

Split Apart

No manicure was going to make Specialist Hansson look like a princess again. Nails too long, finger flesh peeled back and charred. The kerosene, wood and flames had cooked the skin and muscles of her hands and the human tissue had contracted up toward her forearm. Although she lay on a steel table, wisps of smoke rose from her split flesh: a crack in each of her thighs, her shins, her biceps, where her breasts had been. I was only supposed to look at her left hand to see if I could identify her ring, but on her chest, I saw the necklace she had been wearing seared into the blackened valley that was once pink cleavage. And out of my periphery, I couldn't help but notice that she had no face and had her face remained it would have been two halves of a whole. For some reason, her head had split in two from the crown to the chin. I saw parts of Hansson that I never expected to see: her throat from the inside out, the side of her teeth where her tongue would have rested, and speaking of the tongue, the whole length of it from her larynx to its tip. But the tongue was also in two parts. On the top left side of her parietal bone the flames had missed a one-inch piece of flesh. Having miraculously escaped the fire, a small section of long blond hair clung to that bit of scalp. The hair dangled off of Hansson's head like an escape ladder to nowhere.

I had never seen death like that outside of a movie or a picture. I carry the image of Specialist Hansson's charred body with me always. Sometimes when I see a young woman with long, flowing blond hair, I think of Hansson's remaining length of blond hair oddly intact on her blackened scalp by a one-inch chunk of skin, the fire had taken the rest.

After viewing her body, my body, still alive, moved mechanically. "Pretend that this didn't disturb you. Your Soldiers will be watching you. You are in charge of the company. You

have to be strong and in control,” I told myself. So I just moved my body: gathered my notebook, said something to the clerk, signed the document at the morgue’s desk, told my lieutenants to follow me to the hummer, told my driver to start it up, opened the Hummer’s plastic door, climbed in, buckled up, looked ahead. No crying. I had been trained well.

Outside the morgue, life went on. It was Memorial Day, a beautiful spring day, and the rice terraces made green waterfalls on the mountainsides. Sadly, my eyes didn’t see them.