

From the *CAST OF CHARACTERS* anthology in trade paperback and eBook

## *Don't Breathe*

by

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### *The Hunt*

I'm in need of some serious hiding.

Behind a garage or a garbage can won't do.

My thumping heartbeat tells me I've wasted way too much time considering options.

My eyes scan the familiar neighborhood.

The houses' front landscaping is the first place they'll search. They'll also go for the massed ferns on the north walls, although I love the earthy, medicinal smell there, where in the past I've hunkered on my belly like cat, feeling safe and reassured. No, not safe in the back yards. Even the jungle-thick plantings around Mrs. Menard's hidden fish pond are too obvious.

I hear their deep voices calling, coming closer. Any sprint of more than fifteen feet will give me away. *Think, Cathy!*

I've hidden myself all over this neighborhood and I don't care about getting dirty. I must hide completely. I can't be found. I can't be found.

Right now I've boxed myself into the alley. I hear them tromping around the houses' side yards. No fences in this neighborhood. I'm still standing in the late afternoon daylight, feeling naked and visible.

Must disappear totally. *Fast.*

There! Fresh-trimmed brush by the Heinz's dented aluminum garbage can. Barbed-wire sharp branches top a huge pile of grass clippings turning sage green.

I fling the thorny branches aside and burrow like a bone-hungry dog into the dying grass clippings. I'm small, but need to dig deep to cover myself. I can feel the ground pounding from their running footsteps, my heart becoming one with the rhythm of my pursuers.

Shifting deep, facedown into the underlying dirt, so moist, cool, and damp, smelling of earthworms, I shovel soft barbered shafts of grass over me, grabbing sharp branches last. Their large, wilting leaves fan to hide me.

The pounding ground is under me now, my heartbeat sandwiched between that deep, sweet darkness and the dangerous light of day above me,

I hear them stop, the branches stir, their voices muffled.

"She's the last one."

"Ow! Not even a rabbit would get into those thorn-bushes."

"Rotten little four-eyed brat. Thinks she's so smart."

A boot kicks the air and leaves above. If they find me now, I'll really pay.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don't breathe.*

This is supposed to be a game, but it isn't. If I win I only make them madder and meaner. If I lose . . . I don't want to think about that.

Why can't I just become invisible when I need to? Maybe if I think about that harder, some day I will. I can't always freeze like a rabbit. They think they can't be seen when they can.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don't breathe.*

They've gone, but I wait until twilight to be safe, until the mothers in our small town walk to their front doors and call their kids home for dinner.



"How'd you get so filthy, Cathy?" mine asks as I slink through the back door.

"Playing hide and seek with the neighborhood kids."

"The others have come home already."

"They didn't find me."

And when I grow up and get out of this town, they'll never find me.

### *The Pool*

I am trapped.

My toes curl around the round ceramic tile piece that edges the high school pool. Shouts echo against the high opaque glass windows. Boys somersault off the diving board screaming "Geronimo." Ropes of beaded water lash me like liquid pearls as the boys disappear, leaving the waves lapping six inches below my clutching toes. I could hide in the water, but not now, not here. Because I won't move, I won't.

I stand on the brink of the deep end, shivering, because everyone is staring at spindly me, arms crossed over my embarrassingly big chest, wearing my ugly brown tank suit that bags in the rear. I won't go in the water, so I can't warm up and the other kids' splashes just assault me, like they're doing it on purpose.

"It's required that every student swim, Cathy." Mrs. Applebaum looks silly in her coaching shorts and huge sweat shirt, maybe even sillier than me. "You did fine on the shallow end. You know your strokes. One dive off the deep end and I can pass you."

"Water will go up my nose. I can't stand not breathing."

"For heaven's sake. Don't be such a . . . Look. It won't if you exhale as you dive. Or you can hold your nose or your breath. I don't care which you do. You'll be back up treading water within ten seconds and I can pass you. Just jump." She moves on, tired of waiting for me to be ready.

I'll never be ready. I gulp down a huge breath, bend my knees and hold my arms over my head, clasped as if praying. My elbows skim my ears, as instructed. I'll have to fall forward straight down, down, down, into the dappled blue water shaking like Jell-O, shivering like me.



My eyes squinch shut behind the swim goggles as I finally push off, hitting water that hits me back—an icy slap in the face . . . then, then I am pushing down, down, my fingers grazing the slightly rough plaster at the pool's bottom. My body rebounds to arrow up, up, breaking back into a breathing world I view through water-drop blinded goggles.

It. Had. Been. Easy. Fun. Exhilarating.

I thrash to the side, climb the cold metal staircase that hurts my bare feet, poise on the pool's edge and . . . plunge again. And again thrash and climb and plunge.

“Good girl, Cathy!” Mrs. Applebaum yells before my ears hit water and shut out everything but the sound of silence underwater.

I'm used to being told I'm a “good girl.” My record is saved, I can graduate and go to college like a . . . good girl.

Now, though, I want to claim the element that had frightened me, to tame it. I fight to stay longer at the bottom, gazing up through the cool blue Beyond shimmering above. I can hide here, float. Yet the need for air always pushes me back into the noisy, echoing splashes, pushes me into visibility into the tiny tidal basin of everybody's pool.

Not mine.



Now they can't keep me out of the water. I discover the pool's off hours, then spend lovely hours alone there. I dive and remain submerged, my eyes open. My new, wet womb is my exact body temperature. I stare at my light-dappled sky, spread my arms and legs and float, hidden and safe from everyone.

I remember the pretty blue satin lining of my grandmother's coffin lid, gathered into watery ripples, rusching it was called. I'd been ten and decided I wanted a pale blue-lined coffin of my own some day, like a limitless sky of new possibilities.

“Where's she gone, Cathy?” I was asked, and was supposed to answer, “Heaven.”

“Blue heaven,” I'd said instead.

Now, I can glimpse that endless blue peace again . . . .

On land once more, dry and parched for buoyancy and a universe only I can see, I cruise the Internet for information on holding your breath under water.

Pearl divers can do more than six minutes.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don't breathe.*

Stunt athletes established a world record of more than nine minutes.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don't breathe.*

Magicians inhale pure oxygen beforehand and manage seventeen minutes. If I could have held my breath like this during hide and seek . . . .

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don't breathe.*

At last I master the final test for utter comfort under water.

I dive, relax, recline on my back on the pool bottom and look up. It can be done if you don't thrash, if you don't panic. Anything can be done. Some people freak at reaching, much less maintaining this position. I clasp the waterproof wristwatch over my stomach with my other hand and count as I hold my breath and stare at blissful nothing.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don't breathe.*



My parents ask what I want for a graduation gift from high school. They're so pleased with how well I've done the last two years, with my grades, my college scholarship, my maturity, they say. Our family is not in the car for graduation bracket.

"One perfect pearl," I say.

And I get it, not large, but on an eighteen-carat, fine gold chain.

I am a pearl diver.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don't breathe.*

### *The Professor*

My parents try not to show their disappointment when I pick a college in Florida. One night, I hear them comforting themselves with the hope that it might hone my "social skills."

But I'm not after a "party" school. I'm after a place where pools are common. I take Psychology 101 in freshman year and self-diagnose: I'm a cliché: smart but shy and from a sheltered background. You live your life the way you have to and don't analyze it until you must.

Being smart had gotten me bullied, and I'd found the older neighborhood boys big, crude and threatening. At least in college that kind were confined to the locker room and I was meeting guys who wore glasses and read books and liked to talk about the wider world. I'd decided to major in psychology, but in senior year I had to get a passing grade from a professor who made the heartless anti-mentoring sharks I'd heard populated law schools look like guppies.

This was far trickier than diving into a pool of water, but my unique form of stress relief had given me some survival and coping mechanisms by then. I knew how to hide in class.

Professor Shark affected tweed jackets and a flashy bow tie. He was in his late forties, lean as a new manila folder and about as sharp-edged. He wore his thinning gray hair in an autocratic Caesar cut that curled around the front edges, ready for any possibly impending laurel wreath.

The girls who were sent to college for other reasons than degrees or knowledge competed to line the front row of the theatrically raked classroom, all wearing short skirts and crossing their legs.

I kept to the middle seats in the side sections, and always wore jeans. I may still have been shy beneath the studious academic air I was developing but I wasn't stupid. The professor was vain, overbearing and liked to manipulate women.

The writhing wannabes in the first row were an annual fixture, so he adored calling on me.

After reading from what he considered the worst of the weekly papers, he took glee in singling me out as Miss Perfect.

“Miss Carlson, however, avoids illiteracy as well as ignorance. Why can’t you bozo boys and bimbo girls figure out how to parse a graceful sentence, not to mention pose a convincing argument?”

He then would wave my sheaf of white bond with the kind of flourish that passes for a wave from Queen Elizabeth to the crowd. “Stand up, Miss Carlson, and take your bow.”

I would be forced to rise and smile painfully. Again.

“Class, perhaps you will consult Miss Carlson afterwards for tips on getting a passing grade. That’s all.”

Of course they avoid me in droves.

One day as I shuffle out with my laptop bag at my side, someone jostles me. Not unusual. The other students, baited, often do that, punishing me in their mute, herdlike way.

“Wait.”

The voice is unfamiliar. I turn to recognize the professor’s runner, the teaching assistant who never gets a chance to speak, only to sprint up and down the aisled tiers to deliver the papers to their owners . . . after the professor has dusted them off his manicured hands and spiral-bound mind.

“Cathy.” He pulls me out of the crowd and against a wall. “You left your paper.”

I look at it, seeing the large A-plus in red on the cover page. Might as well have worn that grade as a scarlet letter. The students around us glimpse it too, and give me poisonous looks. I clap the paper facedown to my chest.

“Thanks,” I tell the guy, not meaning it.

“Eric. I’m the prof’s T. A. All the T.A. he’s interested in is the tits and asses in the front row. Come on. I’ll buy you beer at Rizzo’s.”

“I like wine.”

“Wine it is.”

“So.” I sip the chardonnay. Eric nurses a pale ale. He’s the opposite of the professor. His thick, curly brown hair brushes his earlobes and the back of his corduroy jacket, his features are even and open and fully shaved. “You’re saying the prof does this every semester?” I ask. “Picks a class brain to turn into a pariah?”

“Pretty female class brain.” Eric grabs some beer nuts to gnaw from the plastic dish in the center of the tiny table.

“I’m not . . . pretty.”

“Sure you are.” He glances at my necklace. I’m relieved his eyes ignore my chest. “Pearly white skin, coppery hair and green eyes, like a mermaid.”

Wow. Eric knew how to make pasty skin, limp hair and murky hazel eyes sound good. His eyes are chestnut-brown, robust and energetic like him. Maybe he actually likes my . . . type.

I sip more wine. “And the only way the other female class members can get a passing grade is to line up in the front row for a turn in his bed? Ugh. That is borderline personality disorder.”

“Yeah. He’s a psychology professor. They’re all crazy.”

“Also a sexist, narcissistic sociopath.”

Eric grins. “You’ll go far in your chosen field. But I gotta get my thesis past that old bastard. I could use your help. He’s stealing from everybody’s papers for his own articles anyway, including yours and my rough-draft thesis. It would be fun to manipulate *him* for a change.”

Fun. I hadn’t had any in college yet. Eric’s smile is mischievous. “Want to visit my crib and cook up some academic revenge?”

### *The Teaching Assistant*

That’s how it started, and if my ghost-writing was good for Eric’s thesis, he was good for me too. My eyes did look more greenish than griegie when I got contact lenses, started using green eye shadow and rinsed my dishwater-blond hair “Copper Shimmer 74.”

I discovered that Eric was also an artist who cast found objects--leaves and seashells and acorns-- into incredible silver and brass accretions that lined his walls like metallic barnacles. They were impressive.

“The masters degree in psych is just to fall back on,” he told me, making a face, “so I can teach if I have to.”

I discovered that sex was not only possible, but fun, like diving. Eric was pulling me into a free-wheeling kidhood I’d never had. We moved in together in six months. First requirement was a big living area he could use as a studio. I needed a pool.

“A pool? Cathy, you never allow the sun to touch a cell of your white skin.”

“I swim after dark.”

“*Hmm*. Weird but somehow sexy. OK. Whatever you want. But you’ve got to let me cast your hands.”

“My hands? They’re kinda big and bony—”

“Sculptural, hon. I don’t know where you got this inferiority complex, but you’re about to graduate so you should have the expertise to shake it, and if you don’t, I’ll shake it out of you.”

He takes my hands and kisses them. “I want to memorialize the hands that make me happy and play me like a computer keyboard. Besides, I have great news. I can afford to put your hands in bronze.”

I feel myself blush. Eric can go overboard, but that’s what I love about him.

“I have some news too.” His smiling, quizzical look encourages me to go on. “I’m thinking I’ll go for my master’s too.”

After a tiny pause, he says, “Great. Two almost-‘doctors’ in the house.”

I’d seen the quickly concealed shadow behind the smile. “What’s your news?”

“First the white wine.” He jumps up to fetch glasses of chardonnay. “A toast to your forthcoming thesis. May you get any advisor other than Old Ironsides. My news? The Vann Sommer Gallery wants to do a one-man show for me next year.”

“But . . . that place is pricey and all the artists it handles are from the coasts.”

“Exactly. I’ll have to work like a demon. I need signature pieces. Bigger, bolder. It’ll cost, Cathy, mostly in time and materials, but the rewards—”

“Oh my God, Eric! That’s amazing.” I bite my lip, seeing what he concealed. “Your T.A. money ran out with graduation and my job at the flower shop isn’t enough to live on.”

“I’ll figure something out. Maybe my father up in Lake City could help out financially. The farm has him rolling in money. Shit sells, but I’m ‘just’ idling away in fine art.”

“You’re estranged from your father.”

“Yeah, but I’m the only son. Maybe he’ll melt. Don’t worry about it. The show is months and months off. Anything could happen.”



Something did. Two months later, I got pregnant.

“I don’t understand. We were so careful.”

Eric stops my distraught pacing with an embrace. “Well, you can’t use the Pill because of the family blood-clot thing. Diaphragm and foam is like something the Etruscans used these days. Not reliable.”

“You’re not angry?”

Eric shrugs. “Not in the plan, but, to be honest, I’m kinda excited. Everything is new for us, our degrees, my gallery show, and now our baby.”

“But the money!”

“Maybe my father will be an ecstatic grandfather. He has a patriarch complex. Maybe we could move up to the farm while you’re pregnant.”

Maybe not. The old man sounded like the kind of tyrannical parent who’d ridiculed his daughters and spoiled his only son. My baby was not going to be born under the likes of him.

Listen to me. Dawning motherhood had given me the spine of a shark. Or maybe at least a cuttlefish.

### *The House*

Eric is right about his father. Once we got a city hall quickie marriage (that disappointed my parents back home) and he told his dad that I was pregnant, the old man signed over a house he owned near the university to his son. The roomy two-story had once been grand, but is shopworn from being chopped up into rented student housing. A monthly mortgage payment comes with it. The only perk is a pool put into the wooded back yard to attract students. A wooden fence keeps the neighboring hordes of college students out.

I get a job with the city social services department serving indigent clients. The pay is twice what I got in the flower shop, but it’s high summer and the smell sits uneasily on my pregnant stomach. On the other hand, the position keeps me off my swollen feet. And my evening solo dips in the pool ease the pressure of my swelling stomach and breasts.

Eric always has a glass of sparkling water waiting for me when I get home from work. He’s making major metal work sculptures now, and his muscles are ropy, his hair curled from sweat.

He's not making any money, spending a lot instead, but you can't say he's not working. He's never looked hotter. It burns off of him like an aura of gas-blue welding-torch flame.

"Come on, hon. Feet up, sit back, and tell me about the weirdoes you saw today."

"They're clients, Eric. People who've fallen through the cracks and have never had their physical or psychological needs fulfilled. And it pays our way."

"Yeah, yeah. You're Mother Teresa. Speaking of physical needs . . ." He pulls a light chair forward so he can take my now-bare feet into his lap for a massage. "I got an idea."

"Umm. Only one?"

"I want to cast your tits."

"What?" I'd seen my metal hands lying around his studio and they gave me an odd feeling.

"Come on, Cathy. They've always been your best feature and now they're really pumped."

His voice is almost a whisper, seductive.

"Come on, Cathy. I work with inanimate metal all day. Being pregnant puts a crimp in our sex life. Let me work with soft flesh for a change, immortalize your killer boobs, have something to polish while you're away at work."

He's never said such things to me. I'm both repulsed and . . . turned on.

His laugh sounds for a second like Professor Shark's. "I take it those nipples trying to punch through your t-shirt are a 'yes?'"

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The process is damp, cold, and strikes me as slightly perverse. The wet plaster clothes draping my chest are more medical than sexual. I suddenly panic at feeling pinned down, frozen, exposed.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don't breathe.*

"Wish I could give you some wine to relax, babe," he murmurs, working over me like doctor with a patient on a table. "Bad for the baby, though."

"Is this going on display?" I fret.

"On my studio wall, sure. But I'm thinking of making a multi-piece sculpture of 'Woman.' You're my muse, why not?"

"I don't want my body parts in an art show."

Eric shakes his shaggy head. "Cathy, Cathy. Don't worry. Nudes are anonymous in art."

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I do worry.

I slip out of my bedroom with the unit air-conditioner at night. Now that I'm pregnant, Eric sleeps in the bedroom "studio." We can only afford only two window units, and he works forging cold casts into hot metal assemblages all day. My breast cast hangs on the living room wall beside one of my hands, and I shudder every time I pass it. It resembles the remnant of some long-gone ship's figurehead, found encrusted with barnacles on the sea floor.

It's so damned *detailed*, a body cast. I feel as if pieces of me have been peeled off, like rinds, leaving my nerves exposed. It's probably hormones, so I cool off in the pool. I don't dive now, but slip into the water as silently as a seal and paddle my way to the bottom. I may feel like a

whale on land, but here deep in the still water I am graceful and supported, my baby learning to be a water creature, like me.

One night, like a spider sensing prey in its web, I feel the surface agitated by tiny tugging ripples. I let myself float up to see four bare feet dabbling in the water at the shallow end.

Only my face breaks the surface as my hand clings to the ladder on the deep end.

It's two silly coeds, a bottle of wine between them as they sit, clothed, on the pool edge.

From the house next door, I hear the blare of an all-night party our air-conditioners drowned out.

"We shouldn't be here, Bree," one says. "I scratched my calf scaling that wooden fence. And actual people live here. I mean, not students."

"Footz on you. Listen to the air-conditioners hum. They're asleep in their separate bedrooms. Isn't this peaceful and *quiet*? We could skinny dip and no one would know."

"No. The guys might catch us."

"Don't be such a wuss, Kelly. Those undergrad guys are so gross and immature."

Speaking of shallow ends, "Bree" and "Kelly" are perfectly placed. I hear them whispering and giggling, Bree singing the praises of "bronze gods" obviously not present at the neighbor's party, and Kelly taking long swigs from the wine bottle between worried glances at my house. Neither one thinks to glance at the other end of the pool.

I take a deep, deep breath and silently submerge. My underwater training will make delivery room breathing patterns a walk in the park. Now I feel mature, in control. Superior.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don't breathe.*



A touch of autumn crisps the air. Soon I'll have to switch to the Y pool two miles away.

When I come home one day, there's no Eric, no glass of sparkling water.

The door to his studio is shut and the music is cranked up to a deafening roar, even over the air-conditioning.

I run to open the door, but it's locked. Pounding, pounding on the thick old wood until my palms sting and my knuckles skin.

Then Eric stands there, bare-chested and gleaming with sweat, an empty whiskey bottle in his hand. He shouts four-letter words at me in repetitive strings. The room is dark except for night lights. I stumble inside to feel for the stereo cord and pull it out of the wall.

Eric is pounding the thick whiskey bottle base on his wooden work table, punctuating every blow with a foul word.

"Eric! What is it? What's happened?"

"The old man. He died."

"Died? I'm . . . sorry. Today?"

"Sorry? Sorry! Three weeks ago he died. My so-called sisters didn't even let me know when he went into the hospital for the last time."

"He did have a brush with cancer last year, you said. You didn't call."

“I was busy with the pieces for the show. Those damn bitches didn’t want me to know, didn’t want me there. I get this letter from a Lake City lawyer and he left everything to them. Like the cliché. The whole freaking farm! They snatched it from me on his deathbed. Do you know what it was worth?”

“A lot, you said, but you still have all the work you’ve done for the show, the baby is coming, we have the house . . . “

“The house is a liability, a piece of shit. It’s underwater, do you know what means? You’re doing a crap job for crap money and I am screwed. The baby. The show. I . . . I just can’t do it.”

His anger drove me out of the room and he slammed the door shut in my face.

I almost went for the chardonnay, but gritted my teeth and stopped myself. And here I’d felt mature and superior compared to those two party girls just a couple weeks ago. Bree was right. It looked like separate bedrooms for now, and maybe forever.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don’t breathe.*



“Cathy?”

I wake up in the tangle of my bedsheets under the hum of the air conditioning unit.

“Cathy.” I feel a weight depress the side of my mattress.

“I’m sorry,” Eric says, only a slumped shadow in the dark. “I went nuts. I’d been counting on that inheritance and so absorbed in doing the pieces for the show. You’re right. I’ve still got the show.” His hand rests on my mounded belly. “And the baby. And you. I’m going to work even harder, because that could get us the financial security we need. Okay? We okay? If you’ll just bear with me--?”

““Bear?”” I repeat with a smile in my voice.

“Oh, right. I’m a doofus.” He lays the side of his face on my belly and I pat his cheek maternally. Men can be such children sometimes. All tantrums and regretful aftermath.

### *The Mask*

“Pretty please,” he says.

Eric has dedicated himself to his studio work. He said the gallery owner came by when I was working to see the new stuff and had been bowled over. Eric showed me a sample of the invitation, classier than any wedding invitation I’d ever seen, on handmade rag paper with exquisitely transparent sheets inside. Eric’s name and the gallery’s were set in embossed silver-metallic type.

I felt like I was nine-and-a-half months’ pregnant, but it was only eight months.

So when Eric sat me down and told me Leon Summers had been enchanted by his bronzes of my body parts, I could only blink with disbelief.

“It’s the human touch in all this inanimate metal, Cathy. I need to do the *pièce de résistance*. The face.”

“People would recognize me. It’d be like stripping for them.”

“No. It’s art. It’s revelation, yes, but in the cosmic sense.”

“I’m not an artist’s model; I’m your wife.”

“I don’t want a model and neither does Leon. What makes it work is it’s a real person, a person who means something to the artist, to me. Please do it.”

“I’ll have that heavy wet plaster cloth covering my face for how long? And how will I breathe?”

“They do in life masks in art classes. Straws, simple drinking straws, small enough for your nostrils. It only takes a few minutes, and you know how to be patient.”

“Yes, I do, and since this pregnancy, I *really* do. It’s a big decision. Let me think about it.”



Eric is as delighted when I say “yes” as when I agreed to marry him.

He brings us ceremonial glasses of chardonnay. Studies showed pregnant women could drink occasionally, so I sip half of it. Then he poses me in the living room reclining chair with a big ottoman under my feet. Eric lards my face with Vaseline, especially the eyebrows and my closed eyelashes.

I’m already feeling a bit uneasy, but he squeezes my hand before he begins laying the wet cloths over my features, the same way a cast is made for a broken limb, only my face isn’t the part of me that’s broken.

The Vaseline-coated straws probe my nostrils. A tentative inhalation works. I try another, deeper one.

“That’s fine, Cathy.” I hear Eric leave my side and almost panic. I’m blind and gagged. He’s back soon. “This will keep you warm.” A heavy winter coat descends on me from neck to knees. My pregnant belly must look like foothill. Blind, gagged, and . . . bound.

I can’t move. I can’t speak.

I feel the fine hairs inside my nose tickle as Eric draws the slender Vaseline-coated straws through them.. Narrow red-striped drinking straws you can find in any grocery store. First in, and now . . . out.

“Don’t worry, Cathy,” Eric whispers over my shrouded ear. “I won’t hang your face cast next to your boobs. No one will ever know the boobs are yours.”

Those are the last words he says to me.

The wine has made my face tingle under the oppressive wet weight of the hardening plaster. The jacket he’s thrown across me is as heavy as a leaded x-ray guard pinning me to the dentist’s chair.

I can barely move a finger, but I don’t want to struggle any more. Particularly not with him. This last betrayal has been too much.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don’t breathe.*

“Why isn’t she fighting? The voice is new, and female, but I’m not surprised that it’s Bree’s.

“I told you to stay out until it was over.”

“I thought it was too quiet in here. Guess the wine worked.”

“With the Xanax, really fast.”

“The baby . . . ?”

“What about it?”

“It’s half yours. Don’t you feel guilty?”

“I’m not the baby-wanting kind. That kid let me down. It was supposed get my father’s financial support. Consider it a late abortion. You’ve done that already, haven’t you, Bree?”

“But it wasn’t yours.”

“Doesn’t matter now. *You* are mine. And that’s forever, baby.”

“I never could figure out,” Bree teases, “why a bronze god like you saddled himself with such a stupid wife.”

“She wasn’t stupid in one way, just in the wrong way. Just a stupid cow with great boobs.”

“Creepy. Nothing’s moving, not even the coat. She’s a goner. I could use a drink.”

“I’m done drinking that pale-piss chardonnay. On to something full-bodied, babe. Merlot. We can drink a toast to my show and my new muse.”

“You *are* a bad boy. Don’t we have a lot of scutt work to do first?”

“Later. Tonight. Once this ole house is burned down. I’ll be out from under it, and from her too.”

That’s right, my dreaming brain registers. His father’s legacy is now an overpriced mortgage. The house is underwater too, under the shirred blue satin of the coffin lid too.

*Be quiet. Lie still. Don’t breathe.*

### *The Floater*

Eric and Bree’s voices segue into a louder, echoing babble. They seem to have panicked, poor things, something I haven’t done, and will not do

When one doesn’t breathe, I found out very early in life, when one is invisible, even when one is just treated as invisible, everything becomes so much easier to hear.

Some girls don’t eat until they disappear.

Some girls cut themselves until they don’t bleed inside.

Some girls hide inside themselves, out of sight to everyone else.

All such girls have nerves of naked awareness.

Poor Eric.

He mistook quiet for acquiescence.

My nerves are screaming now, shrieking violin strings mourning the absence of air.

Even that ungodly noise fades into the dark behind my eyes, the oxygen slowly evaporating from my cells. Our cells.

*Be quiet. Lie Still. Don’t breathe.*

Then a confusing battery of sounds penetrates my shroud of heavy coat and suffocating face mask.

The weight on my body vanishes like a stage curtain jerked aside.

The hardening ghost of my own features is peeling away.

I am the center of all attention, the leading lady.

I can hear Eric and Bree providing a chorus of protests at the far edges of my perception.

“CPR,” a voice shouts.

“No. I think she’s still breathing, very shallowly.”

“Be quiet. Lie still. Just breathe,” a voice counsels me.

“It’s a good thing she didn’t panic.”

“Or we got here just after this started.”

Another stranger’s voice calls from a short distance away, “Here are the nasal straws. The bastard put them in the ashtray *fifteen feet* away.”

“What’s your name, hon?” a woman asks. I don’t mind the familiarity.

My stiff lips move as hoarded air eases through them. Slowly. Always come to the surface slowly. “Cath-Cathy.”

Tending hands and voices surround me, urgent and kind. I sense trembling triumph at finding I can still breathe.

I’m pretty happy about it too. That they arrived in time.

“Okay, Cathy. Inhale again. You’re going to be okay. Just breathe. Slowly. Just breathe. That’s a good girl.”

I manage a tiny smile.

Someone pulls my cell phone from under my fingertips, from slightly under my body, concealed by my right palm and fingers.

“Somehow she managed to text 911 and send it after they pinned her down.”

“It’s a miracle. Can those creeps be charged with more than attempted murder?”

“On two counts? Don’t worry,” the man answers. “Any jury that hears the sheer sadism of their plot to kill mother and fetus will give that pair life without parole. Plenty of time to reflect on their sins.”

“Poor woman. To lie there, absolutely defenseless, and hear, understand, what they were doing to her, and the baby . . .”

“They’re lucky she was still breathing when we found her.”

“Why, I don’t understand. Almost six minutes elapsed before we got here and pulled off the mask. It must have been the maternal drive to protect her baby.”

Oh, yes. My baby is floating in amniotic fluid, attached to a swaying tube of sustenance like an old-fashioned diver’s suit, one with my body, breathing underwater. We all came from water.

Oh, my baby. *Be quiet. Lie still. Don’t breathe.*

Not right now. Not quite yet.

