

Power of the Press

Wes was elated. All morning he'd worried about the interview, and with good cause. Since assuming the post of administrator, the local newspaper had been unrelenting in its criticism of Peter Brannan Hospital. In a small community, hospitals operate in a fishbowl. Whenever news was slow—which was quite often in rural Utah—someone at the *Park City Herald* started poking the hospital's closets for a skeleton.

As Wes watched the front steps of the hospital, Thane Ford unlocked the door to his car. He turned and waved at Wes with a smile before entering and driving off. *Won that one!* Wes thought.

Thayne had disarmed Wes from the start. Contacting Wes's former employer in Maine, Ford had checked his consulting references. "Their enthusiasm was overwhelming," Ford reported sheepishly. "They liked your style. Said you were good at identifying operational problems, and better still at fixing 'em. 'A real smooth cookie,' one reported."

"Sorry I've been so tough on you in the paper," Thayne continued. "It's to everyone's best interest for you to succeed—at least if we want to have a hospital."

"Volume is down," Wes volunteered, "and the negative press hasn't helped."

Thayne's eyes narrowed with regret as he stared at the floor. "In the news media, we get carried away sometimes, maybe to the detriment to the community." His face brightened. "Tell you what we'll do," he said. "Whenever a new president is elected, the press typically gives him a sixty-day honeymoon—a period during which they lay off the negative press. Maybe we ought to do the same thing for you."

"That'd be swell. I'll tell you whatever you want to know—so you don't think I'm hiding things from you. Give us sixty days to get our act together. If we haven't fixed things by then, you're free to go after us."

"You're a tough negotiator," Ford said. Both laughed.

"Okay. Now tell me what's going on," Thayne began. "Is it safe to be admitted to Peter Brannan Hospital?"

"Certainly," replied Wes. "We have our problems, like everyone else, but the overall quality is as good as any rural hospital in the state."

"What kind of problems?" Thayne queried.

"We have a physician we are disciplining. Picked up on some problems when we installed our new accounting system. They were verified this week by a potential malpractice suit. The board has temporarily suspended his privileges. They plan to get him additional training before giving them back—a year's residency in family practice in Baltimore."

"Anyone I know?" asked Thayne.

"Can't give the name," Wes replied, "but we're working on the problem."

"Any trouble getting the medical staff to support you?" Thayne asked while taking notes. "I've heard some doctors are reticent to criticize peers."

"You said this was off the record," Wes verified, nodding at the notebook.

"It's just for the files," Thayne replied.

"There was resistance from the medical staff," Wes said, "but Dr. Emil Flagg, chair of the Credentialing Committee, is handling the situation."

"I hear there's quite a bit of conflict on the board."

"I don't think we want to address that publicly," Wes said warily.

"Remember the deal," Thayne said. "It's just between us."

Wes nodded, and for the next thirty minutes he answered as truthfully as he could Ford's questions about the operation of the hospital. Topics hit included board politics, problems small hospitals have competing with the resources and specialized staff of larger facilities, and Wes's concern that the hospital's reputation never be blighted by fraud.

He probably didn't learn anything he didn't already know, Wes thought. Most of these problems will be fixed in sixty days; they'll be of little interest to the newspaper then.

"I've enjoyed the interview," Thayne had said as he closed his notebook. "It's given me new hope in the future of the hospital. Let's keep in touch; I need to know what's going on, but I'll support you—at least through the honeymoon period."

Standing on the steps of the hospital, Wes was elated to have found a friend and supporter.

He was about to receive the shock of his life.



In the security of his office, Thayne Ford reviewed his notes. The most interesting part of the interview was the malpractice scoop—the issue that had caused the medical staff to suspend "Dr. X." The young administrator wouldn't tell him who that was, but at about that point in the conversation, Wes had been called into the hall to talk to a fire inspector.

Thayne took the opportunity to look at the notes of the Credential Committee meeting that Wes had referred. As Thayne had suspected, the name of the physician had been scratched out. The patient's admission number had not been erased, however, and Ford wrote it in his notebook.

He picked up his phone and punched in the phone number of Patricia Fielding—*Trish*. Trish was a medical records librarian in the hospital, one of Thayne's sources. He had met her in a bar on her first night in town from Brooklyn. Crazy hair, but sexy figure.

"Heyyy, Trish! Guess who?"

The voice at the other end of the line bubbled with excitement.

"Thayne? . . . Howya doin'?"

"Doin' good. Got a favor though . . . no, not that kind." He smirked. "Got a hospital admission number . . . wanna know who's the patient. Yeah, I can wait." He doodled on the notepad while she checked the files.

"Wally Demski, you say? What's the diagnosis? Hmmm . . . too bad. When did he expire? Family plan to sue? Well, maybe they'll change their mind," he said, scribbling in a pad. "Who's the Doc? Ah, Dr. Brannan . . . the *Little Prince* . . ."

Thayne Ford held notepad at arm's length as though admiring a beautiful work of art. A big Cheshire grin spread across his. "I owe you one, baby . . . Yah, I'm sure you will."