

ORANGE **KAREN** TRIBUTE TO A WARRIOR

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Tribute to a Warrior
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Thank you.

Christina Esdon

Dedication

To our Orange Warrior, Karen DeLabar. Your unshakable courage, effervescent spirit, and zest for life are awe-inspiring.

Foreword

by Jennifer Gracen

If you're lucky in life, you have a best friend. (Aside from your spouse, for those of you who were about to say it's your spouse.) Your best friend is the first person you call when something goes right, because you want to share it with them more than anyone else. No one else will be happier for you than they will. And when something goes wrong, you need to hear your best friend's voice to ground you and help you feel better. That voice isn't even the voice of reason, necessarily, but the voice of your safe place. In your darkest moments, only talking to your best friend will comfort you. He or she is your emotional lifeline amid the swirling tides of life. And knowing that your best friend loves you no matter what, and accepts and appreciates you for who you are, unconditionally and completely, is a gift you never take for granted if you've got any sense.

Karen DeLabar is my best friend.

That's why I was asked to write the Foreword for this book, and I'm honored and privileged to do so.

Try to imagine how upset I was when her husband, Eric, texted me from the hospital on June 5, 2012 to tell me he'd had to bring her

back to the emergency room for the second time in two days. *What?* She'd had a fever, been sick over the weekend, but what the hell? Then, as hours passed, more horrific texts streamed in from Eric. They had no idea what was wrong with her, but they were running tests. It was like a bad episode of *House*, only without the practical jokes and the cutting, irreverent sarcasm. Within hours of being admitted, Karen was transferred to ICU, intubated, and placed in something akin to a medically induced coma. She wasn't technically in a coma, but she wasn't really there, either. (Think of staring at the ceiling, no life behind the eyes, not really in a state of consciousness.) She was fighting for her life, and the doctors didn't know if she would make it.

It was three weeks shy of her thirtieth birthday.

For the ten days that she was in a coma, I walked around in a daze, devastated, my insides churning with terror. I had just seen her... she had been *fine*. Less than two weeks before, Karen, Janelle, and I had enjoyed the most wonderful weekend together. I couldn't wrap my head around it. Karen couldn't *die*. She was young, she'd been extremely healthy and fit prior to this mystery illness, she was beloved by many... and, most poignantly, a mother to two beautiful little girls, ages two and four. She couldn't *die*.

Strangely enough, in the grand scheme of things, I actually haven't known Karen for that long. She and I met on Twitter, of all places, in April 2011. We chatted a few times, and I liked her immediately. You hear the phrase "zest for life" thrown around, but Karen obviously really had that. She was vibrant, smart, funny, positive, and open. The kind of person it's really hard not to like, because you can just tell it's all sincere, authentic, not an act. But one day in early May, she sent out a tweet that was unlike her usual sunny tweets; she was sad, upset. Something in her tone, even though it was just a tweet, struck me. Made me want to *talk* to her, to reach out to her. (I can't help it: I'm a nurturer. It's in my DNA.)

So, I messaged her privately and asked her to call me, which she did within a few minutes. We were on the phone for over an hour —

Orange Karen

BOOM. An instant and genuine connection. And that was it. From then on, we spoke on the phone every other day, and chatted online or sent texts every day. In each other, we found the truest kind of friendship: genuine understanding, appreciation, and acceptance. I am fortunate to say that I have many friends, and always have. But rarely had I ever made a connection like I did with Karen. Serendipity. And, luckily, we live only 2 ½ hours away from each other, so we were able to meet in person by July. When I saw her across the hotel lobby and she rushed over to hug me, it was like hugging a long-lost sister.

Karen and I feel things passionately; we love big and bold, and the main objects of our passion are the same. Family, especially our children (she has 2 girls, I have 2 boys). Friends, both “in real life” and online. The arts, particularly books and music. And, of course, writing. We have so much in common. So what if she’s twelve years younger than me. Soul connections don’t pay attention to calendars.

Karen wasn’t just a wife, daughter, and stay-at-home mother before Toxic Shock Syndrome tried to take her life. She was an active member of her community. She spent time with her family and friends. She went to Gold’s Gym almost every day for workouts and classes, sometimes going twice a day. She was a longtime member of the Catsauqua Area Showcase Theater Company, having participated in several shows. She sang in her church choir. And, in early 2011, she became an active presence on Twitter. There, she met other like-minded people, writers from all over. She began interacting with them just because she’s friendly. She likes to talk to people. She was genuine, and that showed. To some in the Twitterverse, she was a smiling, adorkable (her word, and it describes her perfectly) friend to chat with; more than that, in time she became a prolific book reviewer and a vocal supporter of indie authors/publishing. And did I already mention her devotion to her high school sweetheart and husband, Eric — he with the golden heart and moral code of a Boy Scout — and her two tiny, precious daughters, Lily (aka Peanut) and Joss (aka Trouble)? Okay, just making sure.

So perhaps you have a fuller picture now: Karen was a well-rounded force of nature when Toxic Shock Syndrome tried to take her away from the life she'd lived so passionately and all of the people who loved her and valued her so fiercely. A sudden, awful illness is horrible for anyone; the fact that it was happening to someone like Karen — not even 30! a mother to two young kids! friend to so many! a freaking gym rat! adorkable! — made it all the more devastating.

Eric would send texts with updates on Karen to me and our other sister of the heart, Janelle Jensen; then Janelle and I would post on Twitter and Facebook to everyone else. The news of Karen's sudden illness and frightening fight for life brought an outpouring of love and concern on the Internet, the likes of which I had never seen before. These "online people" — people who'd never even met Karen — responded with overwhelming compassion and worry. *Hundreds* of them.

They tweeted back, kept an online grapevine going to let others know what was going on, asked people in their "real" lives to pray for Karen... one man, a Twitter friend all the way out in Washington State, contacted me one night to ask how he could send a pizza to the hospital. He wanted to make sure Eric would eat something. (Case, you *mensch*. You restored my faith in mankind that day, with your small but amazingly heartfelt gesture.) Eric sent out a link to the hospital so people could send Karen e-cards and get well wishes... and the number of incoming cards shut down the hospital's printers for a day. The staff said they'd never seen that kind of response for a patient before. The walls of her room in ICU were covered with messages of encouragement and compassion; Eric made it a point to put them all up so she'd see them when she woke up from her coma. We all waited, hoped, and prayed, collectively holding our breath.

Thankfully, Karen *did* wake up from her coma. She did survive. After all, she is the Orange Warrior — just ask any of her friends. In the months that followed, she fought her way back to a normal life, despite constant pain and uncertainty — weeks after she regained consciousness, doctors were still unsure whether amputations would

be necessary. For two months, she spent two hours a day, five days a week in a hyperbaric chamber, in the hope that she'd be able to keep her fingers and feet — tissue death is almost inevitable with TSS, and the extremities are usually hardest hit. She became addicted to the powerful pain meds that were initially necessary to manage her condition, and then suffered through withdrawal from them. Finally, she endured the amputation of her left pinky toe and several reconstructive surgeries on her left thumb. And as I write this in February, eight months after her hospitalization, she still goes to hand therapy twice a week, and will for some time to come. They still don't know if she'll ever have full movement in her thumb and index finger again.

But she's back at the gym now. She participated in a three hour spin-a-thon in mid-February, a benefit for pediatric cancer. Yes, you read that right. She'd done it last year, and she was determined to do it again this year. It is that fighting spirit, that determination and grit, that unwillingness to give up or give in, that saw Karen through her illness. It is that heart, filled with generosity and goodness in spite of everything she has endured, which inspires others to love and admire her so.

Karen honestly has no idea why her story has affected so many people. (Duh. Because she's adorkable.) But as her best friend, someone in her inner circle, someone who knows, I can tell you how overwhelmed and grateful, how simply mindblown she has been by it all. She was humbled by and grateful for every card, every tweet and post, every prayer, every wish she received for her return to good health and her return to her family and friends. She still is. Always will be.

The Anthology is almost complete, and as I thought about what I wanted to say in this foreword, something occurred to me. This collection of stories was created by a group of writers who simply wanted to help Karen, our friend in need, with her massive medical bills. But it has become so much more than that. This book has become a testament to the truth and power of friendship — specifically, the validity of friendships originally forged online. The Internet

has pervaded every aspect of our lives in recent years, and yet there are still some who espouse the notion that friendships made online somehow aren't "real". As though the fact that a handful or even a bucketful of dishonest people who misrepresent themselves in the digital world automatically devalue every truthful intention of every other honest person on the Net. Can you say "fallacy?"

Karen and I had *many* talks about this before she got sick, and certainly have after. We didn't, and still don't, understand the naysayers and their need to disparage, belittle, or even vilify friendships formed by people who met online. Well, guess what? This unique, amazing collection of stories proves them, and that whole notion, wrong — spells it out in neon orange letters, as a matter of fact. Everyone involved did so purely because they had met Karen online, liked her, and wanted to do something to help. That was their only motive. That goes for every author who contributed a story to this anthology — as well as the fifteen or so authors who didn't make it in, but sent a story. The same can be said of the main OKA group who oversaw the whole project, the editors, the proofreaders, the guy who handled the manuscript formatting (thanks, Glenn!) and the guy who designed the cover (thanks, Kip!). If those aren't "real" friendships, "real" feelings, then I don't know what "real" is.

So there you have it. This book is for Karen, but it's also so much more. I am unspeakably proud to be a part of this unique project. If you bought a copy of this Anthology, I thank you from the bottom of my big, goopy heart. I know I can speak for my best friend on this one and say that Karen does too.

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Introduction

by Karen DeLabar

When I look back over the events of the summer of 2012, one thought comes to my mind: dying would have been easier.

On Saturday, June 2, 2012, I was getting my four-year-old daughter ready for her very first dance recital. I've always had my foot on the stage, so this was a big day for me as well. Unfortunately, I felt like I was hit by a bus. My hands shook while I braided her hair and twisted it into a cute little ballerina bun, and I wiped sweat from my brow when I loaded her into the car. I kept telling myself to get through the night, that I was a stage mom and I wasn't going to let a stupid summer cold keep me from this.

As the night went on I became weaker, often swaying in the wings while little ballerinas flittered around me. Other moms offered to watch my daughter so I could leave, but I was adamant: I would sooner die than miss her dance. I should have known God had a sense of humor. I fell asleep that night with a 102 degree fever, not yet high enough for a trip to the ER. I compared my symptoms to a stomach bug that was going around. I tossed and turned that night

hoping the next day would be better. The fever continued through to the next day and finally reached over 103 that night. Off to the ER I went. After a round of blood tests and some fluids, my fever low-

ered. I was diagnosed with “something viral” and was sent home. I was told it could take up to two weeks to feel better. Lovely.

On Monday, my fever broke; unfortunately, it also felt like my body broke, as well. I couldn't move. Pain worse than labor pain pounded through my body, centering around my neck and shoulders. By Monday night I was laying in front of our bedroom's air conditioner, sweating and shaking. Tuesday morning, my husband, Eric, and I wondered if I should go back to the ER, but the doctor's voice telling us it was viral was still echoing in our minds. Not to mention the \$100 copay for the ER visit that we just didn't have.

Hoping a shower would loosen up my body, I somehow made it to the bathroom — only to get sick several times. I'd finally had enough. I thought, “Let them send me home again, I'm going back to the hospital.”

Later, I was told numerous times that had I not gone back, I would have died at home later that day.

We arrived at the ER around 7 AM, and by 7 PM, I was admitted into the ICU. My heart was pumping at a mere 25%; a normal range is between 55-60%. The doctors and nurses wondered how I'd even managed to walk in on my own accord. They intubated me and told my husband to go home for the night. With the doctors' word that they'd call if anything changed, he left. And I started to crash.

When he walked back into the ICU the next morning, instead of seeing a conscious and healing wife, Eric was greeted by a kidney doctor throwing out ways to prevent kidney failure. I was hooked up to an additional thirteen machines, including an IV that provided hypnotics. These drugs allowed me to move my body when needed for tests, but would bless me with no memory of the events. The unknown infection was taking over my body, causing it to throw out random clots. Rushing against the clocks, the doctors hooked me up to IV machines pumping loproressors, medicines designed to pull blood in to my core to protect the vital organs. This quick thinking saved my life, but doomed my extremities that had already lost blood flow. The toxins pooled where there was decreased blood flow, causing an intense rash. The rash later turned to blisters, which popped, leaving open wounds — disgusting, angry, limb losing wounds.

The doctors were stumped. They tested me for almost every disease known to man, but nothing was coming back with answers. They interrogated Eric about what I ate and where I'd gone.

They inspected every cut, scrape, and black and blue mark on my body — and with two young, energetic kids, I had a lot of places to check.

When the four different antibiotics they placed me on took care of the infection, and they weaned me off of the more invasive medicines and machines, they took me off the ventilator. I was in the ICU for ten days; I remember none of it. Although the hypnotics didn't put me in a coma, some referred to my time out as such because of the state of my consciousness. Most of the time, my family was met with what my dad called the "thousand mile stare". I would just stare at the ceiling, at some far off place no one but me could see. There would be no sign of life in there, just eyes. However, other times I'd be alert and flipping off my brothers, or trying to rip the tube out of my throat. My parents told me that seeing me fight off the nurses brought them more hope than when I laid there nicely taking my medicines like a good girl. It meant I was still in there, fighting.

Just before consciously waking, I had several dreams that will stay with me for the rest of my life. Some, thanks to the high doses of narcotics, were just plain crazy and lovely at the same time. But there is one in particular that I think helped define not only my recovery, but me. The specifics of the dream are long and detailed, but what only really matters is the last portion of it. I'm lying in what appears to be a 1950s hospital room, with a shiny black and white checkered tile floor. The nurse struggling to keep my arms down has her dark hair pulled up in a high bouffant hair-do with a nurse's cap stuck on top of it. Her ruby red lips are drawn up in a snarl as she throws her weight on top of me to stop my struggling.

My body is thrashing from side to side, and I can hear myself sobbing silently, "It's too late, I'm gone." Fear coursed through me and I turned my head towards an open window. The scene outside was breathtaking. A white picket fence stood just outside the window, with the greenest pasture outside of Ireland stretching out for miles. The colors were so vibrant against the drab hospital room that it took my already labored breath away.

Just then I heard my husband's soothing voice. "Don't fight, Karen. It's going to be okay." Misunderstanding his message, rage bubbled up inside of me, and I thought of my two precious daughters. At just two and four years old, I could not imagine not being there to kiss their booboos away. I refused to believe I wouldn't be there for catching fireflies on a summer night, doing their hair for school dances, or consoling them through their first heartbreak. I made myself fight harder. I bucked and swung and tried my hardest to scream to the doctors, to my husband, to God, that I was not ready to die. The harder I pushed against their confining arms, the louder they tried to console me, until everything went white. That's when I woke to my brother and husband.

It turns out that while I was finding my courage, they were trying to take my tube out. I was fighting them because in my confused state, I thought they were telling me it was over and to let go. In reality, they were telling me to calm down so they could take the tube out properly. My first few days awake were difficult for me. I couldn't understand what had happened. I saw the wounds on my feet, my thumb was hard, black, and deflated, yet I asked the doctor if I'd be out in time for the Warrior Dash that was taking place in three days. Looking back, I believe ignorance was the bliss that helped save my sanity.

I had no idea that I would have to learn how to swallow again, or that my dad wouldn't be able to watch my weak attempt of feeding myself and would have to leave the room. I was completely unaware that being in a bed for just two weeks would rob me of all the muscle and strength I worked for over three years in the gym to get. I'll always remember my mom's tear rimmed eyes as I made those three hobbled steps towards her that stole my breath and left me shaky for hours afterward. Pain would ravage my body for months, leaving me screaming into pillows at night so I wouldn't wake my children. If I would have realized that then and there, my story might have gone differently.

Nurses and doctors tried to make me understand that my road to recovery was going to be a long and rocky one, but their words always fell on deaf ears. "Yeah, yeah, I get it, Doc, long road, whatever. I'm not going anywhere, I've got time."

Giving up has never been an option for me. Even when the podiatrist told me that there was a possibility of double amputation up to the knees, I just knew deep down that I would make it work. I spent two hours every day for fifty five days in a hyperbaric chamber, praying that the elevated circulation of pure oxygen at twice the atmospheric pressure the chamber provided would save my feet. I now have two feet and nine toes. I like to think my left pinky toe gave the ultimate sacrifice to save my feet.

I worked with several hand specialists before I found a wonderful microsurgeon in Philadelphia, who reconstructed my dead left thumb using tissue from my arm. It's a long process with multiple surgeries, and by the end I'll have a working thumb again.

I always thought of myself as a strong person, but it wasn't until I heard the stories of my time while I was under hypnotics that I fully understood my strength. I was on enough meds to down a 300 pound man for a week, and yet I fought to take my own tube out. I even tried to take out a nurse when she tried to restrain me.

Simply put, I don't quit.

On days when my feet don't work, or the pain is too much for me, I remember my dream. My subconscious mind was reminding me that I'm a fighter. I truly believed my time was up... and yet I pushed harder. I didn't let anyone, not even my perceived death, stand in my way. If I can do that subconsciously, I can think that way consciously. Some days, it takes everything I have to put a smile on my face, but I remember to do it at least once. After all, what's the point of living if you can't smile? I would have fought for nothing if that was the case.

Life is truly a blessed and beautiful thing. I have many mementos — by way of scars, pain, and overall way of life — that remind me what I went through to ensure that I have a life to live. Whenever pettiness and pride creep in to ruin my day, all I have to do is look down to my hands or feet to remember how precious life is.

Life can be so chaotic that we forget to slow down and appreciate this gift that was given to us. Because no matter what your beliefs are, whether it was given to you by your parents or from God, life is a gift.

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It's true that I do look back and sometimes think it could have been easier, but then, I never do anything the easy way. I'm a fighter. I fight.

In Collusion With Trees

by Jesse James Freeman

You can knock until your knuckles bleed." She couldn't get far enough away from the door to make her feel safe. Thankfully, there was a bolt she was able to latch. She crouched under a window. The panes had been patch-worked over with newsprint. "I'm never opening that door." She was sure of this and she repeated the sentiment, as much for her own benefit as for what was on the other side of it. "Never."

A farm house. Why was she in a farm house? She'd never even seen a farm. She'd barely ever left the city. How was there a farm? Grandma wallpaper pattern and paint peeling wood chipped trim. This place was abandoned, forgotten, off the map.

Well, not entirely abandoned.

"You're not the first to lock themselves in that room." The knocking had stopped and was replaced by the voice on the other side of the door.

"How many times have you done this before?"

"Many times."

Her elbow was pressed into an ancient toilet, the kind she'd only seen in books. The tank was mounted high on the wall and had a pull-chain. The smashed porcelain pieces at her feet had once been a sink. Water hadn't flowed into this place in a long time. There was barely light. There were no smells. There was no...

"Why can't I see colors?"

Light traveling to her eyes registered all wrong. Most things were a dull grey. Light was too white. Shadow was too deep.

"Why would you need to?" That's what the voice asked her.

Why would she need to?

She rubbed her eyes until they formed tears. Maybe she rubbed them until they bled. She had no way of knowing the difference between blood and tears. She watched the droplets that clung to her hands and slowly ran across the lines of her palm.

Sad, fortune-telling rivers.

"How long are you going to stand on the other side of that door?" She pushed her back more firmly into the cracked wallpaper under the window. She stared up, trying to find the yellow in the sunshine that broke through the cracks in the paper covering the glass panes. "What do you want with me?"

She had nothing. There was no rectangle of glass and plastic pressing its shape into the denim pocket of her grey jeans as she pulled her knees into her chest. The glowing screen had kept her entire life stored within it, and was the spider-web that held close to her all that she had loved. She smiled just a little when she was able to remember her own name — it seemed odd that was possible.

It struck her as funny, all those pieces of plastic that made us who we were in the world.

"I'm not going anywhere," said the voice. *"I have to stay until you unlatch the door."*

"The floor'll rot out from under your feet before that happens."

"I have to lead you down the hallway."

Her hand reached for a triangular shard of porcelain. Even white didn't look right to her eyes. She let her hair fall into her face, the strands were colorless.

There was no yellow in the linear pattern of light cast from the window to the wall before her. Her hand tightened on the shard from the broken sink.

"Why do you want to lead me down the hall? What's down the hall?"

"Something."

"There are already somethings where I am now." She looked away from the door. "I have an old-timey poop-throne."

"There is nothing in that room."

She closed her eyes — because maybe when she opened them again...?

"I'm in this room."

"That's what I said. There is nothing in that room."

She hadn't made the decision to jump from the floor and make a run at the door. It just happened. She slammed her shoulder hard into

Orange Karen

the wood and the door shook but the latch held. Then she was banging her palm into wood.

"Go away, asshole. Before I break this door down myself."

The door shook and the echo was heavy in the room, but the hinges were strong. She only stopped when it didn't make sense to keep going any longer.

"You can simply unlatch the door and turn the knob."

"Yeah! I know that." She put her back to the door and crossed her arms. Her hand stung, but only for an instant. "I just want you to go away."

"Why?"

"Because..."

"Because why?"

"There are a lot of becauses! One-because is that I don't know who you are or why I'm locked in here. Two-because is that I don't even know where this is..."

"So, two becauses?"

"Fuck you, asshole. There's a three-because."

"What is three-because?"

"I'm not telling you three-because."

"W..."

"Don't say why!"

"I was not going to."

"You're a liar."

"Why?"

She pushed herself from the door and crossed the room. Her fingers realized they were still holding a porcelain shard and she let it drop to the floor. She wasn't opening the door and there was no need for a weapon. She wasn't even sure if that was why she had picked it up in the first place.

She needed a weapon against the voice. Right?

"Three-because is that you hurt my feelings."

"That's impossible."

She let her fingers run across the newspaper that covered the window. It was so old she couldn't read the words printed on it.

"Why is that impossible?"

"It's illogical that you consider yourself possessing such."

"Arguing with you is worse than any boyfriend ever."

She pressed her finger into a hole in the newspaper. The sunlight wasn't warm on her fingertip.

"I wouldn't speak to you at all. If you would just unlatch the door."

"Four-because isn't going to let me open that door."

"How did I hurt your feelings?"

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"Forget it, weirdo. We're not bonding any more than we already have."

"It's because I told you there's nothing in the room, isn't it?"

She spun on her heel and was yelling again. "Oh, you think? How can there be nothing in the room when I'm in here? I'm definitely a something. Who do you think you're talking to?"

"What makes you a something?"

She realized her arm was raised and finger was pointing squarely at the door. She'd always hated how she couldn't help using her hands to emphasize her words when she got angry. That she was pointing to a voice on the other side of a door in a forgotten bathroom made the act seem even more irrational.

"That's the stupidest thing anyone has ever said to me."

"So tell me."

She put her hands in her pockets and turned away from the door. "I don't know."

"Open the door."

"No."

"Then tell me."

She pushed her fingers into the newspaper on the window and liked the sound it made as it ripped and tore. "Tell me where I am! What is this place?"

"There's nothing out there, either."

"I don't believe you."

She shoved her hands apart and the paper tore and crumbled. The dirty light was blinding. She kept pulling until the window was cleared of obstructions.

Until she could press her fingertips to the glass.

Her eyes adjusted to a black and white world. A planet overcast in haze and fog that she stared through from the second floor window. There was a sloping roof of old shingles that made a perilous descent toward a field of tall grass.

"Why did you take all the color away from the world?" She blamed the voice. "Isn't it enough that I'm trapped in here?"

"There is nothing in there. You are not trapped."

"I've never even seen a farm. A real farm. Is that what this is?" She tried to make out the grass swaying in the wind through the fog. There were trees beyond.

"There is nothing..."

"'...out there.' Yeah, you told me that already."

"Come unlatch the door. Come walk down the hall. It is the only direction in which you will find somethings."

"There are trees."

"What if there are?"

"You admit to trees?"

"They are not for you."

"You're hoarding trees?"

Orange Karen

"Disregard trees."

"You're in collusion with trees?"

She gripped the top of the window and pushed a little. There was a splintered gasp.

"Haven't you had enough?"

"Enough what?" She grunted. "Lies?"

"I am not the one who has told lies."

"I'm lying to myself, then?"

"You are prolonging."

"If you've got somewhere to be..." She pushed up and strained her legs. "...don't let me keep you."

"I cannot go down the hallway without you."

"I'm not going down the fucking hallway."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't want your damn apology."

"No. I'm sorry for all the pain."

She stepped back from the window. She had cracked it just a sliver. "You're responsible for all the pain? Because there was a lot of it."

"I mean the pain that is to come."

There was a quiver in the muscles of her hand. The voice was right — there had been a lot of pain.

"How could it be any worse than what it was?"

"So you do remember?"

"Of course I remember. There's no way I could forget." She watched her fingers flex.

"This is why you won't unlatch the door."

"Shut up." She pressed her shoulder into the window and pushed up hard. "Isn't that what..." She heard the wood crack. "...what it's all about?"

"It does not have to be."

The window barely moved. "That's part of being alive." Her eyes strained and she groaned as she pushed. She could make out the grey grass swaying over a colorless landscape. There were trees beyond the fog.

"There is nothing in that room. Do you not understand?"

She took a step back. "But there is something if I go with you?"

"If you unlatch the door, there will be no more pain."

She ran her fingers into her hair. The window hadn't moved another inch. Her shoulder ached. She remembered how unbearable everything had been before. She rubbed it and looked over her shoulder at the door. "Life?"

"Is pain."

"It hurt." There was no confusion regarding tears then.

"The hallway awaits."

"The something. What is it?"

"It is what it is not. There is no pain."

She could barely make out the tops of the tall grass dancing with the wind. "I never believed in a place with no constant ache."

"Ten steps. No more and no less, once you've crossed the threshold."

"So many holes in my heart... no matter how much I poured into it..."

"...it could never be filled."

She considered the latch — she couldn't stand much more of the emptiness that had stolen all the colors. Ten steps beyond. No more and no less. She could feel the wind seeping in from the crack in the window she'd pushed up with all she had in her. The cool brought her gaze back to the window glass.

There was nothing in the room. There was nothing out that window. Just a world that had turned grey and black — barely lit by a colorless sun.

"No more?"

"No less."

It was the wind that pressed it against the window. After the start that shook her, she almost turned from it to walk to the latch. She tried to make herself turn away from it, but she could not. She was already walking back to the glass before she even realized why. How was it that something so ordinary that she had disregarded every day

of a life — a life she could scarcely remember — had become so fascinating suddenly?

She pressed her hand to the glass. The wind held the leaf tight against it and she cursed the fact that there was anything between it and her hand. She traced her fingernail against the glass, painting an invisible outline around the pattern of what the storm had brought to her.

It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

"It's past time." The voice was sure of itself. *"It is time to walk to the latch."*

She pressed her lips to the cold glass and kissed the pane. The leaf held in place as the grass tilted this way and that, and the fog pushed off the field just enough so that she could see beyond. She had not been wrong.

The leaf against the glass was bright orange.

"There is only pain."

She began backing towards the door. "But there are trees."

She didn't take her eyes from the color that burned off the leaf on the window — and she had never run faster or jumped higher. She laughed when the glass cut her skin. Never had she felt so alive as when she tumbled down the slanted roof through broken shards so she might crash to the ground.

She had a field to run through and a forest of orange-leafed trees to explore.

The voice on the other side of the door smiled before walking down the hallway alone.



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