

LAST CALL

2005

SUMMER IN MOBILE COULD strip Babbie bare. The early morning air, salty and talking rain, clung to the back of her neck. And though she appreciated how her lab coat flattered her spray-on tan, an enhancement to skin that was otherwise as white as a blank greeting card no one cared to send, the coat made zero sense in June. This was her last cigarette break, forty-five minutes before her shift ended at Gulf Coast General. She'd been working there nights going on three months and in under an hour would be cashiering and scanning the bar codes of Cokes and potato chips at her other job at the truck stop. She preferred the grind of it all—two jobs, two kids, single parenting—to scrounging. Although she could do with less humidity and more time, she could not do with less money.

Down the road, the morning blushed hopeful until two ambulances broke through, spoiling the sight. The *scat scat scat* of sprinklers faded into the squall of sirens and left her no choice but to stub out her cigarette. She dropped the unsmoked half into the pocket of her lab coat and passed beneath the ER's sign, brightly lit in a motel neon even the dead in Mobile

could see. And god knows there were plenty of dead in the miles surrounding this hospital on a hill, people dead for centuries under live oaks that had outlived them all and seemed to be fanning the dearly and not so dearly departed when a cool breeze found the city.

Truth was, Babbie wasn't all that fond of sick people, especially the kind that rode up in ambulances. Petite yet curvy, she tried to stay out of the way, unlike the ER's head nurse Penelope, who was tall and Black with a wavy hairdo, a woman who waged war when she worked. From a certain angle, it wasn't hard to imagine her stethoscope as a slingshot, and it was Penelope who now led the ER staff swarming the new arrivals. "They staged a drunken duel," she shouted, "with what they thought were empty pistols."

Paramedics slid stretchers from the two vehicles like fresh bread loaves. Opposite the ER, Babbie hunched into a corner and watched. She was a clerk in the hospital's lab. Basically a glorified receptionist. Rowan, the best of her ex-husbands and a hospital bigwig, had paid for her to take the weeklong class that certified her to collect tubes, enter codes into a computer, and then move the tubes to a refrigerator to await testing. She answered the lab's phone, looked up orders, and transferred calls. The job was easy and paid \$9.25 an hour, better than any she'd worked before, but—and it was a big, damn *but*—when the ER hit capacity, they drafted her to watch monitors and assist as needed. In a larger city she might have escaped this duty, but like all the hospitals near downtown Mobile, Gulf Coast General catered to all the city's residents and stretched a pound of resources to meet three pounds of need. She was that dollop of ketchup added to the ER's bread crumbs, and this was sure to be one of those nights. The ER was already treating a burn case, a heart attack, and a couple in a car accident.

She dreaded stripping another stained sheet or emptying more bedpans. Not that she was a wuss. She'd handled plenty of her children's bodily fluids when they were young, but these people weren't her children. If she'd learned anything, it was that one person's calling was another person's penance.

The first stretcher rolled past. "He's the lucky one," Penelope told an ER

nurse. “Got it in the shoulder. The other one got it in the family pride.” The nurse’s reaction matched the cartoonish penguins somersaulting on her pink scrub top.

Babbie flinched when she saw the second stretcher, not because it was soaked taillight red, but because the man rolling past was Skipper. Months ago, when they’d met, he’d claimed to captain a shrimp boat, though he was probably a header who readied trawlers and sorted shrimp. The sight of him took her back to the half dozen years working at the Dogwood Motel off Highway 90.

In January, she’d been naked and on her back in the little room containing scratched veneer furniture and the framed but lumpy poster of long-ago ladies holding parasols. Her flip-flops wedged the door so she could listen for the bell that rang when a customer needed assistance. In her official capacity, she had been the motel’s overnight clerk at \$7 an hour. In her unofficial capacity, she had been someone else entirely. During those times, she had locked the main entrance and posted a No Vacancy sign.

Skipper had been a relapse. For months before him, there had been no other men. She had wanted to get by without the fast money, without the feeling of being skinned by a stranger’s calloused hands, but when her daughter’s bronchitis turned into pneumonia, she caved to pay the doctor.

Since working at the hospital, she’d tried to forget the names of the men, but she could not forget Skipper’s. Without warning, he’d locked his fingers around her neck and nearly choked her to death as he climaxed. She’d heard about such nonsense, men aroused by briefly cutting off the oxygen of their partners, but he hadn’t warned her, likely because she would have said no. She had knocked her heels against his calves and beat his back with her fists. She’d yanked on his stringy hair, a fevered yellow, but her resistance only heightened his response. And then the door had flown open, and a flip-flop had sailed across the room.

No one at the hospital or the truck stop knew about the men. No one knew at all, except her former boss at the motel, and him only because he’d been drinking at the bar next door—a detail that had caught Babbie off guard and which she’d later learned from a housekeeper. He’d stumbled

into his motel screaming about the lit No Vacancy sign. Skipper was slow to move, didn't understand what was happening. She was standing but still naked when her boss barged in on them. She'd yanked a blanket from the bed to cover herself before fleeing into the bathroom, locking the door and refusing to leave for hours. The manager shouted for Skipper to get the hell out, and Skipper told him to screw off.

"Your girlfriend's out of a job because of you," the manager said.

Skipper chuckled. "Aw, hell, she ain't my girlfriend. She's a whore. I got her number from a friend. Quite a setup she's got here."

"Leave or I'm calling the cops," the manager said. Which Babbie knew he would never do because he didn't want anyone from the city snooping around and finding code violations.

"Sayonara," she heard Skipper say.

In the minutes before the manager banged on the bathroom door, she had time to think about her life and regret most of it. Until that night, her boss had often told her she had nice legs and a good shape.

"Your little slutfest is over," he yelled. "I could kill you, but for what? You're not worth it."

She slumped into a corner and cried.

Hours later, Liling, one of the housekeepers who always arrived early, knocked gently on the door and offered her a warm washcloth for her face. Babbie let her in, and Liling closed the toilet lid and told her to sit. She pushed Babbie's hair back and wiped her face with the warm cloth. Moist and soothing, it seemed to wash away the worst of her deeds. No one, she felt, had ever mothered her this way.

"No shame," Liling had said, "to survive. You will do better now."

Having guessed Liling's story from her comments about growing up in Vietnam, Babbie had understood they shared secrets and the knowledge that anything could be sold.

But standing here in this hospital hallway, watching ER staff rush in and out, Babbie felt her heart race, and beads of sweat collected on her forehead. A part of her felt chained to the motel's cigarette-burned carpet

and the front desk's mildewed Thomas Kinkade calendar. A half-life was better than having to accept the whole of what she'd done.

In two months she would turn forty, a welcome new decade. Maybe she would have a new life. She was not her past. It was just that sometimes her feelings swam too close to shore, a flounder that could not survive if it swam too shallow or exposed too much to the wrong people. Sometimes the darkness was safer than the light. She could not face the man who reminded her of what she was trying to leave behind. She felt the floodlights scanning the water and the poles ready to gig her dead center. She fled the ER and Skipper, but not without Penelope noticing. "Hey, Babbie," she shouted, "we need you in the ER."



Babbie hid in the big stall because no decent person would disturb a woman there. She closed the toilet lid and sat among the gleaming pinkish tiles. Deciding it was best to hide her hot-pink rubber shoes—imposters of the good brand most of the RNs wore—she stepped onto the toilet, crouched, and pressed one hand against the slick metal divider that separated her from the next john.

She blamed Rowan for her predicament, for getting her this job in the first place. Surely he had other connections with jobs better suited to her lack of skills. Anyone could look at her turquoise fingernails and dark roots and see she blended better with the aisles of the Party City superstore than the hospital's oatmeal-colored walls, but Rowan had convinced her that she would get used to the job and its requirements. "It'll provide stability, better income, insurance," he'd said. "Plus it'll look good on your résumé."

She didn't ask "What résumé?" but the question was there, begging to be acknowledged. In the end, he was right about the pay and the insurance, which meant more to her than most people could imagine.

Another woman entered the room, likely a nurse or a CNA given the early hour. The intruder's soles squeaked against the glaring ceramic floor.

“Babbie, are you in here?”

She did not answer the voice she recognized as Penelope’s and instead tightened her body into a ball. The first time she’d met Penelope she’d been filing a broken nail at her desk. “Maybe there isn’t enough work,” the head nurse had said, “for a full-time overnight clerk.”

Babbie had slid the nail file into her pocket and locked her lips into smile position. “I broke one,” she replied. “You know how that is.”

Penelope had flipped her employee badge back and forth between the fingers of one hand like someone who juggled knives in their spare time. “That’s why I keep my nails short,” she’d replied, “but at least you’re not on the phone all hours like the last one. Texting and talking to Lord knows who.”

Penelope let out an exasperated sigh inside the restroom before testing the door of the big stall. Babbie appreciated its tight seal, unlike the half-inch gaps between the stall doors at her other job. She sank her face into her knees and held her breath. She regretted not hiding in the morgue, but earlier that week, she’d dropped off a specimen and seen lumpy remains draped on a stretcher. Her flesh had gone cold and moist. Her knees had locked. She’d only managed to settle down by imagining the sheet as a tablecloth and the lumps as pots and pans.

Penelope left, but outside the restroom, her voice boomed. Babbie strained to hear, unable to make out the words. Unlike the walls at the motel, the hospital’s defied eavesdropping.

She relaxed and allowed her feet to touch the floor. Just for a moment. She planned to ride out the rest of her shift in the stall, out of Penelope’s reach. She knew the woman would not give up. Babbie had gathered that much from working in the lab. When the ER nurses dropped off specimens, sometimes they gossiped about Penelope’s husband, an insurance adjuster too fond of settling up the policies of newly widowed women. “Why does such a smart lady stay with a man like that?” they would ask.

More than once Babbie had responded, “Maybe it’s what she deserves,” but after dealing with three husbands of her own, she didn’t really believe it. People said a woman had choices, but they never said how few those

choices could be. Everyone had a gift, though, and she had accepted hers. She knew the right color of blond to get noticed, the right way to apply lipstick for full and natural-looking lips, how to hold her cheeks and her smile just so to show off the teeth she bleached with a home kit from Dollar General. Yet every morning the mirror forced the truth of her waning beauty: darker gullies beneath her eyes, a rebel gray hair, fat around her thighs. Knowing this, she'd placed a premium on her services and had never accepted less than \$200. Never given any man more than an hour. After the incident with Skipper, she'd vowed to look in the mirror a lot less, thinking when she did look, there would be someone new to see. So far, she'd seen only the woman from the motel staring back at her, daring her to change.



Toilets flushed, zippers zipped, and wrappers were torn from tampons and pads. Four women came and went in silence. Babbie did not make herself known.

Then two more women entered the restroom, went about their business, and convened at the sinks. They traded polite greetings before one asked, "How's your son?"

"He got fired by a computer company over in Atlanta."

Babbie recognized the first voice as the overnight phlebotomist who was generally pleasant and upbeat, and the second as the clerk in post-op, who was always flapping her gums when Babbie collected the unit's tubes.

"You know," the clerk said, "I warned him they wouldn't go in for his big mouth."

"Seems like good advice."

"Yeah," the clerk replied. "But then he tried to act like he knew everything. Didn't ask questions, so they let him go."

"That's a shame," the phlebotomist responded, "but maybe he's learned his lesson."

From the conversation it was obvious the phlebotomist had no sons, and

the unit clerk had none like Bo, Babbie's nineteen-year-old who was serving time for burglary. She hoped her daughter would take a better path, but already the nearly thirteen-year-old gravitated toward shorts that allowed her backside to bubble beneath the hems. Bo had been sixteen and old enough to drive in the great state of Alabama when he'd gotten his first DUI, but he wasn't old enough to be punished like an adult, and for that reason, Babbie had believed he could still be saved. The Blue Haven rehab facility quoted her two grand to dry him out. When she asked for a discount, a secretary with square designer glasses told Babbie she was already on a sliding scale. As if she didn't know.

"There's no call to get nasty," she'd told the secretary.

The woman patted her hand. "It means the cost is based on your income."

"What income?"

Babbie had maxed out her credit card paying for car repairs, doctors' visits, and interest on past-due bills. Those were in addition to feeding and clothing and transporting her kids. She knew better than to borrow from the payday loan gougers and had never received child support from either of her kids' dads. Her toothless parents, who lived outside of Mobile in a trailer, survived on Medicaid and a Baptist food bank. Blue Haven and the fancied secretary might as well have asked for a million bucks.

Before the phlebotomist and unit clerk parted ways, Babbie wanted to appear and tell them both their lives were easy, but they were gone quickly, and minutes later, another pair of shoes tapped hard on the tiled bathroom floor.

"Get down," a man's voice said. "You think it's attractive, a middle-aged woman perched on a toilet?"

"This is a women's restroom," Babbie replied, but unlatched the door anyway and allowed it to swing open.

Although Rowan had aged in the two decades since their divorce, he was still good-looking, the only redhead she'd ever been attracted to. When she'd contacted him in March, she'd imagined him saying how good she looked, too. And he had said she looked good, but just like that. "You look good." Plain. Only the slightest curl at the ends of his lips.

Rowan held the stall door open with one hand as though he expected her to leave.

"You oughta be at home," she told him. "The sun's barely up."

"I wanted to catch up on email," he replied, "but as soon as I arrived, Penelope flagged me down looking for you. Now, stop this nonsense and get out of here."

Babbie had seen him checking email on his BlackBerry dozens of times and couldn't imagine what he gained by checking it at the hospital. If anything, he lost sleep. He certainly hadn't wanted to meet early when she'd contacted him to ask for money or a second job.

She slid her phone from the pocket of her lab coat and checked the time. "I'm not going anywhere except right here for the next twenty minutes."

"As you wish."

Rowan stepped inside the stall, slammed the door shut, and leaned against the tiled wall opposite her. The space shrank and filled with his body and the scent of his outdoorsy aftershave, which was funny because Rowan's idea of the outdoors was a shaded patio. He brushed against the latch of the baby-changing station fastened to the wall by a strap and the plastic shelf opened against his back. Babbie tried not to laugh as he awkwardly rested an elbow on the hard plastic surface and then gave up and re-latched it to the wall. She turned sideways on the toilet to face him. At this angle the seat cupped her in the wrong places. She lifted one leg and wrapped her arms around her knee. Rowan towered over her in the small space and made her want to leave, but she would not leave if she could help it.

"I really don't get why you're hiding," he said. He folded one hand over the other and cracked his knuckles, a nervous habit Babbie had witnessed him doing hundreds of times. "You know, I was going to recommend the hospital send you to phlebotomy school. It would be more money," he added, "but this little stunt won't look good."

Handling people's gunk every night was bad enough and she could only do that by pretending it was Bloody Mary or strawberry margarita mix. "I'm not drawing blood," she said.

He didn't smile when he replied, "I've known you to draw plenty."

She didn't know what to say, didn't like thinking about losing their baby and divorcing him to marry Nick, or Nick running off with a friend, or the third husband, who'd attended dozens of seminars that promised a free meal and the secret to wealth at some hotel off the interstate. By the time the hurricane hit, he was gone, too. She'd called Rowan to stay with her and the kids, one in kindergarten and the other in elementary school. The storm would veer east and peter out, but Rowan's arms around her had felt good. A second chance wasn't possible—she'd known that—yet she'd believed he would stick around. He called once afterward to check on them and never called again. Believing he deserved better, she didn't call him, either.

"I'm sorry," she told him now. It wasn't the first time she'd apologized, but the big apologies were never finished.

"What's done is done," he said. "Just don't make me look bad. I took a chance hiring you. You haven't told anyone, have you?"

"That you hired me?"

"About our marriage."

Her breath stopped when she heard these words, and she realized, at best, she was his pet project, and at worst, his biggest mistake. "Who would believe me?"

He nodded. "You got me there." He began laughing and was still laughing when someone else entered the room.

"Rowan?" the female voice said. "I would know that cackle anywhere."

Startled, he knocked loose the diaper-changing shelf again. He re-latched it and took a deep breath before smoothing his tie and leaving the stall. He shoved his hand in front of Babbie's face and signaled for her to stay put.

"Who's in there?" the woman asked.

Rowan swung the door open and told Babbie to meet his wife, Claire. The woman wore a khaki skirt, a white polo shirt, and navy flats. Babbie could see Claire was the type of woman who might wear yoga pants to the grocery store or join a running club for fun.

"Babbie was having some issues with working in the ER," Rowan said.

He sounded guilty and Babbie could see Claire didn't believe him. It was too far-fetched, an employee's boss slipping into a bathroom to talk someone down from a toilet. "It's my fault," she insisted. "And it's true about the ER. It's a bogeyman some nights."

Rowan cracked his knuckles. "I hope I've convinced you to return to work, per hospital policy."

Babbie understood he was trying to sound official. "Yeah, you have."

He smiled, probably because he'd tricked her. She would be forced to leave the bathroom soon, if for no other reason than to appear trustworthy to his wife.

Rowan moved next to Claire and the bathroom sinks. When he kissed her on the cheek, Babbie noticed how the mirror captured his wife's head casually tilting and that she did not close her eyes. The mirror also reflected her youth in the tight skin of her jawline and her bouncy hair. She was younger. Early thirties at most.

"I need to make a call. See you for breakfast in a few," he told his wife. Then, just like that, he stepped toward the door and was gone.

Babbie couldn't believe he'd escaped without her.

"I knew Rowan's first wife was attractive, but—" Claire stopped and waved her hand dismissively. "Oh, forget it. Let's just say this is not how I expected to meet you."

The woman let out a laugh that wasn't exactly haughty but wasn't innocent, either.

Babbie remembered her mom saying she was too pretty for her own good. Her mom had been right. Pretty girls with money, pretty girls like Claire, did just fine. Babbie had learned the hard way that happiness was a rich girl's dream. "So, you're here for breakfast?" she asked, doing her best to seem pleasant. She wet a paper towel and wiped the deserting liner at the corners of her eyes to buy herself more time, although staying in the room was quickly becoming no better than leaving.

Claire pulled lip gloss from her purse. "I like to meet Rowan for breakfast sometimes, you know, to show an interest in his work." She rubbed an

index finger into the lackluster pink. “I just stopped in here to check my hair and makeup. The humidity is ungodly this morning. Anyway, you can imagine my surprise.”

“I bet,” Babbie replied, but she couldn’t imagine feigning interest in someone’s work, much less losing sleep over it.

Claire smoothed the color onto what Babbie considered average lips and then dropped the lip gloss into her purse. “Hey, we should get together sometime—you, me, Rowan, and”—she paused—“your beau? I mean, you have one, right?”

Babbie saw what Claire wanted, reassurance she wouldn’t cross into her lane, but had it ever occurred to Claire that Rowan might be the one doing the crossing? After she called him in March, he’d shown up drunk at her apartment a few nights later and bemoaned his lack of children with Claire and the child he had lost with Babbie. He bellyached all night because he was worried about carrying on his name. She’d told him he was lucky if that was the worst of his problems. She’d told him he could have Bo.

Part of Babbie wanted to put Claire at ease by telling her about Donnie, a fellow cashier at her other job, but Donnie was wishy-washy and no sure thing. “I’m between boyfriends,” she said. “Anyway, I’m better off alone.” The words hollowed out a place in her chest and left her feeling exposed. Once again, too close to shore.

“I see,” Claire said. Her previously genuine smile disappeared. “Well, you never know.”

“True,” Babbie said. “I mean, who’d have thought I’d be working here?”

A polite smile returned to Claire’s face. “Who, indeed.”

Neither of them spoke Rowan’s name. Neither needed to. Babbie looked in the mirror one last time. The gray skin beneath her eyes made her yawn. “I guess there’s no point in hiding. My shift’s almost up.”

She issued Claire a hug from one side, barely touching the pressed polo shirt.

“Nice meeting you,” Claire said.

“You too.” But it wasn’t any nicer than running into the landlord when her rent was past due.

Babbie entered the shiny hallway with other bodies wearing what amounted to pajama sets and rubber shoes, but her mind wandered far from the hospital and returned to Rowan's drunken surprise appearance at her apartment. She'd driven him in his car to a spot two blocks from his house. "You can take it from here," she'd told him. "Me running into your wife won't get you any gold stars." She had let herself out, walked to a bus stop down the street, and called a cab to pick her up there. No buses ran that late, and anyway, only the hired help rode the bus in his neighborhood. The night had been hotter than usual for late March. Crepe myrtles, live oaks, and a smattering of palm trees nearly shut out the night sky. She'd waited on a painted iron bench and listened to the *whoosh* of a distant car and the crack of magnolia leaves, big as a man's hand, being crushed underfoot by a possum or armadillo.

The next day, probably out of guilt, Rowan had called to offer her the job.



Above the counter in the lab where Babbie worked was a poster on how to avoid heart disease. The arteries on the poster protruded from a pudgy bladder that reminded her of bagpipes. She often stared at the heart as she sat behind the lab's customer service window feeling like a doll in a display case and wondered about the sounds that arteries made.

The phlebotomist Babbie had overheard earlier stopped by her counter to grab a handful of sterile wipes for her lab bucket. The woman's fingernails were dry and cracked with banks of widening cuticles. "Last call for alcohol," she said.

"I'll take mine on the rocks," Babbie replied. The woman laughed and hurried along the hallway toward her final round of morning draws. Babbie thought it might be nice to invite the woman over some afternoon for a beer and home manicure. A friend at the hospital couldn't hurt. Her few other friends either worked at the truck stop or played on her softball team every summer. Not that she could make many games.

Babbie opened the drawer beside her desk and rummaged through her

purse for her car keys. A thumping sound on the lab's window brought her search to a halt.

Babbie looked up, and Penelope's eyes glared at her with the satisfaction of a dogcatcher. She drummed her fingertips on the glass again. "Follow me," the head nurse said.

Babbie slammed the drawer shut and glanced at her phone one last time before confronting the nurse in the hallway. "There's only six minutes left in my shift."

Penelope began walking. "Follow me." She didn't bother to turn around when she added, "Take it up with your ex-husband."

Heat gathered in Babbie's chest and throat. She couldn't imagine how Penelope knew. The only person she'd told was the phlebotomist. Babbie stopped in the hallway and tried to breathe. You couldn't trust a person who poked people with needles every night.

"Don't be so shocked," Penelope turned around and said. "We don't keep secrets around here, especially among the night crew."

She wanted Penelope to know she was good enough for Rowan, even if he hadn't married her in a church, even if none of her husbands had married her in a church or a fancy club. Some people had to make do with pressing their noses against the pretty parts of life. "At least Rowan never cheated on me," she said.

She immediately wanted to gather up her words and drive away. Not that she could do so with pride. She was dented and looking through the cracked windshield of a life. The same feeling had come over her when the motel manager surprised her and Skipper. She felt she could never escape the hours of meaningless sex. Beauty was a curse and a lie, and she wished ugliness for her daughter, ugliness and a man who loved the girl for a beauty only he could see.

Beneath the hallway's brash white lights, Babbie saw that Penelope's face was heart-shaped like her own. She sank her hands into the pockets of her lab coat and tried to think of the right words to say.

"At least my husband is still my business," Penelope said. "And nobody handed me my job."

Babbie wanted to lash out again, but nothing that came to mind carried even a smidgen of truth. Penelope was right: she had earned her position, while Babbie had looked around for someone else to save her. She bowed her head and focused on the slick polished floor, aching with light, unlike the dead motel carpet.

Penelope turned and led, and Babbie followed. When they reached the ER, Penelope directed her toward a curtained-off area she hoped wasn't Skipper's.

"Other staff will be in here in a minute to take him to surgery," Penelope said. "Just keep an eye on the monitors and make him comfortable. If you can."

Babbie didn't blame her for questioning her ability to provide care. She had no business being in this hospital or this job. The makeshift room, meat-locker cold and with only a bed and tray table for furniture, seemed to agree, and in that bed lay Skipper tubed and hooked up to oxygen, an IV, and a heart monitor.

She clenched her fists inside the pockets of her lab coat. When Bo had been little, he and a cousin had dueled with water pistols in the backyard. "Pow, pow," they had shouted, and pretended to die, but Skipper and the other man staff had wheeled in were not boys. He was still overweight, and his sun-parched skin was more akin to animal hide.

Perhaps in his early forties, Skipper had a fuzzy yellow mustache that reminded her of the soft wings of a baby bird. It was the only thing soft about him.

She turned to go. Her shift was up, but Skipper groaned and whispered, "Sherri."

Babbie twisted around and pressed a finger to her lips, then let it fall. "Sherri is gone."

It felt good to say this. Her life had begun to scab over, but if brushed against the wrong situation, it could easily bleed again. "I need to go," she said.

"Sherri," he whispered, and pointed toward a cup of ice on the tray table near the bed.

She wanted to cut off the oxygen to this man's lungs, a man who'd left

a trail of fingerprints on her neck, but in his vulnerable state she could not bring herself to harm him.

“Sherri,” he whispered once more, his voice static, untuned.

How many times had she heard that name? Thirty? Forty? More?

A tear streamed along Skipper’s face, followed by a second and a third. She avoided looking at the bloody mess below his waist or thinking about jokes that involved turning roosters to hens. She saw the box of latex gloves resting visibly on the tray table next to the cup of ice—she wasn’t blind and had been properly trained to maintain a sterile area at all times—but rules begged exceptions.

She plucked an ice cube from the cup with her bare fingers. The cube stuck to them until her body’s warmth compromised it. She moved closer and traced Skipper’s lips with the ice. She would be late for her next job, but none of that really mattered. Skipper’s aging body told the truth. Their second chances were over and they would never be young again.

He clenched her hand with more force than she thought possible from a gunshot victim.

“Let go if you want me to stay,” she said.

He nodded weakly and obeyed.

She ran the ice over his lips again. He closed his eyes and sighed, just as the ER staff scurried in to prep him for surgery.

Babbie stepped back and imagined him boarding a shrimp boat owned by Liling’s husband. She imagined Sherri standing on the wooden dock, barnacles clinging to its posts. Skipper helped Sherri board the boat, then unmoored it and gave the okay. When the boat whinnied forward, Sherri’s hair flamed into the wind. She raised one hand and waved toward shore before facing the open water.

An orderly rolled back the curtain. Babbie turned to go, saw herself turning to go, as Sherri and Skipper cut a path through the bay.