

New Jersey's Famous Turnpike Witch

IN A SMALL ROADSIDE STRIP OF WOODS ten miles north of the Walt Whitman Service Area, Alice Delphine Merkel sits Indian style, nibbles at a peanut butter sandwich in a baggie, and takes stock of her situation. After peaking at number seven back in February, the Turnpike Witch has very nearly dropped out of Crimedog.com's Top Forty Outlaws List. This week's rankings mark a two-year low for Alice's alter ego on Crimedog's thermometer of criminal notoriety. The Crimedog rankings are adjusted every Monday after a week's aggressive online polling. Alice and her crew put a lot of stock in the Crimedog power poll because, unlike your standard government-issue wanted lists, Crimedog takes account of factors like degree of difficulty and artistic expression. By those standards, she used to fare rather well.

But the American attention span is short: you keep giving the people what they want, or they look elsewhere. Alice Merkel has been in hiding for four months – and, as her three partners in crime, her “Engineers,” have been saying, the legend of New Jersey's Famous Turnpike Witch is slipping. So says Crimedog, so says the blogosphere, and so say the many and various celebrity pundits on the cable networks. Hits at her unofficial

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website are dwindling, and with them the ad revenues and merchandise sales that Alice relies on these days to support herself.

“You've got to *do something*,” her Engineers told her this morning, after she confronted them about the crushed Prozac she had detected in her Diet Coke. They've made certain compromises and sacrifices on her behalf, and they depend on her for their living. She is letting them – everybody – down. She gets that. Even the insects in these woods feel betrayed. Usually the presence of the Witch brings the trees close to bursting with fanfare and flourish: the crickets excitedly chirping and the fireflies aglow. Not so today. It's as if they've been slighted. It has been far too long since she's come to visit. Far too long since she's even left her drool-caked fold-out couch in the Engineers' truck-trailer. But the sabbatical ends today. It is high time now for Alice, New Jersey's Famous Turnpike Witch, to give her audience – her crickets, her human admirers, the poor government drudges who hunt her – a show.

Or so she tells herself. The problem is: her body is not convinced. This headache, its accompanying low-grade fever, and the shudder-tremors in her hands are pressing an argument that today might not be the best day for her to get back to business. The Turnpike Witch's “business,” such as it is, is serial traffic disruption. More specifically, it is performance art – the kind of spirited traffic disruption that draws the inconvenienced traveler away kicking and screaming from talk radio into a unique and satisfying real-life experience. There are three key ingredients here: (1) a dramatic, expressive gesture (2) in full costume (3) in the middle of the road. The problem is that these days Alice Merkel does not particularly enjoy her business. She has reached that point on the career arc where the diva first mixes alcohol and barbiturates, sold-out tours are canceled due to “exhaustion,” and her agent asks that fans “respect her privacy at this difficult time.” Being the Witch has ceased to be exhilarating, or meaningful, or important to Alice. All this has become, well, *business*, and she is tired of it. Tired of answering to Crimedog, her overly devoted fan base, her Engineers.

There is more to this malaise than simple self-absorption. There was a freak accident during her last gig, back in March. A squad car rushing to arrest her hit a guardrail. Two cops almost bought it. There is also the fact that she has, by no fault of her own, acquired a mortal,

monomaniacal enemy named David Crilly. Alice knows very little about Crilly, except that he cropped up out of nowhere a year ago, he appears regularly on television to call her a “harpy” and a “Jezebel,” and on the strength of that rhetoric he was appointed by the governor last week to lead the heretofore couldn’t-be-bothered “special committee” that the New Jersey Turnpike Authority formed some time ago to identify and capture the Turnpike Witch.

There is plenty more to this background – more to the car crash, more to Crilly’s obsession with the Witch, more to the political circumstances underlying his appointment. But Alice is already struggling under the weight of this much exposition. She can’t be thinking about this now. She needs to steel herself for what will be a demanding performance. The program she has settled on for this evening is a rerun. An old favorite, tried and true: traffic-surfing. It sounds complicated, looks dangerous, but is really a piece of cake so long as you concentrate:

First, wait for a lull in the traffic, then walk out into the road, shoot up flares. The cars will stop for you. If they don’t, you’re screwed, so count on them stopping. When the cars pull up, you climb the hood of the one in front. You pull the bull-horn from your belt, kneel down just behind the hood ornament, and with one hand on hip and the other holding the megaphone – an authoritative posture is crucial to success here – you order the driver to pull up. Supply further squawk through the megaphone as necessary to get the driver’s foot off his brake. As the car inches forward, mindful of the world-renowned celebrity perched on its hood, you skip up onto the car’s roof, drop down on the trunk, and jump from this car’s back bumper to the hood of the next, which should follow close behind its front-side counterpart without instruction. The front car, dismissed now from the spotlight, will motor off into oblivion.

Through strict, deliberate repetition of this process you should be able to traverse the full column of traffic. Step lightly. Be respectful of the cars underneath you. The drivers and passengers should suffer, at worst, only a minor delay in transit. The driver-spectators should take back to their dreary lives the emblazoned image of Grace itself, draped in glowing orange, gliding through the night over their cars without a sound or noticeable footstep, as though she were flying.

There are traps to avoid, of course: open sunroofs, CB antennas perilously placed – minivans, trucks, SUVs offer variable heights that are tougher to scale. You might consider stepping sideways to a car in the other lane when a particularly problematic vehicle (say, a motorcycle) pulls up next. Though not so ambitious as some of your best-remembered undertakings, like November 2009’s “Operation Cheese Doodle,” or your buck-naked infiltration of the Moorestown state trooper

station last year, an evening of traffic-surfing could be just the ticket to get the Turnpike Witch back in the public eye.

Alice could not have chosen a better night to retake the stage. The air is crisp and cool, the sky peppered with stars and Windindexed clean, but for a crowd of clouds streaming quickly by a thumbnail moon that would, if it could, hitch a ride. A potential for witchcraft hangs on every molecule in the firmament.

She takes a last bite from her sandwich and throws the crust to the squirrels. Inside her backpack is a two-liter bottle of Diet Coke, three-quarters drunk. Alice unscrews the cap and, with three unfeminine swigs, polishes it off. Swallowing, she flattens the empty bottle and stows it in her pack. She has seen the community-service work crews, miserably picking up litter from these roadside woods. They shouldn’t have to clean up after her.

Dress-up time. She pulls her orange synthetic-wool ski mask down over her face. With fumbling fingers she threads no fewer than eighteen safety pins through its bottom cuff and pins the mask to her collar, securing her disguise. This process seems to take days. Only her eyes are visible at this point. Alice’s eyes are naturally a deep, piercing green, but for tonight’s purposes they are brown. Regarding her trembling hands with contempt, she remembers trying to put on the tinted lenses earlier this evening. Dropping the contacts, soiling them, poking herself in the eye for a half hour before her Engineers stepped in to help her.

She slips on surgical gloves and a hooded sweatshirt (hood up) and reaches for the chin-strapped traffic cone. Tar-smearred and scarred, her Witch’s hat has seen better days and a clearer head. She settles the pylon on her head, pulls the strap tight around her chin, and flips open a compact mirror. Looking at the framed image of frightened Alice Merkel, she tries to coax some other, more imposing character out from behind her eyes.

The final touch is her overcoat, left for last because its Day-Glo orange attracts the eye. Alice took this coat off the back of a policeman the Turnpike Witch had surprised behind an overturned Hess tanker up by Interchange Twelve last fall. A whip-smart gesture of her flare gun in the general direction of the gasoline spill and the coat was hers. Her Engineers pegged the promotional value of that rash action, passable to

even the most gun-shy district attorney as armed robbery, at over one hundred grand. They made gleeful report of it on the unofficial website. In recent weeks David Crilly has growled into microphones: “Who does this *harlot*, this *Gorgon* thinks she is wearing a police-issue rain slicker after what she did to those two officers?” Of course the Witch has not appeared in public, with or without the coat, since Officers Angstrom and Hotchkiss crashed their squad car. But facts don’t matter to her sudden sworn enemy.

Alice laces her boots and pulls the ends tight enough to pop the eyelets from the leather. She ties double, then triple knots, then winds electrical tape around her ankles and shins.

Understanding now that she has exhausted every possible means of putting this off, she takes a deep breath and strides out of the woods, over the graveled breakdown lane and into the path of a station wagon bearing down on her in the southbound passing lane. The Turnpike Witch draws twin flare guns from their clips on her belt. Determined to be most careful today, Alice has left ample room for the wagon to slow down. Nevertheless, the driver overreacts: the car brakes, swerves, and skids across both lanes, takes out two reflectors on the road margin, and wrecks flush into the mile marker on which she’s hung her backpack.

Oh. Oh shit. Not again.

The car crash puts the air’s palpable magic to flight. The Turnpike Witch flinches now, belatedly, and takes three giant steps toward the crashed car. No initial sign – blaring horn, driver dumped out into the street – that anyone is in a bad way. *How could this happen?* The driver had to have seen her. He should have stopped. *It wasn’t my fault. I’m wearing bright orange.* The car’s windshield is cracked, and the driver – male, it seems – can’t get the car door open. He’s jiggling the handle with increasing desperation. Alice takes a deep breath, turns away from the accident to confront the oncoming cars. Columns of fire shoot from her arms, diagonally over the heads of oncoming drivers. *Hold it. Hold everything. I need to think.*

Traffic begins to stack up in front of her – angry horns and brights flashing. Alice forlornly absorbs these gestures of impatience, photons and honks that the presence of the Turnpike Witch in her prime would have deflected into outer space. Alice returns flare guns to belt clips

and walks fifty yards ahead of the stopped traffic, where she drops into a squat, tries to gather herself. Dimly respectful of the Witch, the cars stay where they are.

She can’t do this. There has been an accident; *the show does not go on.* That is the principle, but she is not strong enough to act on it. If she cuts and runs, the Engineers will skewer her, Crimedog will file her, Crilly will fault her for causing an accident and leaving the scene. She waits for some director somewhere to shout “cut,” send a grip to attend to the injured stuntman, and reset the scene. But there is no director. She was not ready for this. Not ready to come back out here again. The Engineers should never have made her do it. Tears well up in her eyes. *Stupid stupid stupid.*

The sound of glass breaking – a smaller, subsidiary crash budding off the larger accident – claims her attention. She stands up and steps back down toward the wrecked wagon. Licks of smoke cling to the car’s engine block. An over-designed athletic shoe hangs out the broken window of the driver’s side door. The leg attached to it is cut and bleeding. Kicking his way out. Having done this herself, she knows how the cuts can hurt. A young man climbs out through the window. He falls to the ground and lies there.

Alice knows she should help this kid, but she can’t. “I hate you,” she says to the Turnpike Witch. Once again: “*I hate you.*” Now she has gone on record with her conscience, having expressed aloud her discomfort with having to flee the scene, and said conscience should cut her a break. It’s not like the kid will bleed to death here.

Accordingly, Alice extracts from her coat pocket the paperweight-sized device that will issue her electromagnetic pulse, the effect of which will crash the dashboard computers of every car within a five-hundred-yard radius. Headlights will flicker and drop. Radios will scream with feedback. The smartphone spectators’ tweets will fail to post, and the calls scores of travelers are presently making to the special committee’s Witch Alert Hotline will drop, as handsets and cell towers alike spasm out of function. The fluorescent lamps that light the green street signs will pop out of their federally standardized sockets, and the flashes of whatever cameras are handy will fail in their unsanctioned efforts to deliver to film an image of the Turnpike Witch.

For her part, Alice has no idea any of this will happen. When she was given the device two days ago, her Engineers advised her that it would activate a homing signal that would enable them to locate her, track her route of escape, and motor down the road to pick her up. This is all she's been told about the device, a limited disclosure that does not account for the vulgar and destructive display of power that the device's designer, a real shithead lately, has planned for her to unleash on the gathered traffic.

Unaware, then, of what will follow, and wanting only to flee the scene, Alice centers her thumb on the switch and counts backward. *Three, two, one*—

A cold hand reaches out from behind her and locks around her wrist. Alice whirls around to find the driver of the wrecked station wagon tugging at the sleeve of her coat, dazed and bleeding from his ears. He addresses the Turnpike Witch from his knees.

"Milady, I am at your service." He kisses her hand, then lifts his head; his eyes lock in on hers. Alice grunts and withdraws her hand, unsure what to make of this character, another fan with still less of a grip on reality than she has.

Backed-up cars and trucks begin to gun their engines. A truck driver three times her size grows finally so emboldened as to kick out of his cab and approach her. He calls out to her in a menacing Alabama drawl:

"There a problem here, little girl?"

Alice turns to the injured boy at her feet. "We've got to get out of here. Now. Can you walk?" He doesn't answer. More drivers, more passengers begin to spill out of their cars. They move on her in a growing mass.

"Can you walk?" she repeats. The boy stares dumbly.

"I asked you, sweetheart," the trucker says, his loose upper lip sucked in over a gap in his front teeth, "if you got a problem."

"Can you hear me?" she asks the boy. A crowd gathers in the trucker's wake, murmuring about the Witch. More than one carries a flashlight or an umbrella, something of use in a fight. Some are familiar faces — allies, her fans, Pikers who live down the road at the Walt Whitman Service Area, all of them better talkers than they are fighters. They pretend that they're civilians:

"She's crazy, that one, maybe we should just let her alone."

"All of you had better stand back. Word is she booby-traps herself."

Alice tosses aside the pulse remote, grabs the boy's face in both hands, and shouts at him: "Can you hear me?"

The boy shakes his head. His lips frame the word "no."

Her hands fall away from his face. She looks into her palms: blood. *Oh God. That's my fault.* His head impacted somewhere. Steering wheel, dashboard, windshield — take your pick. He's lost hearing. Right now the Turnpike Witch is wracked with self-loathing, and the first one of these folks to cross her line — looks like the hick trucker is the lucky winner — will pay for it. She will live vicariously through the suffering of that trucker, she decides. She will punish herself for the wreck of that station wagon by kicking his teeth out. Alice switches on her bullhorn.

"Everybody stay back." She pulls the weakened Pike-pilgrim to his feet beside her.

"She's right," someone shouts from the crowd in front of her, twenty to thirty people thick. "She's got powers!"

"She'll melt your eyes!" one of the friendlies yells from her Dodge.

The trucker is unimpressed by these pronouncements. He plucks a golf club out of a bystander's hand and charges at Alice. Still worse: police are now looming over the trees in a helicopter. Searchlights bear down from overhead. Cell calls to the hotline have gone through, and the special committeemen have her in their sights.

She steps out from under her casualty's arm to introduce the trucker's yapping mouth to the toe of her left boot. She lays him out flat with one kick and steps back to catch the boy before he can fall to the ground. The helicopter rotates over her head like a giant clock. Its propeller flushes away the seconds while head and tail tick around the sky in a manic circle, swirling her time remaining down the drain.

With the boy's limp weight on her arm — *God, he can't be older than fourteen* — she thrashes around in the chopper's spotlight looking for her pulse remote. Finding it, she presses its button to summon her Engineers.

The EMP discharge doesn't exactly black out New Jersey, but it does its job. The floodlamp overhead and the lights on the front cars crash out completely. Further away, lights flicker and go dim, indicating the pulse's margin of dissipation, but it's the chopper that has Alice's attention. The helicopter is wobbling sightless in the sky — now it skitters off ahead of Alice and the blocked traffic to find by slivered moonlight a suitable

place to set down. The pulse causes confusion: bodies scramble in every direction in the dark stretch of open road in front of her.

Alice runs with the wounded boy on her arm. *What just happened?* A pain shoots up her arm as she makes for the treeline. The fried pulse generator, in the course of destroying itself, has burned a hole in her palm. She gags at the sight and smell of that – looks quickly, stupidly from the melted hunk of metal and plastic in her hand to the blacked-out traffic. She drops the pulse remote into her coat pocket and continues to stumble along up the road with the boy. *In the dark now: he's got to be terrified.* By the time she has gone fifty yards, most of the vehicles are moving, many of them lightless but reignited. Some of them can drive. Others will not, and no driver can see or predict the traffic around him. Alice slips between the rows of cars and toward the shoulder.

She doubles back to the crashed station wagon. Alice can't leave her pack behind for patrols to recover. The bent mile-marker is wedged under the car. Alice plants a foot on the sign for leverage and, with her second pull, dislodges her bag from between the marker and the loose gravel. The boy grips her arm more tightly and digs his nails in. She squeals and swings a fist at him, reflexively, without landing it.

Gunshots. Alice starts, slides on the gravel and twists her ankle. Behind the scattering masses to her left she can see the hand-held high beams – the backup flashlights of special committee roadside unit troopers – blitzing the scene. Alice has never seen the SCRUS deployed, but she recognizes their reflective yellow uniforms from the news. In a last-ditch effort to keep his job, Crilly's predecessor put together the unit of thirty-six elite Witch-hunting operatives last spring. Now they're closing in on their quarry, firing into the air – blanks, she hopes. Otherwise they're kicking this up a notch too far.

"The Witch! There on the ground! Side of the road! Break off in twos and flank her!" The SCRUS sound competent, which is a bummer. They snake through the traffic as it rumbles back into motion. Their single purpose is to take her alive. The Witch is barely twenty seconds away from dropping off Crimedog's list entirely. And Alice herself stands confused and stationary – the weight of her pylon crown seems to increase until she feels it will twist her, an unwilling drill bit, into the ground.

A Chevy Impala sails in on the shoulder, right under the dripping noses of the SCRUS. It's an early eighties model, with right-rear door duct-taped closed and brakes so worn that the car hits three separate, identifiable skids on the gravel before it comes to a stop.

"We'll help you. Get in the car," the driver says. Alice pauses. The faces aren't familiar. Pimpily kid in the driver's seat. Tattoo crawling up toward his face from the back of his neck. The passenger is more of a clean-cut type. Receding hairline, aquiline nose. She hasn't seen either of them in any of the south-Pike service areas. Could be journalists, could be cops. Still, it's her best bet. Alice pulls the boy behind her toward the car. She takes the pylon off her head, flops into the back seat, then crawls across to the far side. The boy sits down next to her. The door drops open when he tries to close it.

"You have to hook it up," says the passenger in the front seat.

"Show him, Schultzie," the driver instructs. The passenger leans over his seat to loop a bungee cord through the door handle, attaching the hooks to the strap over the door.

The Impala lurches along the berm, circles behind the crowd in the road and angles into an AUTHORIZED VEHICLES ONLY U-turn zone cut out of the median barricade. Stalled-out traffic on that side – cars rubbernecking – pens them in. It occurs to Alice that she might spring out in favor of a more legit ride, but the Impala cuts sharply across the road through a gap in the traffic. Its tires take precarious hold of the gravelly northbound shoulder, and the car accelerates.

"They're going to call us in, Ray," the shotgun passenger complains.

"It's possible that crazy pulse knocked out their radios," Alice suggests, with little confidence.

"It did the job on ours," the driver says. "My Blackberry, too. You gonna pay for that? We're the Impalers, by the way."

"The Impalers?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'm –"

"We know who you are," says the driver. "The Impalers don't stop for just any woman."

"Funny. You seem like the type who might."

“That smarts,” the passenger says, digging a fist into his partner’s upper arm. “Where to, Witch?” Alice looks over at the boy beside her. He is sitting on his feet, his eyes closed, head hunched against the window, crying. Alice swallows hard and closes her eyes.

“To a hospital,” she says. Another cumbersome bit of background: Alice has a grave psychological aversion to leaving the Turnpike. Bad things happen when she tries – really bad things – usually to her, though other people and their property have taken damage, too. “To the nearest hospital,” she says, despite all this.

“Oh, Christ,” the driver says. “This is going to be an all-night thing, isn’t it?”

“She’s right, Ray. That kid’s bleeding out his ears.”

“So we just pull up at the ER with the Turnpike Witch and her car-crash kid in our back seat? With the car registered in your name?”

“It’s the right thing to do.” Shotgun Schultzie consults a map. On the fly, they find the hospital nearest exit four, ten miles down the road.

Alice looks over at the boy. Crew cut with big eyes that catch the cut moon when he’s not wringing tears out of them. She doubts that he’s old enough to drive. *And I shouldn’t have been in the way.* Off in the margin of her consciousness, the Turnpike Witch howls. *You’re going soft. That’s your problem.* That doesn’t frighten her. She would welcome it if it came. It’s fear that makes you hard. It turns you into a nautilus, traps you in a shell of your own making. Craving security, you burrow constantly inside toward the tightest point in the homemade spiral.

They’re at the off-ramp now. Where all the trouble usually starts for Alice. She takes a deep breath as the car stops, then rolls in twenty-foot increments toward the tollbooth.

Alice ducks down in her seat. She fumbles to unlock her safety pins and remove the telltale orange balaclava. The pins aren’t opening fast enough. She ends up tearing the mask off her head with the pins still attached, pulling a ring of green fabric from her collar.

“Dude! She took off her mask!” Ray says. He nudges his friend, who is studying the toll ticket more intently than would seem necessary.

Alice pulls her sweatshirt’s hood over her head, yanks the drawstrings so tight the opening over her face closes to the size of a half dollar. She wriggles off the seat and curls up on the floor. She prays that nobody

has put out a bulletin on an Impala with the Turnpike Witch inside. She closes her eyes again, swallows hard. An ocean swells up on the far side of that tollbooth, its waters poised to crash over her in a flood.

Think baby steps, she tells herself. Just stay conscious, try not to hurt anybody.

The car pulls up to the tollbooth. Alice claps her hands over her throbbing head, tries not to throw up, tries not to run screaming out of the car back to the toll road. It should be the briefest and least loaded of interactions, but Ray still manages to get into some kind of tiff with the toll-taker. He eventually pays her the monies owed, and they pass off the turnpike into Greater New Jersey, where Alice will drown. Liquid and acidic, New Jersey winds its way into her shell to flush her out. She spits up about a pint of Diet Coke onto the floor beside her. The boy squeals and pulls his feet up onto the seat.

“Oh, Jesus, Schultz. She’s back there puking.”

Suburbia fluoresces up around the Impala. Alice hammers her eyes closed, but the streetlights and signs pulse down through her lids as they flash by overhead. Somehow the gibbering idiots up front find the hospital, without the help of Alice, crippled, useless, and hiding her eyes as the car ventures further off-Pike.



In the ER lobby, Alice Merkel enjoys a brief remission from her panic. Stripped down to street clothes, she hits the free coffee hard. The vending machines are either inoperative or unstocked – a sign of the general decline and upkeep failures of off-Pike living – and she needs something to puddle her sick stomach before the gallon of acid inside it eats her alive. The caffeine *might* keep her from fainting – Alice has already exceeded, five times over, her longest period of sustained off-Turnpike consciousness since early 2009. This miracle she cannot remotely explain, unless it has to do with the boy. Someone is cutting her a break, and she appreciates that.

Still, she is panting, pacing the floor, having to stop constantly to secure the lid on her coffee cup while some runaway gag reflex convulses her body. Alice is beginning to draw suspicious looks from bystanders. She is twisting in a whirlwind of inefficient movement and disorganization, bungee-tied through the belt loops and dangling out into a chaos of

pushed paper and bleeding spurters. Two frat boys out in the visitor's lot are her lifeline back to safety and sanity. Alice has ordered the Impalers to stay behind. She was going to have to show her face in the hospital, and she could not allow them to get a look at her.

Forty-five minutes of multilingual cursing, blood, bustle, piss, threats, vomit, and delinquent mops. CONTAIN YOUR FLUIDS, CONTAIN YOURSELVES, prompts a Photoshopped sign from the wall behind the reception desk.

The boy's name is Michael, and his head injury advances him to the head of the class. Within the hour, nurses have him in an exam room. Alice finds the efficient hum of back-room procedure a bit more soothing. Michael sits placidly as nurses apply disinfectant and dress the gashes on his forehead and legs. A doctor arrives – smarmy, middle-aged, peering over horn-rimmed glasses to ask questions that Michael can't hear. Well and good for Alice, who gives up her own version of the story in his stead. She was driving him home from the Phillies game, an SUV cut her off – the Witch is so practiced with lies, from her many civilian interviews with police in the Turnpike service areas, that they drop from her lips without a moment's thought. So simple, airtight, and charming are these lies; they actually relax her.

They will admit the boy and hold him over for evaluation, the doctor says.

“Hold over?” Alice jerks upright. The panic is boiling up again.

“He's conscious and lucid. The CT can wait until morning.”

“Why not now?”

The doctor looks her over. “That car accident upset you. Can I get you something?”

“*Answer the goddam question I asked you.*” The nurses, nonplussed, usher Michael out of the room.

The doctor speaks slowly and carefully. “The radiologist I would rather have treat your nephew is not on call. We'll test Michael in the morning. Get him in and out before lunch.”

“No. Do it now.” Alice's eyes are watering. She tastes blood – her back teeth, anticipating warfare, have dug a trench in her tongue. “Do it now.”

“I can't – I need technicians. The attending physician has to sign off. I can't authorize a test that expensive without getting prior authorization from the insurer –”

Goddammit. Alice inches toward a can labeled MEDICAL WASTE. In a moment she will do something rash and stupid, but her conscious mind has not yet settled on the specifics.

“We have to leave soon,” she says calmly, “and we can't come back.”

“I am not going to discharge your nephew. He has suffered a serious head injury, and he needs to stay here for tests –”

“We've discussed this. You won't *give him* the fucking tests!” Alice's hand buried in her hair, tightens now. She pulls until her eyes stream water. She lifts the lid from the medical waste can and gropes around in the puffed plastic bin liner. The doctor runs over to stop her. Alice pulls out three syringes with shreds of torn blue plastic stuck on their tips. In a split second, she's arranged them spikes-out between the four fingers of a clenched fist. The doctor shrinks into a corner. A skip to the door and a kick slams it closed. Alice has the doctor by the hair. She pulls, pushes, doinks his head on the wall. Three dirty needles appear flush against his chin.

“You'll give him the test *now*, or I swear to God I'll jab these needles so deep they'll skewer your tongue.” This is some other person talking. This isn't her.

“The machine – it's not here. It's upstairs.” The doctor falls to his knees. “Who – who are you?” he asks, broaching the all-important question of true identity that Alice has thus far managed to duck. Hurried footsteps approach the door. Alice whirls and scans the room for a second means of egress. Nothing. On the far wall hangs a glossy, oversized public service announcement: the swollen head of an infant with fetal alcohol syndrome. Alice tears a strip of its middle out with her free hand, crumples both ends inside a fist, and pulls the ring of paper over her head, aligning the torn bottom half of the baby's face over hers. She ties the ends into a rough knot behind her head.

By the time she has her red hood pulled over her head, security guards are pounding at the door. Private contractors in sport coats – the looks on their faces convey something less than commitment to their work. The doctor is cowering on the floor. She commands him to stand up and open the door. With needles poised at the back of his neck, she prods him past the guards and down the hall into the lobby. The baby face covers her mouth.

“Nobody moves.” She is losing her breath. “Or I stab him through.” She gestures to Michael, who has risen from his waiting-room chair, prepared to leave with the Witch. “You stay here. Somebody can help you.” He rushes to her side, confused. She shakes her head in an exaggerated fashion, exposes her mouth so he can read her lips. “You stay here.”

“I won’t,” Michael says. “I have a mission.” She stands awkwardly in a silent room streaming snotty paper pulp down her face and neck, while the 15+ co-occupants study her and log characteristics they will later describe to police:

About five-foot-nine inches tall, thin, black hair, brown eyes . . .

“Fine,” she decides. “Come on.” From behind she rams a knee into the sniveling physician. “Into the parking lot. Nobody moves.”

The automatic doors snap closed behind them, and Michael, Alice, and the doctor take their parade into the parking lot. Ray and Schultzie have no clue what has happened inside, but they seem impressed to see the Witch approach their car with a hostage.

“Are we taking him?” Schultzie asks from the driver’s seat, engine revved and running.

Alice pauses. This is a delicate situation. The doctor has seen her but does not know she is the Witch. These two know she is the Witch, but they haven’t seen her. The three of them together could put the make on her. They can’t be allowed to compare notes.

At her direction, Ray secures the doctor’s arms to his sides with the backseat bungee cord. Schultzie digs an iPod out of the glove box, cranks up the volume, and puts the headphones over the doctor’s ears – all this while Alice stands in plain sight of the hospital doors with sharps poised over the hostage’s throat, promising an immediate triple-dip into his neck if anyone should step outside.

“What do we do with him?” Ray wants to know.

Alice gestures at the ER doors: “As soon as we drop him those guards will come out.”

“So we take him,” Schultzie says.

“There’s another problem.” Alice takes a deep, heaving breath. “He saw my face.”

“Everybody in there saw your face.”

“He saw my face *after* I made myself memorable.”

“Does he make you for the Witch?”

Alice shrugs. Michael seats himself quietly inside the car.

Schultzie pulls Ray aside and whispers something to him. Ray deals his camerado a two-handed shove to the chest. “No.”

Schultzie glares back at Ray. “You ran off and blew our last gas and food money to buy them. They’re as much mine as yours.”

It turns out the “they” under discussion here are roofies. Ray’s idea of romance? The Impalers’ internal power dynamic is swiftly revealed to Alice, as with his glare redoubled and a simple extension of his hand, Schultzie gets Ray to surrender the pills. Alice slips behind the doctor, flips up one of the headphones and whispers into his ear. She explains that neither she nor the Impalers are interested in kidnapping him; they just need to bluff their way out of the hospital parking lot. Thus, if the doctor would kindly consent to ingesting this one nugget of Rohypnol – she assumes he is aware of the drug’s properties – she will see that he is taken home and left to dream of a less complicated world on his front lawn. The doctor stammers out his agreement to these terms, and she reaches into his pocket, pulls out his wallet and reads the address off his driver’s license to verify that this is where he in fact lives.

The doctor swallows the pill, and the Impalers load him into the car’s capacious trunk. Alice recites aloud the doctor’s name and address as Ray starts the car. They ride ten minutes out of their way to the doctor’s house, leaving him on the lawn as promised. Then they’re off again, with Alice continuing to repeat aloud her hostage’s name and address. She does this well past the point when Ray and Schultzie begin to complain. Distant sirens threaten, but police never do pick up their trail. Through the trip Alice can feel big heaping froths of acid and instant coffee churning in her stomach. She has the Devil’s cappuccino inside her. She needs sleep, food, drink, and – more than anything – the Road and its promise of Order.

This was a terrible night for the Turnpike Witch. A car crash, an awkward hostage crisis – dirty, filthy business – and then there’s this Ray, with his pocketful of mickey and presumably a short list of Piker women he plans to drug and assault in the coming days. Some of this she can fix. Alice will arrange to deliver the doctor a fruit basket, maybe a Starbucks gift card. Something thoughtful, paid in cash, to leave on his

front porch, now that she has memorized his address. A phone call to a friendly policeman sees Ray separated from his pants, pills pulled from pockets and flushed down a rest area toilet. Now and then the Turnpike Witch can use her clout to make the world a better place. More the pity, Alice decides, eyeing the twelve-year-old boy next to her, that tonight she has failed miserably at her first principle, which is to do no harm.

She fishes a Dramamine tablet out of her pack, swallows it, and closes her eyes.