

On Saturday morning, as he stepped out of the elevator on his way to the grocery store—even without much appetite, a man still had to eat—a short, slightly disheveled young man came toward him, bounding with the eager energy of a puppy spotting its favorite person.

“Mr. Gray! Mr. Gray!”

George stopped. How the hell did this boy know his name? Nobody in The Tower knew him; he’d made sure of that. Since moving to The Tower eight months ago, he’d spent nearly all his time in his apartment, avoiding interaction when he ventured out and steering clear of common areas.

The young man caught up.

“Hello! You’re Mr. Gray, right?”

“I am. How do you know my name?”

“I’m Matthew, the new activity coordinator.” He thrust out a hand. George offered a firm, practiced handshake, muscle memory from a lifetime of boardrooms.

“I’ve met everyone else in The Tower but you. That’s how I know. You’re in 914, right?”

“Yes.”

“I knocked on your door a few times but got no response.”

George remembered. He hadn’t wanted to open the damn door.

“I was probably away when you came.”

“That’s what I figured. I just wanted to introduce myself. I was really looking forward to meeting you.”

The kid actually looked starstruck.

"I don't participate in activities, so you won't see much of me. Good luck with your new job, young man." George walked on.

"Why not?" Matthew said, trotting to keep up.

"That's how I like it. Goodbye." George pushed open the exit door.

A gust of wind tossed his hair, exposing every bald spot. Other tenants passed, and heat crept up his face as he tried, uselessly, to smooth his hair down.

What an annoying kid, he thought, fighting the wind. The Tower must be desperate, hiring someone barely out of childhood to entertain the residents.

Later that afternoon, George was half-watching TV, deep in his mental graveyard again, when someone knocked. Then knocked again, more insistently. Half pleased, half annoyed by the interruption, he made an exception and answered.

The kid again. He looked so high, George decided, he had to be on something. Probably whatever kids called pep pills nowadays.

"Hello again, Mr. Gray. Remember me? I'm Matthew, the activity—"

"Yes, the activity coordinator. What can I do for you?"

"I found these gloves right after I met you this morning. Are they yours?"

"No. They're not mine."

"I thought not. Just wanted to make sure." He stayed there smiling awkwardly at George for a few breaths, then lifted the small plant he had brought with him. "This is for you."

George blinked, surprised, then took the pot.

"Do you mind if I come in?"

What kind of manners were those? You don't invite yourself in, especially when you're not being invited. The kid clearly couldn't read nonverbal cues and had never attended an etiquette class. Probably never heard of one.

"There's something I'd love to discuss, and I could really use your input." Matthew stood there, shifting from foot to foot. "You seem like a man who oversaw a lot of projects. I'm just starting here, and I'd really appreciate your advice. If you have time."

Time certainly wasn't a problem. And the kid, at least, saw him as capable, not like the useless, crumpled old fogey his children and ex-boss made of him.

"It'll only take a few minutes," Matthew added, hoping to win his approval.

George was at a low point, but not low enough to ignore ethics. If a young man had the humility to admit inexperience and sought guidance from someone who'd walked the path, the least he could do was give him a few minutes. He stepped back and gestured him in.

"Don't know if I can be useful to you, son," George said, leading the way to the living room. "Thanks for the plant." Matthew closed the door and hurried close on his heels. "What do you want my advice on?"