

# Chapter 1

## *Invisible Scars*

The office of Dr. Ethan Blackridge is as much an extension of his psyche as it is a workspace, constructed with an exactitude that suggests both a reverence for order and a quiet terror of chaos. The space, rectangular and windowed on one side, is designed to funnel the eye and spirit directly to the man himself. Through the broad, unblemished glass, sunlight pours in, not in a careless radiance but in perfectly measured slats, as if the very rays had been instructed in their conduct. It strikes the desk—a slab of mahogany so dense and unmarred as to seem preternatural—where it lingers over a topography of carefully tuned objects.

Ethan keeps his office as a museum of curated intentions. The silver pen is placed exactly two thumb-lengths to the right of the legal pad, its body parallel to the desk's long edge. The clock, modern in design but archaic in silence, is set against a wall at a height calculated for eye-level consultation, its hand movements so muted they seem to happen only in memory. Along the bookshelf, volumes arranged not only by subject but by the subtle gradation of their spine color—an ombré of academic obsession. The centerpiece is a nineteenth-century anatomical brain, preserved in a jar of cloudy alcohol, suspended forever in a state of arrest failure.

The scents of the room are deliberate as well. Ethan abides the scent of cedar polish, buffed leather & fresh florals. The sound deployed with surgical restraint: Chopin's Nocturnes, nearly subliminal, piped in to suggest melancholy but never indulgence. Ethan has calibrated the volume so it will evoke nostalgia in most patients, a trick he uses to prime them for the gentle undoing he orchestrates over the hour. Sometimes, if the session seems too easy, he will let the playlist slip into the less familiar Mazurkas, which tend to unsettle; he likes to keep an edge.

The man himself, alone at his desk, is in posture what the room is in design. He sits so upright that one might suspect military schooling, or perhaps an adolescence spent in the presence of punitive ancestors. His features are a study in contradiction: the sharpness of his jaw and the aquiline nose would read as severe if not for the delicate, almost feminine arch of his brow. His hands, which he keeps folded or sometimes laced together on the desk's surface, are slender and veined, the nails trimmed to a uniform crescent. When he works, he does so with a stillness that suggests not effort but the absence of competing desires.

The knock is not unexpected. Ethan can trace the sequence before it occurs—the brisk heel-to-toe approach, the microsecond of hesitation outside the door, the faint static in the air as the receptionist calibrates her performance, eager to please but terrified of misstep. The knock itself—a polite, controlled double-tap—betrays a hopeful uncertainty that annoys Ethan even as he admires its precision.

He issues permission to enter—without inflection, without the grace note of warmth. The door swings inward on silent hinges, revealing his receptionist: early thirties, always overdressed for her station, the corners of her mouth bearing the faint, hopeful residue of lipstick. She holds a tray with both hands, as if carrying an offering to a disinterested god. On the tray: a porcelain cup and saucer, filled precisely to the black lip with coffee, and a neat stack of paperwork.

The top sheet is secured with a paperclip, aligned so the pages do not splay. She is careful with such details. Ethan has cultivated that in her.

“Morning, Dr. Blackridge,” she says. Her voice is both practiced and tentative, a performance for which she senses no audience. She places the tray on the precise spot between the legal pad and his folded hands, not so near as to impose but close enough to signal deference. He does not look up, but he feels the warmth of her gaze as if it were a lamp left on overnight.

Her name is Angela, but he rarely says it. First names, in his estimation, are tokens of intimacy, and he prefers a minimal circulation. Still, he knows everything about her: her daily calorie count (tracked in an app she foolishly syncs to her work laptop), her habit of buying discount cosmetics she then returns unopened, her lonely, rambling emails sent to herself as drafts under the subject line “Don’t Forget.” These facts are not a burden; they are simply the air he breathes.

She clears her throat. “Will you be attending the staff dinner tonight?” Her tone is designed for casualness, but the question lands heavy, its true intent bent around the gravitational pull of hope for something else.

“No,” Ethan replies, the refusal as smooth and unyielding as marble. He does not glance up. “My time is better spent in the office. Thank you for the coffee.”

There is a pause, a caught breath that telegraphs a decade of small disappointments. Her fingers linger on the stack of intake forms a moment longer than strictly necessary, aligning the corners, telegraphing an eagerness to be useful, to be noticed, to be indispensable. Ethan recognizes this gesture is the same one he’s seen in patients, in lovers, in himself during the rare moments he’s allowed hope to flicker and then snuff it out for safety’s sake.

She makes her retreat. The door closes behind her with a hydraulic sigh, an exhale of resignation. For a few seconds her fragrance—floral, synthetic, a little too eager—hangs in the air,

overlaid by the more assertive notes of cedar and coffee. The silence that follows is not empty but charged, as if the room is bracing for his next move.

Ethan waits until the soundscape has fully resolved before he allows himself to a small exhale. He lifts the cup and observes the way steam rises from the surface—always counterclockwise, always a slow, hypnotic spiral. He is not sentimental about such details, but he registers them. Some mornings he times the dissipation to the second, as a means of calibrating his own sense of control.

He sips. The coffee is precisely as he likes it: bitter, scalding, utterly without frivolity. He sets the cup down, aligning the handle at a right angle to the desk's edge, and scans the new patient forms. The first is a hedge fund manager whose preoccupation with risk has metastasized into a full-blown sleep disorder; attached is a note from the referring physician warning of “potentially explosive affect.” The second is a socialite during a third divorce, whose lawyer has insisted she seek psychiatric clearance before the final mediation. The third is a teenager, the form filled out in a mother's careful block print, the presenting complaint “screen addiction and possible gender confusion.” Ethan's interest is piqued only by the possibility of comorbidity; he has little patience for parental panic.

He arranges the files in order of descending clinical potential, blue flagging the case that offers the likeliest yield for experimental protocol. He is nothing if not methodical. The desk is now a geometric abstraction of his priorities, each file a vector aimed at his central preoccupation: the predictable failure of the human mind under pressure.

Outside, the world continues with its anonymous momentum. Lawn crews, the lowing of leaf blowers, the faint metallic laughter of children on playgrounds—all of it muffled, backgrounded, irrelevant. Ethan operates in a biosphere of one.

At precisely 07:15, his phone vibrates. The number on the screen is not one he can ignore. He closes his eyes, fingers forming a steeple beneath his chin, and answers on the third ring.

“Yes?”

A breath, then, “Ethan. Darling.” His mother. She uses his name as if trying to confirm his existence, testing the syllables. He closes his eyes. Her voice never fails to pull him back to the sunstruck hell of his childhood home, the override heat, the dead weight of parental expectation.

“Mother. It's early.”

“Oh, I know, I know. But I thought—well, I haven't heard from you.”

“I'm quite busy. Mondays are— “

She launches into a monologue about her orchids, about the neighbor's dog, about the latest "incident" at the tennis club. Ethan listens or at least creates the impression of doing so. All his life, his mother has required a witness rather than a participant. The only time she ever demanded his full attention was on those nights when his father came home angry. When she needed a buffer, or a scapegoat.

He offers a neutral, "I'm glad you're keeping active." It is what she wants to hear. It is what he always says.

There is silence and hesitation. "Will you visit soon?"

"Perhaps in the spring. If the schedule allows."

"I miss you, Ethan." She means herself, her loneliness, her own past—never him.

"Goodbye, Mother."

He sets the phone down, fingers numb, and sits perfectly still for a long minute, hands flat on the desk. He allows the rising memory to crest—images of his father's study, the smell of pipe smoke, the cruel arithmetic of affection—and then he represses it, the way he was taught. He hates that she can do this, that anyone can make him feel. He has spent a lifetime perfecting the art of detachment, the careful excision of emotion from his professional and private life alike. He finishes his coffee in a single, scalding swallow, then continues with the new patient stack.

The next three are unremarkable, barely deserving of inpatient care. The fourth name stops him.

Hannah Grace Hall.

There is nothing extraordinary about the name itself. It is a composite of the blandly feminine, a triptych of almost biblical virtue. But something in the way the letters align on the page—neat, exact, not a smudge or correction to be found—fascinates him.

He studies her file. Age: Nineteen. History of severe depression, anxiety, no hospitalization, no prior criminal record, no evidence of substance abuse. She is employed at a local coffee shop. Parental history: mother an addict, father unknown, in and out of foster homes until age twelve when she was placed back with her mother.

He reads the intake notes. She had an incident at work—a breakdown in the restroom, hyperventilation, fainting. When asked about her symptoms, she described "feeling like a ghost in someone else's body." Classic derealization, textbook in its banality, but her phrasing was almost poetic.

She has been referred to Dr. Blackridge at the patient's request.

He pauses, reviewing this fact again. None of his prior patients fit her profile; she is neither rich nor connected, and her insurance coverage is the kind he typically finds reason to decline. He searches his memory, but her name elicits nothing but the ghost of recognition. It is possible she has simply read about him, or seen one of his lectures online. His reputation has begun to spread beyond academic circles, a development he regards as more nuisance than honor.

He closes her file and allows his mind to drift, just for a moment, to the possibilities. There is something about cases like this—blank slates, unsullied by previous, failed interventions—that excites him. In his experience, patients who arrive voluntarily are either truly desperate, or searching for a specific kind of salvation. The latter are more interesting.

He pushes the file aside and leans back in his chair, eyes closed, letting the music wash over him. For a brief, luxurious minute, he contemplates the afternoon's session with Hannah Grace Hall the way a collector contemplates an unopened crate at auction.

There is an art at the first meeting. He will speak little at first, letting the silences elongate until she feels compelled to fill them. He will listen to the phrases she repeats, the anxieties she cannot name, the things she only dares admit to strangers. He will map the terrain of her mind, find the fault lines, and press until something breaks.

He imagines how she will look in the office—whether she will choose the couch or the chair, whether her posture will be defensive or defeatist. He considers the possibility that she will try to seduce him, not sexually (though this happens) but with the pathos of her own suffering. He has always been immune to this sort of ploy, and yet, as he reviews her file once more, he feels an unfamiliar ripple under his skin. Anticipation, perhaps. Or something less easily named.

His thoughts are interrupted by another knock, this one tentative.

“Yes?”

His receptionist pokes her head in. “Dr. Chen asked if you could join him for coffee, just for fifteen minutes. He said he wants to discuss a patient you both share.”

Ethan suppresses a sigh. “Which patient?”

“Mr. Aikman, the one with the gambling disorder.”

He frowns, having already noted in Aikman's file that Dr. Chen's approach was too permissive. Still, protocol dictates collegiality.

“Tell him I'll meet him in the lounge in ten minutes.”

She nods and departs.

He glances once more at Hannah's file, committing every detail to memory, then locks it in his desk. When he rises, his reflection in the glass of the office door startles him—tall, lean, dark hair brushed to a shine, jaw clenched with the effort of perpetual self-control. The blue grey of his eyes looks almost metallic, cold as the March sky beyond the window.

He straightens his tie and leaves the office, footsteps echoing down the corridor with precise, martial regularity. As he passes the reception desk, he notes the faint agitation in the staff, the way their conversations lull as he approaches. Power, he has learned, is best wielded in silence.

The staff lounge is a poorly lit afterthought, dominated by the smell of microwaved leftovers and the detergent the janitorial staff uses on the linoleum. Dr. Chen sits in the corner, tapping at his phone. He is a small man, in his mid-thirties' with a gentle, bookish face and a tendency to fidget with his glasses.

"Ethan," he says as Blackridge enters. "Thank you for making time."

Ethan seats himself, folding his long frame into the chair with fluid grace. "You wanted to discuss Aikman."

"Yes." Chen sets his phone aside, steepling his fingers. "I'm concerned we're not getting through to him. He's been missing appointments, and his wife says he's more secretive than ever."

Ethan allows the silence to stretch. "Compliance is not always an indicator of progress."

Chen smiles, awkward. "True. But I wonder if perhaps a more collaborative approach—"

"I don't collaborate on treatment plans, Marcus," Ethan says gently. "It leads to mixed messaging. You're free to refer Aikman elsewhere if you prefer."

The rebuke is delivered softly, but it lands with terminal weight. Chen's smile falters. "Of course. I only thought—well, your reputation with resistant patients is legendary."

Ethan almost laughs. "That is generous of you."

He stands to leave, but Chen stops him with a hand on his arm. "By the way, I noticed you have a new intake. Hall. She's—" He searches for the word. "—an unusual case. If you want another opinion, I'm always available."

Ethan inclines his head. "Thank you, Marcus. But I think I'll manage."

Blackridge returns to his office, the door drawing shut behind him with a pneumatic finality that resounds in the bones, a hush that is not unlike the moment before a body's plunge from height. He stands for a moment in the vestibule of his own sanctum, not moving, not even breathing, as if the world outside might be kept at bay if he does not acknowledge it.

He crosses the room and eases himself into the chair behind the desk—his throne, his observation post, his altar of self-mastery. He opens Hannah Hall’s file again, this time reading not just for content but for texture: the penmanship, the precise indentation of each letter, the rhythm of her reported symptoms as though they form the verses of some obscure psalm.

Her words jump out at him— “I don’t really know where my mind ends and the world begins, Sometimes I feel like I’m melting, If I try to sleep, the dreams eat me alive.” There is more poetry here than in most patients’ narratives, and for a moment Blackridge wonders if she has done this deliberately, if the composition of her pain is in itself a performance.

The music shifts to a piece he cannot name—something minor-keyed and more menacing than the usual playlist. He allows the music to infiltrate his thoughts. He thinks of the meeting with Dr. Chen, of the faint, pointed collegiality in the man’s tone, and wonders if word of this patient has already begun its migration through the institution.

He knows how the corridors work: how information moves, how the pulse of gossip is more regular than any heartbeat in the building. He wonders what rumors he himself has inspired, what mythologies he has unwittingly authored. It does not matter, he tells himself. He is beyond the reach of office politics, beyond all human entanglements but those he engineers for his own purposes.

He sits perfectly still, the only movement the rise and fall of his chest, the steady ticking of the clock above the door. He reads the intake notes again, searching for the micro-aberrations—the tells, the half-truths, the things unsaid. He annotates the file with a surgeon’s precision, using blue ink to signal the points of greatest interest: the place where Hannah’s narrative diverges from statistical normalcy, the sentence where her mother’s presence flickers in and out with spectral inconsistency, the odd refusal to name her own feelings more than once per paragraph. He sketches a psychological map in the margins: Attachment issues. Possible trauma. Suicidal ideation, but with a performative edge. A blankness at the center, as if the core of her being is not so much wounded as absent.

He leans back, closes his eyes, and tries to imagine her voice. He predicts it will be soft, careful, but with an embedded undertow—something that can cut if you are not listening for it. He rehearses the session in his mind. He will begin by letting her sit in the waiting room a minute past the scheduled hour, enough to unbalance her internal clock. He will watch from the two-way mirror as she picks at the hem of her sleeve or at the split ends of her hair. He will note her posture—whether she folds inward or sprawls, whether she claims space or shrinks from it. When she enters, he will offer her either the couch or the chair; whichever she chooses will tell him precisely what he needs to know.

He wonders, not for the first time, whether he is truly helping anyone. Whether the edifice of professionalism is a mask worn to cover the simple, animal satisfaction he derives from knowing more about a person than they know about themselves. He tells himself that the ends justify the means, that his interventions are more effective than the palliative, hand-wringing therapies peddled by his colleagues. He tells himself that he is a necessity, not a luxury. The institution needs him, even if it fears him.

He sits in the silence that follows, waiting for the hour to arrive, feeling the nervous energy mutating into a cold, metallic hunger. He almost smiles at himself, at the cliché of it all. The predator waiting for the prey. Or perhaps, the scientist waiting for the perfect, unspoiled specimen.