



*New York Times* Bestselling Author

TONYA HURLEY

PRECIOUS  
'BLOOD

A  
BLESSED  
NOVEL

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS *THE BLESSED*

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# PRECIOUS BLOOD

A BLESSED NOVEL

TONYA  
HURLEY

SIMON & SCHUSTER BFYR

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

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For my

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MOTHER,

SISTER,

*and*

DAUGHTER

# LUCY'S LAMENT

**I** am alone. Cornered. Next to nothing and the dogs are at my door.

The assembly of the wicked surrounds me. I am mocked and shunned. Abandoned. Lies and pain, my sole companions.

Do not leave me now. I'm shaking and desperate for the comfort of your arms.

Tongues of flames licking my conscience.

The tormentors laugh and grab. I am torn and shredded. Insides out. Without mercy.

Is there no one who can save me?

"Save yourself," you said.

Corpse flowers bloom beautifully beneath my feet. They fill the air with the scent of rotting flesh.

Tears of blood trickle from my eyes and pool upon the ground, a lake of purple and crimson my only mirror now. I am emptied of all but my ghost.

My sorrow is continually before me.

You think there are other ways, but there aren't.

I've made my choice. And it has made me. The path before me is clear.

I am not innocent. I am not ashamed.

I am ready for testing. I demand your worst.

"Do not be afraid," you said.

Here I am.

Stripped down bare. Dressed in blind faith. Filled with fight and fire.

*Vide et creder.*



3 “Agnes!” Martha wailed, clutching the pale arm of her only daughter. “Is he really worth it? Worth this?”

Agnes’s blank eyes were fixed on her mother as she went in and out of consciousness. Her body was unloaded from the back of the ambulance like a raw meat delivery to the local butcher. She was unable to muster the energy to raise her head or her voice in response. Blood soaked through to the leather pad beneath her, collecting and then streaming toward her dark teal ballet flats before finally trickling down the stainless steel leg of the gurney.

“Agnes, answer me!” Martha demanded, anger more than empathy coloring her tone as an EMT applied pressure to her daughter’s wounds.

Her shrill cry cut through the grating static of police radios and EMT dispatch scanners. The emergency doors flew open. The hard rubber gurney wheels clacked metronomically as they rolled over the aged linoleum floor of Perpetual Help Hospital in Brooklyn, keeping time with the blip coming from the heart monitor attached to the patient on board. The distraught woman was running but still could not catch up to her daughter. She could only watch while the plasma—or liquid stubbornness and idealism, as she saw it—drained from her only child.

“Sixteen-year-old female. B.P. one hundred over fifty-eight and dropping. Ten fifty-six A.”

The police code for a suicide attempt was all too familiar to the ER team.

“She’s hypovolemic,” the nurse observed, grasping the young patient’s cold and clammy forearm. “Bleeding out.”

The nurse reached for a pair of shears and carefully but quickly cut through the side seam of Agnes’s T-shirt and removed it, revealing a bloodstained tank beneath.

“Look what he did to you! Look at you!” Martha scolded as she stroked Agnes’s long, wavy auburn hair. She studied the girl’s glamorous, old-Hollywood looks in wonder, her perfect skin and the brass hair that fell in finger waves around her face, even more perplexed that she could do something so drastic over a guy. *That* guy.

“And where is he now? Not here! I told you over and over again. And, now, this, THIS, is what got you!”

“We’re going to need you to calm down, ma’am,” the EMT advised, holding Agnes’s mother back at arm’s length as the stretcher made a sharp turn toward the curtained triage area. “Now is not the time.”

“Is she going to be okay?” Martha pleaded. “If something happens to her, I don’t know what I

do.”

“Something has already happened to her,” the nurse said.

“I’m just so . . . disappointed,” Martha confided, drying her eyes. “I didn’t raise her to behave so thoughtlessly.”

The nurse just raised her eyebrows at the unexpected lack of compassion.

Agnes heard clearly enough but said nothing, unsurprised that her mother needed comforting validation that she was indeed a good parent, even under these circumstances.

“You’re not allowed back in the trauma rooms,” the nurse said to Martha, thinking it might be a good idea for her to cool off. “There’s nothing you can do right now, so why don’t you go home and get some fresh clothes for her?”

Martha, a rail-thin woman with short black hair, nodded, eyes glazed over, as she watched her daughter disappear down the harshly bright hallway. The nurse stayed behind and handed Martha Agnes’s drenched teal T-shirt. Some of it was still wet with bright red ooze, and part was already dried black and cracking as Martha folded it and crunched it in her arms.

There were no tears shed.

“She’s not going to die, is she?” Martha asked.

“Not today,” the nurse responded.

Agnes couldn’t speak. She was dazed, still more in shock than in pain. White cotton bandages were fastened around her wrists, tight enough to both staunch the bleeding and absorb it. Staring up at the rectangular fluorescent ceiling lights that passed one after another, Agnes felt as if she were speeding down a runway, about to take off—for where exactly was anybody’s guess.

Once she arrived in the trauma area, the scene grew even more frantic, as the ER doctors and nurses fussed over her, lifting her onto a bed, attaching the various monitors, inserting an IV, checking her vitals. She had the sensation of walking into a surprise birthday party—everything seemed to be going on for her, but without her.

Dr. Moss grabbed her right wrist, unwrapped the bandages, and turned it firmly into the light above his head to peer at the bloody crevice. He did the same with her left wrist and recited his observations to the nurse at his side for the record. Agnes, now slightly more responsive, managed to look away.

“Two-inch vertical wounds on each wrist,” he dictated. “Laceration of skin, vein, subcutaneous vessels, and ligament tissue. More than a cry for help going on here,” he said, noting the severity and location of the gashes and looking her directly in the eyes. “Opening your veins in the bathtub—old school.”

A transfusion was started and she began to come to, slowly. She watched wearily, transfixed, as some stranger’s blood dripped into her body, and she wondered if she’d be changed by it. That certainly wasn’t a heart transplant, but the blood inside her heart would not be entirely her own.

Agnes started to moan and then became somewhat combative.

“Not a cry for help,” she said, indicating she knew full well what she was doing. “Let me go.”

“You’re lucky your mom was around,” he advised.

Agnes mustered a slight eye-roll.

After a short while, she heard the snap of the doctor removing his latex glove.

“Stitch her up,” he ordered. “And send her up to Psych for an eval after she’s fully transfused and . . . stable.”

“To Dr. Frey?” the nurse asked.

“He’s still up there? At this hour?”



“It’s Halloween, isn’t it?” she grouched. “Just him and a skeleton crew.”

“That’s dedication,” Moss observed.

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“Maybe, but I think he likes it up there.”

“He’s got some of the worst of the worst in that ward. I’m not sure he has a choice.”

Agnes overheard and couldn’t get the image out of her head of a Mad Monster Party going on there. And if they were waiting for her to “stabilize,” they would be waiting a hell of a lot longer than even the poor uninsured souls in the waiting room seeking treatment.

“Another body outlasting the mind,” Dr. Moss said under his breath as he stepped behind the new curtain to assist with a CPR case, already well underway. Agnes was feeling more herself and selfishly welcomed the tumult, if only to distract her from her own problems for a minute. She offered her wrist to the physician’s assistant and tuned into the commotion next to her, like the unwelcome music blaring from a car stereo outside her apartment window on a hot summer night.



13 “Seventeen-year-old female,” the EMT shouted, as she continued compressions. “Suspected drowning.”

The bony, blue-lipped girl in front of the intern was lifeless and turning whiter shades of pale with each passing second. He tried to examine her nails, but they were already painted blue.

“In the river?” the intern asked.

“On the street,” the EMT offered, drawing raised eyebrows from everyone in the room. “Facedown in a pothole.”

“She’s in full arrest. Defib.”

After several rounds of computer-assisted shocks were applied to her chest and rib cage, the tattooed teen bounced, spasmed, and came to.

“Bag her!” a nurse ordered.

Before they could get the intubation tube down her throat, she started coughing and spewing dirty water on the surgical gowns of her caretakers until some spittle ran down her chin. She might even have vomited if she had eaten anything that day. Tinted by her smeared red lipstick, the gravelly discharge left her looking bloody and muddy. Some murky runoff dripped down her underfed abdomen and collected in her belly button, flooding the innie and causing her steel ball barbed piercing to look more like a diving board, one end bobbing slightly up and down.

An IV was started; labs were drawn and sent off for testing.

“What’s your name?” the nurse asked, checking her faculties.

“CeCe,” the girl said wearily. “Cecilia.”

“Do you know where you are?” the nurse pressed.

CeCe looked around her. She saw nurses and doctors scurrying around and heard relentless moans coming from some homeless people on gurneys parked in the hallway.

“Hell,” she answered.

Cecilia looked up at the crucifix posted above the doorway and rethought her response. “This is a hospital.” She looked at the mud on her secondhand faded Vivian Westwood bodice, double bird clasp ring—gunmetal gold pheasant talons gripping her middle and ring finger—leather leggings, and black ankle boots. “What am I doing here?”

“Technically, you drowned,” the nurse said. “You were found facedown in about an inch of water.”

“Oh, my God,” Cecilia cried, shortly before busting out into hysterics.

The nurse held her hand and tried to calm her before discovering that Cecilia wasn't crying, but instead, laughing uncontrollably. So much so that she couldn't catch her precious breath, further depleting her of oxygen.

"There's nothing funny going on here." Dr. Moss eyed the dirty residue and acrylic tube emanating from her. "You almost died."

Of course he was right, but she wasn't laughing at the staff, just at the pathetic train wreck she had become. Inhaling a puddle full of street gravy. How low can you get? Literally. Her friend Jim, who had killed himself by jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge and sucking down thick, murky East River "Chinatown Suey" water, sure would have gotten a kick out of this. The thought sobered her up enough to replan the evening, to visualize the guy she was making out with on the F train back to Brooklyn from the Bowery and whose name she couldn't remember, and the gig she wasn't paid for.

"Emergency contact?" the nurse asked.

Cecilia shook her head *no*. "Where's my guitar?" She felt around the gurney like an amputee for her lost limb.

She was naturally beautiful, gifted with deep green almond eyes and sharp features from early childhood. Her dark hair was shoulder-length, carefully unkempt in an edgy style. Tall and lean, with long bones and muscles. She would've had an easier time becoming a model, she was often told, and not just the kind recruited at shopping mall kiosks by pretty part-time employees with tans and bell-bottom shirts—but the real deal. And fashion was important to her. But she just couldn't stand the idea of becoming a billboard for someone else's creativity. It was stressful enough hawking her own. If she was going to be a messenger for anyone, it might as well be herself. Besides, music and her look were what got her out of bed in the early afternoon. It was what she lived for.

"The admission desk will have a record of whatever you were brought in with," Dr. Moss said. "I'll check on your guitar when things settle down around here."

"Do they ever?" she asked. The little smile she got out of him fueled her.

"Thanks," Cecilia said sincerely, as the doctor left her to contemplate her situation. "You're a goddamn angel."

"No, I'm a doctor. I can only fix damaged bodies."



7 "Doctor! Stat!" the charge nurse ordered, interrupting his attempt at a made-for-TV moralism. Without warning, madness burst through the ER entrance, signaling to Cecilia that it might be a while before she got the GPS on her instrument.

"Holy breast-fed Jesus," CeCe said, trying to decipher what the bright flashes of light against the wall above her cloth divider could be. It was like nothing they'd ever seen, or heard, before. It was almost as if a lightning storm had made its way into triage. The yelling that accompanied the flashes sounded like a pack of famished beasts picking over bones. It was the blaze of camera flashes and the cursing of paparazzi, all jockeying for position. All trying to get a shot. THE shot.

"Lucy, over here!" one yelled.

"Lucy, one shot of you and your IV bag!" another demanded.

"I can't see," Lucy mumbled as she put her vintage blond mink jacket over her head to shield her eyes and shroud her face, before promptly passing out.

"Back the hell up," a security guard at the visitor desk shouted repeatedly.

Neither Agnes nor Cecilia could make out much except what they could see beneath the hanging

curtain and hearing the term “OD” thrown around. Articles of clothing began hitting the floor, first one spiked stiletto and then another, black leggings, a strapless push-up bra, Swarovski headband, vintage Chanel purse, and finally a silk dress that seemed to gently float down like a little black parachute.

“Looks like another recessionista’s charge account came due,” Cecilia said under her breath.

“What is this, teen night?” Dr. Moss asked rhetorically as he prepped the oral charcoal.

“No, just Saturday night in Brooklyn,” the nurse responded. “Mondays are heart attacks . . .”

“Lucy!” another nurse shouted. “Lucy, can you hear me?” The nurse didn’t need to check the clipboard for her name. Anyone who read the blogs or local gossip pages knew who she was and why she was accosted by the screaming paps.

Agnes overheard the chatter between the doctor and the hospital public relations officer who were standing outside her curtain.

“Keep those vultures out of here,” he ordered, looking over at the salivating row of photographers perched restlessly in the waiting room. “No comment and no confirmations from anyone, got it?”

Dr. Moss walked in to examine Lucy. The oral-activated charcoal treatment had already been started. She was gagging on the tube, which he took as a good sign. She awoke abruptly, as if the starter rope was being pulled on a lawnmower. Fully aware and completely awake.

“Get me out of here,” Lucy screamed, wrenching the tube from her throat. She was fidgety, crazed, almost manic.

“Relax, honey,” a large-and-in-charge nurse said, pushing gently down on her shoulders. “You’re safe from all those reporters out there.”

“Safe?” Lucy scoffed, fussing blindly with her makeup, her voice raspy. “Are you kidding me? The shot is gonna put someone’s kid through college.”

The nurse was clearly taken aback not only by her comment but also by the fact that the girl lying on the gurney was in full media mode.

“What are you talking about?”

“An emergency room photo? Do you know what kind of placement those get?” Lucy gave the irascible health aide the once-over and realized that she probably didn’t. “Like you’d understand.” Lucy pulled the overhead examination lamp closer and checked out her reflection in the chrome tray positioned over her gurney.

“Well, then, maybe you can get that officer outside to understand a little better what someone your age was doing passed out in the bathroom of a club?”

Lucy refused to acknowledge the seriousness of her condition, medically or legally, and reached down for the pieces of her scattered outfit. A searing pain stopped her short, and she doubled over clenching her stomach in agony.

The nurse placed sticky-back electrodes on Lucy’s chest and wired her to the cardiac monitor at her bedside. The switch was flipped and instead of the expected *beep . . . beep* of Lucy’s heart rate, the sound was one long extended tone, indicating a flat line.

Then . . . nothing.

Lucy’s eyebrows perked up nervously as the nurse fiddled with the machinery.

“Everyone says I’m heartless,” Lucy jibed.

“Stop moving around,” the nurse ordered. “You’re messing with the monitor.”

“Ugh, I think I’m getting my period.” Lucy dropped her head down on the tiny pillow beneath her head. “Get me some Vicodin.”

Dr. Moss shook his head and left the curtained cubicle. He noticed the photographers and bloggers

uploading and posting from their mobiles, calling sources, vigorously updating editors on the second rate “it” girl’s breaking news. Suddenly, as if the fire alarm had gone off, the crowd dispersed, off to chase the next ambulance.

The nurse poked her head into Lucy’s bay to let her know things had settled down.

“Shit!” Lucy spat, her chance for a little cheap ink thwarted by someone else’s personal tragedy.



Hours passed, lights dimmed, staff, shifts, and dressings changed, and fifteen-minute-interval checks on Agnes’s restraints took place—also mandatory procedure—but the sounds of the sick, the injured, and the dying persisted long past visiting hours, into the night. It was sobering and depressing. Patients came and went, some discharged, some admitted, others like Agnes, Cecilia, and Lucy left in limbo, waiting for a bed or further observation, forced to endure the suffering of others as well as their own.

Agnes’s cell went off and she knew immediately by the *Dynasty* TV-theme ringtone that it was her mother. She hit the mute button and tossed the phone, limp-wristed, onto the monitor stand next to her gurney, ignoring the caller just as she had the digital cascade of text messages that now clogged her mailbox. She sighed and drifted off to sleep, like Lucy, whose lost photo op, and a first round of questioning by the NYPD, proved totally exhausting.

It was practically silent. Still.



13 An ER tech ripped open the curtain all at once, as if he were ripping off a Band-Aid, and wheeled in a computer on a mobile stand. “I need to ask you a few questions Cecilia . . . Trent.”

Cecilia didn’t budge.

“Address?”

“Pass.”

“Ah, okay.” He skimmed the screen for an easier question. “Religion?”

“Currently, I’m practicing the ancient art of”—she paused as he typed—“I don’t give a fuck-ism.”

He continued typing until the end and then pressed the delete button. “I can’t type that.”

“Sure you can.”

“No, I can’t.”

“And they say this is a free country,” Cecilia said. “Okay, I’m a practicing nihilist.”

“Why don’t I come back later.” He pushed his computer cart out of the room as he closed the curtain.

“Don’t be like that,” she called after him apologetically. “I’m just bored.”

“Get some rest.”

She should have been able to, with all that sedation flowing through her, but she couldn’t. She kept replaying the evening over and over in her head, the little she could remember of it. After a while, the ER went almost totally quiet except for the sound of hurried footsteps. They sounded heavy, not like the surgeons’ paper booties or the nurses’ rubber soles that had been scurrying through the ward until then. Cecilia, an experienced night owl by nature and profession, felt uneasy for the first time in a very long time.

Cecilia looked up and noticed the shadow of a male figure on her curtain, passing by her bay. “Coming back for more? They always do.”

She glanced down and saw the coolest pair of black biker boots she'd ever seen. Even in silhouette she could tell, ~~whoever he was, he was hot. Definitely not the douche bag ER tech.~~ She'd gotten real good at determining a guy's "attributes" in the dark.

He stood still, as if he were intensely plotting, his back to her curtain divider, giving her time to wonder about him. Visiting hours were over, and from the almost chiaroscuro outline of his hair, jeans, and jacket, she wondered if this was the guy she'd hooked up with earlier. She could barely remember what he looked like, but maybe he'd snuck past the desk to see her. See if she was okay. Even if it was out of guilt.

"Are you decent?" he asked. "Can I come in?"

"No and yes. Two things about me—I never get on a plane with a country star and I tend to never say 'no' to a guy."

She felt a tingle in her stomach as he slid aside the curtain. He looked anxious, almost like a chain smoker who had given up cigarettes earlier that day. Tense. He ducked quickly into the space. He was tall and lean, olive-skinned, with thick, styled hair, long, slightly muscled arms, and a barrel chest that was barely enclosed by his jacket and a T-shirt of The Kills.

A vision.

"I didn't think anyone was awake," he said in a baritone whisper.

"Here to give me last rites?"

"You have a death wish?"

"After last night, possibly."

"Do you always invite strangers into your room?"

"I prefer the company of people I don't know very well."

"Sounds lonely."

There was an awkward silence and Cecilia had to look away from him. The understanding and compassion in his voice was overwhelming. Her eyes welled unexpectedly with tears. "I'm not crying. I must still be high or something."

"I understand." He stepped forward. Closer to her. Shrinking the space between them. He smelled like incense. Cecilia began to question the wisdom of confiding in this guy. Hot guys cruising clubs was one thing, but hot guys creeping hospitals was quite another. She tensed up. "Do I know you?"

"Wouldn't you know if you knew me?"

The truth was she hung out with a lot of guys, and it was difficult to keep them straight. So running into one turned into a game of Twenty Questions with her. Something she was good at. "Were you at my gig tonight? Did you bring me here?"

"No . . ." he said slowly. "Cecilia."

"You know my name? You better be psychic or I'm screaming," she said, backing away suddenly.

He pointed to the foot of her bed. "Your name is on your clipboard."

"What do you want from me?" Cecilia asked, holding her punctured arms up as far as the vinyl tubes would stretch, like a medicated marionette. "I can take care of myself. Despite what it looks like."

"I can see that." He nodded and tapped her hand gently.

"Who are you?" she asked, immediately pulling away.

"Sebastian," he said, reaching for her again.

She relaxed into his touch.

He took notice of the hard-shell guitar case leaning upright against the wall beside her bed. It was stickered, stained, chipped, and battered. It had seen better days, but he had the sense it was

protecting something precious. "You're a musician?"

"That's what I told my parents when I ran away."

---

"Everyone's either running from something or toward something."

"Well, then," she said, feeling some camaraderie. "Which way are you headed?"

"Both, I guess."

"At least one thing we have in common."

"At least."

"Seriously, I just always felt like there was something deep inside of me I needed to say," Cecilia tried to explain. "Something . . ."

"Trying to get out?" he asked.

She looked up at him in surprise. He understood.

"Yeah."

"Another thing we have in common," he said.

He moved in even closer. Into the light. Close enough for her to feel the warmth of his body and his breath. To see him. To smell him.

"So, Sebastian . . ." Even his name appealed to her. It fit him. She knew his type. Devastatingly good-looking guy, nice moves, but probably cheating on his night nurse girlfriend right under her nose. "What are you doing here?"

"Visiting."

"A girlfriend?"

"No."

"Well, you don't look like a blood farmer, organ broker, or bone thief . . .," she said. "Are you one of those dudes who cruises the hospital for sick chicks?"

The loud clang of a tray dropping and some hallway chatter startled them. He'd looked edgy since he'd walked in, but she could sense he was ready to leave. Right then. "You looking for someone or someone looking for you?"

"I found what I was looking for," he said, reaching down into his jeans pocket.

"Whoa, what the hell are you doing?" Cecilia reached for the nurse call button. He beat her to it, snatching it away. She immediately extended her hand to grab it, then winced in pain, pulling back as the IV lines stretched to their limit and tugged at her veins. "Point blank, I *will* hurt you."

He pulled out a gorgeous bracelet made from what looked to be the oldest, most extraordinary rough ivory beads, and dangling from it, an antique gold sword with a slender cello bow fastened from the handle to the tip.

"Holy shit." Cecilia marveled at it and was both touched and spooked that a total stranger would give her such a stunning, obviously ridiculously expensive, personal, and unique gift. "Were you the one who brought me here?" she asked. "Were you the one who saved me?"

Sebastian placed the bracelet in her hand and clasped his around it, gently but firmly, and backed away toward the curtain. "Later."

Something in his voice sounded to her like he meant it literally. She believed him. This was the most honest conversation she'd had with a guy maybe ever. And he was a total stranger. But an old soul. Like her.

"Listen. I have a few gigs this week. Cecilia Trent. Google me. Maybe you'll find me and come down and check me out minus the IVs."

"Maybe you'll find me first," he said.

"Wait," Cecilia whispered hoarsely after him, holding up her wrist adorned with the bracelet.

“What is this?”

“Something to hold on to.”

---



7 Sunday morning.

The day of rest. Regret. And cotton mouth.

Lucy was lying on her side when she came to. She listened for a while before opening her eyes, holding on to that serene moment before what she had done the previous night revealed itself to her sober and fully conscious mind. The sliver of time before excuses of a sick grandmother or friend's turmoil emerged, all while performing an underwear scavenger hunt.

Her first reflex was to feel beneath the pillow for her Hermès flask, half gray and half salmon-hued, with black leather straps and a sterling silver lid, it resembled an oversize necklace rather than something camouflaging alcohol. The promoters at Sacrifice, an upscale DUMBO nightclub, gave it to her after they hosted an exclusive Hermès party for fashion week . . . along with free top-shelf refills for life, which always kept her coming back, because drink tickets were so last millennium. This morning, however, there was no comfort to be found, under her pillow or anywhere else; she didn't feel a flask.

The pillowcase had slid partially off and her mouth was in direct contact with the plastic bladder cushion. It took an instant before she realized this and panicked, logging a mental inventory of what could have potentially died on it and then lay there for hours, leaking body fluids over it and inside it. Hospital pillows, like airline pillows, were reusable and no one had actually ever seen them change color, she was sure. The plastic cover didn't fool her one bit—all of its infectious contents were now swirling around her mouth playing a game of tag with her immune system. Whatever it was, it was hers.

Lucy opened her ghostly pale blue eyes—blood vessels creeping through the whites of them like a spiderweb—and knew she was in a hospital. She tried to go back to sleep, back to numb, but the whir and buzz of medical equipment booting up along with the hallway chatter made it impossible as did the commingling vapors of ammonia, feces, drying blood, and puke that seemed to permeate the entire ER.

"I need to get out of here," Lucy said, peeling her face off of the plastic pillow.

The nurse simply ignored her and began taking Lucy's vitals before she retreated to paperwork. Lucy's eyes were fixed on her Parisian weekender, the one that she got from her dad when they visited a flea market in France. It was made from an antique rug—hand-woven blooms of rich reds, bright magentas, royal blues, and peridots.

He took her to Paris when she was ten, right before her mother left them, saying that he wanted



her first trip to Paris to be with a man who would always love her. Lucy's mother left when she was young. ~~She decided that she didn't want to be tied down with a husband and a kid. She up and moved to L.A.~~ Later, Lucy realized that those, too, were her initials. Los Angeles, the city of angels, among other things. Whether the abrupt move was some previously unfulfilled ambition or just a fight-or-flight response to a traditional lifestyle, she never really knew. For Lucy, it was both formative and informative, coloring her views of life and love with a decidedly unsentimental palette.

Whatever the reason, her dad was all that she had, and now she barely even talked to him. Unless there was a problem with her rent check. She held on to that bag and to what he said as it shifted from a sweet memory to a bitter lie. All that was left—baggage. When she did talk to him, she was always accused of being just like her mother, which to her father was unforgivable.

Lucy grabbed her clothing from the night before out of the bag. It was bad enough, she thought, that she'd wound up in the hospital, but without anything else to wear, a "walk of shame" was guaranteed. She wondered who might pay for such a shot and how much, and instantly reached for her cell phone, and as she did, something dropped to the floor.

She looked down and saw a bracelet made up of the most exquisite off-white beads with a peculiar double-eyed gold charm.

*Some Fifth Avenue version of the Kabbalah bracelet, Lucy thought, leaning over to pick it up. Probably some Holy Roller looking for a handout.*

Before it even made it up to her eyes, she decided to incorporate it into her look. Barney's New York was doing a whole SACRED line for next fall, and this little number would give her a jump on the season. *Definitely fake, but I can make it work.*

As she brought the piece closer to her face and studied it, she realized that it was anything but fake. The reflection from the fluorescent light above caused her to squint like a jeweler. She could usually tell cheap from a mile away, and this was the real thing. It was unbelievable. Looked as if they were antique. Heavy. Hand-carved. She fantasized for a moment that it had been passed down through the ages like estate jewelry or hidden like buried treasure only to be found centuries later.

Unearthed.

*I'll bet this cost a freakin' fortune. Not like those gum-machine knockoffs for sale on the flying carpets along the sidewalks of Atlantic Avenue, she thought.* She turned over onto her back and held it up in front of her face, fingering the golden charm. It was unlike anything she'd ever seen, not even at celebrity auctions, and it was certainly one of a kind. Strange and familiar to her all at the same time. Almost too much to look at. But she felt, in a way she could not describe even to herself, that it should belong to her. And now it did.

"Was my father here?" Lucy asked the nurse, hope in her voice as if she were a little girl on Christmas again, fondling the rare find. "Did he leave this for me?"

"No," the nurse said, tamping down Lucy's childlike eagerness.

"Yeah, he would never step foot in a Brooklyn hospital. He rarely leaves Manhattan."

The nurse just rolled her eyes.

"What time is checkout?" Lucy asked, still transfixed by the bauble.

The nurse shrugged dismissively and returned to her business.

"Bitch," Lucy mumbled as the short and stubby nurse waddled away.

Watching the nurse leave, she noticed a familiar face across the hall—not a friend or even much of an acquaintance, but a former classmate and a die-hard competitor for precious gossip-column space. The girl never had a bad thing printed about her, until recently when rumors of a pregnancy by an ex-boyfriend, now in college, began to circulate. Lucy knew all about it because she had started the

rumor. And right next to her was the girl's boyfriend.

~~There was no curtain on their bay. They were totally exposed.~~

"Hey, Sadie," Lucy called out, getting the girl's attention.

Sadie was clenched over in pain, moaning, holding her stomach. She was too weak to respond or defend herself.

"Wow. Can't believe how fantastic your postpregnancy bod looks," Lucy said. "Hard to believe you were pregnant like . . . an hour ago."

The girl tucked her head inside her hoodie, knowing what was about to happen, much like a mobster who'd been taken away in the backseat of a rival crime family's car. But the guy didn't even try to hide his face. In fact, quite the opposite.

Ratting Sadie out would surely impress Jesse and get her ER story better placement. In fact, might even warrant a vlog post. All she could think was *jackpot*. In her circle, teen pregnancy was one thing, good for a few days of embarrassing coverage before it got turned into some noble endeavor, but termination, that was quite another. That could mean exile. And for Lucy, one less rival. She couldn't count the number of times they had tried to humiliate her.

Eye for an eye.

Lucy took a picture with her cell and looked it over. It was a perfect snap, capturing all Sadie's tears and torment. But the distraught look on Sadie's face, her vulnerability, reached Lucy in a way she hadn't expected. Even more moving to Lucy was Sadie's boyfriend, Tim, hand in hand with her right by her side. There was no one there for Lucy. Not even the man who should have cared the most, her dad.

She locked eyes with the couple, felt them pleading silently with her for media mercy, felt the pain, which was completely unlike her, and pressed send.

"You're discharged," the nurse said curtly to Lucy on her way down the hall. "Your things are in that bag and the paperwork is at the front desk."

"That's it?" Lucy asked, somewhat disappointed.

"Ha! What did you expect?"

Lucy frowned only slightly, but still just enough to give the night nurse a smirk of satisfaction.

"What do you think?" Lucy inquired, brandishing her bejeweled wrist regally.

"I think it suits you," the nurse said. "Try not to pawn it too quickly."

Lucy bared her teeth and raised her perfectly manicured hands into claws like an angry cat and hissed away the nurse's bad energy.

She grabbed her weekender bag and headed out through the revolving doors. It was dawn, the time when people were getting up for work and, in her case, returning from going out. Her rush hour.

She walked to a food cart and ordered some scrambled egg whites and street meat on a bagel and a hot cup of coffee. Still thinking about what she'd just done to Sadie. How low she'd sunk. She watched the vendor crack the eggs and separate the yolk, the core, the most substantial part, and discard it.

"Scoop it," she ordered, insisting he shell out the bagel, as she watched an obviously downtrodden couple order their toddler a Dr Pepper.

Right on cue, she felt a spindly hand grab her arm. She didn't need to look to know whose it was. Jesse's black-sleeved jacket was a dead giveaway.

"Get your hands off me, prick," she barked, jerking free without even turning around to face him. Jesse was tall, slightly hunched over from all that time spent on the computer, and thin. He tried, to his fault, to be on trend, and looked as if he were uncomfortably dressed by a girlfriend—which he did.

not have.

~~“Awwww,” he whined. “Wake up on the wrong side of the gurney?”~~

Lucy was suddenly struck by the reflection of the sun bouncing off the double-eyed charm. She could have sworn it was staring back at her.

“I’m done, Jesse. This time I mean it.”

“Done with what? You’re living the dream.”

“Whose dream?”

“Yours, remember?”

“All I know is I could have rotted away in there and nobody would give a rat’s ass.”

“I’m here.”

“Like I said.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lucy. You’re all over the place.”

He wiggled his phone in his hand, screen side up.

“I don’t mean morbidly curious about me, Jesse,” she said. “I mean concerned.”

“You just need some sleep.”

“You have no idea what I need.”

Jesse studied the disheveled girl in front of him. He was good at reading her, usually, but something was different this morning. She was more melancholy than he’d ever seen.

“You couldn’t stop in the bathroom to fix your face?”

Lucy lifted her hand to her cheek, and as she did, he saw the bracelet.

“Nice,” he said, reaching for the dangling charm. “Where’d you get it?”

“Don’t touch it!”

“Damn. Well, at least somebody cares, right?”

“You’re evil.”

“Takes one to know one.”

“I’ve gotta go.”

“Don’t forget. We have a deal.”

Lucy couldn’t help but notice that the shadow she cast completely engulfed him. “I don’t owe you anything.”

“Loved the snap of Sad Sadie. Already ran it.”

“Then we’re more than even.”

“Did you catch something in that ER?” he ribbed, trying to keep up.

“Yeah, a conscience.” Lucy rummaged through her purse for a cigarette and taxi fare. “Stay away from me, it might be contagious.”

Jesse saw that she came up empty-handed. “Money for a cab?” He pulled a crisp bill from his jacket pocket and dangled a twenty from between his long, thin fingers.

“Don’t tempt me like you do everyone else.”

“Too late for that, isn’t it?”

“It’s never too late.” Lucy spun around on her four-inch spikes, dropped her oversize rehab shades over her eyes, putting a proverbial period on the conversation, and walked away, blowing him off as only she could. She didn’t have a penny and he knew it. Every cent she had, or had borrowed, she was wearing. If she were lucky, Lucy thought, the Metrocard she was carrying might have one fare left.

“Check your e-mail when you get home,” Jesse called after her, unconcerned.

She stopped for just a second, pulled down her dress, which she could feel riding up her thigh, and continued down the block. Checking to make sure that no one was watching, she then jaywalked over

to a bus stop just across the avenue, praying no one would see her in her outfit from last night. C  
worse, at a bus stop. All the walk of shame boxes were checked.

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Hair—matted.

Lipstick—smeared.

Eyes—black from running mascara.

Clothes—stained and wrinkled.

Head—hung in shame.

Dignity. Lost.



3 The psychiatric floor of Perpetual Help also happened to be the highest floor. “The Penthouse,” as the ward staffers liked to euphemize it. At that moment, all Agnes could think was that it was a pretty good place to jump from, which might have been what the administrators had in mind when they moved the unit up there. The simplest cost-cutting measure of all.

Agnes was wheeled into the waiting room flat on her back but forced herself upright and into a sitting position after she was “parked,” slowly rotating her torso toward the edge of her gurney until her legs fell over the side. She was dizzy and grabbed the edge of the gurney and squeezed down on it, which, it turned out, hurt like hell. She hadn’t realized how much the wrist and forearm muscles were used in steadying yourself like that. Agnes lifted her head to check out her surroundings.

It was grim, barred up, quiet, dimly lit, with walls painted in neutral colors and furniture discretely bolted down, not a sharp edge to be found. Dull and drab, with one exception: an ornate stained glass window. Agnes bathed in the splintered moonlight that blazed through it. It was the only color to be found anywhere on the floor and the kaleidoscopic jewel-toned glow was soothing, maybe even a little mesmerizing. On the not-so-bright side, the place smelled like meat loaf, instant mashed potatoes, soggy canned green beans, and disinfectant. Nauseating. *Lunchtime for the lunatics*, she thought.

The wait seemed endless, but it did give her time to reflect. She was by herself without anyone in her ear. Suddenly, the door opened and a young nurse escorted a little boy into the room and locked the door behind him without saying a word. He was very young, not older than ten. Far too young to be in there, surely, and definitely didn’t fit the funny-farm profile she was expecting from the campfire stories her ER nurse was telling downstairs.

Agnes smiled at him, but he wasn’t interested in gestures or even eye contact for that matter. They were alone.

“What’s your name?” Agnes asked.

The boy sat quietly for an uncomfortably long time. In his own little world and not interested in all in small talk with some stranger.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to—”

“Jude!” he shouted, as if the word had been building pressure inside of him and had now been launched like a rocket. “My. Name. Is. Jude.”

With that labored introduction out of the way, Jude darted toward an old and weathered statue of Jesus, with its left hand pointed gently at its exposed heart. Time and indifference had taken its toll on it. Flecks of white where paint and plaster had chipped or broken off dotted the figure. Agnes guessed that it must have been moved up to the psych ward and out of the way, just like everything else and everyone else up there. It reminded her of the statues that adorned her school lobby, Immaculate Heart Academy, but in worse condition, lending it, ironically, a kind of unforced sympathy, which was more than likely originally intended.

Out of nowhere. Without warning. The boy jumped up on the statue's pedestal and grabbed it with both arms, grunting and struggling with it as if it were fighting him back.

*Maybe this kid isn't too young to be a mental patient after all,* she thought.

"Say 'Uncle,' Jesus!" he said, trying to catch his breath.

Agnes tried not to look.

The boy was getting increasingly agitated and maniacal . . . hanging from the neck of an almost life-size statue, driving his knuckles repeatedly into the Savior's plaster of Paris head.

"Say it!" the boy demanded as if the statue were resisting him.

Agnes was astonished at what kind of kid would bully a statue, let alone one of . . . Jesus. She stared intently at the painted face as several drops of blood suddenly appeared, trickling down the forehead and off the brow.

Her eyes incredulously followed the streams down as they fell to the floor, bright red spots peppering the white, waxed marble. Proving that one—a certain one perhaps—can indeed get blood from a stone.

Startled for a second, she thought she might be seeing things, something miraculous even, until she noticed Jude's knuckles, which were rubbed raw and bleeding. Undaunted, the boy examined his hand, shook it off, and returned quickly to his noogies, stopping only to feel around behind the statue's head. As he pulled his hand away, and hopped off the pedestal and back toward her, Agnes noticed he was clutching something.

"He left this for you," Jude said, handing Agnes the most spectacular white bracelet that she'd ever laid eyes on. "He wanted me to make sure you got it."

Agnes was stunned. Without words. Her heart felt as if it were going to beat right out of her chest and she was sure, if someone looked close enough, they could see it through her smock. The chunky beads—maybe pearls, she gathered—were strung beside an unpolished gold charm embossed with a flaming heart set aflame. She felt her incisions tingle and twitch as she gently fingered it.

"Tell him that I gave it to you," the boy said proudly, without the slightest hesitation or stammer. "Okay?"

"Agnes Fremont," the nurse called out.

Jude heard the nurse and dutifully returned to his seat and his silence.

"*Who? Tell who?*" Agnes queried the boy with sudden urgency, eyeing the statue suspiciously.

The boy did not answer her.

Agnes, meanwhile, was in a kind of shock. Whatever his problems, the trinket was extraordinary. Agnes hid the beads under her hospital gown and tucked the gold charm under her bandage to keep it safe and out of view. The flaming heart emblem that hung from it pressed uncomfortably into her wound. It hurt, but the pain it caused felt somewhat reassuring to her. She really was still alive.

"Agnes Fremont," the nurse called out again, this time with more impatience. "Are you coming?"

Agnes jumped off of her gurney and waited anxiously by the door like a pet that hadn't been out a day. She looked back at the boy who was now sitting like an angel in his seat, and followed the nurse.

down the hall.

~~As she was taken through the patient corridor, she snuck peeks in the rooms. Having never been in a psych ward before, curiosity got the best of her, and she couldn't help but rubberneck. Besides, all the girls in the tiny dormitory-style rooms were doing the same to her.~~

Face after face, all hopeless-looking and lost. Some just staring into nothingness and others just . . . waiting. She felt she had nothing in common with them, except she did.

The nurse gestured for her to enter an office until the doctor could see her. It wasn't like the movie psychiatrist's office she'd been expecting, with the heavy drapes, thick carpet, comfy couch, and boxes of tissues. A smoldering pipe burning cherry tobacco and wall-to-wall bookcases featuring Freud and Janov were nowhere to be found either. The room was tiny, sterile, painted beige, and harshly lit—perfect match to the hallway, except for the noticeable lack of religious iconography that peppered the rest of the hospital. No statues, paintings, no Eyes-Follow-You-Jesus 3-D portraits. Against the wall stood a glass-doored, stainless-steel apothecary cabinet filled with old charts and replicas of brains, whole and cross-sectioned. She took a seat in the chair, a padded pea green job with metal armrests, across from an institutional desk and standard issue high-back office chair. There was a nameplate on the desk but all she could read from this angle was CHIEF OF PSYCHIATRY. She was seeing the boss.

Agnes soon found herself mindlessly picking at the puscolored foam lurking just beneath the old cracked leather seat covering, patience not being one of her virtues. If she wasn't picking at that, she would have been her wounds, but they were tightly bandaged enough that she couldn't do much more damage. The austerity of the surroundings made her more and more nervous and she found herself thinking about the boy in the hall. He was so young to be so whacked-out. Until now, she imagined her youth, her obviously defiant nature might help to put her recent behavior into perspective, to excuse it as a momentary lapse of judgment, and that she'd be let go with some kind of warning. Clearly, *she* wasn't mentally ill.

The door sprang open and a well-groomed middle-aged man in an old-fashioned white lab coat charged in. Agnes flicked away the last bits of foam from under her fingernails and sat at attention with hands clasped daintily over her abdomen. She noticed that her charm was peeking out from her bandage and quickly pulled her hair around and over her wrist to cover it.

"Hello . . ."

He paused. Scanning her chart to find her name.

"Agnes . . . I'm Dr. Frey. Chief of psychiatry."

"So I see," she said, unimpressed, tossing her gaze toward his desk plate. "Working so late on Halloween night?" Agnes asked.

"One of my busiest nights of the year," Frey replied, smiling.

One thing she hated about herself was her impulsivity. She tended to make quick judgments, and already she didn't like him. There was something about the rote politeness and elitist formality in his manner that put her off, but then she wasn't exactly planning to open up either. Or maybe it was simply that he hadn't bothered to find out her name before the appointment. Whatever. The doctor wasn't much for small talk, it appeared. Neither was she. Agnes decided to cooperate for as long as it was in her interest. She wanted out.

"I'm sure you've heard this before but—" Agnes sputtered.

"But you're not crazy," he interrupted, matter-of-factly finishing her sentence without even looking up at her.

"I don't belong here," she almost pleaded, leaning in toward him with her hands outstretched.

inadvertently revealing the bloodstains from her self-inflicted wounds.

~~“Are those tattoos, Miss Fremont?” He looked over the top of his glasses. “No? Then you probably do belong here right now.”~~

Agnes pulled her arms back and dropped her chin, unable to look him in the eye, but she could still hear him and he kept on talking.

“It says in your file that you are a good student, very social, never been in trouble to mention, no history of depression.” He flipped back and forth between the stapled pages in a manila folder. “So what changed?”

Agnes did not respond, shifting uncomfortably in her chair from both the pain of the question and the charm.

“Do you want to tell me about him?”

“Why does it always have to be about a guy?” Agnes blurted, trying to dam the tears that surfaced otherwise.

“Because it usually is,” said Frey.

Agnes paused. She recalled in an instant almost every relationship she’d ever had, as far back as her first crush. There was definitely a pattern. They didn’t last. Even her friends were starting to joke that she couldn’t hold on to a guy. As far as she was concerned, her heart was just too big for those boys to handle. If she could just find one who could, everything would be okay.

“My mom thinks I fall in love too easily.”

“Do you?”

“I just follow my heart. I always have.”

“That is a virtuous quality. But it almost led you to a dead end, Agnes.”

Agnes shrugged indifferently. “When relationships end, it’s like a death. There are always scars.”

“It is easy to be disappointed when you feel so deeply, isn’t it?”

Agnes wasn’t usually so cynical, but the doctor had hit a nerve.

“Yes.”

“What’s his name?”

“Sayer.”

“Tell me about Sayer.”

Agnes was a little weirded-out talking openly with a nurse standing behind her—placed there mostly for the doctor’s protection, legally and otherwise.

A witness.

“Well, according to my mom . . . ,” she began.

He waved her off and leaned forward, his chair creaking. “What about according to you?” He paused. “According to Agnes?”

“She wants to run my life because she hates hers,” Agnes exploded.

“I get that you and your mother disagree about things, but I asked you about the guy.” He was intent. Intense. What started off as an evaluation was snowballing into an interrogation.

It wasn’t until that moment that Agnes realized that she hadn’t given her temp boyfriend a thought since she’d been admitted, her interest in him draining out of her veins along with her blood the night before. “Oh, Sayer wasn’t really that important. Just the most recent.”

“Not important?” Frey squinted her wraps into focus. “I can’t help you if you aren’t honest with me.”

“I liked him. Okay, I liked him a lot. But my mom thought he was poison, just like every other guy I date. It put so much pressure on the . . . relationship. He couldn’t stand it anymore. Neither could



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