficient way he wields the knife between his waist and chest and close to his torso, I know he's had military training. When he lunges forward, I parry with the metal bar, and I watch his eyes widen. But the bar is heavy and not as easy to wield as a knife. When one of my blocks misses, the blade sinks into my upper arm.

Agony becomes a catalyst, and a red veil descends. Everything inside me crystallises with focus and clarity. My body is possessed by a killing demon. Every cell in my body craves this man's death. My own safety is secondary.

What happens next is a blur of automated actions and

responses. Consciousness resurfaces when a frightened voice calls my name across the room.

"Ga-ga-Gabrielle," stutters Sylvie, the name Gabriel pushed out and softened into something attractive and feminine by her French accent.

I find myself on the floor with the man unconscious beneath me. One of my knees is on his neck, the other on his midsection, and I hold the knife in both fists above my head, ready to plunge the blade into his chest. His face is bloodied and lifeless, but I can feel he is still breathing.

"Stop."

Bewilderment quickly turns to clarity, and I assess the man. Reason kicks in. I will need him alive to answer questions. Still working automatically, I pull the cable ties from my pocket and secure his hands and legs. While finishing up, I hear Sylvie say something like 'courier'.

I stand up from the floor and notice her wide eyes flick to the CCTV camera. An alarm sounds from outside the room.

"Cou-rez," she calls out hoarsely, her eyes pleading, as she releases the red emergency cord dangling from the ceiling.

"Run."