



Death
Grip

QUICKREADS

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“**W**ill you just *look* at this awful place!” Katie wailed as she slammed on the brakes.

Bernie Polansky shook his head in disgust as he climbed out of the car. What was *with* this girl? Katie O’Neal was far too emotional for his taste.

She had stopped the car just a few inches short of a heavy iron gate. The sign that arched high over the gate read: *Oak Haven Hospital*.

Katie climbed out of the car and glanced around. “This place looks like the end of the world!” She shivered. “It’s hard to believe it used to be a hospital. Seems

more like a prison!”

Bernie didn't say so, but he had to agree. A dense forest bordered each side of the road. A high fence topped with barbed wire extended deep into the woods. Anyone trying to leave the hospital grounds without permission would have had a *very* hard time.

“Do you have the key?” Bernie asked. When Katie looked up, he pointed to the heavy chain and padlock on the gate.

Katie fished a key from her jeans pocket and handed it to Bernie. “Why would anyone want to keep the gate locked?” she wondered aloud. “My supervisor said this old hospital has been empty for more than 50 years.”

Bernie didn't answer. The lock was a little rusty, and the key stuck. He jiggled it gently.

“Need help?” Katie asked as she crowded in next to him and reached out for the key.

Bernie glanced at her impatiently. “You may not believe this,” he said, “but I can actually unlock a padlock! I'm not as helpless as you seem to think.”

Katie's cheeks turned red. "I didn't mean—" she started to say.

Bernie turned away and went back to work. Just a few seconds later, the rusty padlock snapped open.

Katie got in the car and drove through the iron gate. She glanced at her watch as she waited for Bernie to close the gate and join her. When he climbed in, she impatiently gunned the engine and the car jerked forward.

Bernie glanced sideways at his work partner. Her bad mood was written all over her face. He gritted his teeth. This was *not* going to be a fun day!

Katie and Bernie worked for a maintenance company. The company did all kinds of jobs—from cleaning office buildings to making minor repairs. Bernie had only been hired two weeks ago. This was the first time he and Katie had been paired up. Right now, he was hoping it would be the last!



Katie knew that Bernie had epilepsy—a condition that can cause brief disturbances in the brain’s electrical functions. The trouble was, she didn’t know much about the disorder. Bernie could tell she was scared of him.

Their supervisor had explained to Katie that Bernie would be fine. He controlled his condition with medication. But Katie was nervous. She was afraid that Bernie would have a seizure while they were working together.

Bernie had run into people like Katie all his life. Once they found out he had epilepsy, they treated him differently. He was tired of having to prove himself.

“Oh, wow! Look at that!” Katie said as she drove out of the woods. Just ahead lay acres of rolling green lawns studded with large oaks and pines.

The road wound in front of a huge, three-story white building. “Oak Haven

Hospital,” Katie said. “You know, until yesterday, I’d never heard of this place.”

“You’re kidding!” Bernie gazed at her in amazement. “Oak Haven played a big part in the history of the city. This hospital is over 100 years old.”

Katie glanced at Bernie in surprise. “How do you know?”

Bernie grinned. “I love history,” he told her. He studied the stately white building. “There are a lot of interesting stories about this place,” he went on. “This hospital was one of the few that took in patients with highly contagious diseases like cholera and typhoid. That was long before modern medicine.”

“Maybe that’s why the fence is so high,” Katie said, shifting the car to a lower gear. “They wanted to make sure the patients stayed inside.”

She drove slowly by the hospital. “The city plans to turn this place into a park and museum,” Katie went on. “City workers have already cleaned out the hospital. They’re going to start restoring it soon. We’re here

to clean out a little cottage. It's supposed to be somewhere on the grounds behind the hospital."

Bernie frowned. "Why didn't the city people clean out the cottage, too?"

Katie shrugged. "Who knows? But the pay is good, so don't complain."

Without knowing why, Bernie got the feeling that there was something *wrong* with the cottage.



They pulled up in front of the cottage. "This little place looks like something out of a Disney movie," Bernie said. Then Katie parked the car, and they began to unload their cleaning equipment.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, handing Bernie a broom.

"Look at it," Bernie said. "What a great setting."

Katie stopped what she was doing and studied the cottage. It needed fresh paint, but there was something very charming about

the place. A neat stone path wound its way to the front door. The yard was shaded by a big oak tree, and the front windows were decorated with flower boxes.

“It’s picture perfect. There’s even a white picket fence,” Bernie said.

But inside the cottage, the feeling was very different. Perhaps it was because the oak tree cut off sunlight. Or it could have been the dismal shade of gray paint on the walls. Maybe it was just the dead air inside.

Almost at once Katie felt a chill. “It must be 20 degrees colder in here than it is outside,” she said.

Bernie raised a questioning eyebrow. “Huh? I’m not a bit cold. Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

Katie glared at him. “Do you suppose we could get some heat in here?” She pointed to the small fireplace.

Bernie put down his load of cleaning supplies and lit the log that was there. Katie shivered as she moved closer to it.

“I’m going to take a look at the rest of

the cottage,” Bernie said, starting down the tiny hall.

“I’m right behind you,” Katie said. Bernie glanced over his shoulder at her. Was it his imagination, or did her voice sound anxious?

“I wonder who lived here,” Bernie said as they peered into the small bedroom at the back.

“Maybe a gardener,” Katie said.

Bernie pointed at the frilly lace curtains and the single cot.

“Maybe a nurse.” Katie shrugged and blew on her hands.

Bernie opened the closet and let out a low whistle. “Look at this, O’Neal!” He pulled out a dust-covered dress. It looked like a costume from a very old black-and-white movie. “Wow! This little number must be over 70 years old!”

He shook his head in amazement. “And get a load of the furniture! Have you noticed how *old* it is? These pieces may not look like much, but I’d swear that half of them are genuine antiques.”

He turned around to see if Katie was

listening. She had a funny look on her face. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Haven’t you noticed the odor?” Katie asked. “It smells *awful* in here.”

Bernie sniffed, then shook his head. “The air is stuffy, that’s all,” he said. “I’ll open a window.”

“No!” Katie snapped. “I’m already too cold.” She rubbed her arms. “Aren’t there any other fireplaces in here?”

“You’ll warm up soon enough when you get down to work,” Bernie told her. “Where do we start?”

“The parlor. Where else?” Katie said.

Bernie stared at her in surprise. “You’re joking. The *what?*”

“I said let’s start in the front room.” Irritated, Katie had raised her voice as if she were talking to a deaf person.

“No, you didn’t,” Bernie said. “You called it the *parlor*.”

Katie frowned at him. “I did not! You’re nuts. Or maybe you’re hearing things. Is that because you have—”