

## **The Assistant**

Leslie Tearose was 29, alone, an organizational maniac, and desperate. She'd just come back to work after spending three weeks failing to help her mother try to make her dying grandmother as comfortable as possible, and was desperate to win Employee of the Year. And not just any old Employee of the Year award—she had won that title at her branch for two years running—but Employee of the Year of the entire company, the entire country. Her life was out of control and she needed something to help put things back in the right places.

She came in early on Monday morning, the first one there, giving herself an hour alone to cool down and settle in. Mid-June in Columbia made her hair stick to her face and neck in nasty clumps and she didn't want to get to work looking like a sweaty mess for everyone to see. She'd had enough mess for the past three weeks. The office smelled of vanilla candles, coffee, and printer ink. Her desk was covered with papers and Post-its, though someone had taken the time to put the papers in tidy piles. She'd been the main administrator to a local branch of a national real estate company for three years. She was an integral part to the company, and she knew this because that's what the boss had said the last two years when he presented her with the branch's Employee of the Year award as everyone clapped for her. She had always been an achiever.

Leslie hadn't meant to fail at helping her grandmother, but she might have forgotten about the dying's natural inclination toward real, actual, messy death and the fact that there can be little comfort in it. Her mother, who was in the best health of her life, had insisted that her own mother should be able to die wherever she wanted. Despite

the fact that all the women lived in South Carolina, Leslie had not seen and had barely spoken to her mother in two years (it was easy to miss holidays when other people simply made plans without you), but she'd packed up and drove down to Beaufort as soon as her mother had asked for help. The last weeks had been some of the most horrific Leslie could ever have imagined. She'd never thought it would be easy to cater a death, but she had never imagined that dying of cancer would be so loud and messy. A hospice nurse came three times a week; there was no one else. Her mother had spent most of her time away. Leslie felt more like an in-house nurse than a family member. After the funeral, her mother had shooed her away, and Leslie had come back immediately to Columbia to lose herself in work.

Behind her desk, her wall was covered with spreadsheets and various charts meant to help the real estate agents and managers keep track of sales, rentals, and progress on deals. She had projection charts based on the past three years and the current market. She knew the competition's numbers as well as their own place in the national scheme, though she had three weeks to catch up on. They were a little over two months away from the end of the season. Early on in her career there, she had single-handedly invented a system that made her the glue of the entire branch. On her first day back after the funeral, she settled in, organizing the piles of papers, updating files and folders: things that were finished, things that were unfinished, things that were just begun.

Leslie had the honor of being the third generation of women to kill off a family name. Her grandmother had been born a Cupp, a gritty southern family in which none of the boys lived long enough to father any legitimate children, and had married the last in a line of Barrys. She'd had two girls. Leslie's own mother had successfully ended the

Tearoses. Her parents had split up, but not before Leslie's mother had gotten her husband to get himself fixed.

This didn't bother Leslie's mother much, but it ate at her grandmother who, while still in good health, would occasionally say to Leslie, "You know, they can do all sorts of things now for single women. You could do one of those in virtue things that I hear about on the afternoon shows, and have a boy so that your daddy has a male to carry on his name. You don't have to be like me and your mom." Leslie knew that she was being utterly serious, and her grandmother would not listen to her when Leslie tried to correct her pronunciation.

"That can't be right," her grandmother said. "That doesn't even sound like English. No, they call it in virtue because it's *virtuous*."

Neverminding that Leslie, of all the generations before hers, had the least amount of desire to have children and felt no attachment or loyalty to the father it had come from. Her parents had separated when she was very young, and the times she'd heard from her dad since then had no rhyme or reason to them.

A few hours later, as Leslie sat color-coding leads, Peter, one of the managers, came over to her desk. He guided behind him a small, red-haired girl who looked just a few years younger than Leslie. The girl was lovely, with a sharply featured face—a pointy nose, defined lips, dramatic eyebrows—that made Leslie feel uncomfortable. The girl wore brand new clothes that Leslie knew had to have been pulled directly off of the rack advertising BUSINESS CASUAL COME AND GET IT: thin khaki pants already wrinkling at the crotch, and a pin-striped button up shirt that still had perfect creases down the arms.

“Joanna,” Peter said, “this is Leslie Tearose, who I told you about. She’s the one who keeps it all going. She’s going to make you feel right at home.”

The girl turned to Leslie, smiling and extending her hand. Something about her eager face made Leslie want to cringe, but she forced herself to smile and shake the offered hand. She looked at Peter expectantly, who said, “And this is your new assistant.”

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When Leslie and Peter went back to his office (to talk about her, she knew), Joanna sat down at her new desk, tucked away in a corner of the main room. She loved it; she could see everyone, but did not feel on display for everyone to watch. She hated being watched. She sat down, looking through her drawers, putting pens and pencils into place. She turned on the computer in front of her, but had no password.

She knew she was dressed exactly like someone who had never had a real job before—which wasn’t that far from the truth. She’d almost turned around and gone home, instead of going in for her first day on the job. A few weeks ago she’d seen the ad for “Assistant to Administrative Assistant” on Craigslist, and got excited by the idea of having an even less serious job than what she had anticipated finding. She’d been interviewed by an attractive 30-something manager, being told all about the woman she would be helping, a woman who was currently out of town because of a mysterious family emergency. She knew before she walked out of the office that the job was hers. She just wasn’t sure why.

All she wanted was something easy; she’d just moved back to South Carolina from Alabama, having reached the messy and still utterly anti-climatic ending of a relationship. There at the end both she and Jackson were saying the stupidest kinds of

things heard in movies:

“I really do wish the best for you.”

“I regret the day I first saw your face.”

“It isn’t you. It’s—“

“Stop. Just stop. I’ll throw up.”

“I just need to find out who I am.”

“One day, you’re going to wake up and realize...”

No one was right, and no one was wrong. They were both the good guy, and the bad guy. In the end, Joanna hadn’t even felt like a real human being. She took money from Jackson (“Just go,” he’d finally said) and hauled herself back to Columbia, where she’d gone to undergrad, to stay with some friends, breathe, and reorient herself. When she applied to be an assistant to an assistant, all she wanted was something that would help her begin to feel like a human being again.

She watched the screensaver—cartoon wild animals bounding across the screen—and looked around the office. It was a nice office, full of nicely dressed people. On the wall were large maps and pictures of Columbia through the years, photos of the college campuses nearby. The office hadn’t thrown her a welcoming party or anything, but she felt welcomed. She would be okay here; she would be safe.

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“Peter, I just don’t understand.” Leslie was certain her chest was going to cave in on itself, or burst out of itself. “I thought I was doing everything fine. The system is working.”

Peter’s office was straight from some catalog: dark browns, strong woods,

paintings of majestic wolves. Leslie had once admired and been intensely attracted to the type of masculinity that Peter's office projected, but after having an assistant thrust upon her all she could do was think to herself how *stupid* paintings of wolves were. She stood, leaning against his desk, afraid of the chair that sat terribly low, staring at a wolf leaping onto a horned beast. Peter sat back in his captain's chair.

"You're great. Joanna is just here to help you," Peter said. "After what you went through the past few weeks, I thought this would be good for you."

She'd only made Peter pleased for three years. Three years of met deadlines, of exceeded expectations, coming to work early and leaving work late. Three years of no sick days, no complaints—and for what? Only just within the last year had she begun to comfortably call Peter by his first name, though everyone else already did.

All she wanted was for things to work, to be integral to the process so that people would view her as good and important. Leslie faded under confrontation and criticism. She always heard the negatives the loudest and she was terrified of people with power over her. Leslie had been working on her issues for years, repeating mantras and leaving positive notes around the house and trying to convince herself that other people were far too busy to worry themselves over her every little flaw.

"Of course I appreciate the thought," she said, finally. "But I am fine. I don't need any help."

"Leslie, the truth is that when you were gone we got kind of lost. We simply couldn't figure the damn thing out. Everyone has to start pulling their own weight again—except you, of course," he said. "You have to give some of yours up. And these past weeks had to have been hard for you. No one could just come back after that."

She pushed away from the desk, from the wolves, said, “Okay, you’re right. This will be great.”

“That’s the ticket,” Peter said, and Leslie paused at the door to rub her temples before going out into the main office.

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Leslie had not even spoken with her mother in nearly a year before she had called for help. They’d not had a falling out; they had just simply stopped talking, seeming to have just faded from each other’s lives as if they were mere acquaintances. In fact, they’d been more like roommates when Leslie was young. From the third grade on, after her mother had become a regional manager for a medical uniform supplier, Leslie got herself to and from school, made her own lunches and most of her dinners, braided her hair before bed. If she was sick, she wrote her own notes. Her mother worked a lot, but was usually home before Leslie went to bed, and sometimes came home with dinner. On the occasional weekend, they stayed home together and rented a VCR and movies. Most Christmases were spent with her grandmother, but few holidays were acknowledged. When Leslie went to college, it was as if their lease had just run out.

Leslie had been at work when she got the call on her cell. It was May 23<sup>rd</sup>. A Thursday. It was overcast but dry outside.

“I know I shouldn’t be asking you,” her mother said. “But I just can’t sit there all by myself waiting for her to die, and you’re the only one.”

There was no hesitation. “Of course,” Leslie said. Her pulse raced with a pleasure she didn’t want to identify as the pleasure that came from being needed.

In his office, Peter seemed surprised to learn that she even had family members.

“It’s just something I have to do,” she said. “I know it’s a lot of time to ask off, but it can’t be helped.”

She’d been ready to threaten to quit, but Peter’s kind face was full of sorrow when he walked her to her car that day. He gave her a hug that began hesitantly, as if he doubted it was the right thing to do, but she’d leaned in further. She hadn’t hugged a man in two years.

She’d been in Beaufort the next day. Occasionally someone would want something specific to eat, and Leslie would run to get the ginger ale, or grilled cheese sandwich from the local shop, or a hot ham biscuit that would never get eaten. But there was no phone in the house to ring, and no one rang Leslie’s cell—there was just silence; half-eaten food; unopened books; and the long, low moans of waiting.

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“This isn’t how you tag your cold-calls,” Leslie said. She placed a stack of papers on Joanna’s desk and leaned over to point. “Initial cold-calls should be purple. Return-calls are red, and follow-ups are yellow.”

“Shit,” Joanna said. “I’m sorry.”

“And you can’t file them unless there have been three unreturned calls *in a row*. This one right here called back after your second call, which reset the counter.”

Joanna nodded, feeling miserable. To her, sitting there staring up at Leslie of the slick-shiny dark hair and glowing skin, Leslie looked like a woman who had gotten her act together. Joanna was almost twenty-six and felt like she had nothing to show for it but some worthless Bachelors degrees and awards for stupid things like the time she came in third place in her fourth grade geography bee. Leslie had a job where people took her



seriously, and nice clothes that looked good on her. People came to her with questions, and she was right around Joanna's age. Joanna, who had yet to be asked a serious question.

Sure, there was the time that Jackson had sort-of asked her to marry him, but even that hadn't been put in the form of a question ("Maybe we should start saving up money. You know, for like a ring or something."). And as she was growing up, people often asked her what she was going to do with her life. A serious enough question, but not one that could actually be taken seriously. But when someone came up to you and wanted to know about the status of the Denisfold deal, what else needed to be done, what needed to be locked away—those were serious questions. Those were the questions that Joanna suddenly wanted to know the answers to.

"I know you may not think it's a big deal, but I promise it is. This is what makes things work. Can you please try a little harder?" Leslie asked, and Joanna nodded.

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Sometimes, Leslie would still wake up to moans—agonized moans. Her grandmother was falling out of bed, rolling around in her sleep, crashing with the weight of a log to an old pine floor. The frail woman moaning feebly from her bedroom, on so much medication she rarely recognized anyone. The house was shut-in, dark—the blinds were always drawn, the lights always dimmed for the old lady's eyes. Leslie would wake up in the quiet of her own house—clean, light, organized, and entirely *hers*—and be unable to go back to sleep, the quiet so full with the echoes of those other sounds. She'd bought the house through her company, and loved it from the moment she saw the single badly-lit picture of its living room on the MLS website. It was the calmest, quietest, and

safest place she knew. Yet, even after a month, she was beginning to hate it.

It was nearing the end of the summer, and the end of the season for her company. Everything started over again in September, which the college kids began their new leases and the deal counter was reset. She'd been doing a good job, pushing for new properties, new exclusive listings. Their numbers were up when many other companies' were falling. She was on top of things, but still worried about not being chosen for the award. These days, it was all that grounded her. It didn't even come with a check or trip—just a plaque for her desk, another for the office, and her name being sent out nationwide to all the people in the entire company. Her mother had not called on her own, and rarely answered Leslie's phone calls. She had few friends because the truth was she lived like an old lady: going to bed early, eating dinner early, hardly drinking. Deep inside her, she knew the award wouldn't change anything; on a solely intellectual plane she knew she needed to do something else. But it didn't matter. Her heart wanted what it wanted.

And she felt passionately that Joanna was keeping her from it. The girl never came in early and never left late, but was practically universally loved. And she always seemed happy, or easy-going, at least. She did what was required of her but asked for nothing else to do and seemed fine with it. Leslie felt it took her hours to explain to Joanna the simplest tasks. Despite all this, however, everyone else seemed to like her, seemed to light up around her. Peter was clearly a big fan; he was already joking around with her, sending her across the street to pick up coffee for everyone.

“How you doing today, Leslie?” he'd ask her on his way to Joanna's desk in the corner, barely waiting for an answer. “Everything going all right?” Then he'd talk with

Joanna for entire minutes about who knew what—Leslie could never find a way to eavesdrop on them, could only imagine as she stared at the ceiling late at night, alone in her quiet bed.

Everyone was asking her pointless questions, questions that didn't even deserve answers. She blamed her mother, blamed Peter, blamed Joanna, but mostly her mother. Everything had been fine and now it was all shit—and her mother wouldn't even return her phone calls to try to make up for the fact that everything else was broken. She did the same things every day, and then went home to the same house, cleaned the same dishes, washed the same laundry, watched reruns of the same shows and dug her fingernail into the same place in her palm, day after day.

One Friday, Joanna came up to her desk with a box of donuts. “Thought you might like one of these,” she said. “They were making them fresh when I went in, and Peter said to get whatever.”

Leslie began to shake her head, but saw Peter eyeing them from the front of the office and felt on display. “Sure,” she said, taking the most disgusting one she could find—something dripping with frosting, oozing bright red jelly from its sides. “This looks really delicious.”

“I've often wanted to ask you why you got into real estate,” Joanna said, looking awkward but sincere.

“Well, I'm not actually in real estate,” she said. “I just try to make life easier for real estate agents. I guess I'd be doing the same kind of stuff at any type of office.”

“You just fell into it? Didn't you want to do anything else?”

Leslie couldn't find a napkin to put the donut on, and kept holding it, watching

the jelly begin to shake and tremble as it struggled to hold together and stay within the donut. It would lose, she knew. It would fall, squeezed right out of that vulgar-looking hole—she hated snack foods with holes in them, with cream and jelly and cheese and whatever else crammed in. What could she say to that question? Why wasn't anyone asking her the questions she could answer?

What did it matter what else she might have wanted to do? When she was younger, she wanted to be an Olympic gymnast, ignoring the fact she was not at all flexible and much too tall. Then she'd had fantasies of being an actress, except she hated drama class, hated people yelling at her to do stuff over again. She thought of taking hundreds of lovers and spending her entire life making love in exotic countries. She'd thought of being an FBI agent or of teaching English to little kids in foreign countries. What did it all matter?

Joanna kept on. "I mean, I've done a lot of things, a lot of dumb jobs, and I guess I just never knew how to find something that could matter. I never learned how to *let* things matter, I guess. Like, I thought school mattered and stuff like that, but there are other things that can be important."

Leslie went ahead, pressed her thumb down, smushing it into her palm, sticky sugar dripping everywhere. "Oops," she said. There was just so much to clean up.

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*What we are looking for are employees who move beyond themselves—we're not looking for the person who has stayed the latest, or just taken on the most work. Our goal is to honor those who inspire those around them—and that can be anyone, in any position. When you send in your nominations for Employee of the Year, take this into*

*consideration: Who do you look forward to seeing when you come into work? Who pushes you and those in your office to be a better person? Who struggled under something and still managed to pull through and give us a hell of a year? We can't wait to read about all our fantastic employees all over the country!*

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The office was built not entirely unlike Leslie's grandmother's house: dark brick, a wide front porch, a welcoming front room, a small and homey bathroom (the shower converted into a large storage space). What would have been the bedrooms along the sides had been converted into private offices and conference rooms: what might have once been a study, a nursery, an art studio. Who knew? Near the rear of the house, several rooms had been gutted to become one large room with several desks, with Leslie's desk right in the center. She'd often imagined that where she sat had once been someone's dining room. But maybe she had it all wrong. Maybe it had never actually been a house; maybe it had just been built to resemble one.

She kept checking her e-mail for the announcement. *Congratulations! You've been nominated as THE BEST.* But it was never there, and the date and come and gone and who knew who had gotten it, and the air conditioning kept failing, and the lights were getting dimmer and, always, the remembered smell of shit and piss and death kept waking her up. She adopted an awkward and abused cat named Buckles to keep her company, became obsessed with how often it went to its litter box. Buckles spent most of her time hiding in a closet, getting thick dark hair all over her white bath sheets. Leslie kept calling her mother a few times a week, sometimes leaving messages ("Hi, it's me. Just checking in. Let me know you're okay.") The woman never called back but posted

stupid pictures of animals on Facebook, so Leslie knew she was still alive.

Something seemed to have switched in Joanna: she was suddenly awesome at everything, motivated, good-natured, an Answerer of Questions. Even her clothes were better. After just six weeks, people were beginning to call her *Little Leslie* and Joanna didn't seem to mind. She kept complimenting Leslie, admiring her, bringing her snacks.

"Is there anything else I can do?" she asked all day long. "Want me to call around for more listings, or drive around and look for vacancies listed by owner?" The answer always no, everything here is good.

"Thanks, though," Leslie said. "I'll let you know when something comes up."

Seven weeks after returning to work, on a Friday, the email came through. She wasn't even nominated for the best at her office, much less the entire company. Yet, the winner still came from her office. She couldn't even read the whole thing, just the subject: *Congratulations, Clarissa Mann-Gardner, Rosengarten & Koss Realty Employee of the Year!* Clarissa had worked through most of her pregnancy and then came back soon after, taking her baby around on showings. She sold more houses to more young families than the rest of the office combined. Leslie didn't need to read it to know what it said; she knew the stats on everyone.

Everyone began clapping immediately, looking around for Clarissa, who wasn't even there; she was out on a showing. Peter burst out from his office, and had the audacity to look at her pityingly from across the room. The din died down to an awkward murmur, and Leslie jerkily turned to the side and began packing her purse, feeling watched from every angle.

On her way out of the office, Peter tried to touch her arm. She cringed from him,

and he still said, "I'm sorry."

"Was I even considered?" she asked, then wanted to vomit at guilt that spread across his beautiful face, starting first with his mouth and moving up his nose, until his entire face was almost folding into itself like an accordion. "Oh, stop looking at me that way. I've never seen you look uglier."

She was getting ready to pull out of her parking spot when Joanna banged on the passenger-side window, breathing heavily. She rolled down the window.

"Can you drive me to the gas station up the street?" Joanna asked. "I need some oil for my car. It's such a piece of shit."

"I was going to a bar," she said.

"That works, too."

It didn't make any sense to Leslie, but she didn't care. She shook her head and unlocked the door. "Whatever," she said. "Get in."

"So, where are we going?" Joanna asked. No, *if you don't mind me asking*.

"I don't even know," she said after a moment. "Where do you go?"

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They climbed up the rickety stairs to the Village Idiot, a pizza shop and bar perched over a row of shops on Devine Street. Joanna inhaled the musty beer scent and remembered many underage night spent there as an undergrad. She hadn't been there in ages. She led Leslie to a booth along the back of the wall, away from the bar and the old guys watching tennis. It was cool inside the bar, and mostly empty, but the August humidity had already hit them.

Leslie hadn't said a word since Joanna had begun giving her directions to the

Idiot. She just sat and looked at the menu in a confused sort of way. When the server came over to take their order, Leslie just looked pleadingly at Joanna.

“A pitcher of Bud?” Joanna asked. “Unless you’d like something else?”

“No, no, that’s fine,” Leslie said.

Not since college had Joanna tried so hard to please someone, especially a woman. She didn’t know why she wanted to be around Leslie; she was almost certain the other woman hated her, but since Leslie never came right out and told her to go away, she kept at it. She just wanted so desperately to be liked.

Around the office, she’d heard the stories. After work, grabbing drinks with co-workers (Leslie never, ever there) being painted pictures of the differences between the *before* and the *now*.

“As far as anyone else knows, all she did for three weeks was stay in a house in the middle of Bum Fucked Egypt with an old woman dying of cancer,” Peter said. “And then she just came back here after the funeral, like nothing happened. My heart would break for Leslie, but the woman won’t let anyone do anything for her.”

A familiar song came on the speakers, and Leslie began to sway her head slightly. Her hand was wrapped around her cool mug, but she’d barely drunk. “I like this song,” she said.

“I’m sorry that stuck up bitch won,” Joanna said. “I can’t believe she beat you.”

“Oh, she’s not stuck up. She’s just good at her job.”

“Well, you’re great at yours,” Joanna said.

Leslie just shook her head and reached around to rub the back of her neck.

“Sometimes I hate her,” Leslie said. “My mother, I mean. I just keep asking



myself what the hell she was thinking when I went down there. And then I have to think that maybe she did it because she loves me, because she wanted to show me something about myself, that I can take care of people or be a real human being or something.

“But I don’t think she does things out of love,” she went on. “She’s a lesson teacher, you know? Learn things the hard way, and all that. Like she didn’t make me take a bath as a kid—I just had to go to school dirty until I got made fun of enough to realize it sucked. But what was the lesson this time? Her mother died and it doesn’t make any difference that I was there.”

Joanna said, feeling as awkward as she had felt in front of her favorite professor, “I think I know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, I imagine you do. I’m sure they all do. And they all must think I’m going to crack or something because I saw an old woman die. I don’t know, now. All I know is that she won’t return my calls and I can’t stop thinking she’s going to be dead, and what that will look like—it’s the ugliest thing you can imagine. Even though she looks better than someone half her age—you’ve never seen a healthier-looking woman—it’s all I can think about. How ugly it’ll be.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Joanna asked.

Joanna knew Leslie wasn’t okay, but also knew she wouldn’t say so.

“Did Peter send you out to ride with me?” Leslie finally said, and Joanna didn’t answer because she wasn’t sure what Leslie wanted to hear. “I’m just so tired. I’m just too tired.” She took another drink of her beer. “And this beer really sucks. Is this what it’s always like?”

Joanna laughed. “Sometimes it’s worse.”

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At the last moment, the crucial moment when her grandmother passed, Leslie's mother hadn't been there. She needed air, she said, needed to get away for a minute. She'd been away for lots of minutes. She got in Leslie's car and took off and was gone for the rest of the day. Leslie sat in the dark house, in her room right across the hall from the grandmother's room—the grandmother she had seen just a few times in her adulthood. And those times, her grandmother had primarily been on a mission to convince her to get herself artificially inseminated and have a bastard child with her father's last name.

Leslie sat in a soft chair by a lamp, a large book in her lap, and thought about how she might call into work, just to see how everything was going, even though she knew there was no cell phone service and she wasn't about to make a long distance call on her grandmother's phone.

Leslie imagined the office, what it must look like at that moment. It was 4:38 on a Friday, and people would be rushing to make final calls, final copies, get those faxes sent off to owners, landlords, banks. If she were there, she'd be right in the thick of it. Peter would stand in the corner like some dark tweed god, smiling at her. Maybe this would have been the Friday that she finally went out with everyone, trusting herself with just one glass of wine—she'd been practicing at home, liking the taste of wine. This could have been the Friday that—

From across the hall, a choking, strangled moan—a breath that sounded more like someone drowning, or growling like a monster. The air around her grew stale and heavy. Nothing else existed in the world except that moan and the suffocating air that was a

string between her healthy, unloved body and the one across the hall. She stood, the book falling to the floor. She walked slowly across the darkness, stood at the doorway, and met the eyes of a woman like her who had killed an entire name, then watched her sad, gnarled hands turn into claws.