

Prologue

Susan Powers dreamed she was submerged in deep water. She had always feared drowning, but now she felt no need to breathe. Instead, she floated like a child in a warm salt sea. Her mind drifted between the darkness below her and a distant light above. Slowly, she realized she was rousing from a profound sleep. She opened her eyes with drowsy concentration. She was surrounded by whiteness without boundary. She wondered if she was in heaven.

The light was overwhelming. She tried to cover her eyes with her hands, but her arms wouldn't move. She might have panicked then, but weariness hung on her like a weighted net. Her awareness drifted down her body to her wrists. Thick canvas straps bound her arms. She struggled to move her legs, but something held them tight. A thin sheet covered her nude body from her breasts to her ankles. She was as helpless as a newborn.

She shifted her eyes, trying to see the rest of the room. Light stabbed from a fluorescent fixture hung low from the ceiling. A respirator sat against the far wall and an intravenous drug pump stood to her right. She thought she might be in an operating room. That would explain the unyielding surface of the table beneath her and the smell of disinfectant in the air, but where were the doctors? The nurses? Nothing moved, and the room seemed unnaturally quiet.

“Hello?” she said, her voice thin and raspy. “Is anyone there?”

A man appeared at the edge of her vision. He wore a teal surgical gown, a hood made of the same fabric, latex gloves, and a white cotton mask. Beneath his gown, his body was thin and hard, like a steel bar.

“Hello.” The mask muffled the man’s voice.

Prompted by a blurred memory of sudden pain, she asked, “Have I had an accident?” Her words were slurred and barely intelligible.

“No. Not an accident,” the man said.

“I feel really out of it.”

“That’s the anesthesia.”

“I don’t understand. Did I have an operation?”

“Not yet.” He moved a tray of gleaming instruments into her field of vision. “I’m just getting started.”

She searched for some sign of pain or discomfort. She found nothing, although the anesthesia had left her disoriented and nauseous.

“What kind of operation?” she asked.

“An abortion,” he said.

Pregnant? There was no way she was pregnant. She’d had an abortion once, but she sure as hell hadn’t come here—wherever here was—looking for an abortion. And she knew that abortions never involved being fastened to an operating table like a crazy person.

“But I’m not pregnant,” she said.

“Of course you are,” the man said. “Pregnant with possibilities. Like an egg,” he hesitated and then added thoughtfully, “or a sperm. Besides, I’m not giving you an abortion. I’m aborting you.”

Even through drugs, she felt her heart quicken. What the hell was going on here? Where were the other doctors and nurses? Who was this lunatic? Tendrils of panic crept from her stomach into her heart. She wanted to scream, but she couldn’t believe anything bad could happen in this well-lit room. She was in a hospital, not a dark alley. She was in one of the safest places she could imagine. Doctors helped people. They weren’t supposed to hurt them. Whatever was going on, it must be some kind of sick prank.

“What are you talking about?” She said slowly, rationally, playing along. “You can’t abort me.”

“Why not? Doctors do it all the time. In fact, I think you were in town supporting their right to do so. Or am I mistaken?”

“I’m not a fetus.”

“It’s all the same.”

“It’s not all the same,” she said. “Fetuses aren’t human.”

The man rested his hands on the edge of the table and leaned over her.

“I suppose they’re vegetables then? Like a carrot? Or maybe they’re germs. Like a bad cold.”

She knew it was absurd to argue semantics with a man who had her tied to a steel table, but a lifetime of habit urged her to argue with him, make him see her point.

“Fetuses aren’t people,” she insisted.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said, “if you can convince me there’s a categorical difference between a fetus and any other human being, I’ll let you go. I won’t cut you up.” He rested a rubber-gloved hand on the tray that Susan now noticed held a disconcerting collection of gleaming surgical instruments and ordinary garden tools. Scalpels lay beside pruning shears. The silver teeth of a surgical saw were matched by the green-stained grin of a tree saw. “But every time you lose a point,” the man cautioned, “you lose an extremity.”

His pale blue eyes watched dispassionately as he waited for her to say something. Her theory that this was all a joke began to dissolve. Still, his face was hidden. So was his hair and body. If he released her, she would never be able to identify him to the police. Maybe this was one of her pro-life opponents trying to make a point. Trying to scare her. After those lunatics had started killing doctors, she’d figured anything was possible. The days of simple fire bombings were past, and she knew that some of these nuts believed everything they did was justified by a higher good. Whatever the explanation, she felt a sudden surge of optimism. She could argue her way out of anything. She had been debating since college, and abortion was a subject she knew a great deal about.

“An abortable fetus isn’t viable,” she said. “If it was born, it would die without life support.”

“Nice opening,” the man said. “But viability is an artificial distinction. A newborn is no more viable than a three-month-old fetus. Without continuous care and attention, it would die within hours. If you define viable as being able to survive on its own, I’d say most humans never quite measure up.”

“But viable means being able to survive outside a woman’s body without medical technology.”

“According to that reasoning an old woman who can’t live without weekly dialysis is fair game for anyone who wants to kill her.”

She squirmed beneath the freshly starched sheet. “Forget viability. A fetus is just a blob of protoplasm. It’s only a human being in potential. It doesn’t have any rights.”

“No,” the man shook his head, “sperm and eggs may only be ‘human beings in potential,’ a lovely phrase by the way, but a fetus is not a potential human. It is an inevitable human. Unless something interferes with its development, a fertilized egg will become a human being. The only thing that separates it from a thirty-year-old woman is thirty years and 9 months.”

The fear she felt was quickly being displaced by a frustrated rage. Her face burned with anger. “It’s just part of a woman’s body and she has the right to do whatever she chooses with her own body.”

“That’s not really true, you know. Taking drugs is illegal and so is prostitution. And a fetus is not part of a woman’s body. It’s not an appendix that can be cut out and thrown away whenever it should prove to be a little troublesome. Every fetus is made up of 46 distinct chromosomes, only half of which are shared by the mother. The fetus is a genetically distinct individual connected to the mother through its umbilical cord. You might as well say a breastfeeding baby is part of her body, too, and she’s entitled to kill him whenever he gets to be a little inconvenient.”

“You twisted son of a bitch.” she hissed, arching her back off the hard, steel table and tugging at her restraints. “I don’t know who you are, but I don’t want to do this anymore. I haven’t seen your face, I can’t identify you, just let me go.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he said. “Besides, that’s not really on the subject, is it? Do you have anything to add to your argument? So far, I remain unpersuaded.”

She was half-crazed with fear and frustration. “How can I convince you when you’re the judge and jury? I’m helpless. You’ve already made up your mind and I can’t do a thing to stop you, can I?”

“That’s rather the point, isn’t it? Do you have anything else to add? Last chance, you know.”

She couldn’t think of a single argument. Her mind wasn’t blank. It was too full. Frantic questions and desperate hopes flashed through her brain and tore at her concentration like sharks in a feeding frenzy.

“I’m sorry, your time is up.” He looked down at the instrument tray and selected a battered pair of pruning shears. She watched as he carefully placed the blades of the shears on either side of her big toe and clipped it off. The toe popped from her foot and rolled across the white tile floor. It came to rest with its red-painted nail facing up. For a breathless moment, she was too stunned to scream. Then an anguished cry surged out of her.

“No need to be a baby about it. Besides, no one can hear you. And if you’re screaming, you can’t argue with me. Then I’ll be forced to continue with my little procedure.” He reached over and clipped the second toe from the same foot. She

screamed again, but quickly clamped her mouth down on the sound. Tears ran from her eyes and her body was shaking so hard the metal fixtures on the restraints rattled.

“That’s better,” he said soothingly. “Do you have any further points to make before I continue?”

She knew she was dead. He had just hurt her worse than she knew she could be hurt. And he wasn’t going to stop until all her blood pooled around his ankles. She frantically searched for alternatives, but the pain in her foot was a searing distraction. She couldn’t contain her fear and all at once she lost control of her bodily functions. Hot urine ran down the cheeks of her buttocks and beneath her shaking legs.

“I’m waiting,” the man said. He swung the pruning shears at the end of his arm like a pendulum. Blood ran down the blades and dripped to the floor. She wanted to say something, but all that came out of her mouth was a whimper.

“Well then, if there’s nothing further.” He brought the shears back up to her foot. Even before he made the next cut, she began to scream.