



## JESSICA M. CREBS "NOTHING TO FEAR"

It was oozing across the floor, spreading quickly. That was the first thing she noticed as she unlocked the door to the house, that there was a thin layer of water oozing across the floor. She looked curiously at it, dropped her coat, hat, purse, and keys on the couch, leaving the door open, and followed the water, up the stairs and down the hall into the bathroom. Her stomach dropped. This wasn't good. Michael wouldn't have left the water running like that. She pushed the door open and screamed.

Her home was taken over by cops and the coroner. Her home was not hers anymore. They had dragged her out, kicking and screaming, screaming at Michael, her brother, to wake up, that the joke wasn't funny anymore. And now she was sitting outside, soaking wet from shaking her dead brother, wrapped in a blanket, an animal on display. Nobody cared about her, her brother. The neighbor had called the police because she was disturbed about the noise. Now she was bragging to the reporters, to the cops, to the other neighbors about how she had helped. The joke wasn't funny anymore.

Besides her grief, the stares she got at school, from her parents, from people who read the papers, were the worst. Everybody had a different theory. Michael was suicidal. Michael fell asleep. Michael slipped and hit his head. Michael was murdered. Michael was murdered. Michael was murdered. She knew that, in her very bones. Not that anybody would listen. Michael had gotten weird three weeks before his death, jumpy. And then, it stopped. He was calm, normal again. But he'd been different enough that people noticed and remembered. Her parents were hysterical and blamed themselves ... and her, for leaving him alone.

And then things got better. There was newer, more outrageous gossip at school. Her dad threw himself into work. Most people moved on. Not her mother. No, her mother threw herself out a window. Exactly a month later. Coroner said it happened around the same time as before. Ella found her body first, too.

And she was a star again. She was cast in a role she didn't want. There weren't as many theories for her mother. She killed herself. Ella still suspected murder. Fewer people believed her this time. All signs pointed to suicide. But her mother never would have gone in the attic, even to kill herself. She hated heights, and the floor wasn't finished; it was all exposed beams and fiber-glass.

And things got better again. Her aunt moved in. Her father's sister. It had been years since Ella had seen her. She and her mother hadn't gotten along. But she was sorry, "so, so sorry" for their loss. And then the funeral was over. And her father was back to work. And

Ella was failing her classes and skipping school. And she was fighting with her aunt and her father. And then her father was dead. Ella found him first. She woke her aunt up screaming.

She dropped out of school. Her aunt was selling the house. They were going to be moving into a tiny apartment. Ella didn't care. Ella didn't care about a lot of things anymore. She got a job at the local movie theater. Her boss was a creeper. Her co-workers were mostly deadbeats with no ambition or people she went to high school with determined to make a quick buck and save money on watching movies with friends who gossiped about "Poor Ella whose brother and mom killed themselves and father died of a heart attack, all within three months." She was making them famous. Nobody understood that her father was obsessive about his health. His heart was perfect. He was murdered. But these things can just sneak up on us sometimes, and Ella had to learn to accept that. That's what everyone said at least.

"What do you fear the most in the world, Ella?" A man's voice asked from behind her. The voice was close to her ear, and she shuddered.

She had been waiting for this. Nobody else had put the pattern together like she had. Four months ago tonight her brother died. Her aunt was out for the night with friends, and she just didn't understand why Ella wouldn't be more social.

"Death," Ella said simply, turning from the counter where she'd been pouring a glass of milk.

"You're making my job easy," the man said, smiling. Ella didn't know him. But he knew her. He knew all about her. He'd been watching her family for years. The athletic older brother who was afraid of drowning, yet still made the varsity swim team, determined to overcome his fear, lessen the likelihood it would happen. The mother who was so afraid of heights that she and her husband had a bedroom on the first floor. The father, obsessed with his health since his own father died prematurely from a heart attack. And Ella, the girl who found them all. The only one who knew what had been wrong. She had been special, which is why she was saved for last before he moved on. He had another family to learn about, after all.

"Is that why you killed them the way you did?" Ella asked. "Because it was what they feared?" The man said nothing. She didn't expect him to. He grabbed a knife from the set on the counter, the biggest one, and turned it before him, touched the blade, the tip, to test its sharpness. Perfect. Ella's eyes widened. He stabbed her.

"Is it how you expected?" he wondered aloud as she began to gargle blood. "It's better." Ella breathed all bubbles and blood. And then her eyes went glassy, and she was gone.

Her aunt found her first. The apartment door was open. Ella had left a note.  
*The joke isn't funny anymore. —Ella.*



## "Let Me Sleep"

by Christina J. Foss

"Lucretia," oh, what a word that trembles on my breath, that's spoken pale and hazy in the final sigh of death. For ne'er I heard a name so rare with beauty so complete, an innocence was planted there, an expertise deceit. Like mourning doves shunned by their loves, my fate's the same it seems. I felt the bliss of your sweet kiss but only in my dreams. My sanctuary, slumber, I await you with delight. So hasten, sun, to set and turn the golden day to night. No love is true that's loved by you — and so I hesitate; affections lie, I can't comply, my lucid dreams await — Lucretia, who had the power to make my frail heart leap. My fantasies perch on the hour of midnight. Let me sleep.

Your smile was false, but I was young and eager to be fooled, and noticed not the envy flame we stoked and never cooled. His bitter eyes were hot and green, and vicious his desires, and he by both remained unseen, and both he saw as liars. Oh, jealousy such urgency do you with spite provoke I, dormant, suffer torment when my love does me invoke. I do not want the lie I want on truth that I do not, so leave me, love, and spare your cruel deception any thought. Intrusions, my illusions you destroy and I deplore; my peace you take when I awake, you knock on dreamland's door. I hear your footsteps from the hall into my chamber creep, I'm beckoned by your urgent call, but utter "Let me sleep."

Yet no reply, no single word did meet my waking ear, naught but a creak upon the ancient floorboards did I hear. A strike so quick and cutting that I hardly could detect my killer gravely gutting, his ambitions to protect. I gaze into the shadowed haze to see those emerald eyes, my enemy by jealousy in apathy's disguise. A streak of warmth trails down my face as his lights up with glee — with passion for the slaughter, and tonight his prey is me — that man, betrayed, with bloodied blade, and hands of red. I cry "Lucretia ..." a plea to thee, my last word as I die. His frenzied knives sunk into skin, they sought my soul to reap, but not once touched my heart within. Desist, and let me sleep.

A wicked smile then twists his lips, a spark of grisly pride to know his lone competitor by his mad hand had died. He bore me from the tainted room of murder with a laugh and forged me my eternal tomb, my morbid epitaph: *And here he lies with hopeless eyes. Oh sutor, had you known your flame, that cold hard-hearted dame would let you die alone?* But cruel and bitter irony steps in as I depart; 'tis then that sweet Lucretia endures a change of heart, a throb of pain as I am slain, and — frightened, does awake — an aching breast — to clutch her chest, a pale hand o'er the break. My time has ended on this earth, and sadly, now you weep ... your diamond tears, my life's not worth, so stop, and let me sleep.

A faint sob, so implausible, he disbelieves he hears. No warming welcome with a smile, but bloodshot eyes and tears. He, robbed of glory and of praise, discovers in my bed upon the linen, dark and gory, her form takes my stead. Two bloodstains mingle, fingers tingle, sapped of vital life, on her collapse, her wrists he wraps despite her mortal strife. So sought you quiet death that you might reunite with me. He, unforgiving, kept you living, withheld all mercy. You roamed the halls, the echoing walls, with one purpose in mind — from past regrets and unpaid debts some sweet solace to find. You sought my body every day, now buried in the deep, you would not find it anyway. Turn back, and let me sleep.

For yours, a soul too young and pure for dwelling on the past, I may have been your first love, but I should not be your last. Though he may ghoulishly remain and, sentrylike, observe, you should not foolishly refrain from love that you deserve. He did not kill, despite his will, he could not follow through, although he tried, I never died — my heart lives on in you. Look not with shame upon the fleshy lines that scar your wrist, it is remembrance only, feelings you could not resist. So mourn me not, my love, my dove, Lucretia, my dear, but set me free, your love for me must not delay me here. Although, in life, I wanted best for you my hand to keep, my weary soul needs rest, and you must finally let me sleep.