

GIVE ME YOUR HAND

PROLOGUE

I guess I always knew, in some subterranean way, Diane and I would end up back together.

We are bound, ankle to ankle, a monstrous three-legged race.

Accidental accomplices. Wary conspirators.

Or Siamese twins, fused in some hidden place.

It's that powerful, this thing we share. A murky history, its narrative near impenetrable. We keep telling it to ourselves, noting its twists and turns, trying to make sense of it. And hiding it from everyone else.

Sometimes it feels like Diane is a corner of myself broken off and left to roam my body, floating through my blood.

On occasional nights, stumbling to the bathroom after a bad dream, a Diane dream, I avoid the mirror, averting my eyes, leaving the light off, some primitive part of my half-asleep brain certain that if I looked, she might be there. (*Cover your mirrors after dark*, my great-grandma used to say. *Or they trap the dreamer's wandering soul.*)

So, even though I haven't seen her in years, it isn't truly a surprise when Diane appears at the Severin Lab, my workplace, the

Megan Abbott

building in which I spend most of my waking life. *Of all the labs in all the world, she had to walk into mine.* And everything begins again.

The strangest part is how little we actually know about each other. Not our birthdays, our favorite songs, who made our hearts beat faster, or didn't. We were friends, if Diane is friends with anyone, only for a few months and long ago.

But we do know the one thing no one else in the world knows about the other.

The only important thing.

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The world is blood-hot and personal.

—Sylvia Plath

THEN

This was twelve years ago. We were seventeen, Diane and me, and for the eight or nine months of our senior year, we shared an energy that crackled in both of us, a drive, a hunger, a singing ambition.

Then, one night, everything broke.

We were at my house, my mom's cramped, Lysol-laden house, thick with rescue animals, and absent all privacy. None of the doors fully shut, swollen wood in cheap frames, accordion doors off their tracks. But she told me anyway.

When it started, we were sitting at either end of my twin bed doing our *Hamlet* study questions, Diane with her meticulous handwriting and tidy nails, wearing one of her dozen soft-as-lamb sweaters—a girl so refined she could even get a holiday job at the perfume counter at the fancy department store. She always came here to study, even though the house she lived in with her grandfather was three times the size of ours.

Here we were, so tightly quartered we could hear my mom already creeping to bed, the *slith-slith* of her slippers.

Things felt off from the start. Each time I read out a question

(“What is Hamlet’s central crisis?”), Diane would look at me blankly. Each time, the same distracted look, stroking the locket around her neck as if it were a genie’s bottle.

“Diane,” I said, crossing my legs, the narrow mattress undulating with every move, scrunched pillows, spiral notebooks tilting, our cross-country letter jackets and itchy scarves swarmed around our legs, “is this about what happened in class today?”

Because something had happened: Ms. Cameron had asked Diane to read aloud Claudius’s speech—the best in the whole play—but Diane, pale as Hamlet’s ghost himself, refused to open her book, arms folded and eyes blinking. When she did finally submit, the words came slow as pine sap, as that cough syrup my mom used to give me that tasted like the inside of a dying tree. *Diane, Diane, are you okay?*

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It was hard to argue with that, and I wondered if we should just drop it. But there was something hovering behind Diane’s eyes. Diane, who’d never shared a private thought with me that wasn’t about chemistry or college scholarships or the fairness of the ionic-compound question on the last exam.

I admit it: I wanted to know.

“Kit,” Diane said, gripping her little Signet *Hamlet* in her hand now, the gold Jesus ring from her grandfather gleaming, “did you mean what you said in class? About Claudius having no conscience?”

I could feel something happening, something heavy in the room, a heat shuddering off Diane, her neck pink and pink spots at her temples.

“Sure,” I said. “He kills his own brother to get what he wants. Which means he just has no morals.”

For a moment, neither of us said anything, the air in the room pressing our faces with thickish fingers. And what was that buzzing? The halogen bulb? The chugging old laptop the PTA gave all the students who couldn’t afford computers? Or was it like that time I found Sadie, our scuffed-up lap cat, under the porch, covered in flies?

“Kit,” she said, her voice quiet and even, “do you think it could happen in real life?”

“What?”

“For someone to have no conscience.”

“Yes,” I said so quickly I surprised myself. I believed it, utterly.

Diane didn’t say anything, and her hand wrapped tight around that delicate locket, tugging it down, leaving a red ring on her long white neck.

“Diane,” I said, “what is it?”

We sat a moment, the buzzing still buzzing and my feet nearly asleep from stillness.

“Did someone do something to you?” I said. “Did someone hurt you?”

I’d wondered about it before, many times. I’d known her only a few months and Diane was so quiet, so private, not like any of the rest of us. Private in all the body ways, taking her gym shirt off only behind her locker door. And in how she dressed, like a virgin princess.

Or maybe I assumed that of everyone. It seemed like everyone had sad stories if you scratched deep enough.

“No one did anything to me. I’m talking about something I did,” she said, eyes lowered. “I’m talking about myself.”

“What did you do?” I couldn’t imagine Diane doing anything that wasn’t careful and correct.

“I can’t say it out loud. I’ve never said it.”

With anyone else I knew, I could think of a million possibilities. Stole a sweater from the mall, cheated on a test, rolled on molly all through the school day, too much Baileys and three furtive blow jobs before the party was over. But not Diane.

“Did you crash your granddad’s truck?”

“No.”

A sinking feeling began. A feeling of circling something dark.

“Are you pregnant?” I asked, even though it seemed impossible.

“No,” she said. And I heard something *click-click* in her throat, or mine.

She looked up at me, those golden lashes batting fiercely, but her voice even and calm: “It’s so much worse.”

Smart never mattered much until you, Diane.

I’d always gotten good grades, maybe good enough to get a scholarship at City Tech. But I wasn’t thinking even that far ahead, much less as far as you.

You had a plan for yourself, for what you wanted to be, and you weren’t taking any chances. You were relentless. Everything had to be perfect, fingernails precise little half-moons; those goldenrod mechanical pencils you used, the erasers always untouched. Your answers were always right. Every time. Teachers used your tests for the answer keys.

What I didn’t know then was that all that perfection, held so tightly, can be a shield, either to keep something out or to keep something in. To hide it.

And your ambition was itself a gift—to us both—but also some dark evidence.

Give Me Your Hand

“Mom,” I said, “she’s so serious. She works all the time. She gets up at five to run and then do an hour’s homework before school.”

“Good for her.”

“She’s learning German on her headphones while she runs. She says she’s going to be a scientist and work for the government.”

These were things I didn’t think real people did.

“We used to call them grinds,” my mom said, smiling. “But good for her.”

“Mom, I just...” A yearning inside me I couldn’t explain, to know things, to be bigger, to care more. I’d never felt it before Diane, but now it was there, humming inside. And my mom seemed to sense it, eyes resting on me as I twisted my hands together, trying to explain.

“Well,” she said, “you’re the smartest person I know.”

Diane, after you told me your secret, I’d lie awake at night, staring at the light on my phone.

I’d think about you. Picture you closing your books at last, scattering eraser rubbings (you had to erase sometimes, didn’t you?) into the trash. Scrubbing your face. Brushing your hair until it gleamed moonlight.

I wondered if you thought about what you’d done all the time, like I now did.

Did you rest when you finally shut your eyes?

Or was that the worst moment? The time when you thought of what you’d done, and how, maybe worse still, you’d gotten away with it. When you get away with something it’s yours only, forever. Heavy and irremediable.

* * *

Megan Abbott

Sometimes I wondered: Why did you pick me? Attach yourself to me on your first day at our school? Was I the nicest, the friendliest? The easiest, the smartest, second-smartest to you?

Or was it mere chance, the two of us landing side by side at cross-country, legs bent, at the gate? The two of us in chem lab, elbows on the slab, working the math of it all?

Or was it me who picked you?

N O W

The halls are quiet, soothing.

I always try to get there at least an hour before the others, if I can. Sometimes, I skip the elevator, slow and halting. Take the stairs two at a time, coffee splashing up my wrist and arm, trying to beat the clock, beat the relentless ambition of the other postdocs and near-postdocs.

Dr. Severin probably won't be in for hours, her schedule mysterious and unpredictable, but we swipe security key cards to get in, so she'll know I'm here. Somehow, I think she'd know anyway. *The hardest worker I've ever seen*—that's how all my past advisers always described me. I want her to know too, and the card is proof.

In the fourteen months I've been working at the Severin Lab, I've been the first to arrive every day but two, once after being sideswiped by a pickup truck en route and once when I was stuck in the elevator and the lab tech with the sequoia-thick arms had to pry the doors open.

But today, it's more important than ever to be first.

In the custodian's wheeled trash can, I spot the plastic cups from the day before, champagne foam dried to fine powder.

I smile a little just thinking about it. A nervous smile.

We'd been summoned to the conference room at five o'clock for the announcement we'd all been waiting for. It was delivered by Dr. Severin in her usual dispassionate tone.

"We've received news," she said, back of her hand smoothing the skunk swoop in her black mane. "Our NIH grant application was successful. Planning will begin immediately."

As if by magic, Dr. Severin's assistant arrived with a jumbo bottle of California's finest and a sleeve of plastic flutes.

We all tried to match Dr. Severin's cool, but it was a losing battle. Me with my dumb grin. Zell's face Swedish-fish red. Juwon, unable to stop rocking back on his heels. Even Maxim, reserved and watchful and the most senior of us all, looked like he might weep with joy. We'd all been waiting so long. I can't pretend my heart didn't lift like a fist in my chest.

There were toasts, tongue-tied. *Here's to snagging that last fleck of fat on the federal budget!*

After one twitchy-mouthed sip of Barefoot Bubbly, Dr. Severin made her excuses and we all drifted back to work, keeping our excitement to ourselves.

I imagined Dr. Severin going home, popping open a bottle of real French champagne with her lover, whoever that was, sliding off her expensive shoes, and tasting sweet victory from one of those special glasses shaped like Marie Antoinette's breast.

For us, it had been different, all of us heading home to our various postgrad shoeboxes, eating microwaved burritos, hovering over our laptops. All night, we'd engaged in a group-text crop-

dust, the announcement like a starter's pistol firing. The news was the best we could hope for. But now came the big decision: Who among us would be chosen for the research team?

The rumor is there will be only three of us on the grant. Someone saw the staff line on the proposed budget. It's a collaboration with Neuropsych, which will eat up most of the funds, leaving room for only three postdocs out of a pool of nine. Inside, we were all surely thinking the same thing: *It should be me*. All of us toiling years in the lab, our necks permanently crooked over microscopes, our faces cadaverous from never seeing the sun. We all felt we'd put our time in, and we all shared one thought: *This chance should be mine*. All of us, the rest of the day, watching one another over our slide trays, through our Erlenmeyers, our clamped columns of ether. *This is mine*. I thought it, a lot.

Eh, Alex, the newest among us, teased, who really wants to spend two years delving into the dark heart of PMDD?

We all do, I said. And you know it.

Premenstrual dysphoric disorder, that's the subject of the study. A set of symptoms with no agreed-upon cause. Some kind of catastrophic monthly dance between hormones and the feeling and thinking parts of the brain. Striking every month, it's like PMS only much, much worse. Debilitating mood swings, uncontrollable rage. Abnormal signaling among cells, that's what scientists only recently discovered. An intrinsic difference in the way these women respond to sex hormones. After decades of doubt about whether it even existed, now science has proven PMDD is not only real, it's part of the genetic makeup. The women can't help it, are slaves to it.

Behind their hands, behind their smirks, some of the postdocs call it Hatchet PMS. Medusa Menses. They're all men except me,

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They all look at me, as they do whenever anything related to the female body comes up.

“Well”—Alex jumps in, thankfully—“if men could get PMDD, we’d have all these answers already.”

I can’t help but smile even as Zell rolls his eyes and makes a jacking-off gesture with his hand.

In front of me is a packet of the case studies that have been circulating. I can’t stop reading them, like the old *Police Blotter* magazines my grandfather used to keep in the basement. The British woman who stabbed a fellow barmaid to death. Another who fatally pinned her boyfriend to a telephone pole with her car. The teen who set fire to homes all around her drowsy suburb. The woman in Texas who attacked her sleeping mother, beating her with a hammer until she was dead. All of these laid at the feet of PMDD by canny lawyers, enthralling the tabloids, titillating the public.

Those are the extreme cases, but they’re the ones we discuss in the lab. They’re easier to talk about than the average PMDD patient suffering her slow burn of monthly anguish, crying jags, bad thoughts whirring, boomeranging all day, the crushing thunk of insomnia, lying in bed, sweat-soaked, waiting for the blood to come.

So, Owens, Zell once asked me, reading from one of the studies, have you ever sobbed for six hours straight because your cat looked at you funny?

Do you find yourself consuming entire pound cakes before that time of the month?

Have you destroyed all your relationships because you can’t manage your emotions?

What relationships? I wanted to say with a laugh. My head down over my work for the past decade (a doctorate by age thirty doesn’t

happen any other way, I told my mom), I haven't had any time. And I've never even suffered from cramps, but since I'm the only woman other than Dr. Severin (and we never talk about it in front of her), I'm supposed to know more, know differently, know something about the purple marrow of female rage. The fear all men have that there's something inside us that shifts, and turns. A living thing, once dormant, stirring now, and filled with rage.

"Yes, yes," she is saying into her slender blue phone as she strides into the room.

Dr. Severin doesn't waste time on anything, including greetings, pleasantries. When she does, they are delivered with mild contempt.

"Can you see what her folder says?" whispers Zell, but I won't look at him, at the moisture blistering on his pimpled prodigy forehead. "Is it the grant budget?"

But none of us want to be caught looking and instead we ponder the long conference table, its old wood clouded with coffee rings.

Occasionally, I sneak a glance at Dr. Severin. That face so long and severe, her mouth always brightly colored—today's lipstick I would call placenta red—and teeth white as a shark's. She moves with the brisk efficiency of a general and no one has ever seen her eat, drink a cup of coffee, or hold an umbrella.

Sometimes, as I squeeze coffee from my shirt cuff or chew through a full pack of gum in a single hour or dig into the burn gouge on the toe of my low-top from that time Zell spilled sulfuric acid, I wonder how it is that I'm here at all.

But it was no accident. Dr. Severin plucked me from the masses of pedigreed doctoral students, the only one who's ever come from her undergrad scholarship pool, the only one with a bachelor's

from a state school at all. The only one with a laptop that wheezes like a wind through an accordion when you turn it on. The only one with a second job (cater waiter), much less a third (tutoring), until she got me more fellowship money.

At the original interview, Severin claimed she remembered me from that scholarship ceremony years ago when she handed me the check in a cloud of perfume, the click of her heels on the spit-shined stage.

You were the only one with a serious face, she said.

Once, I spotted an age-browned photo on her desk, a girl with slack black pigtails who might have been a young Dr. Severin, cowboy hat and cutoffs and hooded eyes, biting into a piece of fried rattlesnake.

Somehow it fits with her python boots, her zebra-streaked hair.

She rarely speaks to me but occasionally winks in a way that might be a facial tic, but I'll take it for something else.

I've been around strong women my whole life, and I know their ways.

"Yes. Got it," she says.

We all watch as Dr. Severin finishes her call (no *Good-bye*, no *We'll talk later*), slides the phone into the smooth leather folio. Sitting down, she trains her eyes on us, settling in her chair, neck gliding back like a satisfied snake, its gullet thick with warm mice.

"I have some more news," she says, then her eyes drift to a paper in her hand, and we all wait again.

Finally, I blurt out, "What is it?"

Everyone looks at me, and Severin does that twitch that just might be a smile.

"We're going to have a new addition to the lab starting tomorrow," Severin says.

Give Me Your Hand

All our eyes blink in unison. *What does this mean about the slots—*

“Don’t overthink it,” she tells us. But in that instant, we already have.

No one says anything. We know we’ll confer in hushed asides under the fume hoods later, over honey buns at the rust-pocked vending machine.

“And she’s a catch,” Severin adds, setting her paper down, looking over, I swear, at me, her eyes with those strange vertical-slit pupils, like a cat’s.

A she, I think. Worse still. It’s a she.

I swear, this is true: The second before Severin says her name, I feel it. I feel it under my fingernails, feel it buzzing in my ears.

How can I know? I can’t. I haven’t heard or uttered the name since high school. But I know.

“Her name is Diane Fleming. Harvard. I poached her, snatched her right out of Walter Freudlinger’s wrinkly old hands.”

and they can't even talk about it without twisting their mouths or ducking their heads or making *Carrie* or Lizzie Borden jokes.

But they all want in on the grant. It's the sexy one, maybe a career-maker. I've been waiting for it, working for it so long.

It's not even seven a.m. when I ride up in the elevator. With the grant news strumming through my head all night, I couldn't fall asleep and finally gave up trying.

The minute I step off the elevator, I notice the smell.

Hot, sharp, scalding, it gets stronger as I head down the long, frigid hallway, its browning ceiling tiles and peeling plaster, the mausoleum feel.

At first I think it's some unholy mix of Cheese Nips and the off-brand champagne. But the smell coming from the animal unit is too powerful, powerful enough to feel like a warning.

"Don't go in the feed room," a low voice calls out, and it's Serge, my favorite fellow early-lurker, fluttering like a skipper moth down the hallway toward the colony room.

Serge is the head lab tech: tall, Russian, with a severe jaw and black eyes. Quiet and fastidious and always a little sad. Alex calls him the Cat because he moves so silently—slow, stealthy, his feet never making any sound. Once, over tea in the break room, he told me he took ballet until he was fourteen and his father got a good look at the dance belt he was supposed to wear. *He informed me it was time to start looking like a man.*

And he smiled that sad Serge smile.

Despite his warning, I can't help but stop at the door of the feed room, propped open by a biohazard bin.

Coffee cup against my chest, hand over my mouth, I see it, the slick pile of rotting mice on the floor, tumors splitting their violet skin, loose and massing.

There must be a dozen of them.

Serge arrives behind me, the only sound the slight squeak of the lab gloves he's putting on.

"Watch your head," Serge says, pointing one long gloved finger to a browning ceiling panel. "There may be more."

I step back quickly, lifting my eyes to the ceiling tiles, swollen with age, heat, air.

"I don't think I've ever looked up before," I say. And it's true. At least, not in a long time.

We walk together, Serge carrying the mice in one of the red bio-hazard bags.

"At least it wasn't the ferrets," I say. We had a pack of them for the gonadal study. All the techs hated them, their heavy musk and screeching.

"These are not our mice," Serge says. "Ours are secure. And much more refined. These are mutts. Maybe visitors from Panda Garden across the street."

"Do they really think our feed is better than theirs?" I say, smiling, but inside I'm thinking about the bits and pieces still on the floor. Serge will have to go back with a mop.

"So I guess you heard about the big grant?" I say.

"Oh, yes," he says. "I can smell it."

"What?" I pause. "The adrenaline?"

But he merely smiles in that way he has. "Have a good day," he says, heading toward the animal-waste dock, waving the bag slightly, like a bullfighter's cape.

When I step inside G-21, Alex is already there, Styrofoam cups in hand, a pouchy-eyed wink.

Alex.

Alex always brings me a milky second coffee from the Snack Hut. Just like he always has gum in his pocket for me and will join me in my takeout order from the egg-sandwich place. And when Zell makes one of his *Mother, you be trypsin* puns, or Maxim unpacks his fastidious, girlfriend-prepared bento boxes for lunch, or that time one of Dr. Irwin's postdocs was spotted walking the old man's sheepdogs, we share knowing glances.

Alex doesn't usually come in early, but he often stays late. A few times we've found ourselves in the lab alone together close to midnight, both working under the fume hoods, our faces close. We are the only ones who don't seem to have anyone waiting at home.

"Thanks," I say now, taking the cup, "early bird."

A few gulps and I start working, checking my cell cultures under the microscope, then carefully returning every flask to the incubator.

He's watching, glancing at the newspaper, sipping.

"You are so damn precise," he says. "The way your hands move. In ascending order, I like to watch you cutting, scraping, tweezing, pipetting."

"And with my dainty girl hands," I say. "How could I possibly get them to do such complicated things?"

He leans down closer, his elbow to my elbow alongside our gray coffee. "Don't take this personally, Kit, but your hands are really big. Did you rassle steer?"

"No steer," I say. "Only small-handed men."

"I figured you for one of those 4-H champs on some Kansas prairie. Five brothers and you. Hands like wooden paddles."

"It's amazing I can even button my own shirt," I say, splaying my fingers.

"Sometimes you miss a button," he replies. "But don't worry. No one ever notices."

He's like that, the strangest kind of flirt, and I love it, used to so much worse, the shoulder-squeezing predations of the older researchers. The fumbles and porn-slicked joking of the postdocs, never sure what to do with females around. When you meet the women in their lives—Maxim's multilingual, opera-singing girlfriend, Juwon's dazzling mathematician wife—it becomes more confusing.

Moments later, when Alex has turned back to his coffee, which slaps all over his lab bench when he sets it down, I sneak a look at my hands, palms up. I can't tell if they're small or large; they're just hands, blue-gloved and functioning. But it makes me think about touching him, or him touching me, or something.

Which, I'm sure, was the idea.

In my secret thoughts, I imagine Dr. Severin will pick Alex and me for two of the three slots on the PMDD grant. Together, we'll devote ourselves to the potentially groundbreaking work that she and her colleagues over in Neuropsych will produce. Together, we'll toil, head to head, for two years or more. It will fill our days and evenings and inspire and frustrate and impel us. It will be a thing we share. And it is, as Maxim once admitted, the kind of study that can *make your career. Make your name.*

I think about it a lot because the nights are long and lonely and I've always been partial to men like Alex. The ones whose eyes dance when I appear, who so clearly like me but also never bother me about it. Never demand too much from women, least of all from a woman who works sixty hours a week and has the lab hands—rough, scrubbed raw-red—to prove it.

If I didn't know better, had I never heard the Ivy League ease in his voice—the voice of someone who'd always been listened to,

whatever he said, his whole life—I'd think Alex was nearer to one of the boys from back home, the Golden Fry, the speedway, a million years ago. Because he's easy. Carefree. Or is it careless?

He's the only one in the lab without a coal-miner cast to his skin, all of us sealed up in there, seldom seeing high noon, our bodies like the skin under an old Band-Aid, puckered and tender.

But not Alex, with his golden skin, a look of striking health.

Give him time, Zell insisted when Alex first started a few months ago. *He's still got blood in his veins.*

I always know I like a man if I can't remember what he looks like when he's not around. When Alex isn't here, all I can picture is how tall he is, and how he's always smiling at me.

There's the sound of swooping wings in the air just before ten a.m.

It's Dr. Severin arriving, her coat open, billowing behind her.

"I heard Irwin's postdocs conspiring in the men's room," Juwon says. "They're angling hard for the PMDD slots. When do we find out?"

"It might be today," Maxim says, feigning nonchalance. "But it might be next week."

"It better be soon," Juwon says, shaking his head. "I've been at labs where the longer the wait, the more people start to go crazy."

"Crazy?" I ask.

Juwon nodded. Maxim did too. I didn't like the looks in their eyes. I'd heard their tales from other labs, postdocs contaminating each other's reagents, mislabeling bottles, swapping lids on cell cultures. *Labotage.*

"There will be blood," Zell says, grinning widely, nearly swirling his tongue, never tiring of menstruation jokes as long as Dr. Severin isn't around. But the excessive delicacy and squirminess of the other men, except Alex, is even worse.

The truth is, we all know PMDD's hot stuff. Rumor is Dr. Severin is closing in on *something*, maybe even approaching something that approaches a cure. A cure, that is, other than having your uterus and ovaries yanked out. A cure for a condition only marginally treatable, if it even exists at all, which not everyone believes it does. Dr. Severin believes it does. I do.

At its worst, it's led women to self-destructive acts. Or destructive ones. In the lab, we've all heard the horror stories: Women in its grip hitting their boyfriends over the head with frying pans, rear-ending their children's teachers' cars in the school parking lot. Road rage, baby shaking, worse.

What woman can't imagine it? Dr. Severin asked me once, one of the few conversations I ever had with her alone.

Imagine what? I asked. We were standing at the dented tampon machine in the ladies' room, no less.

That, one month, the usual cramps and moodiness might suddenly spiral up into something larger, something you can't control.

I thought about it while trying to fall asleep that night, minnowing my way through the murk of all the women I'd known who'd made wrong choices or suffered diabolically or made others suffer, even me. Don't we all feel we have something banked down deep inside just waiting for its moment, the slow gathering of hot blood?

We take our seats around the battered conference table, waiting.

"PMDD is a disorder that affects three to eight percent of women," reads Zell from the research précis, adding, with a faint jeer, "and I know them all."

"Dr. Severin thinks it might be closer to ten percent," says Maxim. "That it's underdiagnosed among the women better at controlling it. Or hiding it."

They all look at me, as they do whenever anything related to the female body comes up.

“Well”—Alex jumps in, thankfully—“if men could get PMDD, we’d have all these answers already.”

I can’t help but smile even as Zell rolls his eyes and makes a jacking-off gesture with his hand.

In front of me is a packet of the case studies that have been circulating. I can’t stop reading them, like the old *Police Blotter* magazines my grandfather used to keep in the basement. The British woman who stabbed a fellow barmaid to death. Another who fatally pinned her boyfriend to a telephone pole with her car. The teen who set fire to homes all around her drowsy suburb. The woman in Texas who attacked her sleeping mother, beating her with a hammer until she was dead. All of these laid at the feet of PMDD by canny lawyers, enthralling the tabloids, titillating the public.

Those are the extreme cases, but they’re the ones we discuss in the lab. They’re easier to talk about than the average PMDD patient suffering her slow burn of monthly anguish, crying jags, bad thoughts whirring, boomeranging all day, the crushing thunk of insomnia, lying in bed, sweat-soaked, waiting for the blood to come.

So, Owens, Zell once asked me, reading from one of the studies, have you ever sobbed for six hours straight because your cat looked at you funny?

Do you find yourself consuming entire pound cakes before that time of the month?

Have you destroyed all your relationships because you can’t manage your emotions?

What relationships? I wanted to say with a laugh. My head down over my work for the past decade (a doctorate by age thirty doesn’t

happen any other way, I told my mom), I haven't had any time. And I've never even suffered from cramps, but since I'm the only woman other than Dr. Severin (and we never talk about it in front of her), I'm supposed to know more, know differently, know something about the purple marrow of female rage. The fear all men have that there's something inside us that shifts, and turns. A living thing, once dormant, stirring now, and filled with rage.

"Yes, yes," she is saying into her slender blue phone as she strides into the room.

Dr. Severin doesn't waste time on anything, including greetings, pleasantries. When she does, they are delivered with mild contempt.

"Can you see what her folder says?" whispers Zell, but I won't look at him, at the moisture blistering on his pimpled prodigy forehead. "Is it the grant budget?"

But none of us want to be caught looking and instead we ponder the long conference table, its old wood clouded with coffee rings.

Occasionally, I sneak a glance at Dr. Severin. That face so long and severe, her mouth always brightly colored—today's lipstick I would call placenta red—and teeth white as a shark's. She moves with the brisk efficiency of a general and no one has ever seen her eat, drink a cup of coffee, or hold an umbrella.

Sometimes, as I squeeze coffee from my shirt cuff or chew through a full pack of gum in a single hour or dig into the burn gouge on the toe of my low-top from that time Zell spilled sulfuric acid, I wonder how it is that I'm here at all.

But it was no accident. Dr. Severin plucked me from the masses of pedigreed doctoral students, the only one who's ever come from her undergrad scholarship pool, the only one with a bachelor's

from a state school at all. The only one with a laptop that wheezes like a wind through an accordion when you turn it on. The only one with a second job (cater waiter), much less a third (tutoring), until she got me more fellowship money.

At the original interview, Severin claimed she remembered me from that scholarship ceremony years ago when she handed me the check in a cloud of perfume, the click of her heels on the spit-shined stage.

You were the only one with a serious face, she said.

Once, I spotted an age-browned photo on her desk, a girl with slack black pigtails who might have been a young Dr. Severin, cowboy hat and cutoffs and hooded eyes, biting into a piece of fried rattlesnake.

Somehow it fits with her python boots, her zebra-streaked hair.

She rarely speaks to me but occasionally winks in a way that might be a facial tic, but I'll take it for something else.

I've been around strong women my whole life, and I know their ways.

"Yes. Got it," she says.

We all watch as Dr. Severin finishes her call (no *Good-bye*, no *We'll talk later*), slides the phone into the smooth leather folio. Sitting down, she trains her eyes on us, settling in her chair, neck gliding back like a satisfied snake, its gullet thick with warm mice.

"I have some more news," she says, then her eyes drift to a paper in her hand, and we all wait again.

Finally, I blurt out, "What is it?"

Everyone looks at me, and Severin does that twitch that just might be a smile.

"We're going to have a new addition to the lab starting tomorrow," Severin says.

Give Me Your Hand

All our eyes blink in unison. *What does this mean about the slots—*

“Don’t overthink it,” she tells us. But in that instant, we already have.

No one says anything. We know we’ll confer in hushed asides under the fume hoods later, over honey buns at the rust-pocked vending machine.

“And she’s a catch,” Severin adds, setting her paper down, looking over, I swear, at me, her eyes with those strange vertical-slit pupils, like a cat’s.

A she, I think. Worse still. It’s a she.

I swear, this is true: The second before Severin says her name, I feel it. I feel it under my fingernails, feel it buzzing in my ears.

How can I know? I can’t. I haven’t heard or uttered the name since high school. But I know.

“Her name is Diane Fleming. Harvard. I poached her, snatched her right out of Walter Freudlinger’s wrinkly old hands.”