

Chapter 1

I arrived at the Lakeside Health Center, an all-inclusive mental health facility built on beautiful French Island, next to La Crosse Wisconsin. It had been at this location for over one hundred years. The state tore down the original building in 1975 and replaced it with a state-of-the-art facility, currently trying to rejoin its predecessor, outdated and in dire need of repair.

Climbing out of the front seat of my six-year-old Black 2012 Tundra, I took in a deep breath as my shoes hit the worn-out, sunbaked, winter-beaten employee parking lot. My Tundra was the only thing of value I was able to salvage from my adopted parents' estate. Shortly after my sixteenth birthday, my father was murdered in a bank robbery gone wrong; my mother succumbed to colon cancer two years later.

It was going to be another hot, steamy mid-July day in Western Wisconsin, but I would be working in air-conditioned comfort, so it wouldn't matter.

My body went into a convulsive stretch, trying to shake off the consequences of last night's alcohol-induced activities. I let out a satisfying good morning grunt as I glanced at the electric blue waters of Lake Onalaska which bordered the property on the west side, several miles from the Mississippi River. The area was called "God's Country" for a reason: lakes, rivers, and forests were surrounded by bluffs and rolling hills, truly eye candy for the soul.

I halfheartedly walked into the building's main entrance, my ears tuning in to the redundant sounds of patients' unintelligible chatter, walkers scraping across worn-out linoleum floors and orderlies barking out orders to patients with limited comprehension skill sets who probably had no idea what year it was. But what always snapped me back to reality was the smell. An intoxicating mixture of year-old cat litter doused with urine and mixed with watered-

down bleach, a constant reminder of my job as a Psychiatric Attendant.

Walking through a series of hallways, I greeted several health center employees on my way to the acute psychiatric unit door.

I inserted the plastic security card which dangled from a lanyard around my neck into the scanner and waited for the door to open. I entered the small security hallway and waited for the first door's lock to click back into place. I repeated the same procedure again for the second door and entered the unit, listening as the door clicked into place.

"Ah, the sights, the smells, back into the never-ending psychotic rabbit's hole," I said aloud, pounding my chest twice with my right fist.

Early morning routines created a unit buzz. I turned to the right as several patients walked by and greeted me with the same stale good mornings while some gestured with their hands and others wandered around like zombies in a Walking Dead episode, optimizing their blank stares. I made another right and opened the waist-high swinging nurse's station door.

"Que pasta amigos and amigesses," I happily chanted, trying to stimulate the graveyard shift.

I get the, you just walked in here and let's see you this cheery in a couple of hours look from the staff. Great energy, I thought I accidentally stumbled into a narcoleptic convention.

I stopped at the kitchen at the back of the nurse's station to hang up my backpack, which housed my laptop, golf shirt, shorts, shoes and socks, then headed to one of three worktables behind the main counter.

Russ Hardy sat at one of the tables working on some patients' charts; he was my height, six-feet-two, but unlike me, a skinny laid-back dude who could handle himself in a fight. He was the graveyard psych attendant, fraternity

brother and roommate. He was dressed in a cheap green Walmart golf shirt, jeans, and black Nike tennis shoes.

Russ was a total motor head, most content when his head was buried under a hood. He was smart, holding a degree in engineering but here he was, scraping by at minimum wage in a psych unit in bum-fuck western Wisconsin. Russ was also painstakingly paying off a fifty-thousand-dollar college loan while awaiting replies from the hundreds of resumes he'd sent out nationwide. Like all the Lakeview psychiatric attendants, he kept busy protecting the masses from the would-be street people, who'd be taking up valuable real estate, residing in a variety of cardboard boxes and tents strewn across alleys, freeway underpasses and parks.

Poor Russ was probably wondering why he wasn't making one-hundred-thousand dollars a year as an engineer somewhere. Russ saw me walking over to the table and smiled.

"A peaceful night Steve. Can't believe it. Everyone asleep when I walked in and it stayed that way."

"Lucky you, no Marsha to report?" I inquired.

"Nope, I have her chart and it's a short entry. Her two-week stay at Lakeside's been a real nightmare for everyone."

"I've never seen anyone or anything thing like her, and she ends up here, off the beautiful shores of picturesque Lake Onalaska. I'll see you later, Russ. I'm going to look in on George," I said with a frustrated look on my face."

I walked out and past the station gate when Russ grabbed my shoulder from behind.

"Dude, you need to get over being upset at him for checking back in. He's been here a month now. You need to let it go."

"Yeah, I know. It's hard for me, he shouldn't be here this time. Something's going on and he's not talking."

"Let's ask the doctor."

That created a mutual laugh. The Head Clinical Psychiatrist, Doctor Cameron Wage, must have gotten his degree inside a box of Captain Crunch he found while going to school in Grenada. He reminded me of Dr. Irwin Corey, a character my parents showed me on the old Dean Martin Roast reruns, classic, funny comedians without the F-bombs.

"I checked on him twice; he looked peaceful."

"Thanks, Russ. I appreciate the extra effort."

I left the nurse's station through the day room, toward the patient rooms. The day room was a mental merry-go-round, a collection of broken minds, pierced hearts and damaged souls, all peppered with drugs, nicotine, caffeine, alcohol or any combination of the three, awaiting the quick fix to get them back to the place where they could start the same dysfunctional process all over again. The percentage of patients getting out and staying out are and continue to remain painfully low.

I stopped at room 112 and looked at the temporary room placard next to the door, the name "George Sharp" written in bolded letters. I knocked on the side of an already opened door and entered the room. George Sharp sat on the edge of his bed. He was a tall stately looking man in his late 50's and had made millions with a deep-sea petroleum patent. His head, garnished with salt and pepper hair, which seemed to have an allergic reaction anytime a comb or brush approached it. We'd become close over the past three years of his in-and-out mental health center sojourns. There was something that always drew me near him. Like a pet that I needed to care for.

George's irrational, unexplainable psychotic episodes had plagued him for years. He wasn't Schizophrenic, depressed or bi-polar, according to the head shrink, but here he was again, no rational explanation or medical diagnosis for this extended visit. He was fully dressed from the ankles up, no shoes, no socks, typical George.

“Hi Steve, come on in and have a seat. I’ll have my secretary carve out a spot on my morning calendar, just for you.”

“Thanks for squeezing me in on such short notice,” I said in my usual smart-ass demeanor. “So, how’s it going this morning? Forget something?”

George looked down at his feet. “No. And after a pleasant evening of eyelid research, I’m still not quite sure, but things are trending toward... copacetic. How are you doing on this fine sunny morning?”

“Doing great, George. Two months since I graduated, and the university still hasn’t asked me to return my diploma.”

“You make me laugh.” George chuckled. “You remind me of someone I used to know... me.”

“Really?”

“Except of course for the side-part-pompadour, blonde hair, blue eyes, muscular build, sitting on a six-foot two-inch frame and the Hollywood good looks, we could have been twins.”

“At least you haven’t lost your sense of humor.”

I walked over to the window of the depressing, claustrophobic room with cheap white and blue painted concrete blocks and pulled back the bland faded blue curtain. The plastic brackets holding the curtain were manufactured to break apart under minimal weight, therefore rendering them suicide proof. An aggressive early morning sun crept its way into the room between the thick iron bars outside the window.

“Not what you’re used to, is it George?”

I tapped my knuckles against the unbreakable glass window.

“No, but I’m not here on a vacation either, am I?”

“No, you’re not, and that’s the problem, George. Why haven’t you checked out yet? Come on, you and I both know you don’t belong here, not this time anyway.”

"I've been feeling better the last couple of weeks and I think I'm getting ready to—"

His sentence was drowned out by loud screams coming from the dayroom and an ear-piercing loudspeaker. Several patients ran by Georges' room.

"Code 99, repeat code 99, all patients return to your rooms. Code 99, code 99, all patients return to your rooms."

"Oh shit, Marsha again. Gotta go."

"Careful, Steve. She's extremely dangerous," George warned as he slid off the bed onto his bare feet and watched me run into the tidal wave of uncontrollable psychotic pandemonium.

I raced down the hall and into the day room where I witnessed chaos: running, jumping, screaming, swearing, a chair careening off a day room wall and panic-stricken patients escaping the day room like rats scrambling off a sinking ship. I saw two nurses creating a vapor trail toward the nurse's station.

"What a cluster fuck," I said to myself.

Then I saw her, all five feet, one hundred pounds of her, Marsha Zemlugs. She was a twenty-something-year-old Tasmanian Devil with blossoming scraggly red hair, attired in a stained blue robe, barefoot, hissing, growling, her head rolling side to side, arms and hands swiping at imaginary objects, looking to damage or hurt anything or anyone. She'd be kind of cute if she fixed herself up... a lot. She made eye contact with me, standing alone in the middle of the dayroom. Game on.

I thought of Michael Buffer and announced to the entire day room, "Let's get ready to Rummmmmmmmmble!"

As I dashed toward her, she tossed off her robe, revealing a badly-stained beige nightgown. She charged me with whatever contorted, psychotic gait she could conjure up. A normal person would bet their house on me taking her out. What they didn't know was that a couple of days ago



Adopted at birth and orphaned at eighteen, Steve Mueller is a recent 24 year old college grad working as a psychiatric attendant in a small Wisconsin city.

When he gets the news that his birth father has died he is amazed to learn his inheritance includes not only a wealthy estate in Las Vegas, but a limo company as well. Steve realizes his ship has come in, but from the moment he lands in Sin City, he quickly discovers he won't be gambling his fortune in a casino, he'll be betting everything on his life.

His birth father was murdered, the limo company is falling apart and there's an endless supply of enemies coming after him and his inheritance. Steve will have to wager his razor-sharp wit and physical skills to protect himself from the violence and greed in the sex-crazed city that never sleeps.