

WHITE CLOUD

White Cloud

A SURREAL
PSYCHOLOGICAL
THRILLER

Joy Slaughter



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*With a respectful nod to
Albert, Franz, Viktor, Simone, and Jean-Paul.
Let's have coffee. My dime.*

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1

John's eyes bulged as he yelled. With every new insult he shouted, his skin darkened to a deeper shade of red, which soon became scarlet before morphing into a shiny kind of burgundy with tinges of indigo around his ears. He ripped his ball cap from his head, and a few wisps of brassy blond hair stood straight up before sagging over to lie askew across his nearly bald head. "You're the worst damn medic I've ever seen!"

Ella cringed, cramming her hands deeper into her pockets. She stared at the floor as he shouted about something she had messed up. Probably the same shortcoming as last week, judging from his volume. He was loud. It was a third-time shout. Third-time shouts were the worst. Third-time shouts formed the decibel peak of the transgression continuum and were usually garnished with sweeping gestures of the arms and hands and cussing that propelled spittle into the air. By her fourth repeat of a mistake, the shouter quieted to grumbles and resorted to the next step in the punishment algorithm, which usually involved paperwork of some kind.

Verbal warnings are only real when they arrive in written form.

She nodded in feigned understanding at the appropriate time. This was elemental for a convincing display of contrition, and she was good at contrition, having done so much of it. If she excelled at anything—and that was doubtful—it was extricating herself from trouble. Rolling her shoulders forward and shrinking into her pockets formed only the foundation of her response. Her gaze, which staggered back and forth from the floor to the yeller's face, right between the eyes, did the heavy work. Wide-open puppy eyes combined with a furrowed forehead had to be used sparingly, like cayenne pepper on sautéed vegetables and rice. Too much, and you'd get spit out into a napkin. Tears were reserved for men over forty or last ditch efforts. She'd play the little girl card if she had to, but that was distasteful for everyone involved.

John ramped up to yet another level. Ella was truly impressed by his devotion. The veins in his neck distended, which was a symptom of left-sided heart failure. Or right-sided heart failure. Possibly congestive heart failure. She furrowed her brow and tipped her head. She should probably know this. Maybe. None of it was good in a man his age and would only increase the sparsity under his cap.

"I'd fire your ass, but no one else wants our shit pay! As great as it'd be, I can't run this ambulance alone. Instead, I have to run with a fucking moron for 24 fucking hours straight!"

Ella bit her lip. He wasn't wrong, but his flavorful terms weren't saying anything she hadn't heard before in one combination or another from some irate coworker, or supervisor,

or herself. She was a horrible medic. It was a fact she accepted as firm reality. She maintained no denial or resistance against her perpetual, intractable incompetence. She agreed with him fully, totally, and completely. She pitied his unnecessary exertion to convince her of what she, herself, was firmly convinced.

She felt no shame or embarrassment. Resignation to facts allowed relief. That was that. Incompetence was a fact of her life, like flat tires and robo calls. If anything, her inadequacy revealed her persistence. Though inept, she clocked in. Though unfit for duty, she wore the uniform. Though incapable of properly performing her job, the paycheck displayed her legal name and twice previous address on it. She just kept showing up, to John's chagrin.

Tones blared through the engine bay. Ella gazed at the speaker to hear God's commands. "Med 2, be en route to 806 Farmingdale. 806 Farmingdale. Fall."

John kicked the door jamb. "I've had enough fucking calls with you to last me all of eternity, but sure, let's go again! Why not!" His voice rose higher with his sarcasm. Ella wondered if he was hysterical. "Hystero-" was Greek. German. Latin. It referred to the vagina. Or uterus. The flamingo tubes in there somewhere. A female term. Women are hysterical creatures. She blinked and watched as a clump of bubbles flew from his mouth. Someone should tell him it's a female term.

She tipped her head to her mic. "Med 2, 10-4." If he was working so hard at being hysterical, the least she could do was call in to dispatch.

John pointed at the ambulance. "Now put your ass in that seat, and just—just don't touch anything!"

She ducked her head, her chin brushing the collar of her polo shirt, and pivoted slowly on her heel, her boots lining up parallel as she shuffled around the ambulance to the passenger side, her hands still in her pockets.

John turned over the engine and flipped on the lights and sirens. She watched him, waiting for further diatribe, but he only ground his teeth. Being hysterical must have tired him out. That was like him, silence after the storm. Tipped-over lawn chairs and a flowerpot on the roof. He probably wouldn't speak to her for a few hours aside from "move" and "gimme that." She sat on her hands and waggled her boots in time with the siren, back and forth and back and forth with the wig-wagging sounds. Yelling, silence, yelling, silence. Life imitating art-o-mobiles. She smiled.

2

They arrived at a brick ranch house on a quiet street. John slammed the door too hard, and Ella retrieved the supply bag before trotting behind him up the driveway. Several roaches fled to the garden leaf litter, and Ella slowed to watch. A large one circled its antennae as though considering the most opportune hiding spot. Light glinted off its carapace, making it seem moist and sticky, like a prune.

She'd watched that documentary of the small, helpless animal frolicking or eating or sleeping while Death Incarnate lurks nearby with its teeth bared and its rump wagging in the air, ready to pounce.

She stomped on the prune and lifted her boot again.

Yellow mush protruded from its abdomen as a bent antenna twitched.

John shoved his hands into nitrile gloves and knocked on the door. "Medics!"

Ella fished for her gloves, and the bag dropped from her shoulder, tipping over on the concrete and spilling a hodge-podge of gauze and roller bandages. She hadn't zipped it closed after the last call. She scooped it all back in, along with

some dirt and a few pine needles. In her pocket, she found a broken pen, a gum wrapper, and one glove that tore at the wrist as she pulled it on. The clothes dryer makes gloves brittle and smell like mountain-fresh streams, though she had never found a stream that smelled like laundry. More like dirt and algae. She picked the shredded nitrile from her fingers and shoved it back into her pocket for another spin cycle.

An elderly man in a green cardigan answered the door. He wore glasses on the end of his round nose and puttered with small, level steps as though he felt most at home in a library, reading an out-of-date book about sailboats, hoping the intern would comment on the cover so he could tell her that story about one-time-in-the-Keys. He held the door wide open for them to enter. "My wife fell in the bathroom. I can't get her out, and I think she's hurt."

"Yes, sir," John said. "Take me to her."

Ella followed behind, offering a smile to the man. It was important to smile. As the female of the pairing, that was her job, not John's, or maybe her job in place of John. She represented both of them, two faces peering from her one visage, a Janus in cargo pants. She knew They expected it: John, the patients, their families, firefighters, cops. Especially cops. Cops like it when people follow the rules, especially the unspoken ones that come without code sections. Smile and nod and agree, and they won't have to turn off their body cams. If the entire world erupted in fire, she could smile, and They would be reassured that—at a minimum—a young woman knew the rules, was under control, and abided by the unspoken chapters and sections. Some semblance of hierarchy remained, so all would be well. And as the lava licked up

their legs, They would feel better and smile back and thank her for her service to societal order.

“Ma’am? How are you?” John asked, kneeling next to the moaning woman. She lay on the floor in her flowered muumuu, wincing.

“My hip,” she whimpered.

John always knew what to do. A paramedic for ten years—all for this same service—he knew the city like the back of his hand and never gave the wrong medication.

Baby blue bath mats, towels, and a fluffy toilet cover decorated the bathroom, complete with a crocheted hat for the extra toilet paper roll so there’s no need to waddle to the cabinet for more. Ella couldn’t see a plunger but supposed it had a fluffy blue cover, too. Toothpaste and denture paste and cups and toothbrushes covered the counter. Why did old people have so many toothbrushes? She only had one. It was purple.

“Ella!”

She looked to John and shifted the bag strap on her shoulder.

“Go get the stretcher. Leave the bag here.”

She left the door open as she stepped onto the porch. Quiet reigned over the rows of neat and tidy lawns. All displayed the same three species of hardwoods, the same clumps of hostas in the beds. Welcome. Live. Laugh. Love.

She had seen inside a few of the houses on one call or another. Some were clean and comfortable. Some were dirty and cluttered, with rotting floors and counters stacked high with junk mail, fast food wrappers, and broken appliances. Four- and six-legged vermin populated the baseboards. The

neighbors would be shocked—horrified—to know the conditions that existed thirty feet from their own bedrooms, where they slept and dressed and made love. No one could tell from the outside. The truth could be uncovered only after having been invited in.

But she knew what happened in the tidy homes, too. The prim and proper neighbors looked crisp and starched on the outside, with their loafers and suits and pumpkin-spice infinity scarves, but they were full of shit, too, struggling with mind mice that wreaked havoc on their thoughts, chewing wires and leaving scat and disease. These neighbors never violated the homeowners association agreement—they politely committed suicide instead.

Ella trundled up the driveway with the stretcher and wheeled into the house, bogging down in the thick carpet. John had rigged a sheet splint and given enough medication to take the edge off the woman's hip pain, a mercy before movement.

"Help me lift," he said. "Go over—where are your gloves?"

Ella lifted her hands and turned them. "I don't have any."

"Where are they?"

She shrugged.

"You're a walking OSHA violation," he muttered.

He wrapped his arms around the woman's body. "Get her legs and lift on three." They counted and lifted, and Ella moved back toward the stretcher, catching her boot, tripping, and smacking the woman's legs against the door which resulted in a sharp cry from the other end—John or the woman's or both, she wasn't sure. She kept shuffling and sliding, and they moved her into place on the stretcher. After

rolling the stretcher over the standard “couple of bumps,” the woman was installed in the ambulance.

Ella climbed into the back and sat on the jump seat, watching the patient. Intense sadness welled up within her, and she touched the woman’s arm, her warm fingers turning cold. The woman’s muscles relaxed, and the grimace on her face smoothed. She sighed and smiled. “Such a nice girl!”

“Nice’ isn’t the word I’d use,” John grumbled.

3

When once again ensconced in the EMS break room, John hunched over his laptop, a gargoyle perched atop siloed data. He wrote his report and punctuated it with small comments like, “I don’t know how you fucking do it.”

She waited for elaboration. When it didn’t come, she resumed scrolling her phone.

“That lady loved you.”

Ella once more looked up to the wall. No sense in turning her head if he wasn’t going to continue. She looked down at her phone again.

“You slammed her damn legs into the damn door, and she still fucking loved you. Wanted to tell the nurse all about you.” He switched to falsetto. “Such a sweet girl! ‘What a talented medic!’”

Ella set her phone on the desk.

John propelled his rolling chair backward and held his arms wide. “She’ll probably go right home after surgery and bake you cookies!”

Ella smiled. “How nice.”

“Not for me!” he shouted. “Not for me who did all the

work! Not for me who kept you from killing someone! No cookies for me! Only for you!”

“I’ll share.”

He duck-walked the rolling chair over to her. “I don’t care about the fucking cookies,” he whispered through tight lips. “It’s all of them. All of our patients. Angry ones. Fucked-up ones. Druggies.”

She blinked, looking for the question.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “They all survive. They all improve. And they all love you! I don’t see what they see in you!” He held his splayed fingers inches from her face. “You’re so stupid! I can’t—”

She flinched. “That’s not nice.”

“You-are-in-com-pe-tent!”

She shrugged.

He shook his head. “I’ve always been a black cloud. The moment I clock in, shit hits the fan. Huge wrecks. Full workable codes. Everywhere I look, someone is trying to die, but when you got here all the brass were like, ‘Ohhhh! She’s such a white cloud! An asset to the service!’ Psh! Fucking bullshit!

“You know, a real white cloud is a medic who brings fewer calls when they work. A real white cloud walks through the door, and suddenly, everything is calm and serene. When I work with a real white cloud, I sit in the station, and everything is okay, and I can take a fucking nap. That’s what a real white cloud does. Not you! Everything you do is fucked up, yet it’s smooth in the end. Makes no fucking sense. You think you’re a white cloud, but that’s not real white-cloud shit. That’s some kind of voodoo! I guess you fucked that up,

too. Can't even be a real white cloud." He slammed his laptop closed and stormed from the room.

Ella picked at a spot of mud on her pants.

He was wrong. Not all of them were happy or liked her. Not all of her patients lived. Many died, some peacefully, some horribly and in anguish. She admitted, though, there were more thank-you letters to her on the station bulletin board than to anyone else, and she had a scrapbook at home where she stored the rest. And three boxes more in the basement at her mom's house. And some in the attic. When she felt down, she would slide the scrapbook from under her bed and page through it. There were news clippings and photographs. Candy wrappers from gift baskets. All to her. It made her happy. She would smile.

He was wrong, so she wasn't stupid.

4

Ella wriggled her nose. Urine, body odor, cheap alcohol, a touch of blood, and something else she couldn't put her finger on. She had expected that normal street bouquet, but this woman smelled like something else, too. Ella sniffed again. French fries. That was it. She nodded. French fries. Urine, body odor, cheap alcohol, a touch of blood, and french fries.

John lifted the woman up from where she lay on the littered sidewalk. "Ma'am?" He released her, and she flopped again, her gray hair askew. Her jaw slacked and rattled with a snore. He straightened and crossed his arms. "She's breathing. I don't know what the fuck they want us to do."

"Take her to the hospital to dry out," Ella said as she pictured hanging the woman on a clothesline with two wooden clothespins at her shoulders and her head flopped forward, unsupported, her mouth still gaping with her snores. Ella could pull the clothesline cord, shifting it over a few feet for a fresh spot to hang another indigent straight from the drink. With each squeak of the pulley, she could hang more and more people, all out to dry in the sun and fresh air, with birds singing and prairie grass waving in the wind. Lines of

them, rows of them, weaving all through the city and out into the countryside and through a summer field ripe with hearty American wheat. They'd be stiff once dry, so she'd stack them in great piles and put them away in drawers, interspersed with lavender sachets. The city council would cheer and mop their brows with handkerchiefs, relieved that they could finally quit pretending to care. The mayor's wife would crochet a doily to adorn the top of the dresser.

John wrinkled his nose. "I'm not taking her to the ER."

Ella pressed her lips together and lifted her brow. Most people who joined EMS or nursing or went to med school, when asked why, would answer, "Because I want to help people!" But when it came to drunks, druggies, old people, the disabled—anyone with wrinkles, odor, or tubes—there were rants and reluctance. "Pick your favorite color!" medics would gleefully crow, holding up all the various sizes of IV catheters and hoping the drunk would pick the largest, most painful, one. Even healthcare can be punitive. Anyone who failed to complete suicide would be greeted with disdain and the largest nasogastric tube possible. Even helpers can be bullies. Those providers weren't there to help people for the sake of all humanity. They were only there for certain, pre-ordained people, those blessed by the gods of the blue cross and shield, primarily those who contributed to society through wage-earning work, plus the stay-at-home mom, if she was still pretty enough because sex appeal trumps a lack of economic viability. Healthcare upholds the inner workings of capitalism—fuck all others. Anyone who professed a desire to help just because the patient was a human with a need was met with side-eye atop a handkerchief dabbed at the nose to

cover the scents of patchouli and anarchy and mutterations about Damn Commie Heathens.

Ella squatted and touched the woman's hand.

"Careful," John said. "You don't have gloves on."

The woman's eyes fluttered, and Ella stood again.

"Who are you two?" the woman asked. She looked around. "And where am I?"

John grunted. "EMS. This is the corner of Byrd and South Warren. You passed out drunk."

The woman hobbled to her feet, her tattered and stained skirts shimmying around her knees. Three blouses and two jackets padded out her round stomach. "Drunk, you say? Son, I don't feel drunk. I must have just fallen asleep."

John smirked. "Sure. Asleep." He notified dispatch that they were back in service and ready for another call.

"Do you want some help?" Ella asked.

"No, dearie," the woman said. "I'll just be on my way." She shuffled along the littered sidewalk in her sandals, her red bunions sticking out the side. Soggy hamburger wrappers and empty drink containers with plastic covers and straws with a red stripe piled against the parking meters like snow drifts. Occasionally, she placed her hand on the wall, perhaps for balance, perhaps to notice the tenacious plants that grew between the cinder blocks without benefit of soil.

"Bye!" Ella called to her back. The sleepy woman was happy. Maybe she would write a thank-you note. Ella smiled and clasped her hands together. Her fingers were cold where she had touched the drunk woman who was now a sleepy woman. She breathed on them to warm them and vigorously rubbed them together. Her fingers were often cold at the

end of ambulance runs. It was strange. People would often complain of others' cold fingers. Never hers, though.

5

Tones dropped. “Med 2, be en route to Sunrise Fields. Sunrise Fields. Shoulder injury.”

“A real call,” John said with relief as they climbed back into the cab.

Ella clicked her seat belt.

“Shoulder injury,” he said, easing into traffic. “Whatcha gonna do for that?”

She leaned her elbow on the door and rolled her eyes. Time for another education kick where he’d quiz her to make himself feel better about being stuck in a dead-end job with no chance of retirement. Teaching offered the illusion of a bright future, and he clung to it whenever he could, imagining passing on some flaming torch of knowledge to the next generation of kids too naïve to see they didn’t really want to be like him. That torch magically transformed brute algorithms and sticky-taped mnemonics from a technician’s notebook into a clinical masterpiece worth sharing or at least selling at auction with free shipping and handling. If it could be taught, then it was, by definition, valuable. It had to be. She could tell by the mildly frantic edge of his tone. See one.

Do one. Teach one. Pay no attention to the lack of pedagogical skill.

“Eh?” he said, leaning on the steering wheel and glancing at her, prodding for an answer.

She shrugged.

He swung his head between her and his watching the road. “Come on! This is easy!”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” he shouted. “You’re a goddamn EMT!”

She stared at the posts of streetlamps whizzing past, following one with her eyes until she couldn’t move her eyeball anymore, then flipping to the next and doing it again. After a run of ten, the muscles in her face tired and began to ache.

“You are an EMT, right?” John asked. “You passed the test? Got a license and shit?”

She hummed, noncommittally. If she exercised like this everyday, moving her eyes back and forth, she could build endurance and increase the number of street lamp poles she could follow before getting a headache. Maybe there were competitions. Street lamp Olympics with a podium and gold medals and corporate sponsors and shocking breaking-news stories about doping. She wondered if she would stay clean or succumb to the seedy underground of extreme street lamp sports. It depended on how much she fell for the temptress, Glory.

He huffed. “You sure?”

“Passed the test.”

He squeezed the steering wheel.

Ella slid her gaze to him, then stared out the windshield,

her left nostril flaring as she rued his interruption, his trouncing of her training. He dashed her hopes of becoming a contender, and she mourned her loss of potential greatness with a deep sigh.

“Book smarts ain’t street smarts,” John muttered.

She didn’t like books or streets, but she could perform tricks like any trained dog. To heal the sick is truly a challenge, but to be a professional, one only needs to fill out tax forms. To be sprinkled with the State’s holy water, one need only click a mouse. Bubbling in an answer is a simple motion, even she could do that. Throw enough spaghetti against the wall, and some of it is bound to stick. She had emerged from the robust ranks of spaghetti tossers, a long line of blank-eyed dreamers armed with catapults in tactical holsters found in sidebar ads next to headlines about the one strange weight-loss trick doctors hate.

The ambulance bumped and jostled to the baseball diamond. Ella climbed out, squishing the lush grass under her feet. She twisted her boots, tearing the blades into a green, juicy pulp that would strike terror into the modern housewife. Regular detergents leave your clothes dingy and gray. Only Whiz Bang Oxy Wow fights tough grass stains on—

“Ella!” John roared.

She started and grabbed the jump bag. She trotted forward, too busy to stop for gloves.

A fit and healthy young man in a baseball uniform sat on the ground holding his arm. His shirt bulged at the shoulder in grotesque deformity. He gritted his teeth and hissed through them, his lips peeled back, exposing his gums. A quavering moan huddled in his throat, occasionally escaping

as he was bumped or jostled. Sweat beaded on his wrinkled forehead, mixing with the red clay on his face.

John extended his arm toward Ella, his palm held flat and facing upward.

Ella stared, bemused. She bent at the waist, placed her hand in his, and gave it a good shake.

John's eyes bugged. His mouth puckered as though from the sourest lemon, and his ears turned purple. "The sling," he choked. "Give me the sling!"

"Oh!" she said, putting the bag down and searching through it. "Right here." She opened the plastic and handed it to him. He puffed through his nose so hard she feared boogers would fly into her face.

John fitted the sling around the man, who yelped in pain and muttered a string of curses under his breath.

"Let me help," Ella said, scooching closer on her knees. John waved her back with sharp motions, but she disregarded him. The man moaned as he guarded his dislocated shoulder. Ella tightened her core, paying careful attention as she lifted his uniform's short sleeve with her fingertips and then rested her hand on his forearm.

"Move, Ella!" John growled. He pushed her aside, and she lost her balance, tipping into the player. She squeezed his arm to steady herself, pulling, and his scream ripped through her ear. It increased in volume, intensity, and clamber and then stopped, plunging everyone into a peaceful world where even the ping of metal bats in the bullpen could be heard from where they were on the pitcher's mound.

"Hey," the man said. "It's back in place! My shoulder

doesn't hurt anymore! Thank you so much! You're the best medic ever!"

Ella rubbed her cold fingers.

Smiles and cheers and a smattering of applause broke from those around them. The man climbed to his feet and brought it in for a tight hug, squeezing Ella as she smiled at the coach and players. Everyone was laughing and happy, and Ella was, too.

John slowly leaned back on his ankles and stared up at her with a murderous glare.

6

Ella carefully climbed into the passenger seat of the ambulance, holding a large bucket of popcorn. She had crammed a 32-ounce soda with a twisty straw into the crook of her left elbow because a giant foamy finger covered her right hand. She sat for a moment, trying to decide the best way to close the door and put on her seatbelt. Propping her boot on the frame, she leaned over the center console far enough to tuck the soda into the cup holder. She bit the side of the popcorn container and held it in her teeth as she reached across herself to grab the door handle and slam it shut, then contorted herself to capture the seat belt and pull it into place. She waved the finger in a bouncing motion with her success.

John started the truck and drove in silence. He hadn't said a word since they had left the gates of the ballpark.

"You sure you don't want any?" she asked, holding the popcorn bucket between her knees in order to stuff more kernels into her mouth.

"No."

"I got extra butter."

He turned up the volume on the FM radio.

Ella burped and covered her mouth with the foamy finger. “Scuse me,” she said and took another handful.

The player had been so happy. The fans had cheered. The coach had loaded her with baseball drip. But she knew she hadn’t reduced the player’s shoulder intentionally. She lowered the kernel from her mouth. She had done something. She didn’t know what. She felt the lingering cold in her fingers, a chill that was still only now dissipating. It could mean anything. It didn’t mean she had done something for him. Most of her patients were happy at the end of a call. He was no different from them.

She scratched her forehead with the foamy finger.

It could mean something. It might. There were many things in life she didn’t understand. Microwave ovens. The postal service. Tube socks. Maybe her fingers could make people happy. Maybe her hands could heal. Differential steering was more fantastical than that.

Tones dropped. “Med 2, be en route to 389 Highway 62, difficulty breathing.”

John pulled a u-turn and drove them to the call. They both pulled on gloves as they arrived on scene.

The woman sat on the side of the hospital bed parked in her living room, her hands on her knees, puffing through pursed, blue lips. The oxygen cannula at her nose snaked from her face to the floor and around the baseboards. Ella picked it up in two fingers and followed it, hand over hand, as though it were an extensive network of hamster tubes and she, a large rodent in an inverted dimension, on the outside instead of within. The tank stood in the dining room next to

a china cabinet that displayed a porcelain shepherdess with a missing arm, a stack of dingy vinyl doo-wop records, and an oil lamp with a soot-tarnished chimney.

“Yeah, it’s got pressure,” she called, tapping the dial.

“How much?” John called back.

She leaned forward and squinted. “Oh, wait. No. Empty.”

“Which is it?”

“Empty,” she said. “I think.”

“Goddamn menace,” he muttered, stomping into the room. He grabbed the regulator on the tank. “Zero. Empty. Like your skull.” He huffed and returned to the patient.

Ella wiggled her lips and mouthed naughty words at his back as she followed him.

John shoved his stethoscope into his ears and listened to the woman’s chest, but Ella could hear the wheezes from across the room. She prepared a non-rebreather mask using the small oxygen tank on the stretcher as John watched the oxygen levels and took a blood pressure reading. The woman worked harder and harder for air.

Such distress filled Ella with sadness, yet she couldn’t decide if she wanted to help relieve the suffering or only wanted to end its reflection within herself. Without the melancholy weighing in her chest, she wondered if she would concern herself as much about the woman’s suffering or even care at all. Misery lurks in many places in the world, yet she did little to alleviate it. Only when she felt another’s distress as pain within herself did she feel prompted to act, and she couldn’t call her actions truly altruistic if she only did them because it made her feel more comfortable in her own skin—it was selfish.

Ella rubbed her hand on the woman's back as she set the oxygen mask in place on the woman's face. The woman's eyes glanced at her but then moved away to the floor again as she focused on her breathing. She did not improve.

John prepared a nebulizer and squirted the medication into the well of the mask. He put it back on the woman, and she clutched at it, her eyes widening still further.

"Let's get in the truck," John said.

Ella helped the woman to the stretcher and into the truck. The woman still couldn't breathe. She still wasn't happy. John popped open the medication box and prepared a syringe. Standing still and quiet beside the jump bench, Ella watched him work, then peeled the purple nitrile gloves from her hands.

She stared at her palms and the criss-crossing lines. She clenched them into fists, then opened them again, then turned them over and looked at the nails, clean and short for the most part, except for the bit of popcorn under the middle finger of her left hand. She lifted her eyes again, saw the scene before her with the beeping monitor and hiss of the nebulizer, and set her jaw. She would test her suspicions. Try it out. Experiment. This was science, the height of intellectual endeavorment. She would lift a flask and determine her measure.

John flicked the bubbles from the syringe and rubbed the woman's arm with an alcohol pad. She barely flinched when the needle went in.

As John tossed the used syringe into the sharps container, Ella sat on the bench and placed her hand on the woman's shoulder. At the moment of contact, their eyes locked, the

woman's conveying a deep and primal panic. Her wrinkled forehead quivered, and her eyes bulged with fear. Her blue lips gaped as she sucked as much air as she could and struggled to release the same. Pale skin retracted around her collar bones, creating hollows that flashed with light and dark in response to each desperate breath. Her expression begged for help.

The corners of Ella's mouth softened and lifted as anticipation grew within her. She inhaled her own smooth, easy breath, watched and willed.

The woman's gaze fell to the gurney, then returned to Ella. Under Ella's hand, the woman's tense, ropey shoulder muscles dissolved into pliable flesh. The woman's face smoothed with relief, and her breath lost its wheeze, except for a puff of surprise.

"It's stopping," she said. "I can breathe." She laughed lightly and smiled up at Ella.

Ella returned her smile, pleased by the abatement of suffering. An ember glowed in the midst of her pride, a blooming of satisfaction, a glimmer of euphoria. She licked her lips. She had waited for the scraping of the dot matrix and ripped the paper off to read the report. There was something going on, something extraordinary.

"Thank you!" the woman cried, seizing Ella's hand. "Oh, thank you!"

John muttered something about chopped liver.

7

The secret desire for suffering welled within Ella. The waiting, the watching, the hope someone would find themselves in a situation so foreign, so overwhelming, so terrible they would recognize their inability to cope alone and reach out, not to friends or family, but to strangers on the other side of a phone, her in particular. In order to help, someone must first hurt. To achieve her full potential, she required the suffering of others. She craved it.

She saw this desire reflected in those around her, those in uniform, those in white. Like attracts like. Sufferers know one another. All looking for a little bit of pain to get them through the day, a fix to fix. Some resorted to causing suffering in order to relieve it. Some just liked to peek through the window and watch. All found the scent of it irresistible.

When the tones finally arrived, one look at the patient's face told Ella that someone might write his obituary if they weren't careful. John must have agreed because in a few minutes the fly-car medic he had called in for additional support arrived on scene.

Ella was crumpled up and tossed away like a leftover

fast-food wrapper, despite her desire for more science, and the sick man was placed in the ambulance wearing an assortment of wires. White on the right. Smoke over fire.

John and the other medic pored over the paper strip from the monitor. "It's elevated."

"Definitely. Textbook case."

"What's wrong?" the patient asked from under the mask of high-flow oxygen Ella had given him. She liked giving people oxygen. It was dramatic, and that made it the best treatment, even when it wasn't. People feel better when you put dramatic plastic masks on their faces. It made them feel fancy, like you were really doing high-tech doctor shit, the stuff of miracles.

"You're having a heart attack, sir," John said. "We're going to the hospital now."

That was Ella's cue to go to the front and drive. She reluctantly nodded. It was crowded in the ambulance with the stretcher and equipment and three medics. She gripped the back of John's web belt and shuffled around him, but her wristwatch caught on the IV tubing and pulled further and further until the cannula ripped from the man's arm, the line and his access to potentially life-saving medications lost. The IV bag and tubing danced, and blood dribbled down the man's arm and pooled on the floor.

"Shit," Ella said, grabbing a towel and sopping up the blood.

John seized the bag and tubing in his fist. He blinked twice, three times as his jaw slowly jutted forward. "Get out of my truck," he hissed.

Ella shrank into her shoulders as she slid across the jump

seat to the back doors, where she jumped down and ran to the driver's seat. She rubbed her arms, trying to wipe his hatred from her skin.

Pulling into traffic, lights flashing, she drove toward the hospital. Sirens wailed and gnashed their teeth, squeezing around her as she dodged and weaved through cars, pressing into her until her hair melted, falling in clumps on the gas pedal. Every driver stared at her, their eyes flashing red and yellow. They shook their heads and pointed as their accusations roped about her neck and tightened, and it was hard to breathe and think and see. She switched on the defrost and turned up the fan, melting them away to the edges of the glass, clearing her vision as she pulled into the hospital bay.

John and the other medic rushed the man inside. Staff ran beside them down the long shiny hall to the treatment bay, carrying their prize like ants do cake, passing him from one to another and then engulfing him, placing tubes into every orifice and shouting about arrest and compressions and shocks as he died in their midst.

Ella watched. Had there been shadows, she would have inhabited them and observed death from the catacombs, enshrouded in moss and silvery spider webs, splattered with cold, dripping sewer water. Instead, the lights shone, and she was brushed aside to stand by his feet and the lime-green laundry cart. His blanched face bulged around the tube in his mouth. His eyes stared, open, fixed, dilated. Dead.

The room, a clutter of monitors, equipment, and supply cabinets, convulsed with movement. Nurses worked shoulder to shoulder, and the doctor crossed his arms over his white-coated suit of armor. It was too late. Paying fines doesn't

assuage death. The clanging door, metal on metal, echoed in her ears. All around her knew it was useless, but they still worked, standing in queue to each bang their heads on the wall of futility. She got in line.

Ella stepped to the bed and placed her trembling hand on the man's leg. The sparse hairs lent light texture to his clammy skin. She knit her brows. Her lip quivered.

The monitor beeped, and she snapped her head up to look at it.

It beeped again, a green wave sliding across the screen.

Another. Another.

"We've got him back," the doctor said, lowering his arms as he addressed the peasantry. "Notify the cath lab."

Ella stared at the monitor, nausea settling in her stomach. The waves increased.

"Are you seeing this?" a nurse asked.

More heads looked up, all watching the waves as they grew and multiplied and changed.

"Print a strip," the doctor demanded. A nurse pushed the button and ripped the paper from the machine. The doctor and she huddled over it, reading the improving condition of the man's heart. He threw it on the floor. "Print another!" The doctor grabbed the paper, nearly shredding it as he tore it from the machine. He removed his glasses and read it yet again. "Normal! I'll be damned to hell."

The patient jerked violently on the table, kicking his legs and thrashing his arms. He struck a tech who crashed into an instrument cart, supplies flying and clattering on the floor. The man's red face contorted, and his brows lifted as high on his forehead as possible as he swung his hands around.

“He’s bucking the tube!” a nurse called.

“He’s waking up!”

They removed the tube from his throat, and he coughed and groaned. “Get this stuff off me!”

A secretary leaned around the door frame, phone in hand. She smacked her gum. “Cath lab’s ready.”

“Send him on!” the doctor shouted. “Send him anyway!”

The stretcher moved. Ella leaned with them, trying to maintain her touch, stretching her arm as far as she could until someone shoved her back into the shadows. Her body shook. She stepped away until she felt the wall and leaned back against it.

John picked up the EKG strip from the floor and smoothed the paper on his leg. He stared at it and shook his head. “I’m no sick fuck, and his EKG looks better than mine.”

8

Ella stumbled to the break room which smelled of reheated lasagna and burnt coffee. A medic in a blue shirt with gold embroidery pushed by her grouching about fucking long-distance transports at the end of his fucking shift for more fucking overtime when he wanted a fucking nap. He threw a greasy fast-food bag at the trash can as he exited. The bag hit the rim and fell to the floor, a red and yellow cup sliding out, the straw at an angle. She stared at it, then looked back at him as he strode away, his festival of fucks wafting behind him. The door closed, and she was alone.

The counter held a microwave she didn't dare open and two large plastic bowls that read "Happy EMS Week" from seven years prior. The first bowl contained bruised apples. The second had three snack packages of cookies. She picked one up and tapped it. The cookies shook like crumbs inside the wrapper. She lifted it to her eye, and it shifted in and out of focus. The package held sugar and carbs and a sense of paternalistic care from the service. Eat these. We love you. Eat them all. Get fat. Give us a reason to hate you because the

labor conditions aren't eliminating you fast enough. She had a taste for cookies.

A roach skittered from under the refrigerator and across the floor. Eyeing it, she dropped the cookie package to grab an apple. The smooth, firm skin resisted her fingers, except for the bruised spots that sank as she gripped it. She ran her thumb back and forth, and soured juice seeped out as she watched the bug's chaotic movement and circling antennae.

Ella chucked the apple at it. It hit the floor and rolled past, stopping against the wall. The bug paused in the middle of the room. Perhaps it was shocked, surprised by the sudden attack from the sky. Maybe it was too stupid to know. Or had perfected acceptance and mindfulness. It rains apples now. Assume child pose. The weather makes nice small talk. Stick to that. Nice girls don't talk about murder, even when scientific.

She had killed roaches before. Her apartment had many of them, and she killed several every day. The landlord needed to spray the whole place and fix the dripping sink. She could fix it herself, but she didn't have the tools she'd used in Girl Scouts. She had used her grandfather's tools then. PawPaw liked her smile just as it was and never made her use it when she didn't want to. Someone with brass on his collar had liked her smile, too. He'd said so with her back against the wall and his breath on her ear. He'd smelled of garlic and tortilla chips.

She took another apple. She had killed for pest control. She had killed for hygiene. But she had never before killed for the purpose of requisitioning death. It felt strange to demand it. Then again, she had never needed death before, and she couldn't buy it online with free shipping and a discount

code. She smelled it, the apple, the scent soft and sweet, like shampoo.

Ella flung the apple at the roach. It hit squarely and remained in place. Stuck. She wet her lips, crossed the room, and squatted, reaching shaking fingers to the apple. She held her breath and lifted it.

The roach flailed its brown, jointed legs, and she flinched and gasped, then frantically smashed the apple again and again until the roach's body was flat, dry, and unmoving.

It was done.

It was dead.

She had made death.

Or at least the apple had.

She dropped it, and it rolled away and joined the other at the baseboard, the one with the bruise. Commiseration on the sidelines.

Still squatting, she hugged her knees, huddling on the floor of the breakroom where only two of the five fluorescent lights worked. One shone dimly and buzzed its distress.

Her heart pounded, and her mouth felt fuzzy and dry. She had to touch it, needed to feel. She reached out once more, slowly, her nose wrinkling. She nudged the nasty wing, so smooth and delicate, then jerked her hand away. Death remained, staring at her.

Mustering determination, she extended her index finger. She straightened it as it shook, closer. Her fingertip touched the crisp body. She flinched, but continued her pressure. It crunched, and she held it in place, pinning it to the floor.

She swallowed.

An antenna moved, up and down, sensing the air.

Ella's eyes widened. Then its legs contracted and released, and she jerked her hand away. With a pop of its wing, the roach flipped over and cleaned its antennae. It ran in a wide circle across the linoleum and disappeared between the cabinet and the broom.

Ella burst from the break room and ran down the hallway, bumping into a pudgy, old chaplain in black shirt and collar. She pushed around him and kept running as he cheered, "Go get 'em, hero!" She ran to the stairwell and down the stairs, falling past three of them and tumbling onto the landing. She crawled back into the corner and sat, looking at the stairs going up and the stairs going down, stuck between floors and full of stark echoes.

Her body trembled, sweat and tears mixing. She pulled her knees to her chin and covered her head with her arms. Rocking. Hiding.

Death was solid and reliable. It happened and lasted and stayed where you put it. It came in a readable font, easy-to-open packaging, and was never rejected by the insurance company for being out of network.

The roach said differently.

A far distant door opened, then slammed. Steps echoed, then another door opened and slammed. Silence.

She picked at the edge of her rugged black boot. Stupid roach. She needed something better. A better roach. Science must be repeated.

9

The basement hallway was dim. No one who went down there cared about the lights. Or cared about much of anything, really. Behind her, a crack split the exit sign in two. EX, red. IT, white. The glow mixed and dissipated into the darkness beyond her, darkness that filled the corners, crept along the walls, and licked up to the ceiling. One fluorescent light flickered to the beat of an unheard chaos.

Supply shelves lined the hall. Towels, gowns, no blankets. Body bags. Isolation equipment. An isolette. Old wheelchairs with headrests and thin spokes whispering of stained white nightgowns and stringy hair and sing-song voices. She rubbed her fingers together in need of a rosary.

The morgue door was unpainted and unmarked, but she knew it. Everyone did. They'd zip them up, wheel them here, and leave. No rushed reports. No talking. An anti-ritual for stainless-steel tables and a sink.

Inside the morgue, the chill ran its fingers around her neck. The lights shone bright and shadowless. No sign of the pathologist. Dr. Azriel often lurked around the emergency room. Maybe he was there. The cold, steel wall dominated

the side of the room. She stood before the spectacle of it, oppressed, compelled to sink to her knees and shuffle forward to kiss the hem of the garment. She lifted the handle to open the heavy door. It moved easily enough, despite the weight, and the light inside blinked on automatically, just like the fridge in her kitchen. She needed to pick up milk and eggs and baby carrots on the way home. Peanut butter. Maybe some animal crackers with the pink frosting.

Four white body bags lay on steel tables with wheels. Pick a card, any card. Everyone picks a middle card, so pick a side card, unless they knew you'd think like that, then go with one halfway between the middle and the end. Watch for tells. A blink might mean anything.

She pulled a table closer to her. The wheels rolled smoothly, like the buggies at the high-end grocery store, all together, without that one wheel that wobbled. She took the zipper and pulled on it, down and around, and pushed back the flap to see the feet, pale, pasty, those of a woman, but no polish.

Ella leaned on the edge and looked for a toe tag but guessed that was just movie stuff that had given way years ago to the now ubiquitous bar codes. She shivered with cold and felt eyes on the nape of her neck. She swung around.

The doctor leaned on the door frame, his leg bent, his arms jauntily crossed over his chest as though watching a sports game to relax. Pop a beer and hand me the chips. Dark chest hair curled at the v-neck of his green scrubs. His face, ageless, had lips that dared and eyes that judged. "You sure you're ready?"

She stared at him. Her eyes could widen no further. No more blood could vacate her face. His words made no sense, but doctors' words never did, and they always knew everything. He would tell her what to do and then yell when she did it wrong. Yelling was normal. She knew about yelling. Understood it. Her mouth salivated as she anticipated his yelling. She yearned for it, for anything familiar.

He walked inside and stood opposite her by the table, the woman's body between them. He crossed his arms again. His arms weren't as furry as his chest. His hands wore blue gloves. His lips dropped into a stern expression. "Go on then."

She shook her head.

His brow contracted. "It's why you're here, isn't it?"

The woman's feet lay in the bag. Ella took each breath consciously and with effort. She lifted her eyes, pleading silently for him to kick her out, to ban her from the morgue and report her to her supervisor.

His brow twitched, and he looked away, back toward the door.

He would leave her there and lock her inside. She would pound and pound on that heavy steel door, and he would sit at his desk and drink coffee with creamer from tiny peel-top packages that never held enough, and she would scream and freeze and face this alone.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Ella. Raphaella. Ella for short. Two is faster than four. People like efficiency."

"I'm Judah—"

"Dr. Azriel. Everyone knows you, but they don't like you. You give them the creeps."

He shrugged. "Pathologists are never the life of the party."
"Never the life of anything."

He leaned his hands on the table, the motion of which gaped the front of his scrubs and lowered his face closer to hers. "Get on with it."

"You won't lock me in?"

"I won't."

She squinted. His dark hair bore occasional gray flecks. The small lines near his eyelids blended impatience with a hint of anticipation. He wanted to see, was waiting to see.

She wiped her sweaty palms on her pants and, with a breath to fortify herself, lifted her hands. She sucked in her bottom lip, the corpse visible through the lattice of her shaking fingers. She glanced back at Dr. Azriel, but his unwavering gaze granted no reprieve.

Ella placed her palms on the shins, feeling skin over bone. An icy cold, more intense than the chill of the morgue, seeped into her hands. Her arms tingled. Her breath grew ragged.

Dr. Azriel bent over the body bag. He slid the zipper on its silver track, then threw back the white plastic flap, revealing the woman entirely. She wore a blue hospital gown. The ties, knotted at the neck in a bow, mingled in her wispy, white hair. Her dull skin, the envy of Madame Tussauds, pulled against her bones and hung toward the table.

A pink line crept from under Ella's hands, dragging color as it spread toward the woman's feet and the rest of her body. Bitter cold channeled from the corpse into her hands and arms. She whimpered, yet held in place, afraid to continue, terrified to stop.

The line crept under the gown's hem, now out of their

sight. Ella met Dr. Azriel's eyes, his unwavering intensity. He had not yelled or shouted or pushed her away, but neither had he relieved or comforted her. He embodied neutrality, an observer only. She was alone in his presence.

The line appeared at the woman's neck and arms, and Ella gasped. The line extended down the woman's biceps, past her elbows, to her hands and then fingers. Her face changed as the line curled past her jaw and her ears and toward her features, the pallor melting away.

The woman's eyes flew open, and she inhaled through wet, congested lungs.

Dr. Azriel seized the table and shoved it toward the door. He turned back, pointing his finger. "Don't move!" He pushed the table through the morgue and into the hallway, the door closing behind him.

10

Ella stood still with her feet in her boots, her hands by her sides.

She shifted her eyes to the open cooler door.

The row of steel tables with white bags remained behind her. She rejected being judged by them over the tops of their glasses that lay folded and tucked into the plastic personal item bags on the bottom rack.

Ella stepped out and closed the door behind her. Silence reigned, and she was glad of it. She sank onto the edge of a hard-plastic chair in the corner, clasping her hands in her lap, tensing her shoulders up to her ears.

She didn't understand what was going on, but that was normal. In a moment, someone would walk in and yell at her and tell her to study more. Dr. Azriel didn't seem like the yelling type, so he'd probably bring someone else with him who would do it for him. Maybe John. But at least they'd explain all this to her, and it would make sense for a moment at least, and her brain wouldn't feel so fuzzy. All she had to do was sit still, be quiet, and wait for the principal. He'd call her parents. They would apologize again, and she'd spend the

weekend in her room. She'd lay on her bed next to the open window and watch the curtains wave in the breeze until all the problems she'd caused were fixed by other people.

Stacks of empty specimen containers lined the shelves.

The morgue didn't have curtains.

Dr. Azriel pushed the door closed with his blue hand and remained in place, his face hidden. "She's on a vent, but they expect her to recover."

Ella waited for the yelling. It always made people feel better.

He backed away from the door, his feet silent in his shoe covers. Green scrubs, green covers. Green wall tiles. If he ever did put up curtains in the morgue, they'd probably be that same green color, too. He could make them from old scrubs for a perfect match. His shoulders were wide enough for a café panel. It would take about three panels to line the area behind the sink.

"When did you figure it out?" he asked.

"Right now."

"Before then. You came to me for a reason."

"You have a corpse supply."

Dr. Azriel stood over her. Ella stared at the floor and gripped the sides of the chair.

"You can raise the dead," he said.

"I suppose."

"Only suppose?"

She looked up, first to his stomach, then to his face, but his face was serious with no trace of humor over the huge prank this all must be. Nervous energy welled from her legs to her

core, and she stood, putting a few steps of distance between them as she straightened her fingers and interlaced them. “I mean,” she said, “yes, that’s what it seems. I can. I think it’s more, though. Maybe.”

His brows met. “More? What more?”

“People are healed, not just from death, but sickness and injury, and even...” She searched for words. “Feelings.”

“Feelings?”

She turned back and lifted her hands to her face. “They become happy. And they like me.” She shrugged. “They’re the only ones who do.”

He leaned back against the table with the drains and the overhead sprayer. He rubbed his face, then crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her.

“This is a good thing, right?” she said, pacing in front of him. “I can save people. That’s why we’re all here, isn’t it? To do that?” She pivoted toward him. “Okay, so maybe not you. But everyone else.” She warmed to the idea. “I can help people! I can change the whole world! I can save everyone!”

She ran to the cooler door.

“Wait.”

Ella’s hand rested on the latch. A moment lapsed as she anticipated his explanation. She turned back. “Why?”

He stood. “Death isn’t your pet. It doesn’t respond to your beck and call. It won’t be commanded. You may think you have power over it,” he said, walking toward her, his steps slow and smooth, “but it will not be bullied. There are rules—”

“Not here—”

“Yes, here!” he said, jabbing his finger at the floor. “Even here there are rules.” He stopped inches from her. “Always rules. Cold, ruthless reality.”

She let her hand drop away from the door, then studied his face and saw no hint of a joke. “I must learn them.”

“Must you?” He shook his head and turned away. “Live your life,” he said, walking away from her. “Wear your gloves. Forget this.” He entered the connecting office.

She followed him. “And never use it again?” she asked, incredulous.

He stripped his gloves and sat at his desk. “It can be done.” He pulled a stack of papers in front of him and put on his glasses.

“And never touch anyone ever again? I can’t control when it happens.”

He slammed his hand on the desk. “Exactly!”

She jumped, then smiled. There. Yelling. She had won, so she would follow with her prescribed contrition. She hung her head. No place like home.

He exhaled slowly and picked up his pen. “You have no idea what you’re doing, what you’re starting, what you might unleash, or the effects it may have on you or anyone else.”

She should have bowed her shoulders and shoved her hands into her pockets, but her body quivered, and she held out her palms. “How could it possibly be a bad thing?”

“You have no idea,” he growled and turned back to his papers.

She grabbed the edge of his desk. “No, I don’t!” she cried. “Healing people, making them happy, and raising the dead

can only be good! On the ambulance, we 'Race the Reaper' and—"

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," he said, dropping his pen.

She blinked. "I have it on a t-shirt."

"Of course you do." He shook his head, then pushed back in his chair and propped his ankle on his leg and his hands over his stomach. "Think. Sleep on it. Try to see how things might go awry. Try to see what I see."

She stared at him, confused.

"Sleep on it," he repeated, returning to his papers. "I'll be around."

11

Ella leaned on the front of the ambulance and stared across the wet parking lot. Soap bubbles from the morning truck wash filled the gutters and glittered, iridescent, in the early sun. She had slept on it. Twice, for good measure, because she had tossed and turned the first night and maybe it didn't take because she still thought it was a good thing. She could help people. She could be Someone. The corner of her mouth lifted. She craved the tones. She was ready to see what she was capable of.

John closed the station door behind him and lit a cigarette.

Tones dropped. "Med 2, be en route to 78 Pineville, 78 Pineville. This will be the Green Meadow Cemetery. Unconscious male."

"Fuck," John said, putting out his cigarette. "Wanted that smoke."

They hit the sirens and drove to the cemetery. Ella rubbed her lips together, eager to arrive, ready to get her hands on the patient. This was her time, and she would finally show everyone what she could do.

John put the ambulance in park, and she leaped from the cab.

“Let’s go!” she said, grabbing the jump bag.

Ella strode toward a woman in shorts, t-shirt, and sweatband, who was wringing her hands next to a still figure on the ground. John followed behind.

“What’s the problem?” Ella asked.

“This kid here!” the jogger cried. “He won’t wake up. I didn’t want to do CPR. I don’t even know him!”

The young man lay curled next to a tombstone. Simon Radzeski, Sr. 1970 - 2020. Faithful husband. Loving father. Host to dead addict. The young man seemed to be in his early twenties, but his emaciated form made any determination of an exact age impossible. His closed eyes sunk into purple depressions. His bones jutted from his ripped clothes. An empty syringe lay beside him.

“You did your best,” Ella said, patting the woman’s arm. The jogger smiled, widely, happily. “Thank you for coming!” She moved back out of the way.

John knelt by the man and looked for signs of life. “No pulse. Start compressions.”

Ella reached to the man’s neck and paused.

“Ella! Get going!”

She ignored him and watched the pink line move. “I feel a pulse. Get the oxygen and hand me the Narcan.”

John’s lips parted. He sat back on his heels with his head tipped to the side and stared at her, dumbfounded.

“You heard me,” she said. “Hand it over.”

He dug in his bag for the Narcan nasal syringe and placed

it in her outstretched palm. He slid the jump bag closer and assembled the oxygen.

Ella held the syringe to the man's nose but only pretended to push it. She placed her hands on his face and studied his closed eyes, wondering whether it was the chill of death's abatement she felt or only the coldness of wet cement as her hands pressed into the Avenue of the Stars. His color improved. And then his eyes blinked open, and he groaned into consciousness.

"Oh!" the jogger cried. "He's alive!"

John placed the mask on the man's face and reached for equipment to measure oxygen levels. "Too much Narcan," he said with a tone of disapproval over the increasing groans of the young man as he thrashed about. "Never give that much. Only enough for them to breathe. Never to full consciousness like that. You never know how they'll react. And they usually shit themselves, too."

Ella smiled slyly and squirted the full dose of meds toward the ground while he wasn't looking.

The man, grunting with each breath, pushed to his knees and rubbed his forehead. "Why am I here? Why?"

"Dude, you overdosed," John said. "My partner saved your life. You were almost dead, man."

The jogger clasped her hands and leaned forward. "I thought you were dead, dear. I really did."

"Do you want to go to the hospital?" John asked.

"No," the man said, his lip curling. "Fuck, no!" He rose, then staggered and fell. "Get away from me!" he shouted, then stumbled away between the stones.

Ella watched him go, her lips thinned and lifted at the corners, never more pleased in her life.

12

Broken glass covered the black asphalt, reflecting the chaotic bursts of red and blue lights into the dark night sky. Ella strode toward one smashed car while John went to the other one. A firefighter in bunker gear caught her arm. “Hey, he’s dead. Don’t worry about it.”

She shrugged. “Gotta check. Paperwork, you know.”
“Suit yourself.”

She watched his return to the fire truck, then laughed and wiggled her fingers.

The car’s front end had buckled on impact and been shoved into the passenger compartment by the force of the crash. She pulled on the door. It wouldn’t open, but the window had been broken, either in the crash or the initial attempted rescue. She leaned inside, sniffing the smell of alcohol. A middle-aged man leaned in an unnatural angle in the seat, his seatbelt still attached. Bloody streaks marked his neck by his ears and on his mouth and chin.

Ella glanced back over her shoulder. No one was watching her as they scuttled around with brooms and cutters. She brushed her fingertips across the man’s forehead. Nothing.

She reached both hands to his temples and pressed, feeling the surge within her. She closed her eyes, reveling in the sensation, this flush of cold, of power and control. When she opened her eyes, blood trickled from his mouth. Active bleeding meant a heartbeat. She smiled. She moved her fingers to his neck and felt a slow pulse.

“Hey!” she yelled to the others. “This guy’s alive! Get him out!”

A firefighter threw her a blanket, and using it as a shield against the glass shards, she crawled into the backseat. A sudden force jerked her back. John had grabbed her by the belt and was manhandling her out of the car.

“Stop it!” she shouted, slinging her arms and slapping at his face and chest.

“Let me get there!” he said, trying to pin her arms. “Why the hell aren’t you wearing gloves! There’s blood everywhere!”

Ella jerked away, falling back to the seat. “Let me go!” She raised her boots and kicked one of his arms. “I’ve got this! Get me an IV pack and the oxygen! I’ll treat him, not you!”

The firefighters cranked the Jaws of Life. Further words were useless with the roar of the machine. John clenched his fists and gritted his teeth, yet he hurried back to the ambulance. Ella fell back on the seat, her boots together, her knees spreading apart. She caught her breath, staring at the headliner, then climbed onto her knees to look out the back window while the man in the driver’s seat gasped through congealing blood. She sang a soft, soothing song to herself, one without words, only musical syllables that felt smooth

on her tongue. She ruled the world from the backseat of a Honda Civic.

A firefighter tossed another blanket through the window so she could build a blanket fort for herself and the driver with crayons and apple juice in a box with a bendy straw. It would protect them from flying bits of glass and metal and dragons and shit. John returned with the equipment, and she fitted the oxygen mask on the man and turned to the IV. The angle was terrible. She could hardly reach the man's arm at all, let alone maneuver into an optimal position to start the IV. She smiled and tied the tourniquet anyway, knowing full well nothing horrible could happen. Anything that went wrong she could fix with a touch of her hand.

Ella grinned as she slid the IV through the skin. It swelled, turning purple. "Oops," she said, giggling. She smoothed her hand over the area, wiping it clean, back to the beginning. Click refresh. Listen on repeat. She pushed the IV into place—the proper place, this time—and secured it, running the needed fluids. Rather, the expected fluids. She pursed her lips. She didn't need the fluids at all. She didn't need anything or anyone.

The firefighters popped the door, rolled the dash, and prepared to get the man out. Carefully, they lifted him to the stretcher. She and John moved him to the ambulance.

13

Ella picked up the discarded, open packaging from the ambulance floor and wiped down the seats. The shift couldn't be going any better. She'd saved two lives so far: the addict in the cemetery and the man in the car. She smiled in amazement. She felt strong, confident, and happy. She could swish her silky hair like the actress in a conditioner commercial and throw her sun hat into the air as her hot, actor boyfriend drove them away in a red convertible on the beach. She was crushing it.

She hopped down from the ambulance, twirled, and closed the door.

"What's gotten into you?" John demanded, walking across the hospital parking lot toward her.

"What?" she said coolly.

"I don't know why you're all high and mighty today, but you don't run this goddamn show. I do." He scowled. "I've put up with months of shitty work from you—dropping patients, getting lost, giving the wrong fucking medications! You will not order me around! Do you understand?"

She tipped her head with pity. He didn't know, so of

course, there was no way he could understand, not to the depth that she did. She knew so much more about the world than he did. Poor guy. He was a puppy who didn't understand why he had to wear a cone. If she could just scratch him behind the ears, he'd calm down and grow to like her, just like the patients did. Ella reached for him, her fingers extended.

"Don't touch me!" he growled, swatting her back. "Not with your nasty hands."

Her smile faded at his distemper. Even puppies had to be put down sometimes.

"I said, 'Do you understand?'" John repeated.

She nodded. "Yes," she whispered. "Oh, yes, I understand."

She understood more than he could ever comprehend. He didn't have the temperament for it. He didn't like her. He saw nothing in her but a dumb bitch who couldn't do anything but make his life more difficult. She wanted to grab his sleeves and tell him all about it and make him like her and make him smile, but she didn't.

She couldn't move her feet forward, couldn't make her voice work.

Her quiet need to be seen and recognized resonated from a dark place within. She looked down from her tower and sneered. If he couldn't see how spectacular she was, then he and his weak brain didn't deserve her attention. She wasn't the failure—he was. He should be begging for her attention, wailing for her forgiveness and her goodwill, prostrating himself on the ground before her where she would lift her chin and the hem of her gown and plunge the heel of her sparkling shoes into his shoulder and walk over him to her

adoring fans, the real people who knew her and understood and never called her stupid.

“I need some water,” she mumbled before slinking back to the ER.

14

The next day, on the next shift, Ella slowed her steps to watch two nurses who were whispering in the hallway. One shook her head and glanced back at the room at the end of the hall. “So sad.”

Ella hoped they wouldn't notice her. Most nurses ignored her or walked away with their cool scrubby friends to spill tea. Ella never had tea to spill or scrubs with front hip pockets or perky breasts that jiggled and made you look even though you weren't supposed to. She wasn't tall and handsome and male with biceps and pheromones and a jaunty smile, so she didn't capture the nurses' attention when giving report. She didn't turn enough male heads to make her worth tolerating so the nurses could catch the same wave by association. She wasn't any of that, which made her a mere annoyance that only rolled more work through the ER doors and impeded their carefully curated atmosphere of sex and infidelity.

“She died alone,” the other nurse said.

The first nurse shrugged. “We all die alone.”

“I'd rather die at home surrounded by family than in the

subway in a pool of my own urine and filth and..." Her voice faded as the two nurses walked toward the nurses' station.

Ella stared until they leaned on the desk, far away, then she turned and faced the room. It didn't have to be sad. Not with her there. She could fix it. She could show them.

She pushed on the flat door handle and ducked into the room. The smell of old urine slapped her face with a chaser of rotting flesh. The body, a mound of soft flab, lay on the stretcher under dimmed lights and a white sheet. The woman's face, distorted by the breathing tube and tape, wore a mask of waxy wrinkles. Dirt lined her skin like cosmetics. Yet Ella knew her and instantly sniffed the air, searching for the scent of french fries long since dissipated.

Pinching the sheet with her forefinger and thumb, Ella uncovered the woman's arm. It was mottled with purple blotches, the skin thin and dry as paper. She wrinkled her nose at the thought of touching her, but her curiosity and eagerness overcame her hesitation. She gripped the woman's hand firmly, like a handshake securing an agreement, shaking on the deal. Slap the roof and drive it off the lot. She felt the now familiar interplay of warmth and cold and tingle. The line of reborn life traveled up the woman's arm. Ella saw the green lines on the screen change and bounce once more, alarms sounding far away at the desk.

As she heard voices shout in the hallway, she smiled and straightened her back. Pride surged within her. She puffed her chest and giggled.

The line flattened, straight once more.

Ella's stomach dropped. Her brow creased. She grabbed the woman's arm with both hands, and the line bounced and

beeped again. Her shoulders loosened, but when she released the arm again, she watched the line, once more, retreat and flatten.

“What the hell?” the nurse cried as she pushed open the door and flipped on the overhead light. “What’s going on?”

More staff arrived, pushing Ella away as they prepared for an unexpected resuscitation. She shuffled back, confused, wondering what she had done wrong. She reached again, seeking the cold flesh, feeling it once more. Alarms rang. Then the heartbeat was lost.

An orderly flung back the sheet. Purple skin tore, and liters of yellow fluid filled with small, white maggots cascaded from gaping sores in the woman’s legs, pouring across the cot and splattering onto the floor, writhing and squiggling, searching for putrid flesh, as more and more splashed forth from the deflating limbs. Ella shrieked, slamming back into the cabinet, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. Shouting rang in her ears, and she covered her face with her hands as she curled toward the wall, away from the sound of maggot soup sloshing onto the floor with carrots and potatoes and little green peas.

“Leave!” the orderly commanded.

Ella fled the room and ran toward the morgue.

15

Dr. Azriel leaned over a body flayed open on the autopsy table. He stood frozen in motion, his scalpel poised to cut again, and his eyes glared over the top of his mask. “What have you done?”

She shook her head as the story spilled from her. “Why didn’t it work? Why couldn’t she come back?” She squinched her eyes shut, trying to block out the pouring maggots, but only saw them clearer as they waterfalled off the bed and into the room, filling it higher and higher, sloshing into her mouth, where she bit them with the pop of maggot skin and chew of body and smooth pudding flesh on her tongue, wriggling creamy noodles. She flailed among them, trying to swim, trying to breathe as her boots weighed her down and her clothes constricted. She blinked and swallowed her vomit and snorted as it burned her nose.

The scalpel clattered onto the tray. Azriel ripped his mask off and tossed it onto the table. “My point exactly. You don’t understand.”

“What is there to understand?” she pleaded.

“More than you can comprehend or control.”

Ella sobbed, crossing her arms across herself and squeezing and rubbing her skin, trying to shrink into the floor. Azriel flung his arm toward the half-a-corpse. "What about him?" The man's chest was hollow, devoid of organs, his ribs white and purple stripes. A feast on a medieval table. Swig the ale. Pass the capon. The jester speaks only the truth. "Will you attempt to revive him?"

Ella stumbled forward toward the corpse, tears blinding her eyes. "Yes! I can! I must!"

Azriel seized her arms and wrenched her away from the table. "Revive him to what!" he shouted in her face. "To a hellish, freakish existence?" His blue gloves chafed her skin as she twisted and pulled against his grip.

"I kept trying and trying!" she cried. "She wouldn't come back!"

Dr. Azriel released her. She stumbled, smacking against the wall as he straightened to his full height, the muscles of his arms taut. "You are no match for death," he said. "It wants what it wants! You may thwart it at a singular point, but you cannot prevent its return. No one saves a life. They just postpone the inevitable. Death wins every war."

She pointed to herself. "But I can save lives! I can!" She shuddered with a sob. "I have saved lives!"

He stepped back, his broad chest heaving within his scrub shirt, his fists clenching and unclenching. "Do not deny death its power. Do not deny its mercy." He paused. "Do not deny its completion."

A roach ran from the wall to the table's edge. Its antennae moved and wiggled, touching the cold steel. With one foot, then another, it traveled up the round table leg with the faint

click of chiton on metal. It stopped at the top as if considering the corpse, deciding whether it was a food source or a tourist destination. It turned away, antennae running over the edge of the table, pointing to Ella, the ceiling, the corpse.

Ella watched the roach as she weighed the circumstances. Dr. Azriel was just like John. He didn't understand. She curled her lip. "You don't know death."

Dr. Azriel glared at her, then tucked his finger into his glove's blue cuff and snapped it off his hand. It plopped on the floor and waited for its chalk outline. He cupped his hand and slid it across the steel table toward the roach, stopping inches away. The roach froze, then approached cautiously. It tentatively tapped an antenna, one, then the other, and then skittered onto his hand and climbed onto his fingers.

Azriel lifted his hand, bringing it in line with Ella's eyes. The roach crawled on his finger nail. Beyond it, she saw Azriel's face, first sharp and clear with the hand blurred, then the reverse appeared stronger as her eyes refocused between the two, forcing her to see the roach, to examine it as it moved and explored his hand.

The roach fell.

It hit the floor and lay still with each leg folded over its abdomen.

Dead.

Lowering his hand, Azriel's face darkened, his eyes black as night. "Say it again," he commanded in a low voice.

Ella swallowed, struggling to whisper, "You don't know death."

He wet his lips. "I am Death."

Her gaze bounded between the dead roach and his face.

She shook her head, slightly at first, then faster. “No,” she said, stepping back. “That can’t be. No, if that were true, people would die everywhere.” She bumped the wall and pressed her shoulder and hip against it, her palm flat on the painted cinder block. “Everyone you touched.”

He shrugged. “I’m here among the dead. Nowhere else.” He reached for the discarded glove on the floor. “And like you,” he said, holding it up, “if there’s no contact, there’s no change.” He tossed it into the receptacle. “We are the same, you and I. I knew when you opened my cooler. Now you must find your realm,” he said, resting his hand on the corpse. “Just as I have found mine.” He pulled another set of gloves from the box and put them on before lifting his scalpel and working once more.

Ella stormed into the dark hallway, a flowing cape of dust and detritus stirring behind her as she strode toward the elevator to return to the clean, bright, white above. Her eyes adjusted to the blackness while the one erratic light blinked.

He wasn't Death. He was Dr. Judah Azriel, MD, pathologist, board certified in anatomic, clinical, and forensic pathology. He wasn't Death anymore than she was Life. He was mocking her. He was a bully. That's all he was. He would throw her in the dumpster or stomp on her glasses or jerk her pants down and show her granny panties to a crowd of kids while everyone laughed, just like all the other bullies had, day after day. Soon the bell would ring, and she'd be left to gather her scattered papers and bits of broken pencils and the soggy clumps of her bologna on white bread from behind the trash can. She should firmly and calmly ask him to stop and then report him to a teacher who definitely wouldn't brush her off and tell her to go to her seat and quit complaining, but she knew better. Snitches got stitches. Ratting only led to black eyes. She clenched her fist. She'd show him. She'd find that

stupid haven he talked about and show him how wonderful she could make things.

He had his enclave of death. Her bastion of life must be somewhere nearby where she could commute on the train with a briefcase and umbrella. She scratched her nose. Some found life in nature, but there were bugs out there, and she didn't like to sweat. Some found life in their families, but her mom had kicked her out when she was 16, and she didn't know who her dad was. Some found life in drugs, even entire new worlds and mind-blowing perspectives with brilliant colors and orgasmic sensations while snorting on mirrors or shooting up in abandoned houses on striped mattresses with large circular yellow stains, but she hated the foggy, helpless feeling they gave her, and hangovers never made anything like that seem worth it. Plus, she was broke. To get enough for drugs, she'd have to sleep with someone or save up her pay, and the first option was gross and the second would take weeks because the landlord took his share. Finding the fountain of life is more difficult with a low credit score.

Ella climbed atop an old stretcher with a black rubber mattress. The dry-rotted edges scraped her palms as she sat and leaned forward, watching her boots swing back and forth. She stared at the ceiling and counted the tiles. One had been pushed out of place and propped diagonally above the others, revealing a dark abyss crisscrossed with black and red wires.

A line of three large specimen jars sat on a shelf behind her. She lifted one with both hands. Inside floated a gray organ of some kind with a large assortment of dryer lint. A growth bulged from one side that looked bad, but she didn't

know what it was supposed to look like so maybe that was as normal as something in a jar could be. It couldn't have much going for it at this point. She put it back.

The speaker in the ceiling played "Happy Birthday" on a glockenspiel. Each tone wisped through the air. "Happy birthday to you," she whispered. "Happy birthday, dear—"

She knew where life came from.

Ella pressed her nose against the window, her hands on either side of her face, fingers spread. Bassinets, arranged in rows, angled toward her with little swaddled lumps in the center of each. She rubbed the fog of her breath off the glass with her sleeve, then looked again. So many little life bombs. If Dr. Azriel thrived among the dead, then here, surrounded by new life from concentrate, with or without pulp, she could be a superhero standing atop the hospital with a red sequined leotard over blue tights and leather gloves and a sparkling diamond tiara and white boots with spiky heels she never tripped on. People would cry, “Look! There’s Ella!” but they would say it in such a way that it sounded like a good thing and not like something disgusting.

Her ID badge got her through the door, and the nursery smelled like a hospital dunked in baby shampoo and spit up.

A bassinet shook as its occupant wailed the high, strident screams of someone thrown into a world of air and texture and fluorescent lighting. Ella shuffled forward and rested her fingertips on the curled plastic edge. Her lips softened. Even

lumpy, red gremlins could be cute in some ways. She liked its quivering bottom lip.

She lifted the baby as it continued to cry, and she tucked the soft, striped blanket around it before clasping the bundle close to her chest. Her heart warmed and fluttered. With gentle, curved fingers, she brushed the fuzzy, blond hair from the little forehead. The wails dissipated, losing energy, and faded, until with a final hiccup, the baby rested in her arms, quiet and calm, slowly blinking its eyes.

This was what she needed. A baby. She thought carefully, step by step. She still had her doll cradle. It was almost the right size. She could feed it milk from a can and vegetables from the community garden that she mushed with a spoon. She would rock it to sleep at night and sing lullabies. It would be her haven. She would thrive. She hummed the tune of a folk ballad that wove the tale of a woman thrown into the river by her lover.

“You!” a voice shouted. “What are you doing there!”

A woman in pink scrubs stood in the doorway, her hand atop a red button on the wall.

Ella looked down at the baby. “It was crying,” she said. “But not anymore.”

The nurse walked forward with slow steps, her arms extended before her. “Let me have the baby.”

Ella hummed. It was such a beautiful, tragic song. Every phrase had been composed in a major key, but it was so slow and the words so sad that it felt like a minor key upon hearing.

“Thank you for your help with the baby,” the nurse said,

smiling widely. Her eyes didn't crinkle. "Now, please. Please hand him to me."

Ella knew more songs.

The nurse bowed up, her eyes wide. "You must give him to me now!"

No one in the entire damn hospital understood anything.

A rumble grew from the hall. Dark outlines moved at the window.

John burst through the door. "Ella! What the hell are you doing?"

The nurse swooped toward her and seized the baby, then ran back to a corner.

Ella gasped as two more nurses ran into the room, a pink posse, lassos a'twirlin' and spurs a'clinkin'. They positioned themselves between her and the other bassinets, their arms outstretched, protecting their baby supply.

Ella moved her mouth but couldn't find words.

"What are you doing?" John demanded again.

"It was crying," Ella said. "It's not now."

Others crowded the doorway, leaning over shoulders, craning their necks to see the spectacle. Dr. Azriel sifted his way through, his hands shoved into his pockets, a few feminine eyes lingering on his chest and shoulders which he brushed away like so much dust.

Ella smiled, warm to see him. "Tell them," she said. "You know why I'm here."

John snapped his head toward Azriel. "What's she talkin' about?"

Dr. Azriel shrugged.

Ella gaped, stunned. She stared at his black eyes as they

absorbed the light around him. Her breath grew ragged as her anger built. She stomped her foot. “You know exactly why!” He could fix this. He could explain. He could make all the awkwardness go away until they were all laughing and the nurses looped their arms through her elbows and invited her for a slushie in the hospital cafeteria.

“Just tell us!” John said.

Azriel’s lips remained still. He maintained his impassive expression, revealing nothing, his accursed hands shoved into his pockets. She wanted to grab them and show them to everyone. Then they would know. Then they would see how special she was, and they would like her.

The nurse in the corner had checked the baby over and nodded to the others before rewrapping it and rocking it in her arms.

“It was crying,” Ella repeated. “It’s not now.”

“You can’t steal babies!” John shouted. A baby in a bassinet awoke and cried out.

“I didn’t steal it!” Ella said over the cries, grabbing her ponytail with both hands and twisting it.

A pink lady lowered her shoulders. “Accusing her of kidnapping is a bit much, isn’t it?” she said. “I mean, she just picked up a baby. She didn’t leave.”

“In a secure area!” another nurse said in a whiney, high-pitched voice.

Dr. Azriel inhaled deeply, a movement that drew all eyes to him. “It’s not a secure area if we can all just walk in.” He approached the bassinet where the crying baby lay and reached out his bare hands. “And it’s only compassionate to pick up a crying baby when—”

“No!” Ella shrieked.

He paused and looked over at her with daring eyes. A sly smile played at the corner of his mouth.

“We aren’t supposed to pick them up,” Ella said quietly. “If I can’t, you can’t.”

“I’ll get her,” the pink nurse said, bustling to the bassinet and scooping up the baby. She held it to her shoulder and patted. “I’m allowed.”

Dr. Azriel shrugged once more and shoved his hands back into his pocket. With an upward nod to John, he strolled from the room.

“Everyone out!” the first pink nurse said. “Everyone!”

The crowd at the door muttered as they melted away, dissolving into the floors and walls as the Kool-Aid was stirred in the pitcher. Only the excess sugar remained, stubbornly swirling at the bottom, a problem when only using cold water.

“Get out in the hall,” John growled.

Ella slumped behind him. The door closed heavily. Her nose and hand prints remained on the glass.

“You’ve lost the final dregs of your fucking insane mind,” he said in a low voice he forced through his gritted teeth. His lips were chapped. She had some chapstick in her locker. Cherry flavored. But it was used, so it had germs. Sometimes not sharing is better.

“I didn’t do anything,” she said.

He shook his head and mushed his lips together with his chin wrinkled. “I can’t put you back on a truck. I’m not going to.”

“But my shift isn’t over.”

“Then finish it out in the damn emergency room!”

He walked past her, down the hall, and slammed his hands into the emergency bar on the stairwell door. It clanged behind him.

19

Ella returned the wheelchair to its corner in the waiting room after having assisted a plump, middle-aged woman into her car. The woman had been fussing about the four-hour wait in triage, then the three-hour wait in the hallway, only for the doctor to tell her that her stomach pain was due to period cramps and prescribe her Tylenol. Ella had held her hands and patted her shoulder as she shifted on the leather seat of her Lexus, and the woman had thanked her for such a wonderful time at the hospital—a wonderful institution it was, indeed—and said she was happy to have received such kind and compassionate attention from everyone involved in her care. Ella liked everyone when everyone liked her.

The nurse closed the warmer and handed her a blanket. “Take this to Radzeski in room two.”

Ella stared at the door with the numeral two written on the plastic sign like Radzeski had been carved on the stone. She swallowed and pushed on the latch. The lights in the room, usually so bright, had been shut off. Only the night light on the wall behind the bed was lit. The kid from the cemetery lay in the bed, his body still, his face like one of Dr.

Azriel's corpses. His shallow breathing barely lifted his chest, and even that was soon hidden as Ella arranged the blanket over him. It was all too easy.

She dug for his arm under the covers and clasped his hand, shaping her lips into a sweet smile, the first thing he would see when he awoke.

He twitched and grimaced, his face contorting and his lips retracting to reveal his chipped and yellowed teeth. His arms thrashed, and his hand jerked from her grasp. He moaned a low continuous sound, bumpy and ragged, a gravel road by a rain culvert. When the air had left him, the moan reversed, shifting gears, increasing in pitch and whine and volume until, with lungs filled, his breath changed once more, exhaling into a cry that grew as his eyes widened and bulged. His fingers curled into claws that scratched the bed rails. They gripped and grabbed and bent his elbows, curling him upward, his scream quickening into shrieks echoed by alarms on the monitor.

Ella stepped backward with small steps, her eyes never blinking. He was not happy. Not at all. She had never seen such a wild expression of pain.

A nurse in blue ran into the room. "What's going on?" She pushed by Ella to punch buttons on the IV pump. "Simon!" she called into the boy's face as she took his shoulders. "Simon, listen to me! It's okay!"

Another nurse stuck her head into the room. "What do you need?"

"Fentanyl," the first nurse said. "All of it."

The second nurse nodded and left.

Ella clasped her hands together and propped her chin on them. "But he's an addict," she whispered.

The nurse swung around. "Of course he is!" she hissed. "He has stage 4 testicular cancer!"

The young man dropped back on the mattress and sobbed in agony as he writhed with pain.

"Just a moment longer, Simon," the nurse said, dropping to her knees to look into his face. Her soothing voice flowed over his screams. "Jenny's getting something now." She shook her head and looked up at Ella. "I don't know what happened. He was resting comfortably. He's been fine on the meds all day." She took a washcloth from the linen cabinet and, after wetting it, placed it on Simon's forehead. "Fuck cancer," she muttered.

Jenny returned with the fentanyl and soon the stillness returned, this one, unlike the first, with wet faces and the smell of sweat. The nurses exchanged relieved glances, then left the room. Ella remained, standing in the corner, watching Simon as his eyes blinked slowly, just as the infant's had while resting in her arms.

She held her hands behind her as she hazarded a step forward, toward the bed.

"I'm sorry," she said.

His eyes slid to hers, then away.

Ella hung her head and turned to leave.

"This happened...yesterday," he whispered.

She looked back. His eyes had rested on her.

"C-Cemetery," he stuttered through the white gunk on his lips.

The weave on the blanket looked like a waffle without syrup, hundreds of tiny waffle squares, white, straight from the freezer, still connected and ready to toast.

He took a choked breath. "I want to die."

"You—" Ella said, stepping forward, "You wanted to die, but now you don't. That's what people say. That's what they say when they're saved."

He grimaced and shifted his head slightly as though wanting to shake it. "No."

"Yes," she insisted. "You're glad to live."

"I have," he began, then paused to swallow, "no more life left."

"That's no reason to die."

She wished he would just yell. No more of this talk.

His lids lowered, and he puffed a breath before smacking his lips a few times. "Wanted to be with Dad."

She tipped her head back with a weak laugh. "You're a young man. Young men don't die. You'll go on to—"

"We die," he whispered. "Soldiers. Accidents. Fucking cancer." He coughed twice, then once more. "Everyone dies. Choose a reason."

She wrung her hands. He sounded an awful lot like Dr. Azriel. She glanced over her shoulder at the door to make sure no one was listening to this terrible conversation. "But you could die naturally. As an old man." And with that statement she knew she was trapped. She had bent to his statement, allowed it to stand, and the trap had dropped around her with metallic clang and no matter where she pushed there was no way out.

"Death by nature," he wheezed. "Used to be...rare...but

still a choice. Always choice...I must choose. I'll choose what I want."

Her skin crawled. She rubbed her arms, scratching with her nails, leaving red marks before smearing her hands up her neck and pulling the hair at her temples. "What do you want?" she asked, retching with her words.

His nose quivered and wrinkled. He set his jaw and narrowed his eyes. With short gasps, he slid his hands to his sides, turning his elbows out, and pushed himself up to sit and lean forward toward her. He winced as his face turned red, building with pressure. "I want to die with my Dad!" he roared before collapsing back to the bed and rolling to his side, his body wracked with coughs. As the alarms rang, Ella ran from the room.

20

Ella pressed her back to the hallway wall as the nurse ran by her into Simon's room. Her hand fumbled for the latch of the door next to her, and she slunk inside, hiding and peering through the crack. As the hall settled, she closed the door completely and leaned her forehead on it.

"Are you the one who is bringing the ice pack?" a woman's voice asked.

Her heart hammering, Ella swung around to see a small woman in a flowered house dress sitting on the side of the bed with her narrow ankles crossed. Her short, curly hair framed her face which displayed large bruises across her once delicate features. In particular, her left eye sank into a mass of swollen tissue such that the eyeball was only visible through a tiny crack in the flesh. It had had time to grow.

"I'd really like one," the woman said.

Ella stared. "No. I don't have one."

They blinked at each other, as much as the other woman could blink.

"I can get one," Ella said.

The woman nodded.

Ella floated to the utility room for a zipper bag and held it to the ice machine as it whirred and plunked crescent cubes-that-weren't-cubes into the bag. She slid her fingers across the zipper, but it gaped. She slid again. It gaped. Again, and it gaped. She rolled the bag on itself and tucked it into a towel, then floated back, her feet bobbing before her, her head leaning into the water to look at the sky as the clouds and the canopy of tree branches drifted past, accompanied by the sound of the approaching cataract.

"My husband," the woman said, taking the towel-wrapped ice and nodding her thanks.

"Pardon?" Ella said.

"Most people want to know but don't want to ask," the woman said. "My husband hit me. We have money problems. Credit cards. Loans. He gets angry."

Ella pressed her lips together and nodded. She didn't know what to say and didn't really care. "I'm sorry."

"When he gets angry, he drinks," the woman said. "When he drinks, he hits."

Ella nodded, picking at her pants, then moved toward the door.

"I'm not really sorry he got in that wreck last night."

Ella slowly turned back. "A wreck? Last night?"

The woman lifted her eyebrows, more her right than her left. "They thought he was dead, then somehow he came back. A miracle, they said. He's in ICU now, wracking up the medical bills. Might be two million when all is said and done. Two million more in debt." She stood and walked forward, one shaking step, then two. Her hand shot forward and

seized Ella's. "Imagine what this miracle will do to me now!" The woman's right eye widened, a clear white ring around her brown iris. Her mouth grinned, widening beyond mirth, every molar revealed around her writhing tongue. "Imagine!"

Panic rose within Ella, and she frantically jerked against the woman's grip, trying to peel her hands off.

"A miracle!" the woman cackled, casting her arms outward. Ella broke her grip and fled. "A miracle!"

21

Ella slammed the door, still hearing the woman's cries from inside.

"Ella! Get your ass over here!" John yelled across the ER. "We got a call!"

Relief poured over her. This she knew. This was normal. This would be on a truck, on a street, with a siren and not in this horrible hallway with doors that led to terror. With a deep breath and a smile, she maneuvered down the hallway toward him, glad all the weird and strange was over and behind her. She was more than ready to return to the world of driving and insults.

"Thanks for taking me back on the truck," she said. "I don't like it here."

"It's only a fucking non-emergency transport. That's why."

"Oh. Still."

John stepped to the side to reveal a wheelchair where a man sat, a man who had once been a textbook case. "Recognize him?" John asked. "He coded the other day."

Ella nodded, but barely, her head moving in a small rhythmic twitch. The man's gray hair lay mussed over a face with

blank eyes, jowls covered with salt-and-pepper stubble, and thick lips, caked with crust, that dropped to one side. His body ballooned in fat rolls over the arms of the wheelchair, and his blue hospital gown cut at the knee to show his pale legs, now red with inflammation and bloated with edema. A string of saliva dripped from his lip and pooled on his stomach.

“His heart’s perfect,” John said, balancing his laptop on his forearm and tapping Medicare details on the keyboard, “but his brain function is gone. Can’t talk. Can’t feed himself. He’ll never wipe his own ass again.”

Ella’s boots were filled with lead, her hands encased with iron. Simon’s screams began anew, flecked with the cackles of miracles, as saliva dripped, dripped across a lumpy chin. This was what she had wrought.

John snapped the laptop shut. “Let’s go.” He took the handles of the chair, then paused.

His brow furrowed. His eyes shifted from side to side in surprise and sensation. He slowly lifted one hand and curled it into a fist that he placed reverently on his heart before stumbling back and leaning on the wall, his face red, his eyes wide.

“John?” Ella said. “Are you okay?”

He sank downward, sliding on the wall, then moved his gaze to hers. “Ge-Get the nurse,” he wheezed as he gripped his shirt.

Their eyes remained locked. Torturous shrieks from the long hallway covered the sound of her panting breath. She was the one to blink first, to break their connection and sever their tie. She turned her palms upward to stare at her trembling, powerful fingers. She could heal him. Finally, he would

like her. John. John, the only one who remained in her life. He was surly and mean, but he was reliable and predictable when nothing and no one else in the world was. She glanced over her shoulder at the hallway that continued, that rang with shrieks and cries. She stepped past the wheelchair with its drooping occupant and reached toward John. Toward her friend. For that's what he was. Her only friend in a messed up, backward, hurtful world.

He bowed up and bared his teeth. "Don't you touch me!" he growled, his boots scrambling for purchase on the vinyl floor to raise him higher on the wall. "Your nasty hands! Keep them away!"

"John, please," she said. "Let me help you."

"You!" he croaked. "You listen here! If you were the last damn medic on this entire fucking earth, I wouldn't want you to help me! You're a stupid, lame-brained dope, and God-awful ugly, and I'd rather die than be subject to you! Do you hear me? I'd rather die!"

Deep within her, a flame went out, snuffed in one moment with only a wisp of pungent smoke and a single tear on her cheek to show she ever existed.

"Get the fucking nurse!" he said as he dropped unconscious to the floor.

At the desk, she told them and saw them run, some with hands controlling the bobbing stethoscopes at their necks, some pushing the crash cart into the hall and leaving it next to the wheelchair. They called out orders and lifted John to a stretcher. One started compressions.

The screams from room two grew louder. She flung her head to the side to shake them loose, but they clanged like

marbles against metal as the jack-in-the-box played plinking circus music, the monkey chased the weasel, and the woman with the black eye popped out, spinning with wild glee. “Another miracle! Another miracle!” And she threw back her head and howled with laughter as Ella pressed her hands over her ears and bent at her waist.

22

Ella slammed the morgue door and remained fixed in place. She heard nothing behind her, had seen nothing upon entering, but she knew he was there. He was always there, and he would be now. She dropped her hands to her side and turned.

He stood behind the table as she had suspected, a scalpel in his hand which hovered over a fresh corpse. He, too, was motionless, his black, lightless eyes on her, his jaw set.

She walked to his side—he lowered the scalpel at her approach—and they stood before each other, still and silent, anticipating. Her breath marked time. She saw the feeling of it, the rise and fall, the warm exhale, and felt the sensation of her eyes in her skull. The moment grew too real as though she observed her life and all the universe from outside of it, from nothing, from the point where meaning meets oblivion and she beyond even that.

“I ruined everything,” she said. “I always do.”

“Death is not mocked.”

“They didn’t deserve to die!” She cringed. “Not all of them.”

“It’s not a decision you should make.”

“We always argue with Death!” she cried, looking up at his face. “We take antibiotics! Perform surgery!”

“Negotiations are different from overriding the decision. You weren’t negotiating. You weren’t even arguing, or debating, or cajoling. You rendered Death irrelevant, when you have now seen all too clearly that Death is a critical element of Life.”

“It’s not! It’s not relevant. It’s not purposeful. It’s random and bad!”

“Nothing is always bad. Nothing is always good. Not you, nor I, nor what we stand for.”

She wriggled her toes in her boots and furrowed her brow. “It’s me. I ruin everything.”

“It’s not just you.”

They faced each other, Raphaella and Azriel, the scalpel abandoned, their hands resting at their sides. She stared straight ahead, level, at his chest. A stray fiber escaped from the weave of his scrubs. She lifted her bare fingertips to it and flicked it away. He started from her touch, but his blue hands failed to prevent her.

Narrowing her eyes, she rested her palm, her entire hand, on his chest, his warmth seeping through the green. She tipped her head. He was solid. His breath, too, rose and fell, lifting her hand with its movement, the relentless drum of time beating a vibration under her fingers.

Ella slid her hand up his chest to his throat, her fingers touching his bare skin. Razor-sharp cold sliced through her arm to her shoulder, a bitter chill flooding outward and filling her tissues with ice. Both acting. Both melding.

His voice sounded, some groan of surprise and angry

relief as he shuddered. She slipped her hand to the back of his neck. Warmth spilled across her, radiating to her face, and she ran her thumb along his jaw, even as his expression contorted from shock to anger, his brows dropping and pushing together, his lips retracting from gritted teeth.

Blue gloves grasped her shoulders, his grip digging into her flesh, but she scrambled up, her boots on his knees, and flung her arms about his neck, clinging to him and squeezing his cheek against hers, wrapping her legs about his waist, and crushing her body against his as the destructive burning heat built within her arms and hands and face, skin against skin.

“You idiot! Get off!” he shouted, plucking at her hips, yet she stuck fast as they tumbled toward the table.

Heat swirled with cold, and an undercurrent emerged, bubbling into her consciousness, a bitter, raw, inky darkness confronting a feverish shine. It poured forth, gurgling up, spilling over her muscles and joints. His wild, waving movements upset the instrument tray—it cracked on the floor, scalpels and excised tissue flying—but the table blocked his fall, their entwined bodies shoving the corpse to the very edge where the head and torso tipped over the side and the remaining limbs followed as it dropped to the floor to lie in a disjointed pile of bare ribs and skin flaps. Still, she did not release, only adhered herself tighter as searing heat surged through her hands. They tingled and throbbed, bound up and wrapped around the icy currents and murky, frightening shadows.

Ella, still pressing her cheek against his, moved her face until they were nose to nose, his light stubble scratching her skin as she slid. Their eyes locked, and he continued to

sputter, his hands grabbing at her body. She clung tighter, desperate to hold contact, as he clawed at her grip and pried with his elbow in her ribs.

Her lips met his, matching with open surprise as she kissed him. Nausea crashed over her, plunging her body into a frigid pool. Her muscles cramped, her arms and legs, and she screamed with shock and pain and cold. Each moment left her heavier as life drained. Her limbs curled.

Azriel's body heaved, and he held his hand before his face as a glowing pink line traveled across his flesh.

Ella's strength collapsed. No longer able to cling to him, she sank to the floor. Pain and piercing cold devoured her limbs, and buzzing filled her ears as her eyelids closed.

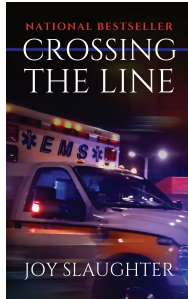
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JOY SLAUGHTER

Joy Slaughter worked for county- and hospital-based emergency medical services and a state EMS office. She holds bachelor degrees in both psychology and public health as well as international credentials in logotherapy and existential analysis. She and her husband, Alan, have seven phenomenal children. Joy is currently working as a philosophical counselor and writes when she can slip away.

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#1 AMAZON BESTSELLER

CROSSING THE LINE

A combat medic falls for his paramedic partner, but a rogue cop threatens to tear them apart.

Sergeant Nathan Thompson lost his leg in Afghanistan. Megan hides a secret. When they are assigned as a paramedic team, tempers flare. He thinks she's a condescending know-it-all, and she resents a partner she can't trust. Then he notices bruises on her arms, and her excuses don't add up. The next life Nathan must save may be that of his own partner.