

TWICE DEAD  
by  
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Prologue

The surgery—if you could call it that—didn't last long. The time it actually took was probably less than it seemed since she didn't know how long to expect it to take. The doctor didn't say much. Just told her to lie still.

Soon all remnants of him were gone—every sign that he had entered her body and left his telltale deposits. She felt washed clean as she sensed, rather than heard, the last piece of him drop into the stainless steel basin.

## Chapter 1

Saturday, 17 March, 1227 Hours

Hope died.

With no warning.

I should have been there. But, as I told Tim when he'd phoned that morning to tell me two nurses had called in sick, I'd promised to take the twins to the St. Patrick's Day parade. Tim had said they could manage; he and Laura would work double shifts.

I've spent all of my career at St. Teresa's Hospital. They offered me my first job after graduation from nursing school, I stayed to get some experience and I'm still here, nurse manager of the intensive care unit, a job that expanded when the medical and surgical intensive care units were combined. Actually, my recently-changed title is patient care manager because someone figured out we were supposed to be managing patients, not nurses.

The rain had let up conveniently right before the parade started although a saturated blanket of clouds hung over downtown St. Louis. It wasn't enough to dampen the spirits of the several hundred thousand rowdy spectators, all celebrating their Irish heritage, even if they happened to be German like us or Dutch or Scandinavian or Italian. St. Louis, like many cities home to descendants of European immigrants, celebrated St. Patrick's Day in a big way. Outdoor decorations festooned most city streets, especially on the Southside. At the very least, an Irish flag hung suspended from a pole on the front porch. One home we'd passed on the way to the parade had green Christmas lights draped on its shrubbery and giant shamrocks plastered on front windows and door. Parade-goers, too, were decorated with green clothing and hats covered with shamrocks; some partyers even sported green hair. The green beer was flowing. Rambunctious spectators partied to the tunes of marching bands and bagpipes. A group of green- and white-dressed dancers, arms rigid and feet spinning to an Irish jig, were passing us when my cell phone rang. I tried to answer it but it cut off in mid-ring.

"Damn," I said under my breath. The hospital provided cell phones to all the supervisors, but chose the cheapest, and most unreliable, service. I tapped Tina on the shoulder. "We have to go."

Her face fell. "Not now, Aunt Monny."

Monny is short for Monika and, strictly speaking, I'm not their aunt. Their mom is my cousin and we are both only children of twin brothers. So growing up Hannah and I had pretended we were sisters. Her children were the nearest thing I had to progeny.

"The clowns haven't come yet!" Tina said. A favorite with the children, the clowns tossed candy to the crowds near the end of the parade.

Gena, sitting on the curb, cried, "Look, it's a green Santa Claus!"

"That's a leprechaun," her sister told her authoritatively as the helium-filled character bobbed past.

"I have to find a phone booth. I have to call the hospital. It's an emergency," I told them.

"We can stay here." Tina, older by fifteen minutes, put her arm around her sister. "We're old enough. We're not little kids any more." A blond pony tail, pushed through the opening in the back of her Cardinal baseball cap, bobbed up and down emphatically. Gena's pony tail nodded in agreement.

“All right. You stay right here. On our corner.” Like many native St. Louisans, we always arrived early to claim a spot on the same corner. Ours was at Market and Eleventh Street.

“Okay?”

Two heads bobbed again.

“Don’t move, and stay together.”

They had turned to see the firetrucks, sirens blaring over the raucous sounds of the crowd, go by. A Dalmatian, green spots competing with black ones, sat calmly atop.

I pushed through the crowd in search of a pay phone and found one a block down the street. A heavy-set woman sat in the phone booth, cracking the door open with her foot. A young man with a bucket of green beer swinging precariously from his hand lunged against the open door. The woman inside was telling someone to do something before she got home. Or else. I tapped my foot impatiently.

My cell phone sounded a short ring again. The young man turned at the sound; his unfocused eyes indicated that he’d already had more than one bucket of beer. I smiled apologetically.

“I need to call the hospital,” I explained.

He didn’t look impressed.

“I’m a nurse. They need me.”

A blank face.

“Can I get ahead?”

He shrugged, splashing drops of beer on his jeans, and moved away.

I tapped on the glass.

The woman shut the door in my face.

I tapped again harder. She looked up, scowling. I pointed to my beeper. She opened the door an inch. “Hold on,” she told person on other end. “Someone’s pestering me.”

“It’s an emergency. I have to call the hospital. I’m a nurse. Please. You can have it right back,” I assured her.

Someone in the line that had formed behind me coughed pointedly. The woman glanced up briefly, then took her time ending the call.

She squeezed out of the booth, moving her considerable weight with difficulty, and slammed the door open behind her. It rattled against the frame as thunder rumbled in the distance. Dark clouds were rolling in.

“Monika, you better come in,” Tim said when I reached the ICU nurses’ station at St. Teresa’s. Tim had been a nurse for more than ten years, the last two working for me.

“Why? What’s happened?”

“It’s Hope. She’s dead.”

“Dead?”

Several heads turned toward me.

I closed the door. “How could she be? I thought she was improving.”

“Just get here. Laura’s gone to pieces and I’m shorthanded.” His voice was clipped and hard, unlike Tim.

I checked my Minnie Mouse watch. The hospital was about a ten-minute drive from downtown and I’d need five minutes to get to my car in the garage a block away. And I had to collect the twins.

“I’m on my way.”

I dialed again, turning my back on the angry looks from the line outside the booth. Hannah agreed to meet me at the hospital in fifteen minutes to pick up the girls.

The parade was almost over and people had already started to leave. Traffic would be impossible soon. Thunder rumbled and the wind picked up, scattering plastic beer cups, soda cans and bits of paper in swirls through the street.

I tried to push by some boisterous partyers noisily singing “Danny Boy” off key. One of men swung his arm around my neck, crushing me in a cloud of beer-soaked smells and rain-dampened jackets. The song came to a sloppy end as I slipped out unnoticed from under his arm, irritated by their revelry while a young woman lay unexplainably dead a few miles away.

I pushed through the rest of the crowd to the corner where I’d left the twins. There were plenty of children there, but not Tina or Gena.

My throat felt dry.

“Tina, Gena,” I shouted impotently into the noise. I pushed my way around the corner against the crowd of more people leaving. No twins. I turned back to the corner checking the street sign. Eleventh Street. They weren’t there. I struggled to see through to the curb but at four feet eleven, I couldn’t see over the crowd. I worked my way down the street, pushed through the throng and stepped into the street, looking back toward the corner to see the girls sitting on the curb almost where I had left them. Relief, then anger, flooded through me as I started toward them.

“Where were you?” I asked in a low, tight voice as I grabbed two sticky hands and jerked the girls to their feet. Four eyes filled with tears.

“We just wanted some candy,” wailed Gena. Several clowns were tossing paper-wrapped treats to children just ahead. “We were just gone a minute,” Tina said swallowing her tears.

“It’s okay. You’re here, but we have to hurry. Let’s run.” A loud clap of thunder made us all jump. “See how fast we can get to the car.” Tears forgotten, they pulled me along, each yelling she was going to get there first. The thunder boomed louder. Giant drops hit us just as we made it into the garage. The girls were still arguing about who had won the race as I pulled into the stream of cars heading west.

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Hannah’s van was parked under the canopy in front of the hospital as promised. I gave the girls quick kisses, waved to Hannah, and then swung my car into the hospital’s garage, steeling myself to deal with yet another unexpected death in ICU.

## Chapter 2

Saturday, 17 March, 1310 Hours

As usual after a code, the room was a mess. The floor was smeared with blood. Wrappings from ripped open packages and blood Chapter 2-streaked IV tubing were scattered everywhere. A blood-stained blanket lay crumpled under the bed.

Hope had been a beautiful young woman with long blond hair. In death, she looked younger than her twenty-three years. Her gown was bunched up around her neck. Her breasts lay flat against her chest, scarred by burn marks from defibrillator paddles. Above her left breast I noticed a tiny butterfly tattoo I hadn't seen before. Her legs were spread open, and blood had pooled where her body depressed the mattress, filled the space between her spread-open legs and spilled onto the floor. Now the dark pool of blood under the bed was turning brown on the cream-colored tile.

"We haven't had time to clean up," Tim said, coming up behind me. "Mr. Bettelman coded after you called. We brought him back, but it took awhile."

I squeezed my eyes shut and took a breath. After more than twenty years in nursing, I had seen plenty of deaths. Some slow, some painful, some quick and merciful. But I want to scream at God, or the Fates, or whatever Power there is. Afterward it's always the same: an overwhelming sadness slips over me like a gray fog. I feel paralyzed, afraid to move, almost afraid to take a breath, as if it is not right that I am able to breathe when my patient can't. Eventually the horror fades, and I go back to work.

"I'll give you a hand." As I reached for the sheet to cover Hope's naked body, my foot slipped in the blood and I fell forward, landing on Hope's bare chest. I jerked back, pushing Hope away. The butterfly tattoo appeared to flutter as her head sank onto her chest and rolled off the pillow.

"You okay?" Tim asked. "Any on you?"

Blood—anywhere—is a nurse's worst nightmare. AIDS.

"I just slipped. I'm fine." My voice sounded shaky. I yanked the sheet loose from the end of the bed. It, too, was blood-stained.

"What happened to Laura?" I asked Tim as I grabbed some gloves out of a carton on the bedside table.

"She just walked off," he said.

I stopped with my hand half into a glove. "Left the patient? Where'd she go?"

"Serena found her in the restroom. Sobbing."

"I don't get it. This isn't her first death. Was Laura Hope's nurse?"

"Technically."

"Technically?"

"Laura had Hope today, but Serena's making up a clinical for school and she was assigned to her."

"Where's the instructor?"

"She didn't want to come in on a Saturday."

"Maybe if I'd come in instead of taking the twins to the parade—"

"You don't know that," Tim said. "This could have happened no matter who was here. Or not. I doubt we could have stopped a hemorrhage this bad."

“You see this?” I asked Tim, pointing to the tattoo. “I always wonder why people get them,” I said as I straightened her head as if she were a live patient I was trying to make comfortable. “You have them for life.”

“And after,” Tim added, studying Hope’s arms.

“Something wrong?”

“I guess she got stuck twice.” He pointed to the needle mark and bruising on the inside of her left arm. IV tubing dangled from the needle still inserted in the inside of her right arm.

“Do the parents know?” he asked. “About the abortion?”

Hope had been admitted about ten the morning before with vaginal bleeding of unknown origin. She’d stopped at a service station and collapsed. An ambulance delivered her to St. Teresa’s shortly thereafter. Before her father and their minister had arrived, I’d coaxed the information out of her that she’d had an abortion.

“Anyone call her parents?” I asked, ignoring Tim’s question for the moment.

“Haven’t had time. Between taking care of everyone, and dealing with Laura’s hysterics. . . .” He pinched the bridge of his nose and squeezed his eyes shut. A loop of dark brown hair flopped down between his eyebrows.

“You’re tired. I’ll do it,” I told him. Telling the family is the nurse’s least favorite job.

“Thanks,” he said with a sigh. He stared a moment at Hope, and then gathered some clean towels, wet them in the sink and began wiping the dribble that had trickled out of the corner of Hope’s mouth. I started on Hope’s legs and genitals, folding the towels between her legs as they became soaked with blood and the urine and feces that had been expelled when she died. Tim attached an identification tag on her toe as I slid a duplicate tag on a string around her neck. We turned her, expelling air from her lungs in one long sigh. Dark blood dribbled from between her legs.

Tim pointed to her lower back. “Ever see one of these? A retroperitoneal bleed?”

Hope’s backside was mottled with purple splotches visible through her pale skin where the blood had pooled.

“Nope,” I said. “Read about it but never saw one.”

“I saw one once on a GYN patient, also with a diagnosis of vaginal bleeding of unknown origin,” he said as we finished cleaning up and spread a clean sheet over Hope’s body.

I turned to go, squishing in the blood.

“Stop,” Tim ordered. “You’re tracking more blood. Stand still.”

He wet a towel in the sink, tossed it next to him and, using his foot, started to mop up the floor. When he finally reached me, after using a few more towels, he said, “You sure have tiny feet. What are they? Size four?”

The staff liked to tease me about my size, calling me “shorty” or “shrimp.” Most of the time I didn’t mind. It helped keep the barrier down between them and me, as management.

“Five. And growing.” My habitual response to the “short” jokes.

“Here, wipe the bottom of your shoes on this.” He threw another clean towel on the floor.

“I’ll call housekeeping and have them finish up the room,” I said.

“Good luck. Their budget’s been cut, too, and this is Saturday.”

“They have to. Administration wants the room filled.” I reached down to pick up a tangle of used tubing. A round strip of plastic was caught in it. It would be a while before the room was cleaned, but I could make a start.

“Look at this, Tim. Hope’s ID bracelet.” Tiny drops of blood dotted the band.

We looked at each other and stepped back to the bed raising the sheet to check Hope’s wrists. Neither one had an ID band.

“How’d that happen?”

Tim shrugged. “Someone probably cut it off during the code.”

“I wonder why they’d do that,” I said, but Tim had already left. I gathered up the bloodstained towels, tossed them into the contaminated laundry bag, peeled my gloves off and dropped them into the empty trash basket as I left the room, pulling the curtain closed behind me.

Our unit was actually one big room with twelve cubicles clustered in a semi-circle around the nurses’ station. The cubicles didn’t have doors, just privacy curtains to shield them from the traffic that went through the unit. There were glass windows between the rooms, and on the side opposite the nurses’ station were a window and door to the outside corridor, all screened by curtains. The nurses’ station had a counter running the length of the unit that shielded a long desktop. Patient monitors, computers, telephones, patient charts, and books on critical care, drugs, and equipment added to the general clutter. Ruby’s large, insulated cup, labeled with her name and DO NOT TOUCH in bold, black indelible ink, sat beside the phone.

I picked up the phone and dialed reluctantly.

“Hello?” a hesitant female voice answered.

“Mrs. Shephard?”

“Yes?”

“Mrs. Shephard, this is Monika Everhardt, from the hospital.”

“Yes?”

“Mrs. Shephard, is there someone there with you?”

“My husband just came in.” She spoke slowly, spacing her words.

“Are you sitting down?”

“Well, not now. I answered the phone.”

“Please sit down and ask your husband to sit next to you.”

I heard her call to him. “Earl, it’s the hospital. They want to talk to us. Bring me a chair.” She didn’t seem at all concerned by my phone call. Then to me, “What is it?”

“I have some bad news. It’s Hope. We tried everything.” I waited, letting the information sink in.

“She’s better, though, isn’t she?”

“I’m afraid not, Mrs. Shephard. She didn’t make it.”

I heard a series of loud noises I couldn’t decipher. “Mrs. Shephard, are you all right?” I shouted.

“Who is this?” a male voice demanded over the phone. “And what did you say to my wife?”

“Mr. Shephard, this is Monika Everhardt at St. Teresa’s. I’m afraid I have bad news about Hope.” I took a breath. “She just died.”

“What?” he screamed. “She just had a little bleeding! What did you do to her?”

“Mr. Shephard, take care of your wife.”

The phone slammed in my ear.

Serena was standing by the nurses' station, arms crossed in front of her small body. Serena worked part time for us as an assistant and was just finishing her first year of nursing school. "What happened to her?" she asked me, tears clouding her eyes. She wiped at them with stubby fingers, smearing mascara onto her cheeks.

I remembered my first death as a nurse. An elderly woman I had cared for. I had barely kept my composure as I readied her body for the morgue and then, ashamed of feeling so grief-stricken over someone I hardly knew, I'd held in my emotions until I got home.

"I didn't do anything wrong." Serena's lower lip jutted out defensively.

I shook my head. "I'm sure you didn't. It just happens. We don't know why."

"Will they find out?"

"They will if they do an autopsy."

"What if the family doesn't want one?"

"Usually they do in cases like this." I checked my watch. "It's been more than twenty-four hours since she was admitted, so it's not a medical examiner's case," I explained to the young student. "As far as I know."

"She was so young," Serena said, sniffing.

I put my arm around her shoulder. "It's hard on me, too, even after all I've seen. But we have to go back to work, take care of all the others."

Mrs. Ritenour pulled back the curtain to her husband's room and motioned for help. "He just doesn't look right," she said.

"Can you see what she wants?" I asked Serena.

Serena nodded. Mrs. Ritenour grabbed her arm as she went through the curtain.

I was glad Serena was upset. She needed to feel for her patients. Without compassion, the work is just mechanical and the nurse, a machine.

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"I'm going to the Shepherd's," I told Tim as we were walking through the tunnel to the parking garage. I'd changed back into my street clothes—a green sweater and blue jeans—from the bloodstained scrubs and lab coat that had been clean when I'd put them on more than four hours ago. "I can take Hope's purse to them so they don't have to come in."

I had stayed and worked the rest of the shift, taking over Laura's patients. Laura had been admitted to the psych unit after an evaluation in the emergency room.

Tim had cleaned up Hope's body and finished the lengthy reporting required after a death, especially an unexpected one. I'd finally convinced someone from housekeeping to come up and clean the room.

"It's on my way home," I went on. "Her father hung up on me and so I think I should make some personal contact. After that risk management seminar we had last week. . ."

"Yeah, personal attention." Tim's voice had a tired sneer. "Fewer lawsuits." Dark hair fell over his wearied eyes. "I think I've given about all the personal attention I can right now."

I patted his shoulder. Tim was a good nurse, but everyone has a limit. With the recent budget cuts our staff had been reduced and double shifts were becoming more common, exhausting even the best nurses. Rumor had it the new chief nurse had been hired to trim expenses even more.

"One more thing gone wrong," Tim said.

I nodded.

The repair budget had been eliminated a year ago, and lately equipment breakdowns were becoming more frequent. And more dangerous. Just last week an X-ray tech was moving an overhead machine when a pin came loose and the machine fell, smashing the exam table below. Luckily, no one was on it.

We stepped onto the garage elevator and it jerked upward.

“By the way, who pronounced her?” I asked Tim.

“Jake Lord.”

“He admitted her, too, didn’t he?”

“Yes, that’s why I called him.”

The elevator doors swung open on the fourth level. I stepped out and took a moment to remember where I’d parked my car.

Tim was holding the door open and looking out at the rain falling steadily outside.

“Isn’t this your level?” I asked him.

The elevator buzzed, signaling the doors had been open too long.

“I was just thinking,” he said stepping out.

“What?”

“Pads. There weren’t any pads in her trash.”

“Hope’s?”

“Yeah.”

“Um. Should have been, with her bleeding.”

We keep track of vaginal bleeding by checking perineal pads, known as sanitary napkins to the public. The number used, the amount of discharge on the pad and its color, odor and consistency tell much about the patient’s condition—whether bleeding is fresh from an open wound or old just sloughing off the last of a bleed. We can tell how much the woman is bleeding or if infection is developing. Examining and counting disposed of pads are important assessments for nursing care.

“Maybe they’d already picked up her trash,” I said. “Do you remember?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t see them.” Like most of us, Tim seldom noticed the housekeeping staff, except when they didn’t do their job, which was more frequent now with the staff reductions. “But that’s probably it,” Tim said as we walked toward our cars.

“Tim, if housekeeping was in the room to collect the trash, they would have noticed—“

“—the blood,” Tim finished.

“So, Hope was alive when they were there. When did you find her?”

“About 11:15.”

“You called the code then?”

He nodded.

“And when did Lord pronounce her?”

“You can check, but I think it was 11:35. There wasn’t much hope from the start.”

“And Laura’s last note on the chart was at 10:15.”

“That narrows it down.”

“To an hour.”

“Plenty of time to bleed to death.”

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The Shepheards lived in South St. Louis, where I'd lived all my life. Known as Dutchtown, the area had been the site of the original German settlement built near the turn of the century. Narrow streets were lined with look-alike brick houses or two-family flats, all with wide front porches. Large trees—their leaves just beginning to bud—marched down well-kept lawns of still-brown zoysia grass edged by straight, even sidewalks. The area was changing, though. Urban blight was creeping south. The neighborhood was looking shabbier than I remembered it.

Unlike most Southsiders, the Shepheards weren't Catholic. Mr. Shepheard had brought their preacher, a Reverend Eden, with them when they'd come to see Hope the evening before. I had walked in to see Mr. Shepheard and the preacher on each side of Hope's bed, like two jailers holding her captive. I'd moved to the head of her bed quickly and asked how she was. She'd given me a little smile and said she was fine. Reverend Eden and her father had stared at me and, with no other reason to stay and many other patients needing attention, I'd turned to go. As I went through the curtain I'd heard Reverend Eden beg Hope to "repent of her sins" and "admit her guilt to God." I'd glanced back to see Mr. Shepheard nodded self-importantly. Hope had cried.

It was difficult to find the house numbers in the rain. Delor Street was the address on Hope's admission form where she'd listed her mother as her next of kin although she'd said she was married. I found a parking spot behind a large, black pickup truck. An empty gun rack was mounted behind the cab and an NRA bumper sticker pasted at an angle on the back window.

I had just rung the doorbell for the second time when the front door swung open.

"And this is the last time!" came a shout from inside as a man in a black leather jacket pushed out the door, bumping into me. I watched his retreating back as he bounded down the steps on worn-at-the-heels cowboy boots with playing cards stamped on the back. He was the ace of spades on the right and the queen of hearts on the left. A winning hand. He folded his long-legged frame into a fire-engine red Mazda Miata, its body glistening with raindrops.

Mr. Shepheard stood in the doorway. "What do you want?" he said, keeping the scowl in place.

Tires squealed as the Miata pulled away from the curb.

"Who is it, Earl?" a high, girlish voice asked.

"I just wanted to see that Mrs. Shepheard is okay," I said as rain continued to splatter my face and run down my neck. "And to answer any questions you might have," I added lamely.

"Just the nurse," he called over his shoulder.

"Tell her to come in."

He stepped back silently. The house was old—seventy years at least—with dark, well-kept woodwork and stucco-covered walls. My sneakers squished as water dripped off my raincoat and onto the already damp throw rug inside the front door. A tall dictionary stand held a large family Bible, its gold-edged pages incongruously regal against the stand's rough wood. My rain-soaked face looked back at me from a large oval mirror above the Bible. A double barreled rifle—its wood glistening—was propped in the corner.

"Come in, come in," Mrs. Shepheard said, rising awkwardly from a sofa in the neat, if sparsely-furnished, living room. A throw pillow retained the imprint of her head. One large chair, faded brown plaid, worn through in places and sagging in the seat, was planted firmly in front of a large television set. A fishing show was on, but the sound was turned down. A gun

rack on the wall held an assortment of rifles and shotguns, mostly old; one had a bayonet attached to its barrel.

“Earl, get a towel and a kitchen chair.” She waved her arms around as she talked, her head bobbing right and left. Her skinny arms looked like sticks emerging from a peach-colored silk blouse, and crisply pressed tan slacks hung loosely on her slender frame, the sharp edges of her pelvic bones protruded from her narrow hips. She motioned me into the room, fluttering pink-tipped bony fingers, and then sat down on the edge of the sofa, perching there like a bird ready to fly away.

“No, no, I can’t stay. I just wanted to be sure you’re all right. Here are your daughter’s things.” I had put Hope’s large, black bag in a brown paper grocery sack along with the sweatshirt she’d been wearing when she was admitted. Her blood-soaked jeans had been cut off in the ER and thrown out. I put the rain-dampened sack on the floor.

“I don’t know what happened. One minute I was talking to you and the next I was on the floor. I’m so embarrassed.” She lowered her head but peeked out from behind eyelash-whispering bangs. Highlighted, blond hair framed her young-looking face with carefully applied makeup.

“Mrs. Shepheard—”

“Faith.”

“Pardon me?”

“Faith. Please call me Faith.” She peered at me intently through small, stylish wire-framed glasses. One temple of her eyeglasses was taped together with a piece of old-fashioned, heavy, white adhesive tape, the kind my Aunt Octavia used to bandage my cuts and scrapes with, the kind that tore the hair off my arm when she pulled it off even though she was an expert and did it quickly. A corner of the tape had come loose and flapped each time Mrs. Shepheard’s head bobbed.

“I just wanted to say how sorry I am about your daughter.”

Mrs. Shepheard turned toward the mantle above the imitation fireplace. Two portraits of the dead girl looked down on us with innocent smiles. An end table held more pictures of Hope, younger, poised to waltz onto the stage in ballet shoes and a tutu and another of her smiling into the sun from a perch on a picnic table.

Mr. Shepheard came in with an old-fashioned chrome-framed kitchen chair, its seat covered with cracked red vinyl.

“Sit, sit.” Mrs. Shepheard directed me, her hands fluttering in the air.

The plastic seat crackled as I sat down.

Mr. Shepheard stood back, leaning against the archway between the living and dining rooms. He was a large man dressed in faded gray-blue work pants and a plaid flannel shirt with its sleeves rolled up above the elbows. The shirt pulled open at the buttons where his belly hung over his belt and a dingy white T-shirt peeked out. Dark stubble shadowed his face in the half light. He was watching the TV fisherman push a wiggling worm onto a hook.

A phone rang in another room and Mrs. Shepheard jumped up. A diamond-studded tennis bracelet slid off her bony wrist and clanked onto the floor.

“Sit down,” Mr. Shepheard ordered. “I’ll get it.”

Mrs. Shepheard was down on the floor. “I can’t reach,” she said, her voice rising in near panic. Her arm waved uselessly in the air in front of the sofa. “It slid too far back,” she wailed.

Mr. Shephard yelled, "Shut up. I can't hear," from the kitchen.

A sob rose in her throat as she sat back on her heels.

"Here I'll help you," I said, taking her arm to help her stand. I slid the sofa out from the wall and retrieved the bracelet. She fondled it as she slid it over her wrist, keeping her hand wrapped around it as she carefully resumed her seat.

"We don't know what happened," I began on awkwardly. "She just started hemorrhaging and we lost her."

"You didn't give her any blood, did you?" Mrs. Shephard asked. "Our religion doesn't allow it. Unless it's from a relative." She reached up as if to give the sign of the cross but she just fastened the tape around her glasses as her husband returned.

"*Blood* relative," Mr. Shephard added, squinting at me.

"It's God's will," Mrs. Shephard said, her voice matter of fact.

"Umph! God's will, my eye!" her husband said, his words spilling out fast. "It's the damn hospital." He leaned toward me. His breath smelled like coffee. "You got that nigger nurse there," he said, referring to Jessie. "I'll bet . . . I'll bet she screwed up and killed my baby." He shot a clenched fist in my direction. "And by God you'll pay," he spit out, his face red with fury.

The racial slur stung like I'd been slapped. "We did everything possible for your daughter, Mr. Shephard," I said through clenched teeth.

"She sinned," Mrs. Shephard stated, her voice flat.

Did they know about the abortion?

"How could God want your daughter dead? And why?" I asked.

"It was her punishment." She nodded her head loosening the tape on her glasses.

"But surely God didn't want her to die."

"Who was it?" Mrs. Shephard asked her husband, sliding the bracelet up and down on her arm.

"Your sister. I said you'd call as soon as she left." He nodded toward me, jaws still clenched.

"Pretty high price if you ask me," I said getting up. I knew I was on the verge of saying something inappropriate. "I'd better go," I told Mrs. Shephard. "I just wanted to see that you were okay and to tell you that we are all sorry you lost your daughter." I wasn't about to say "sorry she died" or anything that might be construed to mean the hospital was negligent, although I doubted we could defend Laura's actions if they decided to sue.

At the door I turned and asked about Hope's husband, wondering if they had been separated, since she'd given her maiden name to admitting. He'd have the say on whether an autopsy would be performed or not.

Mrs. Shephard answered. "They're trying to find him. He's an Army ranger, training somewhere." She glanced at her reflection in the mirror, needlessly giving her hair a pat. "They better find him soon. We've got a funeral to plan." Mrs. Shephard said it as if she were arranging a neighborhood association meeting and the mayor was going to be late.

The rain had stopped but clouds still threatened in the west. I stood for a moment on the top step wishing somehow I'd done better with the Shephards and hoping I hadn't made things worse.

A black car slowed in front of the house, parked behind mine, and a tall, Lincoln-like man with a full black beard matching his thick hair got out. He was dressed in a black suit complete with vest and black string tie. The only thing missing was the stovepipe hat. He walked toward the house with the lanky looseness that tall slender men have, covering the distance to the steps quickly. A well-used Bible was tucked under his arm. He paused when he saw me, and then stopped at the bottom of the steps, looking up at me.

“Hello,” I said in my most professional voice. He gave me a slow smile, holding onto my eyes. I wanted to escape but he stood in the middle of the sidewalk, blocking my way. I nodded and turned sideways to edge past him. He brushed my arm as I went by, leaning toward me to do it. I ran down the walk to my car, glancing back at Reverend Eden standing on the steps as I pulled away from the curb. He was smiling.

I floored it.