

STEPHEN KING ELEVATION

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CHAPTER I

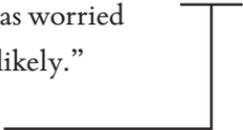
LOSING WEIGHT

SCOTT CAREY KNOCKED ON the door of the Ellis condo unit, and Bob Ellis (everyone in Highland Acres still called him Doctor Bob, although he was five years retired) let him in. “Well, Scott, here you are. Ten on the dot. Now what can I do for you?”

Scott was a big man, six-feet-four in his stocking feet, with a bit of a belly growing in front. “I’m not sure. Probably nothing, but . . . I have a problem. I hope not a big one, but it might be.”

“One you don’t want to talk to your regular doctor about?” Ellis was seventy-four, with thinning silver hair and a small limp that didn’t slow him down much on the tennis court. Which was where he and Scott had met, and become friends. Not close friends, maybe, but friends, sure enough.

“Oh, I went,” Scott said, “and got a checkup. Which was overdue. Bloodwork, urine, prostate, the whole nine yards. Everything checked out. Cholesterol a little high, but still in the normal range. It was diabetes I was worried about. WebMD suggested that was the most likely.”



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Until he knew about the clothes, that was. The thing with the clothes wasn't on any website, medical or otherwise. It certainly had nothing to do with diabetes.

Ellis led him into the living room, where a big bay window overlooked the fourteenth green of the Castle Rock gated community where he and his wife now lived. Doctor Bob played the occasional round, but mostly stuck to tennis. It was Ellis's wife who enjoyed golf, and Scott suspected that was the reason they were living here, when they weren't spending winters in a similar sports-oriented development in Florida.

Ellis said, "If you're looking for Myra, she's at her Methodist Women's group. I think that's right, although it might be one of her town committees. Tomorrow she's off to Portland for a meeting of the New England Mycological Society. That woman hops around like a hen on a hot griddle. Take off your coat, sit down, and tell me what's on your mind."

Although it was early October and not particularly cold, Scott was wearing a North Face parka. When he took it off and laid it beside him on the sofa, the pockets jingled.

"Would you like coffee? Tea? I think there's a breakfast pastry, if—"

"I'm losing weight," Scott said abruptly. "That's what's on my mind. It's sort of funny, you know. I used

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to steer clear of the bathroom scale, because these last ten years or so, I haven't been crazy about the news I got from it. Now I'm on it first thing every morning."

Ellis nodded. "I see."

No reason for *him* to avoid the bathroom scale, Scott thought; the man was what his grandmother would have called a stuffed string. He'd probably live another twenty years, if a wild card didn't come out of the deck. Maybe even make the century.

"I certainly understand the scale-avoidance syndrome, saw it all the time when I was practicing. I also saw the opposite, compulsive weighing. Usually in bulimics and anorexics. You hardly look like one of those." He leaned forward, hands clasped between his skinny thighs. "You *do* understand that I'm retired, don't you? I can advise, but I can't prescribe. And my advice will probably be for you to go back to your regular doctor, and make a full disclosure."

Scott smiled. "I suspect my doc would want me in the hospital for tests right away, and last month I landed a big job, designing interlocking websites for a department store chain. I won't go into details, but it's a plum. I was very fortunate to get the gig. It's a large step up for me, and I can do it without moving out of Castle Rock. That's the beauty of the computer age."

"But you can't work if you fall ill," Ellis said. "You're

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a smart guy, Scott, and I'm sure you know that weight-loss isn't just a marker for diabetes, it's a marker for cancer. Among other things. How much weight are we talking about?"

"Twenty-eight pounds." Scott looked out the window and observed white golf carts moving over green grass beneath a blue sky. As a photograph, it would have looked good on the Highland Acres website. He was sure they had one—everyone did these days, even roadside stands selling corn and apples had websites—but he hadn't created it. He had moved on to bigger things. "So far."

Bob Ellis grinned, showing teeth that were still his own. "That's a fair amount, all right, but my guess is you could stand to lose it. You move very well on the tennis court for a big man, and you put in your time on the machines in the health club, but carrying too many pounds puts a strain not just on the heart but the whole kit and caboodle. As I'm sure you know. From WebMD." He rolled his eyes at this, and Scott smiled. "What are you now?"

"Guess," Scott said.

Bob laughed. "What do you think this is, the county fair? I'm fresh out of Kewpie dolls."

"You were in general practice for what, thirty-five years?"

"Forty-two."

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“So don’t be modest, you’ve weighed thousands of patients thousands of times.” Scott stood up, a tall man with a big frame wearing jeans, a flannel shirt, and scuffed-up Georgia Giants. He looked more like a woodsman or a horse-wrangler than a web designer. “Guess my weight. We’ll get to my fate later.”

Doctor Bob cast the eye of a professional up and down Scott Carey’s seventy-six inches—more like seventy-eight, in the boots. He paid particular attention to the curve of belly over the belt, and the long thigh muscles built up by leg-presses and hack squats on machines Doctor Bob now avoided. “Unbutton your shirt and hold it open.”

Scott did this, revealing a gray tee with UNIVERSITY OF MAINE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT on the front. Bob saw a broad chest, muscular, but developing those adipose deposits wiseass kids liked to call man-tits.

“I’m going to say . . .” Ellis paused, interested in the challenge now. “I’m going to say 235. Maybe 240. Which means you must have been up around 270 before you started to lose. I must say you carried it well on the tennis court. That much I wouldn’t have guessed.”

Scott remembered how happy he had been when he’d finally mustered the courage to get on the scale earlier this month. Delighted, actually. The steady rate of the weight-loss since then was worrisome, yes, but only a

little. It was the clothes thing that had changed worry to fright. You didn't need WebMD to tell you that the clothes thing was more than strange; it was fucking outré.

Outside, a golf cart trundled past. In it were two middle-aged men, one in pink pants, one in green, both overweight. Scott thought they would have done themselves some good by ditching the cart and walking their round, instead.

"Scott?" Doctor Bob said. "Are you there, or did I lose you?"

"I'm here," Scott said. "The last time we played tennis, I *did* go 240. I know, because that was when I finally got on the scale. I decided the time had come to drop a few pounds. I was starting to get all out of breath by the third set. But as of this morning, I weigh 212."

He sat down again next to his parka (which gave another jingle). Bob eyed him carefully. "You don't look like 212 to me, Scott. Pardon me for saying, but you look quite a bit heavier than that."

"But healthy?"

"Yes."

"Not sick."

"No. Not to look at you, anyway, but—"

"Have you got a scale? I bet you do. Let's check it out."

Doctor Bob considered him for a moment, wonder-

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ing if Scott's actual problem might be in the gray matter above his eyebrows. In his experience, it was mostly women who tended to be neurotic about their weight, but it happened with men, too. "All right, let's do that. Follow me."

Bob led him into a study lined with bookshelves. There was a framed anatomy chart on one wall and a line of diplomas on another. Scott was staring at the paperweight between Ellis's computer and his printer. Bob followed his gaze and laughed. He picked the skull up off the desk and tossed it to Scott.

"Plastic rather than bone, so don't worry about dropping it. A gift from my eldest grandson. He's thirteen, which I think of as the Age of Tasteless Gifts. Step over here, and let's see what we've got."

In the corner was a gantry-like scale upon which two weights, one big and one little, could be moved until the steel beam balanced. Ellis gave it a pat. "The only things I kept when I closed my office downtown were the anatomy chart on the wall and this. It's a Seca, the finest medical scale ever made. A gift from my wife, many years ago, and believe me when I say no one ever accused *her* of being tasteless. Or cheap."

"Is it accurate?"

"Let's just say if I weighed a twenty-five-pound bag of flour on it, and the scale said it weighed twenty-four,

I'd go back to Hannaford's and demand a refund. You should take off your boots if you want something close to a true weight. And why did you bring your coat?"

"You'll see." Scott didn't take off his boots but put the parka on instead, to the tune of more jingling from the pockets. Now not just fully dressed but dressed for the outside on a day much colder than this one, he stepped on the scale. "Let 'er rip."

In order to allow for the boots and the coat, Bob ran the counterweight all the way to 250, then worked backward, first sliding the weight, then nudging it along. The needle of the balance bar remained grounded at 240, and 230, and 220, which Doctor Bob would have thought impossible. Never mind the coat and boots; Scott Carey simply looked heavier than that. He could have been off in his estimate by a few pounds, but he had weighed too many overweight men and women to be *this* far off.

The bar balanced at 212 pounds.

"I'll be dipped in pitch," Doctor Bob said. "I need to have this thing recalibrated."

"Don't think so," Scott said. He stepped off the scale and put his hands in his coat pockets. From each, he took a fistful of quarters. "Been saving these in an antique chamber pot for years. By the time Nora left, it was almost full. I must have five pounds of metal in each pocket, maybe more."

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Ellis said nothing. He was speechless.

“Now do you see why I didn’t want to go to Dr. Adams?” Scott let the coins slide back into his coat pockets with another jolly jingle.

Ellis found his voice. “Let me be sure I have this right—you’re getting the same weight at home?”

“To the pound. My scale’s an Ozeri step-on, maybe not as good as this baby, but I’ve tested it and it’s accurate. Now watch this. I usually like a little bump-and-grind music when I strip, but since we’ve undressed together in the club locker room, I guess I can do without it.”

Scott took off his parka and hung it on the back of a chair. Then, balancing with first one hand and then the other on Doctor Bob’s desk, he took off his boots. Next came the flannel shirt. He unbuckled his belt, stepped out of his jeans, and stood there in his boxers, tee-shirt, and socks.

“I could shuck these as well,” he said, “but I think I’ve taken off enough weight to make the point. Because, see, this is what scared me. The thing about the clothes. It’s why I wanted to talk to a friend who could keep his mouth shut instead of my regular doc.” He pointed to the clothes and boots on the floor, then at the parka with its sagging pockets. “How much would you say all that stuff weighs?”

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“With the coins? At least fourteen pounds. Possibly as much as eighteen. Do you want to weigh them?”

“No,” Scott said.

He got back on the scale. There was no need to move the weights. The beam balanced at 212 pounds.

Scott dressed and they went back to the living room. Doctor Bob poured them each a tiny knock of Woodford Reserve, and although it was only ten in the morning, Scott did not refuse. He took his down in a single swallow, and the whiskey lit a comforting fire in his stomach. Ellis took two delicate birdy sips, as if testing the quality, then tossed off the rest. “It’s impossible, you know,” he said as he put the empty glass on an endtable.

Scott nodded. “Another reason I didn’t want to talk to Dr. Adams.”

“Because it would be in the system,” Ellis said. “A matter of record. And yes, he’d have insisted you undergo tests in order to find out exactly what’s going on with you.”

Although he didn’t say so, Scott thought *insisted* was too mild. In Dr. Adams’s consulting room, the phrase that had popped into his head was *taken into custody*. That was when he’d decided to keep his mouth shut and talk to his retired medical friend instead.

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“You *look* 240,” Ellis said. “Is that how you feel?”

“Not exactly. I felt a little . . . mmm . . . *ploddy* when I actually did weigh 240. I guess that’s not a real word, but it’s the best I can do.”

“I think it’s a good word,” Ellis said, “whether it’s in the dictionary or not.”

“It wasn’t just being overweight, although I knew I was. It was that, and age, and . . .”

“The divorce?” Ellis asked it gently, in his most Doctor Bobly way.

Scott sighed. “Sure, that too. It’s cast a shadow over my life. It’s better now, *I’m* better, but it’s still there. Can’t lie about that. Physically, though, I never felt bad, still work out a little three times a week, never got out of breath until the third set, but just . . . you know, ploddy. Now I don’t, or at least not so much.”

“More energy.”

Scott considered, then shook his head. “Not exactly. It’s more like the energy I have goes further.”

“No lethargy? No fatigue?”

“No.”

“No loss of appetite?”

“I eat like a horse.”

“One more question, and you’ll pardon me, but I have to ask.”

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“Ask away. Anything.”

“There’s no way this is a practical joke, right? Pulling the leg of the old retired sawbones?”

“Absolutely not,” Scott said. “I guess I don’t have to ask if you’ve ever seen a similar case, but have you ever read about one?”

Ellis shook his head. “Like you, it’s the clothes that I keep coming back to. And the quarters in your coat pockets.”

Join the club, Scott thought.

“No one weighs the same naked as they do dressed. It’s as much a given as gravity.”

“Are there medical websites you can go on to see if there are any other cases like mine? Even ones that are sort of similar?”

“I can and will, but I can tell you now there won’t be.” Ellis hesitated. “This isn’t just outside my experience, I’d say it’s outside *human* experience. Hell, I want to say it’s impossible. If, that is, your scale and mine weigh true, and I have no reason to believe otherwise. What happened to you, Scott? What was the genesis? Did you . . . I don’t know, get irradiated by something? Maybe get a lungful of some off-brand bug-spray? Think.”

“I *have* thought. So far as I can tell, there’s nothing. But one thing’s for sure, I feel better having talked to

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you. Not just sitting on it.” Scott stood up and grabbed his jacket.

“Where are you going?”

“Home. I’ve got those websites to work on. It’s a big deal. Although I have to tell you, it doesn’t seem quite as big as it did.”

Ellis walked with him to the door. “You say you’ve noted a steady weight-loss. Slow but steady.”

“That’s right. A pound or so a day.”

“No matter how much you eat.”

“Yes,” Scott said. “And what if it continues?”

“It won’t.”

“How can you be sure? If it’s outside of human experience?”

To this Doctor Bob had no answer.

“Keep your mouth shut about this, Bob. Please.”

“I will if you promise to keep me informed. I’m concerned.”

“That I can do.”

On the stoop, they stood side by side, looking at the day. It was a nice one. Foliage was nearing peak, and the hills were burning with color. “Moving from the sublime to the ridiculous,” Doctor Bob said, “how are you doing with the restaurant ladies up the street from you? Heard you were having some problems there.”

Scott didn’t bother asking Ellis where he had heard

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this; Castle Rock was a small town, and word got around. It got around faster, he supposed, when a retired doctor's wife was on all sorts of town and church committees. "If Ms. McComb and Ms. Donaldson heard you calling them ladies, you'd be in their black books. And given my current problem, they're not even on my radar."