

The Cursed Man

A Novel by
Keith Rommel

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In memory of my father

RAYMOND F. ROMMEL

There is not a day that goes by that I don't think of you. And though time has begun to take away some of my pain, the one thing it can never take away is how deeply I love you.

I dedicate this book to my wife, Jennifer, and our children, Caitlin and Travis, who are my inspiration in everything I do.

To my family and friends: thank you for always being there.

Chapter 1

FINAL STRAW

The past.

Alister stood over his wife's lifeless body. "You've gotten them all. Are you happy?" he said.

She was on the bathroom floor, lying on her back. Her wide and accusing eyes were focused on him. The water that overflowed from the bathtub soaked the jeans and turtleneck sweater she wore, and they clung to her body in a farewell embrace. A razorblade that glimmered in the thick blood that painted the floor around her body held his attention.

"You bastard."

He kicked the razorblade away and fell to his knees with clenched fists.

"Oh, Sharon, please don't look at me like that." He brushed his hand lightly over her eyes to close them. A slash of pain in the pit of his stomach doubled him over, and he vomited next to her body.

"I'm sorry."

He wiped his chin and looked to words scribbled on the wall with a finger dipped in blood: *I saw it.*

He pounded his fists against the tile until flesh ripped and bone bruised. Panting like a wild animal, he glanced around the room.

"I know you're in here! Why don't you show yourself, you coward?"

The spout in the bathtub dripped and drew his attention. He shuddered at what he saw and quickly looked away. "You've crossed the line this time. Do you hear me? You've crossed the line!"

He looked at Sharon and lowered his nose to her hair in search of the familiar scent of her shampoo. He pulled away, surprised by the musty stench of stagnant water mixed with blood.

He wiped his nose with the back of his hand and noticed both vertical and horizontal cuts on her wrists. The lacerations were deep and jagged.

“Oh Sharon, what did it make you do?”

Leaning his back against the toilet, he pulled Sharon’s limp body into his lap. Water and blood that dripped from her clothes soaked his legs, and he focused on her face. Her purple lips were parted ever so slightly and invited one final kiss.

He tongued the cold sting the kiss left on his mouth and rocked her gently. He looked over his shoulder. “You couldn’t leave them alone, could you?”

Laughter, elusive and taunting, sent a shiver up his spine. He clamped his eyes shut and slapped his hands over his ears.

“Stop it! I’ve had enough of you! Do you hear me? Enough of you!”

He scanned the room and slowly took his hands away.

Silence.

He lowered his wife to the floor and straightened her limbs. He neatened her wrinkled clothes and ran taut fingers through her tangled hair. “I know how you need to look presentable.”

He stood and stared at the wall as he walked to the bathtub. Taking a deep breath, he tried to control his shaking limbs and fight the swirl of pain that ripped at his insides.

He looked into the bathwater. His one-year-old daughter was floating facedown. Her naked, plump body had turned a sick shade of purple, and her short blonde hair reached out in all directions as if in a desperate attempt to grab onto something.

“Becca, no!”

He gasped and held the edge of the tub to keep from falling.

“What have you done to them?”

He scooped her out of the water and held her tight. He kissed her icy cheek and squeezed her.

“Blame me for this, not your mother. It wasn’t her doing.”

He wiped her body clean and dry, and then wrapped her in a towel. Then he placed her next to her mother and left the bathroom. He walked out of the house.

Alister lay prone in the path of a distant vehicle that was rapidly approaching. The vision of his dead wife and child seared inside his mind's eye filled him with such agony that he had become desperate to escape it.

"Please," he said as he watched the vehicle approach, "let this end here. I can't take anymore."

It was headed straight for him.

"You know I won't let you die," a voice said. It was so loud and clear that it had to have come from his mind.

"But why?" Alister said.

"Because you invited me inside, and it is my right."

"It was a mistake. And I can't live with what I just saw!"

"It doesn't matter. I won't let you go."

"Why do I concern myself with the things you say? You're a thing from my imagination, and I'm through with you."

The sound of tires screeching pulled Alister from his reverie, and he watched as the tire stopped less than a foot away from his face. Gravel in the tread and wear that exposed the steel belt was easy to see. The smell of burnt rubber disguised the stench of death that soaked his clothing. And the heat that emanated from the engine was like the breath of a savage animal that stood over him.

"Do you still believe I am inside your mind?"

The driver of the vehicle jumped out of his car and ran to Alister's side. "Are you OK?"

Alister closed his eyes and drew a deep breath.

The man hovered over Alister, unsure what to do. "I didn't see you until the last second. I could've killed you!"

Alister felt the dull thump of his own heart. "I can only wish."

“Where are you hurt?”

“Everywhere.”

“You’re covered in blood.” The man’s hands continued to drift over Alister, but he didn’t touch him. “Try not to move.”

“It’s not my blood,” Alister said. He didn’t look at the man’s face because it would be another to haunt his dreams.

“I’m going to call for help.”

“No, don’t.”

The man paused.

“My wife and daughter,” Alister said.

“What?” The man moved his ear close to Alister’s lips.

“They’re dead.” He raised an unsteady hand and extended a finger. “They are over there.”

“Where?” The man looked in the direction Alister was pointing. Houses, one after the other, all looked the same. “Which one?”

“It doesn’t matter. You should go before it’s too late.”

The man stood. “I’m calling the police.” He pulled a phone from his pocket and quickly dialed. He lifted the phone to his ear and grunted.

“No, not again!” Alister said and sat up. He watched the man drop to his knees and clutch his chest. The man flopped forward, and the cell phone clattered across the pavement.

“Nine one one, what’s your emergency?”

Chapter 2

A CONFRONTATION

Present day.

Dr. Anna Lee looked up at the three-story, gothic revival limestone structure. Steel bars covered every window, and two towers, one on either side of the large stairway, gave the impression of a well-guarded fort.

Located in the town of Binghamton, New York, Sunnyside Capable Care Mental Institution was well secluded on a one-hundred-sixty-five-acre site. Surrounded by a thick outlying forest, unoccupied dirt roads stretched to all corners of the compound.

Anna climbed twenty steep weather-stained cement steps leading to a vast air-conditioned lobby. The cool air that caressed her body demanded a groan of satisfaction. She tugged on the collar of her blouse and mopped the sweat from her brow with a handkerchief.

A dozen rows of auditorium-style seating off to her right were vacant, and a flat-screen television mounted on the wall flickered with no volume. Fifteen-foot-high ceilings exaggerated every sound, and a plump woman working on a computer behind a large semicircular desk in the back of the room went about her business without pause.

Anna moved to the desk and set the heavy briefcase she was carrying down. Its small metal feet clacked loudly against the porcelain tile floor. She cleared her throat. "Excuse me."

The woman stopped working and looked at Anna. "Yes?"

"I am Dr. Lee." She motioned to the identification tag clipped to her breast pocket. "I am here to see a patient."

"We have three 335 patients in this facility, doctor. What is the name of the patient you've come to see?"

"Alister Kunkle."

The plump woman paused and held Anna's gaze. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Kunkle isn't allowed visitors." She returned her focus to the computer screen.

"I'm not here to visit the patient. I have come to perform an evaluation of both Mr. Kunkle and the hospital on behalf of Miles Griffen and the American Psychological Association."

The woman sighed and dropped her hands onto the desktop. "I'm sorry you've made the trip here, but there are no exceptions to this rule, and you're interrupting me. I have a lot of work to do, so if you'll excuse me..."

Anna's cheeks reddened. "I don't think you seem to understand. If I don't receive this hospital's full cooperation, I can see to it that the funding is reevaluated."

The woman peered over the computer monitor. "Threats aren't necessary, doctor. It is merely protocol, and I am following the rules."

Anna unclipped her identification tag and dropped it on the keyboard. "And I am following mine. What is your name?"

"Bonnie," she said as she eyed the glossy badge with Anna's photo and job title. She compared the picture to the person that stood before her.

Anna pressed her hands on the desktop and leaned forward. "Well, Bonnie, I suggest you get off of your ass and make the necessary arrangements to get me in to see Mr. Kunkle."

Bonnie didn't question whether the person pictured was the same as the one that stood before her. She was just another state employee that had come to flex their muscles.

"I have been nothing less than courteous to you and you have been nothing less than rude to me," Anna said. "Before I get Miles Griffin on the phone, it would behoove you to get me in to see my patient."

"But there is something you should know about the man you're about to see."

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were qualified to give me a prognosis on the patient," Anna said. "Are you a doctor?"

"No, but—"

"Then get me inside so I can see my patient."

"But I don't think you understand."

Anna removed a cell phone from her pocket and flipped it open. "No, I don't think you understand. Last chance or it's your job."

Bonnie took Anna's identification tag and stood. "I don't have authorization to allow you access, Dr. Lee, but I will get you the director."

"Very well." She flipped her phone closed, picked up her briefcase and pointed at the seats. "I'll wait right over there. Don't keep me too long."

"I won't be gone but a minute."

Bonnie spun on her heels and entered digits on a digital keypad mounted on the wall. A buzzer sounded and she opened a door several feet from her desk. Bonnie exited the room.

Anna sat and placed the briefcase on the seat next to her. She slapped a hand over her mouth to mute a chuckle. Confrontation wasn't her strong suit, but this one she handled like a pro.

Moments later, Bonnie reentered the room with a short, thin man in tow. He wore Coke-bottle glasses, which made his eyes look big, and he had a few random strands of hair on top of an otherwise bald head. He approached Anna with an extended hand and bright smile. "Hello, Dr. Lee. I'm Director Conroy."

He had a voice like a mouse, which matched his looks perfectly.

Anna stood, took the director's hand and pumped it up and down twice. His handshake was firm, and she matched it.

"Thank you for seeing me. It seems there is some confusion. I am here to see Alister Kunkle, and for some reason, I'm being met with resistance."

"Mr. Kunkle. Of course. You know, he is a man with quite a history." The director pulled his hand away and wiped it against his pant leg. "But before we get into that, I would like to change your impression of this facility and start over again. Welcome to Sunnyside." He handed Anna her identification tag.

"Thank you," she said, and she forced a smile. The director barely made eye contact.

"I would like to apologize for Bonnie's insistence that Mr. Kunkle not get any visitors. She was acting on a firm, long-standing directive from me." He clasped his hands together behind his back.

"She was hardly a bother." Anna reattached her identification tag and picked up her briefcase. "But I insist I complete the job I was sent here to do. Dr. Miles Griffen himself assigned me to this patient, and I would like to see him immediately."

The director shifted, peered over the thick rim of his glasses, drew close to Anna and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Before you do that, there is something I'd like to talk to you about. How about we go to my office, where we can have some privacy?"

“I don’t think...” The aura of secrecy that surrounded the director and the unquestioned obedience of his secretary had an element of intrigue. “Sure, after you.”

She followed the director through a narrow hallway and into a large, well-lit office. A row of tall filing cabinets in the corner of the room were like obedient soldiers standing guard. White walls and a natural wooden floor gave the room a clean feel. A large Bombay desk in the middle of the room was perfectly centered on a plush, hand woven rug. A golden nameplate with his job title occupied the otherwise empty desktop, and plaques of educational accomplishments hung on the wall. A small oscillating fan positioned atop an upside down garbage can worked the room quietly, circulating the smell of fresh paint.

The director sat at his desk, and he looked lost behind its size. Anna sat in an uncomfortably deep upholstered armchair before him and turned askew. She adjusted her skirt to make sure she was covered and crossed her legs.

“The architecture here is stunning,” Anna said.

The director scanned his office. “It makes quite an impression, I know.” He pursed his lips. “This facility is totally self-sufficient. Dining, a workshop, a chapel, a heating plant, a library, cisterns, a morgue and a cemetery are all on site.”

Anna raised a brow. “The overhead must be tremendous.”

The director smiled. “The meaning behind that statement isn’t lost on me, Dr. Lee. You need not threaten me with funding. You will get the cooperation you seek.”

Anna showed her agreement with a subtle nod.

“But first I would like to know if you’ve been given the history on Mr. Kunkle.”

Anna smiled. “I assure you I’ve done my homework.” She patted her briefcase. “Hours upon hours worth. Not to sound premature, but I’m certain he’s plagued by severe delusions. It is my opinion that if I were to present him with small doses of the truth, he may respond.”

“I appreciate your enthusiasm, doctor, but if it were that simple to diagnose what troubles him, I wouldn’t have to forbid him from having guests.”

“Forbid?” Anna slid to the edge of the seat. “How do you forbid a mental patient from having visits from doctors?”

The director removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. Without the magnification, they were actually small and beady. “When I asked you if you had done your homework, I was specifically asking you about your knowledge surrounding the history of Mr. Kunkle. Do you know what secrets it hides?”

“With all due respect, director, I would like an explanation of what you said to me. What do you mean you forbade him from having guests?”

He scoffed.

Arrogant prick. “Is there a problem?” Anna said.

“Problem? No. Maybe a misunderstanding is all.” He breathed on his glasses and polished them with a tissue. “My forbidding was put in place for the safety of my people and any unsuspecting guest that might believe his disease is treatable.”

“I’m curious to know. Is he violent or dangerous?”

The director put on his glasses. “No, he’s not violent. In fact, the man is as passive and gentle as a young child. But dangerous...” He interlaced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. “There are ways for someone to be a danger to others by the company they keep.”

“You’re contradicting yourself. How can he keep dangerous company if he isn’t allowed visitors?”

“That is a very insightful question, doctor, but if you knew of his past, everything I’ve said would make perfect sense.”

The director stared at Anna and she stared back.

“You should know that this arrangement was something Mr. Kunkle requested because he identified the need,” the director said. “And it is something the board of directors and myself were happy to conform to. To this day it has proved the only effective action against the thing that plagues him.”

“I don’t believe what I’m hearing,” Anna said. “He’s being treated as if he were some sort of alien with an unknown disease.”

The director rested his forearms on the desktop and leaned forward. “I suggest you listen closely and consider everything I’m going to tell you because it could save your life.”

Anna sat back and immersed herself in a moment of silence. “For the record, I am appalled by the treatment this patient has received.”

“He is cared for.”

“I will be including this in the report due by the end of my visit, and the duration of my stay depends upon my findings.”

“For the record, Dr. Lee, your report will be ignored by your superiors. They will be destroyed and false documents will be filed in their place.”

Anna removed her cell phone from her pocket and placed it on the edge of his desk. "Perhaps we should test that theory, being it's for the record."

The director sat back. "No, that won't be necessary."

She put her phone away. "When was the last time Alister had any human interaction?"

The director pressed his fingertips together. "Many years."

"Years?"

"Years." His face glowed with satisfaction. "And it has kept people alive."

"You're telling me no one has spoken to him in several years?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying." He turned in his chair and looked at the diplomas hanging on the wall. "You know, I met a young doctor very much like yourself some years back. He was full of energy and looking to make a difference. I remember him sitting across from me just like you are today. He had that same hungry look as you do. He was listening to the story I'm about to tell you. And I was reluctant to give him any details, as I am with you, because I feared the words I said would be ignored. Of course, he dismissed what I said with a laugh and demanded to see Mr. Kunkle. I thought he was foolish for thinking my story was a work of fiction, and I could tell he thought I was as nutty as the patients I cared for."

Anna groaned.

"I'm sorry if my being blunt offends you, but everything I'm telling you and trying to protect you from is the truth," the director said. "An impossible truth that is true."

"I don't need protecting."

"No, and neither did he. I allowed this doctor to see Mr. Kunkle without another word of protest or caution. The next day he didn't show up for work." He shook his head. "I knew something bad had happened to him, and I knew it was because he had ignored my warning and went ahead and met with Mr. Kunkle."

Anna rolled her eyes. "This is ridiculous!"

"You can be smug if you want to be, doctor, but the man was found dead. He'd been sitting at the table inside his home eating dinner and ended up facedown in his plate of food. It is said that he died of fright."

Anna reared. "Fright? What nonsense."

The director threw his hands up. "You don't know what you're getting yourself into."

“Then why don’t you give me something tangible rather than campfire tales with no substance? I want to understand why you feel it is your job to give Alister less than what he deserves.”

“I can assure you Alister is cared for,” the director said. “The attention he is given is special. Yes, we are limited in what we can do for him because anyone that interacts with him meets a rather swift and unfortunate end.”

Anna pictured the director pulling his educational certificates out of a crackerjack box. “This doctor you say died from fright probably had a heart attack. People die from heart attacks every day.”

“That man spent his day with Alister and was warned about what might happen to him.”

“Like me?”

“Just like you. And it happened.”

“Oh, I understand now. Why don’t we lock him up and throw away the key? Certainly this man is beyond help.”

“If there were only one instance of this, I could agree with what you’re saying. But more than a hundred instances have occurred in which Mr. Kunkle has had direct contact with people right before they die. And to make matters worse, they die only hours after their interaction with him.”

The director rummaged through his desk and pulled out a baby wipe. He scrubbed his hands.

“Look,” the director said, “the series of tragedies that has surrounded Mr. Kunkle is something that deserves attention, caution and action that may not be popular with everyone. I understand and accept that. But the people that died were from different walks of life. They ranged from infants to the elderly, from civilians to police officers. Whatever evil surrounds Mr. Kunkle is angry and jealous and is indisposed to compromise or mercy.”

Anna could barely keep a straight face. “Well, director, that’s quite the story you’ve told me. I’m sorry to say this sounds like the fine premise of a Hollywood movie and not the tragic life of a living, breathing human being. I’ve only met two people that work here so far, and there seems to be a rooted belief in this nonsense. I’d be lying if I didn’t tell you it concerns me.”

The director furrowed his brow. “I’m going to give you a little advice that may save your life, doctor. Go back to your hotel room, write a dummy report on your findings with Mr. Kunkle and the extraordinary care he is being given here at Sunnyside and take a few weeks off.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing.”

"I'll vouch for your passionate work ethics and the spectacular care you gave your patient. You file your report and go on to your next patient knowing the decision you made saved your life."

"What you're telling me to do is not only against the law but also against my moral standings. I would also like to remind you that everything we discuss is going to be in my report."

"And I've already told you that I'm not worried about your report. No matter what you write, it will end up saying what they need it to say. Is it worth risking your life for that?"

"I somehow doubt what you say to be the truth."

The director opened the lowest file drawer with a key he kept in his pocket and removed a thick book with a cracked cover and bent spine. Ripped, yellowed pages hung out of the binding. He dropped it on the desktop and slid it toward Anna.

"What's this?" The musty stench of the pages filled her nostrils.

The director raised an intriguing brow. "That is my last chance to get through to you."

Anna glanced at the book. "This is absurd."

"Can't you put your skepticism to the side even for a moment?" The director allowed the question to hang in the air. "That book holds bits and pieces of Alister's unabridged history. It won't hurt you to have a look. Go ahead—amuse me."

Anna pulled the book close with a sigh and looked inside its cover. The pages were stiff to the touch, and several black and white photos sat freely inside the cover. She flipped through them. One photo after another showed the inside of a filthy house. Piles of garbage were stacked as high as three feet and narrow paths were routed through them. Bugs covered discarded things and maggots were in abundance. She flipped the picture over and "Kunkle/Living Room" was written with a ballpoint pen.

The next item was a letter addressed to anyone that would heed a warning. The handwritten letters were jagged and scribbled down in haste. The words spoke of death and suffering and the need to be left alone. Alister's signature finalized the correspondence.

She turned the page and a newspaper clipping fell out. She read the story of Alister's wife drowning their daughter before killing herself.

The next page consisted of several small articles that told of fallen police officers and dead civilians. All the causes of death, according to the articles' headings, were mysterious in nature but had one thing in common: Alister. They called him a cursed man.

Anna turned another page and found a neatly folded and pressed brown paper bag stuffed between two pages. She removed the bag and opened it. Written in large black letters were the poorly scribbled words, "I'll only talk to you."

"Okay, I've seen enough," Anna said, and she folded the bag. She dropped it between the pages she had pulled it from. "I won't tell you what I'm thinking because I am a professional and a lady. I want to see the patient and I want to see him now." Anna stood. "I expect all necessary resources will be in place and at my disposal without delay."

The director closed the book and put it away. "I hate to sound so glum, Dr. Lee, but if you do that, you're as good as dead. I've mourned the death of many since I've taken responsibility of Mr. Kunkle. You couldn't imagine what that can do to a man's soul."

"One more second of delay on your part will have me on the phone with my boss. I'm sure he'd love to discuss what I've found today. What do you think, two, three hours tops before they've relieved you of your duty? Make your move. What's it going to be?"

The director picked up the phone and turned away from Anna. "Bonnie, I'd like you to send Michael in. Let him know he'll be escorting Dr. Lee to see Mr. Kunkle."

The director twirled the phone cord around his finger and nodded. "Yes, I made her aware of the circumstances. But it seems as though she has made her decision, and she insists on seeing him."