

# HANDS

*Fiction by Lockie Hunter*

SHE IS LITERALLY DOUBLED OVER, her long legs bent at an uncomfortable angle. This is done so as to fit her—a giantess of a woman—in a regulation hospital bed. If she feels discomfort, she does not evince it. At home, she slept in the long twin bed. She read her fan letters in the long twin bed. She took her tea in the long twin bed. She blustered about the administration in the long twin bed. She exposed the heart of others in the long twin bed. Here, she sleeps in a short, railed bed. Her mouth is open, and her skin is baggy on her jaw and her elbows, on her earlobes and her kneecaps. All over her frame, her covering hangs. It seems to her as if she is wearing some ill-fitting suit of flesh. Her sleeveless nightgown exposes skin that folds under nurses' hands and seems to roll away during examination. She feels as if one can just roll her up like one would roll up a well-worn sleeping bag where the goose stuffing has either all piled at one end or has come out through small holes made by cigarette burns and snags on twigs. Her nails are long and yellow-brown and calcified and hard. No one has cleaned underneath them. The nail bed contains bits of yesterday's lunch. The nail bed contains bits of last week's lunch. She notices her hands and seems confused. These odd hands are connected to her wrist where her radial pulse must lie. She greets the nurses as they come in. "I'm just checking your radial pulse now," they say. They regard her radial pulse again and again.

She talks to herself. She talks to herself of the Brooklyn Dodgers. She talks to herself of her babies and grandbabies. She talks to herself of Munich. She talks to the nurses. She tells the nurses that they should not read in such dim light. She tells the

nurses that doing so will ruin their eyesight. She tells the nurses that they should try wearing brighter colors so as to bring out their eyes. She tells the nurses that she thinks her stomach pump may not be suctioning properly as she is in pain. A good deal of pain this time.

She thinks the oddest change is her hands. She recalls the scene in *Titus*, the one that is always performed off scene. The one where the hands are removed from the lovely young woman. The hands of the lovely young woman are removed. Simply cut from her. Severed from their wrists. In some versions, the hands are replaced by straw or twigs, these items simply forced into the bleeding stumps. These are not her hands, but those of an imposter. Her hands must have been removed and these twig-hands sewn in place. She is in a hospital. Atrocities occur every day. Atrocities occur every day in these hermetically sealed rooms. Atrocities occur every day in these alcohol-swabbed rooms. These corridors and rooms. "Get me good hands, stat!" the doctor would have said as he operated on another person—a "living" person—a concert pianist perhaps, who lost both hands in a freakish Cuisinart accident. A person where only the very best of hands would do. "Make sure they are king-size and elegant," the doctor would have commanded, "with galloping fingers and pulsating palms." Of course they chose her hands.

She is surrounded by ravenous newborns. The hospital has run out of room in the geriatric ward, so she is temporarily shelved in maternity. These newborns are piggish. These newborns are determined. These newborns are greedy. They are at the beginning of their travels. She is at the end of hers. She has come here to die, and now she is dying amid a mob of newborn screams.

Her old hands could communicate volumes. Hands that had an independent will to gesture dramatically. Hands that could soothe a grandbaby with a light touch of the fingertips. Hands like Moses with abilities to part seas. Hands such as you have never seen! Those hands were given to this unknown pianist so that beautiful music could continue to be played. She was given old person's

hands, hands of no use, hands that are unclean and veinous and yellow with jaundice. She wishes to hold a new baby. She wishes to hold a new baby. She wishes to hold a new baby just once more. She will hold the baby packed to her flesh-sack, and the baby will take comfort. But she will not ask to touch a newborn with twig-hands such as these. The nurse arrives and places two fingers on her wrist.