

ANASTASIA EUTHANASIA

CHAPTER 1: SHE

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Ask anyone who lives in this city, and they'll tell you the best place to find a massage is in the heart of downtown. There's a small business on East Twelfth street between a diner and hair salon. Without signs to advertise, it's hard to notice, and, at a glance, you wouldn't know it exists. The unpaved parking lot is around the back, where the homeless sometimes camp near burning barrels in the wintertime. The brick walls display a quarter-century of graffiti, and three, vibrant spray-painted letters (BAC) decorate the canopy, but no one knows what they stand for. People come from all around to visit this little shop. It may not appear to be the safest place to visit, but ask anyone who's been inside, and they will attest; here is where you can find pure heaven.

Ask any professional, and they'll agree that a good massage is essential for increasing relaxation, lessening muscle tension, and improving circulation. For twenty dollars, any of the few licensed therapists can reduce your stress and minor aches. In thirty minutes, your soreness will wither away at the touch of someone else's fingertips.

If you seek a different type of relief, perhaps a more permanent solution to chronic suffering, this business provides a unique amenity. It's available to those with the odds stacked against them who feel they've run out of options. It attracts those who think they burden society with their sulky complaints, who wish they were never born yet abide a grueling life. It's a mercy killing for people who want to disappear and believe the world is better off without them.

A free consultation requires a valid reason—poor quality of life, incurable disease, loss of bodily control, or wasted dignity. There's no appointment necessary, walk-ins are always welcome, and death comes with a money-back guarantee.

Many presume only God decides when and how someone dies. Yet within the walls of this tiny shop, God goes by a different name. Simply gather your woes and approach the front counter. Ask to speak with Anastasia, and if she accepts your request, she will put you out of your misery. Whichever way, whatever method, is yours to decide. Clients beware; once you've seen her face, there is no turning back.

Every major city has a variety of urban legends, and for many residents, that's how Anastasia remains—as an urban legend. Those who believe she exists trust her to grant their wishes and handle their final affairs. In return, she confides in them to appreciate her service for what it is—a well-kept secret. After all, nothing compares to the sacred bond you share with the person who stops your beating heart. Nothing is more intimate than your relationship with the individual who takes your final breath away. No gift is more endearing than a soul's exemption from despair. Life is hard, but not everyone is equipped to handle its obstacles. As for the rest of us, a good massage offers solace from the everyday pressure these challenges endure.

If there is anyone who understands this kind of stress, it's the woman working behind the counter. Deloris Green started here twenty years ago at the age of thirteen. Five years later, she took ownership, managing less than a handful of other therapists. Raised by an interracial couple with light skin that shares the same tone as Prince (or the late artist formally known as), Deloris stays true to her mother's African heritage. While on the clock, she wears a long robe and Nigerian gele tie on her head. Each day is a different color, with floral patterns stitched in the fabric. By appearance, some people suggest she could be the backup singer for a 1950s Doo-Wop

music group, although Deloris will be the first to confess she cannot carry a tune.

What she does carry is constant, low-frequency anxiety and the same Pez dispenser she's had since her youth. Today, instead of fruit-flavored candy, the device is loaded with Xanax bars and expels a tablet from a plastic Mickey Mouse head. Deloris doesn't take these pills unless panic grows beyond her control. Instead, she uses different methods to cope with her anxiety before it gets out of hand; skills proved beneficial over the years, such as breathing exercises, grounding rituals, and self-soothing techniques. One particular phrase Deloris recites is 'eighty percent.' She says it over and over again to suppress tension. This chant seems most effective, but only she can tell you what it means. Every waking minute of the day, this elusive apprehension trickles through Deloris like a gentle brook expecting to, at some point, plunge over the cliffs of a chaotic waterfall.

Originally, Pez candy was invented as an alternative to smoking. Still, Deloris finds tranquility with a pack of Virginia Slims throughout the day and the occasional bottle of Chardonnay in the afternoon. Suppose someone tells her these bad habits can lead to health complications. In that case, she refers to the late comedian and actor George Burns, who smoked fifteen El Producto Queen cigars, drank five martinis every day, and lived to be a hundred. As for Deloris, she doesn't waste time worrying about death. Her inevitable demise isn't something that keeps her awake at night. Rather, she feels she deserves the right to make her own grave decisions. Besides, she's been through the wringer a few times—five, to be exact.

Ask her about the time she nearly bled to death, and Deloris will explain the complicated pregnancy of her only child and how close the baby came to growing up without a mother; if not for the hospital staff that saved her life by replacing lost blood after the delivery.

Ask Deloris how she survived a beating, and she will say her boyfriend came home late at night smelling of Hennessy and women's perfume. She'll tell you her accusations sparked a violent argument and the police responding to the domestic dispute said she was lucky her 'fall down the basement steps' didn't snap her neck.

Ask about the time she took a bullet, and Deloris will mention when her cheating boyfriend came home one night to find her packing a suitcase and diaper bag. In a fit of rage, he pulled a gun from his pocket and shot her once in the chest. The bullet hit dead-center but missed her heart by an inch. The surgeon called it 'a one in a million shot' and claimed it was a miracle she survived.

Ask about the time someone stabbed her, and Deloris will clarify the tale of catching her boyfriend vandalizing her car outside a cheap hotel in the middle of the night. When the commotion woke the baby, she came down from her room to confront him, and the intervention cost her a four-inch blade to the left lung. The doctors said the only reason she pulled through was because of her boyfriend's ignorance. He thought the left side was the best place to stab someone because it's where people cover their hearts when they recite The Pledge of Allegiance.

Ask Deloris how she survived a car crash, and she'll swear it was an accident. She'll express her fortune of being alive compared to her boyfriend, who she smashed between the front bumper and a telephone pole. She'll describe the blank expression on his face as the blood drained from his body and how the crimson color mixed with a puddle of neon coolant beneath the engine.

Some people suggest Deloris is a walking rabbit's foot. Even her daughter inherited the ability to escape the clutches of death. As a toddler, she had an allergy to everything they could test for, in addition to diabetes, hemophilia, and epilepsy, all which she later outgrew without any forms of treatment.

These days, Deloris spends most of her time at work, preoccupied with Ebony Magazine.

Seated on a peeled leather bar stool behind the counter, she reads articles on celebrities, their rags-to-riches stories, and latest film projects. Afterward, she picks up the local newspaper to read about recent shootings, robberies, and crime sprees that end in catastrophe. Daily coupons wait like a reward for reaching the last page. Save four dollars on this; buy one, get one free of that; purchase two and get a third for half price. She cuts along each dotted line with a rusty pair of scissors kept in a mesh basket beside a telephone and appointment book.

In the groove of her amber glass ashtray, filled with lipstick-stained cigarette butts, a thin trail of smoke rises from a Virginia Slim, leaving behind a fragile stick of ash. When customers pass by Deloris and her lingering cloud of menthol, they enter an open space that smells of burning incense. The lobby receives ambiance from soft lightbulbs housed by dim lampshades. The soothing sound of water trickles from a decorative fountain, and soft jazz music plays from an old radio that sits on an end table between two chairs. A short hallway leads to four private suites for the masseuses to arrange and decorate how they please. Each has a flat table with a padded donut-shaped headrest, clean towels, and sheets. Deloris uses the fourth, not only for massage, but also as an office where she manages the books and payroll.

One suite opens to reveal a loose and relaxed Walter Mack, sliding his arms through his suit jacket, assisted by his regular therapist, Rita Moss. Her brown hair is puffy and stiff with hairspray, and her eyelids are heavy and thick with fake lashes. She wears a long lace gown and likes to walk around barefoot. Rita has worked here for nearly a decade, and tells people her clients find it easier to relax if she dresses comfortably. It's a personal and sensual experience for them as if they're guests in her home. Anything more, however, no matter how much extra cash she is offered under the massage table, her rubdowns are nothing sexual.

No happy endings.

No special favors.

No exceptions.

What happens in these rooms is out of sight and mind. Neither Deloris nor her business is responsible for what goes on behind closed doors. She permits her masseuses to do whatever satisfies the customer so they'll return, but with a rub-at-your-own-risk policy.

No one working here cares to take a chance, not after what happened to Kendall Fisher, the only male masseuse ever employed by Deloris. The others called him their Ken doll as though he was cut from the same mold as male fashion models, with the tight muscles to fit his body and rock-hard abs that could shatter a swinging baseball bat. Ask and they'll tell you, despite their infatuation, there was something about him, something they couldn't put their finger on at the time.

When the VICE squad stormed through the entrance, flashing badges and waiving a warrant in the air, Deloris was sitting in her usual spot with her eyes skimming the words of some intriguing magazine article. As the agents shuffled by, she took the warrant, sat it on the counter, flicked her cigarette, and turned the page. Feeling subtle but anxious symptoms arise, she used her own version of what is known as the 'four-seven-eight breathing technique' to calm her nerves.

While authorities prepared to raid Kendall's suite, she inhaled slowly from her cigarette and quietly counted to four. When they kicked in the door and found Kendall on his knees in front of their informant, a man who offered forty dollars for a little mouth-and-tongue massage on a stiff part of his anatomy, Deloris held the smoke in her lungs and counted to seven. As the police escorted Kendall from the building, crying and pleading for someone to bail him out of jail, she slowly exhaled the smoke and counted to eight. Once the cops drove away with Kendall in the

backseat, she crumbled the warrant into a ball, tossed it in the garbage as though nothing happened, and went about business as usual.

It's not that she's indifferent to her employee's well-being, but Deloris will be the first to say 'I told you so,' especially when her advice is ignored. Much like her massage parlor, she appears to have a hardened exterior, and the problems that other grown adults bestow upon themselves are not hers to carry. Yet, on the inside, she is sympathetic to fateful needs, and on rare occasions, her heart bleeds for those who come around looking for Anastasia.