

The greatest mistake in the treatment of diseases is that there are physicians for the body and physicians for the soul, although the two cannot be separated.

— Plato

The central problem of such a Life or Death Committee is, of course, that nobody can be sure of anything.

— Shana Alexander “They Decide Who Lives, Who Dies: Medical Miracle Puts a Moral Burden on a Small Committee.” *Life*, November 9, 1962

CHAPTER ONE

April 27, 1992

JL Lycette

Seattle, WA

The hospital had a saying—you came to work unless you were dead.

Apparently, being dead on the inside didn't count.

The latter, which Noah had quipped months ago at intern orientation, hadn't earned him any points with Dr. Artie Andrews, the Program Director. Although his peers had laughed, and he supposed that mattered most.

Humor, his stalwart companion, was nowhere to be found these days. His pre-med-school self, who'd studied literature and philosophy and naively believed medicine a noble art, had become a distant memory. For interns, the drudgery of *bodies* had become their entire existence—how much their patients pissed, shit, vomited, or bled. Plato could wax all he liked about the separation of body and soul, but most days, Noah had to struggle to even remember his patients *had* souls, let alone find time to doctor them. Hell, most days, he was pretty sure his own soul had shriveled up and died a few months ago. It had been somewhere around the halfway point of his internship year, when a patient had died and he'd felt *nothing* when he'd crossed their name off his list. Only another body.

But he had no time for such thoughts this morning. Noah mentally shoved the memory back into its compartment, physically shoved his notes into the pocket of his short white coat, and headed

off the Gen Med ward to make his way to Monday morning Resident Report. It didn't matter he'd been up all night, mandatory was mandatory.

Before he got two steps from the nurses' station, the sharp voice of Kathy, the ward secretary, rang out from behind her desk. "Dr. Meier, wait. Sign this before you go."

Noah suppressed the urge to glance over his shoulder, where he instinctively expected to see Dr. *Thomas* Meier, gifted surgeon, renowned academic—and his late father. Accepting the chart Kathy shoved under his nose, he signed off on the orders he'd missed on his 6:00 A.M. admission. That's what sleep deprivation did to you.

Behind him, the never-ending rain of the Seattle winter clattered on the windows, fraying his already heightened nerves. He scribbled his name and the time and date—7:50 A.M., 4/27/92.

He handed the chart back, his body already angling away, but Kathy's voice stopped him in his tracks. "Any update on when Dr. Doherty will be back?"

Noah's sleep-fogged brain was slow to process her words. "Jasmine Doherty?"

Kathy bobbed her head, the chain attached to her reading glasses glinting as it looped around her neck beneath her permed hair.

Noah squinted at her. A part of his overtaxed brain urged him to catch up with his team or risk being late, something heavily frowned upon, but his curiosity won. “Jasmine’s out?”

Interns didn’t take sick days.

Kathy finished transcribing Noah’s signed orders from the chart and deftly shelved the heavy plastic binder back on the rack before answering with a shrug.

Did this have something to do with the free HIV testing for the homeless project that Noah, Jasmine, and a few of the other interns had been trying to start? The project Dr. Andrews had warned would risk distracting them from their required hospital duties? Had Jasmine gone down to the homeless camp and been delayed? Noah dismissed the uneasy feeling in his gut and said something to appease Kathy. “Maybe she had a family emergency.”

The ward secretary gave him a skeptical glance.

Noah countered with a conspiratorial grin, wielding his familiar shield, humor. “If you don’t already know what’s going on, Kathy, I’m sure you will by noon.”

She rolled her eyes and made a shooing motion with her hands, but he didn’t miss the pleased expression that flashed across her face.

JL Lycette

His grin, a shallow thing that didn't penetrate his hollow core, lingered as he grabbed his coffee and jogged off toward the elevators to catch up with his team, comprising his senior resident, Harper Li, and his co-intern, Colleen Peterson.

Noah found them both outside the University hospital's east-wing elevators. The early morning light filtered through the stained-glass windows beneath the lobby atrium's vaulted ceiling, bestowing a halo around them. The sight of his colleagues buoyed his spirits. All he had to do was get through these last few months of internship. Then he'd be able to start practicing more of the medicine he wanted to practice, like bringing free HIV testing to the homeless population. Once they got through internship, they'd become people again instead of indentured servants of the hospital.

From her rumpled scrubs and frizzier-than-usual red hair, Colleen's call night had been no better than his. They'd been so swamped with admissions he'd hardly seen his co-intern all night. She mumbled to herself, shuffling her index cards. Her freckles stood out on her paler-than-usual face, making her appear even younger than her age, which was somewhere in her mid-twenties. Internship had given the opposite gift to Noah—premature aging. At twenty-eight, gray hairs already sprouted at his temples. Perhaps the only thing he'd inherited from his father, according to his mom, at least.

He closed his eyes and pressed his fingers to them. His father had been too much on his mind of late. The staff calling him "doctor" only spiked his lifelong anxiety about not measuring up. After all, Noah hadn't yet earned the long white coat of a second-year resident.

It was those damn boxes his mom had asked him to help move last weekend out of the attic of her historic, steep-gabled home on Queen Anne hill. The boxes where he'd discovered his father's old journal. The journal he'd never known existed and had spontaneously grabbed, tossing it in his car even though he told himself he'd never read it. It would be a waste of time —

“You ready?”

Noah dropped his hand from his eyes.

Harper didn't wait for an answer before pressing the elevator button. By unspoken agreement, they only allowed themselves the luxury of passive motion in the depths of post-call morning exhaustion—when they'd been on duty over twenty-four hours straight and still had twelve hours to go.

While they waited, Noah had to stop himself from attempting to smooth down some of Colleen's wild hair. Instead, he held up his coffee, and they touched their paper cups together in a silent toast that acknowledged their mutual suffering. The last time he'd tried to touch Colleen's hair had earned him the outrage of both the women on his team. He'd meant nothing by it, only he'd come to think of Colleen as the younger sister he'd never had and always wanted. He imagined the close bonds he and his co-interns had formed in the pressure-cooker of residency to be similar to siblings.

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This past month on Harper's service had been one of Noah's most rewarding of the year. He'd found a mentor, instructor, big sister, and friend in her, all wrapped up in one. He didn't want the month to end, as it would mean moving on to be assigned to a different R3.

Harper leaned close to speak in his ear in a low voice. "The announcements should come any day."

Noah shot a glance toward Colleen, but she was fretting over her notes and didn't appear to have heard. His heart rate sped up. Did everyone know how much he wanted an invitation to the prestigious Osler Society? Or only Harper, the first female member and arguably the most brilliant. Did her words mean he had a shot?

There was the national medical honor society, Alpha Omega Alpha, and then there was Dr. Artie Andrews' Osler Society, or as it was known around the hospital, "the Society."

Andrews had started it two decades ago, and it had attained near-mythical status at their university teaching hospital. Any intern or junior resident inducted into the Society would get their top fellowship or faculty placement choice. It had been no surprise to anyone when they'd inducted Harper as an intern.

But no one on the outside knew what actually transpired at their meetings. Noah had asked Harper once, but she'd only muttered, "Primum non nocere."

“First do no harm?” Noah had asked. “But isn’t that what all of Medicine is about?”

“Yeah, but with Artie, it’s... different,” she had said and shrugged. “It’s hard to explain.”

Noah envisioned them all sitting around Andrews’ office, pontificating about the art of medicine and quoting Latin to each other. Pretentious academics. He’d rather let an E.R. nurse shove a 14-gauge I.V. in the back of his hand. But he wasn’t fooling himself. He wanted to be a part of it, more than anything. To belong. To prove it to the one person he never could. His father.