

# **EMBRYO 3: Raney & Levine**

A novel

by J.A. Schneider

(Plot: Someone is trying to kill Jill and David, but is it someone from inside the hospital or some nut job from outside?)

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To Bob as always, my husband, and an endlessly patient physician who loves explaining medical concepts which I interweave as I write.

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# 1.

“Dead bodies ahead.”

Allie Dodd cringed. She considered herself a strong woman, but yesterday’s first day in the anatomy lab nearly undid her. She was still feeling queasy.

She’d been a chemistry major, had so far avoided most of the squishy bits of biology in her education. *But this was it. Dissecting cadavers time, day two.* She followed her group through the short hall, her fists clenched in her scrub pockets, trying to focus on last week’s no-sweat class lectures. Welcome to your first course of your first term of your first year of medical school. Here are your new books and surgical tools. This is how you hold a scalpel. Watch these videos. Choose three lab partners.

Hearing about an experience isn’t the same as actually doing it. Ha, no kidding!

Now, someone ahead opened the double-swinging doors, and Allie followed into the big white room of thirty dead bodies. She shuddered. The first thing that hit her, like yesterday, was the acrid sick smell of embalming fluid. *Pleese don’t let me humiliate myself.* The next thing was the room’s chill. She’d worn an old sweatshirt under her scrubs. Rubbed goose pimples on her arms, felt herself already turning green.

But stayed steady, tried to anyway, when one of her lab partners named Jay Fleming called to her from their appointed cadaver. The dear boy was one of those eager beaver types, “stoked to be starting!” Already latex-gloved, pulling back the cadaver’s black tarpaulin and peeking under the gauze wrapped around the body’s head.

“C’mon, Allie, you’ll get used to it,” he said a bit impatiently; and her second partner, wise guy Aaron Smith, made it worse by saying, “Just don’t faint into the bucket.”

The bucket. Oh why’d he have to say that? *Don’t look, don’t look...*

She couldn’t help it. Allie’s eyes dropped to the damned thing. Her stomach rolled at the orange biohazard bucket under the table to catch falling pieces of human skin and fat. There was already mush in it from yesterday.

The room spun. Was full of orange bio-buckets under every table.

“She’s not gonna faint,” snapped Allie’s third partner, Tara Wicks, who shot her a warning look: *Don’t let them call us wimps.*

All three of them were already at work. Allie steeled herself and got to it. Don't be stupid, she thought. This was so important, wasn't it? The chance to learn about the human body without the pressure of life and death? Her hand shook as her scalpel made its first cut. And then another. Maybe this wasn't so bad, she thought, trying to calm. In a way the cadaver didn't even seem like a real person, though she knew it had been a man. But now the skin was hard and rubbery, and a weird color of brownish-pinkish-grey.

Yesterday they'd made their first cuts in the standard H-shape. The first one from left to right at the top of the chest, under the clavicle; the next straight down the midline to below the ribcage; and the last horizontally under the bottom of the ribcage. They'd wait a bit before lifting the ribs. Allie was still holding her breath, but working was starting to make her feel better. She was doing it! Holding a scalpel and helping to dissect! Cutting through skin flaps, seeing muscles, nerves and blood vessels, vaguely hearing Tara mutter dammit, they'd gotten a fat one, had the extra work of cutting through layers of icky fat.

"Time to raise the hood," Jay Fleming said. He put his gloved fingers into the bottom incision they'd made yesterday, and started to lift the ribs.

"Need the cutter," he said, and Aaron fired up the bone saw; cut through the bigger ribs.

The saw's screech and the smell of bones being cut was awful. Allie's chin dropped down. Yesterday's nausea was back, big time, rising in her gorge.

Peripherally she saw Jay lift the ribs, and peer with Aaron and Tara into the thoracic cavity. For a half second, stunned silence.

Then, screaming.

"Holy shit!" and "Oh Jeezus!" as all three leaped back from the table.

*Wha...?*

Allie peered in. Terror blurred her vision as the snake, twisted into a knot between the heart and lungs, sprang from the corpse, slid down to the table and then to the floor.

More screaming, yelling. Scrubs at adjoining tables saw and froze in horror. Allie sank to the floor, clutching her belly. The snake was only feet away. Black and semi-coiled by the next table's wheel.

She was aware of Tara kneeling to her, clutching her arm, and Jay too on her other side with Aaron over him yelling something, but it was too late, the vomit came. Allie lurched for the bio-bucket and heaved. Cried too, wept bitterly. Some sicko had shown up her weakness, her lack of nerve. She'd never last here. All those years of studying and struggling and losing sleep, and *she was finished, done...*

They were calling to her but she didn't hear. She was crying her eyes out, and retching again.

He came at a fast walk. Faster than his overweight old bones usually moved, because this didn't look like the usual newbie hurler, they were all yelling.

One of them had the vile thing and was holding it up. Black and twisting, about three feet long. Revolted faces searched his as student Aaron Smith carefully handed it to him.



“Son of a bitch,” breathed Carl Hutchins, M.D., PhD. Well this beat anything he’d seen in his thirty years of teaching anatomy. He held the snake with both gloved hands, his face grim.

Then his gaze fell to the miserable young woman, dry heaving now. Allie Dodd, her name was. He always took care to learn their names.

Gripping the snake in one hand and adjusting his wire-rimmed glasses, he knelt – painfully, oh, the knees – put his free arm around her, and lay the damned thing on the floor where she could see it.

“It’s okay, Allie,” he comforted. “*It’s fake*. Made of rubber. Someone’s cruel prank.” He pounded the snake with his fist, and it bounced.

Her face was pale, clammy, and the back of her scrub suit was drenched in sweat. But he’d seen her in orientation. She was a spirited, determined girl.

One more dry heave. Then she looked up, still clinging to the bucket like a life preserver, and peeked worriedly at the snake. “*Rubber?*” she managed.

“Yeah. Someone’s disgusting...joke.” Hutch hoped none of them crowding anxiously around caught the hesitation in his voice.

Only, Jay Fleming was bending over him and scowling at the snake. “So bleeping *real* looking,” he said. “Cripes, what’s those *other* things near its head? They look like worms. One, two, three...jeez, six of ‘em.”

“Rubber worms,” Hutch said evasively. He didn’t want to scare them with what he was thinking.

Jay reached to pat Allie’s arm. She was sitting straighter on the floor, but looking crushed, just mortified. “C’mon Al, it’s okay. I puked into a fetal pig once. *They made me hose it down.*”

Her swollen eyes peered up at him. Glanced at Professor Hutchins, then back to Jay.

“You hadda hose it down?”

“Yeah. And I puked *again!*”

She grinned feebly, and scrubs around them laughed. Yuks erupted over personal episodes of losing it.

“Okay, okay, back to work,” Hutch said, giving Allie’s shoulder a final encouraging squeeze. He picked up the wretched snake and rose with difficulty, one hand gripping the stainless steel table with his knees screaming in pain. Aaron Smith helped him.

Allie pulled herself up too. Shakily.

“Want to take a break?” Hutch asked her. “Grab a shower?”

She gave a wan yes and thanked him, saying she’d be back ASAP.

“That’s the spirit,” Hutch said, watching her go, watching the others file back to their tables and get to work.

*Now he could fret.*

He carried the snake to the tall window, and fingered it. It looked so real: black, semi-coiled, the skin scaly with three light stripes along its length. Hutch pulled at it, stretched it, coiled it tightly.

Then put it coiled onto the wide sill and let go. It sprang open, seemed to dart, as they’d described it jerking from the cadaver.

And the rubber worms sewn near its head weren’t worms at all.

They were fake baby snakes.

Which made it a seven-headed snake.

He'd grown up in the projects; had had some crazy raving Baptists in his family. Was this what he feared? Or a cruel prank based on it? He picked up the snake again, held it up to the late afternoon light. Someone had gone to trouble sewing on the baby snakes' heads. Black thread, and what had to have been an upholstery needle, something like that, to push through the rubber.

Worriedly, Hutch looked out the window. The anatomy lab was on the first floor of the med school, across the wide Emergency entrance with its ambulances, police cars, and – today – a crowd pressing against the police line guarding the hospital entrance. TV vans lined the avenue behind the reporters, cheering advocates, and protesters.

It was the protesters who bothered him. Today was a big day for the hospital, and people had come running. The crowd bristled with signs and placards.

One of the signs, garish and jostling furiously, read SPAWN OF THE DEVIL. Its owner had a megaphone and was yelling into it, arguing too with those near him.

The sign troubled Hutch.

It troubled him bad.

## 2

### *Do stalkers ever quit?*

Jill Raney saw the frightening sign too. From where she stood, holding Jesse in his blue blanket by the neonatal window, she peered down at the jumping placard. *SPAWN OF THE DEVIL*, it screamed in angry, painted letters dripping red.

Today was the day of Madison Memorial's big announcement. That Jesse was *here*, born, and oh, such frenzy down there by the entrance. A photo of Jesse with a smiling nurse holding him was all over cyberspace and the world's papers.

Jill had dreaded this day.

He weighed barely eight pounds. Hard to believe he was the cause of the chaos five floors below. He slept happily, his tiny fist curled to his cheek as the reporters, gawkers, thrilled advocates, and hollering protesters surged behind the cop line holding them back.

"Déjà vu, huh?" David came to whisper over Jill's shoulder. He sounded tired. Tense too.

Jill didn't answer. She was feeling bad, almost crying bad. Her eyes welled and the corners of her mouth turned down as she thought, *I love this baby*. She had named him Jesse, and for now that's what they were calling him.

*For now...* The words came back to her, and she felt a worse downpress of pain. Guilt too, and a trembly feeling of being terribly alone.

Last night she and David had their first argument.

It was four o'clock on the second Monday in October. Sixteen days after they'd lifted Jesse, wet with amniotic-like fluid, from the silicone cylinder a crazy genius had created for him to serve as a man-made uterus. The media was going nuts because today, after two plus weeks of monitoring him in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, world-famous Madison Memorial Hospital was showing him to the world. This miracle child who wasn't just any IVF baby, started in a Petri dish and transferred to a woman's body.

No, Jesse was the astonishing fetus Jill had discovered last July in a hidden lab, in what at first blink had looked like a rounded fish tank. ARTIFICIAL WOMB, blared headlines as the news hit; DESIGNER BABY, EMBRYO FARM and BRAVE NEW WORLD. Creepy blurry pictures of him, floating in his cylinder at six months gestation, were snapped by staff rushing in to the nearly dark attic where Jill had found him.

And almost died. David too. They were both almost killed.

She blinked; for an instant saw herself again bloodied and screaming and David hauling her back to safety. Trauma had bonded them, fast. Had it happened too fast?

She still felt tense with him, but the awful sign below made her speak.

“See that one?” she said faintly, tipping her chin down to the crowd, to the *SPAWN OF THE DEVIL* sign.

The guy holding the sign had his megaphone turned up; through the glass they could hear him screaming “...the arrogance of taking the place of the Creator! *That child up there is evil!*”

David let out a breath. “Yep,” he said softly. “Nice, huh? Just one religious nut.”

She turned her head toward him. “About last night...”

“It’s okay. We’ll talk later.”

He stepped closer, nuzzled the back of her neck. She had her long, dark hair up in a ponytail. His white-jacketed chest warmed her back in its thin scrub top. She closed her eyes for a second.

Then looked out again, hugging Jesse.

“The cops are taping?”

“You know it. And hospital security.”

It didn’t comfort her. Last July an army of cops and security hadn’t kept a killer from Jesse. After *that* crisis came three months of relative quiet...and now, suddenly, the scene down there was back...like last July’s sweltering crowds when Jesse’s discovery lit its first firestorm. Had people saved their same signs? THANK YOU MADISON MEMORIAL FOR OUR FAMILY jostled next to IVF IMMORAL, and ADOPT AN EMBRYO. The only difference now was, the leaves were turning. It was autumn and the days were shorter. Jill raised her gaze. Beyond the surging mess of disagreeing humanity glowed the first bright dabs of gold and orange, tinted even brighter by the setting sun...

“Doctor Levine?”

“Damn,” David whispered. “How many more?”

“Never ending,” she groaned back.

He touched her arm and went back to today’s bunch of researchers, white-coated and intense, grouped scribbling and conferring around Jesse’s empty isolette. Three days ago the hospital had started allowing excited researchers in in small groups. Jill and David were obstetricians, not pediatricians, but the hospital had assigned them to speak with researchers because they’d seen and *interacted* with this child since three months before his birth.

Just two hours each afternoon, but it was getting old. The same astonished questions asked and answered, over and over. Couldn’t they just all wait for the hospital’s Chief of Pediatrics et al to write their damn paper and get it online?

No. They begged and besieged, just had to see the babe. Poke him and prod him and study his normal chart notes for themselves. Miraculous! Lungs...heart...every organ and neurological response normal! *Gestated nine months outside a woman’s body!*

Jill glanced briefly back at them. Today, three neonatologists from Texas, a pediatric neurologist from Boston, and a pediatric hematologist from London.

*Drone...drone...* Jill tuned them out. Tuned out David too, answering the same bleeping questions as yesterday and the day before. She was back to looking out the window, thinking not for the first time that he was a much nicer person. She was rash and impatient. He was an explainer, a patient teacher who rarely had to show his tough side...which was why he was OB's third year resident charged with teaching younger residents and Jill's fellow interns.

He was her boss, they slept together, and she loved him...*say it*...but it led to some interesting minor wrangling.

Not that last night was minor.

"I want to adopt him!" trilled the blond pediatric neurologist ("Corinne! Call me Reenie!"), who wore too much perfume. Jill made a face that no one saw, then heard an annoyed, "*Git in line.*"

Tricia!

Chubby-cheeked, bespectacled Tricia Donovan, fellow intern and Jill's best friend since med school, had just entered the NICU from the connecting regular nursery; was heading for Jill and waving to David.

His handsome face split into a grin. "Hey Trish! How'd the delivery go? The twins throw you?"

"Nah. Sam caught one and I caught the other. Slid right down da chute."

David grinned again and went back to the white coats. Tricia, reaching Jill, whispered, "Admiring the mad cow herd down there?"

"There's a sign--"

"Saw it. Came to check your fever chart. What's Jesse doing out of bed?"

"Blondie back there used a cold stethoscope on him. He started screaming. I scooped him out and calmed him down."

"Lemme guess. She researches and writes papers more than she handles babies."

"Uh-huh."

"She has donkey teeth."

David's voice was starting to sound hoarse, so Tricia turned to answer the next question for him.

"Yaaas, Jesse grinned and *waved* at us at twenty-four weeks gestation. Or flopped his hands, I guess you'd call it." She stepped closer to them, flopping her hands to show how hands flopped. "Did *something* like a wave."

"You saw him too?" asked one of the Texas neonatologists, a thin, older man behind thick glasses.

"Several of us visited him regularly." Tricia glanced at Jill, approaching too with Jesse. "When he wasn't asleep, we'd hug his cylinder and goof around and play music for him. He likes Beethoven."

"Beethoven," Texas repeated solemnly.

Jill said, "We tried the Stones, Clapton, 'Twist and Shout.' They made him agitated. But Beethoven - he'd do swimmy, dancing little motions to Beethoven's Violin Concerto, um--"

"Third Movement," Tricia said. "We just stumbled onto it. It's really happy music." She switched tacks. "What's really amazing is, till now we - all of us - have only been able to see fetuses in ultrasounds. This little guy we really *watched develop*. Other staff members did too."

“You took pictures?” a Texas white coat asked.

“Yes,” Jill said. “They’re in that folder we gave you. They’re not being released to the media, but they’ll be in a paper the OB and Pediatrics Departments are preparing together.” She started to put still-sleeping Jesse into his isolette.

David said, “Aw, lemme hold him.” She handed the blue-blanketed bundle to him and he cradled the infant, used his free right hand to pat the baby’s wisps of light brown hair.

Jill watched, feeling bereft, feeling Jesse’s warmth leave her arms. It was always a wrench, separating from him.

A second Texas neonatologist said, “But he isn’t waving and responding *now*. He’s mostly sleeping like any newborn.”

“His hemoglobin’s adjusting,” David said, and the London pediatric hematologist nodded eagerly. He wore a flowered tie, Nike running shoes, and was younger than the Texas trio.

“Before birth,” he said in his elegant British tones, “fetal blood absorbs oxygen more readily than ours because there’s less oxygen in the womb, and this tyke’s cylinder apparently duplicated the womb environment perfectly. Now he has to convert to adult-type hemoglobin like any newborn. It takes three months for a complete fetal hemoglobin turnover.”

“Plus, *everything’s* growing,” said blond Corinne emotionally. “Every cell and organ in his little body. That takes energy. Another reason why newborns sleep so much.” A hesitation. “Will you keep us updated on his development? *The first month especially?*”

Jill and Tricia traded looks. Saw Blondie gazing dewy-eyed at David. No surprise. He was gorgeous. Tall, rugged-looking, penetrating dark blue eyes, dark hair that kept falling over his brow.

And like everyone else, Blondie had seen him in news chopper footage shoot a killer dead on a roof. Now he was cuddling an infant, stroking the little cheek with his index finger. What woman wouldn’t get all dreamy-eyed?

“He’s going to be *absolutely* amazing,” Blondie crooned.

David shrugged. “Or maybe he’ll just be a regular kid.”

Tricia rolled her eyes, and Jill gave the woman a sour look. Gestured *enough of this*, and they went back to the window.

The scary sign was still down there, its owner still hollering into his megaphone.

“He’s gonna lose his voice,” Tricia whispered. “Be hoarse for a year.”

“Is insulin findable at autopsy?” Jill asked.

“Yes!” Tricia hissed low. “And you’re not going to sneak up and jab him dead.”

“What about morphine?”

“You know it is.” Tricia glanced up at her tall, slender friend, now frowning.

“Something I gotta ask. At breakfast and rounds you were all tight-lipped and barely spoke to David. Wassup?”

“We had words last night.”

“A whole three months before your first ‘words?’ *I* should have such a relationship. I should have *any* relationship.” Tricia had been trying to lose weight lately. It made her cranky.

Jill blew air out her cheeks.

“I’m also just so damned tired of being afraid,” she breathed. “Of jumping at every shadow or threatening creep.” She hesitated, then her face crumpled as she looked at Tricia. “It’s suddenly like last July again. The nut jobs are back.”

Tricia glanced over at the bored security guard the hospital had belatedly put *inside* the NICU, then looked back as if to say, See?

No sale. “And when Jesse leaves the hospital?” Jill’s voice was despondent. “Grows up or tries to?”

Tricia got it, fell silent, and Jill seemed to sink into a fit of abstraction. Behind them, the voices now droned about Clifford Arnett, M.D., PhD, former second-in-command of the hospital’s Genetic Counseling Committee, and world famous in reproductive endocrinology and infertility research.

Also surprise crazy genius who had built Jesse’s cylinder and put him in it, done other research both stunning and shocking.

Dead now. Fallen from the same roof on which David had fought him and shot to death his murdering assistant.

A Texas voice: “Immeasurable tragedy. Brains and talent like that...”

London: “But he started out nobly?”

David: “So it seems. He wanted to increase immunity, delete inherited disease, and prolong life. His notes say he could snip cystic fibrosis and multiple sclerosis right out of the embryonic DNA. He didn’t say how.”

“He *must* have kept further lab notes.” Corinne’s voice.

“Somewhere. We’re still looking. He worked in an attic with a million nooks and crannies. Workmen have pulled it apart, and his regular lab-“

“Excuse me?” Jill had stepped back to them. “If you don’t need me,” she told David, “I’ll be moving along.”

“Where to?” His brow raised. He was still holding Jesse.

Tricia sidled up and said, “I’ll bet she wants to go assault that religious nut with the sign-“ and got a quick look from Jill: *Don’t*.

Too late. David handed Jesse to Tricia, explaining the SPAWN OF THE DEVIL sign. The others shook their heads, looked dismayed.

“Whackos,” said one of the Texas Three. “We’ve got lots of ‘em.”

“Catholics don’t even like IVF,” Corinne said. “But I’m Protestant. My pastor says God gave doctors the wisdom and ability to help people.”

The researchers thanked Jill as she headed out. To her annoyance David was at her heels, with Tricia back holding Jesse and explaining to London in his flowered tie why Jesse didn’t seem to like Clapton or the Stones.

“Just that Beethoven,” they heard her say. “I’ve got my iPod in case he wakes up.”

### 3

Jenna Walsh tried to open her eyes. She couldn't. Her head was exploding. Her belly too. The pain, *the pain...*

Grit from the cold ground dug into her cheek. Bits of glass, too, it felt like. *She had to get out of here;* got her eyes open a slit. The light was suddenly different. Darker, the shadows longer. *How long had she been here?*

She had to get help. Her body trembled, but she managed to reach one hand out. Her fingers dug into the ground and she struggled, then clawed her way forward, inching toward the alley entrance. How stupid she'd been, to take a shortcut through here. Someone...who?...had attacked her from behind, punched and kicked her when she was down and curled into a ball with her eyes shut tight in horror. Oh God, *why?*

Her belly was so heavy, but she scabbled forward, on her left side mostly, her elbow and knee helping her to push herself. She was inching closer. Just yards ahead, she saw people on the sidewalk. Traffic out there, horns blaring.

"Help," Jenna cried in a feeble rasp. No good, too weak. They'd never hear her.

It was *moving*, the thing her attacker had put under her sweater. It was writhing and snapping against her chest as if it, too, was trying to escape. Oh God...

Whimpering in horror, with her head hurting more, she struggled past a green Dumpster.

Then her vision blurred, and something sharp sliced through her left palm. She cried out and tried to focus on her hand, dripping red from a glinting glass shard.

"Noo..." Shaking, on both elbows, she tried to pull out the shard, but her vision dimmed further, and suddenly it was hard to breathe. She heaved her shoulders up, her mouth open, and managed to pull in a gasp.

"Help!" she cried again with her last strength, her voice ragged and desperate.

She thought she saw someone glance her way, but a second later her vision quit. The alley around her flipped, and a high, queer ringing started in her ears. She gave up. Lay her head down on cold ground, struggling to breathe.

There was a shout, and another shout. She was dimly aware of sudden footsteps around her, hands on her, voices shouting "9-1-1!" and "ambulance!"

A gentle voice, bending close. "Who did this to you?"

"Don't...know." Her gasp was inaudible. The ground beneath her swung crazily. Her eyes opened but she couldn't see. All was black.



“Can you describe your attacker?” The voice came closer to her face. Strong hands cupped her cheeks.

“Didn’t see...” she managed.

“You didn’t see your attacker?”

“No. Came from...behind.”

From far away she heard other voices.

“No sign of rape.”

“Found her purse, doesn’t look like robbery. Name’s Jenna Walsh.”

“Jeezus! Oh God, what’s this under her sweater?”

“Holy hell. Don’t touch, it’s evidence. Looks half dead anyway.”

*Please...get it...off...me...*

Her shoulders heaved desperately from air hunger. Her eyes squeezed in pain, her head hurting worse. Was that a siren she heard? Or the ringing in her ears? She felt hurried hands lifting her, voices babbling, a mask with new, cool oxygen placed over her mouth and nose.

So kind, the people helping her.

She wanted to tell them to be careful, oh please save yourselves, there’s a bomb in my head.

It’s going to go off...

## 4

In Jill's on call room, he leaned against the closed door with his arms folded tightly.

"What're you doing?"

"Changing into jeans." She had her pants around her knees.

"What for? Your scrubs look like running pants."

Jill looked down. It was true, the navy scrubs both of them wore didn't look like scrubs. Okay, they'd do. She pulled her scrub bottoms back up.

"Who says I'm running anywhere?" She whipped over to her chest of drawers for oversized sunglasses. Peeked into the mirror at her intense, big green eyes as she put the glasses on, then pulled on a baseball cap low.

"You look like a female Unabomber."

"That zealot's hollering about Jesse! Outta my way."

She made for the door. He stopped her, putting both hands on her slender shoulders. "Lemme go!" She squirmed angrily, getting nowhere.

"Maybe it's the ones yelling with signs you *don't* have to worry about," he said, grappling with her. "Oof! Please stop. There'll be plain clothes cops in the crowd, security cams--"

"I want his ugly pic on *my* phone."

"We're back on duty in twenty minutes."

"It's enough!" She yanked away and stomped around the little room. Her hands raised helplessly and tears came, she couldn't help it. "Okay, I'm a mess." She pulled the glasses off and swiped angrily at her glistening cheeks. "I'm just...worried about Jesse. What's going to *happen* to him?"

"I'm worried too." David's voice softened. He left the door, exhaling, and took her in his arms. She slumped, melted into his hug, and felt comforted...for seconds. Then pulled away and resumed her stomping.

And last night's argument.

"I found him and I love him," she said.

"He's not a puppy." David sank onto the chair by the bed and leaned forward tiredly. Their argument last night had lasted till one and they'd had to get up at six. Upset, neither had fallen right to sleep.

"The problem," he said slowly, "is us. *We're magnets for weirdos*. Our faces have sold tabloids, blanketed the media. If you..." A hesitation. "...or we adopted him it would mark him for life, make him a target for every bully and whack job. If we

went into *hiding* we'd still be recognizable, and he'd be tagged as that...freakazoid kid like July's killer called him. Have you forgotten?

"How could I?" She'd stopped, breathing hard, and stood glaring at the closed door.

David stared unhappily at the floor. "Picture Jesse at age five, or fifteen. How will he feel knowing he was conceived in a lab and *grown in a fish tank*? That's what mean kids will call it. Assuming religious nuts like your pal out there - *who call him evil - don't* do worse to him." A resigned gesture. "But if he gets adopted and grows up anonymously... Ow! What are you doing? My arm doesn't bend that way."

She was pulling off his white jacket. "It's chilly out," she said, tossing it onto the bed, getting his camouflage jacket from a hook on the wall and pushing it to his chest.

"Put this on. We can argue about the big thing later. For now it makes me crazy to hear *any* child called evil - *a baby, for God's sake!* Don't you just want to see? *What if the cops and cameras miss something?*"

"They won't." David patted the bed. "Let's just lie down for twenty minutes. Maybe we won't get called right away and we can - ow, my arm doesn't bend that way."

She was yanking on a sleeve of his camouflage jacket, and he let out a resigned breath. Jill was Jill, he knew. Relentless yet vulnerable, worried about everyone, and eerily smart. Saw and sensed things that others didn't. Got into trouble too, sometimes bad trouble. Could be headed for a shouting match out there.

He pulled on his other sleeve and a Denver Broncos cap.

"No," she said. "The whole world knows you're from Denver."

He muttered something under his breath and switched to a Yankees cap.

She wriggled into a long, striped poncho and pulled her shades and cap back on. Minutes later they exited the hospital not via the ambulance bay, but from its teeming front entrance.

They blended. Passed TV vans and busy reporters, approached the rear of the crowd and edged into it midway. Excited spectators pushed against the yellow barriers cops had up to protect the E.R. entrance.

The Zealot had taken a position away from other signs, stiff-backed to his stretch of barrier, facing the jammed sidewalk and yelling into his megaphone. He had wild, graying dark hair and was on the scrawny side. Mid forties maybe, red-faced and in a tan jacket. Sounded even angrier than before, probably because onlookers were hassling him.

"That child up there is evil!" he hollered, pointing. "He has no soul! He isn't even eligible for baptism!"

"*You* go take a bath," someone said, heading back to the pro-IVF signs.

"Skip the bath," someone else said. "Go to hell!"

The crowd cheered. Zealot glared, redder-faced, just furious. Jill and David got out their cameraphones and snapped pictures.

“Doesn’t God love all children?” asked a woman. Another woman in a sari cried, “What about Hindu children?” And a gray-haired man said, “What would you *do* with that baby if you got hold of him?”

“That’s no baby! *He’s the spawn of the devil!* The world must be saved from him!” Zealot turned and jabbed his finger up to the hospital. “*AND the devil’s workshop that created him!*”

His wheeling hand brushed a woman, whose husband had had it and lunged at the guy, raising his fist. It was caught by two uniformed cops protecting the peace and the First Amendment. They calmed the couple, who left muttering and shaking their heads. Gawkers came and left. Watched the Zealot like they’d watch any New York sidewalk performance, then edged away to watch the reporters, the cheering IVFers, or the SAVE AN EMBRYO bunch.

Seeing people leave infuriated Zealot even more.

“So you are in league with the devil?” he shouted at a departing back, eyes bulging in fury as he got the finger. “And you and you?”

Jill leaned uneasily to David. “The hospital is the devil’s workshop?”

“Maybe just obstetrics,” he said absently. She looked quizzically at him, then followed his gaze to one of the onlookers, a wiry man, maybe forty, with long, curling dark hair in a brown corduroy jacket. He was the only one really listening to Zealot, his intent, small-featured face taking in every word. The corners of his small mouth turned up as Zealot dealt with his detractors, turned down when Zealot went overboard.

“Is that a fan or do they know each other?” David said low. He snapped a picture. Jill subtly snapped several. “Maybe both,” she whispered, watching as the wiry man stepped forward, smiling, to talk to Zealot; then smiled again as a young blond woman, very soccer mom, came forward too to hand Zealot a pamphlet, which he looked positively thrilled to autograph.

They snapped Soccer Mom too, got her in profile as she turned and saw them. Checked out their faces, their navy scrub pants, and edged closer.

“I’m a cop,” she said low.

Jill was surprised. “Oh! What’s your name?”

“Keri Blasco.”

“What’s the pamphlet?”

“Picked it up in a church. Stay cool.”

She spoke quickly and moved away, joined two men in plain clothes at the edge of the sidewalk.

“She wore leather gloves,” David said. “Handled her pamphlet by its edges.”

Jill nodded. Experience with their murderous stalker last July had taught them about fingerprints. “Professional.”

She was watching the man in the corduroy jacket. He seemed to be trying to persuade Zealot it was time to leave, even took the megaphone from him. Zealot frowned and resisted at first, then finally looked tired and gave in. Together they gathered up Zealot’s things and headed out, onto the sidewalk and toward the downtown subway.

“I’d so like to follow them,” Jill said.

David checked the time. “We have to get back.”

Jill's phone buzzed. She answered, and for a second her face lit. "Hey!"  
She listened. Then frowned.  
"Be right there."

# 5

She hugged Hutch, her lab professor not so long ago. He and David knew each other and shook hands. David had gone to a different med school.

Carl Hutchins never changed. He still wore a colorful bow tie (today, blue paisley) with an oxford shirt under his lab coat, and his office was its usual debris of piled-high journals and specimens in jars. His desk was encircled by stacks of folders, and in front of the folders was...a snake. A coiled black snake.

“Relax,” Hutch said. “It’s fake.”

Jill dropped into a chair. “Gaa-a, I even hate fake snakes.”

David picked up the snake and stood turning it in his hands. Hutch told them what had happened. The whole anatomy lab horror-struck by a snake seeming to jump out of a cadaver. Said he’d called the cops who’d come, two uniforms who took a report and pronounced it a crude prank, at worst desecration of a human body.

“Criminal mischief or a class B misdemeanor, whatever that means,” Hutch said with a grimace. “But I’m worried. It could be something else. I called hospital security after the cops left.”

“What’s with the six heads sewn on?” David said.

“That’s what bothers me. Have a seat.” Hutch took the snake back, laid it coiled on his desk and stared at it unhappily. His eyes blinked nervously behind his wire rims.

“I see this a lot,” he said. “Seven-headed snakes scrawled on graffiti - not that the kids have any idea what it means.” He shook his head. “If this hadn’t happened today, I’d be *maybe* less worried. Security said the same.”

They looked at him.

He glanced out the window. It was nearly dusk. Reporters had left and the crowd with their signs was dispersing. Lights had come on in the emergency bay.

Exhaling, he looked back and pulled open a lower drawer.

“Y’know what was my hardest part of growing up?” he said, pulling out an old clothbound Bible. “It wasn’t life in the projects. It was my grandmother, a mean ol’ polecat who actually *left* the Baptist Church because she thought they’d become too liberal. She’d hit me and scream at me because I was studying *science*...devil teachings, she called it. And called me The Beast.”

His brow arched at Jill and David. Two blank expressions.

Then he opened to a Bible page he'd bookmarked, and read out loud. "Revelations, Chapter thirteen, verse one: 'And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy.'"

Silence. Then Jill said quietly, "Oh damn."

"My feelings exactly." Hutch put the bible down. "It bothered me *before* I saw a sign in that crowd reading SPAWN OF THE DEVIL."

"We saw it," David said. "Just came from there."

"Ah. That loon yelling into his megaphone? With today being Madison's big announcement...the baby..."

"We call him Jesse," Jill said. Her heart was thudding.

David reached for the snake and resumed studying it.

"Weird," he said. "It's just a fake garter snake. They're harmless. You can probably get fake snakes anywhere, toy and science stores...online. So why not something scarier like a rattler? Or a real garter snake?"

Hutch raised his shoulders. "Afraid a real one would've climbed out?" He switched his gaze to Jill and smiled a little. "I had an uncle named Jesse. It's a great name. Means 'gift of God' in Hebrew."

She smiled tightly; wiped her suddenly clammy hands on her scrub pants. "I just...liked it, then googled it and found out what it meant."

Her glance brushed the snake David held. "So..." She shuddered. "Is this someone's disgusting joke? Or a horrible scary message? *We thought we were done with horrible scary.*"

Hutch picked up his remote and turned on cable TV. Floods in Malaysia. He watched for a second, tapped his finger, lowered the sound. Looked back to see David fingering the snake's attached fake snake heads.

"Someone went to a lot of trouble." David brought the gruesome thing closer to Hutch. "Each of these is sliced off an inch behind the head and sewn on with black thread. It must have been hard sewing through this rubber."

Hutch nodded, taking the snake back, recoiling it on his desk. "Too much work for your ordinary cruel joke. This could be a message. That's why I called you. I still hear of Baptists and fundamentalists who are violently against IVF, and *Jesse's sure taken it further.*"

David said, "There were some angry Catholics out there too."

A heavy sigh. "Two extremes of what should have been one faith," Hutch said. "Can't believe Jesus had any of this in mind. He just wanted to heal."

"Every religion has its extremists," David said thoughtfully. Then frowned. "Who could have gained entrance to the lab?"

On the TV, a bridge collapse in Ohio. Hutch glanced over at it, still keeping the sound down, then turned back, looking tired.

"Lots of people," he said. "Besides the med students, there's now physician assistants, EMTs in training and our maintenance people. Residents come too to restudy at all hours." Hutch gestured with a hand. "Put on a white coat and you blend. Who pays attention at two in the morning?"

Cable news finally caught his attention. There, no surprise, was coverage of the conference with Madison Memorial Hospital officials. Willard Simpson, Acting

Chief of the hospital's Genetic Research Committee, was at the center of other white coats lining a table with microphones.

Hutch turned up the sound.

"He's just a baby," bespectacled Simpson was saying, his round, heavy features trying not to frown. "A normal baby with normal development, no sign whatsoever of anything different about him." *Babble babble* from some reporters, and thin, scholarly Bill Rosenberg next to Simpson said, "No, we don't know how this was done. We are studying the, ah, deceased Doctor Arnett's notes, but they are...incomplete."

Reporters shouted more questions. Was this the wave of the future? Were women going to choose this method of having babies now that they had a choice?

"Again," droned Bill Rosenberg, sounding too professorial to be interesting. "We don't entirely know how this was done. Further studies will have to be--"

A male voiceover interrupted, taking us now to the taped-earlier crowd, panning signs and faces – "excited, emotional, some angry" - then stopping on "this frightening SPAWN OF THE DEVIL sign," zooming in for an even more shocking close up. Megaphone Man railed and hollered. A shot then caught his awful sign at an upward angle, with the hospital's fifth floor in its background, "the neonatal unit where this miraculous child is now..."

Jill muttered, "Draw a map, why don't ya."

Then came file footage of David fighting on a steep old roof with now-in-hell Clifford Arnett, then footage of Jill and David, after three days of recovery from their trauma, approaching the hospital last July, then a tight close up of "Doctor Raney's lovely, anguished face."

"Enough," Hutch said, turning off the TV.

Jill and David kept staring at the blank screen.

"I can't breathe," Jill said.

Neither of the other two answered. David leaned forward with his fist pressed to his mouth. Hutch stared sorrowfully at the thing on his desk.

"I had to tell you this," he said.

"Right, absolutely," David said softly, looking up.

At that moment there was a knock on the door, and Allie Dodd stuck her head in. Sort of like a frightened kitten peeking around a corner.

She smiled a bit timidly at Jill and David, then said to Hutch, "Well, I'm done. Caught up and didn't throw up."

He grinned, invited her in, and introduced her. She blinked at the poncho and camouflage jacket and said, "Oh! You're *them*? Oh...wow."

David cracked a little grin, and Jill smiled sympathetically. "We heard about what happened. You're brave to have stuck out the day."

Allie sank to the chair David pulled out for her, and blew air out her cheeks. "Thanks," she said, a little dispiritedly. She was pretty, with short, curling brown hair, but her hands clutched each other nervously. "I'm really not brave," she sighed. "Today's stress on top of the usual, plus...sleep? What's that?"

They nodded in sympathetic agreement, and Allie studied them. David's face was strong and kind, but Jill looked as vulnerable as she felt. It was as if Jill's big, emotional eyes were already reading her.



“How did med school go for you?” Allie asked.

“Very hard,” Jill said. “I had extra problems. Big ones.”

“So how’d you get *through* it?”

“Dunno. Just kept trudging, I guess.”

Allie straightened. Anxiety lightens if you find a kindred spirit. “Could I talk to you sometime? I so need...” She floundered and raised her hands helplessly.

“Sure, call me, please.” Jill gave Allie her cell number. “Leave a voicemail if I’m in a delivery or something. I’ll get back to you.”

Allie thanked her. Smiled more easily at David and rose, looking out the window at the lights in the ambulance bay. “Is it safe to go out?” she said facetiously. “The yowlers seem to have gone.”

Jill gave an unhappy shrug. “Any excitement over Jesse sets off the crazies.”

“*New* excitement,” David said half-heartedly. “After last time it died down for three months, didn’t it?”

A ray of hope lifted them all, feebly.

David’s cell phone buzzed. He answered, listened, and said, “Okay. We’re coming.”

## 6

Red and blue lights flashed in the chill blue dusk. *Beep beep* as the ambulance backed up to the ER dock.

They ran, caught up as EMTs unloaded the gurney, got on both sides of it and helped push it through the double sliding doors into Emergency. The patient was female, unconscious, high-bellied, and her head and face were bloodied. One EMT, holding up the IV, yelled, “seven months pregnant, belly trauma, no fetal heartbeat. Maternal pulse elevated at 140, BP 90 over 50 and dropping, respiration 24, severe head trauma, probable skull fracture.”

As they switched the patient to an ER bed, Sam MacIntyre, second-year resident and good friend, came running into the cubicle. “Where ya been? Woody’s coming, we’ve been – oh jeez,” he said as he saw the patient.

David yanked off his camouflage jacket. “Looks bad,” he said. “BP just dropped in a minute to 85/45, means she’s bleeding out in her belly. We gotta transfuse her.” He watched two nurses work fast, one getting the woman’s jacket off and starting an IV line, the other taping on a new nasal oxygen tube. He sent the second nurse for four units of whole blood and looked back to Sam.

“You know what to do, stat complete blood count, type and cross match four units, bleeding and clotting screen. Call neurosurgery too, there may be a subdural.” To the nurse cutting the patient’s sweater he said, “Save her clothes. Bag ‘em like for a rape,” and to Jill regulating the oxygen tank, “No time to change into scrubs, just wash and gloves.”

“ID’s in her purse, name’s Jenna Walsh, age twenty-seven,” said the nurse cutting the sweater - and then she screamed. Stepped back with her gloved hands to her face as a snake slid out, fell to the floor, and slithered jerkily over her shoe.

Shock froze Jill’s vision. Her heart dropped.

“Oh shit.” David knelt and caught the snake writhing under an instrument table. It was weak and bleeding; offered little resistance. He yanked a plastic liner out of a wastebasket, put the snake into it, spun the bag closed and handed it to the gasping nurse.

“C’mon, Ruthie. He’s half dead anyway.” David pulled off his latex gloves. “Keep this with the clothes and punch some holes in it. We’ll be right back.”

Barely a minute, it took them to scrub up to their elbows in a near scrub room. “A real snake?” Jill bleated. “*Is this the same creep?*”

“What are the odds?” David blasted water. “Yeah, it’s a real garter snake like the fake one. This one was injured like something tore through its-”

“I *hate* snakes! I’m *terrified* of them!”

Back at the cubicle entrance Woody Greenberg, first-year resident, nearly collided with them. He was wiry with brown curly hair and always spoke in a rush. “We just saw Jesse, Sam *always* hogs him, he yawned, he’s so *precious*...oh...”

He looked in at Sam looking up, removing his stethoscope. “No fetal heartbeat,” he said gravely. “Child’s gone.” MacIntyre was a big guy, usually a smart mouth who liked to goof around, but his expression now was stricken. “Look at this,” he said. “*Just look at this.*”

Jenna Walsh was now in a smock raised to just under her breasts, and was sheeted from the hips down. Her exposed belly was horribly bruised, each black-and-blue splotch looking as if she’d been viciously, repeatedly kicked.

Jill closed her eyes for a second and David said bitterly, “Someone wanted her baby dead.”

*The snake guy*, Jill thought, and knew David was thinking the same.

She watched him grimly palpate Jenna’s wrecked belly, then step past Woody emotionally swabbing blood from Jenna’s head to palpate the matted hair above her ear. “Depressed skull fracture. Where’s-“

“Oh God, look at this,” Ruthie said, sounding truly sick. From the snake? Maybe, but she was so professional.

Biting her lip, Ruthie raised Jenna’s smock to her clavicle and pointed to her religious necklace. “Here” – her voice cracked - “a big safety pin attached near her cross. It’s got bloody *flesh* on it.”

Tight-faced, David took a sterile forceps from the instrument tray, prodded, saw scales. “From the snake.” His voice was low, revolted. “*Someone pinned a live snake to her cross.*”

Jill put her hands on the bed to steady herself. Remembered Hutch’s *Afraid a real one would’ve climbed out*. The cadaver had been there all night. Whereas Jenna Walsh had just been attacked. A snake pinned to her was likely to be seen.

“Jeezus,” said MacIntyre, coming to peer at the bloodied flesh on the safety pin. Woody forceps-poked the reddened, scaly skin too, grimacing like a child. “Sick, oh *sick*. Thought I’d seen everything.”

“Means her attacker knew her,” David said. “Knew she wore the cross and sent us a message. Probably followed her into the alley.”

“Definitely planned it,” MacIntyre said, watching Woody. “Brought his pin and snake.”

The nylon curtains whisked open and a neurosurgical resident stepped in. Squeezed past the others to check out Jenna’s head fracture. “Whoa,” he said. “Get her up for a CAT scan.”

David shook his head. “Gotta transfuse her first.”

He looked relieved when the curtains parted again and the second nurse ran back in with the four units of blood. “The cops outside said detectives are coming,” she said, breathing hard.

Seconds, it took them, to switch the patient's IV drip from the clear dextrose and saline in water to the first unit of whole blood. The cubicle was crowded, the usual seeming chaos when treating a seriously injured person with multiple injuries.

"BP's down to 80 over 40," Woody said, nervously eyeing the monitor.

David said, "Open the clamp."

"How far?" Jill moved to the IV pole.

"All the way."

A foot below the hanging, red-filled bag, she turned a small clamp counter-clockwise on the plastic tubing. *Help her, help her*, she prayed, watching red blood flow faster down the tube. She felt sick. Was imagining the snake writhing and snapping against Jenna's chest. Couldn't blot it out. Actually felt Jenna's terror...

The neurosurgeon resident, done checking Jenna's pupils, was now sticking her fingertip with a sterile needle. Though unconscious, her hand jerked away. A good sign. He moved to the foot of the table ("s'cuse"... "s'cuse") wiped his needle with an alcohol sponge, swabbed her ankle, and stuck her lightly again. Her foot pulled away.

"No sign of neuro damage *yet*," he said. "If there's a subdural, you have time."

"Hey!" Woody piped. "BP's back up to 85 over 45!"

"From pushing blood in fast," David said. "Okay, she can continue stabilizing during transport."

A uniformed cop looked in to say detectives had arrived.

David thanked him as Sam and Woody helped him start moving out the bed. To Jill, at the rear by the IV pole he said, "Would you stay? Give the cops her clothes, tell 'em about both snakes?"

His glance went to the bag of Jenna's things, and the punched-with-holes plastic bag on top of it.

Ruthie looked at the second bag too and sent Jill a grimace.

"It's *moving*," she said.

# 7

*A hundred years ago, a lovely stream was here. I close my eyes and see it rippling through green-dappled light to the marshes, just beyond.*

*But the city was growing. Overnight teeming with millions. So the marshes were filled by greedy landfill, and greedy building, and more building...*

*Now, with neglect, the world as God willed it is trying to come back.*

*And I am helping. God chose me to smite those who have given in to the devil.*

*This afternoon, in the alley...SHE RENOUNCED HER SOUL! Made Satan dance in triumph by daring to bring MORE EVIL into the world.*

*But I didn't kill her, did I? No! Because killing is still a mortal sin...isn't it? Even if the sinner has relinquished her soul? I'm not sure. I must ask God the next time He speaks to me. I asked a priest once, and was furious at the answer he gave me. He was surely the devil in disguise.*

*In this place only, I am happy. October is so much better because it gets dark early. I can slip through the boarded windows and come sooner, sit on this rotten timber and look up through the broken, gaping roof to the sky, so beautiful, mauve and blue and dark blue*

*I'm wearing earphones. They block out the blare of traffic just yards away. Through the earphones comes the blessed sound of the Gregorian chant Benedictinos. It sounds creepy too, but it's perfect for...what they've done here. Gives dignity back to the broken doors, the walls peeling paint, the moldy prayer books strewn between toppled pews...*

*At last my heart has slowed. My breathing has eased. I can tame my fury that they've already demolished the rectory. I hear these sacred Gregorian voices, and they help me forget that the devil has taken over the world. I sing softly with them... "Ave mundi spes Maria, ave mitis, ave pia, ave plena gratia. Ave virgo..."*

*Now I inhale. Deeply, and more deeply.*

*I am ready for the next sinner, and that excites me.*

*But my friends must be alive from here on, each time. I am ready to feed them, and to pick one...*

*So I reach down for my bag, rise from my rotting perch, and take a last look up through the torn roof to the sky. That first star up there, shining so bright. It is God, praising me for my brave and lonely work.*

*Carefully, I move through the darkening nave, past the overturned, cobwebby pulpit, to the north transept, and ah, here are the stairs.*

*I descend. It will be pitch black down there.*

*But I can already hear them! They are rustling and impatient, they know I'm coming! Cautiously, my feet hit the black floor. As I move, my feet make slight splashing sounds. The floor is wetter than before because God's splashing little springs are leaking in. Returning! How ironic that demolishing the rectory has gouged the landfill, re-opened the old marsh!*

*Down here I can turn on my flashlight. No one can see...except them, slithering, writhing, coiling as I sweep my beam over them.*

*"Look what I've got for you!" I tell them out loud, and now I suspect that maybe I really am just a little crazy, because I see every pointy black head turn to me, expectant, hungry.*

*Onto the floor I empty my bag of frozen mice. Walk among them and scatter the almost-thawed tiny bodies among their slithering knots. Snouts poke at the mice, hideous little mouths open. They appreciate how hard I've worked for them. For three months catching mice in my traps, freezing them, coming now more often because the work planned since July is at last underway.*

*Other work too. Three months of collecting other...things.*

*God's will shall prevail! Only these coiling servants of Satan will catch the world's attention, remind all sinners of WHAT IS RIGHT!*

*I stoop and catch one in my gloved hand. He snaps and writhes and tries to get away, but I've got him, and push him into my bag, where he still snaps and lunges to get out.*

*He'll be strong to wrap around my next sinner. Leave as a sign that no one will ignore.*

*Halfway up the stairs, I turn off my flashlight. This visit hasn't taken long. No one saw me leave, no one will know I was gone. I take my pills now, and return to walk, unnoticed, among the others.*

*Outside it has become dark, but I still pull my hood up so my face will be hidden. Good, there is no one on the sidewalk. I pass the yellow barriers and walk back quickly with my head down.*

*Under my hood, those blessed voices sing.*

*"Ave virgo singularis, quæ per rubum designaris non passus incendia..."*

## 8

The ER lounge had lumpy old armchairs, cable TV burbling low, and sagging couches usually occupied by a sleeping resident or two. You could send a train through here and it wouldn't wake the chronically sleep-deprived.

Jill lugged in the two plastic bags, stiff-armed and slightly away from her. She greeted the two detectives and motioned them to a quiet place in the corner. Three armchairs and a coffee table, onto which she placed the bags. Dread rolled through her. *Another meeting with cops.* Three months ago seemed suddenly like yesterday.

"Why's that bag moving?" said Alex Brand, pointing at the plastic bag with the holes. She knew Alex from last July.

"There's a snake in it," she said tersely, thinking that she was getting to know half the NYPD. "Nice to see you, Alex. Pity such things have to bring you back."

Alex Brand had intense, hazel eyes, was good looking, and wore a navy parka over a dark blue wool sweater. It seemed odd to see him dressed like that. From his several high-stress visits three months ago, Jill remembered him in polo shirts under light jackets. Once he'd come running over in a T-shirt.

Brand frowned at the bag for a second, then introduced Jill to the second detective. Surprise - it was Keri Blasco, the blond plainclothes cop they'd seen observing Yelling Megaphone Man. Jill barely recognized her. Soccer mom was now very cop, in dark slacks with her hair pulled back, holding an open notebook.

She greeted Jill, then leaned, grimacing, to poke at the smaller bag with her ballpoint. "A *snake*?"

Dry-lipped, Jill filled them in as Keri took notes. The fake garter snake in the anatomy lab. The real garter snake hideously, cruelly pinned to Jenna Walsh's cross. She looked back at the bag with a pity that surprised her. David said he'd caught it too easily because its gut had been torn. It was moving less inside the bag now. It must be dying.

The expressions of both cops showed their revulsion.

Jill pulled in a breath. She was exhausted and hadn't eaten, but the weird, wired feeling she recognized from last summer took over.

"The fake snake," she went on, "had six fake baby snake heads sewn onto it, just behind the neck. That made it a seven-headed snake, which alarmed the anatomy professor, who showed us a passage in the Bible from, ah, Revelations? Something about a seven-headed serpent representing evil."

Keri Blasco, scribbling, said “Yow, I’ve heard of that.”

Jill went on, speaking faster, nervously stumbling over her words. “The anatomy prof also saw that SPAWN OF THE DEVIL sign, and got extra alarmed since today the hospital announced about the baby. So he called us about that sign *and* the guy with the megaphone and we all worried about *how many other people out there are like that...*” She swallowed hard, unconsciously clenching her fists.

“Very scary.” Keri’s intelligent blue eyes met Jill’s, full of empathy. Jill smiled weakly back at her. So much had been exchanged between them without words.

“The guy with the megaphone was taped, we saw the pictures,” Alex Brand said, pulling on latex gloves, pulling Jenna’s larger bag of things to him. He took out her purse, cell phone and wallet, fingered Jenna’s jacket, her cut sweater.

“What a bonus,” he said. “Hospitals never do this unless it’s a rape, and even then they screw up the clothes, lose non-injury evidence.”

“Anyone touching Jenna’s things was gloved,” Jill said. “Evidence ought to be intact.” She hesitated, frowning slightly. “It looks like Jenna was hit on the head first and from behind, to bring her down. *Then* she was kicked and punched in the belly. The blow to her head was serious, close to lethal. Also just above her ear, as if she had started to turn-”

Brand nodded as his cell phone rang. He answered and listened, muttered, listened more.

Keri flipped a notebook page and smiled at Jill. “Alex says last July you and David Levine actually solved that case. I’ve seen him on TV and the police tape.” Her eyes beamed. “That roof scene, the fight with Arnett, and that other bad guy he shot *between the eyes*. Where’d he learn to shoot like that?”

Jill told her. David learned to shoot growing up in Denver, they give prizes to kids there for sharp-shooting. Then at sixteen he started getting into trouble, so to straighten him out his parents sent him to a kibbutz in Israel.

She let herself smile. “He says everyone else weeded all day. He found an army base nearby, made friends, and did target practice with them. Then two years later he was hiking with friends, and shot the head off a rattler forty feet away. I’ve seen the news clippings from *The Denver Post*. He only showed them to me. Actually, he doesn’t like to talk about it.”

Jill’s smile faded when she looked back to the snake bag. It had stopped moving.

Brand hung up from his call. “Connor says Jenna’s brother just arrived. Sounds like a weird guy. They’re going to interview him upstairs.”

“What about his wife?” Keri asked.

“They’re trying to reach her. Left a voice mail.”

Brand went back to going through Jenna’s wallet, pulled out a slip of paper and read it. “Interesting,” he said. “Jenna was headed *here*. She had a four o’clock appointment in your OB clinic.”

He handed the slip to Jill. She read it, frowning. “With Jim Holloway,” she said faintly. “He’s a second-year resident.”

“She was attacked in an alley off Second Avenue and Thirty-ninth. That’s four blocks from here. Whoever did this brought his snake and big pin with him, which means he *planned*, probably knew her, even knew about the OB appointment-“



A pinging sound startled them. The tune to “Good Morning, Sunshine.” It was the ring tone for Jenna’s cell phone, which Brand answered.

“Hello?”

He listened. Said no, this wasn’t a wrong number, and identified himself. The female voice on the other end grew frantic, loud enough to make out as Jill and Keri leaned closer.

*“Where’s Jenna? Where’s Jenna?”*

Brand explained very briefly. The voice on the other end grew silent, then burst into tears. And a torrent of something Brand’s expression said he could barely make out.

“Yes,” he said gently. “We’ll need to talk to you anyway.” He told the woman to come to the surgical floor, and hung up.

He looked from Keri clutching her ballpoint to Jill, and inhaled heavily. “Jenna Walsh was the surrogate mother for this couple, named Sutter. It was the wife who called. They’d planned to meet her after her appointment.”

“They’re coming to the surgical floor,” Jill echoed, to be sure.

“Yes.”

“I’d like to meet them.”

Brand didn’t get the chance to answer. Jill’s phone rang. She was needed for a delivery, fast.

She rose and explained.

“Will you fill me in?” she asked. “I’d like to know about this surrogate couple; ditto Jenna’s brother and sister-in-law.”

Both detectives agreed readily. Doctors can do things that cops need warrants and court orders to do. If only more were like Jill and David...

Keri gave Jill her card, and Brand checked that she still had him on speed dial.

She did. “Still near the top,” she told him.

## 9

In the OR, the anesthesiologist had taken off Jenna's nasal oxygen mask from the E.R. and intubated her, sending oxygen directly into her trachea. He was checking her vital signs when the others, re-scrubbed, capped and masked, came in to be helped into their gloves and surgical gowns by a circulating nurse.

"Ready?" David asked, approaching the surgical table.

"Vitals still look okay," the anesthesiologist said through his mask. "Have to keep an eye on her neuro signs."

"I'm on it." Woody gently lifted Jenna's right eye open, used his penlight to check her pupil, then checked her left eye.

A nurse grimly hung a new unit of blood. Some cases threw her more than others. Hearing about this one upset her terribly.

The ventilator whooshed as David made a long, mid-line incision of the abdomen. He reached in and, with Sam, their gloved hands together carefully pulled apart the abdominal muscles. Sam got in the retractors to keep the opening open, then suctioned blood out so they could see better.

At seven months the uterus looked like a big, upside-down pear with the small end ending in the cervix.

"No damage to liver or spleen," David said, gently inspecting the organs.

"She's lucky."

"Hope so. There's still her brain to worry about." He didn't look up. "Woody?"

"Babinski reflexes okay." Greenberg was at the foot of the table now. Had just run his thumb up the soles of Jenna's feet; both big toes had tipped down, which was good. "How much else can you do when she's out?"

"Just the pupils and Babinski. Keep checking."

The scrub nurse handed David a new sterile scalpel. Now he made a vertical incision into the uterus, opened it, and blinked at the fetus. A little life that never had a chance, dusky-colored and awash in blood.

Sam suctioned the uterine blood out with a gurgling, whooshing sound, muttering, "Son of a bitch who did this, I wanna kill him."

"Get in line." David waited seconds until he got a clearer field. "Bleeding's stopping," he said.

MacIntyre finished suctioning and looked back in. The torn blood vessels between the placenta and uterine wall had contracted and clotted.

Now for the baby.

David put in both hands and gently lifted it out. It was a boy, about four pounds, could have lived just fine if delivered prematurely. He held it for a moment, fighting anger, sadness, then handed the child to the grim-faced nurse, who likewise couldn't help herself. Out of hopeful habit, she put the tiny body into the little bassinette, put on her stethoscope, and listened for a heartbeat. Silence. Awful, hollow silence in the tiny chest.

Grimly, the others continued with Jenna.

David started scooping out the placenta, which had already mostly separated from the uterus. He ran his fingers around its edge to finish detaching it, then tied off any tiny bleeders he saw.

"I think we can save the uterus," he said. "The arterial supply looks intact."

Sam irrigated the uterine interior with sterile saline solution, then suctioned it out again. They had a clear view. In its reddish uterine surface there were lacerations, which David sutured. Then he gently massaged the uterus, which responded by contracting, but not enough.

"Ergotrate," he said through his mask.

Into Jenna's arm, Woody injected Ergotrate to further contract the uterus and prevent any further bleeding.

Before closing, they did one more quick inspection inside the abdomen. Everything looked okay: the liver, spleen, kidneys, stomach and intestines.

"Time to get out," David said, and glanced to Sam. "Want to finish? Make it as thin a scar as you can."

"The pupils! The pupils!" said Woody, back at the head of the table.

The anesthesiologist also straightened and checked the monitor. "Sudden change," he said. "Subdural must be enlarging, causing pressure on the brain. Get neurosurgery in here."

The circulating nurse made the call on her phone.

David blinked, looked abruptly crestfallen. Leaned both hands on the table, and looked painfully down at Jenna.

MacIntyre tried to stay positive. "Hey, she's halfway there. You've done all you can. She's off transfusion, back on dextrose and water - and she's young, you even saved her uterus."

"She could've gone straight into the recovery room..." David's voice trailed.

"So they'll wheel her out for a CAT scan. You'll have to go with her anyway, right? Make sure she *keeps* recovering?"

"Yeah."

"I'll come too."

# 10

Detectives Ted Connor and Ray Zeinuc studied Brian Walsh. Agitated, early thirties with thinning light brown hair and intense round eyes.

“Who would do this?” he kept saying. “Who would *do* this?” He hunched over, his hands clenching and unclenching his knees. He seemed more uptight than sorrowful.

Walsh was on a bench outside OB surgery. The detectives had pulled chairs from the nurses’ station and sat facing him in the wide hall. Zeinuc just stared at Walsh and tapped his ballpoint annoyingly. Connor leaned back, crossed his arms, and said nothing. Cop silence to get the other guy to talk.

Walsh avoided his gaze, and twisted his body away toward the glass wall of the surgical suite.

“Why can’t I see my sister?” he demanded.

“She’s being operated on,” said Connor. “You already asked that question. Now will you answer mine?”

Walsh turned back nervously, his darting, round eyes only brushing the detectives. He still gripped his knees.

“We *weren’t* estranged,” he said. “She just hadn’t been speaking to me lately...”

“And that was why?”

Behind Connor, an orderly pushed a laden gurney, a nurse pushed an instrument tray, and then another nurse ushered Alex Brand, Keri Blasco, and a weeping couple into the doctors’ lounge. The cops avoided exchanging glances, but Brand propped the lounge door open. By prearrangement, Connor had positioned his chair so he could see through the door, judge body language, confer with Brand and his interview by phone.

He looked back to Brian Walsh, who was shifting a bit less nervously, clutching his knees again.

“Jenna said she was sick of me always trying to protect her,” he said slowly, begrudgingly. “It’s been like that since High School, she’d get into trouble and I’d get her out...”

“That was a Catholic High School?” Zeinuc asked, scribbling.

“Yes. I was the good one, and she hated that. Years passed and she kept...getting into worse stuff...” He swallowed, stopped abruptly.

“What worse stuff?” From Connor.

A frown. No reply.

“When did you last speak to her?”

More scowling over to the surgical suite. Without looking back Walsh said, “In June. I called her, tried to reason with her...” His voice trailed.

“About?”

“Family business. Private.”

Zeinuc flipped a notebook page, and Connor leaned forward. “Care to be more specific?”

“I *told* you.” Walsh wheeled on him. “Family business. *We had issues.*”

Connor flicked a glance at the wall clock. “Where’s your wife, by the way?”

“I don’t know. I called her, left a voice mail.”

“That was twenty minutes ago. She hasn’t called back.”

A shrug. “She will.”

“Her name is Dara, right?”

“Right.”

“What does she do?”

“Works nights in a convalescent home.”

“Did you know Jenna had an OB appointment here?”

Walsh’s eyes slid away. The detectives traded glances.

“Did you know—”

“Okay, yes.” Squirming and shifting again.

“I thought you hadn’t spoken to her.”

Dry-lipped: “My wife did. She called her once or twice, tried to be friendly.”

“When?”

“Recently. I told Dara I didn’t want to hear about it.”

Connor’s phone vibrated and he answered, peered into the lounge at Brand who was turned a little away with his phone to his mouth. Keri was trying comfort a sobbing woman.

Brand’s voice said low, “The couple’s name is Susan and Paul Sutter. Jenna was their surrogate mother because Susan’s a type 1 unstable diabetic.”

Connor’s eyes went sympathetically to the Sutters. Paul Sutter, looking stricken, had both arms around his wife.

Brand continued. “They don’t like Brian Walsh. Didn’t know about him when the pregnancy was IVF-initiated in March. Jenna was broke, needed the money, and they liked her. Sweet girl, they say. Later the brother started hounding her. She told them he’d become obsessed with the church over the last couple of years, warned her surrogacy was a mortal sin and she was going to burn in hell. She told them she just was a holiday Catholic, but he upset her. She finally told him to leave her alone.”

Connor was taking notes. Glanced back into the lounge just as tearful Susan Sutter, pale with pale hair, maybe forty, looked up to him. Her eyes were red-rimmed and swollen in a face too ghastly white. Connor had known type 1 diabetics. They’d sometimes pass out in the street, at the wheel, be presumed drunk and nearly die. This was so depressing.

Hanging up, Connor passed his notes to Zeinuc and glared at Walsh. “So you were trying to save your sister’s soul? Is that it?”

A sullen silence.

“You consider surrogacy a sin?”

“That’s the Church’s position.”

“So killing the child Jenna carried would save her from eternal hellfire?”

“No! I never would have done that!”

“Sure you would’ve,” Zeinuc said sarcastically, inventing like the good interviewer that he was. “Last June she was only three months along, so if you got her to abort, convince her to confess *really sincerely*, she could’ve been absolved, right? Isn’t absolution terrific?”

“She hasn’t gone near confession in years.”

An evasive non-answer.

A nurse ran past them carrying orange juice for Susan Sutter, hovered over her while Paul Sutter used their glucose meter to prick her finger. The trio grimly checked the results. Susan drank; lay her head tearfully on her husband’s shoulder.

And Connor’s phone vibrated again. A voice on the other end told him Walsh’s alibi didn’t check out. He worked in a Greenwich Village appliance store, but had taken an hour off for a “late lunch” around when Jenna was attacked. “Not very bright, huh?” the voice finished.

Connor hung up.

“Where’d you have your late lunch?” he asked.

Cocky: “Phil’s Deli, I’m sure I’m on their surveillance tape.”

The detectives traded looks again. *Maybe a planner after all. Maybe he ate real fast...*

Connor gave Walsh a solid stare. “So you’re a devout Catholic?”

“Yes.”

“Your address here lists Macdougall Street in Greenwich Village. How long have you lived there?”

Uncomfortable: “Five months.”

“And before that?”

“Staten Island.”

“Ah! So five months ago you moved to the Village, which isn’t exactly known for its churchgoers. Why is that?”

A shrug. “It’s where I found work.”

“It wasn’t because your sister lived in the Village and you wanted to keep tabs on her?”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“There aren’t appliance stores on Staten Island?”

“Nobody was hiring.”

“But there are snakes, aren’t there? Lots of garter snakes in Staten Island?”

For the first time Walsh locked eyes with Connor, screwing his face. “*Snakes?* What are you *talking* about?” He looked genuinely confused.

Zienuc added helpfully, “Those snakes are common. They’re all over.”

Connor fumed and took another tack. “Maybe this *isn’t* just about the baby,” he said sharply. “Jenna was hit hard on the head. So hard it surprised the doctors the blow didn’t kill her. So this was personal. You couldn’t control her anymore. That made you seriously mad at her, didn’t it?”

“No.” A vein throbbed on Walsh’s temple.

“It drove you crazy.” Connor started inventing too. “You’d assigned yourself to protect her soul, and failed. Now I’m a little rusty here, it’s been a long time since catechism, but doesn’t that mean you too failed in your holy mission?”

“What? No!”

“Sure it does,” Zienuc said, back to annoyingly tapping his ballpoint. “You failed to save her soul, which means she’s sent *you* to hell too.”

“No it *doesn’t*.” Walsh’s face contorted. “You’re twisting everything! I didn’t *do* this!”

“Is your wife a good Catholic by the way?”

“Of course!”

The nurse just leaving Susan Sutter asked them to keep it down. Connor apologized, and said they were done anyway.

“Okay Brian,” he said. “You can leave for now, but we’re not done with you or your wife. Tell her to come in to be interviewed, or we’ll come to her. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

# 11

David slammed a locker door closed. “*Please* move in with me,” he pleaded, intense, uptight.

“I’ve already moved in with you,” Jill said, just as tense. She yanked on a new scrub top, pulled her long dark hair out of it and let it drop down her shoulders.

David exhaled hard. “I mean, full time. A few clothes in a drawer doesn’t mean you’re moved in.”

They had showered and changed in the women’s locker room, where all such traffic had been directed during the police investigation. It was six-thirty and the place was nearly empty. Tricia Donovan had just left. Jill and Tricia had helped deliver their first breech birth, had narrowly avoided complications, and David was fretting about Jenna Walsh, just out of more surgery for a clot on her brain.

Both were exhausted. Thoroughly spent and starving, and now having a go at each other.

Jill put a foot on the locker room bench and started tying one of her running shoes. David leaned over her, his voice low.

“There’s a new creep out there, sending us *messages with snakes*. Megaphone Guy called the hospital the devil’s workshop. Or *maybe he just meant the OB department, or just us*, the media’s faces for all this.”

“Isn’t fame wonderful?” Jill’s hands shook.

“Your apartment’s in a decrepit brownstone. A busted lock on the downstairs front door, for God’s sake.”

“I only go back there for clothes.”

“I’ll go with you. We’ll get them all-“

“And I sleep at your place or in the on call room-“

“With me. That’s bed’s really *small*, Jill.”

She stopped tying her second shoe, frowned down at it for a moment. “I’m not a child,” she said unhappily. “Please...you gotta stop being overprotective.”

He straightened, and looked away. Jill glanced up at him. He looked hurt.

Oh, guilt time...again. She was sorry.

“Can we discuss this on full stomachs? Please?” She straightened too, touching his arm tentatively, then putting her arms around him. David gave in, hugging tiredly back. She nuzzled into the crook of his shoulder, practically sagging on him. “That



wasn't the real me talking because I'm ready to faint," she whispered. "Head's busting and we haven't eaten."

"Okay." David fell silent but kept brooding.

In the staff elevator, which they had to themselves, he paced and his fretting resumed. "The snakes, the damn snakes. It's the *same guy*."

"It's usually me who obsesses, David."

"Nobody killed *yet*, but it's somebody seriously whacko who's after the whole hospital."

Jill peered up determinedly, watching the floor numbers bring them down to the cafeteria. Five, four ... She'd learned their different ways of reacting to stress. David spewed and let his feelings show. Jill retreated into herself.

"The clincher is Hutch's rubber snake," he fumed, stopping to watch Jill watch the numbers. "Why a *fake* garter snake, when you can get fake cobras, rattlers, copperheads? Because real garter snakes are everywhere, easy to find, and after the anatomy lab a woman - pregnant with an appointment waiting *here* - gets brought in horribly beaten with a real garter snake wrapped around her. So we can connect them, right? In case he thinks we're stupid?"

Three, two...

David looked away and resumed pacing, his fists bunched in his scrub pockets, his voice dropping lower. He glared at a GIVE BLOOD poster. Then at notices for staff meetings.

"Same creep and he's *more ambitious* than July's whacko, a planner sending abused women as threats to us and Jesse *and now the whole hospital*."

Jill had glanced further up. "Why is the button for the sixth floor taped over?"

"Huh? Oh, that's the generator floor. Machines and stuff that power the hospital." He paced again. "Shit, Jenna's snake is with the cops for evidence. I would have liked a better look at it. Under a microscope."

"It died."

"No way it could have lived. Its belly had been torn, it had lost most of its blood--"

"David?" Jill breathed out slowly, sounding truly weak. "If you knew the headache I have. Please. Can we just eat first?"

The others were waiting at their favorite table in a far corner of the cafeteria. The table had become a sort of clubhouse for the five of them. Woody Greenberg, Sam MacIntyre and Tricia Donovan had been through it all with Jill and David. During the first crisis on the roof, they'd gone nearly crazy running around and shouting into their cell phones. Then the second time they'd gone through the same horror, when Jill and David were again almost killed.

Déjà vu all over again Jill thought, depressed, as she and David carried their trays past filled tables, the whole cafeteria back to the same anxious hush, with staff in scrubs sending sympathetic or worried glances their way. News of the anatomy lab snake and Jenna's attack had spread fast, on top of today being Madison's big announcement about Jesse, and Jill and David's faces again blanketing the media.

Tricia had told them in the locker room that TV and cable were already covering the attack on Jenna Walsh, surrogate mother. No mention of the snake, though. That hadn't leaked – yet - from the hospital, and the cops must be withholding that part.

“Hangin’ in?” a radiology friend fisted David’s arm as he passed.

“By a thread, thanks,” he muttered.

Other residents sent Jill anxious little waves. So did a table of her fellow interns: Charlie Ortega the Hugger, Ramu Chitkara so very English from Oxford, and Gary Phipps, who usually lived on Mounds bars.

Charlie jumped up to hug her around her tray. “You okay? Jeez, *awful* day.” She smiled faintly, then at Ramu, there too urging tea (“Darjeeling!”), and Gary, also hugging and jibbering how freaked *he* was.

She managed reassuring nothings for them, then followed David to their table.

Woody took her tray from her and MacIntyre pulled out a chair.

“You look pale,” Woody said.

“Really pale,” MacIntyre added helpfully.

“It’s my every-three-months look,” Jill said, thanking them, sitting between David and Tricia, who pushed Ketchup to her.

“You’ll need it on that excuse for a grinder.”

“It’s all they had left.”

“What? The mystery meat is gone? Summon the waiter. I want to complain to the chef.”

Nobody smiled, including Tricia after her feeble attempt to lighten the mood. They all started to discuss Jenna Walsh.

“They called me,” David said grimly between bites. “Her subdural was evacuated, but did pressure damage to the brain.”

“She still comatose?” Woody asked feelingly.

“Yep, being monitored in the neurosurgery recovery room.”

Tricia got emotional. “So horrible. That poor girl. And the baby, the poor little baby...”

Jill bit determinedly into her grinder. She got a few bites down, and then couldn’t eat more. Her heart thudded, and her head. She felt a little sick.

“Anyone got Advil?”

MacIntyre pulled two blister packs from his pocket and pushed them across to her. “Keep ‘em,” he said. “I raided the charge nurse’s supply. Sorry it’s not Percocet.”

Jill smiled thinly, pushed a pill out from under its aluminum foil cover. It was an effort.

Under his bluster, Sam was a sweetheart. Sandy-haired and as tall as David, he was actually attractive unless one minded his occasional temper, his white jacket that always looked slept in, and the eating manners of a timber wolf. Now he was flipping Advil packs like playing cards to everyone around the table.

Woody said, “Aw, let’s steal the good stuff, Percocet’ll keep you happy till March, pass the Ketchup please?” His curly brown hair bobbed as he banged on the near empty bottle. He’d probably be wiry all his life. Even on no sleep he was usually amped and stumbling over his words.

Tricia, watching his Ketchup smother his half-eaten burger, said, "I know I'm going to have nightmares about that snake. Just *hearing* about it..."

MacIntyre grimaced. "Just as well you didn't see it."

Jill and David traded glances.

David looked gravely at Sam and Woody. "You haven't heard the whole story."

Jill listened as he filled them in. The SPAWN OF THE DEVIL sign, maybe connected to the seven-headed rubber garter snake found in the anatomy lab. The Bible passage Carl Hutchins read them about a seven-headed serpent representing evil. Jenna Walsh's real garter snake.

"*Impaled on her crucifix*," David said. "Subtle, huh? Think it's the same guy?"

Tricia saw the whole picture. "My God," she breathed.

Sam was very still, except for one hand making a fist on the tabletop. "So now we have a religious zealot to deal with?"

Woody pushed his plate away, wordless.

"And is this guy *done*?" David asked, leaning forward. "He went to a lot of work sewing that rubber seven-headed snake. His attack on Jenna was planned. He brought his real snake and pin."

"And probably knew she was headed here." Jill put her Coke down. "Had a four o'clock appointment in the clinic. The two snakes *and* the attack - think they had anything to do with Jenna being a surrogate mother?"

She got stares that understood.

"Surrogacy's a huge no-no for Catholics," Tricia said.

"Not for Protestants," from Sam.

"Hutch says Baptists are against it," David said.

"Oh, right, and fundamentalists," Sam said grimly. "They don't like Harry Potter either. Witchcraft, y'know."

David was unhappily stacking Advil packs like a house of cards. "I don't think Jews are against surrogacy," he said. "What was that story In the Bible? Sarah was infertile so she asked her maid to bear Abraham's child? So...that was the first surrogate baby."

"*Recorded* baby," Woody said. "It must have been done throughout history."

Jill listened as the others started talking at once. Do you realize most wars have been fought in the name of religion? Yeah, each side claiming *they* and they alone could interpret the Bible and God's will. The Reformation! Catholics and Protestants killing each other for centuries! Queen Mary I executing Protestants, burning them at the stake? The Inquisition, oh, don't go there. Pulled apart on the rack, then getting burned alive! Wasn't Galileo tortured during the Inquisition?

"I read Galileo's biography," Woody said, watching David piling Advil cards. "He was declared a heretic, forced to recant his *outrageous* idea that the earth revolved around the sun...instead of the Church's position that the sun revolved around the earth. He was old and sick and forced to spend the rest of his life under house arrest."

Jill knew Galileo's story. Abruptly the others switched back to an emotional discussion of the SPAWN OF THE DEVIL sign, and she felt a new tightness in her chest. A sense of fear and loss at once, knowing that David was right about Jesse

because she and David were magnets for every weirdo. Her eyes stung and she wanted to cry.

*Do stalkers ever quit?*

*He'd be safer adopted anonymously.*

*A zealot now to deal with?*

Tricia took another Advil. Woody somberly started collecting their plates, stacking them onto a plastic tray. And David's house of cards fell.

His eyes were grave. "Two snakes in one day," he said. "This creep's got a ritual that excites him. What's he planning next?"

## 12

Like planes landing at JFK, three women in labor had been brought in. David sent Sam, Charlie Ortega, and Ramu Chitkara to one with more time; to another he sent Gary Phipps and woke grumpy George Mackey, and to the one in hard labor, he brought Woody, Jill and Tricia.

The patient had been brought in only thirty minutes before, “ready to pop,” a nurse said. In the labor room Jill and Trish had to rush the history and physical, assess the labor and check the degree of cervical dilatation.

Then the nurse helped them push the bed from the labor room into delivery, where a circulating nurse was helping David and Woody, already scrubbed, into their surgical gowns. Jill and Tricia got into surgical gowns too, and helped hoist the moaning woman onto the table.

Dilatation was already a full ten centimeters. The head was visible. The mother was pushing and moaning loudly.

“Almost there!” Woody said.

“Um, not so sure.” David frowned over his mask. “The head isn’t coming. The kid’s stuck.”

He slid one gloved hand in alongside and past the baby’s face. “Great,” he grimaced. “The cord’s around the neck.”

Jill and Tricia both darted looks to the fetal monitor. “What now?” asked Tricia.

“Come see.”

“I’ve only done this once,” Woody said.

The three watched David slide in his second hand, and manually rotate the baby a quarter turn, from face down to a position where the shoulders were vertical. Then, very gently, he pulled the shoulders first downwards, and then upwards, until the baby and the umbilical cord were partway out.

“This isn’t rare,” he told the others. “You need to do it fast, or the cord will be compressed by the mother’s pelvic bone, which will cut off the baby’s oxygen supply. The cord can also act like a noose and strangle the baby.”

Woody quickly clamped the cord, still pulsating, in two places close to each other. David nodded, and Jill used sterile scissors to cut between the clamps.

“That’s it,” he said. And more brightly, looking up: “Momma, you’re doing great.”

Momma smiled at him, gasping.

The rest of the baby, slippery with amniotic fluid, slid right down into his hands, one hand at the junction of the neck and shoulder, the other under and supporting the lower back. It was a girl. "Oh, beautiful!" he said, holding the child up by her ankles while Tricia unwound what remained of the cord, wiped the tiny face with a sterile cloth, and used a rubber bulb syringe to suction her mouth and nostrils.

The newcomer began to breathe on her own, and let out a lusty wail. Woody hooted and the others beamed as they put her, howling, on her joyous mother's chest. Jill tied the cord, and Tricia removed the clamps.

The rest - checking the placenta, administering Ergotrate to contract the uterus - took just a minute. The whole birth had taken fourteen minutes.

A welcome respite for Jill from her brooding. She even smiled for David as they left the delivery area.

"Let's see how Jenna's doing," he said, scrubbing out.

When they left he had his arm around her. Had seen her gloom in the cafeteria, and in the elevator kissed her, lovingly and fully.

On the surgery floor, they made their way to neurosurgery and Jenna Walsh's ICU room - and a surprise.

She lay, eyes closed, on pillows with her bed slanted up and her head swathed in bandages. A blue sheet and blanket covered her up to her chin. Wires protruded from under her blanket to a beeping monitor. Her IV pole by the monitor hung its tubing down to a vein on the back of her hand.

And seated sprawled across the bottom of the bed was a woman with her face in her arms. She was crying softly. A man was seated next to her, his head down, his arm across the woman's back.

The man looked up as they entered. Blinked at their scrubs, and blinked again as they approached. His bloodshot eyes saw their OB/GYN nametags.

David and Jill introduced themselves.

"Oh," said the man. "We're Paul and Susan Sutter. The...baby's parents. Jenna was our surrogate."

Susan Sutter was frail-looking with short, pale blond hair. Her eyes were raw and her face was strained, but she struggled for composure. Apologized, even, for crying, and thanked them for their efforts. Her hand gripped her soggy tissue.

"Jenna's not doing well," Paul Sutter said, glancing back at the pretty, comatose face on the pillows. "The surgeon was in a while ago. He said there'd been damage to her brain. Hopefully only temporary."

"Hopefully," David said softly, peering at Jenna. "No ventilator, she's breathing on her own..."

"Is that a good sign?" Susan Sutter asked.

David hesitated. "It's favorable," he said carefully. "There's still been brain damage. Something like this, you just have to wait and see."

They'd both just lost a child, and they were still here, deeply concerned about their surrogate. Jill knew David was thinking the same.

“You were close with Jenna?” she asked, putting her hand on the bed rail. David was studying the nurses’ chart hanging at the bottom of the bed: pulse, blood pressure, respiratory rate and temperature. He inhaled, let it drop.

Susan Sutter wiped an eye again and nodded. “She was a friend,” she said. “The sweetest person you can imagine. Big-hearted, giving...” Her voice cracked.

Her husband gulped, “Whoever did this... I don’t understand such evil.” He shook his head incredulously. “A few times Jenna had morning sickness bad, and *worried more about Susan*. My wife’s an unstable type 1 diabetic. Adoption became impossible because if one parent is deemed ill...”

He made a futile gesture, handed his wife another tissue, and swallowed. “Jenna cared so much about others. She used to fret about Susan losing consciousness during her sugar lows. ‘Eat a cracker, have a donut!’ she’d say. They’d go for walks together and Jenna always brought raisins, fruit drinks in those little box lunch packs because she was afraid Susan would faint.”

David’s cell phone rang. He excused himself and stepped out to the hall.

Jill’s breath caught. David might have said Don’t bother them, but she surprised herself by leaping at his absence; looking feelingly from Paul to Susan Sutter.

“Any idea who could have done this?” she asked gently. “Did Jenna have enemies?” Her heart pounded. She and David hadn’t heard what the Sutters told the cops.

“Her brother Brian,” Susan said bitterly; and Paul Sutter said. “We found out belatedly that he’s obsessed with the Church, harangued her that surrogacy was a sin and she was going to burn in hell. He wasn’t gentle about it, he really *hurt* her. She finally told him to get lost, and told us not to worry.”

*He really hurt her.* Jill gritted her teeth, managed to restrain her anger. If someone profoundly believes something, there are kinder ways to persuade. Jenna was brave, giving, and had suffered.

On the bed rail, Jill’s knuckles went white. “Did he ever threaten her? Or, like, stalk her?”

The Sutters’ eyes met. “Not that we know of,” Susan said slowly, looking back at Jill. “He called her one last time during the summer. Spent the whole call screaming at her. She hung up on him.”

“Did she have friends? Any kind of support group?”

Paul looked uncertain. “One good friend named, uh, Mary?”

“Mari,” Susan said. “Mari... something on Bleecker Street. Jenna also belonged to an online group called SurroMomsForum. She found a lot of comfort there. Talked to other people dealing with the same... issue.”

It occurred to Jill that it was doing the Sutters good just to talk. Susan’s face had actually brightened a little when she described Jenna finding comfort.

“Jill.”

David was back, excusing himself again. “We’ve been called,” he said. Delicately, Jill noticed. Nothing about delivering babies.

Paul Sutter stood and gave Jill and David each the Sutters’ card. Jill glanced at it. They owned an interior design company.

“We’re limited to visiting hours here,” Paul said. “But if we miss you, please call us if... anything. We want to help. This shouldn’t happen to good people.”

They thanked him and made for the door, David saying they'd be checking regularly on Jenna.

"Hope to see you again," Jill said with a little wave.

The Sutters smiled bravely back.



## 13

Just outside, Jill let her anger out. Whispering fiercely, she filled David in on Jenna's hostile brother, the whole story.

"Brian Walsh," she said. "The cops interviewed him while I was with that breech and you were doing Jenna's surgery." She stopped for a second. "What was that call?"

David was frowning back toward Jenna's room. "Something Holloway's gonna take," he said low. "I don't like the sound of brother Brian. They should have a police guard--"

He stopped as they saw a figure rushing toward them. A young nun in modern habit, looking bereft. Feet away, she stopped to check the patient's I.D. plaque and room number.

"Ah, Sister?" David said.

She turned with tearful eyes to them. They explained who they were.

"You know Jenna?" Jill asked.

The young nun said yes, she was an old friend of Jenna's, and asked worriedly about her condition.

David gently told her.

She put her hands to her face, half-turned away, and burst into muffled tears. "I'm Cathy Riley," she managed, turning back, pulling tissues from her pocket and scrubbing her face. "Now Sister Catherine, please call me Cathy. I'm...oh, I just can't *believe* this," she said in a high, tremulous whisper. Her words rushed. She needed to talk. "Jenna's been my lifelong friend. I'm four years older. I used to *babysit* for her, then she grew up and...we volunteered at charities, chopped veggies for soup kitchens, laughed and giggled a lot..."

David said, "Sister--"

"Cathy, Cathy."

"Okay, Cathy. Maybe have a seat before you go in?"

On a bench just down from Jenna's room, they sat her between them and told her about the attack - including Brian's reported hostility but leaving out the snake. Listening, she went from sitting slack-jawed and frozen to rocking forward with her face in her hands.

"Brian...do *that*? Kicking and punching her belly?" she said in a muffled voice. "I can't believe it. I know he's a pain and..." She floundered.

“Obsessed with the Church?” Jill said as delicately as she could.

Cathy raised her chin. “In the past few years, yes. But he’s *mean* about it. Drives people away, actually.”

“But you don’t think he could have done this?” David asked quietly.

Sister Cathy straightened, her strained face slack. Finally she said, “I *can’t* think that. I mean, Brian yells, he’s got a temper...but this?”

She mopped more tears. “He’s mean but not crazy. Anyone who uses his religion as a pretext to harm is just plain nuts. Psycho. *No* priest would condone harming anyone. It *can’t* be Brian...”

Her voice trailed as if she were re-thinking it, troubled. She shook her head helplessly.

Jill asked, “Did you know Brian as well as you did Jenna?”

A swallow. “Not since childhood.” A frown. “Actually, even then he was a hard kid to know. Always in his room studying, or just avoiding people if you ask me. He got good marks, but Jenna used to say he studied by *memorizing*, not understanding.”

“Do you know his wife?” David asked.

“Barely. Saw her at the wedding four years ago and maybe twice since. She isn’t gregarious either. Jenna said they’d been fighting lately, and she apparently finds her only comfort in the Church. Brags and *brags* how she’s never missed a Mass. Even I’d want to say, Enough already.”

Cathy’s eyes turned suddenly alarmed. “Not Brian...I can’t believe... There must be some maniac out there.”

They told her the police were on it.

“Working as we speak,” Jill said; and David said, “The surrogate couple is in there now with Jenna. Grieving for their lost child, but also worried about her. Staying with her.”

“That’s so kind,” Cathy murmured.

“You must have known about Jenna’s surrogacy?” Jill asked - again, delicately.

“Yes.” Sister Cathy pulled in a shaky breath. “I wasn’t in favor of it, but her mind was made up. I’ve never met the Sutters but she said she loved them, felt so bad about the type 1 diabetes. Truthfully, I didn’t know *how* I felt. I mean, God loves *all* children, and this baby was to be raised by his or her loving parents and God loves families.” She shrugged and gestured. “I often feel torn.”

They nodded, smiled a little.

Cathy was quiet for a moment, then searched David’s eyes. “Is there any chance Jenna might recover? Partially at least?”

“There’s significant brain damage,” he said quietly. “But there’s always hope.”

“And *prayer*. I’m going to pray my heart out.”

Sister Cathy rose, wiping a tear. “Thank you for telling me, preparing me.” She glanced feelingly toward Jenna’s room. “The Sutters must be in so much pain. Maybe I can comfort them.”

Jill said, “It does help them to talk, have company. They’re feeling very alone.”

“I’ll go to them now.”

The figure was stooped. Wore a dark, cheap coat, leather gloves, and a kerchief over her blond hair.

It should have looked odd: stiff, bleached-looking hair on a tall figure who walked bent over - but at one in the morning, who'd notice in a hospital chapel? *It's nearly deserted anyway*, the figure thought. *Just one man in a pew near the front, weeping.*

Head bowed, the figure moved into a pew several rows behind the man. Placed a battered black purse on the floor, and next to it, a brown paper bag and a Macy's shopping bag. She kept her coat and gloves on, her chin down and her hands clasped, as if in prayer.

The kerchief was pulled forward, which hid most of the face. Still, the figure was careful not to look up. *These days, they might even have security cameras in a chapel. Which makes it a fake chapel, right? Another modern trick of the devil.*

*Only God watches in a truly sanctified place. So what I'm about to do will be alright.*

After ten minutes, the weeping man in front rose from his pew. Moved to the altar and knelt before it on both knees, crossing himself, then re-clasping his hands, weeping more.

The figure kept her head bowed but raised her eyes; watched through narrowed slits. *Hurry up, fool. You're wasting your time. Satan's probably laughing his head off.*

The praying man was overweight. Groaned and cried and had a hard time hauling himself back to a standing position. Finally crossed himself again, and turned.

The figure hunched further forward, as if in more intense prayer. Watched sideways as the man's old shoes moved past, and waited till he was out the door.

*Now, quick. Nighttime's full of weepers in hospitals.*

The figure picked up her purse, Macy's bag, and brown paper bag. Both bulged.

Moving slowly, head still bowed, the figure carried her bags to the altar. Then hesitated. If they had security cameras, there'd probably be one behind the altar, aimed out at the pews.

That was okay. Precautions had been taken for that, too. Makeup could do the most amazing things.

*Sounds in the hall. Someone approaching or just passing by?*

Suddenly quick, the figure put the brown paper bag on the altar. Turned and moved back out a bit faster, head still down, body bent as if in pain.

Moved like that through the hospital lobby, too. It was almost as busy as daytime. Patients coming in looking for the emergency room, crying relatives, doctors and nurses coming on or going off shift.

Nice that the chapel was just off the lobby. Not so nice that security cameras would be out here for sure.

Head down, the figure moved bent and stiffly to the street. Did not straighten until reaching two blocks away, and even then kept the kerchief pulled forward.

Three blocks away, a trash can beckoned. Lose the black purse? No, keep it. It was an old plastic thing, bought in a thrift store like the coat, which would stay on for now. It was a moonless, gusty night with a cold rain starting.

*Good. Extra cover to get the next one! And this time REALLY kill. I have spoken with God. He said it was okay if they've relinquished their souls.*

*Yesss! On such a perfect night with such a perfect getup? Give 'em two! She'll be sleeping, but I have my lock pick!*

The figure pressed her Macy's bag to her and hurried to the downtown subway, thinking, *Oh so busy I am! God's chosen warrior, and tomorrow the world will be forced to confront its sins!*

Inside the hospital chapel, the brown paper bag sat on the altar. It bulged.  
And then moved. Not enough to fall off, but it moved again.  
Poked at some air holes punched in the bag.

# 14

Jesse was sleeping. Didn't wake when Jill took him out of his isolette and held him, hugged him to her.

"I so needed this," she whispered, drawing a deep breath. "Can't tell you how much."

"Ditto," David said tiredly, taking a picture of her hugging the baby, then taking several more. Jill kissing Jesse's little cheek, his tiny hand.

"Okay, my turn."

She handed the baby to David. He sat in the rocker, put Jesse sleeping on his chest, lay his head back for a second and – just like that – he fell asleep. He was so exhausted.

Jesse's head was on his shoulder, and both of them, sleeping, were facing her. *What a picture.* Jill got out her phone and snapped it. David moved a little and Jesse moved a little too, as if sensing their closeness. Jill snapped that picture too.

A nurse just passing grinned and said, "Aww..."

Jill smiled back, then gently lifted Jesse from David's arms and put him, still sleeping, back into his isolette.

David woke.

"Huh?"

"Just putting him back," Jill whispered.

"Gee, he sleeps like a baby."

"We've gotta get to bed too."

David rose, looking foggy-headed. Came awake watching Jill download a baby monitor app to her phone, then did the same with his. "Be in two places at once!" he mimicked the online ad. "Watch your baby when you're away, out on date night! Hey, how 'bout a date night?"

"Two-way communication." Jill was reading the ad too. "You can hear your baby and s/he can hear you."

"Amazing," David mumbled. He turned away and saw Jesse's picture come onto his phone screen.

Jill leaned over the isolette. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

He peered at his screen. "Three."

Then she stuck out different fingers. "How many now?"

"Two. You made a peace sign."

“Awesome.” Jill grinned. “This thing really works.”

Another nurse checking other babies smiled. “A mother’s dream. My sister just got hers.”

The security guard seated nearby smiled too. “That’s what my wife says.”

Such good feelings, just coming here. The newborn nursery was a warming, quiet, protected place, full of love and caring. Every new little life was so precious.

David was back to muttering sleepily, reading the app’s directions. “We have to leave the Wi-Fi on. Use of the camera requires internet access.”

“We’ll keep our phones charged.”

“You can snap a photo or video while away. Sing to him. Play music for him.”

Jill took another picture of Jesse sleeping, then turned her back to him and watched him on her phone’s new monitor.

“Oh, he yawned in his sleep!”

“Yep.” David had seen Jesse do it and was grinning goofily with one eye closed. “Speaking of sleeping...”

“Yes. Bed, bed...”

A bad feeling suddenly chilled. It was time to leave. Go back *out* to the world where evil lived too...and *lay in wait*. Jill felt it and knew it. David saw her expression change and her fists suddenly clench.

He put his arm around her. “Feeling nervous again?”

“Big time.”

He exhaled. “Psycho’s had a busy day. He’s probably tired and fast asleep now, to terrorize another day. Let’s go to my place, sleep in the big bed.”

They practically leaned on each other, heading out.

Minutes later they were on the sidewalk, David in a navy parka, Jill in her old pea coat with a long blue scarf drooping. A cold wind gusted, and she pulled the scarf up over her head. Neither spoke as they hurried the long block to his apartment, in a square building of 60s featureless architecture upgraded with surveillance cameras in the lobby, the elevators, and hallways.

Getting off the elevator, Jill commented on the surveillance.

“There’s always been drawbridges,” David muttered as he unlocked his door and flicked on a light. “Moats, forts, sentries...”

It was a one bedroom, with a good-sized, sparsely furnished central area and a long thin kitchen. They peered tiredly into the fridge, knowing there was nothing there but leftover Chinese and some still-marinating beef. Four nights ago, Jill had tried to make shish kebob, make a lovely dinner...but they’d been called, and hadn’t seen the apartment again until last night, when they’d argued and were in no mood to cook.

“A few more days and we can donate that beef to science,” David said.

Jill groaned and went into the bedroom. Pulled her jacket and scrubs off and was in bed naked a minute later with her head under the bunched pillow. David stripped and followed, lifting the pillow to peek for her. She raised her arms to him, and they made love in the nightglow of the near hospital’s windows, seemingly closer than a block, its towers rising over smaller, closer buildings.

He was asleep soon after with his arm around her. Jill lay on her side, unable to sleep. They'd been too blitzed to remember to close the blinds, and the hospital lights glowed, brought back the awful day. That *sign* threatening tiny, innocent Jesse *and* the hospital, and...oh, poor Jenna Walsh. That attack was so hideously cruel. Jill saw the snake slither from Jenna's sweater again, and jerked cringing in the bed.

David mumbled something in his sleep and moved onto his back. Jill did too; now lay staring at the ceiling, its shifting lights and shadows. Sirens wailed in the street below, more sirens sounded from the ambulance bay. She closed her eyes. Snakes and hateful signs gave way to thinking about her life, her not-terrific past. Parents divorced when she was seven. High-profile, absentee mother, a prosecutor. Father seen just a few times before his death. So busy in L.A. with his brand new life and family, though he'd sent a few birthday cards. Big deal. The cards had made her cry.

She was still crying, holding Jesse, in the middle of a cobbled, crowded square, thatched roofs on smaller houses. "Last birthday card," her father said. "It's the Inquisition, I'm so sorry." She clutched Jesse harder as a crowd dragged them both to a wooden stake with high-piled sticks beneath it. *Burn?* They were going to burn them? Galileo was tied to a stake next to her, his old eyes wide on Jesse. "This is fascinating," he said. "*Quick*, explain." Someone lit the kindling below her and Galileo. Flames shot up, licking the bottom of her long dress. Jesse screamed and she hugged him to her, rising up in an acrid cloud, the hospital electric lights blinking below.

# 15

Dawn angled through the stained glass, sending soft reds and blues and golds across the pews. A shaft of gold lit a weeping woman's clasped hands and her rosary. Her hands stilled, and she looked up, blinking through stinging tears. Had God just spoken to her? Her breath caught. Real, or nervous breakdown? Wait...*real!* She felt it! The gold light was now strong on the altar. It called to her!

Joy replaced exhaustion. God had heard her hours of desperate prayer, and was telling her that Frankie Junior would be okay. She actually felt the Holy Spirit lift her from her seat and carry her, trembling and arthritic, to kneel painfully before the altar.

Prayers tumbled from her lips:

"Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee...Blessed are you, Lord God, h-holy is your name..."

In her rapture she was stammering... "Blessed are you for ever, great is your mercy..."

She raised a hand to touch the altar. "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we praise you..."

And lost her balance.

Then righted herself, catching the altar edge. "...we bless you for calling us to be..."

Heard something *thump* to the floor. "...your holy people..."

Her voice wavered. The gold light shaft had moved on; a rustling sound drew her attention to a brown paper bag on the floor. Bulging.

*Moving...?* Poking at moist places.

Something long and black slithered out and shot across to the front pew. The woman's vision blurred in terror. *Jesus, Mary and Joseph!*

Then another snake shot out, and then more, writhing near her, crawling over each other...

Later, the woman would not remember how she struggled to her feet, and managed to run out screaming. She wouldn't even recall security guards and a cop running to her.

It was all a blur...



They were going to be late for rounds. It was almost seven and the other interns would be waiting. David came, wet-haired from the shower, to read over Jill's shoulder. She was hunched into his laptop, madly scrolling and reading.

"Galileo?" he asked.

"Yeah." She kept reading, didn't look up.

"Your hands are shaking."

"I had another nightmare."

He made a pained sound and kissed her brow. She still didn't look up.

"1633." she said, tapping the screen. "Galileo was old and sick during the Inquisition, but they interrogated him for eighteen days, and finally made him confess that he may have had it wrong, and the Church was right in saying that the sun revolved around the earth, not the other way around." Jill scrolled. "He was still declared a heretic, and died under house arrest."

She frowned, fast-skimming more, then looked up. "The Church finally accepted that he may have been right... *in 1983.*"

"What was the rush? Speaking of rush - please? Rounds and interns await."

Waiting, indeed, they were. By the nurses' desk, Ramu Chitkara had a bag of bagels he was passing out to Tricia, Charlie Ortega, and Gary Phipps, who was munching with one hand while his other hand stuffed an extra bagel into his scrub pants pocket.

Stuffed-face grins broke out as David and Jill approached. "Fresh!" Ramu held up the bagels. "I ran to the bakery."

"Don't you guys ever eat real breakfasts?" David flipped through patient charts, put them back in the chart rack, and gave it a shove. The interns followed, Ramu bitching in his lilting British accent about runny scrambled eggs and dreadful coffee, Ortega extolling twenty minutes' extra sleep and having cold pizza in your room. The two had a tendency to yak simultaneously.

Tricia dropped back to tell Jill she'd had a snakes nightmare, and Jill described her getting burned at the stake dream. Both groaned and hugged each other as Gary Phipps, up front, told David about a breech he'd helped Sam and George Mackey deliver during the night. "Talk about ass backwards!" he said. "And this kid was *big!*"

The night had been slow, with just four new babies born. Healthy babies and healthy moms, who still had to be visited and checked. Outside the first patient's room, David stopped for a moment and looked up at the ceiling.

"What?" Phipps asked, peering up too. "Falling ceiling tiles?"

Jill edged closer. David glanced at her and said, "I'd really like to go up to see Jenna Walsh first."

Ortega winced. "Oh jeez, the snake."

Jill said, "The neurosurgery bunch must be with her now."

David nodded. "Two rounds groups is a crowd. I want to check her incision, make sure there's no infection."

"We'll go after this."

"Yeah."

Chart in hand, David led the way into the first patient's room where he greeted new mom Kim Withers. Asked her how she felt. Did the physical, checked the pulse

and blood pressure, and felt the belly to make sure the uterus was contracting on schedule. It wasn't.

"So?" he asked the interns. "What do we do about that?"

"Ergotrate intramuscular," chorused five voices.

"Oh, such smart interns I have," David said, smiling at Withers, writing an order for the nurse and clamping it to the outside of the chart.

"Stat," Tricia and Charlie said simultaneously. David grinned. "Already done," he said, red-flagging the note with a red stickie.

Kim Withers had turned down the sound of her TV when they entered. It still burbled.

Suddenly: "Oh look!" Her eyes darted from David to Jill and back to the TV. "Omigod, you're *them!*" She turned the sound up.

Tired gazes went to the TV. The same footage as yesterday. Last July, Jill and David somberly approaching the hospital after three days off to recover from the roof trauma. Then footage of the smiling nurse holding "the miracle baby, who our sources say staff for now have been calling Jesse..."

Withers fluffed her hair and got emotional. "Jesse! I love that name!"

Ramu turned the TV sound back down, but Withers didn't notice. Was emoting higher-voiced about how tough her pregnancy had been.

"Morning sickness when I had to be *in court*, I almost threw up on a *client*, and the delivery -omigod, the *pain...and I'd like to have another child*. Uhh..."

They must have all realized what was coming.

"Would it be possible for me to have my next baby *that way?*" She pointed to the TV, now soundless, showing yesterday's Willard Simpson, Bill Rosenberg, and the other white coats before mikes trying to answer reporters' questions.

David shrugged. Repeated what he remembered Rosenberg saying.

"We really don't know how this was done. The hospital's studying the notes of the deceased doctor who did this-"

"Arnett!" Withers said. "Clifford Arnett. I've *so* been following this."

"Right. His notes are incomplete."

The interns shifted impatiently.

Withers got impatient too. "Well, if it was done *once*...how long before they figure out how to do it *again?* Science, right? Who ever thought we'd have people walking on the moon? Scooping soil samples from *Mars?* Surely you can..."

As gracefully as possible, David got them out of there. Time was important; diversions from teaching the interns had to be ducked.

The second patient didn't ask, but the third one did. "Just wondering, that's all," she said defensively. "I mean, I loved my pregnancy, feeling my baby grow and move inside me, but *that delivery* was hell, and it's just kinda fascinating that now there's a *choice*."

"Not in the near future," David said. "Now about your stitches..."

When they left the fourth patient's room, he called and got a nurse on seventh floor surgery. Yes, she said, neurosurgery interns and residents were with Jenna. He asked her to check Jenna's night chart. She came back to the phone to report that Jenna's vital signs were okay, ditto her abdominal incision, and there was no sign of infection or vaginal bleeding.

“They’re concerned about her neuro signs, though.”

“The Babinski?”

“Right foot not reacting. No response.”

“Pupillary assessment?”

“Both pupils sluggish response to light.”

He hung up and looked grimly at his interns, who’d been listening grimly.

“So sad,” Tricia said softly. Ortega stared sorrowfully at David’s phone.

Which rang again in his hand.

It was Hutch, sounding upset.

## 16

“Security called me,” Hutch said, huffing. “Seven snakes were just caught in the chapel.” He gulped air. “*Seven*. One of the security guards got so freaked trying to catch ‘em he *shot* one.”

David stared at the hall floor. Phipps’ Nike laces were untied. Ramu’s socks were red. He looked up to Jill’s eyes, worried, questioning.

And blinked at her, hearing Hutch.

“...in a paper bag, which *also* held yesterday’s newspaper photo of the nurse holding Jesse. That’s a clear threat. No more guesswork after this, huh?”

“No.”

“Security has extra guys watching Neonatal, but they had a couple last July and *a killer got in there anyway*. Parents – *strangers* - come to visit the babies. They’re in patient rooms, crowding the nursery view glass. How the hell do you know who’s who?”

“Hutch? How’s your blood pressure?”

“Bad. I just took it. Gotta lose weight.”

“Try to calm.” David spoke in the softest voice imaginable.

“The snakes are in the Security office waiting for Animal Control or detectives, or both. God help us!”

Hutch stammered a bit more and hung up.

David scanned the interns’ faces. Only Jill knew a frantic call from Hutch meant something bad. Her face was taut. The others didn’t know, but their expressions mirrored David’s.

Which wasn’t good. One of the first things you learn in med school is, *if you have a problem and emote - you have two problems*.

David pocketed his phone and got out his clipboard. “Okay, we’re done,” he said a bit tightly. “What’s the schedule? Hey, two of you are needed in the clinic.”

The mood changed instantly. They started bickering about trading clinic duties.

“Somebody take mine, please?” Gary Phipps whined. “I was up all night.”

“I was too,” Charlie said. “Can I nap right here on the floor? I’ll just lie down-”

“Find a gurney,” David said. “Okay Jill, Tricia, you do clinic duty.”

Tricia said fine. But Jill shook her head.

She turned to Ramu. “Switch with me?”

“Sure,” he said. “I owe you a couple.”

Seconds later she was following David through the heavy fire door to the stairwell - which already meant trouble. The elevators were slow.

“What did Hutch *say*?” She tried to keep up as he thundered down the stairs.

“Where are you going and why’d you try to stick me in the clinic?”

“Cause I know what scares you,” he said, rounding a landing.

Jill stopped. Only one thing scared her, terrified her, and David knew what it was.

“Hutch...*more snakes*?” she gasped. “Please don’t say it’s-“

“Fraid so.” David pounded down, barely turning as he told her about the chapel.

Breath stopped. Made it harder to catch up, to *speak*. “That’s the third...snake event.” Jill’s heart hammered. “The anatomy lab, attacking Jenna, and now, my God, psycho’s *been in the hospital*.”

“On the first floor. Chapel’s just off the lobby.”

“I’m aware of that! So what’s to prevent him sneaking up the stairs? Riding up the elevator like any visitor?”

“Nothing.” Their voices echoed in the stairwell.

“Any creep with a good haircut can walk right past the security guys - oh!” Jill stumbled on a step. Righted herself. Called down over the railing, “Do they have surveillance in the chapel?”

David was now two flights below. “Probably. Ha - what’re the odds Snake Guy wore a disguise?”

“But...evidence? Maybe he left prints or fibers or-“

“Hutch says the cops can so far only treat it as vandalism.”

David reached the first floor. Whammed open the fire door and held it for Jill to catch up.

“C’mon, slow poke.”

“Shaddup. What can *you* do anyway?”

“You’ll see.”

They hurried through halls and more halls and then down a ramp into an older part of the hospital.

Security personnel wore gray uniforms but looked like cops. Many of them were former cops, in what looked like a squad room but with a wide bank of monitor screens at the rear. Three uniformed men and a woman watched the monitor screens. Jill and David moved past busy desks to the office at the end of a hall, where Mike Sivak, the hospital’s Chief of Security, rose to greet them.

“Three months of quiet and now another nut job,” he said with a grimace. He was in his late forties, muscular and barrel-chested.

“Any Jesse excitement brings them out of the woodwork,” David said; and Jill, looking back from the doorway, said, “You’ve got more monitors.”

“Not enough.” An impatient gesture. “We’re expecting more. It’s slow, nothing gets done fast enough.” Sivak motioned them over to a large, open cardboard box a few feet from his desk.

Jill peeked in, and jerked back cringing. Black snakes writhed and slithered, some trying to climb up the box’s sides, and flopping back. A shallow bowl of water was

surrounded by bits of lettuce and bacon and what looked like broken up cheeseburgers.

“We ordered out for ‘em,” Sivak said drily. “The cops said hold off giving them to Animal Control until they decide if they’re evidence.”

“Of something worse than vandalism?” David asked.

“Yeah. The vandalism thing was just from the responding uniforms. Detectives are en route, said it looks connected to that attack on the Walsh woman. Doctor Hutchins filled me in on the anatomy lab snake when it happened.” Sivak grimaced. “Seven heads ... I’ve heard of that. It’s from the Bible, right? Hey! Get back down, mister!”

He reached bare-handed and popped back down a snake who had reached the top of the carton. Jill cringed further back, and sank unsteadily into a chair. Sivak shot her a look and grinned thinly. David almost smiled too.

“Garter snakes,” Sivak told her. “They’re harmless. I used to play with ‘em.” He hesitated, looked at David. “Oh damn, I should have used gloves. Those snakes might have prints on them.”

“Nah,” David said. “More likely the guy wore gloves.” He was glancing around the office.

In her chair Jill made an overdramatic shiver-shudder. ““I haaate snakes. Yech! Why did it have to be snakes?”

David looked from a cabinet back to Sivak. “Carl Hutchins said one of them was shot?”

“Oh, yeah, our Miguel was trying to chase ‘em and went nuts. Tough guy with people but also hates snakes. Feel better?” Another friendly glance to Jill, then Sivak went to a shelf and held up a big Ziplock bulging with ... snake. Dead, black, coiled and bloodied.

“Miguel blew his head off, poor thing. The snake, I mean. Miguel’s out in front there, still recovering.”

Sivak leaned to his door, still holding the Ziploc. “Hey Miguel, feeling better? No more *culebras!*”

Raucous laughter and one protesting male voice answered.

Sivak turned back. David was eyeing the Ziploc.

“The cops won’t need all the snakes, will they?” he asked. “I’d like to take that dead one.”

Sivak frowned a little, unsure.

“*Same guy, they must all be from the same source,*” David pressed. “The cops’ll have the six in the box to examine.”

Sivak shrugged, and gave him the stuffed Ziploc. “Sure. If they want ‘em all, I’ll tell them you have the seventh. What are you going to do with it?”

David said autopsy it, holding up the bloody bag for a closer look.

Jill squirmed and grimaced at the bag. “Argh, I don’t even want to *look* at that!”

The two men traded looks. Sivak fished a big McDonald’s bag out of the wastebasket, and they stuffed the Ziploc into it.

“Want a napkin?” Sivak asked. “Lemon-scented hand wipes?”

Their cell phones didn't buzz and they didn't get called in the dash up to Peter Gregson, in Pathology on the ninth floor. David had called him from the elevator.

"You just caught me," Peter said near the lab door, lightly hugging Jill and greeting David. "With you two, I know it's never going to be boring."

Gregson was the pathology resident who had taught Jill how to grow out a tissue culture to further examine a cadaver's cause of death. Now, bitching about examining boring benign skin moles and leading the way past counters and microscopes and residents working separately, he stopped at his workstation and looked back.

"An autopsy of *what*?" he asked. "Did I hear wrong?"

"Nope," David said, pulling the bulging Ziploc from the McDonald's bag. Watery, bloody liquid sloshed at the bottom.

Jill sank down onto a stool. Stared into Gregson's open slide box, her mind still seeing all that writhing and slithering in Sivak's box. She shuddered again.

"Ignore the gunshot," she heard David say. "What else can you tell us about this snake? Like, where'd it come from, if possible."

"Tall order. They're common." Gregson took the Ziploc and peered in. "This from that chapel fright scene?" he asked somberly.

"Yep." David crossed his arms.

"It's already on cable and online, and the whole hospital's talking about it like it's connected to the Walsh case."

"Ya think?"

Jill made a face at the Ziploc. "This one missed out on a Big Mac. Security ordered out for the others."

For a second Gregson thought that was funny. David didn't and pulled up a stool next to him. "So the Walsh attack and the chapel snakes – yeah, this has to be the same whacko. *Which means the snakes are likely from the same source.*"

Peter looked somber again. "How's the Walsh patient doing?"

"Not well."

A sad headshake. "Hey, I'm happy to help with this."

Peter propped the Ziploc against a flask on the counter next to Jill. It was open, starting to smell. She rolled her stool further away. Fought nausea watching him push aside glassware, tug on latex gloves, and haul his microscope closer.

He screwed up his face. “They should have refrigerated this guy. The soft tissue’s already starting to liquefy.” He opened the Ziploc wider, and dipped a pipette to the red ooze below the black coils. From the pipette he placed a drop of snake squish onto a fresh slide, and pushed the slide below his microscope.

“Wow,” he said, looking in. “Teeming.”

David picked up the still-bulging Ziploc and closed it carefully. “So refrigerate it now?”

“Oh! Yeah, right.” Excited, not looking up.

David opened a little fridge on the shelf above Peter’s microscope and shoved in the Ziploc. Next to a sandwich.

Jill didn’t see that. She found herself suddenly fixed on Gregson, peering down into another world at only one hundred times magnification, and already fascinated. He was muttering, “Next I’ll dissect its organs, soft tissue. Use the microtome to cut some really thin slices, then stain them with-“

David’s cell phone buzzed.

He answered, listened, muttered questions.

“We gotta jet,” he told Jill, hanging up. “Two women in labor just came in.”

They thanked Gregson, who thanked them for the chance to help. “Hope they catch this sonofabitch,” he said.

“They?” David echoed. “*For the snakes, you’re it.* The problem is, despite the seeming tie-in the cops may have to consider the chapel just vandalism, and Walsh just” – he hated air quotes but grimaced and made them – “an assault. *Only homicide scrambles their jets.*”

“Meanwhile,” Jill said intently, “the baby and the hospital have been threatened.” Adrenalin surged back. “The bag those snakes were left in also contained a photo of Jesse, the one with the nurse holding him. We’re worried. I’m frantic.”

Peter shook his head gravely. Who didn’t remember last July?

“Fingers crossed I come up with something,” he said. “I’m on it if I have to work all night.”

Bullet holes in the chapel wall, and snakes, writhing...and the SPAWN OF THE DEVIL sign. Jill couldn’t push the images from her mind. *The creep had been here, was taunting, would be back...*

She and some of the others stood before the OB nurses’ desk as David fast-skimmed new Admissions Forms. Her mind whirled. The images collided in her head like frightened birds unwilling to settle.

A ruptured ectopic pregnancy - a serious emergency – had just been brought in. Added to the two women in labor, suddenly everyone available was needed.

“Can I help with the ectopic?” Ortega asked. “I’ve never seen one.”

David’s face was tight. “Wait. I need two of you for the first delivery, and two for the second. First one looks routine but is further along. Lemme see...” He was scrolling his schedule. “Trish and Ramu are where?”

“Clinic,” Woody Greenberg said. “You sent them.”

“Oh...yeah, I’m distracted.” David shot Jill a glance. “Okay, Gary? Help MacIntyre, he’s already with the first one. Jill, check the second one’s status in labor



room three, and call George Mackey. He's probably sleeping, and if he yells, ignore, stay sweet." David flipped the second patient's chart page, his brow creasing. "This is odd, re-check her urine for albumin."

Jim Holloway, second year resident like Sam, came running up. "You called about an ectopic?"

"Ruptured," Woody told him.

"I've only seen it done once," Jim said.

"Learning time," David said, looking at Woody and Holloway. "You two go scrub, fast. Phipps - change, you scrub for the ectopic too, Sam can manage the routine one, he'll probably just need a catcher's mitt.

David fast-glanced at Phipps, Holloway, and Greenberg. "Okay, crew, see you in OR 4."

He touched Jill's arm as the others moved off. "You okay?"

"No."

He exhaled. "Listen," he said low. "The second you get in there you'll see a new life on its way and you'll get right into it. It will take your mind off the other thing."

She smiled weakly. "That ectopic sounds bad."

"It'll take longer. I'll call you when we're done."

Minutes later David, his two residents and an intern, were all in the OR, scrubbed and gowned. The patient was already anesthetized, the anesthesiologist busy adjusting her intubation and the right amount of anesthetic. The others took seconds to peer at the ultrasound of her lower abdomen and pelvis in the view box.

"Refresh me on why ectopics happen?" Phipps asked.

"You sleep through that lecture?" Woody grouched.

Holloway spoke fast. "Fertilization happens in one of the two fallopian tubes. If the tube is scarred from some infection, the fetus gets stuck there and grows..."

"Fetus is just a few weeks old, nonviable." David eyed the bulge in the pencil-diameter fallopian tube. "This must have been incredibly painful."

He turned back to the operating table.

"Hemoglobin and hematocrit taken?" he asked the charge nurse. She answered yes, read the results from a lab sheet, and said two units of blood were coming.

"Tell them to hurry, we may need to transfuse."

Beeping suddenly speeded from the patient's monitor, and then a high, thin alarm lasting ten seconds.

"BP down to 80 over 50, pulse up to 130," Woody said, frowning at the monitor.

"Oh shit, internal hemorrhage." David took a scalpel from the scrub nurse. Phipps finished placing sterile towels around the incision area, and Holloway finished painting it with antiseptic.

"BP 70 over 40, pulse 96!" Woody piped.

"*Get the blood here,*" David snapped.

"It's coming, it's coming," from someone.

He barely heard. Made a quick incision in the left lower quadrant of the abdomen, and saw blood well up.

The clock on the wall read 1:55.

## 18

The second delivery came faster than expected, no complications. It was a boy. And a thrilled mother. And two surprised interns, Jill and Tricia, who had finished clinic early and come up to help. Suddenly the two had free time on their hands. George Mackey just wanted to go back to sleep.

“Bed, bed, *bed*,” Mackey groaned trudging into the scrub room, pulling off his cap and surgical gown, dumping them into the laundry bin.

Tricia, entering behind him said, “We heard about your night. A tough delivery, three hours of sleep, and then the breech?”

Jill behind Tricia was silent.

“Hell, yeah.” Mackey headed for the sinks. “A fat-kid breech who *weighed nine and a half pounds*. Phipps kept saying, ‘Fat-ass kid! You ever see such a fat-ass kid?’ Don’t think the mother heard, she was moaning, but hell, you gotta do something about Phipps’s mouth!”

“Promise him candy and he’ll shut up. Damn, how does he stay so skinny?” Tricia dumped her surgical gown and cap into the bin.

Then Jill did too.

And looked in, and saw a snake slithering black across OR laundry and up the side of the bin.

She froze, blinked, and the snake disappeared. Her heart rocketed and she felt weak. Grabbed a linen shelf to steady herself.

“You okay?” Tricia frowned, washing at one of the sinks.

“Just had a bad moment.” Jill came to the sink next to her. Pedaled soap and water and started scrubbing out. Snakes, thank God, had disappeared during the excitement of the delivery. Now she was a mess again. The bad images were rushing back, storming her mind.

Mackey washing two sinks down was bitching about overweight. His own. “At least I was a thin kid! That breech was fat at birth! Well what do you expect? His ma weighed 260 unpregnant. We need wider tables. Okay done, now I’m gonna go raid the vending machines.”

He left griping about his pillow getting cold.

Jill and Tricia dried on sterile towels, then left through the scrub room door to the bustle of the main corridor.

“Bed sounds like a good idea,” Tricia said, eyeing an empty wheelchair. “Maybe I can grab a nap someplace.”

“The lounge,” Jill said absently, her mind flashing back to her laundry bin fright. Her body felt cold all over. She rubbed her hands; didn’t know what to do.

“Are you really okay?” Tricia peered up feelingly from behind her glasses. “You seem, uh...okay, you’re fretting, right? About Jesse, and the Jenna Walsh attack and the seven snakes in the chapel? Minor stuff like that?”

Jill blinked. She had planned on a quiet moment like this to bring Tricia up to date. What had she been thinking? The rest of the hospital *knew*. Peter even said it had been on cable, online. For her, the last few hours had been a blur.

Tricia seemed to read what she was thinking. “Two minutes after you and David took off, the hospital drumbeats went nuts. Snakes in the hospital chapel! Like the snake on Jenna Walsh!”

Jill exhaled, and hitched herself up onto an empty gurney. Tricia - “oof” - hitched herself up too. “There hasn’t been a moment to talk,” she huffed, trying to get comfortable, watching an orderly push a gurney past.

“Now there is.”

Speaking haltingly, Jill told the rest about their charge down to Security, Sivak’s cardboard box, then the run up to Pathology and the awaited snake autopsy.

“The assumption being,” Tricia said, “that if you can pinpoint where the snakes came from it will help knowing where the creep came from.”

“Yeah.”

“Pity garter snakes are everywhere. My grandmother in Brooklyn’s afraid to go into her back yard. Saw one snake last summer and won’t set foot out the door.”

Discouraging but true. They both fell silent.

What now?

Two nurses rushed past, and an orderly pushing a lab cart with rattling wheels, and a revoltingly cheery, pink-smocked volunteer saying “Hi!”

Jill didn’t see them. “Wonder how Jesse’s doing.” She’d pulled out her cell phone and started to watch him sleep. His little cheeks looked plumper, and his tiny rosebud lips twitched a little. She felt a bit better, watching him. Then switched to her photo of Jesse and David, both asleep, with that sweet little face on David’s shoulder.

This, she decided, was her therapy. It helped, anyway. She gazed at the photo.

Tricia meanwhile - “I’m Auntie” - had been on her phone with the NICU, asking how Jesse was doing.

“The nurse said he hoovered down four ounces of milk and just went back to sleep,” she said, hanging up. “They *were* calling him Slugger. Now they call him Chugger.”

Jill cracked a smile. “They’ve got me on speed dial. Ditto the NICU security guys.”

She inhaled deeply. A long moment passed.

“I feel so frozen,” she finally said faintly.

“Me too. Another maniac’s looming and what can we do about it? I *hate* feeling helpless.”

Tricia nervously cleaned her glasses with her scrub top and pushed them back on. Pursed her lips, leaned to peer down the wide hall, and stopped another passing nurse.

“How’re they doing in OR 4?”

“The ectopic? Still at it. Just ordered another unit of blood.”

Jill sighed, watching the nurse move on. “David and I were going to go up to see Jenna,” she brooded. “I could go alone, but what would I do? The poor woman’s comatose, she’s going downhill neurologically, and that’s neurosurgery’s domain. What could I do?” she repeated in frustration.

“Sounds like you just want to see her.”

A slow nod. “It’s so pulling at me. This nagging feeling that *I should be there*. I don’t know why.”

“Then go. Or how ‘bout if I go with you? For company?”

Jill found herself climbing off the gurney. “Good idea, let’s go.”

It was as if Jenna hadn’t been moved, or turned, or massaged to avoid bedsores, which of course she had been. But she lay now as she’d lain last night, on her back on pillows with her eyes closed, her bed slanted up and her head swathed in bandages. The blue blanket up to her chin was so *neat*...as if she’d been laid out for a wake...

Jill pushed down the awful thought.

Maybe the couple on the other side of the bed had prompted the feeling. They’d been sitting like chins-down, arms-folded dummies when Jill and Tricia entered. Not crying, or touching each other or Jenna, or trying to speak to her. Relatives of brain-injured patients were encouraged to do that - speak, hold or even read to the patient. But this pair...nothing.

Until both of them looked up, blank-faced, and the woman said, “The doctor was just here,” as if she resented the intrusion.

Her tone was flat. Unemotional. She had a low, raspy voice.

Jill introduced herself and Tricia, who muttered hello and stooped to examine the nurses’ chart at the foot of the bed. “Vital signs good,” she said. “Pulse, temp, respiration and blood pressure.”

“Yeah,” said the man. His arms were tight around his brown wool jacket in his lap, as if he were impatient to leave. “Too bad someone bashed her brain in. They can stay in a coma like that for years.”

*They?*

The woman had short dyed-blond hair, dark roots, and thin lips. “We’re Dara and Brian Walsh, Jenna’s brother and sister-in-law,” she said in the same flat tone. Her eyes narrowed. “You said you’re from obstetrics?”

“Yes.” Out of habit Jill lifted Jenna’s wrist and felt for the radial pulse. It was normal. Jenna’s eyes were closed in her pretty face, but there was no movement behind her lids.

“Your sister-in-law sustained serious injuries,” Jill said. “Needed OB surgery to repair her uterus and...remove the deceased child.”

Dara glanced at Jenna’s flat belly, then looked back.

“Were you aware that child wasn’t hers?”

“Yes. Jenna was a surrogate mom.”

Brian Walsh seemed to wince. Gripped his jacket tighter and said nothing. The couple had been facing the IV pole a few feet in front of them. They never looked at Jenna’s face.

Dara raised her chin. “We’re Catholics,” she told the IV pole. “The Church considers surrogacy a sin.”

Tricia frowned, switching her gaze from the beeping monitor to Dara. “I was raised Catholic,” she said stonily. “Liberal priests say surrogacy for an infertile loving mom and dad is okay, and don’t like the Vatican trying to control them.”

Dara stiffened in indignation. “If a couple is infertile, it’s God’s will,” she rasped. Her husband, reacting at last, gave her a chilled look: *Don’t talk to the heretics.*

Jill’s heart lurched and she felt suddenly furious. Jenna had suffered and been terrorized. Her life as she’d known it had been destroyed. It was a horrible tragedy that brought tears to Jill’s eyes...and these so-called next-of-kin sat here like stones of judgment?

“So you must consider your sister a sinner,” she said sharply across the bed, her fists clenching the bed rails. “And she’s been unable to regain consciousness to repent, so she must be headed straight to burning hellfire, is that how it goes?”

Both expressions glared at her.

Jill leaned over Jenna, her voice rising. “Did you hear the details of her attack? A three-foot-long *snake pinned alive to her cross?* Do you feel no sorrow for her suffering?”

Brian Walsh jumped from his chair and ran out to the hall. “Get that woman out of there!” he yelled. “Get her out!”

An orderly and a neuro resident came running, tried to calm him in the hall. “She!” he bellowed, pointing, and something else indecipherable. “...insulting our religion! Get her out!”

“Nice,” Tricia told glaring Dara. “In a hall of surgical post-ops trying to recuperate. Very considerate.”

The orderly started dealing with Walsh, and the neurosurgical resident came in. Will Keenan, who Jill and Tricia knew. Ignoring Dara, he put one hand on each of their arms, pulling them close.

“Spare yourselves, we’ve been fighting with them,” he whispered, beckoning them back out to the hall. Further up the orderly, a big guy, looked ready to deck Walsh, who was still shouting.

Keenan started trying to tell Jill and Tricia more when they heard a sharp, “Okay, break it up,” from yet a new voice ...and turned to see Keri Blasco there, with Alex Brand coming up behind her.

“Your wife here?” Brand asked Walsh as he passed him, and Keri Blasco stepped to look into Jenna’s room.

“Yep, she’s here.”

She told Dara Walsh, “Stay, please, we’d like to question you in a minute.” Brand ordered Brian Walsh back into Jenna’s room, then turned to Jill, who was looking at both of them with surprise.

Keri looked surprised too. “Bonus finding you here,” she said. “Got a minute?”

## 19

They conferred near the nurses' station. Jenna's clothes, which David had carefully preserved, were a boon, both cops said. Fibers had been found on them. Forensics was overwhelmed with rapes and homicides, but...

Keri and Alex stopped awkwardly, looking frustrated.

"I know." Jill said. "Rapes and homicides go to the front of the line."

"The *long, never ending* line," Alex grouched. "Forensics is overwhelmed."

"What color are the fibers?"

"Brown, a wool and poly mix," Keri Blasco answered. She wore a navy blazer and her blond hair was pulled into a ponytail. "But damn, unless it's a major felony and they go looking for a match..."

Tricia looked from one cop to the other, taking it all in.

And Jill thought, *brown wool?*

"Sounds like Brian Walsh's jacket," she said, tipping her head down the hall. "He's got it there with him."

Tricia and both detectives cast narrowed gazes back to Jenna's room. A uniformed cop stood outside.

Then Keri shook her head, frustrated again. "Problem is, what if the fibers do match? These people are relatives. They could say they'd seen and visited each other on other occasions."

Jill shook her head. "But Jenna hadn't seen her brother since last summer. *Who wears wool jackets in summer?* We met the surrogate couple last night. They said Jenna hadn't seen her brother since June, maybe. They were estranged, after that just fought a couple of times over the phone."

Alex was frowning deeply, his lips pressed tight. "That could be argued as hearsay. The law...our hands are tied at every turn."

That had dawned on Jill a second after she'd said it. Her mother, the prosecutor...

Then Brand's face cleared a little. "Unless," he said, brightening, "*new matching evidence from the alley where Jenna was attacked* can be found on Walsh's jacket. Anything. Dust, debris..."

"That just could work," Keri said. "If we could get a court order for the jacket--"

Jill touched Tricia's arm, her adrenalin surging. "*How 'bout we just go take the jackets? We're not cops!*"

“Yeah!” Tricia said vehemently. “We’ll say Jenna’s allergic to wool or something.”

The cops looked at the two interns.

“There are a lot of brown jackets,” Keri said, trading a reluctant glance with Brand. “Even if something were found, we wouldn’t have probable cause to use them...”

“But it would narrow your search,” Jill insisted. “Then you can find something that *will* stick.” She didn’t wait for no. “C’mon, Trish.”

Open-mouthed, both detectives watched the two go to Jenna’s room, which emitted sudden sounds of a ruckus.

They followed quickly.

Inside, Will Keenan was threatening to call Security if the Walshes didn’t get off his back. They were yelling “It’s God’s will!” as he worriedly watched the monitor’s beeping slow, felt for Jenna’s pulse with one hand, and tried to speak into his phone with the other.

“Pulse is dropping,” he practically hollered. “It’s at 50 beats a minute. Yeah, get down here.”

“And *you* get back,” he told Dara and Brian Walsh, trying to control himself. “It’s still possible to reverse this. The dropping pulse means increasing intracranial pressure. The brain’s continuing to swell. The membranes around it are continuing to produce fluid which we can-“

“You are fighting God’s will!” Walsh shoved Keenan.

“Jesus, that’s assault!” Will cried.

“Do *not* take our Lord’s name in vain!”

“Listen, I’m Catholic too and you’re bat shit crazy!”

“Cavalry’s here! Oh, crap!” Another resident raced in past slack-jawed Jill, and then a nurse and an intern. Tricia let them pass and brought up the rear just as the monitor’s alarm went off - a non-stop, ten-second squeal punctuating the frantic air.

“Dear God,” Jill whispered under her breath. She stood frozen, staring at Jenna’s pretty, loveable face; felt her heart drop.

“Cardiac arrest! Code red!” Keenan suddenly yelled as the alarm changed to an intermittent *beep beep beep beep*. It kept going. The sound was so heart-rending. Jill and Tricia stepped back as someone pushed in a rolling crash cart. The room was suddenly crowded with activity, loud and frantic, even after someone turned the alarm off. The Walshes moved stiffly toward the rear as the team surrounding the bed put electrodes on Jenna’s chest, and checked the crash cart’s oscilloscope.

“Everyone off the bed!”

This was too terrible. Jill’s eyes stung with tears and she pressed both hands to her face.

Keenan was leaning over the bed holding the paddles, and an intern pressed a button on the defibrillator. Jenna’s upper torso arched, then fell back to the bed like deadweight. Keenan peered fast at the oscilloscope.

“She’s still fibrillating.”

“Not good,” Tricia murmured sorrowfully. Jill barely heard her. The awful images were back, rushing at her mind. The scene in the ER with the snake sliding from

Jenna's sweater, Jenna *just yesterday full of double life*, turning into a shortcut alley...

The residents turned up the voltage, and tried again. And again, the pathetic, jerking arch of Jenna's body.

"Ohh..."

Jill turned to see Dara Walsh behind her, her hand to her mouth. Brian Walsh's face was slack; he clutched his jacket tightly to him.

Even in shock and dismay, Jill's overburdened mind raced. "Step back, please!" she told Dara and Brian authoritatively.

They glanced at the two detectives watching grimly from the door, and stepped back further, backs to the wall, almost.

At the bed the doctors tried the paddles again, this time on higher voltage. Jenna's body arched frighteningly higher, and collapsed back onto the bed with a deadened *whump*.

It was so awful to watch. Jill gave out her own emotional "Ohh," and stumbled back into Brian's jacket. Pretended to lose her balance, pressing harder against it. His back was to the wall; he squirmed but had no way to duck her.

By the bed they were giving up. Jenna responded to their final try with the same violent lurch and collapse. Her ventricular pattern on the oscilloscope petered out to a wide, formless curve for a few seconds, and then straight-lined.

A thin, electronic wail punctuated the hushed silence in the room.

Faces fell.

"Okay, I'm calling it," Keenan said heavily. He looked up at the clock. "Time of death, 4:36 p.m."

Trembling, wiping tears, Jill pushed her way out with Tricia sorrowfully following. She reached Brand and Blasco by the door and said, her throat tight, "Got your fibers. It's murder now."

They nodded, but there was something new in their eyes.

From behind them stepped Detective Sergeant Gregory Pappas, Jill's and David's friend from last July.

"Make that two murders," he said gravely. "We just found another one."



## 20

*I'm so smart. No one saw me do the second one. And God praised me for it, urged me on.*

*Last night, halfway down East Tenth Street in the valley of East Village fearing no evil, I had become a different person. Had the sense not use the revolting subway bathroom to change, they have security cameras there too. But into an alley I ducked, and from my Macy's bag I became someone else.*

*I am a chameleon. I can carry my different looks with me.*

*Nikki Sheehan, Nikki Sheehan, your crappy old locks were so easy to pick. I knew they would be in your decrepit building.*

*Creaking stairs, but a broken light bulb made them dark. Every door, I knew, was locked and bolted, with its occupants asleep or stoned.*

*You were such a deep sleeper, Nikki Sheehan. You didn't hear me step into your sad little studio. But I was kind, it was over fast, wasn't it, Nikki? For a second you squealed like a pig, but I had my gloved hand over your mouth, and the rest was over faster than you deserved.*

*I have become more clever. Had my note for them already written, to leave on your bloody pillow next to your sinning, destroyed face. YOU LET SATAN USE YOU TO DESTROY GOD'S WILL. And now you are now burning in hell! I can SEE you burning, and I rejoice! I close my eyes and see you shrieking in eternal flames!*

*My extra special message died, unfortunately, during the day. I had to smash his head. He was too strong, giving me too much trouble. But around your neck he went anyway, Nikki. Really a better message that way, I think. Satan's vile symbol crushed SO THE WHOLE WORLD'S HEADLINES WILL ANNOUNCE MY MISSION.*

*Have they found you yet, Nikki Sheehan? Have the police put their yellow tape before your old brownstone and have the reporters come running? And crowds of fornicators, drunks, druggies and homosexuals with their busy busy phone cameras?*

*I see them burning too.*

*Now I am tired. I hope none of them around me now will notice. I slept just briefly, then was up again, canvassing the hospital just hours ago.*

*My last time. No need for more.*

*I walked right past you twice, Jill Raney, looking different each time! You were so busy, of course you didn't see me, didn't notice that those two different people were really one. But those were magic moments, knowing how invisible I can make myself.*

*Once I was wearing my orderly outfit with the fake nametag. Nice that you can buy both anywhere.*

*The second time I was a female hospital volunteer, wearing one of your ridiculous volunteer smocks.*

*But I cased your hospital well. Explored your nooks and crannies, your stairwells, bathrooms and air vents.*

*That part of my work is done. Finished for my far, far greater achievement.*

*Only hours away...booom! The devil's workshop will burn, explode in flames...*

*What joy I feel, that God chose me above all others to be his warrior. He saw my struggles through my earlier, so-painful life...an innocent victim of sin. He saw that I prevailed, and became Good, and would be strong for Him.*

*My heart rejoices as I hear again God's words... "My EYES are on ALL their ways; they are NOT HIDDEN from me, nor is their SIN CONCEALED from my EYES." (Jeremiah 16:17)*

*It gives me strength to pray. My time is near...*

David fast-scrubbed out and stood in the hall punching his cell phone. Got Jill's voice mail and muttered fretfully to himself.

His phone rang in his hand.

Gregory Pappas. *Homicide* Detective Sergeant Gregory Pappas, uttering a quick hello and asking if David was free.

"As of five minutes ago. What's happening?"

"The Walsh patient died. Doctor Raney's with us. We've got new developments. Can you come up to neurosurgery?"

Seconds later David burst through the fire door onto the seventh floor. Tricia was waiting in the hall for him. "I just left Jill. She's changing."

"Changing?" David's eyes darted up the hall to where police gathered outside Jenna Walsh's room. He looked back, his expression shocked and terribly saddened.

"She's in surgery's locker room," Tricia said, looking thoroughly depressed. "Gonna give the cops her scrubs that may have interesting fibers on them." A pause. "She's crying. Keeps muttering about snakes and maniacs and no justice in the world." Tricia gestured. "I'll be in the lounge. With the cops. See you there."

When he rounded the line of lockers, Jill was pulling up new green scrub pants, looking pale and shaky. He took her in his arms, felt her heart thudding hard through their chest walls. She melted into him for a moment, then lifted her chin.

"Brace yourself," she managed. "There's been a new murder and a confirmed threat against the hospital."

They looked helplessly at each other. Then, jaw clenched, David helped her pull on her scrub top.

"Fibers?" he asked, reaching for a clear plastic bag on the bench. It held her blue scrubs of earlier. He carried it as they left the locker room for the doctors' lounge.

With her voice shaking, Jill explained about the brown wool fibers found on Jenna's ER clothes that he'd collected - and minutes ago, in the chaos of Jenna dying, managing to stumble against Brian Walsh's brown wool jacket. The police were going to see if there was a match.

"Clever girl. What's the word on the second murder?"

"Don't know yet, they're waiting." She looked at him helplessly. "David, is this really happening again?"

It was 5:17. The surgery lounge was mostly empty, except for two residents fiddling with the microwave, plainclothes cops interviewing the Walshes in one corner, and Keri Blasco talking to Tricia in another. Scheduled, elective surgery was over, and the old couches usually filled with napping residents were empty. This floor got its emergencies, but didn't have the non-stop traffic that OB did.

Gregory Pappas was interviewing the stiff next-of-kin with Alex Brand. He saw them in the doorway, got up to meet them, and gestured them out to the hall. The Walshes were so focused on Brand that they didn't look over, which Jill realized was good.

They had already seen her. Now, to see her talking with cops...bad idea.

Just outside, Pappas took Jill's scrubs-filled bag with thanks and shook hands with David. "This is good, very good," he said, surveying the bagged scrubs, then switching his gaze to David. "Ditto the fibers you found on the Walsh clothes." He looked gratefully at them both, easing a manila folder he held under his arm. "Think you two could teach the whole E.R. staff how to preserve evidence?"

The last time Jill had seen Pappas, he had hugged her. She was upset, having to revisit the awful roof scene where she and David had nearly died. He was a dark-haired, heavysset man in a dark suit and bright tie - the kind wives buy. His eyes were tired and kindly and always sharp.

"So, back here again, huh?" He managed a tight smile.

"Yep." David shook his head. "Got a new nut job among us. Find any surveillance tape on Jenna's attack?"

"No. None in the alley, and the stores leading up to it just tape their interiors. With one exception that was old, too grainy like a black blizzard. No damn help."

David pulled up two chairs from the nurses' station, and Pappas sat on a hall bench facing them, leaning forward, holding his manila folder. The hall smelled of food. Dinner trolleys were beginning to roll past.

Quietly, David said, "Jill tells me there's been another murder?"

Pappas nodded grimly. "Twenty-five years old, name Nikki Sheehan, a grad student at NYU. Didn't show up for a presentation she'd been rehearsing with a friend, so the friend went to her apartment on East 10th. Found the body in bed. Her screams alerted neighbors who called 911."

The white-jacketed residents who'd been fiddling with the microwave came out, bitching about it. Pappas waited until they were gone.

Then inhaled. "The door had been left open a crack, like an invitation. The friend said that was the first thing that spooked her. What really traumatized her" - he hesitated - "was the dead snake wrapped around Nikki's neck. A garter snake, its smashed head on the pillow next to Nikki's face."

Pappas watched them both turn sickly pale, then gravely added, “Her head and belly were savagely beaten. Her unborn child is dead.” He swallowed, and added quietly, “She was also a surrogate mom. No connection so far with Jenna Walsh. Nikki’s friend said she’d had OB checkups at Manhattan General.” He chewed his lip for a second. “A brick was used to beat her head. It was left bloodied on her bed stand, like a taunt. No prints, the killer must have used gloves, and so far no other evidence has been found.”

A blunt force had slammed Jill’s heart. *Another surrogate?* Another young woman terrorized and bludgeoned? *Another snake?* Nausea welled at the thought of this new, unknown young woman’s suffering and tragedy.

The expression David bore changed quickly from stunned to barely restrained fury. “How long dead?” he asked, clenched.

“About sixteen hours.”

“So, attacked last night.”

“Around two a.m., roughly. Same creep, same signature, *just hours after his attack on Jenna Walsh*. He’s excited, moving fast. Loves lording – pun intended – his self-appointed moral superiority over others.”

David’s face screwed up. “No connection to Jenna...different doctors and hospitals... How does he *find* these women?”

“What a help if we knew.”

Jill gripped the edges of her chair, hearing again in her mind, *What a help if we knew*.

“His signature’s been snakes since the anatomy lab,” David said, frowning. “Long shot, but we’re having one of the chapel snakes autopsied in our Pathology department.”

Pappas nodded approvingly, and then switched expressions and made an impatient gesture. “Our forensics literally just started with the snakes, when Jenna Walsh became a homicide. Now it’s two murders and a signature killer, so it’s a rush. You guys are ahead. Nice going.”

Now he opened his manila folder, and withdrew a sheet of paper.

“Psycho’s warning to the hospital, left under the snake’s head on the pillow next to Nikki.” He looked grimly at the sheet for a moment, then handed it to David who started to read it.

“It’s a copy,” Pappas told him. “We’ve checked the original for prints and, nada. This creep does nothing without his gloves.”

The paper was a standard computer sheet, 8 ½ inches by 11. David leaned to Jill, showing her, and read softly the huge letters, “MADISON MEMORIAL IS THE DEVIL’S WORKSHOP. *IT AND ITS SPAWN MUST BE DESTROYED LIKE THESE WHORES.*”

“These whores,” Jill repeated faintly, her heart thudding. “He was afraid we wouldn’t link Jenna and Nikki Sheehan?”

“Typical megalomaniac,” Pappas said. “He likes to assume others are stupid.”

David was scowling down at the paper, his expression intense. “The devil’s spawn *and* his workshop.” He looked up, troubled. “The hospital’s a huge place. This isn’t like last summer’s killer who was only after us and Jesse.”

“Right.” Pappas glumly nodded. “*This is a wider threat.* It suggests a Columbine-type shooting or...” He stopped. His lips tightened.

“A bomb,” David said, very quietly.

Pappas nodded again, and checked a text on his phone. “As of ten minutes ago we’ve got bomb-sniffing dogs at every entrance. More dogs are coming. May be patrolling the floors, everywhere.”

*Bomb-sniffing dogs...*

Jill felt a new wave of fear and nausea. Stared down the long hall to a window at the end. When had it become dark?

She looked back to Pappas. “Could all this be traced to that SPAWN OF THE DEVIL sign?”

“We’re on it. It’s also possible the killer saw that megaphone guy on TV. Copied his language.”

“It could have been Megaphone Man himself,” Jill said desperately, leaning forward.

“Keri’s investigating him. He’s a patient at a psychiatric facility in the Village. Allowed to walk around because he’s promised to stay on his meds.”

David snorted. “That was him on his meds?”

“No. He lied to his nurse and said he’d taken them. They have no idea where he got the megaphone. The director wouldn’t tell Keri his name; said if she wanted to talk to the patient she’d have to get a court order, which no judge will give. Freedom of speech, patient confidentiality and all that.” Pappas inhaled wearily. “Plus they check their patients at night.”

“How *well* do they check them?” David asked, and Jill said tightly, “These places with medicated patients usually aren’t big on security, locks.”

She hesitated for a second. “Can I ask Keri more about this? Like, the name of the psych place for starters?”

Pappas agreed readily. “Yes, help us move faster. The dogs can safeguard the hospital, but Psycho could be scoping another woman as we speak. Or...here. Trying to figure how he can get past the dogs. No protection is perfect.”

*They’d heard his unspoken message. We’re living in a post-CSI era. Bad guys know how to leave no trace. They wear gloves, condoms, leave no prints, no evidence. Police work has become harder, every cop knows how you helped before. Entered apartments, poked around, and lifted prints where cops couldn’t without warrants. Illegal search? Not if non-cops did it. Inadmissible in court? Sure. But it helps us narrow the search, save time, footwork...lives.*

Last July, when the cops had the wrong guy, Jill and David had even found the killer.

Now Pappas watched the two trade looks. Everyone in the hospital was threatened. *Let’s do this.*

A shout came from inside the lounge: “...okay, so I talked to her!”

Pappas looked around, and rose. “Gotta go back to Brand with those two.”

“We’re coming,” Jill said, rising with a mounting feeling of dread. “We can pretend to fix that microwave in there, listen in.”

David shook his head. “Lemme go, I’ve never seen them. Good idea about the microwave, though.”

He returned the two chairs to the nurses' station, and Jill massaged her brow, as if in pain. "What was I thinking?" She moved shakily to the bench Pappas had just vacated. "Can I listen from here? Argh, no, unless they shout."

She squinted up at the detective. "I need some fancy listening equipment."

He cracked a thin smile. "You can buy it anywhere. Ask Keri."

## 21

The dogs were friendly. German Shepherds, mostly. Labs, too. *Wag wag, sniff sniff.*

Their police handlers were friendly too. “Don’t worry, just a precaution,” they told anxious people waiting to enter the ER, or already seated in waiting areas, or standing before elevators. A few people showed anxiety, but only fear-of-dogs anxiety. No darting eyes, faces suddenly clammy with sweat, package-carrying people leaving the line in a rush.

The dog handlers were trained in body language too. As their dogs sniffed at purses and parcels, the handlers subtly studied every face.

Injured kids being brought into the E.R. were actually comforted by the dogs.

One little boy with an arm laceration stopped crying in his mother’s arms.

“What’s his name?” he asked as his teddy bear got sniffed.

“*Her* name is Brandi,” said the smiling cop. “She’s a real sweetie. Likes to play ball.”

“Can I pat her?”

The mom bent to Brandi, looking a little scared, but her expression turned to smiles as her tyke patted away and brightened. *Wag wag.*

“See?” the handler told the child. “Brandi likes you and hopes your arm feels better fast.”

Suddenly he wasn’t a scary cop in a flak jacket anymore; he was just a nice guy, waving ‘bye to the child waving back as Brandi got busy with the next person in line.

A woman being calmly checked by another handler with a Lab said, “It’s about time hospitals got the protection they should have had all along. *Anyone* can just walk into a hospital. When I think of Newtown, and that Boston bombing...”

The handler said he couldn’t agree more. The woman told him God bless you, and he smiled and said God bless you back.

“Fascist,” sneered one of two male teens as a Shepherd named Buck sniffed his backpack.

Buck found nothing. Got busy with the next punk as his handler told the first kid, “Stay safe, have a nice evening.”

More and more cell phones were being watched for tweets and updates of the bomb threat. Reporters had arrived in all their flurry. Most of those waiting and

getting checked were calm, no one hysterical. After all, these crazy times we live in...what was unusual about a bomb threat?

The police would take care of it...

“But that was the last time, and *she called me!*”

Brian Walsh was on the edge of the couch, gesturing urgently. “She wanted to make amends. Said she’d found some liberal priest who said what she was doing was okay, even blessed if she’d – well, I heard *liberal* and we fought again...I mean, *argued*. That’s *all*.”

“When did she call you?” Brand scribbled as Pappas retook his seat. Keri Blasco touched Tricia’s arm, said something, and went to rejoin her colleagues.

“The night before her appointment here,” Brian sputtered. “No, maybe it was *two* nights before...”

Dara Walsh exhaled scornfully, “It was the night before,” she said as if her husband was stupid. Her low, raspy voice dropped lower.

Tricia left the lounge as David, not wanting to enter with Pappas, passed her with a tiny grin. In his scrubs and white jacket, he looked like any resident. No one glanced at him as he went to the fridge, took out someone’s leftover Chinese, and peered into the squished white box. Maybe two inches of dried-up rice. The fridge was crowded with white boxes.

He got busy with the microwave; bopped the buttons, waited, nothing. Opened and closed the door, looking frustrated. Shot only a quick sideways glance at the Walshes.

A new stage was set in the surgical lounge.

And just outside, Tricia dropped down next to Jill. “That *woman* is scary,” she said. “Dara Walsh is angry and smart. This is the first the cops’ve been able to question her. They asked her to come in for questioning last night, and she refused.”

“Knows her rights, huh?” Jill said from some still-functioning part of her brain, while the rest obsessed about Pappas’s *No protection is perfect*.

“Yeah.” Tricia watched a food trolley pass. “She told them last night if they wanted to talk to her they could just wait to see her today at the hospital. Y’know? I don’t think she and her husband like each other.” Tricia shook her head. “Tough woman.”

“What does she do?”

“Nurses’ aide, works four nights a week at a hospice in the Village. Probably does a lot of lifting people. Did you see the muscles on her?”

“No, she had her jacket on.”

“She’s scrawny *and* muscular. Bet she works out too.” Another food trolley passed. “Have you eaten yet?”

“No.”

“I’m gonna faint from hunger. Can I get off duty tonight if I faint?”

From inside the lounge they heard, loud again, “So check my phone records! Or hers!”

Then, mutter mutter...



“Dammit, wish I could be in there,” Jill said. Her chest felt tight. In her mind she heard Pappas again: *Same creep, hours after his attack on Jenna Walsh. He’s excited, moving fast.*

*And he’d been in the hospital during the night. The chapel...*

“David will tell us what they’re saying.” Tricia watched the food trolley stop outside a patient door, and a laden tray get carried in. She groaned, got up, and said she was going to go find a vending machine.

Jill slid closer on the bench to the door.

And David inside had the microwave unplugged, out from under the cabinet and on the counter, unscrewing screws with a knife and pretending intense repairs – *chunk!* - while Pappas questioned Brian Walsh.

“She wanted to meet? Where?”

“Some café on Third.”

“What’s its name?”

“Uh, Bistro. On the corner of 37<sup>th</sup>.”

“Three blocks from this hospital,” Kerri Blasco said. “Two blocks from the alley where Jenna was attacked. You’re sure local surveillance tape won’t show you there?”

“Of course I’m sure.”

*“But you knew where Jenna would be. Maybe she waited, you watched from across the street, then followed when she left the café?”*

“No!”

David shot another quick glance at Walsh as his voice turned whiney, defensive. “I tried to call her and cancel a couple hours before, but I got her voicemail. Maybe she was in the subway.”

Brand asked, “Why did you decide to cancel?”

“Because we’d only end up fighting. And I didn’t *decide* to cancel-“

“Yes you did.”

David saw Dara Walsh unclasp her hands from her top crossed knee and give Pappas a sarcastic gesture. “He’s indecisive. Should I put my right foot in front of my left,” she mocked, then re-clasped her hands on her knee.

“I am *not* indecisive!” Brian glared furiously at her, as if he was sick of her unmanning him. *But how fast he’d changed from whiney to wild.* All three cops noticed. Alex Brand scribbled.

Abruptly, Walsh looked over to David. “You’re doing that wrong, y’know.”

“Oh?” David looked up, fake-surprised. “You know about these things?”

Walsh jumped to his feet. “I’ll say.” He turned to the cops. “Are we done?” he said sarcastically, suddenly full of himself. “There’s nothing else I can tell you.”

“Done for now,” Brand said just as sarcastically.

Walsh strode over to the microwave and flipped it upside down; looked in; tinkered.

“Here it is,” he bragged. “Your high voltage transformer’s shorted out. Moisture probably got into it. And look at this, your magnetron tube’s shot, too.” He patted the electronic carcass, pleased with himself. *Jenna was forgotten.* It was as if his mind had flipped him back to advising a customer in the appliance store where he

worked. “You’re better off buying a whole new one. Replacing the parts would cost more.”

David thanked him as his cell phone buzzed. He listened, then said, “Okay, be there in five.”

Outside, Jill had slid to the end of the bench and was practically hanging over it. She could eavesdrop, at least the louder utterances. Her overburdened mind was also replaying Tricia’s “*That woman is scary. You see the muscles on her?*”

She straightened and speed-dialed Brand, who answered yards away.

“Ask Dara Walsh where she was when Jenna was getting attacked,” she said low. “Ditto Nikki Sheehan. She also must have heard Brian repeating ‘Bistro, corner of 37<sup>th</sup>.’”

“Getting there,” Brand said.

Mutter, mutter from inside. At least David, poking through more white leftover boxes, was hearing the string of evasive answers.

“Jenna? Around four o’clock that day?” Dara sounded offended. “I was off, of course. I told you, I work nights.”

“And where exactly were you?”

“Different stores. Browsed, bought groceries. Came home. Unpacked.”

Pappas tried to narrow down the times and places, and Dara went suddenly all floundering, couldn’t remember.

Brand scribbled.

Keri leaned forward and asked, “What about last night? Where were you both around two a.m.?”

Brian was back on a chair, avoiding his wife’s eyes. She avoided his, too. “We were sleeping,” he said; and Dara said, “Both of us. I was off last night too.” She frowned and looked offended again. “What does *last night* have to do with Jenna?”

There was silence in the room, then Pappas drew a long, frustrated breath. “Okay we’re done for now. You can leave but don’t leave town.”

Sounds of chairs scraping, feet moving. Dara muttered something sounding nasty as they crossed the lounge. Jill heard them coming and whipped into a sleeping position, facing the wall on the bench.

They passed, and she was in the lounge like a shot...just as David was inviting the cops over to lift prints off the microwave. He held his phone up to Jill. “We got called. There’s time.”

She nodded.

Brand was pulling on latex gloves and saying, “Did you get the feeling of an act with those two?” He was examining the microwave, getting out his lifting tape. “Like, they’re both holding back on something?”

“Definitely.” Pappas was grimly reading a message on his phone. “CSU’s still found nothing at the Sheehan scene. Stairway, banister, bathroom, doors. We’ve got a bloody brick with just Nikki’s blood on it. Otherwise, zip.”

Bending by the couch, Keri looked over. “And the missus was careful to *touch nothing*. Kept clutching her knee. You should’ve seen how white her knuckles were.”

“Keri?” Jill’s voice sounded high and unsteady to her. “What’s the name of the psych place where Megaphone Man lives?”

“Saint Mary’s in the East Village,” Keri said, straightening. “He’s not in the system and they wouldn’t give me his name. Think you can find out?”

“I’m going to try,” Jill said.

She was back in July. That steady, drumming fear was back, a feeling of cold squeezing her heart with no letup.

It was late. Jill was exhausted, drained, but she worked by rote, functioned okay. The night until after eleven blurred by: two births and another GYN emergency. They got through it all, even the pain of comforting a woman much too young to have just-found third stage ovarian cancer. Then and only then Jill cried, in the hall a ways down from the GYN patient. The dam had burst...

David held her, tried to comfort. But his hands were cold, and when she reached to push his hair off his brow, a vein bulged on it. He was suffering in his way.

By this time, they'd told Sam and Woody details about the more recent, awful developments. Tricia already knew, and half the story had been on TV and online.

SECOND SURROGATE MOM MURDERED, BOMB THREAT AT HOSPITAL, BOMB-SNIFFER DOGS CALLED IN, read online headlines and grim-faced news anchors, none of them yet able to connect the surrogates with a bomb threat. As with Jenna, the police had left out the detail of the snake. But how long before it leaked from Nikki Sheehan's friend who had found her? Who was still traumatized, probably crying now to others?

And what would be the headlines in the morning? Bigger and more hysterical, no doubt, as the connection was made.

Woody, Tricia, and MacIntyre all wanted to help.

An hour earlier Woody had been horrified at Jill's idea. "Saint *Who?*" he'd piped after the second birth, one with complications. "You're gonna go to some psych place looking for that SPAWN OF THE DEVIL guy?"

Jill had said yes. She was adamant.

MacIntyre removing his mask had said, "Just because his sign used the same wording doesn't mean he's the guy."

"There's a connection," Jill insisted. "I feel it. I want to *do something.*"

David yanked off his gloves – *snap! snap!* - insisting, "They won't tell you his name. You can't just go running down there--"

"I'll find *out.*"

David exhaled, admitted that he felt torn. They all knew Jill's determination. And they worried: the hospital was threatened again. Jill and David had helped the cops last time. Who knew? Maybe...

“I’ll cover for you,” MacIntrye had said, looking from Jill to David.

“Me too,” echoed Woody. “Plus there’s Mackey and Holloway, and the other interns, they’ll all help.” He’d looked around, frowning. “Where *is* Tricia?”

“Off googling St. Mary’s,” Jill had answered. “Unless she’s been called again. Probably both.”

Things slowed after eleven. But the lull only re-sharpened the dread, for both of them. Walking the dim halls Jill leaned on David; repeated Gregory Pappas’s words: *Same creep, he’s excited, moving fast.*

“Think he’s in the hospital now?” she asked quietly.

He made no reply, but they walked faster. Hurried down the long OB hall to see Jesse, who was awake, squirming happily in his isolette. They checked out every bustling nurse in the place, then took turns holding him. Felt comfort in his warmth, even laughed a little when one tiny flailing fist bopped David’s cheek. Jesse’s eyes were hazel, contented. In the dimly lit Neonatal Unit, machines beeped softly with a steady, mesmerizing rhythm. All was well.

Holding him, Jill even relaxed enough – briefly – to yawn...and Jesse yawned too.

Smiling, they put him back in his isolette.

On their way out they passed the gowned Security man on the inside, two uniformed men just outside, and more uniforms in the halls. One of them had a dog, a German Shepherd, who seemed asleep until they approached. He jumped up, stiffly alert.

“It’s okay, doggie,” David said, stopping to pet him.

“His name’s Jasper.” The young cop holding Jasper’s leash looked tired, but smiled. “Have a good night.”

“You too,” David said. “Nite, Jasper.”

*Wag, wag.*

Jasper lay down again.

They made their way to Jill’s on call room. It seemed a good idea for tonight.

David locked the door, and Jill found a hurried message from Tricia on her cell phone.

“Gotta run, just got called, you lucky, you can *sleep* tonight. Anyway, Saint Mary’s is in trouble. One hundred and twenty years old, spent generations as a convent sheltering the homeless and raising orphans, now a psych facility next to a church the Archdiocese has *decided to close*, can’t afford the millions it would cost to fix – I’m reading here – ‘serious structural problems at a time when they’ve had to close more than two dozen churches and sell their rights to developers’ – argh, condos! – ‘to narrow their budget gap while facing nationwide low attendance, a priest shortage, and the rising cost of maintaining century-old buildings.’”

A deep breath at the other end. “Reports say the staff’s been getting laid off and *patients* are going to get scattered,” Tricia huffed. “Where do you *put* all those people? Well, it’s the same with regular psych places too, right? No *wonder* there are so many crazies walking the streets-“

Voices sounded impatiently in the background; Tricia's voice dropped. "Oops, gotta go, Mackey's getting cranky, Ramu and Phipps are losing consciousness – okay, I'm coming! – see you at morning rounds, sleep tight, sleep safe, bye."

Jill pocketed her phone and told David Tricia's message, all of it. He nodded, hearing, but was at the desk pounding computer keys.

"What are you doing?"

"Found something."

She came to look over his shoulder. He'd found a website. Lurid with violent reds and violets nearly muddling the site's name: *DevilSpawn.com*.

"Yeow, how'd you find that?"

"Just googled 'Spawn of the Devil,' and up this popped. That guy and his sign were all over the media, I figured the keywords would be searchable." David scrolled a little. "Looks like it just went up. Not too many posts under the, uh, manifesto."

Jill read, openmouthed.

Pale yellow, bold-faced letters against a dark, fiery background raged "...*child of THE BEAST, the DEVIL! He is born and among us and MUST BE DESTROYED! Along with that devil's workshop, Madison Memorial Hospital, for its arrogance of taking the place of the Creator! That is no baby on that hospital's fifth floor, he is the spawn of the devil! The world must be saved from him!*"

Jill closed her eyes for a second. "Oh boy."

"Nice of him to pinpoint our floor." David blinked at the words. "Make it easy to find us. New babies get more visitors than the other specialties combined."

"Strangers," Jill managed. "They can just walk in, carrying flowers, presents in boxes."

"Remember the dogs..." David was reading, scrolling down. "Oh jeez, these posts are gonna rile Psycho worse."

Jill read: "*Hey asshole, whyn't ya do something normal like watch porn! Hands off the kid and drop dead!*"

Then the next few: "*Creeps like u belong ina nuthouse*"... "*Do ur eyes turn red from the flash in pitchers?*"... "*Izis a movie trailer?*" ... "*Where's ur damn link to Amazon?*"

In all, only five posts. All dated within the last two days.

"How did people find him?"

"Who knows?" David hit the logo on the site's upper right. It was one of those create-your-own freebies. The next one advertised gluten free muffins.

He leaned back in his chair, and inhaled. "The worry is kooks who *don't* post. All it would take is one, assuming this isn't the killer himself."

Jill thought as hard as her overwrought brain would let her. "It might not be. Why would he advertise himself?" She swallowed. "On the other hand, he's crazy. So...send the site to the cops. Inciting to violence – that will get them a warrant and they can find out who he is."

"ESP, m'dear." David was already copying the URL and starting an email.

"Wait."

She got out her phone. Logged in to DevilSpawn.com, chose SpawnBegone as a username, and fast-typed: *"I feel as you do, please let me help. What can I do? How can I reach you?"*

Then posted it.

David liked the idea. He typed his email to Pappas, cc'd Brand and Blasco, and copied the DevilSpawn.com link into the email: *"Found this. Frigteninswallowed. "On the other hand, he's crazy. So...send the site to the cops. Inciting to violence – that will get them g new site. Check it out and btw 'SpawnBegone' is Jill trying to get a response."*

He hit Send and closed the laptop. "Bed," he said, rising. "Bed, bed, bed..."

His scrub top was off and in seconds he was under the covers, groaning relief.

Jill pulled off her scrubs too. "I thought this bed was too narrow and made your back ache."

"I'll sleep on top of you."

She climbed in with him. Found comfort in his arms and warmth, his heaviness and the scrape of his stubble on her cheek.

Until minutes later...when he really did conk out on her. David falling asleep sometimes reminded Jill of a Garfield cartoon: he'd fall face first onto the pillow or...her, *whomp*, and it was instant lights out. His whole left side and shoulder was on her, getting heavier. Not that it mattered, because her mind was suddenly wired again. She couldn't shut it down; behind her closed lids flared every horrid image of the past two days.

*He's excited, moving fast ...The Snake Guy...he's going to attack again, but who? Where? Another woman or the hospital? DESTROY the devil's workshop, Madison Memorial fifth floor!*

Had they received David's email at the police station? Maybe some night cops had rushed to wake up some judge who was thrilled to leap out of bed and pull on a robe and sign a warrant, and DevilSpawn Guy was the killer and they'd already arrested him...

Forget it.

David was breathing heavily. His body suddenly jerked a little, as if from a dream, and, mumbling, he rolled away to whomp the wall. Didn't that hurt his head? Apparently not. His deep breathing resumed.

Jill reached and got her phone from the little side table. Never-sleeps cyber light glowed at her, as if waiting.

For what? *Think*, she commanded herself, because something had been nagging at her. Something she'd filed away, deep down but *there*...

Then it came to her.

Last night, Paul and Susan Sutter talking about some online group Jenna Walsh had belonged to. Jill couldn't remember the name, but on her phone did what David did: just googled the key words she was thinking, and up came the site: SurroMomsForum.com.

She decided on "Desperate" as a username, logged in, and read some posts. All were emotional, ranting, struggling.

*"There are surrogates in the Bible. I just don't get why the church can decide things the bible isn't even against."*

*“The church doesn’t agree with science intervening with having babies, they’re against any kind of ivf, and surrogacy includes ivf.”*

*“I just don’t CARE. God loves babies and families and I think the problem is those who have a problem with that, not God.”*

*“I HATE this BS about God’s will. God gave us the intelligence to overcome obstacles, AND He gave us doctors to help us.”*

*“My cancer left me infertile and the priest said it was God’s will. Long awful story, but hubby and I went surrogate and now we have a beautiful family. Thank you, God. Not the church.”*

*“My priest told my sister if God wanted her to have a child, she wouldn’t be infertile.”*

*“Jimmy Fallon’s daughter was born by surrogate!”*

Above those posts was the most recent one, posted three days earlier: *“NO to all of you! Bearing a strange man’s child not your husband’s is interfering with God’s will, agreeing to rape, and committing the biggest lie possible!”*

Jill re-read the last one. It was signed by “Righteous.”

What a self-important username. Um, send her a poke? See what happens?

Jill squinted and punched away and wrote to Righteous: *“You have touched my deepest pain. I feel so torn, wish I could talk to somebody. I don’t suppose you live in the NYC area?”*

She inhaled, bit her lip, and hit send. Felt something heavy lift off her chest, replaced by a fluttery sense of anticipation.

She had just done something, but what?

She frowned, thinking, in the darkness.

There had been something familiar in the voice of SurroMom’s “Righteous.” It had the same furious tone and exclamation points as the text on DevilSpawn... *Destroy! Madison’s fifth floor! Biggest lie possible!*

Two different websites. A voice on both of them sounding the same...

Now I gotta remember, Jill thought. I’m ‘SpawnBegone’ on DevilSpawn.com, and, uh...what?

Oh, ‘Desperate’ answering nasty scoldy ‘Righteous’ on SurroMomsForum.

Or was it the other way around? Look again at what I wrote? Damn, too sleepy...

The phone slipped from Jill’s hand into her Nike on the floor.

Seconds later she was asleep.



In the morning she decided she'd done a fat nothing. Exhaustion combined with sleep creeping up played such tricks, made you think you'd found something when you hadn't.

So dread came back hard, a tightened chest, a high, whirring wail growing louder inside her head. She felt it when they woke and quick-showered; barely had time to tell David, rushing, about her post to SurroMomsForum. The feeling continued through morning rounds – watching David lead and teach the interns how to check on post-delivery patients. Her heart felt squeezed but she managed to put on the Happy Face when worried patients asked about seeing BOMB THREAT! on their TVs and lap tops, and hearing the dogs, their dim barking coming from somewhere, everywhere.

“Just a precaution,” David kept reassuring. That calmed them. One reported her oldest child's school getting a bomb threat, another reported a bomb threat in a mall, and another reported being in an airport that had a bomb threat. Lawyer Kim Withers, still there, said her courthouse at 100 Centre Street got bomb threats “at least once a week.”

“The world's gone crazy,” she said.

“Good people far outnumber bad,” David answered, wanting to get back to teaching. “Now, about your episiotomy-“

“It hurrts.”

“Understood.” He looked at the interns. “So what do we *do* about that?”

“Thirty milligrams of codeine to kill the pain,” Gary Phipps said, rubbing an eye. He'd slept four hours.

“Also order a culture to be taken for infection,” Jill said, sharp as a tack. She was surprised; inside she was frantic, wildly impatient to *do something*, but she was still functioning okay.

David's eyes smiled at her, then smiled encouragingly at Kim Withers. “We'll take care of that.” He slid an order under her chart's front clamp and red-flagged it. Kim smiled gratefully at him. Had no idea how he was feeling underneath.

In the hall between patients Jill had managed to whisper, “Heard from the cops?”

“Nope.” He shook his head and his mouth tightened.

Twenty minutes later, he did. Excused himself, left the interns to kibbitz with a glowing new mom, and stepped back out to the hall.

Jill followed.

“Good find,” said Pappas. David held the phone so Jill could hear. “The DevilSpawn website is new, belongs to your Megaphone Man whose name is Ralph Nash. We’d had him on tape from that day but not his name. Also had his prints on that pamphlet Keri had him sign, but they didn’t match anything in the system.” There was a pause. “The profile doesn’t fit, either. This killer is smart, methodical, and Nash is a psych patient.”

Jill and David traded looks.

“Psych patients can be very intelligent, even cunning,” David said into the phone, keeping his voice low. “They manipulate their way into institutions all the time. Every department here gets ‘em.”

A nurse passed, then an orderly pushing an empty gurney.

“But wouldn’t staff at Saint Mary’s know if Nash was sneaking out?” David asked Pappas. “The Sheehan murder happened around two in the morning.”

Jill hurriedly yanked her scrub pockets inside out, holding her hands palms up. David nodded, remembered. “Correction, St. Mary’s may have laid off staff. They’re in financial trouble and the Archdiocese may be about to close it.”

“How do you know?”

“A friend googled it. The church next door is already closed. Plus they were letting Nash walk around if he promised to stay on his meds, right? But he didn’t.”

“No.” Pappas sounded exasperated. “Well, nice going, we’ve got his name, at least. That’s all the warrant allowed us from the website’s server. But the psych place’s director Sister Something said Nash won’t talk to us. Free speech, no probable cause, circumstantial - and this guy has to be checked out.”

The detective paused for breath. “We’re at a dead end,” he said gloomily. “Those brown fibers of Brian Walsh’s jacket turned up nothing. No evidence he’d been in that alley where Jenna was attacked...”

Jill heard and smacked her palms to her face, frustrated, pacing away a little, coming back frowning to hear more. Also checking her phone.

“...his prints aren’t in the system either. Alex and Keri now like Nash better but—”

“Hold on a sec, Jill has something.” She was suddenly tugging at David’s scrub top - and held out her phone to him, whispering, “DevilSpawn answered.”

He blinked, and read.

In her phone was an email. *“Thank you for your Christian offer to help. I am afraid I’m being persecuted by the Devil Police! If you dare their watchful eyes, it is now I who need help and a fellow pure soul to talk to. I’m in a place at 512 Avenue B in nyc. Please ask for Ralph if you come, and I hope you do! Please hurry, they’re watching me and there’s no telling what they’ll do to me!”*

“Whoa,” David said, coming back to his phone. “I gotta forward this to you.”

He did, from Jill’s phone – and then his own phone beeped. He put Pappas on hold and listened: Two new deliveries just arrived, one already dilated to seven centimeters, contractions galloping. He switched back to Pappas as the interns filed out behind him, saying, We’re done, What now?

With the phone at his ear he muttered sharply, “Holloway and Greenberg need help with two deliveries. Check with Holloway first, his sounds closer. Tricia and

Ramu, help Woody take the second one's history, check her vitals, albumin. She's never had any prenatal care. Gary and Charlie, get the charts updated – *what?*”

“Got it and read it,” Pappas said tightly. “This Nash guy's ready to blow.”

“Jill wrote him at two in the morning.”

“Christ, you two are good.”

“He's schiz. Paranoid schizophrenic. Maybe too much so.”

Silence at the other end. A nurse passed, then a strolling patient in a pastel robe, stopping to pat a dog, chat reassuredly with the police officer.

“Come again?” Pappas growled in David's phone.

“Ralph Nash might have touched too many buttons. Like I said, psych patients are often very smart. They know their diseases, have studied up on them and *know how to sound*. They've been in and out of institutions and know what doctors look for. Nice deal for a standard psych patient - free meals, a warm bed - plus a religious place might be easier to play than a regular institution.”

David pulled in a breath. “On the other hand, this could be real. Ralph Nash could be completely violent paranoid schiz.”

“You're not a shrink. How do you know?”

“Any doctor knows. They play us all.”

A brief silence. “He called us the Devil's Police.”

“Sounds like you've joined his list. *And* if it's him, add this hospital, the devil's workshop that must be destroyed. That's a lot of people he hates.”

“Destroyed' goes beyond free meals and a warm bed. That message on Nikki Sheehan's pillow had the same wording as the website and *we can't question him*.”

“Wait a sec.”

Jill had gripped David's arm. “I'll go,” she said, looking resolute. “I'm not a cop. I can talk to him, pretend to look under his bed for persecutors and see if he has any firearms, explosives.”

David gaped at her. “No way, too dangerous.”

But Pappas had heard. “Keri and Alex can meet her. Stay close, wire her if necessary. Illegal as hell but we need a look at this guy. We need all the help we can get, *fast*.”

Jill was suddenly pacing, her mouth set, and she was wearing that look David knew too well. There'd be no stopping her. She had all the detectives' numbers, and she'd call them herself if he tried to stand in the way.

She met his fretful gaze. “Ralph Nash looks better than Walsh,” she whispered fiercely. “He *is* ready to blow and *what if he gets past the dogs? Could dogs have detected inside those Boston pressure cookers?*”

“Now they'd *check* pressure cookers,” David flared back.

“What about glass? Plastic? There's always some flower vase, and cell phones can set off from a distance - or *right there* if cops find-”

“David? David?” from the phone.

He came nervously back to it.

“Here's what I suggest,” Pappas said. “Jill answers that email, same emotional tone but not sounding too eager. Say she can't get away from her job till something like three o'clock. That will keep him happy – a like-minded visitor's coming – and avoid him suspecting she's Devil Police out to get him.”

The knuckles on David's hand gripping the phone were white. "What job would she be free from at three o'clock?"

"A dog walker."

Jill heard that and grabbed the phone from David. "A dog walker, perfect!" she said. "Should I call Keri or Alex? Where should we meet?"

"Keri will call you," Pappas said. "She was going to anyway."

They argued, and continued to argue in the OB linen closet.

Ironically, the same walk-in linen closet where, over three months ago, they'd begun their relationship with a fight: two Stubborns butting heads with Jill the brazen intern telling her boss he was doing it wrong. They'd forgotten since what the "doing it wrong" thing was. But it was time to butt heads again.

"I don't like this. It's too dangerous." David's face was taut. "You *can't* go alone and I have to stay here. Let Alex and Keri find a way." He leaned stiffly on the jamb, his tall, broad-shouldered frame blocking the exit.

She kept her back to him, pawing furiously through a pile of sheets and accidentally toppling towels.

"I'll be *fine*," she insisted, bending to scabble up the towels. Her face was blotchy red. "Keri and Alex--"

"Will what? Wire you and listen from outside and burst in if they hear you getting attacked? What if this creep has a *knife*? In prisons they sharpen their toothbrushes--"

"Staff will come."

"Doesn't sound like they *have* much staff." David stepped closer to her, his face coloring. "And why would the cops *want* to wire you? They can't *use* anything recorded, it's inadmissible, illegal, unconstitutional--"

"Right!" Jill whirled on him, squeezing bunched up towels. "*Their hands are tied* and who's this nut going to go after maybe tonight? Or sooner? Another woman? The whole hospital? Some uniformed cop on the street just doing his job protecting people? Whacko's been provoked. He's added the Devil Police to his list."

"Nash will recognize you." David's voice dropped lower, like it always did when he was stressed. The vein on his brow bulged. "You've been all over the media."

"I'll wear a disguise." Jill threw the bunched towels into a canvas laundry hamper. "And I still have the Mace from last summer."

David looked away, exhaled heavily, then turned back with tight-lipped resignation. He was beaten, of course. What to do? Jill's tenacity had almost gotten them killed last summer.

It had also saved lives. No telling how many.

A long moment passed.

Abruptly he said quietly, "I'm being selfish."

Jill stood glaring at the ugly canvas hamper. She softened a little, but her face was pinched and he saw that her eyes were tearing.

“Jill,” he said plaintively. “I could be called any minute. You only have clinic duty which I know you’re going to switch - and I can’t go to Nash with you.”

Her face unpinched and she sniffled. “Better you don’t come,” she said, softening further. “Together we’d really be recognized.” She shot him a quick look with eyes that were reddened, but achingly vulnerable. “Why did you say you were selfish?”

He came and bent his face to her.

“Because I’m afraid. I’m crazy-terrified of losing the best thing I’ve ever had or will have. That’s you. My God, how do we get *into* these situations?”

“I practice.”

She shrugged at her thin witticism, and then her face crumpled. “It’s really my fault,” she said in a stifled voice, her head dropping. “If I hadn’t started all that snooping into bad cases, and found Jesse...”

“Stop.” He took her in his arms. She snuffled again and hugged him back, tentatively at first, then melting into his shoulder. He breathed in with huge relief.

It felt so good to stop fighting.

“You did a great, great thing,” he said in the gentlest voice. “You’re still-“

A harried-looking Gary Phipps stuck his head in, holding up a paper. “Get a room, you two. Hey David, that thirty milligrams of codeine for Withers, the nurse says you didn’t sign the order.”

Cussing softly, David turned and said, “Yes I did.” He pointed to his scrawl at the bottom of the sheet.

“*That’s* a signature?” Phipps looked and screwed his face. “The nursing supervisor says it isn’t a signature.”

“It is, dammit.”

Phipps left and David turned back to Jill. She had her phone out and was tapping an email.

He looked over her shoulder.

“Dear Ralph,” it began. “Yes, I can come to you...”

He stiffened again. “I’m *really* hating this. I have a bad feeling.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll be fine. I’ll be fine.”

*“Dear Ralph, I am so sorry to hear your woes. Yes, I can come to you, but not until around three o’clock, if that’s okay. I can’t leave my job until then. I now want to help more than ever. Please let me know if three or possibly a little later will be okay. Your friend in righteousness, Christine*

Jill stared at her email, frowning.

Christine, her middle name. She never thought of it – why had it just popped up? She really didn’t like the name; it had been her mother’s. Mom the prosecutor. Mom the unhappy, frustrated Assistant D.A. who’d always wanted to rise higher, and never did. She got her name in the papers a lot, though. Chris Raney, Chris Raney, Assistant District Attorney battling bad guys. Jill used to come home from school to an empty apartment and read about her mother, online, in newspapers. Fighting at trials, addressing reporters, attending fundraisers; no mention that she was a

divorced, absentee mother...not *there* even when she was at home. She was on the phone, studying briefs, always too busy. Jill had grown up lonely, bookish. Studying hard for good marks and a little attention from Christine.

On other people, the name Christine was beautiful. It just made Jill mad, maybe that's why it popped up. Feeling mad banishes feeling afraid, helpless. It helps you move forward.

She stared again at her email, her finger poised over "Send." Of course she felt afraid, but hadn't wanted David to see. Instead she'd thought of Jenna Walsh, dying so piteously; had imagined the terror and suffering she'd gone through in that alley attack. And Nikki Sheehan, unknown but still so tragic... And *snakes left just last night in the hospital chapel*.

*Same creep, same signature. Excited, moving fast...*

*Is it Nash? What are the odds?*

Jill took a deep breath, and sent the Dear Ralph email.

Then went to find David. He'd gone to chew out the nursing supervisor who'd sent Phipps back with complaints about his handwriting.

Keri hadn't called yet, and it was forty minutes till Jill's clinic duty. David – uptight and just called to a delivery - told Jill to go help Phipps and Ortega update charts. He kissed her cheek hurriedly. And whispered, “*Please* rethink this. You're going to be in a room with a crazy man.”

“Okay,” she said with a look that didn't reassure him.

Which he expected, so he handed her a capped and loaded syringe. “Valium, 20 liquid milligrams,” he said low. “If Nash gets violent, *don't wait for the cops*. Zap him.”

She hugged him, right there in front of the nurses' station, behind which three nurses grinned.

“Go save a little life,” she whispered, pocketing the syringe.

And joined Phipps and Ortega in the OB lounge. Nervously checked the time on the wall clock with the time on her phone, then gritted her teeth and read, flipped pages, took notes and checked on doctors' orders. As they worked, Gary and Charlie muttered wistfully about donuts with sprinkles; Jill tuned them out and chewed on her lip.

And only looked up when someone came in with a real dead-trees paper, its headlines blaring POLICE SEARCH WIDENS IN BOMB THREAT, POSSIBLE CONNECTION TO SURROGATE MURDERS. She only skimmed the first paragraph before feeling sick. Oh, reporters must have been digging all night. Had they seen the DevilSpawn website too? Probably. If David had found the search so easily, certainly hard-digging, excited reporters had. The police, said that first paragraph, were searching for one deranged suspect with a hatred for surrogacy and IVF, and who had threatened to bomb Madison Memorial for having “created” the ultimate of all test tube babies.

Jill pushed the paper away and chewed her lip harder, felt so impatient she couldn't stand it. *Call, Keri, call*, she kept thinking. Her heart thudded hard

But her rote-mode still helped to override her anxiety. Luckily, pages in patient charts were color-coded, which made the going easier if you were half-dead exhausted, or *anticipating meeting a horrific killer*. Lab and X-ray reports were pink, doctors' order sheets were light green, progress sheets were yellow, TPR (temperature, pulse and respiration) sheets were light blue, and nurses' notes were white.



Pages flipped. Charts came out and went back into their rolling rack. Nothing dramatic - until Jill's phone dinged...and she frowned at it. An email, not from Ralph Nash or Kerri. "Righteous" in the subject line.

Righteous?

Oh... Last night, that second email she'd sent to SurroMoms Forum. Blitz-tired, she'd been "Desperate" and posted to "Righteous" who'd yelled at the others with all exclamation points.

She froze. Leaned away and opened the email.

*"Dear Desperate, You are right to feel torn because God is speaking to your heart. And yes, I do live in nyc and could meet with you if you wish to talk. Name a place and time. I'll see if I can manage it."*

Jill stared at the message.

Its voice sounded different from last night, and not just because it lacked exclamation points. Could this be more than one person posting as "Righteous?" Logging on to SurroMoms to make connections with surrogates?

She didn't know what to answer.

Charlie next to her said, "Wanna order out for lunch?"

"Sure," she said, and then, "Oh, I forgot. Will you switch clinic duty with me?"

"Sure, I owe you. This is boring."

She looked back to her phone, breathing faster. Started hesitantly to tap out an answer...and it buzzed.

Keri Blasco, speaking in a low rush. "We're going to see you at three? Would've called earlier but we've been investigating Nikki Sheehan's murder. Found a link between her and Jenna Walsh."

Jill's breath caught. She said nothing.

"Sheehan belonged to an online group called SurroMoms Forum," Keri continued. "There are other such groups but this is the biggest, comes up first in searches. Nikki's friend said she made online buddies there, met with one of them to vent about flak she'd been getting from her family--"

"Keri. Wait."

Jill stood jerkily and went out to the hall. Leaned her brow against the wall and spoke low. "I wrote that same group last night," she managed...and told about Righteous, who had just answered and offered to meet and "talk about it." Any time, any place.

"Forward me the email," Keri said.

"Just did." Jill finished punching keys. Her lips were dry.

Seconds passed, and then, "Got it." Seconds more to skim. "This is great. Okay, email back. Suggest meeting this Righteous at, say, 2:15, same neighborhood as your three o'clock with Nash but not *too* close. Let's see, Nash is at St Mary's on Avenue B..."

"Tompkins Square is good. It's just a few blocks."

"Right. Okay, here's a place. Meet us at 1:40 at the Hookah Café at 107 Avenue A. That will give us time to explain the wire and scam and then for you to meet Righteous."

"*Explain* the wire?"

“Actual wires are extinct. It’s digital now, you’ll see. So let me know if Righteous agrees to that time and location. We’ll be with you every step, watching, listening. Then you’ll have time to make Ralph Nash’s acquaintance, with us still listening. *Hey, you got us a double.* Two meetings with two crazy, maybe murderous zealots.”

Jill listened, scribbling on her clipboard. “I’ve got another idea about the meeting with Righteous.”

“What?”

“Tell you when I get there. See you at 1:40.”

She emailed, said she’d be wearing an old pea jacket, and heard back *too* fast, as if Righteous had been waiting.

“Two-fifteen, yes, see you then at the Hookah,” went the bland message. She forwarded that email to Keri too, and pulled in a deep, shaky breath.

No paranoia in that second email. No exclamation points, no suggestion of nastiness, the voice again sounding different from last night’s ‘Righteous.’

*How many people were involved in this?*

Real fear set in.

Cheeseburgers had arrived. She grabbed hers, thanked Gary who had run down to pay the guy – “my turn next,” she said – and reminded Charlie to sub for her in the outpatient clinic.

“I’m on my way,” he said, rising with his mouth full. “You going shopping or something?”

“Ha!”

In her on call room she changed and ate simultaneously, nearly choking on a fry. Then called David, leaving a detailed voicemail including the second meeting with Righteous. Then got out her Mace, which she hadn’t used since last July. The label pronounced it “the most powerful pepper concentration allowed by law!” It also had a pretty, adjustable strap that looked like a bracelet.

Now, as in last July, she strapped it on, then pulled on her oldest jeans and her beat-up pea jacket. The Valium syringe went into the jacket pocket. She tugged her sweater sleeve down over the Mace, then pulled on her grungy man boots, not used since some college hikes.

Wig? No wig? She had two from last summer, one blond, one light-brown, both short. She hated them. They itched.

Forget the wigs. It occurred that she was most recognizable to patients in the hospital, when she was in her element. Perception is everything. Looking scruffy, clomping down some dingy East Village Street, a movie star would go unrecognized.

She brushed her long dark hair down and parted it in the middle, hippie style. Looked in the mirror again and pulled the sides forward to hide her face more.

Dark sunglasses completed the look. Very Yoko Ono.

Downstairs in the crowded foyer she almost bumped into George Mackey, looking tense and going the other way.

“S’cuse me,” he said, not recognizing her.

Three blocks away she rushed down cement stairs and took the Lexington Avenue Express, barreling south.

Drums, bongos, and guitars boomed on the train platform, the stairs, and before she was even out of the subway. Walking down Avenue A from Fourteenth Street, Jill passed a giant, walking artichoke and Thai, Punjab, Ukranian, and Vietnamese restaurants, small and squeezed close. It was said that the East Village was the neighborhood with the highest concentration of bars and restaurants in the city, perhaps in the world. Further down was a wall of elaborate graffiti screaming DIE, YUPPIE SCUM - a protest of the gentrification that had crept in and driven up realty prices. Also, no doubt, what had caused the closing of St. Mary's. Jill remembered Tricia saying, "Condos! Argh!" describing the Archdiocese putting the church up for sale.

This whole area was known as Alphabet City. Somewhere Jill had read that it used to be one big marsh, until developers started filling it in in the 1890s. In the next hundred years it went from crowded immigrant communities to cheap housing for artist types to Trendy. Condos and boutiques now crowding exotic pubs and clubs.

But if the rent for a one-bedroom had gone up to three thousand a month, the area still kept its atmosphere of artists, musicians, students, and diversity. Four and a half blocks down, just past a guy pounding steel drums and a plastic naked woman leaning coquettishly forward for a kiss, Jill reached the Hookah Café.

She was early. Keri Blasco and Alex Brand were earlier, already lounging at one of Hookah's sidewalk tables and also in jeans and ratty jackets. Keri wore bangle earrings and her blond hair down. Alex had a black gym bag at his feet.

Jill sat down with them, saying, "I just saw a walking artichoke."

Alex smiled and leaned closer. "A panhandler. He didn't stop you?"

"No."

"Then you look like you belong. He makes a beeline for tourists."

Keri said, "They love him. They get their pictures taken with an artichoke, then give him money. His father's a hedge funder in Greenwich, but he likes to make his own way."

"Ha. Beats working." Jill's hands were clasped on the table, working nervously, and Alex looked at them.

"Relax," he said quietly. "Look high or something."

Jill did her best to. Alex ordered a café latte for her, it came swiftly, and chatty openers were over for anyone watching. The man at the next table really was smoking a hookah. Alex and Keri muttered to each other. Jill sipped the latte and checked her phone.

One text from Tricia: “Where are you?” Jill texted back, “Out spying.”

There was nothing from David. Probably in the O.R. or some delivery room. Jill felt afraid, and terribly alone. Switched to view Jesse sleeping, with some nurse’s hands gently adjusting his little blue blanket. He looked so darling. For an instant tears stung her eyes.

Blinking them away, she looked back to see Keri pass her the bowl containing sugar and Splenda packets. “Don’t you want to sweeten that?” Keri asked pointedly, giving Jill a solid stare: *Look in the bowl.*

Jill followed her gaze and saw it. A delicate necklace with a golden, praying-hands medallion wrapped around a sugar packet.

“You’re right, this is kinda bitter,” Jill said, deftly palming the packet and medallion. She switched the medallion to her left hand as she tore open the packet and dumped in the Splenda; drank; and said, “Oh, better.”

Alex leaned to her. “You can hide bugs now in buttons, pens, cuff links...” Jill was nodding and he stopped.

“I know,” she said quietly.

Keri checked the time. “Almost two o’clock. Put it on in the ladies room?”

“Was just headed there.”

There were two dingy stalls in the john. In one of them Jill studied the clasp, looked for long seconds at the two hands praying...nice...and slipped on the medallion. On the wall was scrawled *Vodka/Xanax/Hashish WORKS!!*

When she returned Keri said, “By the way, what was that idea you had about this first meeting?”

Jill leaned forward. “I don’t like it. What if Nash and Righteous *are one and the same?* Psych patients can fake normal, fake taking their meds. I’d rather watch first, see who comes.”

The two detectives traded looks.

“Better,” Alex admitted. “Where do you get these hunches?”

“My suspicion radar. Maybe because my mother was a prosecutor.”

Keri grinned and smacked her palm on the table. “I *knew* there was something about you.”

They crossed the street to an Indonesian restaurant. Ordered syrup-colored coconut juice and watched through the window. Minutes passed, and then more minutes. Righteous was late.

Finally, at 2:28, a thirty-something blond woman in jeans and a dark coat came and sat at the Hookah, ordered nothing, and looked around in annoyance.

Jill almost choked on her coconut juice. “It’s Jenna Walsh’s sister-in-law!” She had a flash of Tricia saying, “That woman is *scary*. Did you see the muscles on her?”

My God, she thought. Was Dara Walsh capable of the brutality on Jenna and Nikki Sheehan? There’d been no rapes, nothing sexual...just bashing those women’s heads, and the rest. *Could Dara handle snakes?*

Keri breathed, “I’ll be damned. *That SurroMom site is how she met Nikki Sheehan.*”

Alex was using his phone to tape Dara, who fidgeted and craned around, looking angrier. The corners of her mouth turned down. She reached for a paper napkin, wiped her hands furiously, and tossed the napkin onto the tabletop.

“Good, her hands are sweating,” Keri said. “Sweating hands spill DNA.”

Dara yanked the sweetener bowl to her, swiped a fistful of packets, pocketed them and then started pounding on her phone.

Jill’s phone dinged. She read, “Are you still coming?” from Righteous, now known to them as – surprise! - Dara Walsh. The words seemed to leap from Jill’s phone screen. Her hands shook as she showed it to the others, then took a quick pic of Dara with her own phone and sent it to David: “*SurroMom’s Righteous is Dara Walsh.*”

Was he still in delivery or surgery? Jill so wanted to talk to him, tell him. Open-mouthed, she blinked at Dara across the street again.

“Tell her you were delayed,” Alex whispered.

Her hands were cold, trembling. She punched letters, the emotion in her answer ironically real: “Oh, so sorry! Delayed! Another day maybe?” She hit Send. Seconds later they watched Dara read, then snap at a waiter and furiously punch her phone.

The email torrent arrived. “Maybe! Another day you’ve delivered your soul to the devil! I could have helped you! If you still want to talk, I’ll give you one more chance to save yourself from burning in eternal hellfire!”

Now exclamation points...

The three of them squeezed together to read it, then saw Dara rise and stalk off.

“Heading north unfortunately,” Keri said. “The way we want to go.”

Alex held his hand up, and they waited a minute, Keri tapping her fingers and Jill twisting her juice straws into knots. Then: “There’s time,” Alex said. “Wait.”

He crossed the street pulling on leather gloves. He badged the waiter, who made a face at the just-vacated seat and took a bill from him, nodding. Then he pulled a small plastic bag from his pocket, bagged the sweetener bowl and the tossed napkin, and crossed the street back to them.

“Fantastic.” He put his bagged evidence into his gym bag as the other two rose from their seats. “Now we’ve got Dara Walsh’s prints *and* her husband’s. Likely even Dara’s DNA from her sweating, thieving fingers. Jill, you should’ve become a cop.”

“I almost did,” she said.

Keri looked at her.

Jill fingered the syringe in her pocket. “Long story. I’ll tell you on the way to St. Mary’s.”

David dropped to a bench, dropped his face in his hand and closed his eyes. He was beyond exhausted. His knees hurt from standing so long in the O.R. Behind his closed lids he pictured...bed, and Jill, her arm around him even as she slept. The image warmed him, helped him feel alive again.

A nurse passing him smiled sweetly and said, "Just heard you saved that woman's life. *Te felicito.*"

He smiled wearily at her as she passed.

Then got out his cell phone. Heard Jill's first voicemail and frowned. Righteous? A second meeting with someone username Righteous on top of the Ralph Nash meeting? He replayed the message, his frown deepening. The cops were with her, but still...

Suddenly his phone dinged and there was Jill's text and a photo, sent seconds ago: "*SurroMom's Righteous is Dara Walsh.*"

His breath stopped. He stared at the angry blond woman's face in the photo.

Dara Walsh? Posting on SurroMom.com? His breath quickened, his mind trying to figure, connect...

Another text dinged. From Jill: "We're headed to St. Mary's now, crossing Tompkins Park. I'm wearing a bug, don't worry, all's well."

He stared at his phone. Flipped anxiously back to the mean-faced photo of Dara Walsh. At least it looked taken from across the street. They were being extra careful.

But now? Headed for an alone-in-a-room with a violent-sounding paranoid schiz? David's fist clenched; he fought the compulsion to text back and say No, don't go!

With Nash, Jill *wouldn't* be with Alex and Keri. What damn good would a bug do if they were this time across the street or just outside if Nash got hostile or worse...

His mind raced as his fingers raced across his phone's letters. What to text back? He felt guilty, crazy-helpless. He wanted to be with her, visit psychotic Nash together. This was nuts. God, he worried, missed her. Even when she was departments and floors away, she was still *here*, in the hospital, under the same roof.

He started to punch keys: *Let the cops do it. It's ten to three, please, turn around now. Come back and let the cops do it-*

The phone rang in his hand. It was Woody, falling over his words.

“All hell down here in the ER. Woman seven months pregnant just brought in, fell or was pushed off a fire escape, skull and bone fractures, gonna be a crowded surgery table, and *we might be able to save the baby*. Meet us in OR 6!”

David closed his eyes for a second. Inhaled. Deleted what he'd started and instead shakily texted, PLEASE BE CAREFUL. I'M WORRIED. I LOVE YOU.

He sent it and got to his feet. Turned back to the swinging doors to go scrub in again.

They'd crossed Seventh Street and entered Tomkins Square Park, keeping their heads down as they moved under trees and past people reading, eating, exercising, break dancing. A stoned trannie with pink hair and ROCK MY WORLD on his sweatshirt told them mournfully, “I'm so *done* with him.”

Jill barely heard. She was checking her cell phone and found David's I LOVE YOU. Blinked at it. Wanted to cry. It was only the second time he'd actually said it. The first time in high emotion too. The words looked so rushed, frantic, as if typed running between one crisis and another.

She felt unaccountably guilty. She should be *there*, not here clomping through some park past more guitars and bongos, dog walkers and acrobats.

Then *DEVIL'S WORKSHOP DESTROYED!* flashed back at her. And *same creep, he's moving fast...*

She felt so anxious, cold. Being with two cops didn't help; ahead Ralph Nash awaited in his room in an understaffed psychiatric institution. She so wanted to be with David. Her mother never hugged her. David hugged and comforted her. Always had his arm around her when they walked, was *there* for her, emotionally. She missed that so much...

LOVE YOU BACK, she texted him, tearing up, then flicked her phone to the picture of him with Jesse sleeping on his shoulder. Smiled down at it, nearly bumped into a man playing his saxophone.

“Oh! Sorry!”

His eyes smiled and he kept on playing. Stoned and happy. Lucky guy.

“So,” Keri asked, wrenching her back as they passed a water fountain. “What's this about you almost becoming a cop?”

Jill fingered the medallion around her neck. David's text and walking under trees, seeing people having fun, had unwound her a little.

Her lips pressed together for a moment. “Like I said, my mother was a prosecutor, an ADA.” She hesitated. “Absentee, divorced, ambitious...not cold but just... too busy when I was growing up. Some things got me her attention, though – good marks and following her cases, talking to her about them, asking questions. And the apartment had lots of cops visiting. Detectives in huddles with her, trying to figure if they had a case.”

She saw Alex testing the medallion bug in his ear pod. “The connection's good,” he said. “You're coming in loud and clear.”

“Great, I'm two feet away.” It came out a bit acerbic, but both cops cracked smiles.



Jill came back to Keri's question, and let herself smile too. "I really loved the cops. They were funny. The harder The Job got, the more they cracked jokes, told incredible stories. Mom would let me listen in, and I loved it. I even learned how to wire the old way." She fingered her medallion again. "Boy, if they had these gizmos then..."

Alex asked, "Who did you know? I might recognize the names."

"Wakely, Tomicelli, Reiser, Joe Connor—"

"Joe Connor?"

"Yeah. Joseph Francis Connor. I was at his funeral. I was fourteen. I cried so hard they thought I was a member of the family."

Keri looked questioningly at Alex, who told her somberly, "Joe Connor was shot. Trying to save a baby in a drug bust."

They all fell silent for moments. Jill finally inhaled and said, "So that's when I decided to become a cop."

Keri had been checking out people they passed. "So what changed your mind?"

"When my mother got cancer. Ovarian cancer gallops, she was metastasizing in months. It was a double shock because I realized that I'd never *had* her as a real mom. Don't think we *ever* had a heart-to-heart. And then with all the crying, it hit that I needed, *wanted*, an antidote to sorrow. A college friend was planning on med school and OB, and I thought...babies! Families! Hugs, smiles, flowers! Well it's mostly that, thank God, but there are tragedies too, and couples fighting, divorcing, custody threats going on right at the new mom's bed...not to mention" - she breathed in - "the other half of OB which is GYN-"

She stopped short, staring ahead. "Oh please don't tell me that's Dara Walsh again."

They followed her gaze. Thirty yards north, just passing the next water fountain, was indeed Brian Walsh's wife, moving fast.

"Must have entered at Ninth Street," Alex said low.

They watched her leave the pedestrian path and head briskly up Avenue B.

"Headed where we're headed." Keri frowned; and Alex, tight-lipped, said, "What the hell...?"

They left the park, and at a good distance followed Dara Walsh the four remaining blocks to St. Mary's.

Which Dara *passed*. *Walked right past* the old red-brick pile, then passed the yellow police barriers and the closed church behind them, and disappeared around the corner.

Alex radioed to have her followed. He then stood eyeing the two shadowy service alleys on both sides of St. Mary's. The one on the left was wrought-iron-gated. The one on the right, between St. Mary's and a brownstone, was open. "We'll be in there," he told Jill, gesturing to the right. "Hugging the building, just yards away." He put his ear pod back in.

Keri subtly slipped in hers too. "Ready?" she asked.

"Yeah." Jill's heart started banging. She pulled out her syringe for both of them to see. "Valium. Works fast. Big help unless I get jumped from behind."

They didn't look reassured.

“Keep your voice steady,” Alex said. “If we hear the slightest alarm in it, we’re in there in a second.”

Jill nodded numbly, swallowing. Stood there on the sidewalk and watched them duck into the alley.

Then looked up at the building. Four stories and brooding, its red bricks looking ready to crumble. She could imagine the *creaks* coming from its old wooden floors and doors. ST. MARY’S HOSPITAL read the faded carving on the lintel.

It was five minutes past three. She pulled in a deep breath, checked her Mace under her sweater sleeve and the Valium in her pocket again.

Then climbed the few steps and went in.

The lobby was small, dark, and smelled old. Jill asked the receptionist for Ralph Nash.

“Christine Connor,” she said. “He’s expecting me.” She’d planned on another last name. Joe Connor’s just came to her.

“Ah Christine, yes, he told me.” The receptionist looked delighted. He had a thin but affable face, thinning pale hair, and looked maybe forty. “My name is Will,” he said proudly. “I’m not really a receptionist, I’m a patient.”

“Oh?” A medicated patient. No real receptionist. “Good for you,” Jill said a bit awkwardly.

“Good for this great place that helped me. *Terrible* its funding is drying up, staff let go. My disorder’s been under control for *weeks*.”

“That’s awesome.”

Will wanted to talk more about his bipolar disorder, the neighbors complaining about his vacuuming at 4 a.m., but when Jill just stood there, saying little, he sighed, smiled again, and pointed to a set of swinging double doors. “Ralph is on the first floor in room 12. Six doors past the stairway. Careful, don’t trip over the threshold. It’s broken, the wood pops up. They’ve even had to lay off the maintenance people.”

Jill thanked him, took a deep breath, and pushed through the swinging doors. A darkened hall stretched ahead. On her right were winding wooden stairs with dusty banisters, and on her left was a small waiting room with magazines on a table. No television. Were there any TVs in this place? Likely not, come to think of it. TV news and violent shows would upset the patients. Will’s eyes had shown no glimmer of recognition from the media.

Jill started walking, looking up and around. There seemed to be no security cameras. She touched her medallion. “I’m in,” she whispered. “Entrance is swinging doors to the left of reception.”

The medallion gave an almost inaudible beep.

Plaques outside each closed door marked the room numbers. She crept past several, soundless within, and reached number 12. Belatedly it occurred to her to switch her cell phone onto “record.”

Then she knocked.

Inside, a chair scraped. The sound of footsteps came closer and a male voice said, “Christine?”

Jill breathed in, her heart thudding. “Yes, it’s me.”

The door opened, revealing a different-looking Megaphone Man. He looked neater, in laundered jeans and a frayed white shirt. His eyes were an overly bright brown, and his graying dark hair was combed. The red, angry face that they’d seen outside the hospital was pale now that there was no crowd hassling him. He looked to be in his mid forties.

“Come in,” he said eagerly, his bright eyes fixed on her.

The room was tiny, with a bed, a crucifix over it, a small desk, a chair before it and another chair by the window. Papers covered with large, handwritten scrawls littered the desk, the floor, and the bed. The chair by the window afforded a view of the closed church’s tan blank wall.

“Do you mind keeping the door open?” Jill asked primly. “I’m not accustomed to being alone in a room with a man.”

“Because you are a decent woman,” Nash said approvingly. “Of course.”

Jill opened the door wider and stood there awkwardly. She kept her jacket on. Nash did not offer to take it.

“Please, have a seat.” He motioned her to the chair by the window as he fumbled through his computer and assorted jumble on his desk, took an old transistor radio into his arms, and sat stiffly facing her on his bed.

“I am so glad you came,” he said, hugging his transistor, his eyes lit with magnetic neediness. That made it easier to respond.

“Of course.” Jill was facing the open door and the hallway. It was so quiet out there. Not a sound. “When you wrote about your woes with the police I had to.”

Nash shuddered and hugged his transistor. “You’re not afraid of *them*?”

“Should I be? Please tell me.” She kept her voice level.

“They’re after me, spying on me. Told Sister Meg about my website, and she told me to shut it down. But I *won’t*. Is this still a country of free speech?”

“Last I heard.” Jill forced an earnest look, though her heart was throbbing. “Why should the police be spying on you?”

“Because of my website. It contains truth, and an urgent alert that Satan is among us.” Nash spoke with a creepy intensity. “That Madison hospital – you saw the name on the website?”

“Yes, yes.” She leaned forward with an expression from a revival tent.

Nash leaned forward too, lowered his creepy voice. “They’ve had the arrogance to take the place of the Creator, and *that child up there is Satan’s son. The world must be saved from him.*”

He fixed intently on Jill across the tiny room. “And you agree, yes?”

What to say now? Oh jeez...Jill licked dry lips. “The truth shall prevail,” she said, wondering where that interpret-any-way cliché came from. Then she sidestepped as a question came to her. “You are skilled to have put up that website by yourself.”

A modest smile crept across Ralph’s face. “I didn’t.”

Jill cocked her head, let her confusion show.

“God did,” he said.

*God built his website?*

“Oh,” Nash said brightly. “Rick showed me that free web site place, and gave me a lesson. It’s easy. Rick and Sister Meg were so pleased that I’d found something I liked” – a slow, unhappy headshake - “until they found out what it was. Now they’re letting the Devil Police intimidate them and telling me to take it down.”

“Who’s Rick?”

“One of the only two nurses left. Gary is the other nurse and Sister Meg is St. Mary’s director.” Nash looked up at the ceiling. “They must be with patients upstairs. *They’re* too sick to merit being on the first floor,” he said proudly. “I moved down nine weeks ago, when they started transferring patients out, and because I was...happy on my medication.”

Nash smiled again, and glanced briefly out the open door. “There are empty rooms on this floor too. It’s so sad. The Archdiocese has no more money, but that’s the work of the devil too. Taking their money.”

Time to steer him back. “You said God put up the website?”

Nash patted his old transistor. “God speaks to me through this. He told me what to say.”

Jill blinked uncertainly. She’d never had experience in psych. “Oh, how wonderful,” she managed. “Will God speak to me too?”

A slow, sorry headshake, another modest smile. “Unfortunately, no. Only I am the chosen one to bear witness. Besides, God speaks to me *just at night, and only at a certain frequency*. I cannot divulge what it is.”

Uh, great, now what? Jill frowned a little, turned, and peered out the window to the service alley. It stretched between this building and the closed church. Trash bins had been pushed right up to the front wrought iron gate. Odd. For easier access to collect garbage or...for climbing over? She noticed too that the window latch, once cemented closed, had been broken open.

Inhaling, she turned back and moved her chair away from the window, then said with fake anxiety, “Do people look through that window?”

“I don’t think so.” Nash blinked placidly and glanced at his watch. “The gates are locked at both ends.”

Huh? Paranoia about police spying on him but not looking through the window?

“But those gates are *low*,” Jill said. “Only four feet.” She rubbed her hands together. “When I came you ... asked if I was scared of the police. I’m not yet, but I *am* afraid of that murderer...”

“Murderer?” Nash looked politely confused.

Genuine or good acting? “Yes. It’s been in the papers. There have been murders of pregnant women. They were beaten to death and left with snakes wound around their necks.”

“Snakes! Oh how horrible!” Nash’s whole body contorted in revulsion and he almost dropped his transistor.

No reaction to the murdered women.

There was a sound in the hall. Footsteps and someone knocking on another door.

Nash glanced out and then back. Jill did too.

“So maybe that’s why the police don’t like your website,” she went on, still faking anxiety. Nash seemed distracted again by sounds in the hall, voices talking.

Jill craned for his attention. "Because these women were pregnant by IVF, do you know what that is?"

She saw him blink. "Of course." He turned his head back to her, his voice whispery soft. "It's a sin. It violates the place of the Creator," he said again. "Even fundamentalist Protestants deem it adultery." His hand swept the sprawl of papers littering his room. "This is what I study. Why I work so hard to restore God's will."

*Does restoring God's will include murder?*

"The newspapers also said these women were surrogate mothers," Jill blurted. *Let's see this reaction*, she thought.

A male voice yelled down the hall. Another male voice placated. Jill's glance darted again to the hall, saw no one.

Then saw that Nash's eyes had turned hard, venomous. "Surrogates? Then those women were prostitutes. They took money for their adulterous, God-defying service. What they did is a mortal sin. And the snakes, though horrible, signify their evil." He lifted his chin importantly. "Galatians 6:7: 'As ye reap, so shall ye sow.'"

Jill faked more torn by doubt and squirmed dramatically. "But murder...that *has* to be why the police are involved. Oh, I do want to help you, but what if they think *we both* have something to do with the murders? Suddenly...I guess I *am* afraid."

Nash looked down at his transistor, his eyes hooded, seeming deep in thought. Then he looked up appraisingly. "But you agree with me? In my beliefs and in my horror at what is being done against God's will?"

Jill floundered for an answer, her gaze sweeping the floor and desk. "I must study, understand more. Can I have a copy of one of your papers you've written?"

"Of course." Nash reached to the floor for a scrawled-on paper and handed it across to her. Fingerprints! She took the paper by a corner he hadn't held, folded it carefully and put it into her pocket not containing the syringe.

Nash smiled aggressively. "I asked you a question. Do you agree with my beliefs-"

Footsteps and a knock on the door jam saved her.

"Time for your pills," said a male nurse entering. Rick? Gary? He was lanky with short dark hair in white pants and a white shirt open at the collar. Looked in his late thirties. *Looked familiar*, too. Jill's lips parted and she racked her brain. *Where had she seen him before?*

Nash looked displeased with him. "What you gave me is still working."

"That was four hours ago. It's wearing off. Time for more." The nurse looked at Jill and smiled. "Hi, I'm Rick." His nametag read Rick Burrell. He had friendly brown eyes and small features in a pleasant face. On Nash's desk he placed a tray laden with small white paper cups and a plastic water pitcher.

"You must be Christine," he said affably, pouring some water into one of the cups. "Ralph told me he was having a visitor."

Jill smiled at him, and then it hit. Burrell was Nash's nurse? *He was also the guy they'd seen trying to deal with him screaming into his megaphone. He'd been Nash's handler!* Looked different now with short hair and dressed in his whites.

She looked anxiously at Nash. His medication was wearing off?

Burrell approached him, one hand carrying a cup of water, the other a paper cup containing pills.

Nash stiffened on his bed, clutching his transistor more tightly. "I'm not taking them."

"C'mon Ralph, you want to upset Sister Meg again?" Rick stretched his hands out and held both cups closer.

Nash tightened his lips and ducked his head away from Burrell's hands.

"Ralph?" Burrell got serious. "I'm going to stand here and make sure you take these. *And* swallow them. No spitting them out after I'm gone like you been doing."

"The church." Nash's words came out like a hiss. "*The rally* and it's almost 3:30."

"Fraid not, Ralph. Sister Meg says no more outings until you take that website down. Then you can go and I'll go with you—"

*"I don't need you always chaperoning me!"*

Nash's fist flashed up and sent both of Burrell's cups flying. Water splashed, pills flew. Jill jumped up, her hand going to her pocket. Saw Nash leap up with his fist smashing Burrell's face, the blow knocking him backward onto the floor with a crash. Nash jumped onto his chest, his hands grabbing Burrell's throat.

"Gary!" Burrell managed as Nash clenched his throat tighter - until he felt the stinging jab through his jeans, and glared up to see Jill over him, her thumb pushing down on a glinting syringe.

"Whore!" he screamed, trying to thrash away. "Lying devil whore like all the others!"

Jill scrambled away from him, breathing hard.

"All's well," she gasped low into the medallion. "It's all over."

*No signal.*

"Really," she whispered. "Valium's in, patient's subdued."

Hesitation, then: *Beep.*

Commotion as another male nurse, big and muscular, rushed into the room. "Oh Jesus!" The second man bent, pulled Nash half-collapsed off Burrell who was gasping and clutching his throat. Jill pulled in a huge breath, pocketing her syringe. Burrell would have been dead by the second nurse's arrival.

Greg Clark, his nametag read. He got Nash back onto his bed still fighting him weakly, and sweet talked him as he got woozier. Must have figured that his fellow nurse had subdued him.

Nash grew limp but his eyes bulged furiously. He was fighting the drug. His hand went out and he pointed at Burrell, now in a sitting position on the floor, head bent.

"He!" Nash whispered viciously. "Thinks *he's* God!"

Greg Clark said in a friendly manner, "Well now, how could *he* be God if *you're* God?" He turned to his colleague. "Hey Rick, go recover. I'm on this."

With difficulty Burrell got to his feet. Jill helped him. His nose was bleeding.

There were tissues near the door. She took a handful, and helped Burrell out.

## 29

*“Subdued isn’t enough!”* In the alley, Keri moved forward in a crouch behind Alex. “We can still use that as a call for help and go in.”

Alex had just hung up his phone. “No need,” he said. “A warrant’s on its way to search Nash’s room and shut down his website.”

Seconds later a squad car roared up with the warrant. Fast, they were up the front steps and past the startled receptionist. They pushed through the double doors and saw Jill ahead, kneeling and swabbing some guy’s face. A wiry male in white pants and white shirt, bloody-nosed, his head leaning against the wall.

Jill looked up at them. “Hello,” she said noncommittally. No sign that she knew them, though her heart was still in her throat.

Alex returned the blank look. “Ralph Nash?” he asked. “He’s a patient here?”

Jill gestured to the open door. “In there.”

“What happened here?” Keri asked, very cop. They all pretended not to know each other.

Burrell spoke up feebly. “This lady saved my life.” He looked both stunned and grateful. “Nash tried to strangle me.”

“Have a flashlight?” Jill asked both cops.

Alex got one from his gym bag, and Jill, hooding the beam with her fingertips, gently checked Burrell’s eyes.

“We’ll call an ambulance,” Keri said.

“No need.” Jill handed the light back. “Pupils normal, react to light.” She gently wiped at Burrell’s nose. It didn’t look broken. A top button of his white shirt had snapped off and opened his shirt a little wider. Underneath he wore a blue shirt with a center strip of letters visible. AL’S OWLIN LEA, Jill made out.

“You bowl?” she asked conversationally.

“Just started. Gettin’ kinda good at it,” he said limply, then focused on her. “Are you a doctor?”

What now? Say she was EMS? No. He’d know that EMTs wouldn’t be walking around with controlled drugs, they would need authorization.

“Uh-huh,” Jill said.

“Lucky you had meds with you,” Keri said; and Alex said, “Why were you here anyway?”

Good. Pretending to start their investigation out here, in the hall.



“Nash asked me to come. I came prepared.” Burrell’s nose only needed a couple of tissues. There was no place to put them, so Jill put them in her jacket pocket.

Alex even asked for her identification.

“In my purse.” Jill pointed to Nash’s open door.

A cue for them all to move into the room, including Burrell, who sank onto the chair near the window. Gary Clark had pulled the second chair closer to Nash’s bed, and was watching him. His eyes were open to furious slits when they entered, but he quickly closed them. His fingertips twitched. And twitched more as he clearly listened to the two cops opening and closing drawers, picking up papers, commenting about his computer.

“First thing,” Alex said, stepping to the desk. “Take down that damned website.”

Jill saw Nash scowl with his eyes closed.

A new female voice behind her said, “What’s all this?”

She turned.

A nun, plump with a kindly face, stood in the doorway. Her habit was modern, reaching to just below her knees, and her head covering was short. “I’m Sister Meg, St. Mary’s Hospital director.” She looked around at the activity, then questioningly at Gary Clark, who explained what had happened.

Jill said, “I had Valium with me. Twenty milligrams injectable.” She hesitated. “I’m a physician.”

Gary looked at her, surprised. So did Sister Meg, until her eyes went to both detectives, who nodded encouragingly. *Oh*, her look said. *This is a police doctor?*

Alex stood, snapping off a latex glove to extend his hand to the nun. Then he introduced Keri, and handed Sister Meg the warrant. She read it carefully, then looked up.

“Yes,” she said sadly. “It’s time. I’m so sorry it’s come to this.”

Another sad glance at Nash on the bed, then she crossed and bent to Rick Burrell, concerned and asking him questions.

Alex sat back down at the desk, scrutinizing Nash’s awful website. Jill’s heart kicked hard as she and Keri looked over his shoulder, silently reading the few newer posts.

“No one agreeing with him,” Alex muttered as they read. *YOU burn in hell, asshole ...Hey mister, I know what YOU need!... Izis a Halloween joke?*

“It’s the ones who *don’t* post...” Jill breathed.

“We know.” Alex stopped scrolling. “That’s it. Pappas says they’ve copied the whole site so...down it goes.” On the upper right corner, he hit a link to another link, then hit “delete account.”

Gone. DevilSpawn.com ceased to exist in cyberspace.

Jill took a deep breath. “Relieved that it’s gone,” she whispered. “But a lot of unknowns have already seen it, and *do we know our friend here is really the killer?*” She glanced at Nash on his bed, glaring around in woozy fury. Then looked at Sister Meg, just straightening from palpating the back of Burrell’s head.

“Sister?” she asked.

The nun smiled kindly. “Yes, Christine?”

“Uh...”

The nun crossed the small space, her hand extended. “In all this confusion, I didn’t get the chance. You’re Christine Connor, Ralph’s visitor. Willy in front phoned to say you were visiting. I didn’t realize you were a police doctor.”

Awkward, awkward...

Jill saw Keri and Alex trade glances. She said, “Sister, have you ever seen me before?”

A surprised look. “No, I don’t believe I have.”

“Do you have television here at St. Mary’s?”

“Yes, an old one in back, in our small staff room.” The nun shook her head.

“What’s *left* of our staff. The Archdiocese has sold St. Mary’s church next door and is trying to sell our poor hospital. We don’t even know where we’ll all be scattered to yet.” She looked lost and troubled for a moment, then came back to the question, frowning gently. “The news and shows on TV are so awful these days. Who’d even want to watch?”

For a moment Jill thought how nice it must be to live in a convent, or to have such a peaceful, convent way of thinking. Then she saw the nun’s gaze turn to dismay, watching Alex and Keri bagging scrawled papers, tossed paper cups, and Nash’s transistor and computer.

Sister Meg pointed to the last two. “You’re taking those?”

From his chair Gary Clark groaned, “He’d only put his site back up, Sister.”

Alex, easing evidence into his bag, said, “Reasonable suspicion, Sister. For the safety of the patient and the public.”

“Oh.” Sister Meg clasped her hands together. “But Ralph will get *violent* again, and I’m afraid he’s built a tolerance to the drugs...including Valium, I’m afraid.” A regretful look to Jill. “He insists his transistor’s the only thing that really calms him.”

*Right. God speaks to him from his transistor. But it’s gotta be at the right frequency.*

Jill caught Nash glaring narrowly at her, then quickly fake sleep. Alex and Keri saw the silent exchange.

Keri asked, “Is there a place where we can talk, Sister?”

Peter Gregson from Pathology had called an hour earlier.

The surgery was finished and David found Peter’s voicemail, muttering in tired relief to Sam and Woody who went off to “collapse somewhere.” At an OR table crowded with surgery and OB residents, they’d helped save two lives. The mother, aged twenty, now in Intensive Care, and a seven-month-old female preemie delivered by C-section, now in the NICU.

It was hard for David to concentrate, switch gears, but Gregson’s excited “*Snake! Found something!*” banished fatigue and sent him running up to the ninth floor.

“Blister Disease,” Peter said excitedly as David approached his workstation. “I’d seen it before with my brother’s pet snake, but I had to look it up again.”

“Meaning what?” David pulled up a stool.

Peter’s gloved finger pointed to the chapel’s dead snake, coiled and slit open lengthwise on a porcelain tile. “See those tiny white puffy sores on the skin? That comes from being in *too much water*. Garter snakes aren’t aquatic, they just like to

be *near* water. Which right away is odd; no garter would get to this size and length with this disease, the infection would kill it. Which in turn means that the snake's environment changed fairly abruptly."

David's jaw tightened as he tried to contain his impatience. He'd checked his phone again on the way up. Nothing from Jill since they were crossing Tompkins Square Park. *Where are you? What's happening?*

"Next," Peter said, poking the snake, rolling it over a little, "I found toxic chemicals like motor fuel, exhaust emissions, asphalt, soot, and concrete washout not just in its intestines but also in its brain and liver. So!" He grinned, rushing his words. "This snake comes from a suddenly-too-watery place near traffic *and demolition*. Some building that got demolished."

"Great," David muttered. "That really narrows it down in New York."

"Ah, but now for the best part. I found a mosquito in this guy's stomach." He tapped the snake again.

"A mosquito." David leaned forward, frowning.

"Yup." Peter beamed as if this was the most fascinating bit of biology and pathology he'd done since med school. "Used the electron microscope - and *in* the mosquito's stomach was *Alphavirus*, family *Togaviridae*."

David blinked. He straightened, caught his breath. "I know that one. It's...damn, my head won't work, it's..."

"EEE!" Peter said triumphantly. "Eastern Equine Encephalitis, it kills horses. Now *where in bleeping hell could EEE be in New York?*"

They ran to a near computer and logged on to the CDC.

In the small waiting room near the front, Jill watched Alex make a quick call, then lead the interview about Ralph Nash's recent behavior. Keri scribbled notes. Greg Clark stayed behind to watch Nash.

Sister Meg and Rick Burrell both described Nash's increasing obsession with the church, especially the Vatican's condemnation of all made-in-the-lab human reproduction.

"He's gotten worse lately," Burrell said, rubbing the sore back of his head.

"Yes, but there might be a reason," Sister Meg said feelingly. "You see, Ralph and his younger brother were orphans. His brother was adopted, Ralph wasn't, and suffered through some horrible foster homes."

"You have records of this?" Alex asked.

"Very little," Sister Meg admitted. "He was found homeless, spent time at Bellevue and was then brought to us. He couldn't even remember his name at first. Still has no idea where he was born."

"But now he remembers those details about a brother?"

"That came after weeks here. He thinks he was maybe four or five when his younger brother was adopted."

"Wound up in juvie," Burrell said. "Wouldn't tell me for what, just kept obsessing about IVF every time he read online about it, and that's *all* he read. 'Why don't they adopt?' he'd say, and start to rage. Once we tried taking his computer away. It got him upset."

Sister Meg said, "His medications were working until recently." She looked at Jill. "You gave him how much Valium?"

"Twenty milligrams."

A slow headshake. "Not enough. His tolerance to it has so built, same with Xanax...and you saw how he  *fights* it."

Sister Meg rubbed her hands together; looked anxiously at Alex. "On calmer days his usual meds are ten milligrams by mouth every four hours, but more than once he tricked Rick and Gary and only pretended to take his pills..." Her voice trailed, and she looked suddenly older.

While she focused on Alex Jill subtly texted David: *Nash's nurse, named Rick Burrell, is that same corduroy jacket guy we saw watching Nash with his megaphone.* She found Burrell's picture from that day and sent it.

Keri was scribbling, and Alex had changed tacks. “Sister Meg, back in Nash’s room, Christine asked if you’d ever seen her before. Care to rethink that?”

The nun peered at Jill and shook her head, confused. Alex asked the same of Burrell, who creased his brow and said, “Well, now that you mention it, maybe...” He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not sure.”

Alex told them who Jill really was. The intern Jill Raney, from that same hospital and obstetrical department against which Nash had been urging violence.

The nun and Burrell both looked stunned.

Then Burrell breathed in sharply. “Now I place you.” He pointed at Jill. “You’re *her*? I *did* see you on TV!”

He caught Sister Meg’s look, and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I go back there sometimes. Check out the TV news when the place is asleep.”

Jill asked, “Even though the same news is online?”

“I don’t get much free time during the day.”

Jill looked harder at Burrell and leaned forward. “Could Ralph Nash have gone back there too? Watched the news in the wee hours? The screen’s bigger on a TV. *I’m wondering if he really did recognize me.* If it was all an act with me. Paranoid schizophrenics can sometimes be good at faking.”

Sister Meg sighed heavily. “It’s time. He should have been on Thorazine already. I’ll ask the doctor about that when he comes, possibly tomorrow.”

“*Possibly?* Sister, did you know that the cemented lock on Ralph’s window has been broken?”

“Oh...no!” The nun’s eyes rounded in dismay. Burrell’s jaw dropped open. “I’d never thought to check,” he said, looking guilty.

“Thorazine, ASAP,” Sister Meg said in alarm. “But we’d need a *prescription*, and the doctors...it’s been so haphazard. There are a few practically volunteering, but they’re spread so thin.”

Footsteps in the hall, and a young uniformed cop entered, excusing himself. Exchanged quick words with Alex, took his black gym bag loaded with evidence, and left.

Keri closed her notebook, and Alex seemed about done with his questioning. “By the way,” he asked abruptly. “Why was Ralph so intent on going to the church next door?”

“For a rally.” Sister Meg inhaled and clasped her hands as if in prayer. “Oh, the Lord does work in mysterious ways. The church was to be replaced by a luxury high rise. The rectory’s already demolished, and workmen *had* started tearing off the church’s roof. But, a miracle - demolition has been stopped for months because preservationists and community groups came together to fight the developers. And 3:30 today is their rally to save the church! Isn’t that wonderful? These people ... I’ve heard they’re mostly not even Catholic, or religious at all. They’re saying the church is a historic landmark.”

As she spoke Jill subtly texted David again: *Nash has been under-medicated. Doctor visits sparse, erratic.*

Gary Clark looked in to say Nash was asleep.

“You’re *sure* he’s asleep?” Sister Meg asked.

“Yes, yes.” He’d heard most of what she had said. “Oh, the church. I had to accompany Ralph there once, just to walk around outside.” Clark looked at Burrell. “You too, huh?”

Burrell nodded in frustration. “Oh, yeah. He couldn’t go in, it’s all boarded up. That got him crazy, but there was that save-the-church bunch he met with there, on the sidewalk. They seemed to know him and calmed him down a little. I think he was emailing some of them.” Burrell grimaced. “They got my email address too. Next thing I knew I was getting bombarded with pleas to help paint posters, come to meetings, make calls to organize, that sort of thing.”

“Did you?” Jill asked.

Another frustrated gesture. “A bit. It just seemed like a losing cause. That church, I’m sorry Sister, but you can practically smell the tree rot from outside.”

Gary Clark was leaning on the doorjamb. “I hadda give one of those people my email too. Helped once, that was it. Ralph kept begging me to take him back to the church, but I said no. He got crazy-mad, said he’d go himself if Rick and I wouldn’t go with him.” Clark looked in annoyance at Burrell. “I didn’t take him seriously. His window was supposed to be cemented closed, right?”

Burrell shook his head in self-reproach. “Yes! I sealed it good and hard. Never thought to look again. Got so busy ...” He shook his head again. “This is scary. Who knows how many times he was in and out that window?”

So Ralph was obsessed with the church too. Alex and Keri traded looks. *Let’s go check out that rally.*

They gave Sister Meg their cards and thanked her. Jill did too and headed with them down the steps.

“God bless you,” Sister Meg called, smiling sadly and waving from the front door.

The time was 4:05.

The CDC guy sounded surprised. They’d called and gotten the damned menu, been switched from one department to another until they got some double-PhD who’d just gotten back from a meeting.

Gregson explained about the mosquito. They were calling from Pathology’s office where they’d dislodged a secretary. Peter had flipped on the speakerphone while David paced.

“A vet called us, like, just two days ago,” the virologist continued. He sounded young and chatty. “Some lady’s dog had it. He was sharp, that vet, knew some animals besides horses get it. So he researched it, and yeah, it was EEE all right, he sent us his report and virus image. We’re trying to get a team together to go up and spray, drain the water. Can’t aerial spray of course ‘cause it’s in the city, also because it’s under some building... waitaminnit” – sound of papers riffling – “Here it is. There’s water exposed at the site of some church rectory just demolished, and water unexposed under the closed church in front of it. In the basement, probably, judging by the new water table the demolition’s created. Jeez, we don’t even have this online, yet. How’d you guys find this?”

David, pacing, felt his phone vibrate. Two texts from Jill: *Nash's nurse, named Rick Burrell, is that same corduroy jacket guy we saw watching Nash with his megaphone;* and, *Nash has been under-medicated. Doctor visits sparse, erratic.*

Peter on the phone was sympathizing with the virologist about their budget cuts. "I know," he was saying. "It's the same here. Budget cuts everywhere."

"Well, we've gotta get somebody up there to evaluate, arrange for drainage and spraying. They're spread so thin! There are two teams out now investigating dengue outbreaks, another's doing a bird flu place - this late in the season, can you imagine? Three others finally got funding to drain and treat no end of water-born places mosquitoes love, it's gotta be done before everything ices over, because – wham! – it's spring before you know it and the damned skeeters start to party again. Humans getting EEE is rare, thank goodness—"

David tore off a piece of lab sheet and scribbled *thanks, I'll call*. Patted Gregson on the shoulder as Peter looked up, rolling his eyes hearing about changed water tables since Hurricane Sandy, reports still pouring in – ha! no pun! – and Staten Island already icing over...

Seconds later David was back in the stairwell, texting Jill. *Avoid the church. DON'T GO THERE!*

He sent, and ran down the rest of the way.

The time was 4:14.

## RALLY! JOIN US! SAVE OUR HISTORY!

In the chill, fading light they chanted, carried signs, and marched before the venerable old church. Some cried to onlookers, “My grandparents were married here!” ... “It’s heartbreaking! ... “Three generations of my family worshipped here!”

Some from the crowd watching joined in. There was a police barricade before the church, but they marched in front of the yellow barriers and the rally was mostly peaceful. Except for one moment when a woman gripping a rosary ran up to a uniformed cop and cried, “They’re killing me! They’re erasing my past!”

“Mine too,” he told her gently. “I took a lot of pictures.”

Squad cars lined the curb. Against the back of one parked twenty yards away, Jill leaned and watched with the two detectives.

“Come back with us in one of these,” Alex said to her. He was taping the rally with his phone. Had made a call, and had other plainclothes people taping too. Every angle counted.

“Thanks,” Jill said, studying faces in the crowd, the rally, absently fingering her medallion. “Is this still working?”

“Yep, I’ve got it turned down. Don’t take it off yet.”

“Okay.” Her breath caught. “*Yeow, look who’s there.*”

Just rounding the long, oval circle demonstrating were Brian and Dara Walsh.

Alex nodded without surprise. “I had Dara followed. She joined this group as it formed behind the demolished rectory.”

Keri said, “Hubby must have been waiting. Huh? They didn’t seem to like each other.”

“So they’ve got this in common.”

Both Walshes carried placards. Dara’s read GREED - Jill pictured her stealing Splenda packets – and Brian’s read DON’T DEMOLISH GOD! They were chanting with the others, “Join us! Join us! Save our history!”

“*Nash must have known them,*” Keri whispered fiercely. “Burrell said there were emails going back and forth, meetings even – Nash had broken his window lock-“

Her phone rang. She answered, and stiffened. “Sister Meg,” she whispered, holding the phone so Alex and Jill could hear. Through the noise, high, thin crying at the other end.

“*...bashed Greg with his crucifix....then took his...and stabbed him!*”



Jill's phone vibrated a second later. She reached for it, and running sounded behind her. Too late, they saw her head yanked back and two white-shirted arms pulling her backward, one practically strangling her, the other holding something glinting at her throat.

Bandage scissors. Opened, curved bandage scissors, the sharper blade over Jill's carotid.

Both cops froze. Jill's eyes were squeezed tight; she looked like she'd stopped breathing, hadn't even screamed.

"My transistor!" Nash's dark eyes raged. "Give me back my transistor!"

"Okay," Alex said placatingly, stepping closer. Keri reached for her gun. Nash saw and yanked Jill further back, her feet dragging, her body too close to his.

She got off a thin cry; rammed an elbow to his solar plexus, raised her knee and stomp-kicked *hard* his foot with her man boot. Nash screamed and his knees buckled.

"Did I break a metatarsal or two?" she yelled at him, jerking away, seeing stunned faces in the crowd as she lost her balance, fell and rolled away; *saw both Walshes worriedly watching Nash*. Alex lunged, punched him and grabbed for the scissors, but Nash's arm swung wildly, slashing Alex's temple. Keri kicked out Nash's feet; he fell, scrabbled wildly and grabbed Jill again, got his scissors back to her throat, got them both back up.

Uniformed cops were holding people back; others had come running, weapons drawn, but Nash was lurching backward fast on one foot, dragging Jill into the near alley. "I'll cut her!" he screamed, craning his head right and left. "*SHE is responsible for that devil child! Approach and her blood will spill AS IT SHOULD!*"

Jill whimpered and struggled. Keri went to Alex, slumped, as uniforms barked into their shoulder phones, "...side alley! Circle building and approach from rear!"

Nash had Jill hard, crushing her throat. Her heart rocketed as she felt herself dragged, her feet having to help or the crushing got worse. She couldn't breathe, couldn't pull in air; slid down and heard him scream at her, saw the scissors threatening her face and got going again, her feet struggling.

Then he stopped, dropped her. She heard a heavy, rusty scrape of metal; tried to get up and run but he grabbed her again.

Cops cutting at the alley's rear iron gate burst it open, ran toward her as Nash dragged her through a door into chill dimness. EXIT, she saw in blurred red letters above her.

The heavy door clanged shut and Nash, limping and groaning with superhuman, drug-fighting strength, bolted it and overturned a heavy chest to block it.

They were in the darkened sanctuary. Overturned, cobwebby pews, a toppled pulpit, strewn prayer books, more pews piled on top of each other. Nash dragged Jill, cursing her, dropping his scissors with a *ping*. Overhead, a gaping, torn-up roof, a vault of darkening sky. Jill's heart banged too hard; she struggled to inhale. Beneath her, moist, rotting floorboards from months of a rainy summer.

Nash crouched down and leered at her. "Wasn't I smart to leave my church's door unbolted? So I could come and go as I pleased?"

Heavy, rhythmic whamming from where they'd come. Cops using their battering ram to get in. More wailing sirens arriving outside.

Nash glared fearfully back at the pounding. His adrenalin had dropped; his pain was really hitting now. He seemed not to know what to do.

Through Jill's haze and her own pain she managed, "They'll... *give* you your transistor." How ridiculous that sounded. But it's what he'd demanded.

Breathing hard, whispery, he brought his face close again. "No they won't. They're the devil's police. Why should they give me God?"

Tell a paranoid schiz he's wrong? Forget it.

Jill's terrified eyes darted up through the torn roof to the first stars. Faint moonlight lit ghostly forms. Her hand found a short, rotted plank. She summoned her last strength.

"They'll give it to you because they want me. Make a... deal."

*"I don't deal with the devil!"*

Whamming, wood-splitting sounds from outside. The cops were almost in.

Nash knew he was done. His coarse hands clamped down and started to strangle Jill. "Devil spy!" he screamed, as she twisted and raised her plank two-handed and slammed his head.

He tumbled backward, screaming; hit a hulking stack of pews piled on top of each other. In pain and gibbering to himself, he grabbed the bottom pew and then the one above it, and tried to raise himself up.

The pile of heavy old wood creaked and tottered, then fell crashing to the floor.

*Bang!* The cops were in! Footsteps pounded the short corridor-

But the floor was moving. *Caving in under Jill.* The silhouetted piled pews looked like a ship going down, heavier end first.

Jill screamed. It seemed like slow motion, falling through behind the pews in their plunge. She heard them crash to the basement floor below. Couldn't see them through the blackness but her scrabbling, struggling hands found cables, then rusty-feeling pipes, which held her for moments, then bent slowly down because of her weight. Crying, she fell the rest of the way.

Onto something that tipped, and slid her skidding to the floor. A dark, cold, *wet* floor; wet cracking asphalt. She lay crumpled on her side, her heart leaping out of her chest. She tasted blood. Wiped her stinging brow and lip; felt stickiness. Moving a little, she inventoried her body: pain in her hip and shoulder, but no broken bones.

Through blackness, she reached past the edge of what felt like linoleum to see what had broken her fall. Found tubular legs, like for an aluminum table, the folding kind. She yanked hard at it, heard other tables teeter. A line of them? Set up like a food kitchen?

Then came the real shock. Slithering, long writhing things crawling over her arm, her leg, her shoulder near her face. *Snakes!* Omigod, snakes in a rotting, cold black basement and *she was in a nest of them*; could hear others snapping, whipping in the dark.

Sobbing hysterically, she scrabbled through a shallow puddle. No words to describe this nightmare, nothing to do but scream and thrash in horror-

And suddenly she *saw* them, hideous knots of them, black and writhing by her head as light beams shown down and shouts called out: "Christ! Snakes!".... "We're

coming, hang on!”...”Basement stairs! Where the hell are the stairs?”...”*Need more light here!*”

Footsteps pounding down someplace. Sweeping flashlight beams and more shouts: “Fuckin’ *snakes*, oh Jesus!” Feet kicking and stomping the writhing things away as hands bent to get her onto a stretcher, tried to get her into a neck brace. Jill moved her head for them. “Don’t need the brace,” she shuddered, shivering wet, opening her squeezed-shut eyes.

Then shutting them again, the glaring penlight beam too strong for her. Someone’s gentle thumb pulled up her right lid, moved the beam back and forth, then checked her left eye.

“Pupils normal,” a man’s voice said, relieved. Yards away another voice said, “Found Nash. Alive. Looks a little broken.”

“Aw, leave him here,” someone snarled. It was the last thing Jill heard as she passed out.

“Do you know where you are?”

“In Aruba, sipping a margarita.”

“Don’t be a wise guy.” David’s voice, sounding choked. “Okay, who’s the president?”

“Herbert Hoover. Nothing but prosperity ahead.”

She heard Tricia half laugh and half stifle a sob. Squinted her eyes open in the light of the examining lamp. Dimly saw David’s gloved hand set the curved suture needle on a sterile towel, then pick up a cotton swab dipped in merthiolate. She was lying on her back with her hands gripping the edge of the exam table.

“Five sutures,” David groaned softly. Finished applying a gauze dressing to the laceration on her brow, then regarded Jill, brooding. He felt helpless and guilty, painfully guilty. Dammit, he should have been there! Not pacing and sweating a whole ten minutes for the ambulance to pull up.

Four of them had cut off her wet clothes and gotten her into scrubs, but there were new bloodstains on her scrub top, and her face was terribly pallid.

“Gee,” David said quietly. “This is the second time in three months I’ve stitched you up.”

“Three and a *half*,” Jill said defensively, more than passing their Mental Status test. “Argh, stop it, Woody.”

She yanked her foot back, and at the end of the table Woody held up his gloved hands. “I surrender! Don’t kick!” He’d just run his thumb up the sole of her foot from her heel to her big toe. “Bubinsky’s *really* normal,” he announced.

Tricia was muttering, “Pupillary reflexes and eye movements normal, neck supple, not stiff” - she squeezed Jill’s arm - and Jim Holloway said, “Yay, leg muscles normal.” He swung around the rubber hammer he’d been using to bang Jill’s knee reflexes.

It bothered Jill that they were *talking to each other*. And she was the patient. The top of the sterile table next to David was littered with an empty Procaine syringe, used mosquito clamps, and a pile of bloody cotton swabs.

*Her blood.* She took a shuddering breath.

Here she was, flat on her back again, on an exam table in an ER cubicle.

David pulled up a stool and sank down on it, staring in disbelief at the dressing on her brow. “You look like you fell through a floor.”

Her expression mirrored his. "You look like you lost your puppy." She felt so bad at putting him through this again.

But it came out funny. The other three gave in to smiles. Then light, relieved laughter. She was okay. *Safe*. "Praise the Lord!" Tricia said, raising both hands and doing a little boogie. Tension went out of them and they sank onto other stools and a chair pulled closer.

Jill smiled at the relieved three. What a blessing, to be safe, have friends who loved you and worried about you.

She blinked, and her eyes went back to David. "How's Alex Brand? Nash slashed him with scissors."

"He's okay. Bandaged and coming with Pappas in a few minutes."

"And Nash's nurse Greg Clark? Nash stabbed him too."

"Just a flesh wound and a head bashed by a crucifix. Neither serious. Probably giving his statement to the cops as we speak."

Outside the cubicle, Charlie and Ramu were heard calming a babble of worried voices. "She's okay. Thanks, we'll tell her. Yeah, we saw it on TV too."

Jill's head cleared further and anxiety pricked. "*Where's Nash now?*"

"Here," David said. "Strapped to his bedrails in Psych with a cop keeping him company. There's already so many cops here, Pappas figured this was the best place to have him." David shook his head. "*The creep's practically uninjured.*"

"Except," Tricia said, grinning, squeezing Jill's hand, "for one broken metatarsal we hear you administered above ground."

David added, "He fell first onto an unplugged water heater, then onto a pile of cot mattresses. The basement had been a homeless shelter."

Jill tried to move. She hurt all over. "I saw the tables. It's like the place had been ready and suddenly abandoned."

Holloway said, "Code violations shut it down, it's been on the news. *You're* on the news again."

"Oh joy. I've so missed reporters."

"They're outside now, taping." Woody made a leering grimace. "They're baaaack."

The nylon curtains parted, and Charlie Ortega stuck his head in. "MacIntyre called *again*. Checking on Jill's status."

"I told him she was okay," David said, sounding drained.

Ramu looked in too. "He's got a woman dilated to seven centimeters. Mackey's got one ready to pop."

"You should go up," David told them. "Thanks. Where's Phipps?"

"Already with Mackey. Sends his love."

Jill tried to pull herself up and sent them a little wave. Her hip ached as if she'd been hit by a truck.

"Oww." She dropped her head back on the pillow.

"Your hip?" Holloway rose and palpated the area.

Jill groaned.

"I saw this. You're all black and blue there. Strained muscles," he said, poking.

"Stop that or die," Jill hissed.

Holloway grinned. The others cracked smiles too.

Tricia asked, “Did you grow a new sense of humor?”

Jill locked eyes with her. “Something like that basement? You either learn to laugh like a loon or go stark raving.”

Holloway’s cell phone buzzed. Another woman was just brought in in premature labor, try to stop it. He, Woody, and Trish had to go.

Hugs that hurt. Jill reached her hand out, and Trish squeezed it hard. Woody did too, and Holloway gave her a gentle shoulder punch.

The curtains had barely closed behind them when they swished open again.

Pappas, Alex, and Keri came in.

“Oh, pale!” Keri said, coming to Jill’s side.

Alex came up on Jill’s other side, smiled fondly at her, and compared head bandages with her. David didn’t look thrilled with that fond smile. He felt worse than he had minutes ago. Gave Pappas his seat and stood with his arms folded, back to the wall and the unused IV.

Pappas patted Jill’s arm. “D’jà vu all over again, huh? Three months.”

“Three and a *half*.”

“Okay, okay.” He looked tired and frustrated as he got out his notes. Then met Jill’s eyes. “We’ve gone over the recordings from your medallion, and one thing stands out.”

He inhaled. “In the church Nash thought he really had you. Was ready to kill you, strangle you, but first he wanted to brag. And what did he say?”

Pappas glanced at his notes, then read. “Wasn’t I smart to leave my church’s door unbolted? So I could come and go as I pleased?”

The detective looked up, his expression more frustrated. “*Nothing about having murdered those women.* Women he told you in his room that he scorned and considered hell-bound. Which is especially significant since he revealed outside, dragging you, that he had indeed recognized you.”

Pappas looked down and read Nash’s first utterance: “I’ll cut her. *SHE is responsible for that devil child! Approach and her blood will spill AS IT SHOULD!*”

Brand stood unhappily with his arms folded. Keri, on a stool, stared grimly at Jill’s bloody cotton swabs.

Hearing Nash’s words repeated, Jill’s mind flared it all back again, the nightmare kaleidoscope. David saw her expression change and stepped closer to her, gripped her hand. It was cold.

“So!” Pappas said, startling Jill back. “Do we have a confession? Nash wanted wildly to brag - and ‘*I left the door unbolted*’ was the most he came up with?”

“We’re still nowhere,” Brand said gloomily. “No bragged admission when the” – he paused – “presumed killer thought he was safe. And every crime scene gave us nothing. No prints, DNA, evidence...and nothing sexual.”

Pappas looked from Jill to David. “Especially frustrating because, thanks to you two, we’ve got both Walshes’ prints, Dara’s DNA from her sweating hands on the sweetener bowl, plus brother Brian’s jacket fibers that showed no evidence of having been in that alley - also no help legally because he could claim he visited Jenna on

another occasion. She's not alive to say otherwise. And what she told the Sutters is hearsay."

Jill stared at nothing, looking disappointed.

"Now we even have Ralph Nash's DNA," Keri said. "He was bleeding from lacerations when they brought him here. We arrested him, read him his rights, he had no problem with our getting a blood sample, but we have nothing to match it to. He's not in the system."

Jill groaned, looking so discouraged that Pappas held up a hand.

"Wait," he said, looking intently at her. "Thanks to your visit down there *we've got Nash's computer, his emails*. There were *lots* between him and both Walshes." The detective's gaze sharpened. "Dara also forwarded to Ralph the two emails you sent her. You signed yours 'Desperate?' Ralph might have noticed that your Christine-signed emails to him had the same address."

"Duh," Jill grimaced.

"How could you have known?" Alex consoled. "And Nash's emails are a bonanza. They prove that all three knew each other, shared the same hatred of surrogates, and were members of that church campaign."

David frowned at Pappas. "And *shared the same list of women*? You got that photo of Jill's I sent you of Dara showing up for her SurroMom appointment?"

The detective nodded. "Shared the lists, yes. They were finding their victims on that web site." He shook his head again. "So who did the killing? Doesn't sound like it was Nash, but we have no solid proof of that either."

The cubicle fell into fretful silence. From adjoining ER cubicles and the wide hall outside came sounds of voices, moans, beeping monitors, and an occasional dog barking. The dog sounds had a chilling effect.

Inside the cubicle, the silence stretched.

Then Jill blinked and said, "I almost forgot. I've got more useless-for-now DNA for you." She pointed to her wet jacket hanging from a hook. "Nash bloodied Rick Burrell's nose. In my pocket are tissues I used to help him wipe it."

Keri was up fast, pulling on gloves and getting the tissues into a small plastic bag. "Couldn't hurt," she said; and Pappas asked Jill, "Describe Burrell. Attitude, body language."

"Ordinary, late thirties, bored, dissatisfied with his bowling abilities but glad to be improving." Jill shrugged. Her head hurt. "Nash's other nurse, Greg Clark, is more muscular than Burrell, who's wiry. There wasn't a whole lot going on behind either of their eyes that I could see."

She suddenly remembered her medallion and fingered it, looking from Alex to Keri.

"Don't you want this back?"

"Keep it longer," Alex said.

Pappas blew air out his cheeks, patted Jill's arm again, and rose. By the cubicle entrance, the three detectives hesitated.

"If you see or hear *anything*, let us know," Pappas said gravely. "I'm thinking the killer's still out there, scoping his next victim or...this hospital, somehow."

Jill and David knew he was remembering yesterday, in the neurosurgery hall showing them the threat left on Nikki Sheehan's pillow: "The devil's spawn *and* his workshop MUST BE DESTROYED!"

Now Pappas inhaled, fretfully bunching some of the cubicle curtain in his hand as if he could take it with him, keep it safe.

"Stay sharp," he said heavily, looking back. "A smart psycho is resourceful. There could be ways to sneak explosives past the dogs."

David squeezed Jill's shoulder. "God forbid," he said.



When they were alone, he got her into a new scrub top, threw her bloodied one into a bin, and helped her stiffly off the exam table.

“Can you stand?” he asked her gently, his hands under her arms.

He let go, and she stood, trying to be stoic. “Damned hip hurts.”

“Percocet kicking in?”

“Yeah.” She managed a weak smile. Lifted her arms around his neck and hugged him. “Come fly with me.”

“Come sleep with me.” He took her in his arms and dropped his face to the crook of her neck. “I so *hated* this.” His voice was muffled. “Went nuts not being there, then really lost it when I heard about the church, an ambulance on its way – I couldn’t believe it.”

“Ditto. Me in an ambulance, I can’t believe it either.” She squeezed him tighter. The arms worked, at least. Her eyes were closed against his warmth, but the mind started up again. She found herself frowning. “How could someone get explosives past the dogs?”

“Dunno.” He pulled away slightly, looking down, inhaling. “Okay, you’re standing, great. Now let’s see if you can walk.”

She did. Put one foot in front of the other, looking like she was fearfully walking a tightrope. “Oh look,” she said with weak brightness. “Two steps.”

“Do two more. Do four.”

She did just two, then gripped his arm. “Damned hip. Hurts a lot.”

He bent and palpated where Jim Holloway had.

She sucked air in under her teeth and pushed his hand away. “Yikes.”

“I think we should get this X-rayed,” he said.

The timing was good, because the curtains swished open, and one of the surgical interns poked in.

“Is this one free yet?” she asked. “We’ve got a gunshot coming.”

After a brief semi-dispute - “*What are you going to do? Hop up there on one foot?*” – David got Jill looking peeved into a wheelchair. And into the mostly empty staff elevator, and up to Radiology on the fourth floor.

He had called ahead, requesting stat. The X-ray tech was waiting in her green, heavy lead apron by the table, and they got Jill onto it, on her back.

“Shield my ovaries!” Jill said; David and the tech both said, yes, yes, as the tech laid a rectangular, heavy lead drape over Jill’s lower abdomen.

“Don’t you worry honey,” the tech soothed, sliding the conical X-ray tube along its ceiling track. Her nametag read Sherry Burke.

David told her, “I want to screen for a fracture or fragment dislocation,” and filled out the requisition form while Sherry, smiling encouragingly, X-rayed first a frontal view of Jill’s hip, then bent to change the cassette.

“Next part’s going to hurt a little,” Sherry said, sweetly apologetic as she got Jill to roll onto her side, injured side down, closest to the film.

Jill gritted her teeth; held her breath until the second film was taken. Seconds later she was on her back again, then David helped her into a sitting position with her head down, feet hanging off the edge.

“You okay?” he asked, bending to her slightly and trying to catch her eye.

“Yeah, peachy.” She seemed suddenly abstracted; was fiddling with the rectangular lead drape.

“Amazing,” she said, hefting it. “This is the smallest drape and it’s so *heavy*. It’s only, what? Twelve by thirty inches, roughly? Seems like it weighs a ton.”

“For radiation protection. It’s made of lead.” David looked up to greet a radiology resident named Andy Chow who’d just come trotting in, apologizing for being late, his running shoe laces flopping. The X-rays were ready and both of them clipped the films into the viewer box to examine them.

Sherry, seeing Jill still fiddling with the drape, stuck a thumb into her thick green apron. It covered from her chest to her knees, like long, weighty overalls. “You think *that’s* heavy?” she said. “This damn thing weighs twenty pounds.”

“Twenty pounds!”

“Feels more like fifty. It’s pure lead filaments inside and I gotta wear it all day. Well, it beats getting radiated.”

By the viewer box, Andy Chow turned. “Hey Jill, good news. You’ve got *maybe* a hairline fracture in the shaft of your femur. It’s so thin I can barely see it.”

She looked at him, relieved. David scowled at the film and Andy pointed to it. “You can walk on it,” he said. “Just don’t run or ice skate and take it easy for a few days. No plaster or brace needed, maybe a crutch if you get extra achy. Use pain reliever if needed, and no more falling through floors, okay? Deal?”

Jill promised not to fall through any more floors.

They thanked him. Andy gave a cheery wave back, and off he jogged.

As David helped Jill limp out, Sherry nudged her arm. “Pain reliever *if needed?*” she scoffed. “You give yourself *good stuff*, hear?”

“Already am.” Jill gave a goofy grin and jerked her thumb to David. “He started me on Percocet.”

“Give her *more*,” Sherry told him sternly.

They both needed to see Jesse.

The little guy was sleeping, his curled fist to his face, under his blue blanket in his isolette. Jill settled in the rocking chair and cradled him. After long, nightmare hours it felt so good to hold him; *Jesse was comforting her*. David pulled his chair close, and ran a gentle finger down the baby's cheek. The nursery was softly lit, a place of innocence with pictures of lambs and puppies on the wall.

A nurse just leaving smiled at them. "He's all fed and changed," she said. "Hoovered his formula and just went back to sleep. He's so *easy*."

Then the nurse remembered. It had been on TV and all over the hospital and the media. "Oh!" She looked at Jill. "How are *you*?"

"Achy," Jill told her. "Really achy."

"Been there," the nurse said. "Fell off the garage roof trying to get my kid's Wiffle ball. Not too smart, huh? Well, feel better fast. I think it feels better to *move*. That's what I did."

She smiled and left.

Silence again, long, blessed moments of it. "Wiffle balls," David said finally. Inhaled. "Can you picture Jesse old enough to start flinging balls around?"

"I so want to."

She handed the baby to him. He grinned, cradling him, adjusting the little blue blanket. Jesse squirmed, and a tiny fist came out. David held it, and smiled down at the sleeping little face as if he'd never held a newborn before.

Like a new dad.

Jill leaned closer. Said yearningly, "I so want to adopt him."

David said nothing, still holding the warm bundle, the tiny fist.

"Others are clamoring for him. If we don't speak up..."

Conflicting emotions crossed David's face. He swallowed hard. "I cannot imagine someone else going off with him," he said softly. "Walking away with him." A troubled hesitation. "But--"

"I know. We're targets for every weirdo. With us, *he* gets recognized, targeted, maybe bullied as he grows up." Jill raised her hands helplessly. "But maybe *less* as the world gets used to...him, to this *thing* that Cliff Arnett did. You heard that patient Kim the Lawyer ask if this could be done for her?"

"It'll be ages before they figure how Arnett did it."

"*Who ever believed man would walk on the moon?*"

David's cell phone chirped. He twisted so Jill could get it out of his pocket.

She listened, her features suddenly dropping to beyond exhaustion. "Emergency," she sighed, giving David his phone back. "Urgent."

Their respite had lasted barely twenty minutes. Reluctantly, they put Jesse back in his isolette, and hurried past the uniformed nursery guard and the young cop seated just outside with his sleeping Shepherd.

The dog was instantly awake, eyeing them warily.

"It's okay, Maverick," the cop told him, giving them a little wave. Maverick put his head back down.

Overhead in the hall, the PA was softly calling their names. Urgent, urgent...

Adrenalin spiked, and Jill moved fast by favoring her good leg. It created a lurching effect.

The elevator got them speedier than usual to the teeming ER. Jill lurched stoically behind David. He glanced back and couldn't restrain a little snicker.

"You look like Quasimodo."

"It feels *better* to move. It's not like I rolled off a garage."

The wrenching scene they never got used to: red and blue lights flashing, *beep beep* as the ambulance backed up to the ER dock. EMTs opened the ambulance doors and rushed in to a gurney laden with someone suffering, bleeding, maybe dying.

“Wait here,” David said, rushing out to help get the gurney through Emergency’s double sliding doors. One EMT, holding up the IV, yelled, “Abdominal stab wound, patient female, airway open, pulse 140, blood pressure 150/90, respiration 26, head trauma.”

*Abdominal stab wound and head trauma?* David reached Jill and they traded looks.

She lurched alongside as they got the gurney into a cubicle. The woman was semi-conscious, her face smeared with blood from a gash to her head. With the IV in place and her vitals known, David ordered two tubes of blood drawn: one for the hemoglobin and hematocrit, the other for type and cross match.

“Any I.D.?” he said through his mask, his gloved hands examining the stabbed belly, moving his stethoscope carefully over it. His breath caught. “She’s about three months pregnant. There’s still a fetal heartbeat.”

Another tense glance to Jill, swabbing blood from the woman’s face.

Her expression had turned to dread.

“What’s *this*?” David again.

He was running his gloved fingertips over the belly’s bloody surface. “I’m feeling *some sort of particles in the blood.*”

Fast, he yanked the needle off a syringe, drew up three cc’s of blood, emptied the syringe into a test tube, and ordered it sent up to the Hematology lab. “Determine nature of granules found in blood,” he dictated to a nurse, who filled out the tube’s label and ran out with it.

Jaw clenched, he asked the second nurse to carefully collect the woman’s clothes, shoes, and her purse the EMTs had brought in.

Jill suddenly stopped what she was doing.

“David,” she breathed.

He raised his eyes to her.

She was blinking down at the woman, a gauze pad bright with blood in her hand.

“It’s...” She looked at him, her eyes wide, incredulous. “*Dara Walsh.*”

He stepped closer, removing his stethoscope.

“Dara?” he said, stunned. “What in hell-“

The curtains flew open and Sam MacIntyre ran in. “Got your call, we just finished upstairs,” he said in a rush. Then frowned, read their expressions. “*What?*”

They told him, and his jaw dropped. “Dara Walsh?”

“Three months pregnant,” David said. “The stab is close to or involving the uterus, but there’s still a fetal heartbeat.”

MacIntyre stared incredulously, absorbing this. “We gotta take her up.”

David double-checked the nurse collecting Dara’s belongings, then glanced at Jill. “Call the O.R. Describe and tell them to be ready.”

By the time they were scrubbed and entering the O.R., Dara was anesthetized and intubated, with whole blood hanging on the IV pole ready to go into her tubing. The respirator whooshed and two separate monitors beeped: Dara’s and her unborn child’s. At three months gestation, the fetal heart rate on the oscilloscope screen was normal at 160 beats a minute.

A good sign...so far. And a quick MRI had shown no cerebral damage.

David made a vertical incision adjacent to the stab wound, long enough so he could explore the outside of the uterus and adjacent organs for injury.

Then they retracted the incision, MacIntyre’s gloved hands holding it apart as Jill inserted the stainless steel retractors.

Blood welled the cavity and David couldn’t see. A nurse suctioned out the blood. Jill reached a bit jerkily to start new IV blood flowing into Dara’s tubing.

“Uterus just nicked,” David said as soon as the field was clear. “She and the baby are lucky, stab didn’t go through.”

“The stab’s just five centimeters deep.” MacIntyre was frowning above his mask. “Two inches.”

“Yeah. Not very penetrating.”

“Funny *shaped* stab too. Angled like from a box cutter.”

“Yup.” Quickly, David inspected the adjacent bowel and blood vessels. “No damage there either,” he muttered. “Lucky again.”

“*Too* lucky?” MacIntyre’s frown deepened. “There’s something weird about this. That head wound was superficial. It’s like her attacker *only wanted to do minimal damage.*”

“I was thinking that.”

*Her attacker. Something weird about this.* Jill’s mind whirled. *Dara Walsh?* She closed her eyes for a second. No way to understand...

With a curved needle and absorbable sutures, David closed the small uterine wound, took a last look around for other internal injury, and then sutured closed the layers of abdominal wall: fibrous tissue, abdominal muscle, and finally the skin.

“Done.” He glanced at one of the nurses. “She can go to Recovery now.”

The nurses wheeled Dara on her O.R. table through swinging doors.

While the doctors scrubbed out, different nurses in the recovery room cubicle followed Dara’s vital signs, her pulse, blood pressure, respiration and temperature.

“How long before she wakes up?” asked a younger nurse.

“Ten minutes,” said an older nurse. “The anesthesia only lasts as long as it’s being administered, plus a few minutes, give or take.”

She glanced out. “As soon as she wakes, start her painkillers. She’ll be groggy but the cops want to talk to her.”

“Why don’t we just sleep *here*? Pack a bag, bring our toothbrushes?”

Pappas wasn’t surprised to be back already. Once a detective caught a case, it was his through sleepless days and nights. Alex groused about the lumpy cots in the stationhouse dorm, and Pappas said he’d lost count of the times his wife had threatened to divorce him.

David smiled grimly, sitting, wiping his wet hands and forearms on paper towels. His expression changed. He was still stunned. “The victim this time is Dara Walsh. It doesn’t make sense.”

Pappas took a last swig of coffee and grimaced. Someone else on call had made it obscenely strong. “Well, we know it’s not Nash,” he said, exhaling. “The killer’s still out there, in a rage, getting careless. Can’t get to his snakes because the church is now surrounded by cops cars, Health Department gets to work in the morning. He probably saw it on the news.”

“*Has* to be Brian Walsh.” Brand looked stymied too. “But what could his beef with Dara be?”

“Besides the fact that she didn’t seem to like him?” David asked.

They all looked tense and exhausted. Going on their nerves. Before them on the OB lounge coffee table were empty Styrofoam coffee cups.

The detectives had been on the phone with the CSU. M.O. was the same. Dara had been pulled into an alley and attacked while on her way to her night job. So far no DNA, no fibers, evidence, or witnesses. They’d also been trying to find Brian Walsh. He wasn’t answering his phone – no surprise - and uniforms sent to his apartment reported nobody there. They were waiting for a warrant to break in. Fat chance at this hour.

Jill had been with them briefly, then excused herself saying she’d be right back.

And back she came now, hobbling on a crutch. “Just temporary,” she managed. “Standing at an O.R. table starts hurting even if you haven’t fallen through a floor.” She was still shaky from the shock of Dara’s attack. Still incredulous. *What did it mean?*

“Percocet?” David asked her.

“Almost time for the next one.” Pale, she sat with a small groan next to David, propping her crutch on a near chair.

David rubbed his unshaven cheek. “There’s something wrong about Dara’s attack,” he said gravely. Unconsciously he touched his drooping dark hair. “For starters, her head bash wasn’t serious. The scalp is very vascular. Even a small laceration can produce a lot of blood. Her attacker *didn’t hit her hard* like the others. Not even close.”

Both cops looked at him. Brand got out his notebook, started scribbling.

“And that stab wound...” David faltered.

“Was *off*,” Jill said nervously. “Off target and not very penetrating. Why? Because he didn’t want to go *too* deep, plus he *didn’t know where a three-month uterus and fetus are*.”

Alex looked up. “Where are they?”

Jill held her hand to her mid section. “At three months the uterus hasn’t grown much. It reaches barely up to the navel.”

“And the stab was just above,” David said. “Externally missed by a couple of inches, though the angle in nicked the uterus.”

Jill frowned anxiously. “Also he didn’t kick the belly like the other women. Could this be a different guy? A *ring* of baddies?”

Pappas didn’t think so. It just felt like the same assailant. Someone who knew where Dara would be, where to follow her, and brought her down first with a bash to the head.

“Still,” Jill said. “Whoever did it still could have stabbed harder, *and he didn’t*.”

Pappas thought about that, his lips tightening. “If the smaller stab was deliberate,” he finally said, “this creep’s still in control. *Dara could have been a message*. But what does it mean?” The detective rubbed his aching brow.

“The cut was in the shape of a box cutter,” David said. “He could have adjusted it to stab only superficially.” As both detectives nodded, agreeing, he glanced at bulging plastic bags on the table. “Dara’s evidence from the ER?” he asked.

“Yes, including her cell phone, thanks.” Pappas put on gloves and pulled it from a bag. He started to scroll names, thanking again because they never could have gotten a warrant for the phone. “Recognize anyone here?”

He showed them, scrolling. They didn’t recognize any of the names until he got to Rick Burrell and Gary Clark.

Jill wasn’t surprised. “They said they’d gotten roped into helping with that save-the-church group, Burrell especially.” Her lips were dry. She fiddled with the medallion she still wore. “Plus, that group had been emailing a lot. Other names might be other members-“

Pappas’s phone rang.

He listened. Grunted, “Interesting. Thanks.”

And looked from Jill to David. “Dara made several calls to Burrell. *More*, recently.”

“Because the rally was approaching?” Jill ventured. “She was trying to get him to do more.”

A nurse came in to tell them Dara Walsh was awake.

Jill and David gave both detectives sterile gowns, and all four of them went into the recovery room.

Dara was groggy. Confused. Weakly crying.

“Do you know who did this to you?” Pappas asked, bending to her.

“He!” Dara’s eyes squinted open, alarmed. “Didn’t...*believe!*” It was a feeble cry.

Pappas tried again. “Who didn’t believe? Did you see your attacker?”

“He...*wouldn’t!*”

David, watching Dara’s monitor, whispered to Pappas to cool it, her blood pressure was rising.



The cops traded frustrated looks. David nodded, and Pappas tried a last, gentle approach. “Would it comfort you if a friend came to visit? Would you like to see...Rick Burrell?”

The name calmed Dara. Her b.p. readout dropped instantly and a quivering smile crossed her lips. “Rick,” she breathed.

Looks crossed between Jill, David and the two detectives. *So who was “he?”*

Back in the hall, near the cop assigned to guard Dara, Pappas used his phone to call Burrell. “No answer. Getting his voice mail.”

“At this hour probably asleep,” Alex muttered tiredly.

Pappas left his message, identifying himself. “Your friend Dara Walsh has been attacked. She’s being treated for injuries at Madison Memorial. She’d be comforted by your visit.”

He pocketed his phone, eyes narrowed in thought. “Those emails. They all know each other. Maybe Burrell has an idea where Brian is.”

“Or not?” David said grimly. “Walsh could be anywhere. Maybe he and Dara fought and he’s passed out drunk in his apartment.”

Jill grimaced at David. “Time for the next Percocet.”

From somewhere, a dog barked.

Looking alarmed, the two detectives said good night and left.

*Just hours to go, and I'm so happy!*

*No one has ever known about my secret place here, where I've toiled nights for over three months in the service of God. Now I finish...oh, how my heart beats and my hands shake in excitement as I work...which is BAD. Stuff might blow up. Must try to control myself. Breathe deep breaths. Put on the earphones and listen, as always, to Benedictinos.*

*Ah, better. The Gregorian voices calm me, mesmerize me, as I work so carefully. I sing softly with them, those sacred male voices... "Ave mundi spes Maria, ave mitis, ave pia, ave plena gratia. Ave virgo..."*

*Now to open the last box, oh so gently, slicing my box cutter just so along the sealing tape. Then I lift the precious bags of powder. It is sinful that you can still get ammonium nitrate online. I didn't know. Spent a whole month scraping off the tips of matches, keeping the rising pile dry. And then...firecrackers! Tons of them available last July. I was careful, removing the precious powder from them too.*

*The box cutter still has her blood on it. I like that. Haven't washed it off because it is a reminder of my brilliant, God-given idea. Carefully, I slice open the boxes of ammonium nitrate. Thank you, God, for leading me to that idea...after months, but I know that that was your plan. Order the most powerful stuff last. If any Devil Police come snooping, it will be too late.*

*The container, they'll never guess. I do believe it is a first. Last August I figured how to cut it in half neatly, leaving no sign of damage. Then I took out its layers of contents, threw them in a trash bin blocks away, months ago. Who would guess anyway? Make any connection with such an innocent-looking thing? Empty, there is lots of room for my ammonium nitrate, matchstick scrapings, and firecracker powder.*

*Now I pour in the gasoline, just like it said to in those online instructions. Not too much, just enough to ignite when the wire connection is made, and that won't be until the final moment. But I've got my cell phone parts prepared. Insert the precious little wire that won't ring until I tell it to.*

*And then, the boom that will be heard around the world. The Devil's Workshop will be reduced to ashes, the Devil's son along with it, praise God! Every sinner will cower in fear, and repent, and God will sit me next to Him, on His throne, for **HAVING TRIUMPHED SO GLORIOUSLY OVER SATAN.***

*At last, I will be important. I will be glorified especially for having triumphed over my terrible, painful beginnings. A mother who gave herself over to Satan, who was so cruel to me, as were the others.*

*And now they are all in hell, burning and shrieking in eternal Hellfire.*

*I hum...and hum...*

*The gasoline is mixed now, and the little wire contact is in.*

*I close the container oh so carefully, then re-glue its parts closed. Then remember that the smell of gasoline might alert the dogs, so again, carefully, I wash the container's outside with warm water and soap. Then dry it, and sniff. All's well, no gasoline odor, no sign of having ever been even opened. It sits there on my workbench, the most innocent-looking object imaginable.*

*In my earphones, they seem to be singing louder! The souls behind those sacred voices have seen, and sing in praise of me! I turn down the volume, and in my earphones they still sing louder! This is overwhelming. I weep as I realize God has told them to sing for me!*

*And I sing with them. "Ave virgo singularis, quic per rubum designaris non passus incendia..."*

*And I look at my precious, Satan-destroying container on my workbench.*

*It was so easy to make, once I had, over time, collected its contents.*

*Perhaps I'll make two of them. There is time...*

David found two pillows and mattresses, pulled them into the on call room, laid them side by side on the floor, and spread them with sheets and blankets.

Then held out his hand. "Tip for room service."

"We could have managed in this bed." Jill patted beneath her.

"It's too narrow. I'm on call tonight. You're in pain and I'd be either squishing you or waking you."

"Oh squish me, squish me." Jill pretended dismay. Had wanted to sound jokey, break the tension if just for a moment, but it came out troubled.

David cracked a tired smile. Laid his phone by his pillow and pulled off his scrubs. "The Percocet kicking in?"

"Starting to." Jill felt the blurry warmth coming on, and even more warmth at seeing him smile.

Enough to make her stop obsessing over her fear, this terrible day, for a whole twenty seconds.

He turned off the lamp, leaving the room in shadowy dimness with a small night light on. She took off her scrubs and ached her way under the blankets with him, snuggling close on her good side.

"You're so exhausted," she whispered. "I hate that you may get called."

"You've had a worse day," he said, hugging her. His face was in the pillow, his voice muffled. "Try to sleep. You gotta sleep."

"David?"

"Mmf?"

"How rare is EEE among people?"

“Very.” A sigh. His voice was an exhausted mumble. “Six cases reported in New York State since 1971. Risk is highest July to September when mosquitoes are out.” His droning slowed. “Cops who were in the church” – he inhaled – “notified to watch for headache, fever, chills...but risk practically nil. That snake probably caught the last skeeter about to lay her eggs.”

“So why’s the Health Department in such a rush?”

“Gotta...clear and spray before the site ices over. Worried about...spring. Other animals mmf...susceptible. Birds, dogs, cats, cops’ horses...”

In the next instant he was breathing heavily, his arm still over her. Jill closed her eyes, tight, tighter, listening to him breathe.

This nightmare day. She felt strung as tight as piano wire, and suddenly lost, alone with hideous images that came rushing back. In her mind Nash’s face flashed back, twisted in rage, and the church floor caving in – *nooo* - and the snakes...*falling into a writhing pit of them*. She shuddered; squeezed her eyes even tighter to force down the awful image.

It didn’t work.

The snakes were the worst. She kept seeing herself scrabbling frantically through the wet, derelict floor with them writhing and snapping, *slithering over her*. A hiss came from somewhere and she turned – “Oh!”

It was the heat going on. David wakened slightly. “Huh?” he mumbled.

“Nothing,” she whispered. “It’s nothing.”

He was already back to sleep. Carefully, she rolled onto her back. Stared at moving shadows on the ceiling. Clouds flying past the moon? She saw them now through the torn church roof. And the dimly lit sanctuary, a dark figure in a long dark hood approaching her. “You’re all going to die,” the figure said, whispery-voiced. A siren wailed, and red lights flashed on the ceiling. “You see?” The figure came closer, its face lost in shadow. “You will all die in fire, the devil child first.” The dark-robed arm reached to drop a writhing black snake onto her chest; bent to pin it whipping and struggling to her medallion. “No!” she cried. “It’s a *bug*-“

“Jill. Jill.”

“Wha?”

“You were dreaming.” David was back in his scrubs, kneeling to her, holding her.

“You...up?”

“Got called.” He pushed damp hair from her brow. “You’re all sweaty. You were crying about bugs.”

It took a moment to register. “Oh... no, it was this.” She tugged at the medallion. “Take it off for me?”

He did. Gently reached behind her neck and undid the chain. “Had a nightmare?” he asked.

“Yeah. I was back in that church. With the snakes and some scary guy dressed like a monk only in black.”

He groaned feelingly and rose, put the medallion on the dresser, then knelt back to her. “No more nightmares, okay? Tell that monk guy I’ll blow his head off.”

She smiled weakly in the darkness. “What time izit?”

“Two-thirty. Stay snug. *You’re safe*. Try to sleep.”

He cradled her face in his hands and kissed her, then kissed her again, then was gone. Jill heard the door lock click closed. She pulled his pillow to her and buried her face in it.

It *was* safe there, in his pillow.

She slept.

“Ammonium nitrate, it’s an explosive,” a woman from hematology called to report at seven. “That blood sample you sent from patient Dara Walsh? We centrifuged it, and those strange particles went straight to the bottom of the tube. Didn’t know what they were, so we sent the sample to the chemistry lab.” She inhaled. “They just called to report. Your sample also contained potassium chlorate, used in firecrackers and on matches. The chem lab sees those substances a lot. Kids blowing their fingers off, the stuff going off accidentally. *Terrible* injuries.”

David thanked her, mopped his still-dripping hair with one hand and called Pappas with the other.

“Oh shit,” Pappas said when he heard. He was driving to work.

“*Mixed in Dara’s stab wound*,” David repeated incredulously. Jill was already dressed and listening, slack-faced, standing with two cups of coffee from their coffee maker.

“This is nuts, the explosive came from this guy’s...knife?” David shakily took one of the coffees. He saw Jill’s fist go to her mouth. “Correction, *box cutter*. Dara’s wound was in the shape of a box cutter.”

“Which he also used to open his bad stuff, ya think?” Pappas exhaled a few more obscenities. “We gotta get this guy fast. Meanwhile you’ve got more K-9 sniffers protecting you. Sent in from Connecticut, Jersey, guarding at every entrance, stairwell, broom closet...” He stopped, sounding a bit miffed. “Y’know, One Police Plaza has a really nice lab too. Best in the world and also works all night.”

“This saved time.”

“Well, stay safe. And keep your eyes open.” Horns blared at Pappas’s end. He said something else indecipherable, and signed off.

They were mute with shock as David pulled on his scrub top. What could they say? They grabbed donuts and were two halls away when a floor nurse called.

“Dara Walsh is severely depressed,” she told David. “She’s being treated for pain, but she’s crying, won’t talk.”

“We’re on our way,” David said.

Regular morning rounds awaited, but Dara came first. One tablet of Percocet was doing its job without affecting Jill’s thinking, but she felt like she’d taken a fistful of uppers instead. The heart was banging. She could barely breathe.

And she was lurching again, carrying her crutch instead of using it.

“Use the crutch,” David said as they got on an elevator.

“Don’t need it yet. It hurts my armpit.”

“So the leg’s better?”

“Ready to dance. Gimme morphine.”

“Sorry, luv,” he said, imitating Ramu.

She inhaled, then blurted, “Should we say anything about the dynamite?” She had whispered, but it came out like a gasp for air.

“It’s...no. Wait.”

On the OB floor, the other interns waited as usual by the nurses’ station. Tricia hugged Jill, and the others crowded around, asking how she felt. “Leg’s okay...” she said, seeing her monk-in-black dream again, feeling a cold knot in her chest. It tightened harder.

*Dynamite!... You will all die in fire...*

It was surreal, how the others looked the same as usual. Getting here they’d passed uniforms and dogs, and felt protected. Tricia’s Pop Tarts stuck out of her pocket and Ramu Chitkara’s bagels bulged in his. Charlie and Gary left the group hug to go unload their favorite crap from the vending machine.

David put the patient charts into the chart rack, and gave it a shove. “Do not ever,” he told them, “tell the patients how we eat.”

They followed him down the hall, passing a uniformed cop, his dog, and security guys. “Place looks like a fortress,” Phipps said.

“Bout time,” Ortega muttered. “They have armed guards in schools now, why not a threatened hospital?”

A siren wailed outside, jolting Jill’s heart like an electric shock. That had never happened before. *I’m a mess*, she thought miserably. *Gotta hang on... What can I do?*

As they entered the room with the police guard outside, Dara turned her face away. Squinted miserably out the window.

How life turns on a dime. Jill’s mind flashed on Dara looking nasty yesterday, swiping fistfuls of Splenda. *Who did this to you, Dara?*

David walked to face her on the window side of the bed. “Hi Dara.” He bent to her. “Remember me?”

No answer. Dara’s mouth was grim, and a tear rolled down her cheek. From the other side of the bed Ramu handed David a box of tissues. He took one and gently wiped Dara’s cheek.

“I can help,” he told her softly. “Did you see who attacked you?”

She shot him a split second look and...nothing. The eyes squeezed to narrow, miserable slits, and the corners of her mouth turned down further.

“Do you remember anything about the attack?”

Still nothing. Hostile. Some secret, walled in.

He went to the foot of the bed where the interns waited. To Jill he shrugged and whispered, “She saw us with the cops.”

Then he looked back to the bed. It was time to teach.

“This patient was attacked last night,” he said in a soft voice. “Superficial head wound and a stab wound to the abdomen. Stab entry was two inches north of the uterus, but the angle nicked the uterus.”

*Purposely not hurt bad like the others*, Jill thought, biting her lip.

“We operated,” David continued as the interns took notes. “Starting with a four inch vertical incision, inspected for damage, found that adjacent bowel and blood vessels were intact. Only injury was a non-penetrating nick of the uterus. We sutured it and re-closed.” He glanced back at Dara’s not-showing-yet belly under her pale blanket. “Fetal heartbeat remained normal and steady throughout. The wound was swabbed for culture and sensitivity to find whatever bacteria was present, and she was started on amoxicillin, 500 milligrams, three times a day pending culture results.”

Gary asked, “What if the amoxicillin doesn’t work?” And Ramu asked, “Can we get a preliminary reading from Bacteriology?”

David said, “I’ll be calling to check. The surgery was fourteen hours ago, there’ll probably already be some colony growth.”

He looked, and saw George Mackey there too, taking notes. “Hi George,” he said. Higher-up residents often joined intern rounds if a case was interesting.

“I heard, wanted to see this,” George said low. “Is this the same, uh-“

David motioned for him to stop. George shrugged sorry and went back to his notes. His scrubs as always looked slept in.

Jill’s cell phone vibrated. She nervously checked it; Administration had called her. David was answering Gary’s question about amoxicillin – she didn’t need that – so she punched to hear the message.

And caught her breath. Fast-wrote three words on her tablet, and showed them to David.

*Rick Burrell called.*

He blinked, finished talking to Gary, then moved closer to Mackey. “Hey, the rest are healthy, happy new moms. Would you take over rounds?”

“Sure. Happy to. Been a while.”

Casting last looks at Dara Walsh, her gaze still miserably averted, Jill and David went out to the hall.

Jill punched the number from Administration’s message. After a few rings Rick Burrell picked up.

“How...? What is going *on*?” He sounded shocked. “I found a call from the cops. Dara Walsh was *attacked*?”

“Yes.” Jill held the phone so David could hear. “And stabbed.”

Silence at the other end. Then, slowly, “Oh my God.”

“She’s stable, and the wound wasn’t deep. She’s lucky but despondent. Asked for you.”

“Me?”

“Right. Not her husband.” Jill fought to keep her voice even. David bent close to her.

At Burrell’s end someone yelled, and he excused himself. Muffled assurances, the yell became a whine, and he was back.

“They’ve been having problems,” he said. “Dara and Brian, I mean. I guess Dara thought I was nice. I mean, I *listened*...”

“Problems?”



“I was surprised she even told me. We were making posters at some meeting, she just started to cry, and this whole...thing came out.”

Jill’s silence prompted him.

“Patients are wandering around upstairs, I gotta get back,” Burrell said tensely. “But...well, Dara said she’d found out she was pregnant, and *Brian didn’t believe it was his*. They’d been trying for years, and he’d decided God *willed* them to be childless.”

Jill traded stunned looks with David.

“So...I was supportive,” Burrell went on. “It didn’t seem like she had anyone to talk to, and Brian’s got a wicked temper. I invited him once to bowl with my team. He was doing lousy and flew off at everybody. So...yeah, guess I became a shoulder to cry on. There were more meetings, and she called a few times.”

“Do you know where Brian might be now?”

“Wouldn’t *want* to know. Him, you can have.”

“It would cheer Dara if you’d visit. Plus she might remember something about the attack and tell you. She seems wary of us.”

He hesitated. “I work until six. Then I have bowling at seven, I can’t let my team down...”

“*There’s been a terrible crime, Rick*. And a depressed patient you can help. Please come.”

Even his silence sounded guilty. “Okay. I can work it out. What time after six is good?”

“You couldn’t come sooner? *Try*.”

“I will. If I can I’ll let you know.”

Jill thanked him and hung up. She gave David a shaky smile.

“Think Dara would like that medallion?” she asked. “I’ll tell Alex to turn it back on.”

She had to run and catch up with rounds, so David called Pappas again, got his voicemail, and then tried Brand.

He was at his desk. Low-voiced and intense, David told him about the call to Burrell.

“Dara won’t talk, probably because she saw us with you.” His phone beeped; he glanced at the readout and tensed further. “Burrell is her friend, sounds like it’s not more than that but she may unload to him.”

“Good, it’s something,” Brand said. “We haven’t found Brian Walsh yet. Cops went to his favorite bars, tried his apartment again this morning - no answer. He’s missing. We’re waiting for a warrant to get into his place.”

“It’s only eight-thirty, judges don’t keep our hours.”

Woody Greenberg had come up, and David motioned for him to wait. Woody grimaced and paced with his hands in his pockets; almost bumped into a loaded gurney; got yelled at by an orderly.

Then Woody stood looking at David like a puppy that wanted to go out, badly.

“Here’s a surprise,” David said, back to the phone, his eyes telling Woody *Wait, dammit*. “Walsh didn’t believe his wife’s pregnancy was his.”

Brief silence at the other end. Finally: "I'll be damned."

"Burrell's coming to visit Dara tonight. Maybe sooner." David's hand gripped his phone so hard his fingers hurt.

"Sooner is better," Alex said. "This killer's bustin' to kill, and it's gotta be Walsh. If Dara spills to Burrell...here's an idea. Think Dara might want to wear that medallion?"

"Jill thought of that too. Great minds and all."

"She should've been a cop."

"I know. I know."

Hanging up, David nearly shouted "*What?*"

Woody held up both hands. "Easy, cowboy. Holloway just got called, looks like he's gonna be starting a Caesarean, so he's asking to be re-scheduled from that hysterectomy."

"Tell him okay. I've got a lot of re-scheduling to do. Sorry I yelled."

Ninety minutes later, in the outpatient OB/GYN clinic, Jill had whipped through three routine exams and a post-delivery checkup when her phone buzzed.

It was Rick Burrell, elated. “I just got the chance to tell Sister Meg about Dara, the whole situation. She’s horrified, and said to help any way I can. So I can come right after lunch.”

“That’s great.” Jill stepped awkwardly aside for someone rolling an instrument table. She was back to using her crutch. Now her leg ached and her armpit ached.

“Things are under control here,” Burrell said. “There are so few patients left anyway and they’re medicated. Greg and Sister Meg can handle the afternoon. Hey, I can visit and *still* get to bowl.”

“Greg’s better?”

“His scissor stab is sore and bandaged, it wasn’t too bad, so he’s back to work. So...I’ll see you after lunch?”

“If I’m free. Give me a call.”

In a blur Jill went back to work, but kept looking over her shoulder. For what? Someone who looked like they may have snuck in dynamite? Between her second and third patients she’d peeked out at the waiting room. The same faces, it seemed. Anxious or bored...no monks in long black robes. One man - a relative? – looked crossly at her, and she ducked back to the clinic.

Tricia and Gary were working with her.

“Try to relax, you’re wound so tight,” Tricia urged, stopping to hug her as the two rushed between cubicles. And, “Hey, no snakes,” Gary said brightly, patting Jill’s arm.

She went white.

“Phipps, you are *such* an idiot,” Tricia told him.

“Just trying to *help*.” Gary looked injured.

At lunch in the cafeteria the three joined Ramu and George Mackey. David was in surgery but Jill texted him that Rick Burrell was coming sooner, after lunch. Then she flipped to watch Jesse, getting changed, his tiny arms flailing happily.

She smiled a little, but she couldn’t eat.

Had the cops found Brian Walsh? Gotten a warrant for his apartment yet? What would they find there anyway? He must know he was being hunted. Was probably holed up in some crappy hotel or hiding place, laying low until...

*Don't go there, don't, don't...*

She picked at her food while the others, feeling the hospital tension in their own way, talked about the harm that religious extremism had done through the ages. Ramu, in his lilting U.K. English, told some hideous stories from England's sixteenth century Reformation. "Catholics were executed under treason laws. Then during Mary's reign, Protestants were hacked and burned at the stake. When her sister Elizabeth took over, it was back to executing Catholics and *even priests were beheaded.*"

"Under Napoleon too," Mackey said, munching.

"School boys," Ramu continued intently, "used some poor priest's head as a football. To this day, there are secret tunnels under some of the grand old houses for the priests to hide in."

Gary looked unusually thoughtful. "Now in Syria priests are getting beheaded, while crowds cheer and scream for more. Extremists *enjoy* their hate. *They get off on it.*"

The room dipped and swam. Jill was now reliving her dream about Galileo when her phone buzzed.

Burrell. "I'm here! I mean, just coming out of the subway. I forgot to ask what room Dara's in."

Jill told him and said to go right up. Seconds later she frowned at her phone, remembering something.

He just got out of the subway, she thought.

Am I losing my mind? Dammit, I forgot my plan...

Grabbing a roll and excusing herself, she crutch-hurried back to her call room. Found the medallion on the dresser, and put it in her pocket.

The line was long. Burrell wore a leather jacket and gloves, carried a big bouquet, and pulled his Rolling Thunder two-ball bowling bag. He waited patiently.

The dogs were calm, barking just a little, sniffing and straining as far as their leashes let them, while their handlers smiled and reassured over and over. "Just a precaution"... "for your protection"... "her name's Ollie, sure you can pat her."

They also hand searched through purses, opened shopping bags and backpacks. When they got to him, they took extra pains with the flowers. Examined the blue glass vase, made sure it was filled with water – one of the K-9s even nosed closer wanting a drink – then opened his Rolling Thunder bag to find two bowling balls, and smelly shoes and socks.

Nothing else. One of the cops made a face zipping the bag closed.

"Next," said another cop handling a dog straining toward someone's gift-wrapped package. "Sorry, Ma'am," he said. "We'll have to put that through the X-ray."

Rick Burrell crossed the foyer past more dogs and reassuring cops. Even stopped to pat a friendly Lab and smiled.

Then he squeezed himself and his rolling bag into the elevator crowded with other visitors.

Someone had already pressed for the fifth floor.

OB got so many visitors.

In short, painful minutes Jill was at Dara's bedside. Dara was asleep. Painkillers can do that, make people sleepy. Could she lift Dara's head and slip the chain around her neck?

No, she'd wake, get hostile.

Jill looked around, her heart thudding. Was Burrell already in the elevator?

Probably. No time...

*Stoopid*, she thought. He might recognize the medallion anyway and wonder what the hell – it was possible, wasn't it?

Quickly, she wound the chain small and put the medallion on the bedside table, behind a small lamp.

A sound startled her, and she turned.

Rick Burrell was in the doorway, carrying flowers and pulling his bowling bag, blinking feelingly at Dara in her bed.

"Hi," Jill said, crutch-crossing to him. "She's sleeping lightly. You can wake her. She'll be happy to see you."

He shrugged uncertainly. "If you say so."

"I do. Oh, pretty flowers."

"Where should I put them?"

"Next to that lamp where she can see them. That was sweet, Rick."

"You're using a crutch."

"Just for aches. I'll leave you two alone. Try to ask her if she remembers anything."

At a safe distance down the hall, Jill called Alex Brand. Got his voice mail and told him where the medallion was now.

"Turn your end back on," she said. "Do you have to be closer? Yards away or something? I don't know how those things work, but Dara may be transmitting any minute. Tune in..."

Minutes later, a surveillance vehicle rigged to look like a cable TV repair van pulled up outside the hospital. A uniformed cop approached to say don't double park. He stopped to answer his shoulder phone, listened, and turned away.

Inside, two men adjusted their earphones while others checked their police radio, transmission connection, computers, and printers for photos and reports. Someone also checked the overhead luggage rack - used to conceal the antennas for high-powered radio equipment.

"Audio on," said the first man in earphones, and the other flicked a switch.

*"...really sorry to wake you. Want me to leave?"*

*"No..."* Weak. Muffled.

*"I'm so sorry about what happened."*

*Silence.*

*"Hey, don't cry. Lemme wipe those tears. You and your baby are gonna be okay. The doctors told you that, didn't they?"*

A long, feeble sigh. "Yes."

*“Aww, that’s what I want to see, a smile. Try to consider this behind you...except for them to catch the bastard who did it. Do you know what happened?”*

*Silence.*

*“Did you see who did this to you?”*

*“It was dark. I...think I saw...”* A sudden moan. Sound of a sheet thrashing.

*“Hey, easy. It’s over and you’re safe. Stay calm for the baby.”*

Long, confused silence. *“For...the baby.”* Voice weak again. *“They’re sure...it’s okay?”*

*“Absolutely. So did you see-“*

*“Pray with me, Rick.”*

*“Huh?”*

*“Hail Mary... full of...grace... The Lord...is...with...”*

Silence. *“Dara?”* Silence. *“You asleep, Dara?”*

More silence. Then the scrape of a chair, footsteps.

In the van a female officer called in on the police radio. “Got it? Subject questioned. Vague, fell back to sleep.”

“Stay,” a voice said on the other end. “I like that ‘*I think I saw...*’ We’ll get him back.”

“Can you get him back in there?”

“Hope so. This is good, she was *talking* to him?”

“Yes. Get him back.”

Jill had stayed close. Was crossing the hall between one patient’s room and another’s when Rick caught her eye. He stood, looking uncertain, outside Dara’s room three doors down.

Jill went to him.

“She fell back to sleep,” he said, peering back into the room again, shrugging *well I tried* at the cop stationed feet away.

The cop smiled tightly back.

“Her meds have almost worn off, I checked her chart,” Jill said, reaching to close Dara’s door. “Would you try again in a bit?”

Burrell looked down at his bowling bag. But he didn’t bowl until evening! *Think of something.*

“Are you hungry? There’s homemade Danish down in our coffee shop. Oozing with icing, cinnamon, raisins...”

His eyes lit. “Oh, I’m there. Skipped lunch. How long before she wakes?”

It was 1:10. “Twenty minutes, max. Figure 1:30.”

Jill saw the cop’s eyes check the wall clock.

“Okay, be back then,” Burrell said. “I see now I can help.”

“Definitely. So far she’s only talked to you.”

He looked pleased with himself and pulled his bowling bag to the elevators. Pressed the button, patted a police dog while he waited.

*Wag, wag.*

Nash was on Thorazine, but you wouldn’t know it. He looked alert, bitching about his restraints and hollering about his transistor. “*I need God. He can’t speak to me without my transistor!*”

David passed the cop stationed near the bed, and Nash looked pleased to see him. White jacket and scrubs. A new doctor to cajole?

“*I hate* these straps, and they won’t give me my transistor,” he whined.

“Maybe they’re afraid you’ll throw it at someone,” David said.

Nash’s eyes turned angry, not suspicious. He’d never seen David.

“Throw God? That’s blasphemy! Just the sort of thing Erik would say.”

“Who’s Erik?” *A new name... What’s this?*

Ralph Nash sulked. His expression changed from reproach to slow, bitter resentment. “He’s someone who betrayed me. It was supposed to be our secret.”

You didn’t have to be a shrink to see that Ralph Nash wanted to talk. David stepped closer to the bed, looked sympathetic, even nodded encouragingly.

“It hurts to feel betrayed,” he said.

“*Hurts?*” Nash yelled, yanking violently at his restraints. “For something like this? You science types think it’s all fun and games until you get thrown in hell with Satan and his demons because you won’t repent and turn from your sins!”

The psych resident who’d been watching, yards behind David, came up and said softly, “He’s getting agitated.”

David turned to him and whispered, “Scram.” The resident looked worriedly from David to the cop, who stood next to the bed with his arms folded, his narrowed eyes saying the same.

The psych resident backed off.

Nash was still pulling at his restraints. “Erik said it was God’s will even more than the work I’d been doing to put up that web site - to reach more believers to *our cause!* When I woke in the morning he said it was God who put the writing on it. But *that site lost me my transistor* – so he must have lied!”

“Did Erik give you a list of women’s names?”

“List? What list?”

“Did Erik commit those murders?”

“What are you *talking* about? Murder is a mortal sin! A mortal sin! A mortal...”

He was still hollering and for the psych residents it was upping the Thorazine as David moved away and got out his phone.

He’d already seen Jill’s text about Burrell coming right after lunch. He speed-dialed, and when she answered he asked, “Burrell arrived?”

“Yes,” she said low, her free hand checking a sleeping patient’s chart. “Dara fell asleep so I sent him down to the coffee shop.”

“Okay, so who’s Erik?”

“Erik?” Jill frowned. “Wait.”

Out in the hall she said low, “That’s a new one.”

He told her fast about Nash’s ranting. “Said someone named Erik told him God posted that text on his site while he was sleeping. He woke to find it there, sounds like he’d presumed Erik a friend, co-believer.” A pause. “Was Burrell carrying anything?”

“Yes. Flowers and a bowling bag ...” Something horrible dawned. Jill stared wildly up at the ceiling, as if she could see through it to David and the psych floor he was on.

“Bowling balls are made of thick layers of plastic, hard resin,” David said. “Glass and plastic, polymers, sniffer dogs can’t detect through them. *Think Erik’s anyone we know?*”

“Oh God. I’ll check.”

Officer Terry Smith in his size fourteen boots crashed his battering ram through the



door. As it splintered open, the smell knocked them all back, with groans of “Oh shit,” and “Jeez I *hate* this.”

But in they went to Brian Walsh’s apartment, gloved and grimacing, stepping carefully around the entrance perimeter and neat living room.

No sign of forced entry or violence. Walsh had admitted his visitor. Knew him.

In the little kitchen, in a thick pool of clotted blood, they found Walsh’s body. It had been stabbed in the back and its throat was slit, with a long, dead black snake tied tightly around it. Smearly red trails ran this way and that. There were live snakes there too, writhing, their bloody tracks left under chair legs, the table, the little counter. More groaning, swearing, hollering for Animal Control.

Someone had sneaked past the cop cars guarding that church. It had been a dark, cold night. Maybe that someone had been watching, saw his chance when reinforcements were handing out fresh coffee?

“You need fuckin’ boots!” someone yelled at the CSU bunch just arriving. Minutes later Joe Miranda, who headed the unit, looked grimly up from the body and estimated the time of death at least sixteen hours ago.

Before the attack on the victim’s wife.

“That rules him out for that one,” Miranda said into his phone. “Maybe for the others too? We got snakes here. Lotsa snakes. He got past the cars watching. Left bloody footprints too. First time he’s left evidence. That’s it, he’s outta control. Gonna hit again faster.”

He listened, nodded, hung up and got back to work. Outside, the medical examiner’s morgue van had just arrived.

Gregory Pappas called David, told him fast about Walsh.

Then David told him about Nash. “Just now,” he said, breathing hard. “Ranting about someone named Erik who filled in that website while Ralph was asleep. Told him God wrote the text.”

“An insider,” Pappas said tightly.

“Named Erik. Think Rick could be a nickname?”

“Yeah. We gotta find Burrell.”

“*He’s in the hospital now.*”

Seconds later David was pounding down the stairwell.

“It got confusing,” Sister Meg said. “You see, Eric – that’s spelled with a ‘c’ – is really Greg’s *first* name, and the patients got it mixed up with Rick’s name, which is Erik spelled with a ‘k,’ so we decided to use Eric Gregory Clark’s *middle* name, which made it easier. Greg actually prefers his middle name.”

“So Rick’s first name is really Erik?” Jill’s voice was shaking.

“Yes,” Sister Meg said. “By the way, I’m just so *bewildered by* him. He just...*left* this morning, sometime after ten it must have been. No explanation, no request for permission, he just rushed out and left Greg and me terribly short-handed. I’ve tried to be patient, but he’s been...different, sometimes erratic since his mother’s death.”

“When was that?”

“Last March. She was just eighteen when she had him, and his childhood was awful, off and on in foster homes...oh, I really should stop there. Luckily, Doctor

Sweet showed up today – they have no schedule, these volunteer doctors - so thank goodness God sent him and he stayed on to help.”

“That’s wonderful. I have to hang up now, Sister. Thanks for clearing up my confusion.”

“You’re most welcome. Any way I can help, just call, dear.”

It was twenty-five past one.

Adrenaline surged. Barely using the crutch, Jill raced into Dara’s room and saw...Dara’s face. It was blue. Jill’s heart dropped. On leaden feet she moved closer, felt Dara’s carotid out of habit.

Nothing.

Dara was dead. No pulse. No heartbeat. Nothing.

A sound startled her, and she wheeled.

Burrell stood there, his back to the door he’d slipped closed.

“I pillowed her face and turned off her monitor,” he said, smiling. “Couldn’t have the code going off, could I?”

Between his feet was his bowling bag, as if he were protecting it.

In a sickening flash it all fit. He killed Dara, so it had to be him who'd stabbed her too and unwittingly left explosive particles on her wound. That affable act of his. How well he'd played it.

*Dynamite in the bowling balls.* Layers and layers of plastic and resin. *Oh God...*

"W-why'd you kill her?" Jill's voice shook uncontrollably. She should have screamed, but she wanted to know if he'd acted alone. She backed away from him, around the foot of the bed.

He left his bag by the door and stepped closer. His eyes burned. "Brian and Dara started guessing what I was *really* doing with their lists, and it wasn't urging and counseling, ha. They got scared. Wanted to run to a priest."

She'd reached the other side of the bed. He followed, eyeing her with his hands clenched. Jill's eyes darted and she froze. He'd exposed the medallion when he placed his flowers.

*Why hadn't she thought of that? But where else could she have told him to put them?*

"Surrogates are worse than prostitutes." His stare was pure venom. His voice was creepy-quiet, but spittle formed at the corners of his mouth. "My mother was a prostitute who I hated – even after death - *until I was saved*, discovering Ralph's obsession, discovering there were even worse women who birth monsters with no souls."

He sneered. "Oh stop looking at me like I'm crazy. I've been on Haldol since I was seventeen. It has worked fine, no one knows about my past, juvie records closed."

He laughed.

"Haldol? *You're schiz too?*" She blurted it unintentionally, backing closer to the bed table.

"Only intermittently," he leered. "My doctor says there's a broad spectrum of schizophrenia. *My secret doc*, he knows nothing about the real me. And I'm nothing like poor Ralph, so easy to manipulate, make him think that was God in his transistor instead of me. I rigged his clunker like a walkie-talkie." Another ugly laugh. "*And wasn't I smart to get Dara back into the hospital?* So I'd have an excuse to visit? I even played coy with you too. Oh so reluctant-"

He saw her throw the briefest, urgent glance back at the medallion, and his face froze.

“That’s what you wore yesterday with the cops.” His eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Lying whore bitch, is that-“

She swung the heavy end of her crutch at his head. *Crack!* But not hard enough because he grabbed it, yanked her to him before she could let go, and threw her to the floor. Stomped hard where her head had been a millisecond before, but she’d slid under the bed.

From there she saw his feet rush around the bed. He seized his bowling bag, and opened the door.

They’d heard in the van. Had cops converging on the room from which “bowling bag” had never been mentioned. Even passed a bored-looking guy pulling such a bag and reassuring the cop outside that that thump was just him dropping the darn thing. He sauntered away as they burst into the room.

Jill was sliding out from under the bed. He’d thrown her down but her hip hurt less than she’d feared.

“You okay?” the first arriving cop said, helping her up. Then David burst in and she fell into his arms.

“It’s Burrell, he killed Dara,” she gasped to him, and looked at the others. “*That guy who just left. That bag he’s pulling is a bomb.*”

David’s eyes turned frantic. “You okay?”

“Yeah.”

He pulled her out with him behind the running cops, who covered just sixty feet of hall and then stopped short.

There was Burrell, just yards away, looking casual, even. Busy before the long glass looking into the newborn nursery, removing his jacket, kneeling and fiddling with his open bowling bag. Around him, pressed close to the glass, were the babies’ thrilled parents and relatives, talking joyously to each other. “Oh, she’s beautiful! ... What a big boy!”

Burrell stood. Smiled at a woman holding a pink-ribboned, gift-wrapped present.

“Pretty!” he said loudly, his back to the glass. “Is your precious newcomer one of those little IVF monsters?”

The crowd around him recoiled, their eyes wide with shock. Several started to move away.

Then Burrell saw cops moving toward him. Looked the other way down the hall and saw more cops, closing in. All had their guns drawn. Dogs pulled at their leashes, barking, going crazy.

Insanely, he ignored them.

A grandmotherly-looking woman screamed. “It’s him! He’s the one!”

Chaos, terror as he grabbed the woman and yanked her to him. “Yes!” he yelled happily. “I’m the one! And you’re all going to burn in hell for condoning” – his free hand holding something indicated the glass – “what’s going on in there.”

A woman fainted. Her husband and others bent to her.

“I just opened my two bowling balls,” Burrell said triumphantly, his arm squeezing the older woman’s neck. “When I press *this*” - his free hand held up his cell phone - “the dynamite in them will blow up this whole floor, including delivery rooms, patient rooms, probably the floor above too.” He glanced up beatifically and said, “Do you see what I’m doing for you, God? Make the fires spread. *Destroy this whole Devil’s Workshop.*”

Cops circled closer through more cries and dogs barking and people clutching at each other. A second woman sank to the floor, and another screamed, “Please, my baby!”

“Shut up, whore!” Burrell yelled, flinging the grandmother to the floor. She lay there whimpering, her head bleeding. Someone reached to her and pulled her away. The crowd was paralyzed with terror.

Near doors opened. Women in pastel robes looked out, horror-struck.

“There’s a bomb!” one told the other, and both started to scream. More doors opened. More cries. Keri Blasco and Alex Brand were there, trying to calm, getting the women back into their rooms.

“Please,” Keri was saying. “Let the police do their job.” Jill, seeing them, realized that if she’d screamed in Dara’s room Burrell would have triggered his bomb there. She fought nausea, looked frantically around. Pappas was loudly on his phone with the SWAT team.

And David, squinting by Jill, saw that Burrell’s hands looked darkened. From the explosives he’d been handling? He saw Burrell wipe his free hand on his shirt, which looked darkened, too.

“Stay,” he whispered to Jill, starting to move forward through the cops. She shook her head no and followed him. Around her police radios crackled quick, urgent exchanges. Her eyes darted through the newborn window. Nurses were in there, frantically evacuating babies, starting with the ones closest to the glass. The PA above them must be issuing soft, controlled directions. A first nurse hustled infants, one in each arm, to the exit, and from there, Jill knew, down the stairwell.

Her wildly trembling hands got out her phone and checked Jesse. He was crying and alone, still in his isolette at the rear. *No!*

She couldn’t move. Saw Burrell ranting to the crowd and waving his cell phone. “Do *not* move or I’ll blow you up this instant!”

Then Jill’s heart leaped. Others were arriving behind the glass to help the nurses. Tricia! Gary! Holloway, Mackey and pediatric residents! Running in from the other exit to help.

Risking their lives.

Burrell didn’t see the evacuation. His back was turned to the glass, furiously scolding.

“I don’t see *one* of you condemning that devil child in there! *Or* the arrogance of taking the place of the Creator! *Or* the evil of women prostituting themselves to bear the child of a man not their husband’s. You *condone* violating the sanctity of marriage? Of flaunting God’s will?”

His hand swept over faces crying, pleading. “*That makes you all sinners. Doomed to die in eternal hellfire! Get on your knees.*”

Most were already on knees that had buckled. Burrell's head swiveled to uniforms, and he raised his phone higher. "You too, cops. On your knees!"

They knelt, quieted their dogs. Make the psycho feel important: training had taught them that. Hunched, it also allowed hands to ready weapons.

David had moved in a crouch to the front. A cop behind him slid a gun to him. They all knew he could shoot.

He shouted, "Why did you kill Dara Walsh?"

The hand holding the cell phone stilled, came down a bit, its owner confronted with his own mortal sin.

"Had to, *both of them*," Burrell whined. "They might have...*told!* I would have been lost, and *I'm the chosen one!*"

Burrell's mouth twitched. He liked bragging to the Devil's Workshop doc in his white jacket. "It was all so perfect until" – his glare went to Jill – "*that one wrecked my plan to make Nash look like the killer!* Oh look, a sniper!"

He'd spotted a SWAT-garbed officer, crouched low, his finger squeezing his trigger – and the cell phone flew up again. "THAT'S IT! PREPARE TO-"

David raised his gun and fired once.

Shot the phone out of Burrell's hand, sent it clattering to the floor. Screams and wails, people fell on each other. Burrell was screaming too, hugging his hand spurting blood. A near cop grabbed his phone and quick-turned it off. Other cops rushed Burrell – too late. He'd grabbed a young woman with his other arm holding a glass shard to her throat.

David's bullet had gone high through the nursery window, shattering it. Burrell had grabbed a hanging splinter and was already cutting the woman. Cutting his second hand too. He seemed unaware.

"Get away!" he shrieked, dragging her.

The police drew back, their faces stricken. The woman was whimpering in terror, half-strangled under Burrell's arm. Blood from where he'd cut her neck was trickling onto her white sweater. More blood pooled where he'd been. In it lay his shot-off, bloody thumb.

He pulled her down the hall, yelling, "Stay away or I cut her throat!"

The cops followed, trying to get a bead on him as he wove and ducked behind his hostage.

Jill wept, remembering Nash dragging her. The hostage had to move her feet or die.

With her heart rocketing, Jill threaded through people sprawled, clinging to each other and crying, into the nursery. Got to Jesse. Grabbed him and another squalling infant and got both babies out the exit. Almost ran into Gary and Tricia, coming back. Tricia cried out at seeing her; quick-hugged her around both infants.

"No more bomb," Jill gasped to them.

They heard the soft, controlled announcement over the PA. "Bomb alert is over. Repeat, bomb alert is over."

But the nursery was a mess. Shattered glass near the front. Wires pulled, monitors stilled, babies screaming. Gary and Tricia went in.

Praying desperately for the woman Burrell held, Jill hurried in a semi-lurch down the stairwell with Jesse and the other infant in her arms.

Ran into Sam and Ramu, just coming up.

“We’re getting the rest out,” MacIntyre said, his breath heaving. “Woody’s helping the evacuation downstairs. Other hospitals are sending ambulances.”

## 40

Burrell had gotten the bathroom door open and yanked her in. Bullets had missed his head by inches; he'd held his hostage too close.

*The bathroom?*

"What's in there?" a cop asked David, running to it.

"Nothing." David caught up to the first cops pushing at the door. They were having trouble getting it open.

And then they did, pushing at something heavy. David's heart sank. He guessed what...

Her white sweater was drenched red. She lay in a pool of blood...*but she was still breathing.*

"Bastard's berserk, missed her carotid," David said, kneeling to her, flinging off his white jacket to staunch the flow. The gun he'd put in its pocket skidded away. Two cops took his place with the woman as another called for help.

And another cop saw the ceiling vent out of place above one of the toilets. It was a wheelchair-sized toilet, with blood smeared on the wall, the toilet, and the vent.

"He's up there!" The cop who'd found the vent slid it away and tried to heft himself up. He couldn't. He was too heavy.

"I'll go." David climbed onto the toilet and hauled himself up through the opening. A thinner man in uniform followed him, and then another.

The three looked around.

It was the generator floor.

The smell of diesel exhaust hit them along with roaring, other-worldly shapes of electrical engines, noise mufflers, dial monitors, and fuel lines.

The first cop to follow David turned and craned. "Where-?"

A *crack* sounded as an iron rod came down on his head. He fell. The other two spun, ducking, as the maniac swung his rod wildly at them, just missing wires, pumps, machinery.

David crouched, missed a swing, then rose and smashed Burrell hard in the face.

He fell backward, howling, dripping blood from his nose and his missing thumb. David grabbed for his foot but he rolled and spun away, screaming, "Burn in Hell! Burn in Hell!" as he ran and hid behind one generator, then ducked to another generator further away. The floor was crowded with roaring machines.



More cops had climbed up. Some lowered their injured brother down as others, hunched, followed the blood trail.

But they couldn't shoot.

Those elephantine machines and their wires, dials and pumps supplied the hospital's power: surgery in progress, patients on ventilators, dialysis machines.

Burrell knew it. David knew that he knew it. *Now he was holding the whole hospital hostage.*

They couldn't see him, but the blood trail led from one noisy machine to another.

David followed carefully with the others, and then suddenly stopped. The red splotches were further apart now, and led around to the back of a tall, wide machine set between a web of crisscrossing wires and fuel pipes.

"Wait," he said softly.

He stepped away from the others and approached the huge machine; walked around it.

Locked eyes with Burrell's crazed, defiant glare. He was in a hunched position, hanging onto the edge of a dial. Somewhere he had dropped his iron rod. His eyes darted insanely around for something else to use.

"Give it up," David told him. "You're done."

"No, you're done! And this whole hospital, burn in Hell!" he shrieked again. He found an unused fuel pipe on the floor and hurled it at David, who ducked it.

Howling, he started pulling maniacally on another, smaller fuel pipe. An *attached* fuel pipe.

"*Don't!*" David yelled in a panic. "That's...you'll get..."

Burrell exerted his whole body weight, twisted and yanked the pipe free...

...and was blasted by spewing diesel fuel. The force of the gush threw him backward, his falling body tearing through electrical wires which snapped and sparked and whipped around...

...and found the dynamite on his shirt.

Burrell's chest burst into flame. He shrieked in pain and horror as the spewing diesel blasted his face and body, formed a pool beneath him which erupted into flame.

"The generators! Get him away from the generators!" David cried, pulling at Burrell's feet, the only part of him not on fire.

Another cop helped. They dragged Burrell, still shrieking hideously, away from the danger of exploding the whole place. Others had their jackets off and were beating the flames out.

A sudden roar sounded as backup generators turned on. Every cop cheered. The backup system was okay.

The shrieking had stopped. The huge room now smelled of burnt flesh. Someone called for repairs fast to cap the gusher.

They all viewed the charred mess that had been a killer.

"*You* burn in Hell," one of the cops said.

In the hall outside the cleared nursery, Tricia and MacIntyre were filling in Pappas when David appeared, behind cops just exiting the bathroom.

Quick words were exchanged. Hugs of relief from Sam and Tricia, both gibbering at once that Jill and the others were downstairs, getting evacuated.

“She’s probably waiting for you,” Sam said. “Being stubborn, holding Jesse and refusing to get into an ambulance.”

David ran. Passed Kerri, Alex, and trauma counselors comforting and moving away traumatized parents. Alex called after him, holding up his phone. “Hey, nice going! I heard about upstairs!”

A wave without turning, a plunge down five flights of stairs, and in the controlled chaos of a cleared area in the ER, he found Jill.

Sam was right. She was sitting on the floor shivering, hugging blanketed Jesse to her and comforting him. The sliding ER doors were open, and cold, darkening rain blew in on her. Someone had pulled a blanket over her, but she still shivered. Was watching the lights-flashing ambulances just outside, and the last of the babies getting lovingly placed into waiting isolettes.

“Jill.”

She looked up to him and burst into tears.

He knelt to her and held her, held both of them. Jesse actually looked up at him, a bit cross-eyed.

“David, you’re safe...safe,” Jill cried between gulps, her face pressed to his. “My phone...they said...fire.”

“I’m okay.”

She gulped air again. “Burrell?”

“In Hell.”

He held them. Long moments of comfort, of giving thanks passed between them.

Then he pulled Jill up, still cradling Jesse. She was in her thin scrubs, and her blanket was a bit wet. David asked for a new one, and wrapped her and the baby snugly inside it.

Then looked at them, and kissed her again. “Mama saves her baby,” he said in the softest voice imaginable.

Jill smiled weakly, and leaned into him.

There was room in the last ambulance. No isolettes left, but no problem.

They rode with Jesse to Mount Sinai Hospital, taking turns holding him.

## EPILOGUE/ JULY 1

The blueberries were perfect. And the strawberries - joyously red and plump. Those two, that's all Jill said they needed for their dessert with chocolate sauce over vanilla ice cream, but David poked happily among the bright mangos, grapes, papayas and cantaloupes, watching the setting sun glow on the whole sidewalk stand, and on his wedding ring.

It actually warmed his finger, and he stopped to twirl it a little, enjoying the feeling. Then he went back to picking the blueberries and strawberries, and a baguette and roses too. A beautiful bouquet of red ones, Jill's favorite. Paying, he grinned back at the grocer, grinned too at others who recognized him, then hurried home.

She was in the kitchen and looked up smiling – then delighted - when he came in. “Oh beautiful!” She took the roses and hugged him hard with her free arm, kissing him lovingly.

As she poured water for the roses into a pitcher he said, “Congratulations, first year resident.”

She laughed happily, then let out a subdued cowboy hoot. “Yeeehaaw!” Not loud enough to wake Jesse, but she couldn't resist; had heard it from some of David's relatives, his hearty father mostly, summoned for their quickie marriage ceremony at NYC's City Hall. It took all of twenty minutes. His parents had gifted her with loving hugs and cookware and a cowgirl hat. They owned a sporting goods store in Denver.

She felt high with happiness. Last night, June 30 at the stroke of midnight, Jill's year of internship had ended and she'd become a first year resident. So had all of them – Tricia, Ramu, Charlie and Gary. No chance to celebrate though, work continued, so they'd gathered and hugged and toasted with Sprite for a whole five minutes before they had to run off again...or collapse in bed to start all over at 6 a.m.

No time off, no summer vacations, no joke. July first was also the day the new bunch of interns arrived, and you didn't want them wandering around in a daze with their limited clinical experience.

“Remember last year, when you were one of ‘em?” David smirked, leaving the water running to start rinsing the strawberries.

“Oh...” She jabbed him in the ribs, not wanting to remember her first dreadful week.

They fell silent for a moment, remembering the darkness of the July before, and last October again...

Then the moment passed. The darkness was behind them, *they'd gotten through it*, and tonight they had – off! Jill had made a beautiful salad nicoise, and David, slicing the baguette, commented about bed early and a decent night's sleep.

She looked at him, arching a brow, and he re-thought the sleep part. Peered out the long, thin kitchen to the living area beyond. It was still as quiet out there as it was when he went for the fruit.

"Jesse still asleep?" he asked.

"You know it."

True. No baby clamor yet. Jesse was nine months now. The adoption had proceeded with the speed of government, but he'd been theirs, really theirs, for over four months. The tiny bundle they'd once held was now a seventeen-pound happy babbler, expert crawler, and enterprising explorer. He was on track as just a normal kid, as they told the rare reporter who called of late, or the cameramen who'd caught them in their heavy jackets last winter walking to and from the hospital.

The paparazzi had pretty much disappeared after December. Other media excitement had replaced the Jesse furor. The whole winter, spring, and now July had been so quiet. No threats, no bogeymen. *The three of them had stopped being danger magnets! So the awfulness was over, right?* People had gotten used to the idea of Jesse. The only news stories appearing concerned women clamoring to have their babies the same way – not a lot, but they were vocal, increasing in numbers, demanding and insisting that doctors find out faster how it was done or "admit their indifference to the hardships of women, especially working women."

The beautiful, oh-give-thanks thing was that the world was leaving Jill and David alone to be just normal, overtired, overworked residents whose joy was having Jesse, watching him grow.

David went to him. Jill dried her hands and followed, carrying the salad, a bottle of Chardonnay, and the roses on a tray. Their table, already set, was just feet from the crib. Jill put her tray down and joined David, gazing at their sleeping child.

Who squirmed, and squirmed some more...and opened his eyes.

"Da..." he said, seeing David first. His right hand reached sleepily for his favorite toy, a soft bunny, and he handed it up to David. The bunny was a gift from Gregory Pappas. The whole living area, the floor and every shelf, was crammed with toys from friends. Alex Brand and Keri Blasco with her boyfriend had been over. Alex had brought a soft plastic fire truck; Keri had brought a little red horse.

The police were grateful that Jill and David had continued to help with their cases. Three rapes and a case of statutory rape and child molestation. The child had been a pregnant thirteen-year-old. Keri and Jill had become close friends.

Leaning over the crib, Jill said, "Hi cutie. Wanna come out and play?"

"Paaay," Jesse said sleepily, his light brown hair a little sweaty on his brow.

They changed him, and took turns eating a bit awkwardly, one-handed with him traveling from one lap to the other. He held his own bottle. Once he dropped it, then, chortling, swept some of David's rice to the floor and thought that was hugely funny.

"Meth! Meth!" he chirped happily. He was proud of himself. He'd made a mess and had learned another word.

David reached for the baby development book.

“He’s ahead in language development,” he said, reading thoughtfully. Then he smirked and looked down at the carpet. “We’ll need a drop cloth here.”

“Almost every day a new word,” Jill said, restraining Jesse’s little hand from swiping more rice. “Maybe because we talk to him a lot. Ditto the hospital day care bunch.”

Every hospital staff member had access to daycare for their little ones. Jesse also spent two afternoons a week in the hospital’s more-famous-than-ever Infant School, but he didn’t seem to like it. He often did just the opposite of what the teachers tried to teach him, and preferred the free-crawling, rolling, head-butting scene of the regular daycare.

“So he’s going to be an independent thinker,” David said later, sprawled with Jill on the carpet, watching Jesse crawl around. He was babbling and pushing Alex’s soft plastic fire truck, another favorite toy, holding it with one hand while using his other hand and two knees to propel himself.

Outside the wide darkening window, the hospital lights glowed, and an ambulance sounded. Then another, and another, all wailing together into the nearby ambulance bay.

A big accident someplace. Collision at an intersection? A house fire? Building crane collapse?

Jill sighed. Home helped her forget the suffering and trauma of the outside world. It never ended, did it? Hearing the sirens always brought the realization back. Amid all this homey coziness, she felt a sadness take hold, wondering who was in pain, bleeding, maybe dying.

She sighed again, audibly this time. David, leaning against her, understood and patted her hand.

Are nine-month-olds able to read body language? Jill didn’t know, but doubted it. Until the following happened.

Jesse seemed to have seen her sad expression. He stopped crawling for a second, then scrambled to her looking worried, and held his fire truck up to her. *Don’t be sad, Mommy.*

She took it, and smiled for him. “Thank you, sweetheart. Mommy’s happy again.”

David watched, amazed. Jesse beamed, his round little face showing his first front teeth coming in.

Then he pulled himself up on Jill’s knee.

And then he let go, and *took his first step. And then another.* And almost a third before he fell into David’s arms, squealing with delight and looking back at Jill. *Mommy proud? Mommy proud?*

No words to describe the exclamations and stunned thrill of that moment. David took Jesse’s little hand and kissed it, and then kissed Jill, who was nearly in tears with excitement. She had felt comfort before from holding Jesse as a baby, but this...took her breath away.

Good people heal and comfort each other. Jill knew in her heart that Jesse would be one of those good people.

He crawled from David to her lap, cuddled, popped his thumb in his mouth, and resumed being a baby again.

It felt so good.

## Author's Note

Hello, and thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed this book. If you have the time to write a review, let me know and I will thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your review on Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or Goodreads would also help others decide if they would enjoy the book.

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More books are in the works, so please join my Newsletter at <http://jaschneiderauthor.net> You'll be the first to know when new books are available, and more!

Thanks again for reading!  
~ Joyce

## **About the Author**

J.A. (Joyce Anne) Schneider is a former staffer at Newsweek Magazine, a wife, mom, and book lover. Words and story ideas are always teeming in her head – “a colorful place!” she says. She loves thrillers...which may seem odd, since she was once a major in French Literature - wonderful but sometimes heavy stuff. Now, for years, she has become increasingly fascinated with medicine and forensic science. Decades of being married to a physician who loves explaining medical concepts and reliving his experiences means that there’ll be medical angles even in “regular” thrillers that she writes. She lives with her family in Connecticut.