

THE DEADENING by Kerry Peresta

EXCERPT

Prologue

The stiff bristles of the brush grew coppery as he scrubbed back and forth, back and forth. Wrinkling his nose at the smell, he groped for the mask he'd bought, looped it over his head, and snugged it into place.

He dipped the brush in the red-tinged solution in a blue, plastic bowl beside him on the floor, and continued scrubbing. Fifteen minutes later, he emptied the bowl down the toilet and shoved everything he'd used into a trash bag. He fought to staunch the bile creeping up his windpipe, but his throat constricted and he gagged. After retching into the sink, he turned on the faucet and splashed water on his face. Paused to take deep breaths. He could do this. He had to do this. He gripped the edge of the counter and stared out the bathroom window.

She'd not told anyone. Thank God for that. No one could know. No one would ever know. He'd make sure.

He walked to his garage, opened his car trunk, tossed in the latest trash bag. His hands felt icy. He rubbed them together, wiggled his fingers, and slammed the trunk shut.

Admittedly, her terror had excited him. Confusion. Dawning realization in her expression. His lips curved upward into a smile, then disintegrated. Reliving it didn't change anything. He needed to move forward.

He returned and studied the carpet. In spite of his efforts, the stain still needed work. He cursed, dropped to his knees, and pounded the dampness with a fist.

Through a veil of fatigue, he watched in horror as the kidney-shaped stain stood and pointed an accusatory finger at him. He blinked, hard. Was he hallucinating? How long had he been without sleep? He crabbed backwards, leaned against the wall, pulled his knees to his chest and squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them some moments later, the blood-apparition had disappeared.

He groaned.

He stared at the ceiling until his brain spit out a solution.

The problem lay in the other room. That's how he looked at her now.

A problem to solve.

He rose from the floor and walked out.

His eyes slid from her pale face, down her form, to her feet. He no longer thought of her as warm, soft, desirable. She had been so scared...eyes wide and unblinking as she fell. He shook his head and pushed the image away.

Nesting her in towels so her blood wouldn't pool on the couch, her bronze-sandaled feet with their shiny, pink toenails hung over the edge. He looked away. "Get a grip, man. Just do it."

The towels fell away when he picked her up. He wound them back around her, careful to tuck in the edges. His heartbeat slammed his ribs.

She was fragile, a little bit of a thing, like a bird. He drew his index finger across her lips. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "If you had just...if you had only..." His voice trailed away. Jaw clenched, he carried her to his car.

Chapter One

Nathan ambled along sidewalks that wound through the manicured hospital grounds, fishing in his pocket for a lighter. He lit the cigarette dangling from his lips and inhaled deeply, his smile saturated with nicotine's unholy bliss.

"Thank God," he mumbled around the cigarette, and withdrew it from his lips, stretching. He glanced over his shoulder at the brightly lit ER entrance to Mercy Hospital, rubbing his neck. He rolled his shoulders, inhaled several deep drags from the cigarette, dropped it, and ground it beneath his shoe. "These night shifts are killing me." He groaned and gazed at the sky. Clouds hid a full moon. He'd been grateful to get the med tech job, but after two months of bodily fluid testing and storage, he was bored. He needed a challenge.

Nathan followed his typical route through the hedged lawn, almost on auto-pilot, so when he stumbled and sprawled onto the grass face-first, he was stunned. What had tripped him? Cursing softly, he explored his cheeks, nose, forehead. No damage done that he could tell. "Klutz," he berated himself, pushing up to hands and knees.

Something soft and warm lay beneath his palms. His breathing sped up. He looked down, but it was too dark to see. Trembling, his fingers inched their way to lips, nose, eyes, stiff knots of hair. His mouth dropped in horror. The clouds obligingly slid off the moon and revealed a woman's body, her hair blood-matted, her face ghostly white. The grass around her head was rusty with blood. He edged his head toward her lips to check her breathing. Shallow, but at least she was alive.

He scrambled to his feet, fighting nausea and staring at his palms, sticky with the woman's blood. Shrieking for help, he raced into the hospital and skidded to a stop in front of the desk. The ER nurses behind the reception desk squinted at him like he was deranged.

"Possible head injury!" He flailed an arm at the entrance. "Someone, anyone, come quick!"

A male nurse and two aides followed him outside, shoes pounding the sidewalk at full gallop. The tech stopped, turned, and signaled them to tread carefully as they parted ways with the sidewalk and navigated the shrubbery in the dark. Single file, panting, they tiptoed through the shadows until the tech raised a palm for them to stop.

"Here," he hissed at the nurse, and held a point like a bird dog.

The nurse dropped to the ground and clicked a flashlight on. “Ohmigosh,” he whispered. He lifted the woman’s thin, pale wrist and glanced at his watch. Satisfied that she had a pulse, he slapped the flashlight into Nathan’s bloodied palm. “Stay with her!” He rushed inside.

Within minutes, looky-loos poured from the ER and clustered around the limp form.

“Move back!” Nathan stretched out his arms like a cop directing traffic. “She’s barely breathing!” His glanced nervously at the ER entrance.

The crowd didn’t yield an inch. The ER doors whooshed open. A stretcher clattered down the sidewalk and onto the dew-damp grass. Chills shivered up the tech’s spine as the ashen pallor of death climbed from the woman’s neck to her face. He dropped to the ground and picked up her hand. The paramedic team drew closer, their flashlights piercing the darkness with slivers of light. The crowd eased apart to let them through.

Nathan bent closer to the woman, and whispered, “Hang in there. Help is on the way.”

The stretcher slid to a stop beside him. The paramedics dropped to their knees, stabilized the woman’s head with a brace, staunched the bleeding, and wrapped the wound. They eased her onto the stretcher and rumbled away. The aides shared nervous smiles of relief. They looked at Nathan, then followed the paramedic team back inside.

Nathan, his heartbeat finally slowing, called, “Thanks for the assist, guys!” as they walked away.

The crowd dispersed with curious glances at Nathan, who watched until the group disappeared behind the ER’s double glass doors. He heaved a sigh of relief and swiped perspiration off his forehead. He patted his scrubs pocket for a cigarette, reconsidered, and trotted toward the ER entrance.

After the automatic doors parted, he jogged past two closed-door exam rooms and paused at a third, wide open. He looked inside.

The paramedics shared their observations with the ER doctor on call as he deftly explored the woman’s wounds. When he finished, he nodded, barked instructions, and pointed at the bed. In seconds, the woman’s transfer from stretcher to bed was complete. One of the nurses whisked a blood pressure cuff around her arm. Another hooked an IV bag to a chrome stand, pierced the skin on the back of the woman’s hand, slid in a needle, and taped it down.

The tech stepped back from the door to allow the paramedics to exit. Holding his breath, he stole into the room and crept past a floor-to-ceiling supply cabinet. He planted both palms onto the smooth, white walls behind him and inched sideways, melting into the corner next to a shelf holding tongue depressors, a box of plastic gloves, and a sanitizer dispenser.

“Pulse one-fifteen.” The nurse studied the blood pressure cuff. “Blood pressure eight-five over fifty.”

“Need a trach,” the doctor barked. “She’s bleeding out. Get some O neg in here.”

A blur of motion, two nurses and the ER doctor huddled around the woman’s body. When they stepped back, a laryngoscope, an endotracheal tube, and four sticky electric nodes leading to a cardiac monitor had been secured.

The medical team stilled, their eyes riveted to the monitors. The nurses wore sage green scrubs. Both had pink stethoscopes around their necks. The ER doctor had on a crisp, white jacket with his name scripted in black on the pocket. Nathan fidgeted and stuck his head out from the corner a little to focus on the screens.

The readings sputtered, stalled, plummeted.

“Code Blue!” The doctor spun around. A nurse jumped to the wall and slapped a flat, white square on the wall.

“*Code Blue!*” echoed through the ER’s intercom system. Frantic footsteps in the hall. Shouted instructions. Clanging metal. Squealing wheels. Nathan squeezed farther into the corner as the cart bearing life-saving electronic shock equipment exploded through the door.

“Brain must be swelling,” the doctor mumbled. He grabbed two paddles and swiped them together. “Clear!”

The woman’s body jolted. The doctor’s head jerked to the cardiac monitor. Flat.

“Clear!” He placed the paddles on the woman’s chest.

Her frail torso arched. The machine blipped an erratic cadence, then droned a steady hum.

The doctor cursed. “Clear!”

Another jolt. The monitor surged, sagged, then settled into a reassuring metronome blip. Tense faces relaxed. Applause spattered around the room.

The doctor blew out a long breath. “Okay, people, good job.” He smiled.

Within minutes, more lines snaked from the woman’s form. An orogastric tube drooped from the corner of her mouth, behind the intubation tube. A lead to measure brain waves clung to her forehead. The doctor studied each monitor in turn. Nathan let out the breath he’d been holding, slid down the wall into a crouch, and balanced on the balls of his feet.

“Any additional instructions, Doctor Bradford?” Brows raised, the nurse waited.

He rubbed his head thoughtfully. “Think she’s stable for now. CAT scan already ordered?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

“Tell them to expedite.” He cocked his head at the woman. “May be a long night. Watch her closely.” The doctor strode to the door, paused, and turned. He glanced at the tech huddled in the corner. “Good job, son.”

Nathan grinned and rose from his crouch, his chest puffed out a little. He’d never saved a life before. After a sympathetic glance at Mercy Hospital’s latest Jane Doe, he returned to the lab.