

Part I

1

“Are you sure?” Jeff asked. He squeezed Lisa’s hand as they stood before the gray steel front entrance of the converted antebellum mansion.

Aren’t you?”

“No, but what choice do we have?”

Lisa didn’t answer, but returned his squeeze and smiled up at him. They had discussed it again during the U.S. Airways flight to Atlanta, hunching together and whispering under the dull throb of the jet engines. The frustration of the past year wore heavily on her, and she was disconcerted by Jeff’s uncertainty. This was Ethan’s last chance, and they both knew it. What choice, indeed.

Jeff turned and managed what passed for an answering smile before he pressed the call button on the intercom to the right of the door. They waited in silence for several seconds before Jeff pressed it again, holding it down longer. He looked back between the Doric columns at the rented Ford Escort parked between a red Mercedes roadster and a gray Lexus SUV. Lisa knew he was thinking about returning to the car and suspected he preferred to maintain his slim hopes rather than face the final crushing verdict.

“Honey, they wouldn’t have invited us down here just to tell us ‘no,’” she said. Lisa pulled on his hand and pressed the button four times in rapid succession. “This time will be different.”

“Maybe.” The word caught in his throat.

A soft buzz and a sharp metallic click accompanied the melodious voice from the intercom. “Come right in, Mr. and Mrs. Kinkade.” Lisa looked at Jeff, whose gaze still rested on the parking lot. She grabbed the iron door handle, and pulled him gently but insistently as she strained with the weight of the door. He sighed and took the handle from her, easily swinging the door open. They stepped inside.

A very pregnant young woman shuffled across the large foyer, extending her right arm with her hand drooping as if she expected Jeff to bow and brush his lips across the back. Lisa reached out quickly and grasped it. Brightly lit by an ornate chandelier, the room oozed opulent tradition. An Oriental rug nearly covered the cream-colored marble floor. In the middle of the rug, the brilliant shine on the surface of a simple oak desk reflected the subdued pastels of the pastoral scenes adorning the panels that flanked the columned doorway opposite the front door. The only objects interrupting the reflection were a small bound book, a princess telephone, and a large vase of colorful flowers. Past the closed double six-panel doors on each side of the foyer, small matching side tables with electric candelabras shined with equal perfection. Through the opposite entryway, Lisa spotted a gracefully staircase spiraling to the upper floor.

“I’m Amanda,” the young woman said, languidly drawing out the ‘man’ in an accent that painted images of the genteel South on a sultry summer day. “Welcome to the NewGenesis Center. Did I keep you waiting?”

“Only a moment,” Lisa said.

“I was indisposed,” she said with a demure smile. “Unavoidable in my condition.”

“I can see,” Lisa said. “You must be due soon.”

“Oh, yes. This little miracle will be arriving any day now.” She cradled her belly momentarily, tilting her head to one side and pursing her lips in a silent kiss.

“I love your dress,” Lisa said as Jeff started to fidget and glance around the room. She wore a simple pink sundress printed with white dots and accented by a grosgrain ribbon below her bust. Her cropped brown hair brushed against her bare shoulders as she looked up and smiled.

“Very practical,” Lisa added.

“I tried some of those business clothes for expectant mothers. But they were just so uncomfortable. I was ever so grateful when Dr. Redfern said I could dress more casually.”

“Speaking of Dr. Redfern,” Jeff said. “Is he available?”

Both women frowned at him, but Amanda’s frown was more amused, while Lisa’s was distinctly disapproving. “Just like a man,” Amanda said. “Get right to business—no time for pleasant conversation.”

“He’s not usually so rude,” Lisa said, giving Jeff her best “keep quiet” look. “It’s just that we’ve come a long way, and we’re anxious to meet with the committee.”

“And they are anxious to meet you,” Amanda said. “They’re in conference with one of the guests, so Dr. Redfern asked me to show you around the plantation grounds until they can see you.”

Jeff glanced at her belly. “Are you sure you should be—“

“Don’t be silly,” she interrupted. “I may be in a delicate condition, as they say, but a little agreeable exercise is good for mother and child. Besides, they won’t be long.” She walked to the door and waited. Lisa pushed Jeff, he opened the door, and they

followed Amanda. She turned right and walked down the broad covered porch, moving past the long row of unpainted wooden rocking chairs. A matching side table sat between each pair of chairs. The furniture was so precisely arranged and untouched that Lisa wondered if anyone ever used them.

“I always liked sitting out on my grandparents’ porch on warm summer days,” Jeff said as they neared the corner of the mansion.

“The staff prefers to call it ‘the veranda,’ Mr. Kinkade.” She pointed up. “The porch is above us, but yes, rocking in a gentle breeze with a cold lemonade is almost heaven on earth.” They followed a brick pathway around to the back, where the entrance to a formal garden was marked by gracefully-arched latticework covered with vines. “It’s a shame you weren’t here while the roses were in bloom. The trellis was absolutely awash in color.”

As they passed under the arch, Lisa gasped, amazed by the display of flowers. Back in Delaware, the blooming season was long since over and only the most reluctant leaves remained on trees. Amanda laughed softly.

“You should have seen it two months ago,” she said. “But the head gardener has a genuine talent for layering the plants. Even when I arrived in March, the gardens were spectacular. Let me show you some of the highlights.”

“I’d love that,” Lisa said.

“Do you two mind if I just sit here?” Jeff asked, motioning toward an iron bench just past the entrance. “I’m a little tired.”

“That would be fine,” Amanda said. “We’ll be back shortly, and maybe Dr. Redfern and the committee will be ready by then.” Jeff sat, and Lisa leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

“It’ll be okay, honey,” she said.

Amanda and Lisa strolled along the paths for several minutes, stopping frequently for closer inspections. They stopped at the delicate clouds of violet-blue flowers on the gray-green, silvery foliage of the Russian Sage and a broad blanket of rosy red Autumn Joy Sedum that contrasted dramatically with the leaves. They walked past numerous beds of chrysanthemums, and Lisa commented that she had never seen so many varieties and colors.

“These are my favorites,” Amanda said as they rounded one corner. Delicate yellow and pink trumpets emerged from creamy petals speckled with red-brown spots on long stems.

“They’re lilies, aren’t they?” Lisa asked.

“Toad Lilies. They started blooming last month, and I’m told they’ll last until almost everything else has faded.”

“Are you a gardener, Amanda?”

“Oh, no. I seem to have a brown thumb, but my mother always loved to tend her little garden. Nothing like this, of course, but we always had fresh flowers on the table.”

“You have an unusual accent, Amanda. Where are you from?”

Lisa had been trying to place Amanda’s accent since her first words in the foyer. It was Southern, of course, but Lisa knew there were many varieties and dialects. Amanda’s sounded vaguely familiar, but she couldn’t place it.

“I grew up in Charleston, South Carolina,” she answered.

“Oh, I’ve heard that’s a lovely city.”

“Yes, but I do not speak of Charleston anymore. It is too painful.” Lisa wondered what lay in Amanda’s past that was so devastating that she could not even talk about her childhood home. Despite her curiosity, Lisa decided it would be rude to inquire further. Amanda’s tone carried a distinct finality. They walked on without talking until Lisa spotted a graceful white and yellow flower.

“This one almost looks like a daffodil,” Lisa said. She was genuinely interested in the flowers. At the same time, she was feeling a growing impatience, but she could not bring herself interrupt Amanda’s enthusiastic commentary.

“That’s a Japanese Anemone,” Amanda said. Not only are they beautiful, but they also help keep down the pests.” Lisa noted the waves of goldenrod swaying in the breeze and was glad Jeff wasn’t with them. Goldenrods usually left Jeff’s eyes burning. Beyond the goldenrod, she spotted a cluster of shingled roofs.

“What are the buildings?” she asked.

“Those are the guest cottages.”

“Guests?” Lisa echoed.

Before she could continue, Amanda spotted a tall, bearded man walking briskly toward them from the far side of the gardens.

“There’s Dr. Redfern now,” Amanda said. Lisa recognized him from the photo on the NewGenesis website. He wore a brown sport coat over a white shirt and a striped tie. Even though it was late October, the temperature hovered around eighty, and as he approached, smiling and waving, she could see the beads of perspiration clinging to the

sparse hair on top of his head. She glanced over her shoulder in the direction Jeff waited, wishing that he were with her for this first meeting.

“Here you are, Amanda,” Dr. Redfern said when he reached them. “Have you been enjoying the gardens, Lisa?”

“Very much.”

“Good, good. Our accountant thinks I spend too much on them, but having beauty around is always worth the expense. Would you agree?”

“Certainly, but you could recover the expenses if you charged admission. I would pay to see gardens like these.” He laughed and extended his hand, which Lisa took.

“I like a woman with a firm handshake,” he said approvingly. “I guess you’ve figured out that I’m Dr. Redfern, but where’s Jeff?”

“We left him back at the entrance,” Lisa said. “He has a lot of allergy problems, and all these flowers would have him sneezing and scratching the rest of the day.”

“That’s a shame,” he said. “At least he’s gotten some time to rest. With the flight from Philadelphia and the drive down here to Pine Mountain, it wouldn’t be surprising if he was a little tired.” Lisa could detect no accent at all, even though his bio on the website stated that he was born in Mississippi. “We’re ready for you now, if you’re both ready.”

“We’re looking forward to it.”

“Well, let’s go pick up Jeff and head inside before the rest of them try to sneak off to their offices to get some other things done.” Dr. Redfern pulled a cell phone from his coat pocket and pressed a button. “We’ll be right in,” he said into the phone. He turned to Amanda. “You’re so close to your cottage here, Mandy. Why don’t you go relax. We’re

not expecting any more visitors today, and we'll let the answering service handle any phone calls." Amanda thanked him and turned toward the buildings.

"I enjoyed exploring the garden with you," Lisa said. "Maybe we can do it again." Amanda looked back and smiled broadly, but her eyes darted toward Dr. Redfern. Lisa thought she saw him shake his head, only the slightest movement.

Amanda's smile remained, but Lisa saw something else in her eyes. "Maybe," Amanda said. She walked away quickly and disappeared through the goldenrod. Lisa stared, disquieted by the puzzling exchange between Amanda and the doctor until he took her arm. Maybe it had just been her imagination. She allowed him to lead her back toward the entrance.

"I hope you're not anxious about this meeting," Dr. Redfern said.

"Not anxious, I would say—more like cautiously hopeful."

"I've reviewed your file carefully. I should think this will be a formality." Lisa's heart skipped a beat or two, but she refused to get her hopes up prematurely. "The committee will want to go over everything together, but if things go as I believe they will, tomorrow will be the more rigorous day."

"Why's that?"

"Today is more anecdotal—we just want to hear your story. Tomorrow would be more clinical. We'll want to be very sure that there is a high probability of helping Ethan." The sound of her son's name caused Lisa to stumble slightly, but Dr. Redfern's hand remained on her arm. "We all want the same thing here, Lisa. It's all about Ethan."

"Thank you," she said so quietly that she wondered if the doctor heard her.

2

Everyone stood as Dr. Redfern ushered Jeff and Lisa into what he referred to as the Center's conference room. All the conference rooms Lisa had been in before seemed to have the same design—a long table surrounded by black, high-backed adjustable chairs with a large credenza against one wall, on which usually sat the coffee urn, foam cups, a container of cream, and a selection of sweeteners. Artwork was limited to one or more motivational posters—a mountain scene with a slogan like “Always keep climbing.”

By contrast, the NewGenesis Center conference room was more like a large living room. In keeping with the southern motif she had noted in the entryway, the furniture was wicker rattan with bright, floral-patterned plush cushions. A large sofa sitting in front of a picture window that looked out on the gardens was the obvious focal point of the room. When Dr. Redfern motioned Jeff and Lisa to it, they sat facing a massive, ornate fireplace. Six chairs and a love seat fanned out from the sofa. In addition to the six-panel double doors through which they had entered, glass double doors on the opposite wall, flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows, opened onto the veranda. The committee members sat almost simultaneously after Dr. Redfern took his chair adjacent to the fireplace. The entire scene looked more like a cocktail party than a medical consultation, and Lisa was not surprised to spot an open wet bar in the wall behind Dr. Redfern. She almost expected him to offer Bloody Marys or Mint Juleps

“Well, let’s start with some introductions,” Dr. Redfern said. “Colleagues, this is Jeff and Lisa Kinkade of Newark, Delaware. They are here to see if we can help them with their two-year-old son, Ethan, who suffers from beta thalassaemia major. He has needed almost continuous transfusions, and his condition is worsening. Without effective treatment, his prognosis is grim.” Lisa winced at the cold clinical description of her son’s condition even though she had heard it before. “Prior to contacting the Center, they were turned down by three hospitals in their area. I trust you all read the file.”

“Now I’d like to introduce the committee,” he continued. “As I do, I would like each member to state his or her initial assessment of the Kinkade’s case.” He looked around the room slowly, and each person nodded to him as Jeff took Lisa’s hand. “Very well. To my right is Celeste Williams, esquire, who has served as counsel for the NewGenesis Center for the past four years.”

Despite her commitment to racial justice and her friendship with women of varying ethnicity in their church, Lisa was instinctively surprised that a black woman would hold an important position in the South, particularly since she looked a lot like one of the secretaries in her school. She wore a simple red dress, a single strand of pearls framing the scooped neck. She pushed her glasses up on her nose and smiled.

“This case presents no fundamental legal issues,” she said. “If there is medical consensus, I see no obstacles.” Short and to the point—Lisa appreciated that.

“Very good,” Dr. Redfern said. “Next to Ms. Williams is Dr. John Sanger, distinguished professor of bioethics at Emory University in Atlanta. Dr. Sanger has been the conscience of the Center since its inception in 1996. During those six years, he has helped us navigate the sometimes turbulent waters of modern reproductive science.”

“Thank you, Wallace,” Sanger said. “It has and continues to be a distinct privilege to work with this important institution and its committed staff.” He turned to Jeff and Lisa. She chuckled inwardly at Sanger’s appearance. With unkempt, thinning hair; bushy eyebrows; and an unpressed striped white shirt and tie, he was a virtual caricature of the prototypical college professor.

“I want to say as emphatically as possible that I think the Kinkade’s situation is precisely the kind that the NewGenesis Center was created to address,” he said. “Facing the intractable ignorance of the assembly-line mentality of traditional hospitals and their insurance company masters, there is really no other place for them.” Lisa saw Jeff smile bitterly and nod at Sanger’s acerbic comments, but she was not as infuriated with the hospitals. While she was heartbroken by each refusal, she tried to see the hospital’s side. Facing increasing demands with limited resources, they were forced to make difficult decisions in determining priorities. She assumed, however acute she and Jeff viewed Ethan’s condition, there must be even greater needs. She accepted that God was in control, and he would lead them.

“Theirs is a classic example of an opportunity to create greater happiness in the world. From everything we can tell, Ethan is an otherwise normal child who, once cured, will lead a happy and productive life. Having been the beneficiary of the miracles of advanced medicine, he may even be motivated to pursue a care-giver career himself. Furthermore, since Jeff and Lisa recognize the risks associated with natural conception, embryonic selection and IVF are the only viable route to expanding their family. The child conceived here will be valued for more than his or her parts. As the source of

Ethan's recovery, they will love the child all the more, ensuring a bright and happy future."

While Lisa was warned by Dr. Sanger's definitive statement, she couldn't avoid the impression that it was rehearsed. To her, it sounded more like a commercial than an informed opinion, and she was further disconcerted by the fact that he stared at the floor throughout his little speech. She was not, however, tempted to voice her misgivings.

"An astute observation and analysis, John," Dr. Redfern said. "As always. Next, to your right, Lisa, is Dr. Cynthia Ragle, our resident obstetrician. Dr. Ragle graduated magna cum laude from Dartmouth College and received her M.D. from Columbia University. Her ground-breaking work in IVF and ICSI at her clinic in Alexandria, Virginia, caught our attention two years ago. It took several months to craft the proverbial offer she couldn't refuse, but we're indeed fortunate to have her on staff."

Lisa noted that the introductions were becoming increasingly effusive, as if Dr. Redfern felt the need to impress Jeff and her. On the other hand, it was a welcome contrast to their other interviews, where they had felt compelled to plead their case. Whatever her qualifications, Dr. Ragle was a striking woman, not flashy but strikingly elegant. She wore slacks and a dark coat over the straight-necked jersey that accentuated her long neck. The color of her pulled back brown hair matched her penetrating eyes as closely as Lisa thought she'd ever seen. Lisa made a mental note to ask her about her make-up. Even though she knew it was there, it was undetectable.

"Both Jeff and Lisa are in excellent physical condition, and, at 31, Lisa is in her prime child-bearing years. She had few problems carrying Ethan, and I would predict a very high probability of successful in vitro fertilization with one, or at most two,

insertions. In fact, if we were interviewing for gestational surrogacy, I would consider her an ideal candidate. She is—”

Lisa saw Dr. Redfern’s expression change momentarily to one of obvious disapproval as he interrupted. “That’s fine, Dr. Ragle. I think we get the point, and I suspect you may be making Lisa feel like a specimen.”

“Oh, no,” Lisa said. “I don’t mind at all. In fact, having babies is one of my primary purposes. To hear I’m apparently so well equipped is gratifying.”

“Nothing I didn’t know,” Jeff whispered in her ear, and she blushed.

“Nevertheless, Dr. Ragle’s assessment is clear.” Dr. Redfern said. “Let’s move on. Next to Dr. Ragle is Dr. Cili Torma, who is our psychologist. She graduated from—” He hesitated.

“Wellesley,” Dr. Torma said in a deep, sultry slightly Mediterranean accent, Lisa could not identify, but that single word raised Lisa’s warning antenna. The woman had been blocked by Dr. Ragle before, but now she leaned forward. As if her alluring voice weren’t dangerous enough, she has stunning. Where Dr. Ragle might leave an intermittent trail of turned male heads when she walked down a street, Dr. Torma would leave every tongue hanging. Judging by his girlfriends prior to their marriage, Jeff had a penchant for brown-eyed blondes, and here was one with a small, turned-up nose, a perfectly symmetrical face, and a drop-dead body under what appeared to be a silk and cashmere turtleneck sweater and slightly-too-tight suede pants. About Lisa’s age, she might have stepped right out of the pages of a Victoria’s Secret catalog.

It wasn’t that she had any specific reason to think Jeff might be unfaithful. In fact, his faith was at least as important to him as hers was to her. There were none of those

telltale signs, no lessening of his affection or his passion. No reason to worry. Except Jeff was movie-star handsome while she was school-teacher ordinary. Except that she caught him perusing Victoria's Secret catalogs more than once. "Looking for something nice for my sexy wife," he'd said on each occasion. No reason to worry—except that he had that thing for brown-eyed blondes, and he whistled along any time Jimmy Buffet's "Brown-Eyed Girl" came on the radio. She found herself glaring at Cili Torma. Chastising herself, she turned toward Jeff and saw she wasn't the only one.

"Of course, Wellesley—and a Ph.D. from Tulane," Dr. Redfern said, seeming a little flustered. Was it Cili Torma and something else? "Dr. Torma joined us right after graduate school, a year after we opened.

"Actually," Dr. Torma said, looking at Lisa. "After I graduated, I spent a year in as a research institute in the Florida Keys. I was looking into being a dolphin psychologist." She laughed—soft, silvery notes drifting across the room. Even her laugh is perfect, Lisa thought. "In fact, that's where I first met Dr. Redfern. His enthusiasm about the work here was so infectious, I gave up Cetaceans forever." As much as she tried not to, Lisa found herself actually liking this woman—she definitely had an air about her.

"Before you give your assessment, Dr. Torma," Dr. Redfern said, "I realize I've been an atrocious host. Let me offer you all something to drink." He leaned back and pressed a small button on the wall. "What can we get you, Lisa?" Before Lisa could respond, a young woman came through the doors. While she was not as obviously so as Amanda, Lisa guessed she was pregnant. At work, her ability to recognize pregnancy very early earned her the nickname "EPT" among the other teachers. She didn't know

how she could tell—perhaps it was the complexion, or the breasts, or the eyes—but her accuracy was uncanny, and this girl, despite a slim figure, screamed “pregnant” to her.

“Jessica,” Dr. Redfern said. “Would you please see what everyone would like to drink and take care of it?”

“Of course, Dr. Redfern,” She quickly took orders—five sweet teas, one unsweetened iced tea, two lemonades, a diet coke (Dr. Torma), and one gin and tonic (Professor Sanger). She scurried out as quickly as she’d appeared.

“Go on, Dr. Torma,” Dr. Redfern said.

“There’s not a lot I can add at this time. I’ll have a better idea tomorrow after the personal interviews, but from everything I saw in the file and everything I’ve already heard today, I’d say Lisa and Jeff will be perfect NewGenesis guests.”

“Thank you, Dr. Torma. Next to her is Debbie Southern, who’s our head nurse. Do you have any observations, Debbie?” He had invited her to speak, but there was something dismissive in his tone. In addition, Lisa noticed that she was the only one he called by a first name, and that she was the only one not sitting in a wicker chair. She sat in an uncomfortable-looking ladder-back chair that had obviously been brought in for the meeting. She was also the oldest one in the group—early fifties, Lisa guessed. Her bright orange hair was meticulously arranged, Her jade-green eyes were the only remarkable feature other than a pasty complexion and the long earrings that brushed her shoulders as she shook her head.

“No, Dr. Redfern,” she said.

“Well, that leaves our two geneticists,” Dr. Redfern said as Jessica backed into the room—incredibly soon—carrying a silver tray loaded with glasses. She served the drinks

efficiently, never asking for a reminder of who wanted what—Dr. Redfern first, then Lisa and Jeff, the three women doctors, the two other men, and finally, Debbie Southern.

Everyone seemed to understand the pecking order her.

“Dr. Jared Baker has only been with us, what, two months now,” Dr. Redfern said.

“Four months next week,” the handsome black man said. The three things Lisa first noticed about him were his amiable smile, exposing impossibly white teeth; his high forehead below closely-cut thick hair, and the sparkling intelligent behind his deep brown eyes.

“That long?” Dr. Redfern said, laughing. “I guess I should be paying more attention around here. Correct me if I’m wrong again, Dr. Baker. You graduated from Duke—both bachelors and doctorate—and spent six years at the National Institutes of Health before coming here.”

“That’s right. I met Dr. Kirby at a therapeutic cloning conference in Chicago, we had breakfast the next morning, and I agreed to join the staff here before we finished our second cups of coffee.”

“Yes, well. I’ve saved the most important—at least for your kind of case—for last. Dr. Patricia Kirby graduated from Berkeley and Stanford. Early in her career, she worked with some of the biggest names in medical genetics, participating in some ground-breaking work. She spent another fifteen years heading up the most scientifically and commercially successful reproductive clinic in San Francisco before coming here four years ago. If we all decide to go forward, you’ll be in the hands of the best in her field.” Another commercial, Lisa thought. Why did he think he needed to sell them?

Patricia Kirby simply didn't fit Lisa's image of a brilliant research scientist. She looked more like the mothers in their SUV's dropping off and picking up children at her school. Her reddish brown hair was cut for low maintenance, the strands pulled behind her ears falling to her shoulders and bangs that needed cutting covering her forehead. She wore khaki linen pants, a powder blue polo shirt, and sensible shoes. Her pale face was unremarkable, although her nose was a little on the long side. As far as Lisa could see, she wore little or no make-up and no jewelry—not an earring, not a bracelet, not a necklace or even a ring.

“We have a number of tests to run,” Dr. Kirby said, “but I'd have to agree with the rest of the committee that the NewGenesis Center and the Kirkades are close to a perfect match. The fact that both Lisa and Jeff are beta thalassaemia carriers will complicate the embryo selection. There'll be a significant probability that tissue-matched embryos will also carry the disorder. While Dr. Ragle may be optimistic about the chances of successful implantation, it may take several harvests to yield viable, uninfected, matched subjects.” She leaned back and took her sweet tea from the table where Jessica had placed it on a coaster. Taking a long sip, she looked at Dr. Redfern, raising her eyebrows in a silent question. He nodded, and she returned the glass to the table.

“Since Ethan's condition is degrading,” she said, leaning over with her elbows on her knees, “you may want to consider a simpler, quicker option.”

“What option?” Jeff asked, also leaning forward.

“Embryonic stem cell therapy.”

“Would that involve the death of the embryo?” he asked.

“I don’t think it’s appropriate to think of it as a death since we would be creating a stem cell line from the inner cell mass of a blastocyst.”

“Blastocyst?” Jeff echoed.

“Perhaps a brief description of early embryonic development is in order,” she said. Lisa was familiar with the stages, having investigated when they first decided to try to have a baby, but Jeff had had much more interest in other aspects of the reproductive process. It would be helpful for him to learn more now. “For our purpose,” Dr. Kirby continued, “only the first three stages are relevant. Fertilization—the fusion of egg and sperm, usually in the fallopian tube—results in the creation of a zygote, a single cell that contains the merged genetic imprint of the mother and father. About twelve hours after the completion of fertilization, still traveling down the fallopian tube, the zygote begins to divide into cells called blastomeres within the zona pellucida.”

Lisa saw Jeff’s puzzled look. “That’s the membrane around the egg,” she said. “It only lasts a few days after fertilization—until the embryo reaches the uterus and is ready to implant.”

“Very good,” Dr. Kirby said. “Would you like to continue this?”

“I’m sorry,” Lisa said. She was sure she’d heard a hint of sarcasm in the comment. She took her lemonade from the coffee table and examined the patterns of condensation on the glass to avoid showing Dr. Kirby any expression.

“The zygote divides about every twenty hours,” Dr. Kirby said. “After the fourth division—sixteen cells—it becomes a morula and enters the uterus. This happens on about the fourth day after fertilization.” Lisa saw Jeff’s eyes droop. He was becoming bored already. “As cell division continues,” Dr. Kirby said, apparently unaware she was

losing her audience, “a cavity forms in the center of the morula, and it becomes a blastocyst. Now, two different cell types begin to form—trophoblast on the outside of the cavity, and embryoblast on the inside. It is these embryoblast cells that comprise the inner cell mass. They are the mother lode of stem cells, about thirty undifferentiated, pluripotent cells that can be harvested and cultured.” She stopped and stared at Jeff, who was looking at the large painting over the fireplace. “Am I boring you?” she said.

“Uh—” he said, and Lisa laughed.

“He’s just not—” Lisa said.

“Perhaps you could summarize,” Dr. Redfern said.

“Very well,” Dr. Kirby said. “If we isolate the embryoblasts from the inner cell mass in a culture medium, they continue to reproduce themselves over a long period of time. These cells, stimulated to form red blood cells, can be used to treat Ethan’s anemia.”

“More transfusions?” Jeff said

“No, not more transfusions. Stem cell injection and permanent cure.”

“But what’s the advantage over using a baby’s matched blood?”

“Time, your biggest enemy. Using stem cell therapy, we could begin treatment in six months or less. With pregnancy and birth, it will be at least a year.”

“The problem,” Lisa said, “is that you’re destroying a human life to create the stem cell line.”

“No, no—” Dr. Kirby hesitated and drew a deep breath. “Okay, I know some people consider the embryo a human being from the moment of conception, but when you really understand embryonic development and human reproduction in general, that

just isn't an incontrovertible conclusion. During the reproductive lifetime of a normally-healthy woman practicing unprotected intercourse, she probably has dozens in fertilizations of which she's totally unaware. The chances of a fertilized egg becoming a pregnancy are about thirty percent. Human reproduction is really remarkably inefficient."

"Dr. Kirby," Lisa said. "I understand that much of society agrees with what you say, but my faith—our faith—tells us that the embryo, even at the zygote stage, is human life. Barring intervention—natural or deliberate—the zygote inevitably becomes a baby."

"There's really no reason to debate this," Dr. Redfern said. "The decision to pursue stem cell therapy or pregnancy is really up to you and Jeff. As a responsible physician, Dr. Kirby is ethically obligated to discuss the options with you. She has, and you are obviously already well aware of the issues, so we will pursue your informed choice."

He stood and moved behind his chair, leaning against it. "We've heard from everyone," he said, although Lisa noticed that Dr. Baker had not been invited to comment. "The consensus is clear that we believe your case is one which the NewGenesis Center can certainly address. Now we need to discuss this privately as a staff, and you need to do so as a couple. So with that, I'd like to close this meeting."

The committee members immediately filed out of the room without further conversation, leaving Jeff and Lisa alone with Dr. Redfern.

"The painting," Lisa said, pointing over the fireplace. "Is that this house?"

"Yes," Dr. Redfern answered. "It dates from before the civil war, when the plantation was in its heyday. There was no significant action in the southern half of Georgia during the war, and Sherman's march was well north of here, so the house

survived, but reconstruction was hard on the owners. It remained in the family, slowly deteriorating, until 1955, when it was purchased by a local preservation group. It functioned briefly as a museum, which was abandoned about ten years later. It sat empty until 1980, when my father purchased it. He died in 1986, and I decided to convert it to a research center. It took fourteen years and most of my inheritance, but it was worth it.”

“You did a lovely job,” Lisa said. “Do you still own all the original plantation property?”

“No, something less than half of it. I was forced to sell the rest to developers in order to finance all the equipment we initially purchased.” He put his arm around Lisa’s shoulder and led her through the foyer and onto the front veranda with Jeff following.

“There’s one thing I’ve been wanting to ask you,” he said as they descended the broad steps descending from the veranda to the brick path that curved gracefully to the small parking lot. “How did you hear about us?”

“After our third rejection,” Lisa said, “one of the doctors on the committee handed us a piece of paper as we left. On it, he’d written your website address and a note saying, “Don’t give up. Check this out.”

“I was pretty unimpressed with the website,” Jeff said.

“Jeff, that’s not necessary,” Lisa said.

“Oh, don’t worry, Lisa,” Dr. Redfern said. “I know it’s pretty meager.”

“Meager?” Jeff said. “It’s just one page—a single paragraph, your bio and picture, and the phone number. Frankly, it made me suspicious. If we weren’t desperate, I don’t think we would have called.”

“We keep it that way deliberately,” Dr. Redfern said. “We’re not interested in the casual inquiry. Besides, it worked, didn’t it? You’re here.”

3

Wallace Redfern returned to his office, sat at his desk, and pressed the button on the intercom. When the young female voice responded almost instantly, he said, “Jessica, would you please ask Drs. Torma and Kirby to join me?”

“Certainly, Dr. Redfern,” Jessica answered.

He fidgeted while he waited, rummaging randomly through some papers on his desk until his eyes landed on the half-empty tumbler sitting on a mouse pad. He was too keyed up, he realized. He needed a drink. He twirled his chair around to face his credenza and opened the center cabinet, pulling out the open bottle of Glenfiddich Ancient Reserve eighteen-year-old single malt Scotch whisky. One remaining unopened bottle remained from the case he’d shipped back from Scotland the previous year.

He placed the bottle on his desk and launched his chair backwards past the credenza, slowly making the one-quarter turn so that he wheeled to a stop precisely in front of the sink. He rinsed out the glass, spun another quarter turn and shoved himself back to his desk. He realized he was bordering on giddiness, but who could blame him?

His planning of the past twenty years seemed almost ready to come to fruition. Amanda would deliver within days, Jessica was pregnant, and within a month or two, Lisa would be. He poured an inch of the rich amber scotch into the tumbler and threw it down his throat, relishing the warmth as it descended. He poured two more inches and brought the tumbler to his nose, breathing in the faintly sweet aroma of apple and wood. He took a sip and placed the tumbler on the mouse pad as the intercom buzzed.

“Yes, Jessica,” he said, feeling much calmer.

“Doctors Kirby and Torma are here, Dr. Redfern.”

“Send them right in, Jessica.” He leaned back, wrapping his fingers behind his head. The women entered the richly-paneled office and sat on the leather sofa next to the large window overlooking the gardens. He waited long enough to confirm that they had learned not to speak until he did. Satisfied, he leaned forward and pressed the intercom.

Jessica answered, and he said, “It’s too wonderful a day for a young woman such as yourself to stay cooped up here, Jessica. Take the rest of the day off to explore some more of the plantation.”

“Are you sure you won’t need me, Dr. Redfern?” She was new to NewGenesis, only having arrived three weeks earlier. Dr. Redfern had taken such an instant liking to her that he moved Amanda downstairs, making Jessica his personal secretary. Her lack of appropriate skills was irrelevant since he had few requirements. The jobs for the surrogates were related more to monitoring than productivity.

“No, I’ll be fine.”

“Thank you, Dr. Redfern. I’ll see you in the morning,”

He grabbed his glass of scotch and walked to the window, looking out at the magnolia in the distance. Late October, yet it teemed with large pink and white blossoms. The wonders of genetics, he thought, turning to the women. He tipped the glass casually in their direction. “Either of you care to join me?”

“You’re offering the Glenfiddich?” Celi said, while Pat grimaced.

“I’m feeling magnanimous,” he said with a smile.

“In that case, make mine a double,” Celi said. He turned and headed back to his desk, turning back moments later.

“Let me pour you one, too, Pat,” he said. “Remember what they say: scotch is an acquired taste.”

“I won’t live that long,” Pat said, prefaced by a disdainful humph. “Why don’t you keep a good bourbon in that cabinet?”

“I suspect there’s enough of that in your office,” he said, not intending to sound sarcastic but unconcerned if he did. He took a second tumbler from the upper shelves of the credenza and filled it nearly to the brim.

“Wow!” Celi said. “You really are feeling magnanimous. What accounts for that?”

“I think things went rather well with the Kinkades today. Would you agree?”

“It was a good start,” Pat said, “but I warned you their religion would be an issue.”

“When it comes down to it,” he said, “I think their faith, as Lisa put it, will take a backseat to Ethan’s needs. Besides, we didn’t want them choosing stem cell therapy anyway. We want her to bear the child.” He handed the scotch to Celi. She swallowed a substantial sample and purred.

“Of course, but you saw how absolute she was. Typical fundamentalist—intolerant and closed-minded.”

“I think you’re misreading her,” Celi said. “She has her beliefs, but she probably wouldn’t be here if they were a real obstacle. Her apparent receptivity to embryo

selection and IVF must run counter to those beliefs. I'll explore it more deeply tomorrow, but I think Lisa is, above everything else, a realist."

"I agree," he said. "I think you're the one displaying a bit of closed-mindedness, Pat."

"Time will tell," she said.

"I'm more concerned about Jeff," Celi said. "He said almost nothing, but most of his body language was defensive and cautious. I suspect he'll be second-guessing the whole thing tonight. Without a little management, he could eventually be a problem."

"And how do you suggest addressing it?" Redfern asked.

"I think a little divide-and-conquer might be useful," Celi said. "I may try to get Lisa a little jealous."

"Not that you won't enjoy that," Pat said, but Redfern dismissed the implication. He knew Celi kept a solid wall between work and pleasure and, if she chose to seduce Jeff, she would approach it as dispassionately as filling out an insurance claim.

"It's always interesting to observe reactions to unexpected stimuli," Celi said. "I think he'll be relatively malleable."

"I could strongly advise Lisa to abstain from sex during her pregnancy," Pat said. "If she thought it could endanger the fetus she'd probably comply."

Celi laughed. "Just make sure to let me know if you do that. I'll want to know how much to raise and lower his testosterone. If he gets too frustrated, and I give him an opening, he might jump me."

"I suspect you could handle him," Redfern said.

“Besides,” Pat added, “those fundamentalist Christians take fidelity very seriously.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” Celi said. “I’ve seen statistics that suggest the divorce rate among Christians, even conservative Christians, is not much lower than the general population. They may believe in God, but they’re still only human.”

“Well, back to the main issue,” Redfern said. “Do you both agree that the Kinkades should come to NewGenesis?”

“You heard the committee, Wallace—” Celi began, but Redfern interrupted.

“I’m not referring to Ethan’s case. I’m talking about our little experiment.”

“Of course,” Celi said. “I received the rest of the background check this morning. They’re as suitable as anyone we’re ever likely to find. Jeff is completely estranged from his entire family. They’re apparently appalled by his evangelical activities. According to one investigator, his father hasn’t even said his name for more than five years. He’s also not particularly close to the other paramedics in the fire department.”

“Good, good,” Redfern said. “And Lisa?”

“She’s even better. Her parents and only sister died in a plane crash two years ago. Her father was an only child, and her mother’s only brother died in Vietnam in 1968. Her only living grandparent has advanced Alzheimer’s. He’s wasting away in a Veterans’ Hospital outside Kansas City. I don’t think Lisa even knows he’s alive. She’s taught in four different schools in the last six years, including a new one this year, so she doesn’t have close relationships there. If it weren’t for Lisa’s church, in fact, I’d describe her as the most isolated person I’ve ever encountered.”

“You mentioned their church,” Redfern said.

“There are about five hundred members, and Jeff and Lisa have been going there for several years. It’s the only risk factor in the equation, but I think it’s manageable.”

“That will be your responsibility, Celi,” Redfern said, and she nodded.

“It’s been a long, good day,” he said. “And tomorrow will be another one. Let’s get together again at the end of the day and make a final go/no-go decision.”

Celi and Pat stood, and Redfern ushered them to the door. As they exited, Pat leaned over to him and whispered, “It’s Thursday.”

“I know what day it is,” he answered, making no attempt to match her hushed tone. She frowned and left. Redfern returned to his desk and dialed the phone. Two thousand miles west of Pine Mountain, Georgia, a cell phone emitted the first few bars of the Hallelujah Chorus. The young woman, still recovering from the previous night’s partying, groaned and pulled a pillow over her head until the music stopped.

“Hi, Sweetie,” Redfern said to the voice mail recorder. “I just wanted to see how the exam went yesterday. Love you. Call me.”



In their second floor room at the Davis Inn adjacent to Calloway Gardens, the major tourist attraction in Pine Mountain, Lisa and Jeff sat on the end of the extra-length double bed, picking at the Chicken Mai Fun and Pork Egg Foo Yung that had been delivered a half hour earlier. Jeff used the remote to surf through the channels until he found ESPN2. Lisa leafed absently through the brochures she’d grabbed from the rack in the hotel lobby.

“Are we going to talk about this?” she asked, breaking an hour-long silence.

“The UD-UMass game is on,” he said. Except for the call from the NewGenesis Center and the last-minute flight to Atlanta that morning, they would have been in the stands since they had season tickets for the University of Delaware football season.

“I know, but...” Her voice trailed off, and she fought back tears. He muted the television and turned to her, taking her in his arms and holding her for long minutes as she sobbed. It was the end of the first quarter before her shaking subsided.

“Was that relief, or something else?” he asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Why? It looks like Ethan’s finally going to get the help he needs.”

“I know...”

“But?”

“It’s silly, but there’s something about the NewGenesis Center that doesn’t seem quite right.” He nodded.

“I know what you mean.”

“What did you see?”

“Nothing specific. I’ve just been uncertain ever since that counselor handed us the note. Why the big secrecy? Do you think we should look someplace else?”

“Where?” she asked. “We’ve tried the only hospitals in our area that could have helped. Where would we go?” She fell back on the bed, pulling her arm over her face.

“I’ll tell you what I think,” he said, and she pulled her arm away to look at him. “I think we shouldn’t be analyzing this so much. Ethan needs help. The NewGenesis Center can give him that. Sometimes God leads us to places that aren’t very comfortable. Maybe this is one of those. I think we should try hard to see this opportunity as a gift from God.”

“Do you really think it is?”

“I guess we won’t know for sure unless we have faith. If Ethan is cured, we’ll be sure.”

“You’re right, I suppose. Besides, like you said earlier—what choice do we have?” She rolled off the bed and stood up. “I’m going to shower. You watch the game.”

He watched her walk to the bathroom and close the door, sighing deeply and letting his own silent tears trickle down his cheeks. He heard the water running and clicked on the TV sound just in time to hear loud cheers as the Blue Hens scored a touchdown.

As halftime started—with Delaware ahead, 23-3—Lisa emerged from the bathroom, wearing the sheer nightgown he’d bought her on their last anniversary. He raised his eyebrows to her.

“My period’s over,” she said.

“Oh?”

“Once I’m pregnant, we won’t be able to for a while. Maybe we should use the chances we get.” He stood and embraced her, their lips meeting tenderly.

“That’s the funny thing about sexy nightgowns,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“They never stay on long.” She giggled and raised her arms over her head.



In the sumptuous third floor suite at the NewGenesis Center, Wallace Redfern slipped under the silk sheets of his king bed. He rolled over reached for the woman lying next to him.

“You’ve had a big day, Dr. Redfern,” she said as his hand found her bare thigh.
“You deserve a special surprise.”

“Indeed? What did you have in mind?” She rolled away from him, reaching for the light switch.

Later, the time lost in hormonal fog, he said, “My, my, Dr. Kirby, you’re a very dirty girl, aren’t you?”

4

Jeff stood on the hotel balcony the next morning, enjoying the bright sunshine and unexpected crispness while he waited for Lisa to finish dressing. He had decided to view the NewGenesis Center as a gift of God, and he decided to bury any further misgivings. Lisa's natural tendency toward paranoia or, more charitably, extreme vigilance, would kick into high gear if he voiced any further concerns. They both knew they really had no choice, so he saw no value in second-guessing themselves. Instead, he turned his thoughts toward Ethan—an Ethan free of the needles and transfusion bottles.

He wandered down the stairs and went into the lobby, grabbing the Friday morning edition of the *Atlanta Constitution* from a stack at the registration desk. He pulled out the sports section and returned the rest of the paper to the stack. He smiled at the clerk who emerged from a door at the back of the registration area and left the lobby. When he opened their room door and saw the bathroom door still closed, he returned to the balcony and leafed through the sports pages.

Several minutes later, slightly annoyed but not surprised that the *Constitution* had not deemed last night's UD-UMass game worthy of printing, he went back into the room just as Lisa emerged. She walked over and greeted him in the way she only did the morning after lovemaking—a gentle nuzzle on his neck, a playful nibble on his earlobe, and a deep, lingering kiss. “Thank you for last night,” she breathed in his ear, an expression of apparent gratitude that never failed to slightly annoy Jeff, but he never said anything except “You're welcome.”

Lisa used Jeff's cell phone to call the LPN staying with Ethan while they ate a light breakfast of juice and English muffins in the hotel's nondescript dining room. From Lisa's side of the brief exchange, Jeff knew everything was fine at home. Lisa promised to call again around lunchtime before she hung up and handed the phone back to Jeff.

"What do you think they'll do with us today?" she asked under her breath.

"I guess we'll find out when we get there," he said, effectively ending the conversation. They finished their breakfast in silence, returned to their room to brush their teeth, and headed down to the car.

They arrived at the NewGenesis Center fifteen minutes later, having successfully negotiated the serpentine route through heavily-wooded country roads without the three wrong turns they had made the previous day. Lisa had found it difficult to interpret the plain map that had been faxed to her at the school, particularly because it lacked any landmarks and all street names other than those on the direct route. They passed through the gated entrance, showing the uniformed guard their driver's licenses as they had the day before.

At the front door intercom, they were surprised when Dr. Redfern responded to the button. He buzzed open the door and asked them to wait in the foyer.

They entered the foyer. No Amanda, Jeff noted as Lisa surveyed the painted panels. The doors to the conference room they had met in the previous day lay open, but the facing doors remained closed. The desk was exactly as Jeff had seen it before—same flower vase, same telephone, same book. He wandered nonchalantly to the desk and looked at the padded leather volume. The only identification on the cover was "NewGenesis Center at Falconbury Plantation" in Old English type. He casually inched

open the cover, flipping silently through several pages—all blank—before dropping it shut with a distinct thud when Dr. Redfern’s voice boomed from the open doorway at the rear of the foyer.

“Jeff! Lisa!” Redfern called. Jeff turned and was relieved to see Dr. Redfern only halfway down the staircase. He could not have seen Jeff leafing through the book. “Come on up.” Dr. Redfern descended to the third step, where he waited for Lisa and Jeff. When they reached the bottom on the stairs, he added, “I’m sure you won’t mind using the stairs. We have an elevator, but some days these stairs are my only exercise.”

“No problem,” Jeff said, and they followed him up the spiral staircase. At the top, Jeff glanced up and down the long hallway dotted with frames and closed doors. Dr. Redfern led them through the only open door, the one directly across the hall. As they passed through a small outer office, Jeff noticed a desk that could have been the clone of the one in the entry foyer—same desk, same Princess telephone, same leather-bound volume. The only difference was the paperback Diana Gabaldon novel, which Jeff recognized only because Lisa had picked one up during their vacation in Rehoboth two summers ago, only to discard it after discovering the graphic sex scenes.

They moved on into Dr. Redfern’s office, and he directed them to the leather couch.

“What a beautiful view of the gardens,” Lisa said, looking out the picture window.

“Yes,” he said. “I do my best thinking looking out that window. But we have a long day today, so we should get started. You’ll spend most of the day with the staff you

met yesterday, but I wanted to have a brief conference with you first.” Lisa smiled and Jeff grunted.

“Other than the various clinic tests,” Dr. Redfern continued after Lisa and Jeff sat close together on the couch, “I think you’ll find your time with Dr. Kirby instructive. Some of Dr. Torma’s questions may seem intrusive or perhaps even irrelevant. I’d ask you to overlook that and be as responsive as possible. Everything we do here has an important purpose.”

“We certainly have a big interest in everything going well, Doctor,” Lisa said. Jeff was wary, but he decided not to say anything at that point.

“Good, good,” Dr. Redfern said. He leaned over and pulled a stapled document from the corner of his desk. He handed it to Jeff. “This is our standard Non-Disclosure Agreement,” he said. “I probably should have given this to you before you left yesterday so you could have perused it overnight, but it’s pretty straightforward—a bunch of legalese that Ms. Williams, our attorney—you met her yesterday—insists on. All it really says is that you and Lisa agree to treat all communication with NewGenesis Center staff as confidential, as well as all information about Center policies, procedures, and protocols.”

Jeff started to read the document, quickly getting lost in a series of heretofores, whereases, and in-as-much-ases. “I think you might be better interpreting this,” he said to Lisa and handed the papers to her.

“Is this really necessary, Doctor?” she asked.

Dr. Redfern laughed. “I wish I could rid the world of lawyers, Lisa. But barring that, I have to listen to Ms. Williams’ advice. She assured me she kept that as simple as possible. I’m afraid we can’t proceed without your agreement.”

Jeff looked at Lisa, who began reading the document. Dr. Redfern leaned back in his chair. He spread the fingers of both hands and touched the tips of one to the other. He placed his connected thumbs under his chin and tapped to fingers together rhythmically as he waited. Jeff scanned the room, noting the complete absence of the usual doctor’s office accoutrements—no framed diplomas or awards, no photographs of the doctor shaking hands with a celebrity. The only wall hanging, in fact, was a large blow-up of Dr. Redfern standing alone beside a twin engine plane with low snow-capped mountains in the background. Lisa flipped to the second page. The bookshelves were similarly bare—none of the usual tomes with unpronounceable titles. No photographs there, either.

“Can I get either of you something to drink?” Dr. Redfern said, still tapping his fingers. “A Coke, Sprite, something like that.”

“No, thank you,” Jeff said, but Lisa was apparently engrossed in reading.

“Lisa?” Dr. Redfern said.

“A drink? Oh, no. Nothing now, thanks,” she said without looking up.

Having taken in the decided minimalism of the doctor’s office, Jeff turned his attention to Lisa. He watched her subtly shifting expression as she continued to scan, her mouth moving soundlessly as she proceeded down the page. Several times she frowned then nodded. Twice, rather than nodding, her frown deepened. Jeff waited. Finally, she rested the document in her lap and looked up at Dr. Redfern.

“If I understand this correctly,” she said. “We are completely prohibited from ever telling anyone anything about the NewGenesis Center. Is that correct?”

“Yes,” Dr. Redfern said. “That sums it up pretty well.”

“Why?” Lisa asked.

The doctor brought his hands down and grabbed the arms of his chair, leaning forward. “As you both may have surmised by now, the NewGenesis Center keeps a very low profile. We operate on the amorphous fringes of the medical community, offering services to individuals and couples who have exhausted opportunities at traditional institutions.” Both Jeff and Lisa frowned.

“I know that may sound rather suspicious in some ways,” he continued. “But I assure you that everything we do is within the law. At the same time, if traditional medicine were to learn of the kinds of break-through procedures we have developed here, the spotlight that would be thrown on the NewGenesis Center would be likely to prevent us from offering precisely those services. Does that make sense?” He smiled pleasantly and waited, but neither Jeff nor Lisa responded immediately.

“Let me see if I can offer an analogy from your profession, Lisa,” he said. “What if your school were to implement a radically new teaching tool that showed promise of increasing student reading ability tenfold in a short period of time? What would happen if a newspaper reported that before the results could be fully verified and replicated?”

“I understand your point, Doctor,” she said, looking him squarely in the eyes. “But what right would we have to keep that to ourselves?”

“Oh, eventually you’d certainly want to get the word out, just as someday soon we will publish all of our results. Perhaps the analogy doesn’t fit entirely because

education—and I mean no disrespect here—is less scientific than medicine. Good medical practices hinge on verifiability and repeatability. Premature release of medical advances is not only bad science, it may be dangerous.”

“Are you going to be doing dangerous things to Lisa?” Jeff asked, loud alarms blaring in his head. “I don’t want her being some sort of Guinea pig.”

Dr. Redfern shook his head vigorously. “Absolutely not, Jeff. We perform some experimental procedures here, but nothing in your case indicates any such need. That’s just my point. What you and Lisa would be doing here is well-established within the leading medical institutions, but that only takes in one or two percent of the total healthcare community. You’d be surprised at how many hospitals are in what amounts to the dark ages. You’d also be surprised at how routinely confidentiality is required at those few institutions operating on medicine’s leading edge.”

“I really don’t want to see this be an obstacle, Jeff and Lisa,” Dr. Redfern said after several moments of silence. “Not only is it routine, but I suspect by the time we complete everything with you, we’ll be able let you talk about it. In fact, if you choose to, we’ll welcome it, but you may want to think about the impact that might have on the child.”

Lisa looked at Jeff, who squared his jaw and nodded slowly. She reached for the purse sitting at her feet, but Dr. Redfern pulled a pen from an inside jacket pocket. He removed the cap, slid it on the opposite end, and held it out. Lisa took it, smoothed out the papers on the coffee table separating Jeff and Lisa from the doctor, and hesitated. After a moment, Jeff took the pen from her, turned the papers toward him, and signed on the line over his printed name. He turned the document back to Lisa and offered the pen.

She took the it and looked at him few several seconds. She added her signature beneath his.

Dr. Redfern scooped up the executed Non-Disclosure Agreement—a little too hastily, Jeff thought—and placed it on his desk.

“Good, good,” he said. “Now let’s get on to a few other details. Lisa, when did your last cycle end?”

Jeff shifted uncomfortably in the couch, but Lisa showed no hint of embarrassment. “As a matter of fact, it was just this past Tuesday,” she said.

“How regular are you?” the doctor asked.

“Usually like clockwork—twenty-six days—unless I’m training for a marathon.”

“You run?”

“Jeff and I run one charity marathon a year. For the three months beforehand, we increase our regular runs each day so that we’re running about fifteen miles the week before the race.”

“Well, Jeff can certainly maintain a running schedule, but you’ll have to stop once we start treatment.”

“I ran with Ethan until I was six months,” Lisa said.

“An acceptable risk,” Redfern said. “But with this pregnancy, there will be no such thing as an acceptable risk. The stakes are too high.”

“I’ll follow doctor’s orders,” Lisa said.

“Good, good. Now the next thing is not something you have to decide today, but you should start thinking about it. We’ll need to know your wishes for the unused embryos.”

“Unused embryos?” Lisa said.

“Yes,” Dr. Redfern said. “Surely you realized—”

“How many unused embryos?” Jeff asked, saying the last two words with as much ironic emphasis as he dared.

“I can’t say exactly,” the doctor said. “But probably somewhere between six and twelve.”

“Can’t we just fertilize one egg at a time?” Lisa asked.

“We could, but that rather defeats the purpose of embryo selection. In addition, it really makes no difference as far as the number of unused embryos is concerned. If the first one we fertilized didn’t match Ethan, we wouldn’t want to implant it.”

Jeff saw Lisa thinking and watched as her expression changed from confusion to dejection. “You’re right, of course,” she said. “I guess I just hadn’t thought about it. I feel really stupid.”

“You can’t think of everything at once, honey,” Jeff said. He took her hand.

“Don’t beat yourself up. We knew there would be tough decisions.” He looked up at Dr. Redfern. “You said you’ll have to know our wishes. Are there options?” he asked.

“Three, or four maybe. You can choose to have the embryos destroyed—“

“Kill our own children?” Lisa shouted. “How can you think—“

“Just a second, honey. Dr. Redfern said there are three choices,” Jeff said.

“Yes,” the doctor said, “and disposal would be our last recommendation. The remaining options all involve cryogenics—freezing the embryos.” Jeff felt Lisa squeeze his hand reflexively as she cringed. Dr. Redfern had apparently notice her reaction.

“Without freezing or implanting, embryos cannot survive more than a few days past the

late blastocyst stage. After the embryos are frozen, they can be donated to sterile couples, an indescribable gift of love, or they can be donated to an embryonic research lab.”

“Study our children, then kill them,” Lisa said with venom in her tone.

“Lisa, Lisa,” Dr. Redfern said. He reached out for her hand, but she pulled it away. He sighed. “Lisa, it really isn’t productive for you continue to think of these tiny undifferentiated cell clusters as children. Yes, they have the potential to develop when placed in a uterus, but at the stage we’re talking about, they are really no more “children” than a stem cell in your bone marrow.”

“No experimentation on our chil... embryos,” Lisa said flatly.

“You mentioned there might be a fourth option,” Jeff said.

“Well, you could choose to have the frozen embryos transferred to a long-term cryogenic facility, where they would be preserved for your own later use. We don’t have the capacity here, but we have a contract with a very reliable company in Cincinnati.”

“Does the freezing kill most of the embryos?” Lisa asked, her voice calmer.

“Not at all!” Dr. Redfern said. “Five years ago, perhaps thirty percent would have been damaged by the freezing process, and another thirty percent or so would not be viable when thawed after long-term freezing. But the technology has advanced to the point that we can predict over ninety percent of frozen embryos will remain viable. We package each embryo in its own carefully labeled straw, so when they are needed, only one—and only one matching desired characteristics—need be thawed.”

“Can we minimize the number of embryos?” Lisa asked.

“Certainly, but a smaller number of embryos reduces the chances of finding a viable one matching Ethan’s tissue. That will almost inevitably extend the selection

process. Instead of one or two months, it might take five or six, and in the end, there might be the same number of unmatched embryos.” He again reached for Lisa’s hand, and this time she allowed him to take it.

“Lisa, we all need to keep the primary objective in mind—a cure for little Ethan. None of us knows if his condition will stabilize or worsen in the next few months. To give him the best chance, we need to produce, harvest, and fertilize as many eggs as practical. The more we have, the higher the odds of finding a tissue match.”

Lisa nodded and pulled her hand gently from the doctor’s. She turned and fell against Jeff, crying quietly into his shoulder. He put his other arm around her. “We understand, Doctor,” he said. “And we’ll follow your advice. We’ll have to talk about it, but I think we’d want to donate the embryos to other couples.” He felt Lisa nod into his shoulder.

“That’s fine, fine,” Dr. Redfern said. “I think that’s the most unselfish and appropriate use for these embryos.” He stood up and walked around to his desk drawers, pulling a box of tissue from one. He returned and handed one to Lisa. Not the first time he’s left someone crying in his office, Jeff thought.

“We have one more thing to discuss, but you two need a moment to gather yourselves. Why don’t I take a walk?” Jeff nodded, and Dr. Redfern left his office.

“How could I have been so naïve?” Lisa said after the doctor closed the door behind him.

“Maybe we were both naïve,” Jeff said. “But does it really change anything?”

“It changes how I *feel* about this whole thing.”

“Does changing how you feel change what we know we have to do?”

“No.”

There really being nothing more to say, they waited for Dr. Redfern’s return. Lisa blew her nose a couple of times. Jeff pointed out the small sink beside the credenza, and Lisa used it to splash water on her face. She dried it with a paper towel from the neat stack on the shelf above and inspected herself in the full-length mirror on the wall opposite the picture window. She retrieved her purse from the sofa and returned to the mirror, applying a little make-up until she was apparently satisfied. Dr. Redfern came back through the door shortly after she rejoined Jeff on the couch.

At the doorway, Dr. Redfern looked back and said, “Jessica, please contact the staff that we’ll be wrapping up here shortly.” He looked at Lisa. “Feeling better?” he asked.

“No,” Jeff said. “But we know what we have to do.”

“Good, good. Then let’s discuss the final item. Lisa, you said your cycle runs twenty-six days. How long does the menses last?” Jeff shifted on the couch again.

“Usually five days,” Lisa said.

Dr. Redfern cocked his head up to the left and closed his eyes, mouthing something and counting off on his fingers. After several moments, he opened his eyes and said, “You really need to start Lupron today.”

“What’s Lupron?” Lisa asked.

“It’s an injectable drug that blocks the secretions of the pituitary gland. Effectively, it will put you in temporary menopause to rest your ovaries and help ensure the timing of the procedure.”

“Is that really necessary? I’ve heard menopause isn’t much fun.”

“If you’re really so regular, it might not be absolutely necessary, but doing so help maximize your egg production next month. It certainly enhances the probability of success. Besides, you may not experience much in the way of menopausal symptoms. A few hot flashes, maybe some mood swings, but it’s for less than three weeks.”

“Well, okay,” Lisa said. Jeff could see her hesitancy, but if she was okay with all this, he couldn’t justify interfering. Besides, he reminded himself, Ethan’s life is at stake.

“Do you think you could give the injections, Jeff?” Dr. Redfern asked.

“Sure,” he answered. “I have to give shots and insert IV lines all the time.”

“Good, good. We’ll get you a three-week supply to take back with you. We’ll put it in a small cooler you can take on board.” Dr. Redfern closed his eyes and again counted off on this fingers. “That means we’ll want to start the first regimen of medication on November fifteenth,” he said, reopening his eyes. “But you should be here a couple of days before that for some prep work. Can you disentangle yourselves in Delaware and relocate by the fourteenth?”

“Relocate?” Jeff said.

Dr. Redfern shook his head and laughed. “Surely you don’t think this all can be done from a thousand miles away, or whatever it is. These are complicated procedures that require almost constant monitoring from the first day of drug therapy until Ethan’s anemia is cured. You will need to live here on the NewGenesis grounds for at least a year, perhaps as long as eighteen months.”

Jeff grunted sarcastically. “Doctor, we haven’t even talked about what all this is going to cost! We can’t live on my salary alone, and it might take weeks for me to find a job.” Dr. Redfern started to speak, but Jeff interrupted. “And even when I did, I doubt

my insurance would pay. Wouldn't this be what the insurance companies love to call a 'pre-existing condition'?"

"That's one of the great beauties of being a private research institution, Jeff," the doctor said. He smiled and spread his arms expansively. "We have quite a number of very wealthy, very generous investors. They hope to capitalize on the profits eventually realized from our work, of course, but in the meantime, everything is without cost to our guests—all tests, medicines, procedures, even room and board. You would live in one of our comfortable guest cottages for the duration. We might be able to help you find work, but it really isn't necessary. In fact, at the end of it all, you will be paid a stipend that I'm sure will exceed what you could save during the same time."

Jeff and Lisa sat speechless. It occurred to him that this was all too good to be true, and questions formed in his mind. But they were quickly replaced by the image of his son, Ethan, whose thin, pale face filled his mind's eye. The image receded—Ethan lying in his small bed, the ever-present intravenous bottle hanging over him on its stand. In the last image before Jeff spoke, he saw Ethan's small arm, perpetually bruised by repeated needle marks.

"We'll be here," he said.

"Good, good. Then we're finished here unless you have any other questions."

Jeff could probably have thought of a thousand questions, but he threw them aside and said, "Only a suggestion, Doctor: the next time a couple like us calls you, give them a little more warning of the larger bombs before they arrive."

5

Celi Torma hated running. She hated everything about it with every fiber of her being. She hated the pain. She hated the mindless pounding of feet on pavement. She hated the parched throat it gave her. She hated constantly looking down to avoid the next pothole. Most of all, she hated the sweat.

To her, running was a way to escape danger, not an exercise. Exercise was working out on her Bowflex Ultimate 2 and her Star Trac Stairclimber 4100 in the spare bedroom of her air-conditioned luxury apartment on the outskirts of nearby LaGrange. Besides, she was one of those women other women hate—one who required relatively little diet and exercise to maintain a reasonably hard body.

That was why Celi had sworn softly under her breath when she awoke that morning and again thirty minutes later when she emerged into a cool fall morning. The day before, when the thermometer had neared ninety, she could have raised the necessary sweat in five minutes. Today, it would take several times longer. Sometimes work could be a pain. She selected her outfit deliberately and threw it in her yellow Gold's Gym sports bag.

She pulled her replica 1967 Mark 3000 Austin Healy Sebring into the NewGenesis Center parking lot just in time to see the lights go on in Wallace Redfern's third story bedroom. He had only asked her to arrive before the Kinkades, but she wanted to get a little work done before she had to start her run.

At half past nine, as she finished reading a journal article on the psychological implications of extra-marital affairs, her telephone rang—the distinctive triple-tone she had assigned to both Wallace Redfern’s office and mobile numbers.

“How long?” she asked.

“Ten minutes,” Redfern said.

“Perfect. Bring him in and have him wait in my office. I’ll be back in fifteen.”

She hung up and took one last look in the full-length mirror on the back door of her private bathroom. Perfect, she thought, admiring the red Fit Couture Cambridge fitted tank top with black trim around the arms and neck. She turned and looked over her shoulder at the rear view of the black Denver low-rise shorts with a red stripe down each side and around the waist. She’d decided to save the sexier of her two workout outfits for later. Once she worked up a healthy sweat, this one would be more effective for the task.

She left her office, using the narrow back staircase to reach the side exit of the building. She would have preferred to run on the cindered garden trails, but Lisa and Jeff might see her through Redfern’s window. She turned and ran toward the parking lot.

Precisely fifteen minutes later, she bound up the stairs, taking two or three steps at a time, thinking that perhaps running wasn’t so bad after all. She had stopped only at the first floor ladies room to make a quick inspection, ensuing that the sweat had strategically permeated her tank top. She was prepared to supplement nature with a little water from the sink, but there was no need. Her decision to leave the sports bra in the bathroom was affirmed by the reflection in the mirror. “Perfect,” she breathed.

She ran down the hall and burst through her office door. “Jeff!” she shouted. “I didn’t think you’d be here yet.” He was sitting in the closer of the two leather armchairs

in front of the one of the three large barrister bookcases, each filled with academic and popular psychology books.

“Uh, I’m sorry. I’ll wait in the hall,” he said.

“No, that’s okay. You wait here. I’ll be with you in less than ten minutes.” She strolled to her desk and pretended to inspect a few papers, letting him take in the view. She looked up once and saw him look down immediately. She smiled and walked over to him. She ran one hand vigorously through her hair, creating a small shower of sweat. Most of it fell to the bare wide oak floorboards, but a few drops landed on Jeff.

“Do you run, Jeff?” she asked, already knowing the answer from the three investigators who had dug into every aspect of Jeff and Lisa Kinkade’s life in the ten days since their initial inquiry call.

“Uh-huh,” he said without looking up.

“Wow! After you move down here, maybe we could run together sometime.”

“Uh, maybe.”

“Jeff, are you nervous about our interview?” She wanted him to look up one more time.

“No.” Stubborn, Celi thought—this one may be fun after all.

“Have you looked around my office yet? You might be most interested in the books over here.” She walked in front of him to the bookcase adjacent to the door. “Most of these are trade books, not the stodgy old texts in the other cases.” He looked up and actually flinched. She smiled inwardly and walked to the bathroom.

“Just make yourself comfortable,” she said before she closed the door. “I’ll wash off this stench and be right out.”

“I should really wait outside, Dr. Torma,” he said. He started to stand.

“Don’t be silly. And please call me ‘Celi.’ Redfern and some of the others may insist on honorifics, but we’re all going to get close over the next few months. If you keep calling me ‘Dr. Torma,’ I’ll think you’re talking to my father.” Jeff couldn’t know her father was a Romanian emigrant who drove a cab in Detroit for twenty years before dying of lung cancer without ever making more than twenty thousand dollars a year. Jeff plopped back down in the chair.

In the bathroom, Celi stripped and adjusted the shower temperature. She stepped in the stall and started singing the Rolling Stone’s “Beast of Burden” as the hot shards of water streamed down her body. She knew it was a long shot, but if Jeff had seen the romantic movie, *The Family Man*, perhaps he’d conjure up the image of Téa Leoni’s body behind a translucent shower door and wonder what he was missing behind hers. Cleansed, she stepped out, dried off quickly, and put on her scoop-necked blue cashmere sweater and a short black skirt. She wiped the condensed water off the mirror and inspected. She toweled her hair vigorously until it was just damp, ran a brush through it, then tousled it slightly to get the right look. “Perfect,” she said and emerged from the bathroom.

She glanced around, disappointed and perplexed—Jeff was not in the office. She stuck her head out of office door and peered down the length of the hall toward the top of the staircase.

“I’m here,” Jeff said from behind, startling her. Turning quickly, she banged her head on the corner of the door. He was standing in front of the lone picture down the short end of the hall. “I’m sorry, did I scare you?” he asked.

She rubbed her forehead, gritted her teeth, and swore softly. This might leave a bruise, she thought. “As a matter of fact,” she said angrily, but she checked herself and forced a smile. “I expected you in my office.”

“I just felt like moving around,” he said. “Nervous energy, I guess. You should put some ice on that. I could hear the thump.”

“It’ll be fine. Come on in and let’s get started.” He shrugged and walked to the open door. Celi took one sidestep and positioned herself so that it would be impossible for him to get through without brushing against her.

“After you,” he said while swinging one arm toward the office.

“Come on in.”

“No, please, after you,” he said. Celi shook her head imperceptively and gave up. Jeff followed her through the doorway and proceeded to the chair she’d found him in earlier. As she eased herself into the facing chair, she saw he had left the door open. She rose, catching the foot she’d curled under herself on the chair. She pitched forward, stumbling into the corner of her desk. She swore aloud at the sharp resultant pain in her side. Jeff leapt out of the chair and took her arm firmly, preventing her from falling unceremoniously on her rear end.

“Thank you,” she said, grimacing. She grunted and touched her side. “Ouch!” she cried, a single tear escaping from the corner of one eye.

“Are you all right?” Jeff asked. He released her arm and stepped back.

“I’ll be fine,” she spat.

“I’ll go out and wait in the hall so you can have a chance to catch your breath.”

“No!” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, deliberately calming herself. “Really, I’m fine. Have a seat.” Jeff complied, and Celi sat carefully in her chair. She winced as she tried to pull one leg up under herself and thought better of it. She sat straight with both feet on the floor.

“Are you sure?” Jeff asked.

“Yes, I’ll be fine.” She didn’t even convince herself completely. “Great! I may have cracked a rib,” she thought.

She took a deep breath, wincing again. She carefully adjusted herself in the chair, raising her skirt a couple of inches, and settled back in the chair. She reached for a small black box and pushed a button. “Jeff Kinkade,” she said rotely. “October 27, 2006. Session One.”

“Why the recorder?” Jeff asked.

“I like to focus on the patient—uh, client,” she said. “I’ll take notes later from the tape.”

“Oh.” He peered at the machine.

“If it bothers you, I’ll leave it off for the preliminaries,” she said, slowly feeling more in control.

“That’s okay.”

She spent the next half hour asking Jeff routine questions about his past—jobs, interests, friends, family, and similar things. She didn’t learn anything that hadn’t been in the investigative reports, but she needed to establish knowing them. Regardless of how careful one might be, it was easy to inadvertently reveal something she couldn’t normally know.

“I haven’t spoken to my father for several years,” Jeff said in answer to one of Celi’s questions.

“Why is that?” she asked.

“My father is staunchly Greek Orthodox. He doesn’t approve of any form of Christianity that doesn’t have formal sacraments and lots of pomp and circumstance.”

“A name like Kinkade doesn’t sound very Greek.”

“No,” he chuckled—his first laugh of the day. Maybe he was finally loosening up. “My grandmother—his mother—is a second generation Greek immigrant—Evangelia Pappas. My grandfather was Irish Catholic. East meets West.”

Celi didn’t understand the ramifications, but didn’t really care. There had been enough small talk. She seemed to have finally relaxed him. It was time to probe more sensitive areas.

“How are you going to feel about not being able to have sex with your wife for months?” she asked, relishing the discomfort the sudden shift would cause. She was rewarded by his simultaneously shocked and dumb-founded response.

“Surely, you realized,” she said.

“Uh, no. I hadn’t thought...” He hunched forward and put his left elbow on his knee and brought his hand over his mouth.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Celi said as she reached over and gently touched Jeff’s arm.

“When she was pregnant with Ethan...” He fell silent, and Celi waited, watching him think. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable discussing this,” he finally said.

“I’ll bet you’re not!” she thought. Aloud, she adopted her most sympathetic, counseling tone. “Jeff, I’m an experienced psychologist. My training—and my job here—

involves working with the psychological aspects of treatment. I understand that we barely know each other, but I hope we will develop the kind the trust that will allow us to discuss anything openly and honestly.”

He remained silent, so Celi continued. “Too often, medicine focuses on the patient—your wife, in this case—and forgets about the rest of the family. Here at the NewGenesis Center, we recognize the impact on others, particularly spouses, and we offer support and guidance—or just a caring ear.”

“I’m uncomfortable discussing this with a *woman*,” Jeff said.

“I understand, but I’m the only psychologist on staff. Ultimately, it will be very hard on you—and perhaps your marriage—if you keep everything to yourself. Besides, in matters of human sexuality, studies have shown that interaction with the opposite sex is highly therapeutic because of the complementary perspective.” There were no such studies, Celi knew, but Jeff wouldn’t. “I can not only sympathize with your issues, I can help you understand your wife’s perspective.”

“Well, when—uh, how long...”

“Abstinence?” she asked. He nodded. His pathetic expression almost made Celi laugh. “Immediately—and for the duration of the pregnancy.” His eyes widened.

“Why is that necessary? When Ethan...” His voice trailed off again and he rubbed his chin slowly.

“I’m sure you and your wife were told sex was fine for most of her pregnancy with Ethan, but the circumstances are different. There’s always some risk involved, but it’s minor. In this case, we simply can’t afford anything that might threaten the

pregnancy. A miscarriage would throw the entire process back to square one, delaying Ethan's treatment."

"I wouldn't want to do anything to..." Jeff stopped abruptly, a look of concern crossing his face. "Why immediately?" he asked quietly.

"We can't let Lisa get pregnant naturally right now."

"Oh. Of course. I understand." He sighed and raised his arm, releasing Celi's soft grip.

"Let me go back to my original question. How do you feel about that?"

"It won't be a problem," he said.

"Really?" Celi said, raising her eyebrows. "Is sex with your wife that infrequent?"

Jeff sat up rigidly erect and he looked straight at Celi. "Look, Dr. Torma—"

"Celi," she said.

"Dr. Torma," he said. "I am not going to discuss our intimate details with you. It just isn't...appropriate."

"Why not?"

"I said before, you're a woman. It's just not appropriate."

"Well, I hope you'll get over that in time—after we've had a chance to develop a closer relationship."

"Not likely."

"Very well," she said. "Let's move on to other things."

She administered two short personality tests, after which they talked at length about his experiences as a paramedic. Twice, she tried to sidle up to the subject of sex,

but he either failed to understand or deliberately changed the subject. Talking about himself, however, loosened Jeff up a bit. Time for another tact.

“What would make you think about divorcing your wife?” she asked.

“Absolutely nothing,” he said, staring at her.

“What about an affair?”

“Won’t ever happen.”

“How can you be sure? She’s human. Marriages ebb and flow.”

“Look, Dr. Torma—“

“Celi.”

“Dr. Torma,” he said, emphasizing each syllable. “Maybe you don’t understand what it means to be a committed Christian. Affairs are not an option.” She heard the animosity in his voice, so she decided to be flippant.

“Against the rules, huh?”

“It’s not really about rules. It’s about bonds, trust, and faithfulness.”

“Well, just hypothetically—would an affair justify divorce?”

“Dr. Torma, I don’t see the point in this.”

“Okay, Jeff, I’m going to be brutally honest with you here.” She leaned forward and rested both elbows on her knees, clasping her hands in front of her. “This whole thing is likely to put enormous strain on your marriage. You don’t want to talk about sex, but you’re a healthy young man, and there will be no sex for the next ten to twelve months at least. You may experience second thoughts about the procedure. You’ll be in a new place and perhaps a new job. Ethan may get worse. Any number of things could impact your marriage, and I’m here to help you. Why do you dislike me so much?”

Celi saw his body language shift. His jaw loosened and his shoulders hunched.

“I don’t dislike you,” he said. Celi enjoyed the slight whine in his voice. “I just...”

“Just what?” Having finally gotten him on the defensive, she pressed the advantage.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you dislike all psychologists—or just me?” She sat up, striking her best offended pose.

“I told you—I don’t dislike you.” He hesitated, his eyes shifting around. “But maybe I don’t trust psychologists.”

“So you don’t dislike me—you just distrust me. What did I do to deserve that.”

“It’s not about you. I don’t know. Maybe it’s just about psychology in general—digging into people’s past, thinking all their problems are because their father was too weak, or they have a secret desire for their mothers. It’s a bunch of bull.”

“So my life’s work is a bunch of bull?” Celi said, raising her voice.

“I didn’t mean that,” Jeff said quietly.

“You seem to think all psychology is Freudian.” Celi leaned forward and relaxed. “I think most of that is bunk. I’m much more interested in dealing with practical problems and offering practical solutions. I’m not here to psychoanalyze you, Jeff. I’m here to be a friend. You’ll need that in the coming months.”

He sighed and looked down at the floor. “I guess I understand” he said. He rested both hands on the armrests, and Celi reached out and touched one gently.

“I hope so, Jeff,” she said softly. “Maybe I’m just so interested in you and your case that I went a little too quickly. I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing for you to be sorry about. You’re just doing your job. I’m just being a jerk. Lisa says I can be that way sometimes.” He pulled his hand back.

“Oh, I don’t think that at all,” Celi said. “You’re just under a lot of pressure right now.”

“Yea. Thanks.”

Despite having relaxed him some, Celi was frustrated—he had some high walls. Although she’d caught him looking, the wet tee shirt bit hadn’t seemed to work. He pulled away any time she touched him or moved closer. She couldn’t get him talking about sex. If she was going to give Lisa reason to be jealous, she’d have to find a different approach.

Shortly before noon, she ended the session. “Your wife should be finishing up with Dr. Kirby about now. We’re all going to have lunch together in the dining room. Why don’t you go down to the foyer and wait for us all there.”

“Thank you, Dr. Torma,” he said as he rose from the chair.

“Celi,” she said. He grunted and walked to the door.

After he left, she went into the bathroom and peered in the mirror. Seeing the prominent egg rising from her forehead, she swore aloud. She lifted her sweater up and inspected the small bluish-red bruise on her right side. She swore again, but it wasn’t really the bruises that annoyed her. She looked down at the exercise outfit she’d thrown into the corner earlier. She smiled as another idea formed. She looked back in the mirror.

“You’re a challenge, Jeff Kinkade,” she said to her image. “But you’re not invulnerable. After all, you’re only human.”

?

Jeff was glad the foyer was empty when got there. He wanted a couple of minutes before he saw Lisa. He didn’t trust himself around Celi. Not only was she drop-dead gorgeous, she had a special air about her, something vaguely feline—soft and comfortable. Each time she’d leaned forward, he’d tried to look elsewhere, but he kept catching himself glancing at her chest. At least once, he knew she’d noticed, and he was surprised she hadn’t sat up in response.

It wasn’t that he didn’t consider Lisa beautiful, but her beauty lay less in what he could see with his eyes than what he felt in his heart. He loved her for her the way she held Ethan; the way she always seemed to care about anything he said, no matter how stupid; the way she dove into every task she faced; and most of all, the way she shared his love of God. But none of that stopped him from occasionally wishing she was more distinctly female. He had loved the curves and softness she developed while carrying Ethan, but that had largely disappeared when she stopped nursing and resumed running seriously. He admired and enjoyed her firm, muscular body, but sometimes it seemed almost boyish.

He didn’t hear Lisa come into the foyer, so when he heard his name, his entire body lurched forward away from the sound. Lisa laughed.

“Boy, where were you?” she said. “I called you three times.”

“Sorry. It was a long morning.”

“Tell me about it. I got shuttled back and forth between three or four offices. How about you?”

“Uh, no. I spent most of the time with Dr. Torma.”

“Really?” Lisa said. Jeff wondered if it was suspicion he heard in her voice, and he felt a pang of guilt even though he hadn’t done anything wrong. “What did you do all that time?” she asked.

“Mostly talked about me,” he said. “It was really boring,” he said with a laugh. “Oh, and she also gave me a bunch of silly tests.”

“Don’t mention tests. I’ve been poked and prodded so much this morning, I felt like a prize cow at the state fair.”

“Well, you are a prize, but you’re hardly a cow,” Jeff said. He leaned over and brushed her lips.

“You’re sweet,” she said. She reached up and curled one hand around his neck, bringing their lips together in a more meaningful kiss. It lingered several moments—much longer than Jeff enjoyed in public, but he didn’t protest. When she finally pulled her head back, she encircled him with her arms and pressed against him.

“Tell me more about your morning,” Jeff said, anxious to keep the focus on her.

“First, Dr. Ragle gave me a pregnancy test. She was pretty annoyed when I told her we made love last night—“

“You told her that?” Jeff said in a stifled shout.

“She’s a doctor, Jeff. She asked when the last time had been.”

“Why’d she need to know that?”

“They can’t implant the new baby if I’m already pregnant.”

“Of course not, but you said they did a pregnancy test.”

“Yes, but now she’ll need to do another one when we get back.”

“But you used your protection, right?” He looked down at her, but she turned her head. He pulled away, holding her at arm’s length. “Lisa,” he said more firmly. “You had it in, didn’t you?” She shook her head, almost imperceptively. “For God’s sake, Lisa. Why not?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It just didn’t seem right.” He could barely hear her.

“But even without all this,” Jeff said, gesturing broadly around the room, “we agreed to be careful! I thought we agreed we couldn’t risk another baby with thalassaemia.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t good enough, Lisa. What if you’re pregnant?”

“It’s impossible, honey. My period just ended. It would be at least a week before it was possible.”

“It was still *stupid!*” he said.

“I said I was sorry,” she said loudly. “You’re always telling me that thing bothers you.”

“That’s no excuse.”

“Can we drop it?” she said. “It won’t happen again.”

“It better not.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Lisa said. “It won’t happen because Dr. Ragle doesn’t want us to have *any* sex until the baby is born.”

“Yea. Dr. Torma told me the same thing.”

Lisa started to say something, but they heard footsteps and voices behind them on the staircase. The staff was coming down for lunch.

6

The lunch was unlike any hospital meal either of them had ever experienced before. Someone laid out a startling variety of foods on the long narrow table against one wall—chilled gulf shrimp so plump four of them filled a dessert plate; platters of thinly sliced roast beef, ham and turkey accompanied by five different types of cheese; a heaping bowl of potato salad laced with eggs, celery, and a hint of garlic; another bowl containing a baby spinach salad loaded with still-warm crisp bacon, sliced eggs, buttery croutons, and—surprisingly—fresh raspberries; four different types of bread piled in neat stacks; and steaming tureens of corn chowder, andouille sausage gumbo, and sweet potato soup.

For Lisa, the *pièce de résistance* was also her weakness—dessert. After the soups, sandwiches, and salads were consumed, a tall black man in a formal white suit rolled out a cart with pumpkin, peanut butter, and pecan pies. Remembering she would soon be eating for two again, she had small slices of each.

After such a feast, which lasted until nearly one-thirty, it would have been nearly impossible to immediately resume the meetings, so Dr. Redfern suggested that everyone relax for an hour. He led Lisa and Jeff to the comfortable room across the foyer. After he left, Jeff complained that the last thing he wanted to do was sit around, so they decided to stroll in the gardens.

“I hope they don’t feed us like that every day,” Lisa said as they passed under the trellised archway. “I’d be that cow within a month. But did you taste that pecan pie? And the peanut butter one?”

“No, I couldn’t possibly have had any dessert,” Jeff said.

“You think I was a pig, don’t you?”

“Of course not. You don’t eat that way all the time.”

“That’s my point. I don’t know if I could resist those pies.”

“I’ll hide the silverware,” he said.

She laughed. “That wouldn’t stop me.”

“I’m sure that was unusual. They seem to be ultra-careful, so they won’t want you gaining a lot of extra weight.” He took her hand, and they wandered through the colorful display. Lisa shared much of what Amanda, the talkative pregnant receptionist, had told her the day before. As she did, she wondered if Amanda was having her baby. She hadn’t been in the foyer all day.

“The geneticists—Dr. Kirby and Dr. Baker—went over the entire process with me this morning,” she said when they reached the Japanese Anemone.

“Which one was Dr. Baker?” Jeff asked.

“The handsome young black man,” Lisa said. “Somehow he doesn’t seem to fit in with the others. He’s so friendly and open. Dr. Ragle, the obstetrician, was so clinical about everything, almost like I wasn’t a real person. And that Dr. Kirby—she has some kind of problem. She never looks you in the eye, and she bounces from subject to subject. It was hard to follow her. If Dr. Baker hadn’t been there, I wouldn’t have understood any of it.”

“Are you still okay with it all?” Jeff asked.

“Yea, although I’m not comfortable all the stuff they’re going to make me take. You know I don’t like shots and pills.”

“What are they all for?”

“I took some notes I can show you tonight—some of them had really long names. Most of them are timed to maximize my egg production, so they’ll be plenty for fertilization.” She stooped down and sniffed the vibrant flower.

“I thought we wanted them to create as few embryos as possible.”

“I know,” she said, “but Dr. Baker explained that better than Dr. Kirby did during the meeting. He convinced me that they need to gather—Dr. Kirby used the word ‘harvest,’ which made me feel like a crop in the field. Anyway, the more eggs, the better, but that doesn’t necessarily mean more embryos. I reminded them about that.”

“Good, but I’m starting to wonder how much they listen to us.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I don’t know,” Jeff said, scanning the gardens. “It’s just a feeling.”

Lisa poked him in the ribs. “Now who’s the paranoid one?” she said. She knew she was overly careful sometimes, but she didn’t like it when Jeff called her “paranoid.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

Lisa stood up and stretched, stifling a yawn. She saw movement in the swath of goldenrod and squinted. She rose her hand to her forehead to shade to bright sunshines.

“It’s Amanda,” she said. She waved enthusiastically.

“Where?” Lisa pointed and Jeff tried to follow her arm.

“There—in that gap in the goldenrod. C’mon, I want to talk with her” Amanda looked around the gardens and waved back, smiling when she saw Lisa moving toward her. She remained behind the row of yellow-flowered bushes.

“Lisa,” Jeff called. “I’m not going anywhere near that stuff.”

“I’ll be right back,” she answered. She broke into a gentle trot, staying on the paths. When Lisa was about fifteen feet from her, Amanda backed away from the bushes and gestured Lisa through the gap.

“I saw you walking,” Amanda said. “I have been very lonely today.”

Lisa suddenly realized where she had heard Amanda’s distinct accent and speech pattern before. One of the girls—Rosalind, Lisa thought she remembered—on the hall during her sophomore year at the University of Delaware had been from Charleston. Her throaty drawl, bereft of contractions and frequently punctuated by obsequious compliments, flowed with a syrupy consistency that reduced both pompous professors and crude football jocks alike to stammering supplicants. Amanda’s speech so perfectly mirrored that of her hall-mate that Lisa assumed there must be schools or tutors to ensure that young Charleston women carried on the city’s beguiling vocal tradition.

Since Amanda exhibited no manipulative intentions, Lisa fought back the instinctive antipathy induced by the memory of a serious boyfriend lost to her college acquaintance.

“Why aren’t you at the Center?” Lisa asked.

“They told me to rest,” Amanda said. “They think the baby is coming tomorrow. I had some pains late last night and called Dr. Ragle. She came over this morning and after she examined me, she said I was starting to dilate.”

“You must be very excited,” Lisa said.

“Under different circumstances, I would be.”

“What do you mean?”

“I cannot talk now, Lisa. Dr. Ragle is coming back again any minute. If you have time later, could you come over so we could talk?”

“I don’t know, Amanda. Maybe after all our appointment this afternoon.”

“I would be very grateful,” Amanda said. “I need to talk to someone, and I have a truly delicious story about the Plantation I can share with you. My cottage is the first one of the left.”

“I’ll do my best.” Amanda took Lisa’s hand and squeezed it lightly. She turned and waddled—as quickly as Lisa imagined she could—back toward the row of seven or eight identical cottages. Lisa ducked through the goldenrod and hurried back to Jeff.

“We need to get back,” he said, tapping his watch. Lisa bolted, calling back over her shoulder, “Race you there.”

Jeff waited a moment, watching Lisa glide effortlessly along the path. At the third corner, Lisa glanced back and saw Jeff take off. She put her head down and accelerated. As she shot through the arch, she heard Jeff’s footsteps pounding behind her. She cut diagonally through the grass flanking the mansion and bounded up the six steps to the veranda in two leaps. She weaved through the rockers toward the front door and glanced back again. When she didn’t see Jeff, she slowed.

She caught movement out of the corner of her eye and turned to see Jeff shoot past her on the front lawn. She accelerated again, but Jeff took the front steps in a single leap and touched the front door two seconds before her.

“You cheated,” she said.

“You lost,” he said. She laughed, and they walked slowly around in front of the door, catching their breath. The door opened a crack, and Dr. Redfern stuck his head out.

“Where have you two been? We’ve been looking for you,” he said.

“In the gardens,” Lisa said.

He snorted and opened the door the rest of the way, gesturing them in.

?

“I didn’t see you at lunch,” Lisa said as Dr. Celi Torma ushered her into the office.

“No, I ate a salad here in my office,” Celi said. “I record my sessions with clients, and I wanted to write up notes from this morning with your husband.”

“So is he sane, doctor?”

The psychologist laughed lightly—the same infectiously seductive laugh Lisa had noted the day before, although her dress was far more business-like. She had greeted Lisa at the door in a charcoal gray pants suit with a double-breasted blazer over a wide-collared white blouse buttoned to her neck.

“Quite sane,” Celi said, “but more than a little boring.” Lisa returned the laugh.

“That’s my Jeff,” she said.

Celi eased into the chair behind her desk and gestured Lisa to one of the two leather armchairs facing her. “It was a challenge getting him to talk at all. Is he that way all the time, or was it just me?”

“He’s pretty quiet—until you get him with a bunch of guys watching a football game,” Lisa said.

“Ah, the great American male-bonding experience,” Celi said. “Of course, they don’t really talk then. It’s more like some kind of scripted ritual—‘what a catch,’ ‘great tackle,’ ‘lousy call, ref!’ It’s not like they really express anything meaningful.”

“It sounds like you speak from experience. Are you married?”

“Twice, but neither took. I’m thinking of giving men up.”

“I know what you mean,” Lisa said, sharing another laugh.

“But let’s talk about you, Lisa.”

“You’ll probably find me even more boring than Jeff.”

“I doubt that. Yesterday you struck me as an intelligent, confident woman who speaks her mind without being offensive.”

“I’m not sure Dr. Kirby would agree.”

“Did you have difficulties with her this morning?” Celi asked.

“Well, she called me intolerant and old-fashioned.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. Dr. Kirby’s definition of intolerance is anyone who doesn’t agree with her. What were you discussing?”

“She kept trying to convince me that an embryo can’t be considered human until at last the fourteenth day,” Lisa explained. “Kept calling the baby a pre-embryo.”

“Well, that is pretty much the accepted clinical perspective these days,” Celi said, “although most doctors I know use the term ‘embryo’ once it’s implanted in the uterus.”

“She claimed the big distinction is the appearance of something she called the primitive streak, but she didn’t explain much. She just kept objecting every time I referred to an embryo as a baby.”

“I can explain the primitive streak for you. It’s a defining moment in embryonic development technically known as ‘gastrulation.’ Up until that point, which occurs on about day fourteen, the cell mass is congregated at one end of the embryo. But at gastrulation, a thin line of cells begins to migrate up what will become the axis of the embryo. It’s really a rather remarkable. We don’t fully understand the triggering mechanism, but it’s as if a little army of clone soldiers has been meeting for thirteen days, then on orders from the general, they go marching off to their various posts. Like a real army, the soldiers start to specialize—differentiate in cellular terminology—so they can perform their assigned functions.”

“Fascinating,” Lisa said, genuinely intrigued. “Although perhaps there might be a better analogy than an army.”

“Why?” Celi said. “The Apostle Paul compared Christian evangelism to being a soldier.” Lisa couldn’t have been more startled if Dr. Torma donned a papal hat.

“Are you a Christian?” she asked.

“I grew up Catholic,” Celi answered. “I gave it up during college when all those stories about priests abusing children surfaced. I don’t attend church regularly, but I still consider myself a Christian.”

“The way everyone talks around here, I would have thought you were all confirmed secular humanists.”

“I suppose any scientific institution would seem that way, Lisa, but you’re probably right. There aren’t many church-goers among the upper staff.”

“Dr. Kirby must not be one of them,” Lisa said. “She seems to think an embryo is just a bunch of cells that we can manipulate any way we want.”

“You’re probably right there, but she still has a profound respect for the miracle of life. The only difference is the definition of when life truly begins and, specifically, human life. She certainly considers the pre-embryo life, just not human life at that point.”

“That’s the big difference, isn’t it, Dr. Torma? There has to be some definition of the beginning. I believe that’s at conception.”

“How did you reach that conclusion?” Celi asked. Lisa sensed nothing confrontational in the question, even though she had when Dr. Kirby asked essentially the same thing that morning.

“In the Bible, David says, ‘For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.’ That suggests that life begins in the womb.” She had quoted the same scripture and gotten a predictably flippant, cynical response from the geneticist. She wondered how Dr. Torma would respond.

“I know there are those who distinguish between life and personhood,” Celi said slowly. “They insist that life, defined as personhood, does not begin until birth—or even later. To me, however, it is clear that life begins in the womb, but that does not necessarily mean at conception.”

“Any other definition,” Lisa said, more defiantly than she intended, “is completely arbitrary.”

“You’re certainly right about that, and the church of my upbringing still insists on the dogmatic view of life beginning at the moment of conception. But isn’t that equally arbitrary?” Lisa frowned but did not respond. “Think about David’s comment you just quoted—‘you knitted me together in my mother’s womb,’ and then think about what I

just told you about gastrulation. It's really at that point that the knitting begins. Before that, the embryo is just an amorphous ball of cells."

Lisa paused, considering Dr. Torma's words. She thought of several other Scriptures about pregnancy and birth, but she couldn't come up with one that specifically mentioned conception itself. "But doesn't that amorphous ball, as you call it, already contain everything it needs to become a human being?"

"Sure it does," Celi said. "But think about your own words—'to become a human being.' Doesn't that acknowledge that it isn't yet truly a human being, just something that can *become* a human being. You wouldn't consider a human egg a human being, would you? Yet it too has the potential to become a human being."

Lisa frowned. She was not convinced by Dr. Torma's argument, but she could understand her point and had no rebuttal.

"Lisa, I'm not trying to convince you of anything here. I just think you would be better served if you developed a less rigid view of this. If you insist on human life beginning at the moment of conception, you will be forced to view all the eggs we fertilize for your IVF as human beings, and you may experience significant psychological difficulties with the decisions you'll have to make. Even if you choose to have the resulting embryos frozen for future use, there are problems."

"What kind of problems?"

"I see two primary ones," Celi said. "First, the freezing itself. If the embryo is a human being, and therefore worthy of individual respect, what right would you have to order it frozen?" Lisa thought about her conversation with Dr. Baker that morning. He

had convinced her they needed to fertilize several eggs, and she knew Dr. Torma was right—she would have to reconcile freezing the unused ones.

“Second,” Celi continued. “Not all embryos survive being frozen and a subsequent thawing. If those tiny blastocysts are human beings, freezing is a death sentence for some.” She reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a large color photograph of three round mottled shapes on a turquoise blue background. “These are four-day-old blastocysts floating in culture. Do they look like God has started knitting anything together yet?”

Lisa stared at the photo. Even though she tried to force them back, tears trickled down her cheeks. She doubled over in the chair and put her face in her hands. Celi came around the desk and knelt next to Lisa, stroking her hair. “It’s okay,” Celi whispered. “I know this is tough, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s not you, Dr. Torma,” Lisa said without looking up. “I just don’t know why this is happening to us. I’m caught between two evils—let Ethan suffer and perhaps die, or kill a bunch of embryos. I just don’t know what else to do.”

Celi moved around in front of the chair, still kneeling. She took Lisa’s hands in her own, holding them until Lisa looked up. “I don’t have any answers about why this is happening, Lisa. What I see here is a dedicated mother, determined to save the life of her child. Not too many years ago, there would have been nothing you could do. Don’t you think it’s possible God has allowed people to learn about embryonic development to provide cures like this?”

“It just seem like such a..” Lisa said, her eyes burning from smudged mascara that had worked its way into the corners. “A rationalization.”

“I understand,” Celi said. “But it’s better to face this now. If you can come to see the blastocysts for what they are—the beginnings of a potential for life from which we will choose one to be Ethan’s salvation—then you will know what is right, and you won’t second-guess yourself later. That’s important.”

“I don’t know. Maybe,” Lisa said. She sniffed and sat up. Celi released her hands and got up. She retrieved a box of tissues from another desk drawer, and handed one to Lisa. “You come prepared,” Lisa said with an ironic laugh.

“Tools of the trade, Lisa.”

Lisa wiped her eyes carefully and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” she said again.

“For what? For being human? For caring? Don’t apologize for that.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Why don’t you use my bathroom to freshen up a bit?” Celi said.

Lisa thanked her and went into the bathroom, where she turned on the faucet. The water was tepid, but it turned cold quickly. She pushed the old-fashioned stopper into the drain and let the sink fill halfway. She leaned over and splashed water on her face several times. She looked in the mirror and grimaced. She found another box of tissues sitting on top of the toilet and used one to remove what was left of her smudged mascara. Finally, she stared at herself in the mirror and thought, “You have to do this!” When she turned to exit the bathroom, she spotted a wrinkled set of gym clothes wadded in the corner in front of the shower. Above them, a light blue sweater and short skirt hung neatly on a hanger hooked onto a towel rack.

Back in the office, Lisa saw Celi pulling some papers out of one of the lower drawers. She returned to the armchair.

“Are you okay?” Celi asked.

“I’m okay,” Lisa answered, appreciating the sympathetic tone in Celi’s voice.

“Then let’s change gears. I have a short personality test here I’d like you to take. It will help me know more about you.” Lisa nodded and took a small booklet and answer sheet from Celi’s extended hand.

“This is one of those tests where there are no right or wrong answers,” Celi said. “And don’t overthink your responses. Just choose the best one.” As she worked through the ninety-some questions, Lisa found she rather enjoyed the process. Each question consisted of the start of a sentence like “Do you usually...” and “If you had to make a decision...” followed by two choices. Usually, Lisa found it easy to make a selection. While she worked, Dr. Torma read from a large book, occasionally pausing to make notes on a pad of yellow legal paper.

After about twenty minutes, Lisa looked up.

“Finished already?” Celi asked.

“Should I check my answers? I usually tell my students to check their answers.”

“No, not for this test.” Lisa handed the booklet and answer sheet back to Celi, who laid it aside on her desk.

“Don’t I get to know the results?” Lisa asked.

“It takes me several minutes to score it,” Celi said. “I’d rather do it later.”

“Oh...”

Celi laughed. “Don’t worry about this, Lisa. It’s not like you could fail. When you and Jeff come back next month, I’ll be happy to go over it with you. I think you’ll be surprised how accurate the descriptions are.”

“We women are supposed to be mysteries,” Lisa said. “Is this going to reveal all my secrets?”

Celi laughed along with Lisa. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell Jeff—or any of the other men around here. It’ll be our secret. But when you return, I’ll not only go over your results, I’ll share Jeff’s with you. Give you a little of an upper hand, you know?”

“That would be interesting. Between us, Jeff’s the more mysterious one in our relationship.”

“Does he tend to be a little non-communicative?”

“More than a little,” Lisa said.

They continued for another two hours, intermittently laughing together about some common weakness or, particularly, their complaints about men. When Celi finally announced they had to stop, Lisa was disappointed. She enjoyed talking to Dr. Torma so much it hadn’t seemed like a session with a psychologist.

“I think we’re going to become fast friends, Lisa,” Celi said as they parted.

“So do I,” Lisa said. At the door she turned back to Celi. “Can I ask one other question?”

“Certainly.”

“Does the Center perform abortions?”

Celi affected her most indignant expression. “Absolutely not,” she said. “We are here to help people with special reproductive needs. We’re in the business of helping create life, not destroy it.”

“That’s good to hear,” Lisa said. “Very good.” She left the office and walked along the hallway slowly, inspecting each piece of art work she passed. She came to one

showing a young man rowing a boat in a pond dotted with lily pads. A young woman holding a fringed parasol sat in the back, looking at the man with unveiled admiration. A sudden thought struck her—some good friends become a husband's lover. She looked back toward Dr. Torma's office and shook her head, banishing the fleeting thought.

7

Just before five that afternoon, Jeff and Lisa pulled out of the parking lot and headed down the long driveway toward the gated entrance to the NewGenesis Center grounds. About halfway there, Lisa spotted a narrow road leading off to the right.

“Turn in there,” she said. Jeff braked, slowing the car to a crawl and glanced toward her.

“Why?”

“I think that road must lead to the cottages. I told Amanda we’d stop by.”

“It’s been a long day already,” Jeff said. “Let’s just go back to the motel.”

“I promised her. Besides, that must be where they’ll put us. Don’t you want to see what our new home looks like?” When he didn’t respond, she thrust out her bottom lip in a mock pout and whined, “Please?”

He sighed and turned slowly onto the side road, following its winding route through the tall pines until it ended at a small clearing in front of the row of buildings. He pulled the car around, aiming it back up the road before he stopped and pulled on the parking brake. They got out and walked hand-in-hand along the cottages, looking for signs of life.

“I wonder if these were the slave quarters,” Lisa said after they passed the fourth building.

“Not likely,” Jeff said. “They look much too new, and they’re much too large. Besides, plantation owners probably didn’t build slave quarters to last the way they did the mansion.”

Lisa spotted Amanda sitting on a rocker on the porch of the last cottage and called her name. Amanda looked up and waved. She rose laboriously, leaning to one side and pushing on one knee with one hand and the arm of the rocker with the other. Jeff and Lisa climbed the two steps to the porch just as Amanda completed the long, slow rise.

“I did not think you would come,” Amanda said to Lisa.

“Well, I did,” Lisa said brightly.

“I am so pleased,” Amanda said. “Can you stay a while?”

Lisa glanced at Jeff, who nodded. “I’m going to investigate the other cottages,” he said. “It doesn’t look like anyone’s living in the others.”

“Only Jessica,” Amanda said. “She is in the first one down by the parking area. The others are open.”

“Okay,” Jeff said. “You two women can talk while I check them out.” He kissed Lisa on the cheek and jumped back down the steps. Lisa started to sit in a rocker facing Amanda as Jeff walked away.

“Can we go inside?” Amanda asked. “It’s getting a bit chilly.”

“Sure,” Lisa said. She walked to the front door and held the wooden screen door open for Amanda. Lisa’s first impression was the marked contrast of the Spartan cottage décor to opulence of the mansion. One room spanned the length of the cottage, a set of matching upholstered furniture—sofa and two chairs—at one end, facing a large cabinet. Small lamp tables flanked each end of the sofa. A surprisingly large television occupied

the center cavity of the cabinet, and a myriad of paperback books littered the adjacent shelves. At the other end of the room, four straight-backed chairs surrounded a small round wooden table.

Behind the table and chairs, an open doorway led into what appeared to be a kitchen. Next to the cabinet, a closed door led into what Lisa guessed must be the bedroom. An partially open door in between revealed the bathroom. Several small pictures of outdoor scenes hung on the walls—the kind of mass-produced artwork usually found in budget motels.

“Very nice,” Lisa said as Amanda led her to the sofa. Amanda flipped on the two lamps on the tables before carefully lowering herself into the sofa. She invited Lisa to join her as she shifted slowly until she found a reasonably comfortable position. Lisa sat at the opposite end and glanced at the book resting on the coffee table in front of the sofa—a handsome cowboy sitting casually on his horse peered out of the cover, snow-covered mountains in the background.

“You enjoy westerns?” Lisa asked, thinking Amanda’s choice of reading material seemed incongruous with her elegant accent.

“I have read everything else,” Amanda said, sweeping one arm toward the shelves. “But I find I rather enjoy that book. Full of gallant men and their brave women—along with, of course, the obligatory villain. I do hope you enjoy reading. Other than television, which I abhor, there is little else to do here.”

“There seem to be quite a few attractions in the area,” Lisa said. “The hotel brochures I read made Calloway Gardens sound magnificent.”

“I have not left the plantation for nine months. In fact, for the past three months, my entire world has consisted of this house, the gardens, and the mansion foyer.”

“No wonder you seem so bored.”

“Oh, no. I love to read. And I have made a couple of friends.”

“Jessica?”

“No, not Jessica. She just moved in a few weeks ago. At first, I was disappointed that they put her in the furthest house, but that turned out to be for the best. She watches MTV all night. Sometimes she has the sound so loud, I can hear it from here. No, I have gotten to know one of the gardeners—I think he has a crush on me. Until a couple of weeks ago, he came by here nearly every day, making up excuses like having to weed the flower beds or fertilize the trees.”

“Has he stopped coming?” Lisa asked.

“Yes,” Amanda said. “I fear I may have gotten him fired. I heard the head gardener—a rather unpleasant man—chastising Chester for ignoring the other houses.”

“That’s too bad. Who else?”

“One of the Negro cooks is a delightful woman full of stories—which reminds me, I promised to tell you the legend of the plantation. Actually, there are two legends—one a hundred and fifty years old, the other, much more recent.”

“Sounds interesting.” Lisa said.

“But I have been a poor hostess,” Amanda said, simultaneously slapping her knee.

“Would you like some sweet tea, or perhaps a lemonade?”

“I’d love some, but only if you let me get it.”

“I must admit I do not relish the thought of elevating this body again.”

“Just tell me what you want and where everything is.”

“Glasses are in the cupboard to the right of the sink, the lemonade is in the refrigerator, you will see the large pitcher of tea on the counter, and ice—well, I imagine you know where to find that. It would be kind of you to pour me some tea—two ice cubes, please.” Lisa went into the small kitchen. Everything looked quite new, although lime stains streaked the metal sink. She easily found the things she needed and returned to the living room within two minutes, carrying two tall, heavy glasses—a lemonade for her, and tea for Amanda, with two ice cubes.

Amanda took a delicate sip of her tea and smiled. “I seep my tea all day,” she said. “In the morning, I put the pitcher under the sunshine that comes through the kitchen window and let the natural heat do the work. Some people say it does not make any difference, but I swear sun tea is much more mellow than tea that has been boiled.”

“I don’t know about the tea,” Lisa said, “but this lemonade is wonderful. Did you make it yourself?”

Amanda nodded. “I squeezed the lemons this morning,” she said. “I hope it is not too sweet for you. I like my lemonade very sweet, just like my tea.”

“It’s delicious.”

“Enough small talk,” Amanda said as she placed her glass on the side table.

“Time for some delicious gossip.”

“I’m all ears,” Lisa said.

“I learned this all from Gloria, the lovely Negro cook I mentioned? She has been at the Plantation since Dr. Redfern’s father bought it from the Pine Mountain Conservancy in 1978. According to Gloria, Dr. Redfern’s parents moved here from

Mississippi because he was in medical school in Atlanta, and his mother could not bear to be so far from her darling son. But that's more the second story.

“The Mansion was originally built around 1826 by Matthew Talbot for his granddaughter, Lucy Skaggs, and her husband, Jacob Falconbury, but the story really starts with Lucy's great grandfather, James Skaggs, an immigrant born en route to America. He was a friend of Daniel Boone, and what they called a Long Hunter because he and his friends went out hunting and trapping for months on end. At age seventy, James Skaggs served as a guide on Colonel Knox's expedition into western Kentucky. He blazed the Wilderness Trail all the way to the Ohio River, where Louisville is now located.”

“It's hard to imagine a seventy-year-old man hacking through the wilderness,” Lisa said. “He must have been quite a man.”

“I should say,” Amanda said. “Because of his fabulous exploits, he earned a great deal of notoriety, which his sons and grandsons parlayed into social and political prominence. His grandson, Joshua Skaggs, was one of the most powerful men in Tennessee, where he moved in 1815. He would not remain in Tennessee for long, however; for there he met Polly Talbot, the daughter of the future governor of Georgia, who was visiting Nashville. Joshua fell in love with the beautiful Polly, and even though she was only fifteen at the time—and he was twenty years her senior, they were married the following year.

“Polly tried to live with her husband in Tennessee, but she missed her native Georgia terribly. Joshua refused to relocate again. He had ambitions for the United States Senate, and his influence was in Tennessee, not in Georgia. But Joshua was apparently a

terminally foolish businessman. He invested heavily in the slave trade with an unscrupulous scoundrel and lost his fortune. Two years after their marriage, with Polly seven months pregnant, he committed suicide.”

“Serves him right,” Lisa said.

“Why do you say that?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t have, Amanda. You’re from the South, so maybe you have a different attitude, but I believe slavery was horrible. I just don’t see how Christians could justify it.”

“Oh, I agree,” Amanda said, and Lisa breathed a silent sigh of relief. She was definitely taking a genuine liking to Amanda and didn’t want to offend her new friend. “My father always defended the South’s position on slavery,” Amanda continued. “We had terrible arguments about it.”

“Did you ever convince him?”

“No, he went to his grave cursing Abraham Lincoln,” Amanda said. Hearing that Amanda’s father was dead, obviously at the young age since Amanda was in her early twenties, Lisa thought perhaps this was why she didn’t like to talk about Charleston and her childhood.

“Continuing with the story,” Amanda said after taking a long sip of her tea. “Polly scraped together enough money from friends to buy passage back to her father’s plantation a few miles north of here, in what is now Talbot County. The trip, coming in one of the worst winters in the history of Georgia, took a heavy toll on Polly. Two months after reaching home and giving birth to a daughter, Lucy, named after her mother, Polly died of pneumonia.”

“Little Lucy became the apple of her grandfather’s eye. He doted on her constantly and gave her everything her heart desired. When Matthew Talbot served as acting governor of Georgia for two weeks in 1819, his most important act was to throw a huge party for Lucy in the governor’s mansion, even though her birthday came three weeks after his short tenure.”

“Sometimes I wish my father had spoiled me like that,” she said, a wave of pain rushing through her as she thought about the plane crash two years earlier. She brushed it aside, however, and focused on Amanda.

“Well then, you will surely envy this. When Lucy married Jacob Falconbury in 1826, Governor Talbot purchased the large tract of land that is now the NewGenesis Center for them. He contracted for the building of the mansion, which was completed about a month before his death in 1827.”

“That’s a great story, Amanda—full of tragedy like all good stories are.”

“Wait,” Amanda said. “There is more. I haven’t even gotten to the delicious part. Jacob and Lucy were very happy on the Plantation, although they never made much money. For some reason, Jacob decided to grow peanuts.”

“I would have thought peanuts were a lucrative crop in the South,” Lisa said.

“Not at all,” Amanda said. “Until after the War, peanuts were always considered a food for the poor. They were difficult to grow, and harvesting techniques were very laborious. Nevertheless, Jacob and Lucy eked out a minimal existence and had three sons. When the War broke out, Jacob, despite being in his early sixties, and all three sons enlisted in the Army of the Confederacy, leaving Lucy and their small group of Negroes to tend the farm.”

“The War did not touch this part of Georgia until 1864, when Sherman attacked Atlanta and proceeded on his march to the sea. A band of marauding Union soldiers broke off from Sherman’s main force and headed south, firing plantations along the way. They arrived at the Falconbury Plantation in mid-August.

“Lucy confronted them at the front door of the mansion, standing defiantly with a rifle cradled in her arms, and accompanied by Gloria’s great-great grandfather. The soldiers laughed at her and lit their torches. Knowing she could not dissuade them with her unloaded gun, she offered the only thing that interested them. Apparently, even in her late fifties, Lucy was still a handsome woman. Securing her favors, the soldiers rode on to the next plantation, sparing the Falconbury mansion.”

“I don’t know if I could do that,” Lisa said. “But I still admire Lucy’s courage in defending her home.”

“So do I,” Amanda said. “But it all turned out tragically less than a year later. When Jacob returned home and learned his sons were all dead, he became morose. Eventually, he asked Lucy how the home had survived when most neighboring plantations had been destroyed. She made the worst mistake of her life—she told him. That night, full of whiskey, he strangled her in her bed.”

“That’s terrible,” Lisa said, even though she saw Amanda’s smile.

“Here’s where the legend comes in,” Amanda said. “According to Gloria, Lucy took her revenge on Jacob after her death, returning to haunt him for two years before he died of liver failure. Gloria says that Lucy still roams around the mansion at night. She even claims to have seen her on two occasions.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Who really knows what to believe, Lisa? I know I believe there is more than this life, so it is certainly possible that some spirits cannot escape this world.”

Amanda suddenly gasped and grabbed her belly. “Oh, my,” she said. “That was quite a kick!”

“Probably a boy,” Lisa said.

“Oh, I know this is a boy. It was planned that way. If it had been up to me, I would have chosen a girl.”

“Why wouldn’t it be up to you?”

Amanda looked at Lisa with an expression she couldn’t read. “I guess you don’t know.”

“Know what?”

“I’m a surrogate. This is not my baby.” Lisa was so shocked she couldn’t respond. “You probably think this is horrible—having a baby for someone else.”

“I don’t know. I don’t think it’s something I would do.”

“Until ten months ago, I would not have thought I would either. But I told Dr. Torma today that I wanted to keep the baby. She got really angry and we had a big fight. I threatened to call a lawyer, and she calmed down. She told me she understood my feelings—carrying this child for nine months after all—and that we could talk about it again tomorrow.”

“I thought there were contracts or something involved in this kind of thing.”

“Yes, I signed something when I first came here, but I only scanned it. I do not know what I was thinking.”

A gentle knock startled both women. Amanda leaned back and pulled the gingham curtain aside, craning her neck. Lisa didn't panic, but she was worried. She didn't know how the NewGenesis staff, who had already revealed a tendency for strict rules, would feel about her visit to the cottage.

"It's Jeff," Amanda said, and Lisa could see that she was equally relieved. Lisa got up and opened the door.

"You ready to go?" Jeff asked.

"I have yet to tell you the second story," Amanda called from the sofa. Lisa glanced at her watch and was surprised that more than an hour had passed. She glanced back and forth between Jeff and Amanda.

"I will be brief," Amanda said. "This one may be more relevant for you." Lisa looked at Jeff, and he nodded.

"Why don't you go in and get yourself some lemonade from the fridge?" Lisa said to him. Jeff came in, and she motioned to the kitchen. "Glasses are next to the sink." She returned to the sofa.

"This is about Dr. Redfern." Lisa's eyes widened slightly in interest. "He moved in with his mother here after his residency in Atlanta and opened a practice in gynecology in LaGrange. His father died in 1986, and about ten years ago, his mother was paralyzed in an automobile accident. Dr. Redfern closed his practice and dedicated himself to nursing and—he hoped—curing his mother. Gloria told me she's overheard him talking about the potential of embryonic stem cells for curing paralysis." A chill ran up Lisa's neck as Jeff came back into the room.

The phone that sat on the table to Lisa's left rang, and Amanda eyed it without moving. "Should I answer that?" Lisa asked.

"No," Amanda said quickly. "Hand it to me." Lisa picked up the cordless receiver and gave it to Amanda.

"Hello." Lisa stood and walked over to Jeff, putting her arm around his waist. He took a long drink of the lemonade, a thin trickle escaping the corner of his mouth and falling into Lisa's hair.

"That will be fine, Dr. Ragle," Amanda said into the phone. "I will see you in a few minutes." She handed the phone back to Lisa, who placed it in its cradle.

"Dr. Ragle is coming over to check on me," Amanda said. "I think it would be better if you were not here."

"Why?" Jeff asked.

"I think she's right, Jeff," Lisa said. She took his hand and pulled him insistently toward the door.

"Wait a minute," Jeff said. "What's this all about?"

"It's no big deal, Jeff. But if that's the way Amanda feels, we should leave." He shrugged and placed the empty glass on the dining room table before he followed Lisa out the door. On the porch, Lisa asked Jeff to wait a moment and scurried back inside.

"Amanda," she said from the doorway. "What are you going to do now?"

Amanda grunted. "With or without the baby, I guess I'll be checking out of here soon."

?

In a dimly-lit room beneath the NewGenesis Center, two men watched Amanda's image on one of a bank of monitors lining one wall. Crowded with sophisticated electronic equipment, the room bore no resemblance to its original intent as a root cellar.

"I didn't know little Mandy was clairvoyant," one of the men said. They both laughed.

A half hour earlier, when Lisa had first stepped into the room, the man had picked up the sleek telephone hanging below the monitors. In Wallace Redfern's second floor office, the unique ring startled the doctor as he sat in the armchair across from Celi Torma. He stood and moved quickly to his desk.

"Yes," he said into his telephone. Celi watched him with interest as he listened. He frowned and looked at her, shaking his head. "I understand," he said after several seconds. "Maintain surveillance and call me immediately if you sense any danger of compromise." He replaced the telephone in its cradle.

"Trouble?" Celi said.

"Maybe. Lisa is paying a visit to Mandy."

"That's unfortunate," Celi said. She stood and peered out the window, looking over the gardens to the row of cottages beyond. "Maybe we should abort. I'm becoming less convinced that we can control Jeff and Lisa."

"It could be months before we get another chance like this," Redfern said.

"I know, but I just told you Amanda's becoming a problem. She's almost certain to raise Lisa's suspicions. And Lisa's personality type is extraordinarily vigilant. Right now, she's desperate because of Ethan, but as the weeks proceed, she may start putting things together."

“I think the Kinkades are manageable, Celi. Are you telling me you can’t handle this?” Redfern said.

Celi knew Redfern well enough to know this was his best attempt at “reverse psychology.” She decided to play along with him for now. She allowed a look of indignation to cross her face. “Absolutely not!” she almost shouted. “Even if Lisa is difficult, I’m sure I can manipulate her through Jeff.”

“I thought you said he had strong defenses.”

“Yes, and that’s his biggest weakness. He has too much confidence in them, and when they crumble, he’ll have nothing else to call on.”

“*If* they crumble,” Redfern said, joining Celi at the window.

“*When* they crumble,” she said.

Redfern put his hand on her shoulder, and Celi allowed it rest there for several moments before she turned away from the windows.

“Whether or not Amanda says anything significant to Lisa tonight, she is a problem.”

“Let me handle Mandy,” he said.

“See that you do,” she said, making sure she had the last word before she walked out of his office.

?

After Celi left his office, Wallace Redfern finished up his confidential monthly report to the NewGenesis Center investors. The document contained three sections: research update, special projects, and budget. The research section focused on Pat Kirby’s successful attempt to trigger embryonic stem cells to differentiate into heart

muscle cells. He kept the medical jargon to a minimum, knowing his investors were primarily interested in the commercial implications.

He updated the two ongoing special projects and introduced them to a third new one. In the budget section, he reported a slight over-expenditure for travel and investigative services in the month of October, justifying them as necessary for the initiation of the third special project. He suggested that November might also be over budget in these areas but that the NewGenesis Center would close 2006 well within the allocated funds. That being so, he requested the purchase of a number of replacement medical instruments.

He ran Word's internal spellchecker, correcting several errors, before he used the custom add-in to double-encrypt the document. He entered five addresses in the To line and one—john_sanger@emory.edu--to the BCC line. He smiled as he clicked the Send button. He logged off the Dell laptop and slowly lowered the screen until it clicked in the catch. He spun around in his chair and opened the large lower left door in his credenza, revealing the safe door behind. He spun the tumblers six times back and forth, smiling again at the satisfying thump as he hit the last number. He opened the safe, inserted the laptop, closed the door, and spun the tumbler.

He picked up his telephone and dialed Cynthia Ragle's cell phone.

"Is Mandy all right?" he asked. He listened for several moments.

"Good. One of the groundskeepers said he heard some unusual noises from her cottage. Thanks for stopping by. I'd glad it was a false alarm." He listened again.

"Well, I would have preferred Monday," he said. "But nature has a way of interrupting our weekends sometimes, doesn't it? I'll see you here tomorrow morning."

He hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair, folding his hands behind his head. It would be easier, he thought, if they could bring Cynthia in fully on the special projects, but there was too much at stake. The fewer people, the better anyway.

He poured himself a glass of the Glenfiddich, drinking it slowly to luxuriate in each warm, smooth sip. When the glass was empty, he rinsed it out in the sink and replaced it on the credenza shelf. He glanced out the window, appreciating the reddish-orange glow of the sunset filtering through the tall pines behind the cottages.

“Tomorrow,” he said aloud, thrilling at the sound of the word. “Tomorrow.”

He left the office and walked down to the elevator at one end of the hall. The door opened instantly when he pushed the Up button. He went in and inserted a key in the lock above the third floor button. When he turned it, the elevator jerked slightly and moved upward, going up two floors. He stepped out of the doors and walked the three strides to the single closed door directly in front of the elevator. He used his keys to disengage both locks.

He went inside, shivering instantly, and faced the small speaker inset in the wall beside the door. “Monitor off,” he said distinctly. He looked up at the camera mounted in the near corner, just below the ceiling. Moments later, the tiny red light at the bottom of the camera went out. He stood for a moment, watching his condensed breath and listening comforting throb of the refrigeration units.

He turned and faced the large wooden box resting on an ornately-carved table. He walked slowly to the box. He put one hand on the top, sliding it unhurriedly down the length of the rich mahogany lid, stopping momentarily at each inlaid chestnut heart. Returning to the center, he grasped the brass handle and lifted. He stood looking into the

box for nearly five minutes, allowing tears to come. They fell on the floor, freezing into glistening patterns within moments.

“No,” he said resolutely. “Today is not a day for tears.”

He focused on the simple broach resting on the collar of the exquisite royal blue velvet gown. His eyes shifted left and he grimaced. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small gold tube. He removed the cap and rotated the disc at the bottom, extending the rich, red stick a half inch out of the tube.

He leaned into the box and carefully applied the lipstick. He smiled at the results and turned the lipstick back into the tube, replacing the cap. Again, he leaned into the box and kissed the cold, dead lips.

“Tomorrow, Mother. Tomorrow,” he said.

8

Jeff threw their bags into the trunk of the rental car and went into the motel lobby to check out. Lisa sat in the passenger seat, still hoping she could convince him to drive back to the NewGenesis Center before they headed for the Atlanta airport. There was plenty of time, and she was worried about Amanda. She understood Amanda's desire to keep the child she had carried for nine months, but she tried to put herself in the shoes of the couple waiting for the child.

She imagined them about her age, having tried to have children for years. Finally, in a desperation similar to her own, they had turned to surrogacy. Even though she'd never met this couple—didn't even know their names—she knew the joy they must be feeling at the prospect of finally having a child of their own. Lisa wanted to help Amanda see that side, to understand that a loving couple would give the baby a loving home, and that any attempt to keep the baby was likely to create anguish for everyone involved.

Lisa could see a goodness in Amanda. She sympathizes with the pain she must have gone through losing her father. But Amanda was still very young. Unmarried, she might love the child, but it would be an enormous burden that would affect her entire future. She thought maybe she could help Amanda see all those things.

Jeff opened the driver side door and fell into the seat. "All right," he said. "But they may not even let us in." Lisa smiled. She was glad she hadn't nagged Jeff about going to the Center. Things always worked out better when she gave him a chance to think. "And I still think you're sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong."

“I thought about it most of the night, sweetie. I just can’t leave without trying. Four lives could be devastated, and I’d be at least partially responsible.”

“I already said we’d go over there,” he said. “You don’t have to keep trying to convince me.”

“Thank you.”

When they arrived at the gate twenty minutes later, they found a different uniformed guard. He stepped up to the car window and leaned over as Jeff lowered it.

“May I help you folks?” he said without emotion.

Lisa leaned down in the seat and peered up at him. “Yes, sir,” she said. “We’re the Kinkades. We’ve been meeting with the staff the past two days.” Jeff glanced at Lisa, giving her a slightly disapproving look.

“Kinkades, you say?” He looked down at the clipboard he was carrying. “I don’t see your name on today’s list.”

“We had a couple of additional questions to ask Dr. Redfern, so we hoped to see him this morning before we go to the airport.” The guard looked back down at the clipboard, leafing back through a couple of pages.

“I see your name here yesterday, but not today.”

“We were talking last night after we left the Center and realized there were a couple of things we needed to clarify,” Lisa said.

“I’ll have to call,” the guard said. He withdrew into the guard house. Jeff turned and shook his head at Lisa. She shrugged helplessly, watching the guard pick up the phone and press a button. He held it to his ear for a couple of minutes before he turned back to them. “No answer.”

“These were really important things we need to understand before we come back next month,” Lisa said.

“You’re coming back?” the guard said.

“Yes, in a couple of weeks. We’re coming here for some important treatment.”

The guard looked absently at the clipboard, then back at the phone.”

“I don’t know...”

“We understand, officer,” Jeff said. “You’re just doing your job.”

“Well, I suppose it’d be okay,” he said tentatively.

“Oh, thank you, officer,” Lisa said quickly. “We won’t be long.” He stood for a moment, looking at the car. Finally, he reached into the guardhouse and pushed a button that opened the steel gate. Jeff eased the car ahead.

“This is foolish, Lisa,” Jeff said. “What if Dr. Redfern finds out we lied our way into the Center. They’d be likely to withdraw the offer for treatment. Then where is Ethan?” The sudden guilt hit Lisa hard—she hadn’t thought about the potential affect. Her mind spun.

“Here’s what we’re going to do,” Jeff said in a clearly authoritative tone that Lisa knew well. In most situations, he would hang back, letting Lisa take the lead. But when things became a crisis, he took over. He made decisions quickly and brooked no arguments. “We’re going to swing by Amanda’s cottage first,” he continued. “You have ten minutes to talk to her while I stay in the car. When you’re done, we’ll drive on to the mansion, where we’ll ask for Dr. Redfern. While you’re with Amanda, I’ll come up with a couple of questions we can ask him.” Lisa was relieved. Jeff’s suggestion undid her little lie. Well, it didn’t really undo it, she admitted, but it covered it.

“I agree, sweetie. Thank you.”

Lisa didn't take ten minutes with Amanda because she wasn't there. Lisa banged on the door several times and finally stuck her head in and called. There was no response. She hurried back to the car and told Jeff. They drove on to the mansion.

“It is Saturday, you know,” Jeff said when no one answered the intercom.

“There are other doors,” Lisa said.

“No, Lisa. That's enough. You tried.” She looked at him and nodded in resignation. It would have done no good to continue urging him. “Do you have any paper handy?” he asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“I'm going to leave a note,” he said. “The guard may report what happened, and I don't want Dr. Redfern wondering why we were here.” She dug her small spiral bound notebook out of her purse and handed it to Jeff along with a pen. He scribbled quickly, explaining that they had had a couple of questions, but they would either call or wait until they came back. He folded the paper and stuck it through the slot of the Victorian mailbox adjacent to the door.

When they got back to the guard station on their way out, Jeff told the guard no one had answered. The guard just nodded as he opened the gate and said he might see them when they returned.

Jeff didn't say anything more to Lisa for about fifty miles. She sat leaning against the passenger door, staring out at the passing landscape along I-85. Shortly after they passed Newnan and Peachtree City, she unbuckled her seat belt and slide over next to him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“A gift from God, Lisa,” he said. “Remember, this is a gift from God.”

“A gift to Ethan,” she said. He kissed the top of her head.

?

Celi approached the third floor delivery room just before noon. Redfern had called her two hours earlier to tell her Amanda was going into labor. “It’ll be a little while,” he said. “You should probably be here no later than two.” Lisa was considering how she would deal with Amanda if she tried to insist on keeping the baby. There was no possibility that she’d leave with the child, but it would be easier if Celi could convince Amanda to cooperate.

A woman’s scream careened through the door and down the hallway. Celi broke into a run as it grew louder and more intense. She burst through the broad, swinging double doors and quickly survey the scene. Amanda lay on the obstetric table, her feet strapped into the raised stirrups. She was struggling to rise up on her elbows. Wallace Redfern stood at her side, holding her hand. He looked confused and surprised.

They were both looking past Amanda’s feet at Cynthia Ragle, who was backpedaling rapidly toward the wall behind her, a look of maniacal terror on her face. Her scream had become staccato as she began to hyperventilate. Between Cynthia and the table, Pat Kelly knelt on the floor, her back to Celi. She was looking down at the floor.

Celi rushed over to Pat, looked over her shoulder, and immediately vomited. She took several steps back, terror clutching at her throat. She spat and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. She took several deep, deliberate breaths—each slightly less faltering than the previous—before she stepped back toward Pat. Redfern released Amanda’s hand and jumped to the end of the table.

“No!” he shouted in an extended pathetic wail. “No!” over and over.

Celi closed her eyes and turned her head toward the floor, laboriously willing her eyes to reopen. She stared at the quivering mass of flesh lying in a small pool of blood at the foot of the table. It took several moments for Lisa’s mind to coalesce the shape into anything recognizable. It was a baby, grotesquely covered with dozens of large masses that only the most disturbed mind could imagine. In each mass, tangled hair, misshapen teeth, and raw muscle pocked the surface. In one, a vacant eye stared out. In others, Celi saw partial ears, fingers, noses. It was a scene only Dante could adequately describe. She turned and gagged, bile rising into her throat. She spat again.

To her right, Amanda was whimpering pitifully as she struggled to see what she never should. As Celi watched helplessly, Amanda’s body slid off the side of the table away from her, but her feet remained firmly tethered in the stirrups. Celi heard the sickening sound of bone snapping just before Amanda’s horrible scream. She leapt up and deftly released the straps, allowing Amanda to slide to the floor.

Cynthia had reached the wall and was pressed against it, still screaming as she stared at the baby. Celi rushed over to Cynthia and grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her violently.

“Cynthia! Cynthia! Get a hold of yourself.” Recovering more of her own composure, Celi was momentarily surprised that it was the obstetrician who was most hysterical, but then she realized that while the obstetrician must have delivered hundreds of babies and that some surely would have exhibited deformities, nothing in her experience could have prepared her for this. Still Cynthia screams did not abate. Celi grabbed her by one arm and dragged her roughly through the swinging door into the

adjacent prep room. Celi pushed her against the wall, and Cynthia collapsed, falling into a heap. But at least, Celi noted, her screaming tapered off to an anguished wail. “Stay here,” she said, although she suspected Cynthia needed no such orders.

She ran back into the delivery room just as Redfern leaned over and picked up the tiny beast, cradling it against his chest. He expelled one last, long “No!” before bursting into sobs. Amanda’s scream pierced the air, part of it acute pain, the other a plaintive cry, “My baby!” Pat Kirby stood and stared at Redfern. Amanda fell silent, the pain finally washing over her as she lost consciousness.

Celi walked over to Redfern. She heard the baby’s futile attempts to draw breath—a desperate rattling gurgle. She reached for the baby, and Redfern looked at her, unimaginable pain in his eyes. She let her eyes speak to him of her sympathy and understanding. She extended her arms inches further. “You know what has to be done, Wallace,” she said. The pain in his eyes redoubled but he nodded.

Slowly, tentatively, he handed the child to Celi, who took her in her arms. She looked into the baby’s eyes and thought she saw desperate pleading. She shifted the baby’s position, cradling her in one arm. With the other she covered the baby’s mouth and pinched her nose. She did not struggle as her brief life ended.

“Mother,” Wallace Redfern whispered.

“I know,” Celi said. “There is still Jessica”

He nodded and turned, walking slowly out of the delivery room through the double doors. They whooshed back and forth quietly several times before becoming still and silent.

Part II

9

Three Sundays after what they were already referring to simply as “that day,” the NewGenesis Center board of director, disturbed by Wallace Redfern’s insipid e-mail message, converged on Pine Mountain. They gathered in the boardroom on the first floor of the Center. Despite two walls on floor-ceiling windows, only artificial light illuminated the room. Dark, heavy drapes blocked the bright Georgia sun from entering. The décor of the room could only be described as practical—a large rectangular oak table purchased from a large discount office supply store surrounding by comfortable, but hardly luxurious, chairs. Refreshments that morning were limited to coffee, tea, and a tray of bagels from a local bakery. The assembled power brokers might appreciate opulent surroundings in their own companies and institutions, but they were less tolerant when their own money was involved.

Wallace Redfern stood before them alone. He would have preferred to have Celi there, or even Pat Kirby, but the board had insisted on meeting with him alone. “Gentlemen,” he said, “uh, and Lady,” he added, gesturing to the only woman in the group. “It is a pleasure to see you all again. I have a few brief remarks and then I will open the floor to questions.”

A distinguished gray-haired man, Chief Executive Officer of one of the world’s largest pharmaceutical companies cleared his throat and turned slowly in the swivel chair,

looking at the other board members. “I hope you intend to begin with the events of October 28,” he said, his deep voice commanding attention.

“I certainly intend to address that,” Redfern said, his body tensing visibly, “but I had hoped to make some preliminary remarks.”

“Why don’t you dispense with the usual dog-and-pony, and get right to the issue at hand,” the Alabama congressman said. His grating southern accent dripped with sarcasm.

“Certainly,” Redfern said. He squirmed inside his gray pinstripe suit and glanced down at his notes sitting on the desktop lectern. He sipped water from the glass next to the notes. He took a deep breath and lifted his head. “I think it is important, first of all, to recognize that the NewGenesis Center accomplished the first full-term, live delivery of—“

“Cut the crap, Wallace,” the woman said. She was not only the lone female on the board, she was also both the youngest and probably the wealthiest. A venture capitalist from Boston, she was, in addition, the one member Wallace Redfern most feared—and admired. Redfern paused again, trying to maintain his calm. He took another sip of water, feeling the weight seven pairs of eyes fixed on him.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “The infant died without five minutes of delivery. The woman nodded and leaned back in her chair. “It presented with multiple teratomas—“

“English, please, Wallace,” she said in a tone that sounded distinctly like a mother scolding a recalcitrant child.

“Of course. Teratoma tumors arise from pluripotent stem cells and involve all three embryonic cell layers—the ectoderm, the—“

“Dr. Redfern,” the CEO interrupted, clearly exasperated. “Can we keep to the pertinent information? I think we all want to know is: One, what went wrong? Two, how will you prevent it from recurring? And, three, are there any exposure risks as a result of this unfortunate incident?”

“Yes, sir. Well, it should be pretty easy to deal with those topics.”

“Then see that you do,” the venture capitalist said coldly.

“Yes, ma’am. We believe the tumors were unrelated to the cloning procedure.

The fact that a sonogram as recently as three week prior to the delivery was normal indicates that this was a normal random occurrence of birth defects.”

“Normal?” the congressman said. “We’ve seen the pictures, Doctor. I would hardly call what we saw ‘normal’! How can you be so sure this was directly related to the procedure?”

“Every clinical test up to the day of delivery was negative,” Redfern said, feeling on slightly safer ground. “But the primary issue is really the future. Would you agree?” Most of the board members remained impassive. Only the CEO and the Philosophy professor nodded.

“As you know from last month’s report, we successfully implanted the second surrogate. Her pregnancy is proceeding as expected, but we are conducting additional, more frequent tests to stay on top of the condition of the embryo. Because we believe the first infant was completely normal up until no more than two weeks before delivery, we will redouble our testing beginning in the seventh month. If we have any results that are even questionable, we will be prepared to deliver by Caesarean section on a moment’s notice.

“But I would be remiss if I did not reiterate that, despite the disappointment we experienced, Infant A represents the first successfully delivered human clone.”

“You have a perverse definition of success, Dr. Redfern,” the congressman said.

“Let’s not debate the point,” the CEO said. “Let’s turn to exposure.”

“That’s easy,” Redfern said. “There is none. For reasons unrelated to the birth, the surrogate died shortly after the infant. We took tissue samples of both and disposed of the remains.”

“Precisely how did the infant die?” the New York banker asked.

“The condition of the infant was terminal. She was euthanized rather than allowing her to continue to suffer needlessly.”

“And the mother?” the banker asked.

“Surrogate,” Redfern said.

“Why not just refer to her as ‘the womb’ or ‘the uterus’ or something even cruder?” the venture capitalist said sarcastically. Redfern gave her an embarrassed smile, but he knew better than to respond .

“How did she die?” the banker asked again.

“She suffered massive internal bleeding.”

“How can you be sure the deaths were unrelated?” the congressman asked.

“There was no clinical connection between the events.”

“Double-talk,” the congressman mumbled.

“Who was is the delivery room?” the venture capitalist said.

“Only Drs. Torma, Kirby, and Ragle.”

“Ragle was there?” the professor said. “I thought this project was to be limited to the three of you.”

“That’s correct, but Dr. Ragle is our obstetrician. We had every reason to expect the perfectly normal delivery of an ostensibly perfectly normal baby girl. To have excluded Dr. Ragle, who treated the surrogate throughout the pregnancy, would have seemed suspicious.”

“And how did Dr. Ragle respond to the reality of that evening?” the CEO asked.

“She was visibly upset.”

“I spoke with Dr. Kirby about that day, Dr. Redern,” the venture capitalist said.

“She characterized Dr. Ragle’s reaction as ‘totally freaking out.’”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration,” Redfern said. “She was quite upset, but we spoke the following Monday, and she was much more philosophical. She regretted her outburst.”

“I understand you put her on administrative leave,” she said.

“No, she asked for a couple of weeks off. She had not taken a vacation in over a year, and she just wanted to relax for a few days. She went down to the Keys for some scuba diving, but she’ll be back next Monday.”

“Would it be better to bring her in on the projects when she returns?” the CEO asked.

“I don’t think so,” Redfern said. “There is no particular reason to keep her in the dark, but we all agreed that we should minimize the number of staff directly involved. If the time comes that it becomes necessary to inform her, I am prepared to so do.”

“Very well,” the CEO said. “I’m satisfied. Not please, mind you, but satisfied. Let’s move on to the new project.” Redfern hope the board didn’t see his sign of relief. He had dodged a bullet.

“The second project begins this week, when the couple we have selected arrives.”

The board meeting concluded forty minutes later, the seven investors all excited by the commercial potential the new project promised. They left the NewGenesis grounds as they had arrived—in separate, nondescript, carefully-spaced vehicles with smoked windows. The seven cars headed for five different five different small airports within fifty miles of Pine Mountain, where corporate jets waited for their return trips.

?

Celi still hated running, but it was part of her job now, so she tolerated it. It was one of two new pastimes that were necessary for her work with the Kinkades. That Sunday morning, while she knew Wallace Redfern was squirming in front of the board of directors, she bounded down the back stairs of the Center and jogged around to the parking lot. She glanced down the asphalt strip that disappeared into the tall pines just beyond the lot, feeling a keen sense of anticipation.

At their meeting with Redfern the morning before, Celi had commented that she was discouraged by her lack of progress. The investigative reports indicated Jeff was accomplished runner, having recently run a half-marathon in under sixty-six minutes. Most weeks, he ran four times—twice with Lisa and twice without her. Alone, he usually ran ten miles in about fifty-five minutes. Celi had yet to push past three miles, and that took over thirty minutes. If she was going to keep up with him, she needed to increasing both stamina and strength—quickly.

Redfern was accommodating, pointing out that she had just started running, but Pat Kirby offered concrete assistance—injections of recombinant erythropoietin.

“What’s that?” Celi asked.

“Erythropoietin, or EPO, is the hormone produced by the kidneys that stimulates red blood cell production. It’s used to treat some forms of anemia, but many athletes, particularly cyclists and runners, use it as a performance-enhancer. An increase in red blood cells give you an increased oxygen-carrying capacity and, as a result, greater endurance.”

“Okay, I’ve heard of EPO doping,” Celi said. “But hasn’t it been implicated in a number of deaths? I seem to remember something about some Danish cyclists.”

“Actually, they were Dutch, but yes,” Pat said. “That’s because they exceeded safe levels. Their blood was so thick, their hearts couldn’t pump it. We’d keep you to significantly lower levels.”

“I don’t know.” Celi said, eying Pat with more than a little suspicion. “I don’t like the idea of a bunch of injections that could kill me.”

“Neither do I, Pat,” Redfern said. “Celi’s a very fit woman. Let’s just let her build up.”

“At the rate I’m going,” Celi said, “that could take weeks, or even months.”

“There is another approach,” Pat said. She paused until Celi and Redfern turned to her again. “We could inject you with a harmless virus carrying an extra copy of the EPO gene. The virus will insert the gene into a few cells and give you the permanent capacity for increased RBC’s.”

“Oh no, Pat,” Celi said emphatically. “I’m not going to be one of your genetic experiments—that’s what the guests are for.”

“This is really experimental, Celi,” Pat said. “The efficacy is well established in the literature.”

“Regardless, just how is permanently-elevated EPO safer than temporary injections?” Celi asked.

“By using promoters,” Pat said. “That’s the part of each cell that regulates gene activity. A Massachusetts company found that a modified version of rapamycin can be used to create a promoter to activate the extra EPO gene. You take rapamycin and get enhanced endurance for about a month—all within safe levels.”

“Isn’t rapamycin an immunosuppressor?” Redfern asked. Celi felt a chill creep slowly up her spine. She looked down and saw her fine white arm hair rise.

“Yes, but a once a month ingestion carries no risk. It’s enough to activate the EPO gene, but not enough to threaten the immune system.”

“I don’t like this, Pat,” Celi said. “All this is easy for you to say. It’s not your body we’d be playing with.”

“Hey, you’re the one complaining about your performance. I’m just trying to offer help. If we don’t believe in genetic enhancement, why are we even here?”

Celi had to admit Pat had a point, but tampering with the guests was one thing. Getting personally involved was quite another.

“Here’s what I recommend,” Pat said. “We give you one injection of EPO—I have some on hand here—and you see what you think. If it doesn’t seem therapeutic or you have any adverse reactions, we forget all about it. If you respond well and want to

continue, we can either inject carefully-monitored levels of EPO or try the genetic approach. I'd have to order some rapamycin anyway."

Redfern turned to Celi, stroking his precisely-trimmed beard and raising his eyebrows.

"You're sure this is safe?" she said tentatively.

"Completely," Pat said. "I could give you the injection before we leave today."

Celi mulled it over for several moments. She had always been curious about the enhancement protocols Pat was working on, and this could make her plans for Jeff much easier. She nodded and the trio had moved on to other matters.

The next morning, she didn't feel any different. She clicked off the timer on her new Locman *Nuovo* multifunction sports watch and started down the driveway in long, loping strides. A couple of hundred yards into the woods, she veered left onto the well-defined deer path she'd found several days before. When she completed the two-mile loop back to the Center, she glanced at the watch, still running in place. She had to check it twice, surprised that the timer hand was sweeping past fifteen minutes.

She looked down the driveway, smiled, and burst into a sprint. At the deer path, she slowed slightly to pick her way through the occasional roots and felled branches. When she again returned to the parking lot, she glanced at the watch without stopping—twenty-nine minutes—before sprinting down the road again.

Shortly after she reentered the woods, she felt a sudden euphoria overwhelm her. She laughed aloud as she ducked under a long-hanging branch. She pushed harder, breaking into a pace she knew might be risky on the uneven path. As she ran faster, she felt her sweat covering her body, sopping her tank top. Why did I ever hate sweating,

Celi thought, reveling in the wet warmth of the soft fabric against her flat belly. She laughed again, bursting from the woods and running headlong to the foot of the front steps of the Center.

She stared at the stopwatch in fascination—six miles in forty-three minutes. She paced around the parking lot, spent but elated. She wondered how much EPO Pat had really injected, but she knew she was going to talk with Pat again about the genetic approach. She turned back to the front entrance of the Center.

Redfern was undoubtedly looking for her, but she hoped to avoid him this morning. She walked around to the mansion, using her key to enter through the rear door. She padded slowly up the stairs, listening for sounds above. At the second floor landing, she opened the door a crack and peered down the empty hallway. She eased the door open enough to squeeze through and scurried to her office.

She wanted a shower, but she knew the sound of running water would draw Redfern, so she pulled the Bible off the shelf and plopped down in one of the chair to continue the second new pastime. She had started with three *Idiot's Guides*—the Bible, Christianity, and Jesus—for a quick background. Four days ago, she dove into the Bible itself. She had read through Nehemiah, although she had skipped First and Second Chronicles, having read they were virtual repetitions of earlier books. Left along today, she would complete the Old Testament.

Speed reading was a skill she developed in college. She turned the pages so quickly, an observer would assume she was merely leafing through a book, but she could retain all but the tiniest details. In college, it was a skill she had needed in her freshman year since she was working two on-campus jobs. She worked hard at her studies, but she

knew that there were many people who worked hard, only to get steamrolled by a lesser individual with connections. She used her innate charm and her growing understanding of psychology to supplement her intelligence and diligence.

She hadn't always been a serious student. Before her father and mother died within fifteen months during her first two years in high school, she did just enough to avoid anything lower than C's. When a class interested her, which was rare, she displayed her brilliance, making her an enigma to school counselors. After their deaths, she assumed household responsibilities for her five younger brothers and sisters. Her older brother joined the Army the day after their mother's funeral. Technically, their aunt and uncle—her mother's sister—were their guardians, but they had six children of their own.

Granted this taste of what life would be without a good education and solid connections, Celi gave up any social life to divide her time exclusively between her siblings and studies. The slow start precluded any chance of the highest academic honors at the school, but she so thoroughly impressed many of the school's top teachers that she earned effusive letters of recommendation. When she was admitted by Wellesley, she matter-of-factly informed her brothers and sisters that Diona, the next oldest, was now in charge. Celi left Detroit the next day. She had attended a professional conference there three years earlier, her first return, but she did not search out her family.

By her sophomore year, she had used her various skills to garner a prestigious fellowship that not only paid her tuition and living expenses, but also added a small stipend. She no longer needed to speed read everything, but it had become habitual. Sometimes she envied people who could linger endlessly over a good novel. Those few

Celi read, she finished within a hour or two. She found the Bible enormously more difficult than Stephen King, but by Tuesday or Wednesday at worst, she would have absorbed the entire Judeo-Christian holy book.

Running was the key for Jeff, the Bible for Lisa. Both, she thought, would be an interesting challenge. She was looking forward to their arrival the next day.

Celi looked up at the sound of the doorknob tapping against the lock. She knew it had to be Redfern. Only he would presume to enter her office without knocking. She stretched out around the back of the chair and looked toward to door. The doorknob turned slightly left and right a couple of times before the light rap on the wood. She leapt out of the chair at the muffled sound of keys rattling outside the door.

She threw the Bible on the chair and bound to the bathroom door. She took only moments to make her decision, adjusting the door quickly so its full-length mirror would reflect the shower toward the office door. The key-rattling continued as she kicked off her lime green Puma Ngong XC running shoes. She peeled off her running clothes and underwear. She heard the soft metallic sound of key entering lock and the distinct click as the inside push lock popped out. The knob turned slowly. She turned to the shower and rotated the handle to her spot that would produce a deliciously hot steam of water.

She glanced back and saw the office door opening slowly. She bent down and slowly peeled off her half-socks, then she turned sideways to the mirror and reached into the shower, leaving her hand under the broad cascade of the polished brass, eight-jet Giessdrof showerhead for several seconds. Without turning, she reached back and pulled the bathroom door closed. She'd given him enough of a thrill, and she didn't want to overdo it.

After five minutes under the rejuvenating waterfall, she heard a soft tap at the bathroom door. She ignored the knocking until it became more insistent. She opened the shower door and stuck her head out.

“Who is it?” she called.

“It’s Wallace, Celi. Can we talk?”

“Sure. Sit down and relax. I’ll be out in the few minutes.” Despite the opportunity to titillate him, she was annoyed that he entered her locked office because of the implication of his superiority. He needed another dose of humility. She had long since rejected the idea of controlling him through sex—that was his game. Even though they thought they were discrete, Celi knew of his weekly trysts with Pat Kirby and the servile obsequiousness that produced in the geneticist. If she allowed it, he would certainly expect the same response from Celi. No, the best way to control Wallace Redfern was to occasionally give him a provocative hint of what might be while constantly staying just out of his reach

She stayed in the shower just long enough to feed his growing impatience. She was glad she had chosen her baggy Tulane sweatshirt and matching sweatpants for the drive over to the Center that morning. It served as a stark contrast to the brief glimpse she had given him earlier. She toweled off quickly, threw on the outfit, and wrapped a fresh towel into a turban. She returned to her office barefoot and curled up in the chair facing him.

“Is there a problem, Wally?” she asked when she was comfortable. She knew he disliked the nickname, but he didn’t say anything.

“The Board is anxious,” he said.

“I’m not surprised. I think you oversold the cloning project a bit.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve told me how many failures that Scottish clinic had before Dolly,” she said. “You were overly confident with Amanda. You should have been more cautious with the Board.”

Anger flashed momentarily in his eyes, but he said, “You’re probably right, but everything seemed to be going so well. Pat was confident. All of Cynthia’s tests were normal.”

“But was it reasonable to expect success on the first try?”

“Amanda was the first try. You know that,” he said.

“No, but the others didn’t get past the first trimester.”

“I know,” he said, dejection clearly in his voice.

“Oh, I suppose you had every right to be so optimistic,” Celi said, abruptly switching from chiding to encouragement. “So what did you say to the Board?”

“I had a brilliant little speech prepared about how they should really view this is a wonderful success—the first birth of a human clone and all—but they cut me off. They just wanted to know about the security impact and where we go from here.”

“They know about Jessica, don’t they?”

“Of course, but now I’m kicking myself for not recruiting more subjects and having several on-going projects. We have to wait another eight months, and by then we may not be the first.”

“Have you heard something?”

“Nothing specific,” he said, glancing furtively around her office. “But I’m sure the Koreans are trying. Without the same restrictions we have to deal with, they’re making rapid strides.”

“Well, there’s nothing you can do about that,” Celi said. “And you can’t hurry Jessica up.”

“No, but I’m not going to make the same mistake. I e-mailed Sanger this morning to start looking again. I’d like to have three or four more surrogates within a month.”

“Won’t that be risky with the Kinkades arriving?”

“I don’t think so—just the opposite, in fact. We know that Amanda told Lisa she was a surrogate. If we only have one here, they might get suspicious, wondering why so few.”

“Yes, but won’t they question the confinement? I mean, for them we can build the case for remaining here, but there’s really no justifiable excuse for keeping surrogates on the Plantation. There are surrogates all over the country leading normal lives.”

“I know,” Redfern said. “If it comes up, we can tell them that we don’t offer routine surrogacy—that each of our cases involves potential difficulties that require close monitoring.”

“Maybe, but with an increased number of cases, won’t they wonder why they never meet any of the biological parents?”

He looked at her quizzically. “You know there aren’t any parents—at least not in the usual sense.”

“Of course I know that, but that’s just my point. They don’t know. Maybe you should have Sanger look for a normal surrogacy case, too.”

“Why? I don’t want to introduce too many new people. And what possible rationale would we have for confining donors?”

“We wouldn’t confine them,” Celi said.

“But that increases the security risk.”

“That could be managed. Have Sanger look for people like Lisa and Jeff who have a vested interest in keeping the surrogacy to themselves. I’m still a little worried about the Kinkade’s religion—although I have a plan to neutralize the problem—but it’s one advantage is that embryonic selection contradicts their basic beliefs. They don’t want people to know about it.”

Redfern scratched his beard. “I’ll talk to Sanger about it,” he said.

Celi watched Redfern as he continued to think. After a few moments, she said, “How are *you* doing?” She had been disturbed at his obvious distress over the tumor-ridden clone. She knew his reputation was on the line to some extent, but his reaction had seemed to go well beyond professional disappointment and contradicted his usual detachment. When they talked about it two days after the delivery, he had shown all the symptoms of profound personal grief.

“I have come to terms with it,” he said. “I don’t want to look back any more.”

“That’s healthy,” she said. “So what can I do for you today?”

He was silent for more than a minute, looking down into the glass of Scotch he’d brought in with him. He slowly spun the glass, swirling the brown liquid into a tiny eddy. Finally, he stood. “Nothing, really,” he said. “I guess I just wanted a little friendly company after the hostility of the Board.”

She rose beside him, touching his shoulder lightly. “They shouldn’t have been so hard on you, Wallace. They just don’t appreciate your dedication because they’re just in it for the money.”

“Yea,” he grumbled. “You’ve got that right.”

“They’ll be eating out of your hand in a few months. You’ll show them the first human clone, not to mention the Kinkade’s remarkable baby.” He smiled.

“Thanks, Celi.” He leaned over and kissed her cheek. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.” She felt him press lightly against her, so she backed away.

“I’m completely behind you, Wallace. Whatever you need me to do, just ask.”

“Thanks, Celi,” he said again. He walked to the door and grabbed the knob. He hesitated and looked back at her. He returned her pleasant smile, nodded, and left.

10

Jeff, Lisa, and Ethan pulled up to the NewGenesis Center gate a little after two Monday afternoon, having driven the last 150 miles on a temporary tire. The flat had happened shortly after they crossed the South Carolina-Georgia border. Lisa had spotted the large piece of metal in their lane and cried out, but Jeff was busy with the radio—scanning through the stations trying to find something other than Country music. They rolled over the debris at seventy-five miles per hour. Lisa gasped at the loud clang from the undercarriage as Jeff hit the brakes.

He pulled into the breakdown lane, got out, and peered under the three-year old Dodge Caravan. It had been a major concession on Jeff's part, and Lisa knew parting with his Mustang had been painful. It took nearly a year and a half after Ethan was born to convince him that they needed more appropriate family transportation. They traded in the Mustang for the used Caravan that had recently come off a lease. Now, even Jeff appreciated the Caravan. They never could have gotten their possessions in the Mustang, even after disposing of most of them in a yard sale.

Lisa had to refer to the dog-eared owner's manual to find the spare after Jeff unloaded everything from the back, assuming it was in a well under the mat. Instead, it was suspended under the rear of the car, lowered and removed with special tools it also took a while to find.

"I thought this was a top of the line model," Jeff said when the tire became visible.

"It is," Lisa said. "Why?"

“You would think a top of the line model would have a full-sized spare. This is one of those undersized temporary tires.”

“Oh, yea. The manual says we shouldn’t drive more than fifty miles with it and not over fifty-five miles an hour.”

Jeff glanced at this watch. “We don’t have much choice,” he said. He gestured to the flat right rear tire. “God knows how long it will take to have that repaired. It’s after one and we’re already a day late. I’m sure we can make it to Pine Mountain on the spare.”

“If that’s what you think, sweetie,” Lisa said, although it seemed to her that even if a repair took an hour, they would finish the trip at about the same time either way. Jeff was already annoyed with her, so she knew it was better not to offer that opinion. They were behind schedule because she had insisted on going to a party their church threw Saturday evening.

While Jeff changed the tire, Lisa played with Ethan on the embankment adjacent to the highway. She peek-a-booed with him on the old blanket they used for picnics. It was the only tangible relic she had from her original family, and she remembered sitting with her sister and parents on it for the same purpose. Occasionally, she noticed an old stain on it and imagined it might be grease dropped from a piece of fried chicken her mother had cooked.

After Jeff finished the job and reloaded the Caravan, she asked, “Do you think I should use the IV? Ethan’s a little pale.”

Jeff glanced at their son. “I think he’ll be okay until we get there. It’s probably not a good idea to do that in the car.” He climbed in the front seat and started the motor. Lisa

hesitated until he looked impatiently at her. She strapped Ethan into the safety seat in the middle of the bench seat behind them, then got back in the car. They didn't talk much the rest of the way.

The guard greeted them warmly at the NewGenesis Center gate. Lisa was glad it was the guard who had been there the two days they had legitimate meetings rather than the one they had deceived the following day.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Kinkade,” the guard said. We've been expecting you. Dr. Redfern wants you to go directly to your cottage. That's the road that turns off to the left about halfway to the mansion. I'll call Dr. Redfern and let him know you're here. He should be there soon after you here. He'll show you to your cottage and have some men to help you unload.”

Jeff nodded and passed under the raised barrier, turning onto the cottage road when they reached it.

“I wonder if Amanda will still be here,” Lisa said when they reached the small empty parking area.

“I doubt it if she was having the baby when we tried to see her,” Jeff said. Lisa hadn't told him it wasn't Amanda's baby until they had left Delaware, partly because she hadn't thought about it and partly because she worried Jeff might have additional second thoughts about the NewGenesis Center. When she told him, somewhere in northern Virginia, he voiced his objections to surrogacy, but he hadn't commented further. “Why would she stick around after she gave her baby away?” he added.

“It wasn't really hers,” Lisa said, immediately regretting it.

“Sure it was,” he said. “She carried it for nine months.” Lisa decided not to respond, particularly since they heard the sound of gravel crunching under tires behind them. Two vehicles pulled in on either side of them. Dr. Redfern emerged from the black Cadillac sedan on Jeff’s side, and two men piled out of a beat-up pickup on Lisa’s. Jeff and Lisa opened their doors simultaneously.

“Lisa, Jeff,” Redfern said, spreading his arms. “We were just beginning to worry about you.”

“We’re sorry, Dr. Redfern,” Lisa called from across the car. “We got away a day late.” She slid open the rear door and extracted Ethan from his car seat. She picked him up and walked around the car.

“This is Ethan,” she said to Dr. Redfern. His expression turned to a frown.

“Is he usually this pale?” he asked.

“We probably need to get him on the IV as soon as possible,” Lisa said. “It’s been several hours.”

“Then let’s go down to your cottage right away. We have everything set up there for you.” He turned to the two pickup men and told them to wait until he returned.

As he led them down the path, Lisa kept expecting him to turn into one, but he walked all the way down the row and mounted the two steps to the cottage Amanda had occupied. Redfern opened the door and ushered them in.

“This will be the first time we’ve had more than three in one of our cottages,” Dr. Redfern said. “It will be a little cramped, but we’re going to start building a larger one behind this one next week. As a matter of fact, Jeff, if you have any building skills, we thought we might employ you for the construction.”

“Oh, he’s very talented,” Lisa said. “He built a wonderful cabinet for Ethan.”

“Yea,” Jeff said, “but I’ve never worked on a house.”

“Oh, there will be several workers, including a foreman. If you’re good with tools, he’ll find plenty for you to do.” Jeff looked down at the floor. “Well, we can talk about that later anyway. Let’s take care of Ethan first.”

He held them into the bedroom, which was largely than Lisa would have imagined. A queen-sized bed sat to the right, flanked by matching bedside tables. A hospital crib was at the foot of the bed, an IV stand at one end. A metal table rested at the far end of the crib. Along the back wall, between a large window, were two low matching bureaus. Folding louvered doors lined the left wall—obviously closets. An upholstered easy chair was crammed into the corner past the closets. Lisa walked further into the room and saw a small refrigerator between the bureau, under the window. Dr. Redfern strode quickly to the fridge.

“We just put this in for you,” he said, bending down and opening the refrigerator door. “I thought it would be easier to store Ethan’s IV bags here rather than filling up the kitchen refrigerator.” He pulled a bag bulging with bright red blood and hooked it onto the IV stand. “Lay him down and we’ll get him started.”

“What about blood type?” Lisa asked.

“You told Dr. Ragle he’s AB positive, didn’t you?” Dr. Redfern said. “I certainly he isn’t negative.”

“Oh, I’d forgotten. That’s right.”

“I assume both of you are pretty practiced at this,” Dr. Redfern said, motioning to the IV needle looped over the stand. “Or would you like me to do the honors?”

“That’s okay,” Lisa said. “I’ll do it.” She put Ethan into the crib and, having already spotted the cotton swabs and alcohol on the high table, quickly cleaned off needle. She ran two fingers along Ethan’s right arm until she found the spot she wanted. She swabbed his skin and inserted the needle, hitting the vein.

“My, my,” Redfern said. “You’re quite an expert phlebotomist.”

“Lots of practice,” she said without looking at him. She squeezed the IV bag and watched as the blood flowed down the tube and into her son.

“She always does it now,” Jeff said. “I have too much trouble finding a vein.”

“We have a couple of very good nurses,” Dr. Redfern said. “They can help if Lisa can’t for some reason.” They stood for a moment, all looking at Ethan, whose eyes were darting around the room.

“Well, we should get you moved in,” Dr. Redfern said. “I have to go back up to the mansion, but Joe and Bill will help. Jeff, why don’t you and I go back to the cars? Lisa can stay here with Ethan. Oh, and by the way, we knew you’d be tired when you arrived, so we prepared dinner for you. It’s on two plates in the kitchen refrigerator.”

Lisa wanted to ask about Amanda, but she was afraid she might reveal more than she should know. She watched as the men left the bedroom. She sat beside Ethan, stroking his fine brown hair for a few minutes until he nodded off. She tiptoed into the living room and glanced around. Everything was exactly as it had been when she had been there two weeks before. Even the bookshelves remained crammed. She tilted her head and scanned two shelves of titles before she spotted a Dean Koontz novel. She was a big fan and was delight to discover she hadn’t read this one—*Odd Thomas*. She pulled it out and leafed through the pages before she walked back into the bedroom and flopped

down in the chair. It would be a wonderful reading chair, she thought. She felt the tension she had not realized was there melt away as she opened the book and began reading, but her eyelids started drooping before she turned the page, and she was asleep before Jeff and the two men started bringing in their meager remaining possessions.

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After Dr. Redfern greeted the Kinkades and got them situated in the cottage, he drove back to the mansion. Rather than entering, he walked around to the left side to a large shed where the fleet of riding mowers and other ground-keeping equipment was kept. He proceeded to the closet in the back corner, closed the door behind him, and punched a six-digit code into the keypad next to the door. He smiled at the low hum of the motor as the closet descended. Near it jarred to a stop, he reopened the door and walked into the Center's surveillance room.

The man in front of the bank of monitors didn't turn around as he said, "I wondered if you'd be coming down here today. I see our new guests have arrived."

Redfern scrunched his nose at the smell permeating the small room. "I thought I told you not to smoke down here."

"You try to sit here for eight hours without a cigarette!" the man shouted. "Put two of us on shift at a time again and I'll be happy to go upstairs."

Redfern humphed. "Are all cameras operating?" he asked.

"Sure," the man answered. "They work fine for our little Amanda. Why not now?"

"A simple 'yes' will do, Fedor."

“Da, they all work. Same monitor—second now, three from the left,” he said, pointing.

Redfern watched as the view on the monitor switched from to living room to the kitchen. Jeff was leaning over, peering into the open refrigerator. The screen flickered and the empty bathroom filled the screen. He continued to watch until the bedroom appeared, Lisa sleeping in the corner chair and Ethan in the crib.

“Is the sound good?” he asked.

“Da,” Fedor answered “And I start tapes when you walk in.”

“Good, good. And you’re sure you swept the place clean?”

“Who is surveillance expert, Redfern?”

Redfern grunted and continued to watch the monitor. When the view returned to the kitchen, Jeff was standing at the counter. The microwave door was open and he was peering at the array of buttons.

“That take fireman time to figure out,” Fedor said with a gruff laugh. He spun his chair around and faced Redfern. “I thought you say woman was attractive.”

“I think she’s very pretty,” Redfern answered. “Classic high cheek bones, nice clear skin, lovely long legs.”

“Yea, but not much upstairs,” Fedor said, shaking his cupped hands in front of his chest. “But she be knocked up soon, da? Maybe that help. It did with Amanda. She spend a lot of time admiring herself in bathroom mirror.” He laughed, choking as he did. He coughed for a minute or two and spat into a small can sitting on the counter.

：“Sometimes you’re really offensive, Fedor,” Redfern said. He despised the former KGB surveillance expert. Not only was he obese, he often reeked of alcohol. But

Redfern had never found him drunk on the job, so at least he limited his vodka binges to off hours. He would have loved an excuse to fire the Russian, but he had been hand-picked by the Board congressman, so he knew he probably never could anyway.

“Did you get the equipment installed in all the other cottages?” Redfern asked.

“Da, but one. We get that one tomorrow.”

“You were supposed to have them all finished by last Friday.”

Fedor muttered something in Russian and then said, “It take longer than I thought. We do it tomorrow.”

Jeff and Lisa would be busy at the mansion tomorrow, so while Redfern would have enjoyed berating Fedor, there really wasn't any point.

“When will others be coming?” Fedor asked.

“Probably within the month.”

“Hey, try to get eye candy, huh? Like that Dr. Torma. We need extra entertainment down here.”

“You haven't put a camera in Dr. Torma's bathroom, have you?” Redfern roared. “I told you—Dr. Torma and Dr. Kirby get some privacy.”

“Nyet,” Fedor said. “But she sometimes forget to take clothes in when she takes shower. Then she bounce into office. One time she not have bra.” He laughed again, starting another, briefer coughing fit.

“I want you to turn off the monitor when she's in the bathroom,” Redfern said. “Just listen until he can tell she's finished.”

“Da, sure,” Fedor said, chuckling.

“All right, then. Uh, it looks like everything’s in order.” Redfern motioned to the Kinkade monitor. Call me if they have any interesting conversations.” Fedor waved casually, and Redfern went back up in the elevator.

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Lisa almost fell out of bed when the telephone rang the next morning. She looked around the unfamiliar room frantically for the several seconds it took to orient herself. Another ring—this one cut off in the middle. She glanced beside her on the bed. It was empty. She rolled to the edge of the bed and pushed herself up to a sitting position, letting her legs hang to the floor. She searched for the fleece-lined moccasins that were always there, except they weren’t. She glanced to the end of the bed. The crib was empty.

A sudden surge of panic overwhelmed her—no Jeff, no Ethan. She leapt out of the bed and raced barefoot into the living room. Nothing. She continued to the open kitchen door. Nothing. She threw open the bathroom door. Nothing. She stood in the living room, feeling helpless and close to tears. Then she remembered the phone—someone had answered it. She looked at the telephone of the table next to the sofa. The cradle sat empty, a red light glowing from the top.

She knew it must have been Jeff, but where was he? She kneeled on the sofa, pulled back the curtain, and started breathing again. Jeff was sitting in one of the rockers, the phone to his ear. The IV stand sat next to the chair, the line draping down to Jeff’s lap. She smiled, hopping off the sofa, and stepped out onto the porch.

“Hey, look Ethan,” Jeff said. “It’s Mrs. Van Winkle.”

“What time is it?” Lisa asked. “Last thing I remember I was in the chair, starting a new book.”

Jeff looked at his watch. “It’s just after eight—almost fourteen hours. That must be a personal best.”

She groaned and stretched, reaching high above her head and then clasping her hands behind her head. “Don’t let me sleep that long again. I ache all over.”

“You didn’t even stir when I moved you to the bed.”

She looked down at her long flannel nightgown. “You undressed me?”

“It’s not the first time,” he said with a smile. She giggled and knelt next to the rocker. She stroked Ethan’s hair and kissed Jeff.

“Who was on the phone?” she asked.

“Dr. Redfern. He wants us to go over to his office as soon as we can. Just us. He’s sending one of the nurses over to stay with Ethan.”

“Why can’t we take him? I don’t want to leave him with someone I haven’t even met.”

“It’s one of the Center’s nurses, Lisa. Besides, do you really want to the IV along?”

She thought for a moment. “I suppose not,” she said, “but I want to spend some time talking with the nurse before we head over.” He nodded and she got to her feet. “I’m going to shower and get dressed. You okay? Did you and Ethan eat yet?”

“A couple of hours ago,” Jeff said. “He was up before the sun.”

“I’m sorry. You should have gotten me up.”

“We’ve had a good time together this morning, Haven’t we, big guy,” he said, tousling Ethan’s hair.

“Good time, Daddy,” Ethan laughed. “More horsy.”

Jeff squeezed his legs together and eased Ethan to his knees. He took the boy's arms in his hands and started bouncing his legs gently. "Trot, trot to Boston..."

"Jeff, I've asked you not to do that," Lisa said. "You could break his arms."

"Relax, honey. He's not made of china. I'll be careful." Lisa signed and went to the door, where she paused and looked back at Jeff and Ethan.

"Trot, trot to Boston." Ethan squealed in delight. "Trot, trot to Lynn. You better watch out, or you might fall in." Jeff spread his legs, letting Ethan slip down a few inches while he kept a firm grip on his arms. Ethan screamed and laughed simultaneously.

"More, more, Daddy," Ethan shouted. At the door, Lisa laughed.

"I'd still rather you did the 'To market, to market' thing," she said, "That one just involved a little bouncing, not the drop and the pressure on Ethan's thin arms."

Jeff lifted Ethan back up on his knees and started lifting alternating legs this time instead of the two-legged bouncing of 'Trot, trot to Boston.' "To market, to market, to buy a fat pig," he said.

"No, Daddy! To Boston." Jeff looked up Lisa and shrugged. She laughed and shook her head as she went through the door.

"Trot, trot to Boston," Jeff said from the porch. Ethan giggled, warming Lisa's heart despite her misgivings.

She showered quickly and went into the bedroom. She looked around for her three large suitcases, even crouching down and looking under the bed before she opened the closet doors. Well over three quarters of the long closet was filled with her clothes, all hanging on the plastic hangers that had been packed in one of the boxes. She moved to

the closest bureau and slid open the middle drawer. Her panties and bras were all neatly folded and stacked. What a sweetheart, she thought. He must have been up all night.

Jeff had dressed Ethan in his new blue Polartec pants with the zoo animal pattern, a white sweatshirt, and some heavy wool socks, but Jeff wore his habitual jeans and tee shirt. She decided on jeans, partly to match him, but mostly because she knew he liked how she looked in them. She threw on her yellow UD tee-shirt and pulled a light sweatshirt over it.

When she returned to the porch, Jeff and Ethan were sprawled on the grass in front of the cottage. Jeff pulled a long blade of grass up and used it to tickle Ethan's ear. Ethan pushed Jeff's hand away. "No tickle, Daddy!" he said sternly.

"Isn't that grass wet, Jeff?" Lisa asked.

"Nope. Dry as a bone. No dew last night," he said. He sat up, looked at Lisa, and whistled. "Now that's what I like. Yum, yum."

"Don't start anything, boy," she said with a laugh. "You know what they said."

"Yea, but—"

"No buts," Lisa said, but then she smiled and added, "Not that I wouldn't like to."

"You should get something to eat," Jeff said. "Someone stocked the kitchen. You can find just about anything you want in there."

"You're kidding! When does the personal chef arrive?"

Yea, well, they're not perfect. They got Beech-Net food instead of the Gerber's you like."

"Ethan won't eat it."

"He did this morning."

“That’s surprising. He usually refuses to eat Beech-Nut, even though I can’t taste any difference.”

“You eat that stuff?” Jeff said, drawing his face into a look of disgust. “Yech!”

“I wouldn’t want a steady diet of it, but it’s not so bad. You’d be surprised how many times I’ve had to have a few spoonfuls of something new before he’ll try it.”

“Well, go have a banquet. There’s a whole cabinet full of the stuff.”

“I think I’ll stick to eggs and toast this morning,” Lisa said.

Jeff whisked Ethan off the ground and stood. “Want me to scramble some eggs for you?” he asked.

“You’ve done enough, Jeff. I can’t believe you unpacked everything. How late were you up?”

“About midnight. Nervous energy, I guess.”

“Where’d you put the suitcases and boxes?”

“When the sun came up, I took Ethan for a walk around the cottage. We found a large shed out in back. There’s an identical one behind each cottage down the row, so I figured they’re storage for each cottage. Ours was empty, so I put everything in there.”

“You’re the best, sweetheart,” Lisa said, despite the fact that she would have liked to arrange things herself. Saying so would have hurt him, and he might pout or get angry. She’d have plenty of time to redo some things.

He stepped up onto the porch, and Lisa put her arms around his waist, just below Ethan. She got up on her toes and put her lips to Jeff’s, giving him a long, breathless kiss.

“Now who’s trying to start something?” Jeff whispered.

“Sorry. I guess I’ll go get breakfast.” Lisa went back in the house, and Jeff returned to the rocker.

She was rinsing off her breakfast dishes and placing them in the dishwasher, when she heard a woman’s voice outside, talking with Jeff. She was surprised when she went outside and saw Dr. Torma sitting on the porch steps next to Jeff. Ethan sat between them.

“Hi, Lisa,” Dr. Torma said brightly. “It’s very nice to see you again.”

“It’s nice to see you, too, Dr. Torma,” Lisa replied.

“Problem solved, honey,” Jeff said. “Dr. Torma’s gonna stay with Ethan for the morning.”

“Ethan and I are going to have fun together,” Dr. Torma said. “Aren’t we, Ethan?” She tickled him under the chin, and he laughed.

“Is that okay with you, Lisa?” Jeff asked.

“Uh, yes, I guess,” Lisa said. “Are you, uh, trained, Dr. Torma? You know, in case anything was wrong?”

“What could go wrong?” Lisa said. “We’ll be fine. Besides, we’re only a phone call away from Dr. Ragle.”

“I thought Dr. Ragle was an obstetrician,” Lisa said.

“She is, but she’s also a pediatrician. She did residency in both. That was one of the reasons Dr. Redfern hired her—two for the price of one.” She picked up Ethan and placed him in her lap. She nuzzled her nose against his and cooed. “You’re just the handsomest little boy, Aren’t you? Aren’t you,” she said in a high-pitched babyish tone.

Lisa was even more surprised at Ethan's response than she had been to see Dr. Torma. Ethan rarely even let anyone else touch him. Now he said laughing in Dr. Torma's lap, staring into her eyes—green, Lisa noted. Did everyone just naturally like this woman? She looked at Jeff and hoped not.

“Well, I guess it'll be fine,” she said tentatively.

“Sure we will,” Dr. Torma said. “You just go on up to the mansion and don't give it another thought. I'll see you when you come back.”

“Don't you have work to do?” Lisa asked.

“This is my work today, but it'll be play than work.”

“You want to walk, honey?” Jeff asked, holding out his hand.

“You can get to the gardens from here,” Dr. Torma said. “Just go around those high bushes over there, and you'll see a gap in the goldenrods. Go on through and you'll be in the gardens.”

Lisa didn't feel completely comfortable, but lacking any specific objection and seeing Ethan happy in the psychologists lap, she took Jeff's hand and together they headed for the mansion.

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Celi waited several minutes after Jeff and Lisa disappeared through the tall bushes. When she was convinced they wouldn't turn back, she snapped Ethan off her lap, holding him under his armpits with her arms out straight.

“No problem today—okay, kid?” she said. Ethan whimpered softly. “Look, I'd do want to be here anymore than you want me here, but Redfern forgot the nurses are both out today. So you're just going to lie in your crib for a while, okay?”

She took him into the bedroom, dragging the IV stand behind them, and laid him down in the crib. Ethan rolled over onto his stomach and lifted his head, looking uncertainly at her.

“I’m just going to get a couple of things out of my car. I’ll be right back.” She walked out of the bedroom, calling back over her shoulder, “And no crying either.”

11

“Do you know who Louise Brown is?” Dr. Ragle asked.

Lisa and Jeff occupied the two leather chairs in Cynthia Ragle office. They had just come from Dr. Redfern’s office, where he and Celeste Williams, the attorney, presented them with a lengthy release form. Like the Non-Disclosure Agreement they signed a couple of weeks earlier, it was full of confusing legal terms and conditions. Jeff asked if they could review it overnight, but Dr. Redfern had Ms. Williams explain it in layman’s terms, so despite reservations, they both signed.

They talked briefly with Dr. Redfern and Ms. Williams about their trip from Delaware. When Lisa started into a detailed description of the flat tire, Dr. Redfern had glanced at this watch and, commenting that it was almost time for their next meeting, abruptly ended the session.

Dr. Ragle sat behind her desk, and Dr. Jared Baker was in a low chair he had wheeled in from another office. He positioned the chair backwards and sat forward, his arms overlapping on the chair back. His dress was equally casual—khaki chinos and a dark blue polo shirt bearing the name “Golfsmith.” The small oval logo above the word showed a man working on something in a vise—a golf club, Lisa assumed. Like she had at the initial meeting in the first floor living room, Dr. Ragle was dressed conservatively and formally—a gray-green pants suit with a plain white shirt.

When they entered her office, Dr. Ragle had greeted them and explained that Dr. Baker was joining them to hear her discussion of the IVF and genetic selection process. Without further preliminaries, she had asked about Louise Brown.

Jeff shook his head, but Lisa answered. “She’s the first test-tube baby—born in 1978, I think.”

“That’s right,” Dr. Ragle said, “although that term is a bit of a misnomer. No test tubes were ever involved—at least Louise Brown was never in one. The correct term is ‘in vitro fertilization’ or ‘IVF’ for short. That first IVF created a major furor in England and around the world. Some people accused her parents of playing God. It’s hard to believe now. IVF is a widely accepted medical procedure; in fact, about one percent of births in this country are now conceived through IVF. In other developed countries, the percentage is even higher. In Australia, for example, IVF accounts for about five percent of all births.”

Lisa was not particularly looking forward to sitting through another lecture on IVF. Dr. Ragle had done so two weeks ago, and even then, Lisa had already known most of what the doctor related. She was, however, glad Jeff was being forced to listen after he had routinely changed the subject every time she wanted to discuss it. In addition, the statistics surprised her.

“Why is it so popular in Australia?” Lisa asked. “Are there more sexual problems there?”

Dr. Ragle laughed quietly. “No. In fact, I suspect Australians have fewer sexual inhibitions than Americans do, but I suspect you meant reproductive problems anyway. But that’s not true either. The difference is probably purely a financial one. The

Australian government is a bit more enlightened than ours. They offer significant subsidies for IVF.”

Lisa flushed, embarrassed by her use of the wrong vocabulary and maybe a little miffed that Dr. Ragle didn't just ignore it. On the other hand, it was the first time she'd heard Dr. Ragle employ anything approaching humor. The obstetrician wasn't unfriendly; she was just so formal most of the time. Lisa sensed a warmth behind her large brown eyes, but she had yet to experience it.

“I've been told you may have some misgivings about IVF,” Dr. Ragle said. “Is that true?”

“I'll admit to some ambivalence,” Lisa said, deliberately attempting to show her vocabulary wasn't entirely bereft of multi-syllabic words. “I think it's wonderful that parents who couldn't otherwise have children now have that opportunity. But the thought of conception occurring in a Petri dish makes me a little uncomfortable.”

“Why is that?”

“Only because it's not natural, not the way God designed it, I guess.” Lisa saw Dr. Ragle frown, so she continued. “On the other hand, if God disapproved of IVF, I suppose he could have made it impossible.”

“What about you, Jeff?” Dr. Ragle asked. Lisa knew that if Jeff was uncomfortable listening to discussions about ‘woman things,’ he was all the more so talking about them. She looked at him, wondering if he'd try to change the subject with the doctor.

“Uh, I agree with Lisa,” he mumbled.

“I’ve been told you both are conservative Christians,” Dr. Ragle said. “Would you describe yourselves as fundamentalists?”

“That word is political than spiritual,” Jeff said quickly. Lisa smiled inwardly, knowing this was safer ground for her husband. He seemed to enjoy a good religious debate. “And since I don’t like the politics of a lot of people who call themselves ‘fundamentalists,’ I don’t call myself one.”

“How would you describe your beliefs?”

“I believe that God created the world—“ Jeff began.

“In seven days?” Dr. Ragle asked.

“He could have if he chose to,” Jeff answered. “But I think it was a lot longer. God’s time is not measured in human terms.”

“From what I know, that alone disqualifies you as a fundamentalist. I’m glad to hear you accept that science can explain some things that religion can’t. But let’s get back to IVF.” Jeff frowned and opened his mouth, but he didn’t say anything further. Lisa knew he would prefer a theological discussion, and she was proud of him for letting it go. Now was neither the time, nor the place.

“Would you say then that you have no fundamental... Uh, sorry, bad choice of words. No basic religious objections to IVF?”

Lisa waited for Jeff’s response, but when it was apparent it would be forthcoming, she said, “Not objections, I’d say. Just some reservations.”

“What about you, Jeff?” Dr. Ragle asked again. Jeff shifted in the chair.

“Uh, yea, just reservations.”

“Are these reservations likely to influence your attitude about the procedure here?” Dr. Ragle asked.

“No,” Jeff said. “This is a gift from God.”

Dr. Ragle’s eyebrow rose. “Oh? How so?”

“We prayed for a cure for Ethan. This is God’s response.”

“Well, I don’t know about that—“

“Do you believe in God, Dr. Ragle?” Jeff asked, and Lisa was glad she didn’t hear any antagonism in his voice.

It was Dr. Ragle’s turn to shift uncomfortably in her chair. She was probably as uncomfortable discussing spiritual matters as Jeff was women’s reproductive issues.

“Probably not in precisely the same way you do,” Dr. Ragle said slowly. “I do believe in a Supreme Being, but not in one that is routinely meddling— Sorry, that’s probably another inappropriate word. “Not a God who intervenes in people’s lives.”

Lisa looked at Jeff, knowing this kind of deism was one of his pet peeves. He didn’t understand how people could believe in an impersonal god. He looked at her and made a tiny shrug. The unspoken message they shared was “not now.”

“Maybe we can talk about that sometime,” Jeff said. “All that really matters to us right now is making Ethan well.”

“That’s good,” Dr. Ragle said. “That’s just what we hope to do—and have every reason to be very optimistic.” She turned to the Dr. Baker and asked, “Do you have any questions or observations on these topics, Jared?”

“Well,” he said. “We’re not really into my area yet, but I do have one observation. He sat up straighter in his backwards chairs and folded his hands under his chair. He

looked directly at Jeff. “I understand the Kinkades misgivings. I grew up in a strong Baptist home, so many I probably share many of your core principles. I think your perspective is the right one—the opportunity is indeed at gift. My own field, genetics, is even more controversial among the Christian Right. It seems to me that every advance in the human experience, particularly those involving medical science, has been closely scrutinized by the church. In my opinion, this is good. It only becomes bad when we either turn a blind eye to God’s continuing revelation or we are blinded by our own hubris.”

It was quite a little speech, Lisa thought, particularly delivering in Dr. Baker’s rich baritone and precise articulation. If he were a preacher, people would listen simply because of the power of his delivery. Jeff must have agreed, because he was smiling and nodding. Dr. Ragle seemed less impressed.

“Why don’t we go on to the procedure itself?” Dr. Ragle said. “I know we already went over this in broad strokes, Lisa, but Jeff hasn’t heard it, and you will pick up additional details.” Jeff and Lisa turned to her and nodded.

“First, I need to confirm that you’ve been getting the Lupron,” Dr. Ragle said.

“Every morning.”

“Any problems?”

“Let’s just say I’m not looking forward to my mid-forties, or whenever it comes naturally,” Lisa said.

“I can understand that,” Dr. Ragle said. “I just turned forty this year. My mother didn’t go through menopause until her early fifties, so I’m hoping those genes passed to

me. But it's something we all go through sooner or later." The two women shared a sardonic laugh.

"You can discontinue that after tomorrow," Dr. Baker said. On Thursday, we'll take some blood for a couple of tests and do an ultrasound to check the condition of your ovaries and fallopian tubes. If everything checks out, we'll start you on FSH—follicle stimulating hormone—that day. Because we detected a slightly reduced ovarian reserve in our tests last month, we're using a variation of the stop Lupron protocol."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Ragle," Lisa said. "I thought I knew a lot about all this from a couple of websites I visited, but you're completely lost me." Lisa might have been lost, but Jeff was thoroughly baffled on top of being embarrassed. "To be honest, Dr. Ragle," Lisa added, "at this point I have to trust that you know what you're doing. I don't need to know all the science behind it."

Dr. Ragle looked disappointed. "Oh. Well," she said, picking up a stack of papers and tapping them on the paper so they were perfectly aligned. She put the neat stack precisely in front of herself on the desk. "Very well. I'll just tell you then that we'll continue the FSH, again by injection, for about ten days. I think we'll also have you take Serophene during that time to further stimulate egg development. We'll run blood tests and an ultrasound every third day at first, then daily near the end of the ten days. When the tests show you have a number of mature follicles, we'll give you one dose of human chorionic gonadotropin—hCG—to simulate ovulation. The next day we'll retrieve the mature eggs and transfer them to a culture medium. This is where you come in, Jeff."

When Jeff didn't answer, Lisa turned to him. He was staring out the window. "Jeff," she said insistently. He didn't respond. "Jeff!" she repeated, tapping him on the shoulder.

"Uh, sorry. What'd you say?"

"I was saying," Dr. Ragle answered, enunciating each word slowly like Lisa did with her most troublesome second graders, "that once we retrieve Lisa's eggs, we need your contribution. We'll need a sperm sample about two hours before egg retrieval. We'll process the sample using a variety of tests, selecting the healthiest, most active sperm." She paused and a thin smile crossed her lips. "Separating the men from the boys, so to speak."

Lisa laughed softly, but Jeff didn't even smile. "Uh, uh. Okay," he said blankly.

Dr. Ragle frowned at Jeff and then turned and smiled at Lisa. "We put the boys in with the girls and let nature take its course. Viola! Twelve hours or so later, there should be several buns in the oven."

Lisa couldn't fail to notice that Dr. Ragle had gotten progressively giddier as she described the procedure. She was also struck by the contradictions. Nature wasn't taking its course, and the "buns" weren't in her "oven."

"Dr. Baker, now I believe it's finally your turn," Dr. Ragle said, throwing both arms toward him in a grandiose theatrical gesture.

Lisa thought maybe Dr. Baker had also been taken aback by Dr. Ragle's sudden transition from the technical to the vernacular, but if so, he quickly regained his composure.

"You still with us, Jeff?" he asked. "Or should we take a break?"

“No,” he said. “Let’s keep going,” Jeff said. From his expression, Lisa was sure Jeff just wanted to get this over as quickly as possible.

“Very well. We’ll examine each egg microscopically to find those which have been fertilized. We’ll remove those that have and place them in their own culture. The next couple of days is a waiting game, during which Dr. Kirby or I will be continually monitoring the development of the pre-embryos. They should divide every twenty hours or so, from one to two to four to eight cells, although the cells don’t all divide at the same moment. When each reaches eight to ten cells, we’ll remove one or two cells and examine them for the genetic characteristics we’re after the match with your son. Is that all clear?”

“Yes,” Lisa said, “but won’t removing cells at that stage damage the embryo.”

“No, at that point, every cell in the pre-embryo is identical—what’s called undifferentiated—and able to become any type of cell, which is called totipotent. Removing one or two has no affect whatsoever on the eventual development of the embryo.”

“But if those cells are undifferentiated and can become anything, aren’t they then embryos in their own right?” Lisa asked. Next to her, Jeff sat up straight and stared at the geneticist.

“Not really,” Dr. Baker said. “The cells in the pre-embryo are surrounded by a thin membrane called the zona pellucida. We remove the individual cells by piercing the membrane, so those cells are no longer part of the group and are therefore not pre-embryos anymore than a cell from your skin is.”

“But my skin cells aren’t—what did you call it?”

“Totipotent,” Dr. Baker said. “You’re very quick, Lisa. I’m impressed. You’re right about your skin cells, of course, so let me offer a correction. Every person carries adult stem cells, very similar in many ways to embryonic stem cells. The best known adult stem cells are in the bone marrow. So I’ll amend my earlier comment to say that the individual cells we remove from the pre-embryo are no more pre-embryos than cells from your bone marrow.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Lisa said. Something didn’t sound quite right, but she couldn’t get his mind around it. In addition, she was very impressed with Dr. Baker. He seemed patient without being condescending. Unlike so many men, even her husband sometimes, he took her seriously. Other than the vague feeling, the only thing that bothered her was his continued insistence on the term “pre-embryo.” She still thought it was nit-picking, but there was no reason to argue. Nevertheless, she was going to continue to use “embryo.”

“Okay then. We’ll examine the individual cells, comparing the relevant genetic information to your son’s—“

“His name is Ethan,” Jeff said.

“Sorry, Jeff. He and I haven’t met yet, and I just forgot whether it was Ethan or Evan, and I was too embarrassed to ask, or to make a mistake. Ethan—I won’t forget again. As I was saying, we’ll examine the pre-embryonic cells for a match to Ethan.”

“How precisely do they have to match?” Lisa asked.

“Very little, actually. It’s really only the blood we’re concerned about—matching types and, of course, the absence of the thalassaemia gene. While we’re looking, we’ll also do a preimplantation genetic diagnosis.”

“What’s a preimplantation genetic diagnosis?” Jeff asked.

“It’s a pretty routine procedure with IVF. We screen for Down Syndrome, Hemophilia, Cystic Fibrosis, Huntingtons, and a growing list of genetic diseases.”

“And if you find them?”

“Well, we wouldn’t implant that embryo.”

“Brave new world, huh?” Jeff said sarcastically. “Get rid of all the broken people, so only the perfect ones are left. Didn’t some guy named Adolph try that?”

“Jeff!” Lisa shouted. “That’s really rude. Dr. Baker’s just trying to help.”

“Why? Isn’t that where this is all headed? Parents already choose their baby’s sex. Isn’t that right, Dr. Baker?”

“Yes, some clinics do offer gender selection—“

“You see?” Jeff said to Lisa. “Next it’ll be blue-eyed blondes. Let’s get rid of all everyone with ugly noses, the overweight, the Bla..” He stopped and looked at Dr. Baker. “Sorry, he said.”

“No need to be, really,” Dr. Baker said. “Your point is well taken. But don’t blame it all on Hitler. The eugenics movement was big in this country, too. A lot of it was aimed at the poor and ignorant, which in the early twentieth century pretty much meant African-Americans.”

“Yea, I know,” Jeff said. “I am sorry. I get a little worked up about that.”

“A little?” Lisa shouted, feeling anger boiling up. “These people are trying to help us, and you’re trying to screw it up, just to prove that you’re right!” She knew her anger was out of proportion, but she wanted it hit him. Instead, she threw her face in her lap and cried.

“I’m sorry, Lisa,” Jeff said. “What else can I say?”

Dr. Kirby stood up and walked around her desk as Lisa began to sob uncontrollably, her shoulders convulsing. Jeff stood and took a step toward Lisa, but Dr. Ragle put her hand on his shoulder and held him. “That’s probably the Lupron talking, Jeff. I think we could all use a break.”

“No!” Lisa said. She straightened up and angrily wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. “I’ll be fine.” She looked at Jeff, who shrugged pathetically and mouthed “Sorry.”

“Lisa, please,” Dr. Ragle said. “I really think—“

“I’ll be fine, Dr. Ragle,” she said, willing calm. “I’d like to keep going.”

“Very well.” She moved back behind her desk. “Dr. Baker?” Jeff slumped down in his chair.

“At the risk of raising temperatures again,” Dr. Baker said, “I’d like to say that I agree with Jeff’s sentiments. There is a growing sense of inevitability in this country about radical genetics and a serious vacuum in political leadership in this area. I also want to assure both of you that we are not involved in such research here at the NewGenesis Center.

“At the same time, I also believe strongly in the potential of responsible genetic research. That’s should hardly come as a surprise given my profession, but not all geneticists are creating glow-in-the-dark fish or cloned cats. Not all geneticists are promising two-hundred-year life spans and the end of disease. There are those who do, to be sure, but they are the fringe minority. That’s not what we’re about here. We’re about helping the living without fundamentally altering who they are.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Baker,” Jeff said again. “But isn’t the thing you described—looking for defects in embryos—isn’t that a step down the radical road?”

“There are a lot of possibilities being bandied about in the genetics community. Some of them, like the creation of a subhuman slave race, are abhorrent to almost everyone. Others, like the creation of gene-based drugs to replace the chemical drugs with terrible side effects, are acceptable to almost everyone. What we have to do in our society is create a forum where we can discuss the continuum rationally and make decisions based on reliable information. The media isn’t helping right now. They could be educating, but instead they run rampant with the latest sensational rumor—like the one a couple of years ago about the cult that claimed to have cloned a baby. There’s so much hype and misinformation that the public is being forced to choose between the extremes—no genetics or runaway genetics. We can certainly do better than that.”

“I think Dr. Baker has outlined the broad genetic issues very nicely,” Dr. Ragle said. “Maybe we should get back to you, Jeff and Lisa.”

“No genetic screening except to match Ethan,” Jeff said. He looked at Lisa, and she nodded her assent. She wasn’t as rabid as Jeff on the issue, but she cringed at the thought of doctors peering into the recesses of her future child’s DNA and forcing them to choose life or death. To a degree, she knew that was precisely what they were doing, but she wanted to limit it to only what was necessary for Ethan. Surely God could understand that.

“Even if we detect Down’s Syndrome?” Dr. Baker said. They both nodded.

“Hemophilia?” They nodded.

“Severe combined immune deficiency?”

“What’s that?” Lisa asked.

“It’s popularly called bubble boy disease.”

“Oh, that.” They nodded.

“It’s your choice, of course,” Dr. Baker said. “But I’d encourage you to discuss it some more between yourselves. Think about the life-changing implications of some of those diseases—not just for you as parents, but also for the child.”

“We’ll think about it,” Jeff said, although Lisa suspected he did so just to end the discussion.

“”Then we can continue,” Dr. Baker said. “Assuming we are able to identify a pre-embryo that is a match for Ethan, we’ll remove the others, freezing them donation to other couples, as per the wishes you expressed two weeks ago. Unless you’ve changed your minds.” Jeff shook his head.

“We’ll grow the selected pre-embryo until the fifth day after fertilization. Then Dr. Ragle will carefully implant it into the uterus. The injections of hCG will have signaled your uterus, Lisa, to get ready, but at that point, we’ll be depending on luck to a large degree.”

“It won’t be luck,” Lisa said.

“I won’t debate that, one way or the other. We don’t really understand why some pre-embryos implant while others don’t. Candidly, I must inform you that the odds of successful implantation in any one attempt are well below fifty-fifty, perhaps as low as twenty percent.”

“We’ve read the statistics, doctor,” Lisa said. “We respect your abilities as doctors, we understand the risks and the probabilities, but ultimately, we believe the

result of this lies in greater, wiser hands.” Jeff reached over and took Lisa’s hand. Her anger had washed away as quickly as it had surged over her. She lifted his hand to her mouth and kissed it softly. Dr. Baker smiled at them.

“I guess that’s about it for today,” Dr. Ragle said. “Lisa, I’d like to see you at nine tomorrow for the tests. You can expect to be here most of the morning. Just one more thing before you go. I have a release form here that Ms. Williams asked me to have you sign.”

“We signed a long form in Dr. Redfern’s office,” Jeff said. “Is this the same one?”

“I don’t think so. This one’s less than a page. It just says acknowledges that we have described the procedures and the associated risks.” Lisa scanned it before handing it to Jeff. He signed and gave it back to Lisa, who appended her signature.

They slipped into Dr. Redfern’s office before they left, as he had requested. Jessica greeted them in the outer office. “I see you all moved in,” she said. “I hope my music won’t bother you. Amanda was always complaining, but I have to have my music.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Lisa said. “We’ll let you know if it gets too loud.”

“Okay. You can go right in.”

“Well, how’d it go?” Dr. Redfern asked, remaining behind his desk. “Any lingering questions?”

“Just one,” Jeff said. “Is there any way we can get a cable modem or DSL in our cottage. I’d like to have internet access.”

“Oh, I can do you one better, Jeff. We have a wireless network at the Center. We extended it to the cottages a couple of months ago.”

“Hey, that’s great,” Jeff said. “But I’ll need to get a router.”

“We’ll take care of that. I’ll have our network manager come over and get you set up. Is that the only question?”

“That’s it,” Jeff said.

“Well, you two must still have some moving in to do. Why don’t you go back to the cottage?”

As Lisa and Jeff left the office, Dr. Redfern called out. “And, Jeff—our construction manager may come by to talk about having you join the team.”

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Dr. Redfern got up and walked to the head of the stairs. He watched Lisa and Jeff descend the sweeping staircase before he returned to his office. He closed the inner door behind him, went to his desk, and picked up the telephone. He pushed two buttons to connect to the cottage phone. “They’re on their way,” he said after Celi answered.

He hung up and pushed a different set of two buttons, connecting him to the basement surveillance room. He was glad when he heard Eddie answer. “When does Fedor relieve you?” he asked. Eddie told him Fedor was due in at two. “That’s good,” Dr. Redfern said. “After he does, would you go over to Cottage 8 and check out the new guests’ computer to see what you need to get them to hook into our network? Oh, and before you go, bring up this morning’s tape from Dr. Kirby’s office?”

He knew the surveillance equipment didn’t use tapes. It was all digital, but Eddie knew what he meant and would deliver a DVD. He hung up and dialed a third number—this one ten digits to an office phone in Atlanta.

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When Redfern called, Celi grabbed Ethan and the first toy she found and scurried into the living room. She set Ethan in the middle of the floor next to the brightly painted wheeled wooden cart and lay down next to him on her side, propping herself up on one elbow. Ethan looked at her for several moments, an uncertain look in his eyes.

“Go ahead, kid, play,” she said impatiently. Ethan frowned and started gasping lightly, his eyes moistening. “Oh, no. I said no crying.” His grasping turned to a plaintive cry and tears started rolling down his cheeks. “Oh, no. Don’t do this to me, kid.” Feeling a vague panic, she got up and knelt next to the box. “Look, look, Ethan. See the car.”

The top of the toy box was painted in various shades of green to resemble a field. Four small wooden toys—a cat, a butterfly, a horse, and a car—were attached in slots that snaked through the scene. She pushed the car back and forth along its light blue-gray road. Ethan’s cry turned to a scream.

“Aw, c’mon kid, gimme a break,” she said. She turned the cart so the side with nine cut-out shapes faced him and grabbed one of the matching shapes from the tray at the bottom. “Look, Ethan, a star.” She offered it to him. “Look, Ethan, where does the star go?” He continued to cry, showing no interest.

She swore under her breath and flipped the star back in the tray and rotated the box to the side with the jumbled letters of the alphabet attached with zelcro. She pulled the S off and held it out. “Look, Ethan. What can you spell?” He screamed louder.

She swore and rotated the box again, presenting the side with what looked like four small fabric billfolds attached, each with a different closure. She pulled open the bow on the laced one and took one of Ethan’s hands. “Let’s tie it, Ethan.” He yanked his hand back and screamed louder. She pulled open the snapped one, and still he screamed,

so she moved to the zippered one and pulled the zipper up and down, saying, “Zzzzz- zip” with each pass. Ethan’s crying stopped as quickly as it had started, and he reached out for the zipper. “Finally,” Celi said. She relaxed, settling back on her heels. Ethan pulled at the zipper, but he couldn’t move it. He started whimpering.

“No, no,” Celi said. She grabbed the zipper and pulled it up. “Zzzzzzz- zip,” she said, drawing out the zee in a long ascending tone for several seconds, ending with an accentuated p. Ethan looked at her and giggled. “Zzzzzzzzzzz- zip-pah,” she repeated. He giggled louder. She repeated the performance several times, each drawing a delighted squeal from the boy. “God, can’t you entertain yourself?”

She continued zipping up and down until a faint offensive odor drifted into her nostrils. She sniffed harder, grimacing in disgust. “What is that?” she said aloud. She sniffed several more times, moving her head around to locate the source. She leaned toward Ethan and sniffed. “Oh, no,” she said. She bent over next to his bottom and sniffed hard. “Ew!” she said loudly, almost gagging.

She stared at Ethan for a moment, thinking. Finally, sighing in resignation, she grabbed him gingerly under the armpits and picked him up, holding him out and looking at him like he was a bag of rotten fruit. She turned her head away and held her breath. She took him into the bedroom and placed him on top of the changing table next to the bed. She ripped off the tapes on both sides of his paper diaper. She turned away and drew a long breath, holding it in, before she looked back down at Ethan. She carefully pulled back the front of the diaper and peered in.

“Oh, crap!” she said, turning away in disgust and feeling her stomach churn.

“That’s what it is,” Lisa said behind her. Celi nearly jumped off the floor at the sound of her voice and turned. She knew her face must have registered her desperation because Lisa instantly burst into a laugh. “Let me do that,” Lisa said, walking to the table.

Celi backed away immediately and watched as Lisa pulled the diaper back all the way, took Ethan’s ankles, and raised him slightly. When she slid the diaper out from under Ethan, fully revealing its contents, Celi gagged. She threw one hand to her mouth and ran from the bedroom. She dove into the bathroom and threw open the toilet just in time to throw up into the bowl.

She fell on her knees and leaned over the toilet, panting. Another wave of nausea overwhelmed up and she threw up again...and again...and again. Finally, she felt her stomach begin to relax, and she spit out the tiny chunks on her tongue. She remained hunched at the toilet until she was sure it was over. She rose shakily, flushed the toilet, and went to the sink. She ran water into her cupped hands and threw four handfuls on the face, sputtering.

She turned off the water and stood hunched over the sink grasping the sides of the sink. Finally, she rose slowly to face the image in the mirror. She gasped at the side of her deathly pale face, her eyes bloodshot and swollen. She threw three more handfuls of water on her face and toweled off.

“Are you okay, Dr. Torma?” Lisa asked from the doorway, barely suppressing her laugh. Ethan, resting comfortably at her side, sat on Lisa’s arm. He looked at her and smiled. Celi felt a strong urge to strangle him, but she managed to offer Lisa a weak smile.

“I guess so,” Celi said, the words raising the taste of bile from her throat. She gagged audibly but fought it back. Lisa took a step into the bathroom and pulled a paper Dixie cup from the wall dispenser next to the mirror. One-handed, she turned on the cold water and filled the cup. She handed it to Celi.

“Rinse and spit,” Lisa said. Celi complied. “Again.” The cup empty, Lisa took it from Dr. Torma and refilled it. “Now drink this,” she said. Celi took the cup and threw the water down her throat. She refilled it herself and drank another. She sighed and turned to Lisa.

“It’s funny,” Lisa said. “That happened to me the first time I had to change a diaper for a child I was babysitting. I decided babysitting wasn’t for me and that I going to have a nanny when I had children. But when it’s your own, it’s not the same.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Celi mumbled. Lisa laughed.

“No, if you haven’t had children, you wouldn’t.”

“I’m *never* having children,” Celi said, glaring at Ethan. Lisa laughed again.

“Trust me, Dr. Torma. It’s just not the same with your own—at least not for the mother. Fathers seem to have less tolerance. Jeff went back outside when he saw what was happening.”

“Yea,” Celi said.

“Oh, you got some on your shirt, Dr. Torma,” Lisa said, pointing at Celi’s chest.

Celi looked down at her brand new red and black Lovethislife tee shirt. A long brown streak, punctuated with tiny chunks, ran through the line-drawn butterfly between her breasts.

“Let me get you a clean shirt,” Lisa said.

“No, that’s okay. I’ve got one at the office.”

“You don’t want to go back looking like that. I’ll get one.” Lisa left the bathroom, and Celi didn’t object again. She returned moments later and handed Celi a pink jersey. She pulled the bathroom door closed. Celi took off her tee shirt over her head, wadded into a ball, and threw it on the floor. Celi glanced in the mirror and saw that some of the vomit had leaked through—there was a small brown stain on the lacy pink fringe of one cup.

She took a washcloth from the towel rack and led it under running water. She dabbed her bra with the damp cloth and smiled when it came clean immediately. She slipped on Lisa’s shirt and retrieved the tee shirt. Sixty bucks down the drain, she thought, and briefly considered making that literal, but she knew the shirt would be likely to clog the toilet.

She went out into the living room and headed for the sound of Lisa’s humming from the kitchen. Lisa was still holding Ethan on her hip as she stood in front of the stove, stirring a pot with a long wooden spoon. She smiled warmly at Celi.

“Let me wash that shirt,” Lisa said.

“I think I’ll just throw it out,” Celi answered.

“Oh, no. It’s such a beautiful shirt. Stay and have lunch with us, and it’ll be done by the time we’re finished.”

“I have to get back,” Celi said.

“Please stay,” Lisa said so pleasantly that Celi felt a sudden affection. She didn’t want to feel anything for this woman, considering what she planned to do to her, so she was angry at herself, and she used the anger to beat back the brief warmth.

“No, I really have to go.” Lisa looked crestfallen.

“Well, at least let me wash the shirt. If you don’t clean it right away, the stain will set. I can bring it by in the morning when I come for my tests.”

“All right,” Celi said, handing the shirt to Lisa. She stood for a moment watching Lisa as she pulled a bottle of something out of a cabinet, opened up the wadded shirt, and squirted a small stream of liquid down the stain. She opened the washer lid and threw in the shirt. She dialed the control on the washer, closed the lid, and pushed a button—all one-handed. Water began trickling into the washer tub.

“I guess I’ll go now,” Celi said.

“Are you sure you can’t stay?”

“No, I have a lot to do.”

“Okay. I understand, but I hope I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll bring your shirt.”

Celi said goodbye and left the cottage. She looked around for Jeff and spotted him standing against a tree, his hands shoved in his jean pockets. He nodded to her and made an odd look as she stepped off the porch. She glided over to him.

“Hi, Jeff, it’s good to see you. How are you?”

“Fine, Dr. Torma.”

“Celi,” she said, touching his arm softly. “Please call me Celi.” His silence instantly frustrated her again. “Did you run this morning?” she asked.

“No, Lisa slept late, so I had to watch Ethan. Then we had to go to the Center.”

“Are you going to run tomorrow?”

“Maybe”

“I run here three times a week at least,” Celi said. “It’s a lot nicer here than the streets of LaGrange. I could show you the best trails.”

“That’s okay. I’ll find my way around.”

“It’s easy to get lost. Why don’t I come by in the morning around seven. I’ll bet you’re an early riser.”

“I’ll be done by then.”

“Okay, I could come earlier. Six?” She thought of getting up early enough to be there by six held no appeal for Celi. She’d have to get up in the dark, but the sooner she became Jeff’s running partner, the better.

“No, that’s okay.”

“Aw, c’mon,” she said, pouting. “I don’t really like running alone.”

“I like running alone,” Jeff said. Celi realized he was not going to relent and continuing to press would just antagonize him.

“Okay then,” she said. “Maybe we’ll run into each other. I’ve got to go now.” Jeff nodded and Celi walked slowly down the path past the row of cottages, putting a little extra sway in her step. Halfway to her parking lot, she looked back and saw Jeff watching her from the porch. He turned away and went into the cottage. She smiled.

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