

# TESS GERRITSEN



# LIFE SUPPORT



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**Also by Tess Gerritsen**

*Harvest*

*To Jacob, Adam, and Josh—  
the guys in my life*

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# 1



A scalpel is a beautiful thing.

Dr. Stanley Mackie had never noticed this before, but as he stood with head bowed beneath the OR lamps, he suddenly found himself marveling at how the light reflected with diamondlike brilliance off the blade. It was a work of art, that razor sharp lunula of stainless steel. So beautiful, in fact, that he scarcely dared to pick it up for fear he would somehow tarnish its magic. In its surface he saw a rainbow of colors, light fractured to its purest elements.

"Dr. Mackie? Is something wrong?"

He looked up and saw the scrub nurse frowning at him over her surgical mask. He had never before noticed how green her eyes were. He seemed to be seeing, really seeing, so many things for the very first time. The creamy texture of the nurse's skin. The vein coursing along her temple. The mole just above her eyebrow.

Or *was* it a mole? He stared. It was moving, crawling like a many-legged insect toward the corner of her eye. . . .

"Stan?" Dr. Rudman, the anesthesiologist, was speaking now, his voice slicing through Mackie's dismay. "Are you all right?"

Mackie gave his head a shake. The insect vanished. It was a mole again, just a tiny fleck of black pigment on the nurse's pale skin. He took a deep breath and picked up the scalpel from the instrument tray. He looked down at the woman lying on the table.

The overhead light had already been focused on the patient's lower abdomen. Blue surgical drapes were clamped in place, framing a rectangle of exposed skin. It was a nice flat belly with a bikini line connecting the twin flares of the hip bones—a surprising sight to behold in this season of snowstorms and winter white faces. What a shame he would have to cut into it. An appendectomy scar would certainly mar any future Caribbean tans.

He placed the tip of the blade on the skin, centering his incision on McBurney's point, halfway between the navel and the protrusion of the right hip bone. The approximate location of the appendix. With scalpel poised to cut, he suddenly paused.

His hand was shaking.

He didn't understand it. This had never happened before. Stanley Mackie had always possessed rock steady hands. Now it took enormous effort just to maintain his grip on the handle. He swallowed and lifted the blade from the skin. *Easy. Take a few deep breaths. This will pass.*

"Stan?"

Mackie looked up and saw that Dr. Rudman was frowning. So were the two nurses. Mackie could read the questions in their eyes, the same questions that people had been whispering about him for weeks. *Is old Dr. Mackie competent? At the age of seventy-four, should he still be allowed to operate?* He ignored their looks. He had already defended himself before the Quality Assurance Committee, had explained, to their satisfaction, the circumstances of his last patient's death. Surgery, after all, was not a risk-free proposition. When too much blood pools in the abdomen, it's easy to confuse one's landmarks, to make the wrong slice.

The committee, in their wisdom, had absolved him of blame.

Nevertheless, doubts had seeped into the minds of the hospital staff. He could see it in the nurses' expressions, in Dr. Rudman's



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frown. All those eyes watching him. Suddenly he sensed other eyes as well. He caught a fleeting glimpse of dozens of eyeballs floating in the air, all of them staring at him.

He blinked, and the terrible vision was gone.

*My glasses, he thought. I will have to get my glasses checked.*

A drop of sweat slid down his cheek. He tightened his grip on the scalpel handle. This was just a simple appendectomy, a procedure a lowly surgical intern could pull off. Surely he could manage this, even with shaking hands.

He focused on the patient's abdomen, on that flat belly with its golden tan. Jennifer Halsey, age thirty-six. A visitor from out of state, she had awakened this morning in her Boston motel room suffering from right lower quadrant pain. With the pain growing worse, she had driven through a blinding snowstorm to the ER at Wicklin Hospital, and had been referred to the surgeon on call for the day: Mackie. She knew nothing about the rumors concerning his competence, nothing about the lies and whispers that were slowly destroying his practice. She was merely a woman in pain who needed her inflamed appendix removed.

He pressed the blade to Jennifer's skin. His hand had steadied. He could do it. Of course he could do it. He made the incision, a smooth, clean slice. The scrub nurse assisted, sponging up blood, handing him hemostats. He cut deeper, through the yellow subcutaneous fat, pausing every so often to cauterize a bleeder. *No problem. Everything's going to be fine.* He would get in, remove the appendix, and get out again. Then he would go home for the afternoon. Maybe a little rest was all he needed to clear his head.

He slit through the glistening peritoneum, into the abdominal cavity. "Retract," he said.

The scrub nurse took hold of the stainless steel retractors and gently tugged open the wound.

Mackie reached into the gap and felt the intestines, warm and slippery, squirm around his gloved hand. What a wondrous sensation, to be cradled in the heat of the human body. It was like being welcomed back into the womb. He exposed the appendix. One glance at the red and swollen tissue told him his diagnosis had

been correct; the appendix would have to come out. He reached for the scalpel.

Only as he focused once again on the incision did he realize that something was not quite right.

There was far too much intestine crowded into the abdomen, twice as much as there should be. Far more than the woman needed. This wouldn't do. He tugged on a loop of small bowel, felt it glide, warm and slick, across his gloved hands. With the scalpel, he sliced off the excess length and set the dripping coil on the tray. There, he thought. That was much neater.

The scrub nurse was staring at him, her eyes wide over the surgical mask. "What are you *doing*?" she cried.

"Too much intestine," he answered calmly. "Can't have that." He reached into the abdomen and grasped another loop of bowel. No need for all this excess tissue. It only obscured his view of things.

"Dr. Mackie, no!"

He sliced. Blood pulsed out in a hot, arcing spray from the severed coil.

The nurse grabbed his gloved hand. He shook it off, outraged that a mere nurse would dare interrupt the procedure.

"Get me another scrub nurse," he commanded. "I need suction. Have to clear away all this blood."

"Stop him! Help me stop him—"

With his free hand, Mackie reached for the suction catheter and plunged the tip into the abdomen. Blood gurgled up the tube and poured into the reservoir.

Another hand grasped his gown and pulled him away from the table. It was Dr. Rudman. Mackie tried to shake him off, but Rudman wouldn't let go.

"Put down the scalpel, Stan."

"She has to be cleaned out. There's too much intestine."

*"Put it down!"*

Struggling free, Mackie swung around to confront Rudman. He'd forgotten he was still holding the scalpel. The blade slashed across the other man's neck.

Rudman screamed and clapped his hand to his throat.

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Mackie backed away, staring at the blood seeping out between Rudman's fingers. "Not my fault," he said. "It's not my fault!"

A nurse yelled into the intercom: "Send Security! He's going crazy in here! We need Security STAT!"

Mackie stumbled backward, through slippery pools of blood. Rudman's blood. Jennifer Halsey's blood. A spreading lake of it. He turned and bolted from the room.

They were chasing him.

He fled down the hallway, running in blind panic, lost in a maze of corridors. Where was he? Why did nothing seem familiar? Then, straight ahead, he saw the window, and beyond it, the swirling snow. *Snow*. That cold, white lace would purify him, would cleanse this blood from his hands.

Behind him, footsteps pounded closer. Someone shouted, "*Halt!*"

Mackie took three running steps and leaped toward the rectangle of light.

Glass shattered into a million diamonds. Then the cold air whistled past him and everything was white. A beautiful, crystalline white.

And he was falling.

# 2



It was a scorching day outside, but the driver had the air conditioner going full blast, and Molly Picker was feeling chilled as she rode in the backseat of the car. The cold air blowing out the vent by her knees seemed to knife straight up her miniskirt. She leaned forward and rapped on the Plexiglas partition.

"Excuse me?" she said. "Hey, mister? Could you turn down that air conditioner? Mister?" She rapped again.

The driver didn't seem to hear her. Or maybe he was ignoring her. All she saw was the back of his blond head.

Shivering, she crossed her bare arms over her chest and scooted sideways, away from that vent. Staring out the car window, she watched the streets of Boston glide by. She didn't recognize this neighborhood at all, but she knew they were headed south. That's what the last sign had said, Washington Street, South. Now she looked out at boxy buildings and barred windows, at clumps of men sitting on front stoops, their faces glossed with sweat. Not even June, and already the temperature was in the eighties. Molly

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could read the day's heat just by looking at the people on the street. The languid slump of their shoulders, their slow-motion shuffle down the sidewalks. Molly enjoyed looking at people. Mostly she looked at women because she found them so much more interesting. She would study their dresses and wonder why some wore black in the heat of summer, why the fat ones with big butts chose bright stretch pants, why nobody wore hats these days. She would study how the pretty ones walked, their hips swaying ever so slightly, their feet perched, perfectly balanced, on high heels. She wondered what secrets pretty women knew that she didn't. What lessons their mamas had passed along to them, lessons that Molly had somehow missed. She would gaze long and hard at their faces, hoping for divine insight into what makes a woman beautiful. What special magic they possessed that she, Molly Picker, did not have.

The car stopped at a red light. A woman in platform heels was standing on the corner, one hip jutted out. Like Molly, a hooker, but older—maybe eighteen, with lustrous black hair that tumbled all over her bronzy shoulders. Black hair would be nice, thought Molly wistfully. It made a statement. It was not an in-between color, like Molly's limp hair, which was neither blond nor brown and made no statement at all. The car window was darkly tinted, and the black-haired girl couldn't see Molly staring at her. But she seemed to sense it, because she slowly pivoted on her platform heels to face the car.

She was not so pretty after all.

Molly sat back, feeling oddly disappointed.

The car turned left and continued southeast. They were far from Molly's neighborhood now, heading into territory that was both unfamiliar and threatening. The heat had driven people out of their apartments and they sat fanning themselves in shady doorways. Their gazes followed the car as it passed by. They knew it did not belong in this neighborhood. Just as Molly knew she did not belong here. Where was Romy sending her?

He hadn't given her any address. Usually a scrawled street number was thrust in her hand, and she was responsible for scrounging up her own taxi. This time, though, there'd been a car waiting at

the curb for her. A nice car, too, with no telltale stains on the backseat, no stinky wads of tissue paper stuffed in the ashtray. It was all so clean. She'd never ridden in a car this clean.

The driver turned left, onto a narrow street. No people were sitting outside on the sidewalk here. But she knew they were watching her. She could feel it. She dug in her purse, fished out a cigarette, and lit up. She'd taken only two drags when a disembodied voice suddenly said: "Please put it out."

Molly glanced around, startled. "What?"

"I said, put it out. We don't allow smoking in the car."

Flushing with guilt, she quickly stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray. Then she noticed the tiny speaker mounted in the partition.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" she said.

No reply.

"If you can, could you turn down the air conditioner? I'm freezing back here. Hello? Mister driver?"

The blast of cold air shut off.

"*Thank* you," she said. And added under her breath: "Asshole."

She found the electric switch for the window and rolled it down a crack. The smell of summer in the city wafted in, hot and sulfurish. She didn't mind the heat. It felt like home. Like all the damp and sweaty summers of her childhood in Beaufort. Damn, she wanted a cigarette. But she didn't feel like arguing with that tinny little box.

The car rolled to a stop. The voice from the speaker said: "This is the address. You can get out now."

"What, here?"

"The building's right in front of you."

Molly peered out at the four-story brownstone. The first-floor windows were boarded up. Broken glass glittered on the sidewalk. "You've got to be kidding," she said.

"The front door's open. Go up two flights to the third floor. It'll be the last door on your right. No need to knock, just walk right in."

"Romy didn't say nothing about this."

"Romy said you'd cooperate."

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"Yeah, well—"

"It's just part of the fantasy, Molly."

"What fantasy?"

"The client's. You know how it is."

Molly gave a deep sigh and stared out at the building again. Clients and their fantasies. So what was this guy's dream fuck? Doing it among the rats and cockroaches? A little danger, a little grunge to notch up the excitement? Why did clients' fantasies never match her own? A clean hotel room, a Jacuzzi. Richard Gere and Pretty Woman sipping champagne.

"He's waiting."

"Yeah, I'm going, I'm going." Molly shoved open the car door and stepped out onto the curb. "You're gonna wait for me, right?"

"I'll be right here."

She faced the building and took a deep breath. Then she climbed the steps and pushed into the entrance.

It was as bad inside as it looked on the outside. Graffiti all over the walls, the hallway littered with newspapers and a rusty box spring. Someone had trashed the place good.

She started up the stairs. The building was eerily silent, and the clatter of her shoes echoed in the stairwell. When she reached the second floor, her palms were sweaty.

This felt wrong. All wrong.

She paused on the landing and gazed toward the third floor. *What the hell did you get me into, Romy? Who is this client, anyway?*

She wiped her damp palms on her blouse. Then she took another breath and ascended the next flight of stairs. In the third-floor hallway, she stopped outside the last door on the right. She heard a humming sound from the room beyond—an air conditioner? She opened the door.

Cool air spilled out. She stepped inside and was amazed to find herself in a room with pristine white walls. In the center was some sort of doctor's exam table, padded in maroon vinyl. Overhead hung an enormous lamp. There was no other furniture. Not even a chair.

"Hello, Molly."

She spun around, searching for the man who'd just said her name. There was no one else in the room. "Where are you?" she demanded.

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I'm just a little shy. First I'd like to get a look at you."

Molly focused on a mirror, mounted in the far wall. "You're back there, aren't you? Is that some kinda one-way glass?"

"Very good."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Talk to me."

"Is that all?"

"There'll be more."

Naturally. There was always more. She walked, almost casually, to the mirror. He'd said he was shy. That made her feel better. More in control. She stood with one hand propped on her miniskirted hip. "Okay. If you want to talk, mister, it's your money."

"How old are you, Molly?"

"Sixteen."

"Are your periods regular?"

"What?"

"Your menstrual periods."

She gave a laugh. "I don't believe this."

"Answer the question."

"Yeah. They're sorta regular."

"And your last period was two weeks ago?"

"How do you know *that*?" she demanded. Then, shaking her head, she muttered, "Oh. Romy told you." Romy would know, of course. He always knew when his girls were on the rag.

"Are you healthy, Molly?"

She glared at the mirror. "Don't I look healthy?"

"No blood diseases? Hepatitis? HIV?"

"I'm clean. You won't catch anything, if that's what worries you."

"Syphilis? Clap?"

"Look," she snapped. "Do you want to get laid or not?"

There was a silence. Then the voice said, softly: "Take off your clothes."



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This was more like it. This was what she expected.

She stepped closer to the mirror, so close her breath intermittently steamed the glass. He would want to watch every detail. They always did. She reached up and began to unbutton her blouse. She did it slowly, drawing out the performance. As the fabric parted she let her thoughts go blank, felt herself withdrawing into some safe mental closet where men did not exist. She was moving her hips, swaying to imagined music. The blouse slid off her shoulders to the floor. Her breasts were exposed now, her nipples dimpling in the room's chill. She closed her eyes. Somehow that made it better. *Let's get this over with*, she thought. *Just screw him and get out of here.*

She unzipped her skirt and stepped out of it. Then she peeled off her panties. All this she did with her eyes closed. Romy had told her she had a good body. That if she used it right, no one would even notice how plain her face was. She was using that body now, dancing to a rhythm only she could hear.

"That's fine," the man said. "You can stop dancing."

She opened her eyes and stared at the mirror in bewilderment. She saw her own reflection there. Limp brown hair. Breasts small but pointed. Hips as narrow as a boy's. When she'd been dancing with her eyes closed, she had been acting out a part. Now she confronted her own image. Her real self. She couldn't help crossing her arms over her naked chest.

"Go to the table," he said.

"What?"

"The exam table. Lie down on it."

"Sure. If that's what turns you on."

"That's what turns me on."

To each his own. She climbed onto the table. The burgundy vinyl was cold against her bare buttocks. She lay down and waited for something to happen.

A door opened, and she heard footsteps. She stared as the man approached the foot of the table and loomed above her. He was garbed entirely in green. All she could see of his face was his eyes, a cold steel blue. They were gazing at her over a surgical mask.

She sat up in alarm.