

Elena DeCook

Harbinger



Finalist

She won't look at my hands until I hold them out to her. "This isn't your blood, is it, baby?"

The red is stained across both my palms and up one of my forearms. Uneven gloves. I shake my head and do not see her face collapse. When she lifts me off the ground, she is already blank and exhausted.

"Mama, in the woods," I say in between sobs. "A lady fell."

"I know, sweet," she says, balancing me on one hip and rummaging through her bag on the other. I get smudges of an oxidizing maroon on her blouse.

The siren rings out louder, just once. "Mama, *help!*"

She buckles me into a car seat, sluggish and sure. "I can't, Dia. I don't know how."

It was *unfair*.

That was the first thing I could think of, when I knew to think

about it. I couldn't figure out how I deserved it.

Allen Fishinger drops to the wood chips like a glass out of a soap actor's hand. I notice first, or at least I move first. He used to let his big palm fall on the top of my head when he approached my parents after church, and I feel it like a weight as I skid to my knees near his left shoulder. His eyelids twitch. It's cold enough that I can hear winter coats buzz against each other as the other kids hurtle in.

Snapping open her cell phone like a shield, Miss Ruth forces her way through the dying-person diameter of responsibility. I've had two fingers where Allen's pulse used to be for maybe a minute now, but she snatches at it herself as she navigates the whitewater of her 911 call. Splinters of dirt catch on the edge of my church dress as I settle further into the ground. Miss Ruth is listening to the air near his nose and mouth. I can't stop seeing the way Allen's eyes snapped open for the last time like a coffin lid slamming, and I'm glad I didn't know him any better.

Only one person looks back when I finally glance up. Mrs. Krotsky stands to my right, and I'm sure she saw me run first. She sees my two small hands wrapped around Allen's big one. She doesn't mean to, but she looks at me with daggers of distrust.

The timing was always impeccable, if unreliable—not that anyone bothered to tell me. Once a week, once every two? Too often.

"You two are late," Sawyer says, but he puts the attendance sheet away without marking a tardy. Jessie and Damian puff and apologize through the door.

In the seat next to me, Jessie curses very quietly as she settles, smiling through it. She dangles one hand over the side of the desk, fingers fluttering; Damian looks at them skeptically.

I cross and uncross my legs. I hate babies. Something bad might happen while I'm watching them; something bad might happen while I'm not. Four of the girls in my grade have delivered this year. I don't know if it's some completely subconscious maternal instinct or that they've registered the looks I give their infants, but I'll go weeks without making eye contact with any of the girls.

"Claudia," Jessie says, intently studying something above my right ear. "Will you watch Damian while I go to the bathroom?"

She's trying, and it's a noble effort, so I try back. For exactly three minutes and forty-eight seconds my world simmers down to the wrinkles on Damian's knuckles and the fluorescent-light drone of the

blood in my ears.

He looks like a monkey. My legs twitch with anxiety, heels tapping on the uninspired tile, arms quivering. It's silly to be so afraid of the worst happening when it's already happened hundreds of times.

Damian's chest rises and falls like divine grace.

Medical professionals can never tell you precisely when the point of no return is. I don't think there's really any way to know, not when I saw it so many times and was still never sure.

It's fair of me to run from Sierra, who's waxed rhapsodic about Brown until I can hardly keep from screaming. We're all pretty close to implosion, or at least I think we are. *That was the point of drinking, right?* I ask my reflection. That we'd go and party and stop thinking about what comes after for a few hours?

I blink until the mirror comes into focus. Maybe it's my imagination, but I think I can see every beat of the bass shake through the walls. It's kind of mesmerizing; I look up, almost hoping that plaster dust is coming down from the ceiling.

There's a strangled cough behind me.

"No," I say aloud. "No, no, no." Not now, for God's sakes. It's too much for right now.

But there they lie, the immobile legs protruding from the shower stall. I take three steps forward, like a park ranger with a bear.

There's metal in my mouth, like I've still got braces on. The drunkenness in my knees clamors louder than it did a second ago.

I cannot help walking up behind her, or at least I don't know if I can. Her elbows have given out under her; her face sinks into the bath mat. Her nose is almost in the contents of her stomach.

The showerhead hisses unhappily when I turn it on. I haul her to sitting.

My frayed willpower tugs rope-burns into my waist, and if I have any courage left—if what I am has anything to do with courage—it escapes now. Panic swallows my feet like flames at a witch-burning. Satellite dish faces turn towards me as I run through the house and out. Sierra is still talking in the kitchen about college. My future, stretching out endlessly in front of me, is full of bodies.

I learned early on not to talk about it, as you do. People would start thinking I was a serial killer. I might start thinking I was.

The nursing home is institutional taupe. Everywhere. they've freshened up with patches of a floral patterned fabric that looks like it was designed off of plastic flowers. Not inspiring, but safe.

I sit by Mr. Hernandez's bed and read him *Captain America* comics as he slips away. He's not a hand-holder, which I'm grateful for. I can always feel the heartbeat leaving through tissue-paper hands.

As soon as I'm sure he's gone, I press the call button and let someone else deal with the emergency of dying. Someone taps my shoulder as I leave the room, taking heaving breaths of stale, sanitized air. "Claudia, can I talk to you in my office?"

Mickey looks at me tiredly over his glasses. I don't know if I should or shouldn't be worried. I know what this is about, I think, but he always looks tired. Senior care is not a thrilling industry. Most of us have that kind of driftwood face.

"You've been present at four deaths in the past month alone," he says.

I nod and pick at a loop of thread escaping from the cushion in my chair.

"In fact, whenever someone passes on your shift, you're there almost every time." I nod to this too.

But the mortality rate hasn't gone up. There isn't anything for him to accuse me of. He says as much, then looks at my face through watery eyes.

"Is there anything I should know about?" he asks, like I might confess to statistically insignificant murder.

My white knuckles are piled together in my lap. "No, there isn't." There's nothing he should know.

It looks like the emergency is that I'll be shadowed whenever we have new workers. They need to get used to the reality of death. He'll be tough on them with my routine.

There were times when I wished I had premonitions to go with everything else. It would have been easier, maybe. Instead, I learned CPR, just in case it was my fault.

Snow sticks to my coat in clumps, and I self-indulgently imagine it gathering into heaviness on my back. The wet knees of my jeans chafe as I climb my mom's front steps. My coat is relatively clean, or at least clean enough to pass suspicion. The man in the alley wasn't too dirty. There

wasn't any blood. He was just sad—the kind where it meant something that he could breathe out with his head in someone's arms instead of on the pavement.

The welcome mat is icy enough to slip on, so I'm gingerly taking steps when I freeze with one hand raised to knock.

Vividly, violently, I can see through to the other side of the door. I can see myself on the couch, my mother in and out of the room on soft, slippered feet. She still tells me I should have kids. I still tell her maybe. Then the kitchen is a crime scene, an aneurysm—that simple. I rush towards the crash with the foolish assumption of dropped dishes.

My hands balk at the feel of her bathrobe, cataloging them unwillingly with the textures of all the other fading bodies I've held. I scream like a banshee, although as far as I can tell, that's not part of my mythology. Where's my immunity? Where's my thick skin?



It was never a matter of getting used to anything. No matter how many people shuddered to a halt in front of my eyes, I never stopped wanting to wail, to scream, to order someone to fix it.

The snow brings me back to myself. I'm still standing on the front steps, frozen fist extended to pound on the door. Before I can think any more about it, I force my hand forward. It's unfair. I steel myself to find out anyway.

