

DARWIN'S  
RADIO  
AND  
DARWIN'S  
CHILDREN

GREG  
BEAR



BALLANTINE BOOKS



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# DARWIN'S RADIO

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BALLANTINE BOOKS

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DARWIN'S  
RADIO

**GREG  
BEAR**

BALLANTINE BOOKS  
NEW YORK



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**FOR MY MOTHER,  
WILMA MERRIMAN BEAR  
1915-1997**



**D A R W I N ' S**  
**R A D I O**



**PART ONE**

H E R O D ' S

W I N T E R





### The Alps, near the Austrian Border with Italy

AUGUST

**T**he flat afternoon sky spread over the black and gray mountains like a stage backdrop, the color of a dog's pale crazy eye.

His ankles aching and back burning from a misplaced loop of nylon rope, Mitch Rafelson followed Tilde's quick female form along the margin between the white firn and a dust of new snow on the field. Mingled with the ice boulders of the fall, crenels and spikes of old ice had been sculpted by summer heat into milky, flint-edged knives.

To Mitch's left, the mountains rose over the jumble of black boulders flanking the broken slope of the ice fall. On the right, in the full glare of the sun, the ice rose in blinding brilliance to the perfect catenary of the cirque.

Franco was about twenty yards to the south, hidden by the rim of Mitch's goggles. Mitch could hear him but not see him. Some kilometers behind, also out of sight now, was the brilliant orange, round fiberglass-and-aluminum bivouac where they had made their last rest stop. He did not know how many kilometers they were from the last hut, whose name he had forgotten; but the memory of bright sun and warm tea in the sitting room, the *Gaststube*, gave him some strength. When this ordeal was over, he would get another cup of strong tea and sit in the *Gaststube* and thank God he was warm and alive.

They were approaching the wall of rock and a bridge of snow lying over a chasm dug by meltwater. These now-frozen streams formed during the spring and summer and eroded the edge of the glacier. Beyond the bridge, depending from a U-shaped depression in the wall, rose what looked like a gnome's upside-down castle, or a pipe organ carved from ice: a frozen waterfall spread out in many thick columns. Chunks of dislodged



ice and drifts of snow gathered around the dirty white of the base; sun bur-nished the cream and white at the top.

Franco came into view as if out of a fog and joined up with Tilde. So far they had been on relatively level glacier. Now it seemed that Tilde and Franco were going to scale the pipe organ.

Mitch stopped for a moment and reached behind to pull out his ice ax. He pushed up his goggles, crouched, then fell back on his butt with a grunt to check his crampons. Ice balls between the spikes yielded to his knife.

Tilde walked back a few yards to speak to him. He looked up at her, his thick dark eyebrows forming a bridge over a pushed-up nose, round green eyes blinking at the cold.

"This saves us an hour," Tilde said, pointing at the pipe organ. "It's late. You've slowed us down." Her English came precise from thin lips, with a seductive Austrian accent. She had a slight but well-proportioned figure, white blond hair tucked under a dark blue Polartec cap, an elfin face with clear gray eyes. Attractive, but not Mitch's type; still, they had been lovers of the moment before Franco arrived.

"I told you I haven't climbed in eight years," Mitch said. Franco was showing him up handily. The Italian leaned on his ax near the pipe organ.

Tilde weighed and measured everything, took only the best, discarded the second best, yet never cut ties in case her past connections should prove useful. Franco had a square jaw and white teeth and a square head with thick black hair shaved at the sides, an eagle nose, Mediterranean olive skin, broad shoulders and arms knotted with muscles, fine hands, very strong. He was not too smart for Tilde, but no dummy, either. Mitch could imagine Tilde pulled from her thick Austrian forest by the prospect of bedding Franco, light against dark, like layers in a torte. He felt curiously detached from this image. Tilde made love with a mechanical rigor that had deceived Mitch for a time, until he realized she was merely going through the moves, one after the other, as a kind of intellectual exercise. She ate the same way. Nothing moved her deeply, yet she had real wit at times, and a lovely smile that drew lines on the corners of those thin, precise lips.

"We must go down before sunset," Tilde said. "I don't know what the weather will do. It's two hours to the cave. Not very far, but a hard climb. If we're lucky, you'll have an hour to look at what we've found."

"I'll do my best," Mitch said. "How far are we from the tourist trails? I haven't seen any red paint in hours."

Tilde pulled away her goggles to wipe them, gave him a flash smile

with no warmth. “No tourists up here. Most good climbers stay away, too. But I know my way.”

“Snow goddess,” Mitch said.

“What do you expect?” she said, taking it as a compliment. “I’ve climbed here since I was a girl.”

“You’re still a girl,” Mitch said. “Twenty-five, twenty-six?”

She had never revealed her age to Mitch. Now she appraised him as if he were a gemstone she might reconsider purchasing. “I am thirty-two. Franco is forty but he’s faster than you.”

“To hell with Franco,” Mitch said without anger.

Tilde curled her lip in amusement. “We are all weird today,” she said, turning away. “Even Franco feels it. But another Iceman . . . what would that be worth?”

The very thought shortened Mitch’s breath, and he did not need that now. His excitement curled back on itself, mixing with his exhaustion. “I don’t know,” he said.

They had opened their mercenary little hearts to him back in Salzburg. They were ambitious but not stupid; Tilde was absolutely certain that their find was not just another climber’s body. She should know. At fourteen, she had helped carry out two bodies spit loose from the tongues of glaciers. One had been over a hundred years old.

Mitch wondered what would happen if they had found a true Iceman. Tilde, he was sure, would in the long run not know how to handle fame and success. Franco was stolid enough to make do, but Tilde was in her own way fragile. Like a diamond, she could cut steel, but strike her from the wrong angle and she would come to pieces.

Franco might survive fame, but would he survive Tilde? Mitch, despite everything, liked Franco.

“It’s another three kilometers,” Tilde told him. “Let’s go.”

Together, she and Franco showed him how to climb the frozen waterfall. “This flows only during midsummer,” Franco said. “It is ice for a month now. Understand how it freezes. It is strong down here.” He struck the pale gray ice of the pipe organ’s massive base with his ax. The ice tinked, spun off a few chips. “But it is verglas, lots of bubbles, higher up—mushy. Big chunks fall if you hit it wrong. Hurt somebody. Tilde could cut some steps there, not you. You climb between Tilde and me.”

Tilde would go first, an honest acknowledgment by Franco that she was the better climber. Franco slung the ropes and Mitch showed them he remembered the loops and knots from climbing in the Cascades, in

Washington state. Tilde made a face and retied the loop Alpine style around his waist and shoulders. "You can front most of the way. Remember, I will chisel steps if you need them," Tilde said. "I don't want you sending ice down on Franco."

She took the lead.

Halfway up the pillar, digging in with the front points of his crampons, Mitch passed a threshold and his exhaustion seemed to leak away in spurts through his feet, leaving him nauseated for a moment. Then his body felt clean, as if flushed with fresh water, and his breath came easy. He followed Tilde, chunking his crampons into the ice and leaning in very close, grabbing at whatever holds were available. He used his ax sparingly. The air was actually warmer near the ice.

It took them fifteen minutes to climb past the midpoint, onto the cream-colored ice. The sun came from behind low gray clouds and lit up the frozen waterfall at a sharp angle, pinning him on a wall of translucent gold.

He waited for Tilde to tell them she was over the top and secure. Franco gave his laconic reply. Mitch wedged his way between two columns. The ice was indeed unpredictable here. He dug in with side points, sending a cloud of chips down on Franco. Franco cursed, but not once did Mitch break free and simply hang, and that was a blessing.

He fronted and crawled up the bumpy, rounded lip of the waterfall. His gloves slipped alarmingly on runnels of ice. He flailed with his boots, caught a ridge of rock with his right boot, dug in, found purchase on more rock, waited for a moment to catch his breath, and humped up beside Tilde like a walrus.

Dusty gray boulders on each side defined the bed of the frozen creek. He looked up the narrow rocky valley, half in shadow, where a small glacier had once flowed down from the east, carving its characteristic U-shaped notch. There had not been much snow for the last few years and the glacier had flowed on, vanishing from the notch, which now lay several dozen yards above the main body of the glacier.

Mitch rolled on his stomach and helped Franco over the top. Tilde stood to one side, perched on the edge as if she knew no fear, perfectly balanced, slender, gorgeous.

She frowned down on Mitch. "We are getting later," she said. "What can you learn in half an hour?"

Mitch shrugged.

"We must start back no later than sunset," Franco said to Tilde, then grinned at Mitch. "Not so tough son of a bitch ice, no?"

“Not bad,” Mitch said.

“He learns okay,” Franco said to Tilde, who lifted her eyes. “You climb ice before?”

“Not like that,” Mitch said.

They walked over the frozen creek for a few dozen yards. “Two more climbs,” Tilde said. “Franco, you lead.”

Mitch looked up through crystalline air over the rim of the notch at the sawtooth horns of higher mountains. He still could not tell where he was. Franco and Tilde preferred him ignorant. They had come at least twenty kilometers since their stay in the big stone *Gaststube*, with the tea.

Turning, he spotted the orange bivouac, about four kilometers away and hundreds of meters below. It sat just behind a saddle, now in shadow.

The snow seemed very thin. The mountains had just passed through the warmest summer in modern Alpine history, with increased glacier melt, short-term floods in the valleys from heavy rain, and only light snow from past seasons. Global warming was a media cliché now; from where he sat, to his inexpert eye, it seemed all too real. The Alps might be naked in a few decades.

The relative heat and dryness had opened up a route to the old cave, allowing Franco and Tilde to discover a secret tragedy.

Franco announced he was secure, and Mitch inched his way up the last rock face, feeling the gneiss chip and skitter beneath his boots. The stone here was flaky, powdery soft in places; snow had lain over this area for a long time, easily thousands of years.

Franco lent him a hand and together they belayed the rope as Tilde scrambled up behind. She stood on the rim, shielded her eyes against the direct sun, now barely a handspan above the ragged horizon. “Do you know where you are?” she asked Mitch.

Mitch shook his head. “I’ve never been this high.”

“A valley boy,” Franco said with a grin.

Mitch squinted.

They stared over a rounded and slick field of ice, the thin finger of a glacier that had once flowed nearly seven miles in several spectacular cascades. Now, along this branch, the flow was lagging. Little new snow fed the glacier’s head, higher up. The sun-blazed rock wall above the icy rip of the bergschrund rose several thousand feet straight up, the peak higher than Mitch cared to look.

“There,” Tilde said, and pointed to the opposite rocks below an arête.

With some effort, Mitch made out a tiny red dot against the shadowed black and gray: a cloth banner Franco had planted on their last trip. They set off over the ice.

The cave, a natural crevice, had a small opening, three feet in diameter, artificially concealed by a low wall of head-size boulders. Tilde took out her digital camera and photographed the opening from several angles, backing up and walking around while Franco pulled down the wall and Mitch surveyed the entrance.

“How far back?” Mitch asked when Tilde rejoined them.

“Ten meters,” Franco said. “Very cold back there, better than a freezer.”

“But not for long,” Tilde said. “I think this is the first year this area has been so open. Next summer, it could get above freezing. A warm wind could get back in there.” She made a face and pinched her nose.

Mitch unslung his pack and rummaged for the electric torches, the box of hobby knives, vinyl gloves, all he could find in the stores down in the town. He dropped these into a small plastic bag, sealed the bag, slipped it into his coat pocket, and looked between Franco and Tilde.

“Well?” he said.

“Go,” Tilde said, making a pushing motion with her hands. She smiled generously.

He stooped, got on his hands and knees, and entered the cave first. Franco came a few seconds later, and Tilde just behind him.

Mitch held the strap of the small torch in his teeth, pushing and squeezing forward six or eight inches at a time. Ice and fine powdered snow formed a thin blanket on the floor of the cave. The walls were smooth and rose to a tight wedge near the ceiling. He would not be able to even crouch here. Franco called forward, “It will get wider.”

“A cozy little hole,” Tilde said, her voice hollow.

The air smelled neutral, empty. Cold, well below zero. The rock sucked away his heat even through the insulated jacket and snow pants. He passed over a vein of ice, milky against the black rock, and scraped it with his fingers. Solid. The snow and ice must have packed in at least this far when the cave was covered. Just beyond the ice vein, the cave began to slant upward, and he felt a faint puff of air from another wedge in the rock recently cleared of ice.

Mitch felt a little queasy, not at the thought of what he was about to see, but at the unorthodox and even criminal character of this investigation. The slightest wrong move, any breath of this getting out, news of his

not going through the proper channels and making sure everything was legitimate . . .

Mitch had gotten in trouble with institutions before. He had lost his job at the Hayer Museum in Seattle less than six months before, but that had been a political thing, ridiculous and unfair.

Until now, he had never slighted Dame Science herself.

He had argued with Franco and Tilde back in the hotel in Salzburg for hours, but they had refused to budge. If he had not decided to go with them, they would have taken somebody else—Tilde had suggested perhaps an unemployed medical student she had once dated. Tilde had a wide selection of ex-boyfriends, it seemed, all of them much less qualified and far less scrupulous than Mitch.

Whatever Tilde's motives or moral character, Mitch was not the type to turn her down, then turn them in; everybody has his limits, his boundary in the social wilderness. Mitch's boundary began at the prospect of getting ex-girlfriends in trouble with the Austrian police.

Franco plucked a crampon on the sole of Mitch's boot. "Problem?" he asked.

"No problem," Mitch replied, and grunted forward another six inches.

A sudden oblong of light formed in one eye, like a large out-of-focus moon. His body seemed to balloon in size. He swallowed hard. "Shit," he muttered, hoping that didn't mean what he thought it meant. The oblong faded. His body returned to normal.

Here, the cave constricted to a narrow throat, less than a foot high and twenty-one or twenty-two inches wide. Angling his head sideways, he grabbed hold of a crack just beyond the throat and shinnied through. His coat caught and he heard a tearing sound as he strained to unhook and slip past.

"That's the bad part," Franco said. "I can barely make it."

"Why did you go this far?" Mitch asked, gathering his courage in the broader but still dark and cramped space beyond.

"Because it was here, no?" Tilde said, voice like the call of a distant bird. "I dared Franco. He dared me." She laughed and the tinkling echoed in the gloom beyond. Mitch's neck hair rose. The new Iceman was laughing with them, perhaps at them. He was dead already. He had nothing to worry about, plenty to be amused about, that so many people would make themselves miserable to see his mortal remains.

"How long since you last came here?" Mitch asked. He wondered why he hadn't asked before. Perhaps until now he hadn't really believed. They

had come this far, no sign of pulling a joke on him, something he doubted Tilde was constitutionally capable of anyway.

“A week, eight days,” Franco said. The passage was wide enough that Franco could push himself up beside Mitch’s legs, and Mitch could shine the torch back into his face. Franco gave him a toothy Mediterranean smile.

Mitch looked forward. He could see something ahead, dark, like a small pile of ashes.

“We are close?” Tilde asked. “Mitch, first it is just a foot.”

Mitch tried to parse this sentence. Tilde spoke pure metric. A “foot,” he realized, was not distance, it was an appendage. “I don’t see it yet.”

“There are ashes first,” Franco said. “That may be it.” He pointed to the small black pile. Mitch could feel the air falling slowly just in front of him, flowing along his sides, leaving the rear of the cave undisturbed.

He moved forward with reverent slowness, inspecting everything. Any slightest bit of evidence that might have survived an earlier entry—chips of stone, pieces of twig or wood, markings on the walls . . .

Nothing. He got on his hands and knees with a great sense of relief and crawled forward. Franco became impatient.

“It is right ahead,” Franco said, tapping his crampon again.

“Damn it, I’m taking this real slow, not to miss anything, you know?” Mitch said. He restrained an urge to kick out like a mule.

“All right,” Franco said amiably.

Mitch could see around the curve. The floor flattened slightly. He smelled something grassy, salty, like fresh fish. His neck hair rose again, and a mist formed over his eyes. Ancient sympathies.

“I see it,” he said. A foot pushed out beyond a ledge, curled up on itself—small, really, like a child’s, very wrinkled and dark brown, almost black. The cave opened up at that point and there were scraps of dried and blackened fiber spread on the floor—grass, perhaps. Reeds. Ötzi, the original Iceman, had worn a reed cape over his head.

“My God,” Mitch said. Another white oblong in his eye, slowly fading, and a whisper of pain in his temple.

“It’s bigger up there,” Tilde called. “We can all fit and not disturb them.”

“Them?” Mitch asked, shining his light back between his legs.

Franco smiled, framed by Mitch’s knees. “The real surprise,” Franco said. “There are two.”

**Republic of Georgia**

**K**aye curled up in the passenger seat of the whining little Fiat as Lado guided it along the alarming twists and turns of the Georgian Military Road. Though sunburned and exhausted, she could not sleep. Her long legs twitched with every curve. At a piggish squeal of the nearly bald tires, she pushed her hands back through short-cut brown hair and yawned deliberately.

Lado sensed the silence had gone on too long. He glanced at Kaye with soft brown eyes in a finely wrinkled sun-browned face, lifted his cigarette over the steering wheel, and jutted out his chin. “In shit is our salvation, yes?” he asked.

Kaye smiled despite herself. “Please don’t try to cheer me up,” she said.

Lado ignored that. “Good on us. Georgia has something to offer the world. We have great sewage.” He rolled his *rs* elegantly, and “sewage” came out *see-yu-edge*.

“Sewage,” she murmured. “See-yu-age.”

“I say it right?” Lado asked.

“Perfectly,” Kaye said.

Lado Jakeli was chief scientist at the Eliava Institute in Tbilisi, where they extracted bacteriophages—viruses that attack only bacteria—from local city and hospital sewage and farm waste, and from specimens gathered around the world. Now, the West, including Kaye, had come hat in hand to learn more from the Georgians about the curative properties of phages.

She had hit it off with the Eliava staff. After a week of conferences and lab tours, some of the younger scientists had invited her to accompany them to the rolling hills and brilliant green sheep fields at the base of Mount Kazbeg.

Things had changed so quickly. Just this morning, Lado had driven all the way from Tbilisi to their base camp near the old and solitary Gergeti Orthodox church. In an envelope he had carried a fax from UN Peace-keeping headquarters in Tbilisi, the capital.

Lado had downed a pot of coffee at the camp, then, ever the gentleman, and her sponsor besides, had offered to take her to Gordi, a small town seventy-five miles southwest of Kazbeg.



Kaye had had no choice. Unexpectedly, and at the worst possible time, her past had caught up with her.

The UN team had gone through entry records to find non-Georgian medical experts with a certain expertise. Hers was the only name that had come up: Kaye Lang, thirty-four, partner with her husband, Saul Madsen, in EcoBacter Research. In the early nineties, she had studied forensic medicine at the State University of New York with an eye to going into criminal investigation. She had changed her perspective within a year, switching to microbiology, with emphasis on genetic engineering; but she was the only foreigner in Georgia with even the slightest degree of the training the UN needed.

Lado was driving her through some of the most beautiful countryside she had ever seen. In the shadows of the central Caucasus they had passed terraced mountain fields, small stone farmhouses, stone silos and churches, small towns with wood and stone buildings, houses with friendly and beautifully carved porches opening onto narrow brick or cobble or dirt roads, towns dotted loosely on broad rumpled blankets of sheep- and goat-grazed meadow and thick forest.

Here, even the seemingly empty expanses had been swarmed over and fought for across the centuries, like every place she had seen in Western and now Eastern Europe. Sometimes she felt suffocated by the sheer closeness of her fellow humans, by the gap-toothed smiles of old men and women standing by the side of the road watching traffic come and go from new and unfamiliar worlds. Wrinkled friendly faces, gnarled hands waving at the little car.

All the young people were in the cities, leaving the old to tend the countryside, except in the mountain resorts. Georgia was planning to turn itself into a nation of resorts. Her economy was growing in double digits each year; her currency, the lari, was strengthening as well, and had long since replaced rubles; soon it would replace Western dollars. They were opening oil pipelines from the Caspian to the Black Sea; and in the land where wine got its name, it was becoming a major export.

In the next few years, Georgia would export a new and very different wine: solutions of phages to heal a world losing the war against bacterial diseases.

The Fiat swung into the inside lane as they rounded a blind curve. Kaye swallowed hard but said nothing. Lado had been very solicitous toward her at the institute. At times in the past week, Kaye had caught him looking at her with an expression of gnarled, old world speculation, eyes drawn to

wrinkled slits, like a satyr carved out of olive wood and stained brown. He had a reputation among the women who worked at Eliava, that he could not be trusted all the time, particularly with the young ones. But he had always treated Kaye with the utmost civility, even, as now, with concern. He did not want her to be sad, yet he could not think of any reason she should be cheerful.

Despite its beauty, Georgia had many blemishes: civil war, assassinations, and now, mass graves.

They lurched into a wall of rain. The windshield wipers flapped black tails and cleaned about a third of Lado's view. "Good on Ioseb Stalin, he left us sewage," he mused. "Good son of Georgia. Our most famous export, better than wine." Lado grinned falsely at her. He seemed both ashamed and defensive. Kaye could not help but draw him out.

"He killed millions," she murmured. "He killed Dr. Eliava."

Lado stared grimly through the streaks to see what lay beyond the short hood. He geared down and braked, then careened around a ditch big enough to hide a cow. Kaye made a small squeak and grabbed the side of her seat. There were no guardrails on this stretch, and below the highway yawned a steep drop of at least three hundred meters to a glacial melt river. "It was Beria declared Dr. Eliava a People's Enemy," Lado said matter-of-factly, as if relating old family history. "Beria was head of Georgian KGB then, local child-abusing sonabitch, not mad wolf of all Russia."

"He was Stalin's man," Kaye said, trying to keep her mind off the road. She could not understand any pride the Georgians took in Stalin.

"They were all Stalin's men, or they died," Lado said. He shrugged. "There was a big stink here when Khrushchev said Stalin was bad. What do we know? He screwed us so many ways for so many years we thought he must be a husband."

This Kaye found amusing. Lado took encouragement from her grin.

"Some still want to return to prosperity under Communism. Or we have prosperity in shit." He rubbed his nose. "I'll take the shit."

They descended in the next hour into less fearsome foothills and plateaus. Road signs in curling Georgian script showed the rusted pocks of dozens of bullet holes. "Half an hour, no more," Lado said.

The thick rain made the border between day and night difficult to judge. Lado switched on the Fiat's dim little headlights as they approached a crossroads and the turnoff to the small town of Gordi.

Two armored personnel carriers flanked the highway just before the

crossroads. Five Russian peacekeepers dressed in slickers and rounded piss-bucket helmets wearily flagged them down.

Lado braked the Fiat to a stop, canted slightly on the shoulder. Kaye could see another ditch just yards ahead, right in the crotch of the crossroads. They would have to drive on the shoulder to go around it.

Lado rolled down his window. A Russian soldier of nineteen or twenty, with rosy choirboy cheeks, peered in. His helmet dribbled rain on Lado's sleeve. Lado spoke to him in Russian.

"American?" the young Russian asked Kaye. She showed him her passport, her E.U. and C.I.S. business licenses, and the fax requesting—practically ordering—her presence in Gordi. The soldier took the fax and frowned as he tried to read it, getting it thoroughly wet. He stepped back to consult with an officer squatting in the rear hatch of the nearest carrier.

"They do not want to be here," Lado muttered to Kaye. "And we do not want them. But we asked for help . . . Who do we blame?"

The rain stopped. Kaye stared into the misting gloom ahead. She heard crickets and birdsong above the engine whine.

"Go down, go left," the soldier told Lado, proud of his English. He smiled for Kaye's benefit and waved them on to another soldier standing like a fence post in the gray gloom beside the ditch. Lado engaged the clutch and the little car bucked around the ditch, past the third peacekeeper and onto the side road.

Lado opened the window all the way. Cool moist evening air swirled through the car and lifted the short hair over Kaye's neck. The roadsides were covered with tight-packed birch. Briefly the air smelled foul. They were near people. Then Kaye thought maybe it was not the town's sewage that smelled so. Her nose wrinkled and her stomach knotted. But that was not likely. Their destination was a mile or so outside the town, and Gordi was still at least two miles off the highway.

Lado came to a stream and slowly forded the quick-rushing shallow water. The wheels sank to their hubcaps, but the car emerged safely and continued on for another hundred meters. Stars peeked through swift-gliding clouds. Mountains drew jagged dark blanks against the sky. The forest came up and fell back and then they saw Gordi, stone buildings, some newer two-story square wooden houses with tiny windows, a single concrete municipal cube without decoration, roads of rutted asphalt and old cobbles. No lights. Black sightless windows. The electricity was out again.

"I don't know this town," Lado muttered. He slammed on the brakes,

jolting Kaye from a reverie. The car idled noisily in the small town square, surrounded by two-story buildings. Kaye could make out a faded Intourist sign over an inn named the Rustaveli Tiger.

Lado switched on the tiny overhead light and pulled out the faxed map. He flung the map aside in disgust and heaved open the Fiat's door. The hinges made a loud metal groan. He leaned out and yelled in Georgian, "Where is the grave?"

Darkness was its own excuse.

"Beautiful," Lado said. He slammed the door twice to make it catch. Kaye pressed her lips together firmly as the car lurched forward. They descended with a high-pitched gnash of gears through a small street of shops, dark and shuttered with corrugated steel, and out the back side of the village, past two abandoned shacks, heaps of gravel, and scattered bales of straw.

After a few minutes, they spotted lights and the glow of torches and a single small campfire, then heard the racketing burr of a portable generator and voices loud in the hollow of the night.

The grave was closer than the map had showed, less than a mile from the town. She wondered if the villagers had heard the screams, or indeed if there had been any screams.

The fun was over.

The UN team wore gas masks equipped with industrial aerosol filters. Nervous Georgian Republic Security soldiers had to resort to bandannas tied around their faces. They looked sinister, comically so under other circumstances. Their officers wore white cloth surgical masks.

The head of the *sakrebulo*, the local council, a short big-fisted man with a tall shock of wiry black hair and a prominent nose, stood with a doggishly unhappy face beside the security officers.

The UN team leader, a U.S. Army colonel from South Carolina named Nicholas Beck, made quick introductions and passed Kaye one of the UN masks. She felt self-conscious but put it on. Beck's aide, a black female corporal named Hunter, passed her a pair of white latex surgical gloves. They gave familiar slaps against her wrists as she tugged them on.

Beck and Hunter led Kaye and Lado away from the campfire and the white Jeeps, down a small path through ragged forest and scrub to the graves.

"The council chief out there has his enemies. Some locals from the opposition dug the trenches and then called UN headquarters in Tbilisi,"

Beck told her. "I don't think the Republic Security folks want us here. We can't get any cooperation in Tbilisi. On short notice, you were the only one we could find with any expertise."

Three parallel trenches had been reopened and marked by electric lights on tall poles, staked into the sandy soil and powered by a portable generator. Between the stakes lengths of red and yellow plastic tape hung lifeless in the still air.

Kaye walked around the first trench and lifted her mask. Wrinkling her nose in anticipation, she sniffed. There was no distinct smell other than dirt and mud.

"They're more than two years old," she said. She gave Beck the mask. Lado stopped about ten paces behind them, reluctant to go near the graves.

"We need to be sure of that," Beck said.

Kaye walked to the second trench, stooped, and played the beam of her flashlight over the heaps of fabric and dark bones and dry dirt. The soil was sandy and dry, possibly part of the bed of an old melt stream from the mountains. The bodies were almost unrecognizable, pale brown bone encrusted with dirt, wrinkled brown and black flesh. Clothing had faded to the color of the soil, but these patches and shreds were not army uniforms: they were dresses, pants, coats. Woolens and cottons had not completely decayed. Kaye looked for brighter synthetics; they could establish a maximum age for the grave. She could not immediately see any.

She moved the beam up to the walls of the trench. The thickest roots visible, cut through by spades, were about half an inch in diameter. The nearest trees stood like tall thin ghosts ten yards away.

A middle-aged Republic Security officer with the formidable name of Vakhtang Chikurishvili, handsome in a burly way, with heavy shoulders and a thick, often-broken nose, stepped forward. He was not wearing a mask. He held up something dark. It took Kaye a few seconds to recognize it as a boot. Chikurishvili addressed Lado in consonant-laden Georgian.

"He says the shoes are old," Lado translated. "He says these people died fifty years ago. Maybe more."

Chikurishvili angrily swung his arm around and shot a quick stream of mixed Georgian and Russian at Lado and Beck.

Lado translated. "He says the Georgians who dug this up are stupid. This is not for the UN. This was from long before the civil war. He says these are not Ossetians."

"Who mentioned Ossetians?" Beck asked dryly.

Kaye examined the boot. It had a thick leather sole and leather uppers,

and its hanging strings were rotted and encrusted with powdery clods. The leather was hard as a rock. She peered into the interior. Dirt, but no socks or tissue—the boot had not been pulled from a decayed foot. Chikurishvili met her querulous look defiantly, then whipped out a match and lit up a cigarette.

*Staged*, Kaye thought. She remembered the classes she had taken in the Bronx, classes that had eventually driven her from criminal medicine. The field visits to real homicide scenes. The putrescence protection masks.

Beck spoke to the officer soothingly in broken Georgian and better Russian. Lado gently retranslated his attempts. Beck then took Kaye's elbow and moved her to a long canvas canopy that had been erected a few yards from the trenches.

Under the canopy, two battered folding card tables supported pieces of bodies. *Completely amateur*, Kaye thought. Perhaps the enemies of the head of the *sakrebulo* had laid out the bodies and taken pictures to prove their point.

She circled the table: two torsos and a skull. There was a fair amount of mummified flesh left on the torsos and some unfamiliar ligaments like dark dry straps on the skull, around the forehead, eyes, and cheeks. She looked for signs of insect casings and found dead blowfly larvae on one withered throat, but not many. The bodies had been buried within a few hours of death. She surmised they had not been buried in the dead of winter, when blowflies were not about. Of course, winters at this altitude were mild in Georgia.

She picked up a small pocket knife lying next to the closest torso and lifted a shred of fabric, what had once been white cotton, then pried up a stiff, concave flap of skin over the abdomen. There were bullet entry holes in the fabric and skin overlying the pelvis. "God," she said.

Within the pelvis, cradled in dirt and stiff wraps of dried tissue, lay a smaller body, curled, little more than a heap of tiny bones, its skull collapsed.

"Colonel." She showed Beck. His face turned stony.

The bodies could conceivably have been fifty years old, but if so, they were in remarkably good condition. Some wool and cotton remained. Everything was very dry. Drainage swept around this area now. The trenches were deep. But the roots—

Chikurishvili spoke again. His tone seemed more cooperative, even guilty. There was a lot of guilt to go around over the centuries.

"He says they are both female," Lado whispered to Kaye.

“I see that,” she muttered.

She walked around the table to examine the second torso. This one had no skin over the abdomen. She scraped the dirt aside, making the torso rock with a sound like a dried gourd. Another small skull lay within the pelvis, a fetus about six months along, same as the other. The torso’s limbs were missing; Kaye could not tell if the legs had been held together in the grave. Neither of the fetuses had been expelled by pressure of abdominal gases.

“Both pregnant,” she said. Lado translated this into Georgian.

Beck said in a low voice, “We count about sixty individuals. The women seem to have been shot. It looks as if the men were shot or clubbed to death.”

Chikurishvili pointed to Beck, and then back to the camp, and shouted, his face ruddy in the backwash of flashlight glow. “Jugashvili, Stalin.” The officer said the graves had been dug a few years before the great People’s War, during the purges. The late 1930s. That would make them almost seventy years old, ancient news, nothing for the UN to become involved in.

Lado said, “He wants the UN and the Russians out of here. He says this is an internal matter, not for peacekeepers.”

Beck spoke again, less soothingly, to the Georgian officer. Lado decided he did not want to be in the middle of this exchange and walked around to where Kaye was leaning over the second torso. “Nasty business,” he said.

“Too long,” Kaye spoke softly.

“What?” Lado asked.

“Seventy years is much too long,” she said. “Tell me what they’re arguing about.” She prodded the unfamiliar straps of tissue around the eye sockets with the pocket knife. They seemed to form a kind of mask. Had they been hooded before being executed? She did not think so. The attachments were dark and stringy and persistent.

“The UN man is saying there is no limit on war crimes,” Lado told her. “No statute—what is it—statute of limitations.”

“He’s right,” Kaye said. She rolled the skull over gently. The occiput had been fractured laterally and pushed in to a depth of three centimeters.

She returned her attention to the tiny skeleton cradled within the pelvis of the second torso. She had taken some courses in embryology in her second year in med school. The fetus’s bone structure seemed a little odd, but she did not want to damage the skull by pulling it loose from the caked soil and dried tissue. She had intruded enough already.

Kaye felt queasy, sickened not by the shriveled and dried remains, but by what her imagination was already reconstructing. She straightened and waved to get Beck's attention.

"These women were shot in the stomach," she said. *Kill all the first-born children. Furious monsters.* "Murdered." She clamped her teeth.

"How long ago?"

"He may be right about the age of the boot, if it came from here, but this grave isn't that old. The roots around the edge of the trenches are too small. My guess is the victims died as recently as two or three years ago. The dirt here looks dry, but the soil is probably acid, and that would dissolve any bones over a few years old. Then there's the fabric; it looks like wool and cotton, and that means the grave is just a few years old. If it's synthetic, it could be older, but that gives us a date after Stalin, too."

Beck approached her and lifted his mask. "Can you help us until the others get here?" he asked in a whisper.

"How long?" Kaye asked.

"Four, five days," Beck said. Several paces distant, Chikurishvili shifted his gaze between them, jaw clenched, resentful, as if cops had interrupted a domestic quarrel.

Kaye caught herself holding her breath. She turned away, stepped back, sucked in some air, then asked, "You're going to start a war crimes investigation?"

"The Russians think we should," Beck said. "They're hot to discredit the new Communists back home. A few old atrocities could supply them with fresh ammunition. If you could give us a best guess—two years, five, thirty, whatever?"

"Less than ten. Probably less than five. I'm very rusty," she said. "I can only do a few things. Take samples, some tissue specimens. Not a full autopsy, of course."

"You're a thousand times better than letting the locals muck around," Beck said. "I don't trust any of them. I'm not sure the Russians can be trusted, either. They all have axes to grind, one way or the other."

Lado kept a stiff face and did not comment, nor did he translate for Chikurishvili.

Kaye felt what she had known would come, had dreaded: the old dark mood creeping over her.

She had thought that by traveling and being away from Saul, she might shake the bad times, the bad feelings. She had felt liberated watching the



doctors and technicians working at the Eliava Institute, doing so much good with so few resources, literally pulling health out of sewage. The grand and beautiful side of the Republic of Georgia. Now . . . Flip the coin. Papa Ioseb Stalin or ethnic cleansers, Georgians trying to move out Armenians and Ossetians, Abkhazis trying to move out Georgians, Russians sending in troops, Chechens becoming involved. Dirty little wars between ancient neighbors with ancient grievances.

This was not going to be good for her, but she could not refuse.

Lado wrinkled his face and stared up at Beck. "They were going to be mothers?"

"Most of them," Beck said. "And maybe some were going to be fathers."

### 3

#### The Alps

**T**he end of the cave was very cramped. Tilde lay under a low shelf of rock, knees drawn up, and watched Mitch as he kneeled before the ones they had come here to see. Franco squatted behind Mitch.

Mitch's mouth hung half open, like a surprised little boy's. He could not speak for a time. The end of the cave was utterly still and quiet. Only the beam of light moved as he played the torch up and down the two forms.

"We touched nothing," Franco said.

The blackened ashes, ancient fragments of wood, grass, and reed, looked as if a breath would scatter them but still formed the remains of a fire. The skin of the bodies had fared much better. Mitch had never seen more startling examples of deep-freeze mummification. The tissues were hard and dry, the moisture sucked from them by the dry deep cold air. Near the heads, where they lay facing each other, the skin and muscle had hardly shrunk at all before being fixed. The features were almost natural, though the eyelids had withdrawn and the eyes beneath were shrunken, dark, unutterably sleepy. The bodies as well were full; only near the legs did the flesh seem to shrivel and darken, perhaps because of the intermittent breeze from farther up the shaft. The feet were wizened, black as little dried mushrooms.

Mitch could not believe what he was seeing. Perhaps there was nothing

so extraordinary about their pose—lying on their sides, a man and a woman facing each other in death, freezing finally as the ashes of their last fire cooled. Nothing unexpected about the hands of the man reaching toward the face of the woman, the woman's arms low in front of her as if she had clasped her stomach. Nothing extraordinary about the animal skin beneath them, or another skin rumpled beside the male, as if it had been tossed aside.

In the end, with the fire out, freezing to death, the man had felt too warm and had thrown off his covering.

Mitch looked down at the woman's curled fingers and swallowed a rising lump of emotion he could not easily define or explain.

"How old?" Tilde asked, interrupting his focus. Her voice sounded crisp and clear and rational, like the ring of a struck knife.

Mitch jerked. "Very old," he said quietly.

"Yes, but like the Iceman?"

"Not like the Iceman," Mitch said. His voice almost broke.

The female had been injured. A hole had been punched in her side, at hip level. Blood stains surrounded the hole and he thought he could make out stains on the rock beneath her. Perhaps it had been the cause of her death.

There were no weapons in the cave.

He rubbed his eyes to force aside the little jagged white moon that rose into his field of vision and threatened to distract him, then looked at the faces again, short broad noses pointing up at an angle. The woman's jaw hung slack, the man's was closed. The woman had died gasping for air. Mitch could not know this for sure, but he did not question the observation. It fit.

Only now did he carefully maneuver around the figures, crouched low, moving so slowly, keeping his bent knees an inch above the man's hip.

"They look old," Franco said, just to make a sound in the cave. His eyes glittered. Mitch glanced at him, then down at the male's profile.

Thick brow ridge, broad flattened nose, no chin. Powerful shoulders, narrowing to a comparatively slender waist. Thick arms. The faces were smooth, almost hairless. All the skin below the neck, however, was covered with a fine dark downy fur, visible only on close examination. Around their temples, the short-trimmed hair seemed to have been shaved in patterns, expertly barbered.

*So much for shaggy museum reconstructions.*

Mitch bent closer, the cold air heavy in his nostrils, and propped his hand against the top of the cave. Something like a mask lay between the bodies, actually two masks, one beside and bunched under the man, the other beneath the woman. The edges of the masks appeared torn. Each had eye holes, nostrils, the appearance of an upper lip, all lightly covered with fine hair, and below that, an even hairier flap that might have once wrapped around the neck and lower jaw. They might have been lifted from the faces, flayed away, yet there was no skin missing from the heads.

The mask nearest the woman seemed attached to her forehead and temple by thin fibers like the beard of a mussel.

Mitch realized he was focusing on little mysteries to get past one big impossibility.

“How old are they?” Tilde asked again. “Can you tell yet?”

“I don’t think there have been people like this for tens of thousands of years,” Mitch said.

Tilde seemed to miss this statement of deep time. “They are European, like the Iceman?”

“I don’t know,” Mitch said, but shook his head and held up his hand. He did not want to talk; he wanted to think. This was an extremely dangerous place, professionally, mentally, from any angle of approach. Dangerous and dreamlike and impossible.

“Tell me, Mitch,” Tilde pleaded with surprising gentleness. “Tell me what you see.” She reached out to stroke his knee. Franco observed this caress with maturity.

Mitch began, “They are male and female, each about a hundred and sixty centimeters in height.”

“Short people,” Franco said, but Mitch talked right over him.

“They appear to be genus *Homo*, species *sapiens*. Not like us, though. They might have suffered from some kind of dwarfism, distortion of the features . . .” He stopped himself and looked again at the heads, saw no signs of dwarfism, though the masks bothered him.

The classic features. “They’re not dwarfs,” he said. “They’re Neandertals.”

Tilde coughed. The dry air parched their throats. “Pardon?”

“Cavemen?” Franco said.

“Neandertals,” Mitch said again, as much to convince himself as to correct Franco.

“That is bullshit,” Tilde said, her voice crackling with anger. “We are not children.”

“No bullshit. You have found two well-preserved Neandertals, a man and a woman. The first Neandertal mummies . . . anywhere. Ever.”

Tilde and Franco thought about that for a few seconds. Outside, wind hooted past the cave entrance.

“How old?” Franco asked.

“Everyone thinks the Neandertals died out between a hundred thousand and forty thousand years ago,” Mitch said. “Maybe everyone is wrong. But I doubt they could have stayed in this cave, in this state of preservation, for forty thousand years.”

“Maybe they were the last,” Franco said, and crossed himself reverently.

“Incredible,” Tilde said, her face flushed. “How much would they be worth?”

Mitch’s leg cramped and he moved back to squat beside Franco. He rubbed his eyes with a gloved knuckle. So cold. He was shivering. The moon of light blurred and shifted. “They’re not worth anything,” he said.

“Don’t joke,” Tilde said. “They are rare—nothing like them, right?”

“Even if we—if you, I mean—could get them out of this cave safely, intact, and down the mountain, where would you sell them?”

“There are people who collect such things,” Franco said. “People with lots of money. We have talked to some about an Iceman already. Surely an Iceman and woman—”

“Maybe I should be more blunt,” Mitch said. “If these aren’t handled in a proper scientific fashion, I will go to the authorities in Switzerland, Italy, wherever the hell we are. I will tell them.”

Another silence. Mitch could almost hear Tilde’s thoughts, like a little Austrian clockwork.

Franco slapped the floor of the cave with his gloved hand and glared at Mitch. “Why fuck us up?”

“Because these people don’t belong to you,” Mitch said. “They don’t belong to anybody.”

“They are dead!” Franco shouted. “They do not belong to themselves, do they, anymore?”

Tilde’s lips formed a straight, grim line. “Mitch is right. We are not going to sell them.”

A little scared now, Mitch’s next words rushed out. “I don’t know what else you might plan to do with them, but I don’t think you’re going to control them, or sell the rights, make Caveman Barbie dolls or whatever.” He took a deep breath.

“No, again, I say Mitch is right,” Tilde stated slowly. Franco regarded her with a speculative squint. “This is very huge. We will be good citizens. They are everybody’s ancestors. Mama and Papa to the world.”

Mitch could definitely feel the headache creeping up. The earlier oblong of light had been a familiar warning: oncoming head-crushing train. Climbing back down the mountain would be difficult or even impossible if he was going to fall under the spell of a migraine, a real brain-splitter. He hadn’t brought any medicine. “Are you planning to kill me up here?” he asked Tilde.

Franco shot a glance at him, then rolled to look at Tilde, waiting for an answer.

Tilde grinned and tapped her chin. “I am thinking,” she said. “What rogues we would be. Famous stories. Pirates of the prehistoric. Yo ho ho and a bottle of Schnapps.”

“What we need to do,” Mitch said, assuming that she had answered in the negative, “is to take a tissue sample from each body, with minimal intrusion. Then—”

He reached for the torch and shone the light beyond the close, sleepy-eyed heads of the male and female to the far recesses, about three yards farther back in the cave. Something small lay there, bundled in fur.

“What’s that?” he and Franco asked simultaneously.

Mitch considered. He could hunker and sidle his way around the female without disturbing anything except the dust. On the other hand, it would be best to leave everything completely untouched, to retreat from the cave now and bring back the real experts. The tissue samples would be enough evidence, he thought. Enough was known about Neandertal DNA from bone studies. A confirmation could be made and the cave could be kept sealed until—

He pressed his temples and closed his eyes.

Tilde tapped his shoulder and gently pushed him out of the way. “I am smaller,” she said. She crawled beside the female toward the rear of the cave.

Mitch watched and said nothing. This was what it felt like to truly sin—the sin of overwhelming curiosity. He would never forgive himself, but, he rationalized, how could he stop her without harming the bodies? Besides, she was being careful.

Tilde squeezed so low her face was on the floor beside the bundle. She gripped one end of the fur with two fingers and slowly turned it around.

Mitch's throat seized with anguish. "Shine a light," she demanded. Mitch did so.

Franco aimed his torch as well.

"It's a doll," Tilde said.

From the top of the bundle peered a small face, like a dark and wrinkled apple, with two tiny sunken black eyes.

"No," Mitch said. "It's a baby."

Tilde pushed back a few inches and made a small surprised *hmm!*

Mitch's headache rolled over him like thunder.

Franco held Mitch's arm near the cave entrance. Tilde was still inside. Mitch's migraine had progressed to a real Force 9, with visuals and all, and it was an effort to keep from curling up and screaming. He had already experienced dry heaves, by the side of the cave, and he was now shivering violently.

He knew with absolute certainty that he was going to die up here, on the threshold of the most extraordinary anthropological discovery of all time, leaving it in the hands of Tilde and Franco, who were little better than thieves.

"What is she doing in there?" Mitch moaned, head bowed. Even the twilight seemed too bright. It was getting dark quickly, however.

"Not your worry," Franco said, and gripped his arm more tightly.

Mitch pulled back and felt blindly in his pocket for the vials containing the samples. He had managed to take two small plugs from the upper thighs of the man and the woman before the pain had peaked; now, he could hardly see straight.

Forcing his eyes open, he looked out upon a heavenly sapphire blueness precisely painting the mountain, the ice, the snow, overlain by flashes in the corners of his eyes like tiny bolts of lightning.

Tilde emerged from the cave, camera in one hand, pack in the other. "We have enough to prove everything," she said. She spoke Italian to Franco, rapidly and in a low voice. Mitch did not understand, nor did he care to.

He simply wanted to get down the mountain and climb into a warm bed and sleep, to wait for the extraordinary pain, all too familiar but ever fresh and new, to subside.

Dying was another option, not without its attractions.

Franco roped him up deftly. "Come, old friend," the Italian said with a

kindly jerk on the rope. Mitch lurched forward, clenching his fists by his sides to keep from pounding his head. "The ax," Tilde said, and Franco slipped Mitch's ice ax out of his belt, where it tangled with his legs, and into his pack. "You are in bad shape," Franco said. Mitch clenched his eyes shut; the twilight was filled with lightning, and the thunder was pain, a silent crushing of his head with every step. Tilde took the lead and Franco followed close behind. "Different way," Tilde said. "It's icing badly and the bridge is rotten."

Mitch opened his eyes. The arête was a rusty knife edge of carbon shadow against the purest ultramarine sky, fading to starry black. Each breath was colder and harder to take. He sweated profusely.

He plodded automatically, tried to descend a rock slope dotted with patches of crunchy snow, slipped and caught on the rope, dragging Franco a couple of yards down the slope. The Italian did not protest, instead rearranged the rope around Mitch and soothed him like a child. "Okay, old friend. This is better. This is better. Watch the step." "I can't stand it much more, Franco," Mitch whispered. "I haven't had a migraine for over two years. I didn't even bring pills." "Never mind. Just watch your feet and do what I say." Franco shouted ahead to Tilde. Mitch felt her near and squinted up at her. Her face was framed with clouds and his own lights and sparks. "Snow coming," she said. "We have to hurry." They spoke in Italian and German and Mitch thought they were talking about leaving him here on the ice. "I can go," he said. "I can walk." So they began walking again on the glacier slope, accompanied by the sound of the ice fall as the slow ancient river flowed on, splitting and booming, rattling and cracking on its descent. Somewhere giant hands seemed to applaud. The wind picked up and Mitch turned away from it. Franco turned him around again and pushed less gently. "No time for stupidity, old friend. Walk." "I'm trying." "Just walk." The wind became a fist pressed against his face. He leaned into it. Ice crystals stung his cheeks and he tried to pull up his hood and his fingers were like sausages in his gloves. "He can't do this," Tilde said, and Mitch saw her walk around him, wrapped in swirling snow. The snow straightened suddenly and they all jerked as the wind grabbed them. Franco's torch illuminated millions of flakes whipping past in horizontal streaks. They discussed building a snow cave, but the ice was too hard, it would take too long to dig out. "Go! Just head down!" Franco shouted at Tilde, and she mutely complied. Mitch did not know where they were going, did not much care. Franco cursed steadily in Italian but the wind drowned him out, and

Mitch, as he dragged forward, pulling up and putting down his boots, digging in his crampons, trying to stay upright, Mitch knew that Franco was there only by his pressure on the ropes. “The gods are angry!” Tilde yelled, a cry half triumphant, half jesting, with high excitement and even exaltation. Franco must have fallen, because Mitch found himself being tugged hard from the rear. He had somehow come to be holding his ax and as he went over, he fell on his stomach and had the clarity of will to dig the ax into the ice and stop his descent. Franco seemed to dangle for a moment, a few yards down the slope. Mitch looked in that direction. The lights were gone from his vision. Somehow he was freezing, really freezing, and that was allaying the pain of his migraine. Franco was not visible in the straight parallel bands of snow. The wind whistled and then shrieked and Mitch pulled his face close to the ice. His ax slipped from its hole and he slid two or three yards. With the pain fading, he wondered how he might get out of this alive. He dug his crampons into the ice and pulled himself back up the slope, by main force dragging Franco with him. Tilde helped Franco get to his feet. His nose was bloody and he seemed stunned. He must have hit his head on the ice. Tilde glanced at Mitch. She smiled and touched his shoulder. So friendly. Nobody said anything. Sharing the pain and the creeping evil warmth made them very close. Franco made a sobbing, sucking sound, licked at his bloody lip, pulled their ropes closer. They were so exposed. The fall cracked above the shrieking wind, boomed, snapped, made a sound like a tractor on a gravel road. Mitch felt the ice beneath him shudder. They were too close to the fall and it was really active, making a lot of noise. He pulled on the ropes to Tilde and they came back loose, cut. He pulled on the ropes behind him. Franco stumped out of the wind and snow, his face covered with blood, his eyes glaring behind his goggles. Franco knelt beside Mitch and then leaned over on his gloved hands, rolled to one side. Mitch grabbed his shoulder but Franco refused to budge. Mitch got up and faced downslope. The wind blew from up the slope and he keeled forward. He tried it again, leaning backward awkwardly, and fell. Crawling was the only option. He dragged Franco behind him, but that was impossible after a few feet. He crawled back to Franco and began to push him. The ice was rough, not slick, and did not help. Mitch did not know what to do. They had to get out of the wind, but he could not see well enough where they were to choose any particular direction. He was glad Tilde had abandoned them. She could get away now and maybe someone would make babies with her, neither of them of course; they were now out



of the old evolutionary loop. All responsibility shed. He felt sorry that Franco was so banged up. “Hey, old friend,” he shouted into the man’s ear. “Wake up and give me some help or we’re going to die.” Franco did not respond. It was possible he was dead already, but Mitch did not think a simple fall could kill someone. Mitch found the torch around Franco’s wrist, removed it, switched it on, peered into Franco’s eyes as he tried to open them with his gloved fingers, not easy, but the pupils were small and uneven. Yup. He had pranged himself hard on the ice, causing concussion and flattening his nose. That was where all the new blood was coming from. The blood and snow made a red messy slush on Franco’s face. Mitch gave up talking to him. He thought about cutting himself loose, but couldn’t bring himself to do that. Franco had treated him well. Rivals united on the ice by death. Mitch doubted any woman would really feel a romantic pang, hearing about this. In his experience, women did not much care about such things. Dying, yes, but not the camaraderie of men. So confusing now and warming rapidly. His coat was very warm, and his snow pants. Topping it off was that he had to pee. Death with dignity was apparently out of the question. Franco groaned. No, it wasn’t Franco. The ice beneath them vibrated, then jumped, and they tumbled and slid to one side. Mitch caught sight of the torch beam illuminating a big block of ice rising, or they were falling. Yes, indeed, and he closed his eyes in anticipation. But he did not hit his head, though all the breath was slammed out of him. They landed in snow and the wind stopped. Clumped snow fell on them, and a couple of heavy chunks of ice pinned Mitch’s leg. It got quiet and still. Mitch tried to lift his leg but soft warmth resisted and the other leg was stiff. It was decided.

In no time at all, he opened his eyes wide to the sky-spanning glare of a blinding blue sun.

## 4

## Gordi

Lado, shaking his head in sad embarrassment, left Kaye in Beck's care to return to Tbilisi. He could not be away from the Eliava Institute for long.

The UN took over the small Rustaveli Tiger in Gordi, renting all of the rooms. The Russians pitched more tents and slept between the village and the graves.

Under the pained but smiling attention of the innkeeper, a stout black-haired woman named Lika, the UN peacekeepers ate a late supper of bread and tripe soup, served with big glasses of vodka. Everyone retired to bed shortly after, except for Kaye and Beck.

Beck pulled a chair up to the wooden table and placed a glass of white wine in front of her. She had not touched the vodka.

"This is Manavi. Best they have here—for us, at any rate." Beck sat and directed a belch into his fist. "Excuse me. What do you know about Georgian history?"

"Not a lot," Kaye said. "Recent politics. Science."

Beck nodded and folded his arms. "Our dead mothers," he said, "could conceivably have been murdered during the troubles—the civil war. But I don't know of any actions in or around Gordi." He made a dubious face. "They *could* be victims from the 1930s, the '40s, or the 1950s. But you say no. Good point about the roots." He rubbed his nose and then scratched his chin. "For such a beautiful country, there's a fair amount of grim history."

Beck reminded Kaye of Saul. Most men his age somehow reminded Kaye of Saul, twelve years her senior, back on Long Island, far away in more than just distance. Saul the brilliant, Saul the weak, Saul whose mind creaked more every month. She sat up and stretched her arms, scraping the legs of her chair against the tile floor.

"I'm more interested in her future," Kaye said. "Half the pharmaceutical and medical companies in the United States are making pilgrimages here. Georgia's expertise could save millions."

"Helpful viruses."

"Right," Kaye said. "Phages."

"Attack only bacteria."

Kaye nodded.

"I read that Georgian troops carried little vials filled with phages

during the troubles,” Beck said. “They swallowed them if they were going into battle, or sprayed them on wounds or burns before they could get to hospital.”

Kaye nodded. “They’ve been using phage therapy since the twenties, when Felix d’Hérelle came here to work with George Eliava. D’Hérelle was sloppy; the results were mixed back then, and soon enough we had sulfa and then penicillin. We’ve pretty much ignored phages until now. So we end up with deadly bacteria resistant to all known antibiotics. But not to phages.”

Through the window of the small lobby, over the roofs of the low houses across the street, she could see the mountains gleaming in the moonlight. She wanted to go to sleep but knew she would lie awake in the small hard bed for hours.

“Here’s to the prettier future,” Beck said. He lifted his glass and drained it. Kaye took a sip. The wine’s sweetness and acidity made a lovely balance, like tart apricots.

“Dr. Jakeli told me you were climbing Kazbeg,” Beck said. “Taller than Mont Blanc. I’m from Kansas. No mountains at all. Hardly any rocks.” He smiled down at the table, as if embarrassed to meet her gaze. “I love mountains. I apologize for dragging you away from your business . . . and your pleasure.”

“I wasn’t climbing,” she said. “Just hiking.”

“I’ll try to have you out of here in a few days,” Beck said. “Geneva has records of missing persons and possible massacres. If there’s a match and we can date it to the thirties, we’ll hand it over to the Georgians and the Russians.” Beck wanted the graves to be old, and she could hardly blame him.

“What if it’s recent?” Kaye asked.

“We’ll bring in a full investigation team from Vienna.”

Kaye gave him a clear, no-nonsense look. “It’s recent,” she said.

Beck finished off his glass, stood, and clutched the back of his chair with his hands. “I agree,” he said with a sigh. “What made you give up on criminology? If I’m not intruding . . .”

“I learned too much about people,” Kaye said. *Cruel, rotten, dirty, desperately stupid people.* She told Beck about the Brooklyn homicide lieutenant who had taught her class. He had been a devout Christian. Showing them pictures of a particularly horrendous crime scene, with two dead men, three dead women, and a dead child, he had told the students, “The souls of these victims are no longer in their bodies. Don’t sympathize with them.

Sympathize with the ones left behind. Get over it. Get to work. And remember: you work for God.”

“His beliefs kept him sane,” Kaye said.

“And you? Why did you change your major?”

“I didn’t believe,” Kaye said.

Beck nodded, flexed his hands on the back of the chair. “No armor. Well, do your best. You’re all we’ve got for the time being.” He said good night and walked to the narrow stairs, climbing with a fast, light tread.

Kaye sat at the table for several minutes, then stepped through the inn’s front door. She stood on the granite flagstone step beside the narrow cobbled street and inhaled the night air, with its faint odor of town sewage. Over the rooftop of the house opposite the inn she could see the snow-capped crest of a mountain, so clear she could almost reach out and touch it.

In the morning, she came awake wrapped in warm sheets and a blanket that hadn’t been laundered in some time. She stared at a few stray hairs, not her own, trapped in the thick gray wool near her face. The small wooden bed with carved and red-painted posts occupied a plaster-walled room about eight feet wide and ten feet long, with a single window behind the bed, a single wooden chair, and a plain oak table bearing a washstand. Tbilisi had modern hotels, but Gordi was away from the new tourist trails, too far off the Military Road.

She slipped out of bed, splashed water on her face, and pulled on her denims and blouse and coat. She was reaching for the iron latch when she heard a heavy knock. Beck called her name. She opened the door and blinked at him owlishly.

“They’re running us out of town,” he said, his face hard. “They want all of us back in Tbilisi by tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“We’re not wanted. Regular army soldiers are here to escort us. I’ve told them you’re a civilian advisor and not a member of the team. They don’t care.”

“Jesus,” Kaye said. “Why the turnaround?”

Beck made a disgusted face. “The *sakrebulo*, the council, I presume. Nervous about their nice little community. Or maybe it comes from higher up.”

“Doesn’t sound like the new Georgia,” Kaye said. She was concerned about how this might affect her work with the institute.

“I’m surprised, too,” Beck said. “We’ve stepped on somebody’s toes. Please pack your case and join us downstairs.”

He turned to go, but Kaye took his arm. "Are the phones working?"

"I don't know," he said. "You're welcome to use one of our satellite phones."

"Thanks. And—Dr. Jakeli is back in Tbilisi by now. I'd hate to make him drive out here again."

"We'll take you to Tbilisi," Beck said. "If that's where you want to go."

Kaye said, "That'll be fine."

The white UN Cherokees gleamed in the bright sun outside the inn. Kaye peered at them through the window panes of the lobby and waited for the innkeeper to bring out an antiquated black dial phone and plug it into the jack by the front desk. She picked up the receiver, listened to it, then handed it to Kaye: dead. In a few more years, Georgia would catch up with the twenty-first century. For now, there were less than a hundred lines to the outside world, and with all calls routed through Tbilisi, service was sporadic.

The innkeeper smiled nervously. She had been nervous since they arrived.

Kaye carried her bag outside. The UN team had assembled, six men and three women. Kaye stood beside a Canadian woman named Doyle, while Hunter brought out the satellite phone.

First Kaye made a call to Tbilisi to speak with Tamara Mirianishvili, her main contact at the institute. After several tries, the call went through. Tamara sympathized and wondered what the fuss was about, then said Kaye was welcome to come back and stay a few more days. "It is shameful, to push your nose into this. We'll have fun, make you cheerful again," Tamara said.

"Have there been any calls from Saul?" Kaye asked.

"Twice he calls," Tamara said. "He says ask more about biofilms. How do phages work in biofilms, when the bacteria get all socialized."

"And are you going to tell us?" Kaye asked in jest.

Tamara gave her a tinkling, sunny laugh. "Must we tell you all our secrets? We have no contracts yet, Kaye dear!"

"Saul's right. It could be a big issue," Kaye said. Even at the worst of times, Saul was on track with their science and their business.

"Come back, and I'll show you some of our biofilm research, special, just because you are nice," Tamara said.

“Wonderful.”

Kaye thanked Tamara and handed the phone back to the corporal.

A Georgian staff car, an old black Volga, arrived with several army officers, who exited on the left side. Major Chikurishvili of the security forces stepped out of the right, his face stormier than ever. He looked like he might explode in a cloud of blood and spit.

A young army officer—Kaye had no idea what rank—approached Beck and spoke to him in broken Russian. When they were finished, Beck waved his hand and the UN team climbed into their Jeeps. Kaye rode in the Jeep with Beck.

As they drove west out of Gordi, a few of the townspeople gathered to watch them leave. A little girl stood beside a plastered stone wall and waved: brown-haired, tawny, gray-eyed, strong and lovely. A perfectly normal and delightful little girl.

There was little conversation as Hunter drove them south along the highway, leading the small caravan. Beck stared thoughtfully ahead. The stiff-sprung Jeep bounced over bumps and dropped into ruts and swerved around potholes. Riding in the right rear seat, Kaye thought she might be getting carsick. The radio played pop tunes from Alania and pretty good blues from Azerbaijan and then an incomprehensible talk show that Beck occasionally found amusing. He glanced back at Kaye and she tried to smile bravely.

After a few hours she dozed off and dreamed of bacterial buildups inside the bodies within the trench graves. Biofilms, what most people thought of as slime: little industrious bacterial cities reducing these corpses, these once-living giant evolutionary offspring, back to their native materials. Lovely polysaccharide architectures being laid down within the interior channels, the gut and lungs, the heart and arteries and eyes and brain, the bacteria giving up their wild ways and becoming citified, recycling all; great garbage dump cities of bacteria, cheerfully ignorant of philosophy and history and the character of the dead hulks they now reclaimed.

*Bacteria made us. They take us back in the end. Welcome home.*

She woke up in a sweat. The air was getting warmer as they descended into a long, deep valley. How nice it would be to know nothing about all the inner workings. Animal innocence; the unexamined life is the sweetest. But things go wrong and prompt introspection and examination. The root of all awareness.

“Dreaming?” Beck asked her as they pulled over near a small filling station and garage clapped together from sheets of corrugated metal.

“Nightmares,” Kaye said. “Too much into my work, I guess.”

## 5

### Innsbruck, Austria

**M**itch saw the blue sun swing around and darken and he assumed it was night, but the air was dim green and not at all cold. He felt a prick of pain in his upper thigh, a general sense of unease in his stomach.

He wasn't on the mountain. He tried to blink the gunk from his eyes and reached up to rub his face. A hand stopped him and a soft female voice told him in German to be a good boy. As she wiped his forehead with a cold damp cloth, the woman said, in English, that he was a little chapped and his nose and fingers were frostbitten and that he had a broken leg. A few minutes later he went to sleep again.

No time at all after that, he awoke and managed to sit up in a crisp, firm hospital bed. He was in a room with four other patients, two beside him and two across from him, all male, all less than forty years old. Two had broken legs in movie-comedy slings. The other two had broken arms. Mitch's own leg was in a cast but not in a sling.

All the men were blue-eyed, wiry, handsome in an aquiline way, with thin necks and long jaws. They watched him attentively.

Mitch saw the room clearly now: painted concrete walls, white enameled bed frames, a portable lamp on a chromed stand that he had mistaken for a blue sun, mottled brown tile floor, the dusty smell of steam heat and anti-septic, a general odor of peppermint.

On Mitch's right, a heavily snow-burned young man, skin peeling from his baby-pink cheeks, leaned over to say, “You are the lucky American, are you not?” The pulley and weights on his elevated leg creaked.

“I'm American,” Mitch croaked. “I must be lucky because I'm not dead.”

The men exchanged solemn glances. Mitch could see he had been a topic of conversation for some time.

“We all agree, it is best for fellow mountaineers to inform you.”

Before Mitch could protest that he was not really a mountaineer, the

snow-burned young man told him that his companions were dead. “The Italian you were found with, in the serac, he is broken-neck. And the woman is found much lower down, buried in ice.” Then, his eyes sharply inquisitive—eyes the color of the wild-dog sky Mitch had first seen over the arête—the young man asked, “The newspapers say, the TV say. Where did she get the little corpse baby?”

Mitch coughed. He saw a pitcher of water on a tray by his bed and poured a glass. The mountaineers watched him like athletic elves trussed up in their beds.

Mitch returned their gazes. He tried to hide his dismay. It did him no good to judge Tilde now; no good at all.

The inspector from Innsbruck arrived at noon and sat beside his bed with an attending local police officer to ask questions. The officer spoke better English and translated for him. Their questions were routine, the inspector said, all part of the accident report. Mitch told them he did not know who the woman was, and the inspector responded, after a decent pause, that they had all been seen together in Salzburg. “You and Franco Maricelli and Mathilda Berger.”

“That was Franco’s girlfriend,” he said, feeling sick, trying not to show it. The inspector sighed and pursed his lips disapprovingly, as if this was all very trivial and only a little irritating.

“She was carrying the mummy of an infant. Perhaps a very old mummy. You have no idea where she got it?”

He hoped the police had not gone through his effects and found the vials and recognized their contents. Perhaps he had lost the pack on the glacier. “It’s too bizarre for words,” he said.

The inspector shrugged. “I am not an expert on bodies in the ice. Mitchell, I give you some fatherly advice. I am old enough?”

Mitch admitted the inspector might be old enough. The mountaineers did not even attempt to hide their interest in the proceedings.

“We have spoken to your former employers, the Hayer Museum, in Seattle.”

Mitch blinked slowly.

“They tell us you were involved in the theft of antiquities from the federal government, the skeletal remains of an Indian, called Pasco man, very old. Ten thousand years, found on the banks of the Columbia River. You refused to hand over these remains to the Army Corpse of Engineers.”



“Corps,” Mitch said softly.

“So they arrest you under an antiquities act, and the museum fires you because there is so much publicity.”

“The Indians claimed the bones belonged to an ancestor,” Mitch said, his face flushing with anger at the memory. “They wanted to bury them again.”

The inspector read from his notes. “You were denied access to your collections in the museum, and the bones were confiscated from your house. With many photographs and more publicity.”

“It was legal bullshit! The Army Corps of Engineers had no right to those bones. They were scientifically invaluable—”

“Like this mummified baby from the ice, perhaps?” the inspector asked.

Mitch closed his eyes and looked away. He could see it all very clearly now. *Stupid is not the word. This is fate, pure and simple.*

“You are going to throw up?” the inspector asked, backing away.

Mitch shook his head.

“Already it is known—you were seen with the woman in the Braunschweiger *Hütte*, not ten kilometers from where you were found. A striking woman, beautiful and blond, observers say.”

The mountaineers nodded at this, as if they had been there.

“It is best you tell us everything and we hear it first. I will tell the police in Italy, and the police here in Austria will interview you and maybe it will all be nothing.”

“They were acquaintances,” he said. “She was—used to be—my girlfriend. I mean, we were lovers.”

“Yes. Why did she return to you?”

“They had found something. She thought I might be able to tell them what they had found.”

“Yes?”

Mitchell realized he had no choice. He drank another glass of water, then told the inspector most of what had happened, as precisely and clearly as he could. Since they had not mentioned the vials, he did not mention them, either. The officer took notes and recorded his confession on a small tape machine.

When he was finished, the inspector said, “Someone is sure to want to know where this cave is.”

“Tilde—Mathilda had a camera,” Mitch said wearily. “She took pictures.”

“We found no camera. It might go much easier if you know where the cave is. Such a find . . . very exciting.”

“They have the baby already,” Mitch said. “That should be exciting enough. A Neandertal infant.”

The inspector made a doubtful face. “Nobody says anything about Neandertal. So maybe this is a delusion or joke?”

Mitch was long past losing everything he cared about—his career, his standing as a paleontologist. Once more he had screwed things up royally. “Maybe it was the headache. I’m just groggy. Of course, I’ll help them find the cave,” he said.

“Then there is no crime, merely tragedy.” The inspector rose to leave, and the officer tipped his cap good-bye.

After they were gone, the mountaineer with the peeling cheeks told him, “You are not going home soon.”

“The mountains want you back,” said the least snow-burned of the four, across the room from Mitch, and nodded sagely, as if that explained everything.

“Screw you,” Mitch muttered. He rolled over in the crisp white bed.

## 6

### Eliava Institute, Tbilisi

**L**ado and Tamara and Zamphyra and seven other scientists and students gathered around the two wooden tables on the south end of the main laboratory building. They all lifted their beakers of brandy in toast to Kaye. Candles flickered around the room, reflecting the golden sparkles within the amber-filled glassware. The meal was only halfway finished, and this was the eighth round Lado had led this evening, as *tamada*, toastmaster, for the occasion. “For darling Kaye,” Lado said, “who values our work . . . and promises to make us rich!”

Rabbits, mice, and chickens watched with sleepy eyes from their cages behind the table. Long black benches covered with glassware and racks and incubators and computers hooked to sequencers and analyzers retreated into the gloom at the unlighted end of the lab.

“To Kaye,” Tamara added, “who has seen more of what Sakartvelo, of Georgia, has to offer . . . than we might wish. A brave and understanding woman.”

“What are you, toastmistress?” Lado demanded in irritation. “Why remind us of unpleasant things?”

“What are you, talking of riches, of *money*, at a time like this?” Tamara snapped back.

“I am *tamada!*” Lado roared, standing beside the oak folding table and waving his sloshing glass at the students and scientists. Above slow smiles, none of them said a word in disagreement.

“All right,” Tamara conceded. “Your wish is our command.”

“They have no respect!” Lado complained to Kaye. “Will prosperity destroy tradition?”

The benches made crowded Vs in Kaye’s narrowing perspective. The equipment was hooked into a generator that chugged softly out in the yard beside the building. Saul had supplied two sequencers and a computer; the generator had been supplied by Aventis, a huge multinational.

City power from Tbilisi had been shut off since late that afternoon. They had cooked the farewell dinner over Bunsen burners and in a gas oven.

“Go ahead, toastmaster,” Zamphyra said in affectionate resignation. She waved her fingers at Lado.

“I will.” Lado put down his glass and smoothed his suit. His dark wrinkled face, red as a beet with mountain sunburn, gleamed in the candlelight like rich wood. He reminded Kaye of a toy troll she had loved as a child. From a box concealed under the table he brought out a small crystal glass, intricately cut and beveled. He took a beautiful silver-chased ibex horn and walked to a large amphora propped in a wooden crate in the near corner, behind the table. The amphora, recently pulled from the earth of his own small vineyard outside Tbilisi, was filled with some immense quantity of wine. He lifted a ladle from the amphora’s mouth and poured it slowly into the horn, then again, and again, seven times, until the horn was full. He swirled the wine gently to let it breathe. Red liquid sloshed over his wrist.

Finally, he filled the glass to the brim from the horn, and handed it to Kaye. “If you were a man,” he said, “I would ask you to drink the entire horn, and give us a toast.”

“Lado!” Tamara howled, slapping his arm. He almost dropped the horn, and turned on her in mock surprise.

“What?” he demanded. “Is the glass not beautiful?”

Zamphyra rose to her feet beside the table to waggle a finger at him. Lado grinned more broadly, transformed from a troll into a carmine satyr. He turned slowly toward Kaye.

“What can I do, dear Kaye?” Lado said with a flourish. More wine

dripped from the tip of the horn. “They demand that you must drink *all* of this.”

Kaye had already had her fill of alcohol and did not trust herself to stand. She felt deliciously warm and safe, among friends, surrounded by an ancient darkness thick with amber and golden stars.

She had almost forgotten the graves and Saul and the difficulties awaiting her in New York.

She held out her hands, and Lado danced forward with surprising grace, belying his clumsiness of a few moments before. Not spilling a drop, he deposited the ibex horn into her hands.

“Now, you,” he said.

Kaye knew what was expected. She rose solemnly. Lado had delivered many toasts that evening that had rambled poetically and with no end of invention for long minutes. She doubted she could equal his eloquence, but she would do her best, and she had many things to say, things that had buzzed in her head for the two days since she had come down from Kazbeg.

“There is no land on Earth like the home of wine,” she began, and lifted the horn high. All smiled and raised their beakers. “No land that offers more beauty and more promise to the sick of heart or the sick of body. You have distilled the nectars of new wines to banish the rot and disease the flesh is heir to. You have preserved the tradition and knowledge of seventy years, saving it for the twenty-first century. You are the mages and alchemists of the microscopic age, and now you join the explorers of the West, with an immense treasure to share.”

Tamara translated in a loud whisper for the students and scientists who crowded around the table.

“I am honored to be treated as a friend, and as a colleague. You have shared with me this treasure, and the treasure of Sakartvelo—the mountains, the hospitality, the history, and by no means last or least, the wine.”

She lifted the horn with one hand, and said, “*Gaumarjos phage!*” She pronounced it the Georgian way, *phay-gay*. “*Gaumarjos Sakartvelos!*”

Then she began to drink. She could not savor Lado’s earth-hidden, soil-aged wine the way it deserved, and her eyes watered, but she did not want to stop, either to show her weakness or to end this moment. She swallowed gulp after gulp. Fire moved from her stomach into her arms and legs, and drowsiness threatened to steal her away. But she kept her eyes open and continued to the very bottom of the horn, then upended it, held it out, and lifted it.

“To the kingdom of the small, and all the labors they do for us! All the

glories, the necessities, for which we must forgive the . . . the pain . . .” Her tongue became stiff and her words stumbled. She leaned on the folding table with one hand, and Tamara quietly and unobtrusively brought down her own hand to keep the table from upsetting. “All the things to which we . . . all we have inherited. To bacteria, our worthy opponents, the little mothers of the world!”

Lado and Tamara led the cheers. Zamphyra helped Kaye descend, it seemed from a great height, into her wooden folding chair.

“Wonderful, Kaye,” Zamphyra murmured into her ear. “You come back to Tbilisi any time. You have a home, safe away from your own home.”

Kaye smiled and wiped her eyes, for in her sodden sentiment and relief from the strain of the past days, she was weeping.

The next morning, Kaye felt somber and fuzzy, but experienced no other ill effects from the farewell party. In the two hours before Lado took her to the airport, she walked through the hallways in two of the three laboratory buildings, now almost empty. The staff and most of the graduate student assistants were attending a special meeting in Eliava Hall to discuss the various offers made by American and British and French companies. It was an important and heady moment for the institute; in the next two months, they would probably make their decisions on when and with whom to form alliances. But they could not tell her now. The announcement would come later.

The institute still showed decades of neglect. In most of the labs, the shiny, thick, white or pale green enamel had peeled to show cracked plaster. Plumbing dated from the 1960s, at the latest; much of it was from the '20s and '30s. The brilliant white plastic and stainless steel of new equipment only made more obvious the Bakelite and black enamel or the brass and wood of antique microscopes and other instruments. There were two electron microscopes enshrined in one building—great hulking brutes on massive vibration isolation platforms.

Saul had promised them three new top-of-the-line scanning tunneling microscopes by the end of the year—if EcoBacter was chosen as one of their partners. Aventis or Bristol-Myers Squibb could no doubt do better than that.

Kaye walked between the lab benches, peering through the glass doors of incubators at stacks of petri dishes within, their bottoms filled with a film of agar swept and clouded by bacterial colonies, sometimes marked

by clear circular regions, called plaques, where phages had killed all the bacteria. Day after day, year after year, the researchers in the institute analyzed and cataloged naturally occurring bacteria and their phages. For every strain of bacteria there was at least one and often hundreds of specific phages, and as the bacteria mutated to throw off these unwanted intruders, the phages mutated to match them, a never-ending chase. The Eliava Institute kept one of the largest libraries of phages in the world, and they could respond to bacterial samples by producing phages within days.

On the wall over the new lab equipment, posters showed the bizarre spaceshiplike geometric head and tail structures of the ubiquitous T-even phages—T2, T4, and T6, so designated in the 1920s—hovering over the comparatively huge surfaces of *Escherichia coli* bacteria. Old photographs, old conceptions—that phages simply preyed upon bacteria, hijacking their DNA merely to produce new phages. Many phages did in fact do just that, keeping bacterial populations in check. Others, known as lysogenic phages, became genetic stowaways, hiding within the bacteria and inserting their genetic messages into the host DNA. Retroviruses did something very similar in larger plants and animals.

Lysogenic phages suppressed their own expression and assembly and were perpetuated within the bacterial DNA, carried down through the generations. They would jump ship when their host showed clear signs of stress, creating hundreds or even thousands of phage offspring per cell, bursting from the host to escape.

Lysogenic phages were almost useless in phage therapy. They were far more than mere predators. Often these viral invaders gave their hosts resistance to other phages. Sometimes they carried genes from one cell to the next, genes that could transform the cell. Lysogenic phages had been known to take relatively harmless bacteria—benign strains of *Vibrio*, for example—and transform them into virulent *Vibrio cholerae*. Outbreaks of deadly strains of *E. coli* in beef had been attributed to transfers of toxin-producing genes by phages. The institute worked hard to identify and eliminate these phages from their preparations.

Kaye, however, was fascinated by them. She had spent much of her career studying lysogenic phages in bacteria and retroviruses in apes and humans. Hollowed-out retroviruses were commonly used in gene therapy and genetic research as delivery systems for corrective genes, but Kaye's interest was less practical.

Many metazoans—nonbacterial life-forms—carried the dormant remains of ancient retroviruses in their genes. As much as one third of the

human genome, our complete genetic record, was made up of these so-called endogenous retroviruses.

She had written three papers about human endogenous retrovirus, or HERV, suggesting they might contribute to novelty in the genome—and much more. Saul agreed with her. “Everyone knows they carry little secrets,” he had once told her, when they were courting. Their courtship had been odd and lovely. Saul himself was odd and sometimes quite lovely and kind; she just never knew when those times would be.

Kaye paused for a moment by a metal lab stool and rested her hand on its Masonite seat. Saul had always been interested in the bigger picture; she, on the other hand, had been content with smaller successes, tidier chunks of knowledge. So much hunger had led to many disappointments. He had quietly watched his younger wife achieve so much more. She knew it hurt him. Not to have immense success, not to be a genius, was for Saul a major failing.

Kaye lifted her head and inhaled the air: bleach, steam heat, a waft of fresh paint and carpentry from the adjacent library. She liked this old lab with its antiques and humility and decades-old story of hardship and success. The days she had spent here, and on the mountain, had been among the most pleasant of her recent life. Tamara and Zamphyra and Lado had not only made her feel welcome, they had seemed to open up instantly and generously to become family to a wandering foreign woman.

Saul might have a very big success here. A double success, perhaps. What he needed to feel important and useful.

She turned and through the open doorway saw Tengiz, the stooped old lab caretaker, talking to a short, plump young man in gray slacks and a sweatshirt. They stood in the corridor between the lab and the library. The young man looked at her and smiled. Tengiz smiled as well, nodded vigorously, and pointed to Kaye. The man sauntered into the lab as if he owned it.

“Are you Kaye Lang?” he asked in American English with a distinct Southern drawl. He was shorter than her by several inches, about her age or a little older, with a thin black beard and curly black hair. His eyes, also black, were small and intelligent.

“Yes,” she said.

“Pleasure to meet you. My name is Christopher Dicken. I’m from the Epidemic Intelligence Service of the National Center for Infectious Diseases in Atlanta—another Georgia, a long way from here.”

Kaye smiled and shook his hand. “I didn’t know you were going to be here,” she said. “What’s the NCID, the CDC—”

“You went out to a site near Gordi, two days ago,” Dicken interrupted her.

“They chased us away,” Kaye said.

“I know. I spoke with Colonel Beck yesterday.”

“Why would you be interested?”

“Could be for no good reason.” He thinned his lips and lifted his eyebrows, then smiled again, shrugging this off. “Beck says the UN and all Russian peacekeepers have pulled out of the area and returned to Tbilisi, at the vigorous request of the parliament and President Shevardnadze. Odd, don’t you think?”

“Embarrassing for business,” Kaye murmured. Tengiz listened from the hall. She frowned at him, more in puzzlement than in warning. He wandered away.

“Yeah,” Dicken said. “Old troubles. How old, would you say?”

“What—the grave?”

Dicken nodded.

“Five years. Maybe less.”

“The women were pregnant.”

“Yesss . . .” She dragged her answer out, trying to riddle why this would interest a man from the Centers for Disease Control. “The two I saw.”

“No chance of a misidentification? Full-term infants impacted in the grave?”

“None,” she said. “They were about six or seven months along.”

“Thanks.” Dicken held out his hand again and shook hers politely. He turned to leave. Tengiz was crossing the hall outside the door and hustled aside as Dicken passed through. The EIS investigator glanced back at Kaye and tossed a quick salute.

Tengiz leaned his head to one side and grinned toothlessly. He looked guilty as hell.

Kaye sprinted for the door and caught up with Dicken in the courtyard. He was climbing into a small rental Nissan.

“Excuse me!” she called out.

“Sorry. Gotta go.” Dicken slammed the door and turned on the engine.

“Christ, you sure know how to arouse suspicions!” Kaye said loudly enough for him to hear through the closed window.

Dicken rolled the window down and grimaced amiably. “Suspicious about what?”

“What in hell are you doing here?”



“Rumors,” he said, looking over his shoulder to see if the way was clear. “That’s all I can say.”

He spun the car around in the gravel and drove off, maneuvering between the main building and the second lab. Kaye folded her arms and frowned after him.

Lado called from the main building, poking out of a window. “Kaye! We are done. You are ready?”

“Yes!” Kaye answered, walking toward the window. “Did you see him?”

“Who?” Lado asked, face blank.

“A man from the Centers for Disease Control. He said his name was Dicken.”

“I saw no one. They have an office on Abasheli Street. You could call.”

She shook her head. There wasn’t time, and it was none of her business anyway. “Never mind,” she said.

Lado was unusually somber as he drove her to the airport.

“Is it good news, or bad?” she asked.

“I am not allowed to say,” he replied. “We should, as you say, keep our options open? We are like babes in the woods.”

Kaye nodded and stared straight ahead as they entered the parking area. Lado helped her take her bags to the new international terminal, past lines of taxis with sharp-eyed drivers waiting impatiently. The check-in desk at British Mediterranean Airlines had a short line. Already Kaye felt she was in the middle zone between worlds, closer to New York than to Lado’s Georgia or the Gergeti church or Mount Kazbeg.

As she reached the front of the line and pulled out her passport and tickets, Lado stood with arms folded, squinting at the watery sunlight through the terminal windows.

The clerk, a young blond woman with ghostly pale skin, slowly worked through the tickets and papers. She finally looked up to say, “No off going. No taking.”

“Beg pardon?”

The woman lifted her eyes to the ceiling as if this would give her strength or cleverness and tried again. “No Baku. No Heathrow. No JFK. No Vienna.”

“What, they’re gone?” Kaye asked in exasperation. She looked helplessly at Lado, who stepped over the vinyl-covered ropes and addressed the

woman in stern and reproving tones, then pointed to Kaye and lifted his bushy brows, as if to say, *Very Important Person!*

The pale young woman's cheeks acquired some color. With infinite patience, she looked at Kaye and began speaking, in rapid Georgian, something about the weather, hail moving in, unusual storm. Lado translated in spaced single words: hail, unusual, soon.

"When can I get out?" she asked the woman.

Lado listened to the clerk's explanation with a stern expression, then lifted his shoulders and turned his face toward Kaye. "Next week, next flight. Or flight to Vienna, Tuesday. Day after tomorrow."

Kaye decided to rebook through Vienna. There were now four people in line behind Kaye, and they were showing signs of both amusement and impatience. By their dress and language, they were probably not going to New York or London.

Lado walked with her up the stairs and sat across from her in the echoing waiting area. She needed to think, to sort out her plans. A few old women sold Western cigarettes and perfume and Japanese watches from small booths around the perimeter. Nearby, two young men slept on opposite benches, snoring in tandem. The walls were covered with posters in Russian, the lovely curling Georgian script, and in German and French. Castles, tea plantations, bottles of wine, the suddenly small and distant mountains whose pure colors survived even the fluorescent lights.

"I know, you need to call your husband, he will miss you," Lado said. "We can return to the institute—you are welcome, always!"

"No, thank you," Kaye said, suddenly feeling a little sick. Premonition had nothing to do with it: she could read Lado like a book. What had they done wrong? Had a larger firm made an even sweeter offer?

What would Saul do when he found out? All their planning had been based on his optimism about being able to convert friendship and charity into a solid business relationship . . .

They were so close.

"There is the Metechi Palace," Lado said. "Best hotel in Tbilisi . . . best in Georgia. I take you to the Metechi! You can be a real tourist, like in the guide books! Maybe you have time to take a hot spring bath . . . relax before you go home."

Kaye nodded and smiled but it was obvious her heart was not in it. Suddenly, impetuously, Lado leaned forward and clutched her hand in his dry, cracked fingers, roughened by so many washings and immersions. He

pounded his hand and hers lightly on her knee. "It is no end! It is a beginning! We must all be strong and resourceful!"

This brought tears to Kaye's eyes. She looked at the posters again—Elbrus and Kazbeg draped with clouds, the Gergeti church, vineyards and high tilled fields.

Lado threw his hands up in the air, swore eloquently in Georgian, and leaped to his feet. "I tell them it is not best!" he insisted. "I tell the bureaucrats in the government, we have worked with you, with Saul, for three years, and it is not to be overturned in one night! Who needs an exclusive, no? I will take you to Metechi."

Kaye smiled her thanks and Lado sat down again, bending over, shaking his head glumly and folding his hands. "It is an outrage," he said, "what we have to do in today's world."

The young men continued snoring.

## 7

### New York

**C**hristopher Dicken arrived at JFK, by coincidence, on the same evening as Kaye Lang, and saw her waiting to go through customs. She was transferring her luggage to a cart and did not notice him.

She looked dragged out, wan. Dicken had been in the air himself for thirty-six hours, returning from Turkey with two locked metal cases and a duffel bag. He certainly did not want to run into Lang under the present circumstances.

Dicken was not sure why he had gone to see Lang at Eliava. Perhaps because they had separately experienced the same horror outside Gordi. Perhaps to discover if she knew what was happening in the United States, the reason he had been recalled; perhaps just to meet the attractive and intelligent woman whose picture he had seen on the EcoBacter web site.

He showed his CDC identification and NCID import pass to a customs supervisor, filled out the requisite five forms, and slouched through a side door into an empty hall. Coffee nerves gave everything an extra sour edge. He had not slept a wink on the entire flight and had slugged back five cups in the hour before landing. He had wanted time to research and think and be prepared for the meeting with Mark Augustine, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Augustine was in Manhattan now, giving a talk at a conference on new AIDS treatments.

Dicken carried the cases to the parking garage. He had lost all track of time on the plane and in the airport; he was a little surprised to discover dusk falling over New York.

He made his way through a labyrinth of stairs and elevators and drove his government Dodge out of long-term parking and faced the bleak gray skies above Jamaica Bay. Traffic on the Van Wyck Expressway was dense. With a solicitous hand, he steadied the sealed cases on the passenger seat. The first case held dry ice to preserve a few vials of blood and urine from a patient in Turkey, and tissue samples from her rejected fetus. The second contained two sealed plastic pouches of mummified epidermal and muscle tissue, courtesy of the officer in charge of the United Nations extended peacekeeping mission in the Republic of Georgia, Colonel Nicholas Beck.

The tissue from the graves near Gordi was a long shot, but there was a pattern emerging in Dicken's mind—a very intriguing and disturbing pattern. He had spent three years tracking down the viral equivalent of a boojum: a sexually transmitted disease that struck only pregnant women and invariably caused miscarriages. It was a potential bombshell, just what Augustine had tasked Dicken to find: something so horrible, so provocative, that funding for the CDC would be guaranteed to rise.

During those years, Dicken had gone time and again to Ukraine, Georgia, and Turkey, hoping to gather samples and put together an epidemiological map. Time and again, public health officials in each of the three nations had stonewalled him. They had their reasons. Dicken had heard of no fewer than three and as many as seven mass graves containing the bodies of men and women who had supposedly been killed to prevent the spread of this disease. Getting samples from local hospitals had proven extremely difficult, even when the countries had made formal agreements with the CDC and the World Health Organization. He had been allowed to visit only the grave in Gordi, and that one because it was under UN investigation. He had taken his samples from the victims an hour after Kaye Lang had left.

Dicken had never before dealt with a conspiracy to hide the existence of a disease.

All his work could have been important, just what Augustine needed, but it was about to be overshadowed, if not blown wide open. While Dicken had been in Europe, the quarry had broken cover on the CDC's home turf. A young researcher at UCLA Medical Center, looking for a common

element in seven rejected fetuses, had found an unknown virus. He had shipped the samples to CDC-funded epidemiologists in San Francisco. The researchers had copied and sequenced the virus's genetic material. They had reported their findings immediately to Mark Augustine.

Augustine had called Dicken home.

Rumors were spreading already about the discovery of the first infectious human endogenous retrovirus, or HERV. As well, there were a few scattered news stories about a virus that caused miscarriages. So far, no one outside the CDC had yet put the two together. On the plane from London, Dicken had spent an expensive half hour on the Internet, visiting key professional sites and news groups, finding nowhere a detailed description of the discovery, but everywhere a slam-dunk predictable curiosity. No wonder. Someone could end up getting a Nobel—and Dicken was ready to lay odds that that someone would be Kaye Lang.

As a professional virus hunter, Dicken had long had a fascination with HERV, the genetic fossils of ancient diseases. Lang had first come to Dicken's attention two years ago when she published three papers describing sites in the human genome, on chromosomes 14 and 17, where parts of potentially complete and infectious HERV could be found. Her most detailed paper had appeared in *Virology*: "A Model for Expression, Assembly, and Lateral Transmission of Chromosomally Scattered *env*, *pol*, and *gag* Genes: Viable Ancient Retroviral Elements in Humans and Simians."

The nature of the outbreak and its possible extent was a closely guarded secret for the time being, but a few insiders at the CDC knew this much: The retroviruses found in the fetuses were genetically identical with HERV that had been part of the human genome since the evolutionary branching of Old World and New World monkeys. Every human on Earth carried them, but they were no longer simply genetic garbage or abandoned fragments. Something had stimulated scattered segments of HERV to express, then assemble the proteins and RNA they encoded into a particle capable of leaving the body and infecting another individual.

All seven of the rejected fetuses had been severely malformed.

These particles were causing disease, probably the very disease that Dicken had been tracking for the past three years. The disease had already received an in-house name at the CDC: Herod's flu.

With the mix of brilliance and luck that characterized most great scientific careers, Lang had precisely pegged the locations of the genes that were

apparently causing Herod's flu. But she did not yet have a clue what had happened; he could tell that in her eyes in Tbilisi.

Something more besides had drawn Dicken to Kaye Lang's work. With her husband, she had written papers on the evolutionary significance of transposable genetic elements, so-called jumping genes: transposons, retrotransposons, and even HERV. Transposable elements could change when, where, and how often genes expressed, causing mutations, ultimately altering the physical nature of an organism.

Transposable elements, retrogenes, had very likely once been the precursors of viruses; some had mutated and learned how to exit the cell, wrapped in protective capsids and envelopes, the genetic equivalents of space suits. A few had later returned as retroviruses, like prodigal sons; some of those, over the millennia, had infected germ-line cells—eggs or sperm or their precursors—and somehow lost their potency. These had become HERV.

In his travels, Dicken had heard from reliable sources in Ukraine of women bearing subtly and not-so-subtly different children, of children immaculately conceived, of entire villages being razed and sterilized . . . In the wake of a plague of miscarriages.

All rumors, but to Dicken evocative, even compelling. In his hunting, he relied on well-honed instincts. The stories resonated with something he had been thinking about for over a year.

Perhaps there had been a conspiracy of mutagens. Perhaps Chernobyl or some other Soviet-era radiation disaster had triggered the release of the endogenous retrovirus that caused Herod's flu. So far, he had mentioned this theory to no one, however.

In the Midtown Tunnel, a big panel truck decorated with happy dancing cows swerved and nearly hit him. He stood on the Dodge's brakes. Squealing tires and a miss of mere inches brought sweat to his brow and unleashed all his anger and frustration. "Fuck you!" he shouted at the unseen driver. "Next time I'll carry Ebola!"

He was feeling less than charitable. The CDC would have to go public, perhaps in a few weeks. By that time, if the charts were accurate, there would be well over five thousand cases of Herod's flu in the United States alone.

And Christopher Dicken would be credited with little more than a good soldier's footwork.

**Long Island, New York**

**T**he green and white house stood on top of a low hill, medium in size but stately, 1940s Colonial, surrounded by old oaks and poplars, as well as rhododendrons she had planted three years ago.

Kaye had called from the airport and picked up a message from Saul. He was at a client lab in Philadelphia and would be back later in the evening. It was seven now and the twilight sky over Long Island was glorious. Fluffy clouds broke free from a dissipating mass of ominous gray. Starlings made the oaks noisy as a nursery.

She unlocked the door, pushed her bags through, and keyed in her code to deactivate the alarm. The house smelled musty. She put down her bags as one of their two cats, an orange tabby named Crickson, sallied into the hallway from the living room, claws ticking faintly on the warm teak floor. Kaye picked him up and skritchd him under the neck and he purred and mewed like a sick calf. The other cat, Temin, was nowhere in sight. She guessed he was outside, hunting.

The living room made her heart sag. Dirty clothes had been scattered everywhere. Microwave cardboard dishes lay scattered on the coffee table and oriental rug before the couch. Books and newspapers and yellow pages torn from an old phone book sprawled over the dining table. The musty smell came from the kitchen: rotten vegetables, stale coffee grounds, plastic food wrappers.

Saul had had a bad time of it. As usual, she had returned just in time to clean up.

Kaye opened the front door and all the windows.

She fried herself a small steak and made a green salad with bottled dressing. As she opened a bottle of pinot noir, Kaye noticed an envelope on the white tile counter near the espresso maker. She set the wine out to breathe, then tore open the envelope. Inside was a flowery greeting card with a scrawled note from Saul.

*Kaye.*

*Sweetest Kaye, love love love I am so sorry. I missed you and this time it shows, all over the house. Don't clean up. I'll have Caddy do it*

*tomorrow and pay her extra. Just relax. The bedroom is spotless. I made sure of that.*

*Crazy old Saul*

Kaye folded the note with an unmollified sniff and stared at the counter and cabinets. Her eye fell on a neat stack of old journals and magazines, out of place on the butcher block table. She lifted the magazines. Underneath, she found a dozen or so printouts, and another note. She turned off the heat on the stove and put a lid over the pan to keep the steak warm, then picked up the pile and read the first sheet.

*Kaye . . .*

*You peeked! This stack by way of apology. Very exciting. Got it off Virion and asked Ferris and Farrakhan Mkebe at UCI what they know. They wouldn't tell me everything, but I think It's here, just like we predicted. They call it SHERVA—Scattered Human Endogenous Retrovirus Activation. There's very little useful on the web sites, but here's the discussion.*

*Love and admiration. Saul.*

Kaye did not know quite why, but this made her cry. Through a film of tears, she flipped through the papers, then put them on the tray beside her steak and salad. She was tired and overwrought. She carried the tray into the den to eat and watch television.

Saul had made a small fortune patenting a special variety of transgenic mouse six years ago; he had met and married Kaye the year after that, and immediately he had put most of his fortune into EcoBacter. Kaye's parents had contributed a substantial amount as well, just before their deaths in an auto accident. Thirty workers and five staff filled the rectangular gray and blue building in a Long Island industrial park, cheek-by-jowl with half a dozen other biotech companies. The park was four miles from their house.

She wasn't due at EcoBacter until noon tomorrow. She hoped that something would delay Saul and she would have more time by herself, to think and prepare, but this wish made her choke up again. She tossed her head in disgust at her rampant emotions and drank her wine through dripping, salty lips.

All she really wanted was for Saul to be healthy, to get better. She wanted her husband back, the man who had changed her perspective on



life, her inspiration and partner and stable center in a rapidly spinning world.

As she chewed small bites of steak, she read the messages from the Virion discussion group. There were over a hundred, several from scientists, most from dilettantes and students, rehashing and speculating upon the spotty news.

She sprinkled A-1 sauce over the last of the meat and took a deep breath.

This could be important stuff. Saul had a right to be excited. There were so few specifics, however, and not a clue as to where the work had been done, or where it was going to be published, or who had leaked the news.

She took her tray into the kitchen just as the phone rang. With a little pirouette in her stocking feet, she balanced the tray on one hand and answered.

“Welcome home!” Saul said. His deep voice still sent a small thrill. “Dear far-traveling Kaye!” He became contrite. “I wanted to apologize for the mess. Caddy couldn’t come in yesterday.” Caddy was their housekeeper.

“It’s good to be back,” she said. “Working?”

“I’m stuck here. Can’t get away.”

“I’ve missed you.”

“Don’t clean up the house.”

“I haven’t. Not much.”

“Did you read the printouts?”

“Yes. They were hidden on the counter.”

“I wanted you to read them in the morning with coffee, when you’re at your sharpest. I should have more solid news by then. I’ll be back by eleven tomorrow. Don’t go to the lab right away.”

“I’ll wait for you,” she said.

“You sound beat. Long flight?”

“Bad air,” she said. “I got a nosebleed.”

“Poor *Mädchen*,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’m fine now that you’re here. Did Lado . . . ?” He let the sentence trail off.

“Not a clue,” Kaye lied. “I did my best.”

“I know. Sleep snug and I’ll make it up to you. There’s going to be stunning news.”

“You’ve heard more. Tell me,” Kaye said.

“Not yet. Anticipation is its own joy.”

Kaye hated games. “Saul—”

“I am adamant. Besides, I haven’t got all the confirmation I need. I love you. I miss you.” He made a kiss-sound good night, and after multiple good-byes, they broke the connection simultaneously, an old habit. Saul was sensitive about being last on the line.

Kaye looked around the kitchen, wrapped a dishrag around her hand, and began to clean up. She did not want to wait for Caddy. After straightening to her satisfaction, she showered, washed her hair and wrapped it in a towel, put on her favorite rayon pajamas, and built a fire in the upstairs bedroom fireplace. Then she squatted in a lotus on the end of the bed, letting the bright flames and the soft smoothness of the rayon reassure her. Outside, the wind rose and she saw a single flash behind the lace curtains. The weather was turning rough.

Kaye climbed into bed and pulled the down comforter up under her neck. “At least I’m not feeling sorry for myself anymore,” she said in a bold voice. Crickson joined her, parading his fluffy orange tail across the bed. Temin leaped up as well, more dignified, though a little damp. He condescended to be rubbed down with her towel.

For the first time since Mount Kazbeg, she felt safe and balanced. *Poor little girl*, she accused. *Waiting for her husband to return. Waiting for her real husband to return.*

## 9

### New York City

**M**ark Augustine stood before the window of his small hotel room, holding a late night bourbon and water on the rocks, and listened to Dicken’s report.

Augustine was a compact and efficient man with smiling brown eyes, a firmly rooted head of concentrated gray hair, a small but jutting nose, and expressive lips. His skin was permanently sun-browned from years spent in equatorial Africa, and from his years in Atlanta, his voice was soft and melodious. He was a tough and resourceful man, adept at politicking, as befitted a director, and it was said by many at the CDC that he was being groomed to be the next surgeon general.

When Dicken finished, Augustine put down his drink. “Ver-r-r-ry interesting,” he said in an Artie Johnson voice. “Amazing work, Christopher.”

Christopher smiled but waited for the long assessment.

“It fits with most of what we know. I’ve spoken with the SG,” Augustine continued. “She thinks we’re going to have to go public in small steps, and soon. I agree. First, we’ll let the scientists have their fun, cloak it in a little romance. You know, tiny invaders from inside our own bodies, gee, isn’t it fascinating, we don’t know what they can do. That sort of thing. Doel and Davison in California can outline their discovery and do that for us. They’ve been working hard enough. They certainly deserve some glory.” Augustine again lifted the glass of whiskey and twirled the ice and water with a quiet tinkle. “Did Dr. Mahy say when they can get your samples analyzed?”

“No,” Dicken said.

Augustine smiled sympathetically. “You would rather have followed them to Atlanta.”

“I’d rather have flown them there myself and done the work,” Dicken said.

“I’m going to Washington Thursday,” Augustine said. “I’m backing up the surgeon general before Congress. NIH could be there. We aren’t bringing in the secretary of HHS yet. I want you with me. I’ll tell Francis and Jon to put out their press release tomorrow morning. It’s been ready for a week.”

Dicken admired this with a private, slightly ironic smile. HHS—Health and Human Services—was the huge branch of government that oversaw the NIH, the National Institutes of Health, and the CDC, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia. “A well-oiled machine,” he said.

Augustine took this as a compliment. “We’ve still got our heads shoved up our asses. We’ve riled Congress with our stance on tobacco and firearms. The bastards in Washington have decided we’re a big fat target. They cut our funding by a third to help pay for a new tax cut. Now a big one comes and it’s not out of Africa or the rain forest. It has nothing to do with our little rape of Mother Nature. It’s a fluke, and it comes from inside our own blessed little bodies.” Augustine’s smile turned wolfish. “It makes my hair prickle, Christopher. This is a *godsend*. We have to present this with timing, with *drama*. If we don’t do this right, there’s a real danger no one in Washington will pay attention until we lose an entire generation of babies.”

Dicken wondered how he could contribute to this runaway train. There had to be some way he could promote his fieldwork, all those years tracking boojums. “I’ve been thinking about a mutation angle,” he said, his mouth

dry. He laid out the stories of mutated babies he had heard in Ukraine and outlined some of his theory of radiation-induced release of HERV.

Augustine narrowed his eyelids and shook his head. “We know about birth defects from Chernobyl. No news in that,” he murmured. “But there’s no radiation *here*. It doesn’t gel, Christopher.” He opened the room’s window and the noise of traffic ten floors below grew. Breeze puffed the inner white curtains.

Dicken persisted, trying to salvage his argument, at the same time aware that his evidence was woefully inadequate. “There’s a strong possibility that Herod’s does more than cause miscarriages. It seems to pop up in comparatively isolated populations. It’s been active at least since the 1960s. The political response has often been extreme. Nobody would wipe out a village or kill dozens of mothers and fathers and their unborn children, just because of a local run of miscarriages.”

Augustine shrugged. “Much too vague,” he said, staring down at the street below.

“Enough for an investigation,” Dicken suggested.

Augustine frowned. “We’re talking empty wombs, Christopher,” he said calmly. “We have to play from a big scary idea, not rumors and science fiction.”

## 10

### Long Island, New York

**K**aye heard footsteps up the stairs, sat up in bed and pulled her hair from her eyes in time to see Saul. He stalked on tiptoes into the bedroom, along the carpet runner, carrying a small package wrapped in red foil and tied with a ribbon, and a bouquet of roses and baby’s breath.

“Damn,” he said, seeing she was awake. He held the roses to one side with a flourish and bent over the bed to kiss her. His lips opened and were so slightly moist without being aggressive. That was his signal that her needs came first but he was interested, very. “Welcome home. I have missed you, *Mädchen*.”

“Thank you. It’s good to be here.”

Saul sat on the side of the bed, staring at the roses. “I am in a good

mood. My lady is home.” He smiled broadly and lay beside her, swinging his legs up and resting his stocking feet on the bed. Kaye could smell the roses, intense and sweet, almost too much this early in the morning. He presented her with the gift. “For my brilliant friend.”

Kaye sat up as Saul plumped her pillow into a backrest. Seeing Saul in fine form had its old effect on her: hope and joy at being home and a little closer to something centered. She hugged him awkwardly around the shoulders, nuzzling his neck.

“Ah,” he said. “Now open the box.”

She raised her eyebrows, pursed her lips, and pulled on the ribbon. “What have I done to deserve this?” she said.

“You have never really understood how valuable and wonderful you are,” Saul said. “Maybe it’s just that I love you. Maybe it’s a special occasion just that you’re back. Or . . . maybe we’re celebrating something else.”

“What?”

“Open it.”

She realized with growing intensity that she had been away for weeks. She pulled off the red foil and kissed his hand slowly, eyes fixed on his face. Then she looked down at the box.

Inside was a large medallion bearing the familiar bust of a famous munitions manufacturer. It was a Nobel prize—made of chocolate.

Kaye laughed out loud. “Where . . . did you get *this*?”

“Stan loaned me his and I made a cast,” Saul said.

“And you’re not going to tell me what’s going on?” Kaye asked, fingering his thigh.

“Not for a little while,” Saul said. He put the roses down and removed his sweater and she began unbuttoning his shirt.

The curtains were still drawn and the room had not yet received its ration of morning sun. They lay on the bed with sheets and blankets and comforter rucked all around them. Kaye saw mountains in the rumples and stalked her fingers over a flowered peak. Saul arched his back with little cartilaginous pops and swallowed a few great gulps of air. “I’m out of shape,” he said. “I’m becoming a desk jockey. I need to bench-press a few more test benches.”

Kaye held out her thumb and forefinger and spaced them an inch apart, then raised and lowered them rhythmically. “Test tube exercises,” she said.

“Right brain, left brain,” Saul rejoined, grabbing his temples and

shifting his head from side to side. “You’ve got three weeks’ worth of Internet jokes to catch up on.”

“Poor me,” Kaye said.

“Breakfast!” Saul shouted, and swung his legs out of bed. “Downstairs, fresh, waiting to be reheated.”

Kaye followed him in her dressing gown. *Saul is back*, she tried to convince herself. *My good Saul is back*.

He had stopped by the local grocery to pick up ham-and-cheese stuffed croissants. He arranged their plates between cups of coffee and orange juice on the little table on the back porch. The sun was bright, the air was clean after the squall and warming nicely. It was going to be a lovely day.

For Kaye, with every hour of good Saul, the lure of the mountains faded like a girlish hope. She did not need to get away. Saul chattered about what had been happening at EcoBacter, about his trip to California and Utah and then Philadelphia to confer with their client and partner labs. “We have four more preclinical tests mandated by our caseworker at the FDA,” he said sardonically. “But at least we’ve shown them we can put antagonistic bacteria together in resource competition and force them to make chemical weapons. We’ve demonstrated we can isolate the bacteriocins, purify them, produce them in neutralized form in bulk—then activate them. Safe in rats, safe in hamsters and vervets, effective against resistant strains of three nasty pathogens. We’re so far ahead of Merck and Aventis they can’t even spit at our butts.”

Bacteriocins were chemicals produced by bacteria that could kill other bacteria. They were a promising new weapon in a rapidly weakening arsenal of antibiotics.

Kaye listened happily. He had not yet told her the news he had promised; he was building to that moment in his own way, taking his own sweet time. Kaye knew the drill and did not give him the satisfaction of appearing eager.

“If that wasn’t enough,” he continued, his eyes bright, “Mkebe says we’re close to finding a way to gum up the whole command and control and communication network in *Staphylococcus aureus*. We’ll attack the little buggers from three different directions at once. Boom!” He pulled back his eloquent hands and wrapped his arms around himself like a satisfied little boy. Then his mood changed.

“Now,” Saul said, and his face went suddenly blank. “Give it to me straight about Lado and Eliava.”

Kaye stared at him for a moment with an intensity that almost crossed

her eyes. Then she glanced down and said, "I think they've decided to go with someone else."

"Mr. Bristol-Myers Squibb," Saul said, and lifted a rolling and waving hand in dismissal. "Fossil corporate architecture versus young new blood. They are *so* wrong." He gazed across the yard at the sound, squinted at a few sailboats dodging small whitecaps in the light morning breezes. Then he finished his orange juice and smacked his lips dramatically. He fairly wriggled in the chair, leaned forward, fixed her with his deep gray eyes, and clasped her hands in his.

*This is it*, Kaye thought.

"They *will* regret it. In the next few months we are going to be so busy. The CDC just broke the news this morning. They have confirmed the existence of the first viable human endogenous retrovirus. They've shown that it can be transmitted laterally between individuals. They call it Scattered Human Endogenous RetroVirus Activation, SHERVA. They dropped the *R* in *retro* for dramatic effect. That makes it SHEVA. Good name for a virus, don't you think?"

Kaye searched his face. "No joke?" she asked, voice unsteady. "It's confirmed?"

Saul grinned and held up his arms like Moses. "Absolutely. Science marches on to the promised land."

"What is it? How big is it?"

"It's a retrovirus, a true monster, eighty-two kilobases, thirty genes. Its *gag* and *pol* components are on chromosome 14, and its *env* is on chromosome 17. The CDC says it may be a mild pathogen, and humans show little or no resistance, so its been buried for a very long time."

He placed his hand over hers and squeezed it gently. "You predicted it, Kaye. You described the genes. Your prime candidate, a broken HERV-DL3, is the one they're targeting, and *they are using your name*. They've cited your papers."

"Wow," Kaye said, her face going pale. She leaned over her plate, the blood pounding in her head.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, feeling dizzy.

"Let's enjoy our privacy while we can," Saul said triumphantly. "Every science reporter is going to be calling. I give them about two minutes to go through their Rolodexes and search MedLine. You'll be on TV, CNN, *Good Morning America*."

Kaye simply could not wrap belief around this turn of events. “What kind of illness does it cause?” she managed to ask.

“Nobody seems clear on that.”

Kaye’s mind buzzed with possibilities. If she called Lado at the institute, told Tamara and Zamphyra—they might change their minds, go with EcoBacter. Saul would stay good Saul, happy and productive.

“My God, we’re hot shit,” Kaye said, still feeling a little woozy. She lifted her fingers, *la di da*.

“You’re the one who’s hot, my dear. It’s your work, and it ain’t shit.”

The phone rang in the kitchen.

“That’ll be the Swedish Academy,” Saul said, nodding sagely. He held up the medallion and Kaye took a bite out of it.

“Bull!” she said happily, and went to answer.

## 11

### Innsbruck, Austria

**T**he hospital gave Mitch a private room as a show of respect for his newfound notoriety. He was just as glad to get away from the mountaineers—but it hardly mattered how he felt or what he thought.

An almost total emotional numbness had stolen over him in the past two days. Seeing his picture on the television news, on the BBC and Sky World, and in the local papers, proved what he knew already; it was over. He was finished.

According to the Zürich press, he was the “Sole Survivor of Body-Snatching Mountain Expedition.” In Munich, he was “Kidnapper of Ancient Ice Baby.” In Innsbruck, he was called simply “Scientist/Thief.” All reported his preposterous story of Neandertal mummies, helpfully relayed by the police in Innsbruck. All told of his stealing “American Indian Bones” in the “Northwest United States.”

He was widely described as an American crackpot, down on his luck, desperate to get publicity.

The Ice Baby had been transferred to the University of Innsbruck, where it was being studied by a team headed by *Herr Doktor Professor* Emiliano Luria. Luria himself was coming later in the afternoon to speak with Mitch about the find.



So long as Mitch had information they needed, he was still in the loop—he was still a kind of scientist, investigator, anthropologist. He was more than just a thief. When his usefulness was over, then would come the deeper, darker vacuum.

He stared blankly at the wall as an elderly woman volunteer pushed a wheeled cart into his room to deliver his lunch. She was a cheerful, dwarfish woman about five feet tall, in her seventies, with a wizened apple face, and she spoke in rapid German with a soft Viennese accent. Mitch couldn't understand much of what she said.

The elderly volunteer unfolded his napkin and tucked it into his gown. She pressed her lips together and leaned back to examine him. "Eat," she advised. She frowned and added, "One damned *young* American, *nein*? I do not care who you are. Eat or sickness comes."

Mitch picked up the plastic fork, saluted her with it, and began to pick at the chicken and mashed potatoes on the plate. As the old woman left, she switched on the television mounted on the wall opposite his bed. "Too damned quiet," she said, and waved her hand back and forth in his direction, delivering a chiding, long-distance slap to his face. Then she pushed the cart through the door.

The television was tuned to Sky News. First came a report on the final and years-delayed destruction of a large military satellite. Spectacular video from Sakhalin Island traced the object's last flaming moments. Mitch stared at the telephoto images of the veering, sparkling fireball. *Outdated, useless, down in flames.*

He picked up the remote and was about to shut off the television once more when an inset of an attractive young woman with short dark hair, long bangs, large eyes, illustrated a story about an important biological discovery in the United States.

"A human provirus, lurking like a stowaway in our DNA for millions of years, has been associated with a new strain of flu that strikes only women," the announcer began. "Molecular biologist Dr. Kaye Lang of Long Island, New York, has been credited with predicting this incredible invader from humanity's past. Michael Hertz is on Long Island now."

Hertz was formally sincere and respectful as he spoke with the young woman outside a large, fashionable green and white house. Lang seemed suspicious of the camera.

"We've heard from the Centers for Disease Control, and now from the National Institutes of Health, that this new variety of flu has been positively

identified in San Francisco and Chicago, and there's been a pending identification in Los Angeles. Do you think this could be the flu epidemic the world has dreaded since 1918?"

Lang stared nervously at the camera. "First of all, it's not really a flu. It's not like any influenza virus, and for that matter, doesn't resemble any virus associated with colds or flu . . . It isn't like any of them. For one thing, it seems to cause symptoms only in women."

"Could you describe this new, or rather very *old*, virus for us?" Hertz asked.

"It's large, about eighty kilobases, that is—"

"More specifically, what kind of symptoms does it cause?"

"It's a retrovirus, a virus that reproduces by transcribing its RNA genetic material into DNA and then inserting it into the DNA of a host cell. Like HIV. It seems quite specific to humans—"

The reporter's eyebrows shot up. "Is it as dangerous as the AIDS virus?"

"I've heard nothing that tells me it's dangerous. It's been carried in our own DNA for millions of years; in that way, at least, it's not at all like the HIV retrovirus."

"How can our women viewers know if they've caught this flu?"

"The symptoms have been described by the CDC, and I don't know anything more than what they've announced. Slight fever, sore throat, coughing."

"That could describe a hundred different viruses."

"Right," Lang said, and smiled. Mitch studied her face, her smile, with a sharp pang. "My advice is, stay tuned."

"Then what is so significant about this virus, if it doesn't kill, and its symptoms are so slight?"

"It's the first HERV—human endogenous retrovirus—to become active, the first to escape from human chromosomes and be laterally transmitted."

"What does that mean, *laterally transmitted*?"

"That means it's infectious. It can pass from one human to another. For millions of years, it's been transmitted vertically—passed from parents to children through their genetic inheritance."

"Do other old viruses exist in our cells?"

"The latest estimate is that as much of one third of our genome could consist of endogenous retroviruses. They sometimes form particles within

the cells, as if they were trying to break out again, but none of these particles have been efficient—until now.”

“Is it safe to say that these remnant viruses were long ago broken or dumbed down?”

“It’s complicated, but you could say that.”

“How did they get into our genes?”

“At some point in our past, a retrovirus infected germ-line cells, sex cells such as egg or sperm. We don’t know what symptoms the disease might have caused at that time. Somehow, over time, the provirus, the viral blueprint buried in our DNA, was broken or mutated or just plain shut down. Supposedly these sequences of retroviral DNA are now just scraps. But three years ago, I proposed that provirus fragments on different human chromosomes could express all the parts of an active retrovirus. All the necessary proteins and RNA floating inside the cell could put together a complete and infectious particle.”

“And so it has turned out. Speculative science bravely marching ahead of the real thing . . .”

Mitch hardly heard what the reporter said, focusing instead on Lang’s eyes: large, still wary, but not missing a thing. Very bold. A survivor’s eyes.

He switched the TV off and rolled over on the bed to nap, to forget. His leg ached inside the long cast.

Kaye Lang was close to grabbing the brass ring, winning a big round in the science game. Mitch, on the other hand, had been handed a solid gold ring . . . And he had fumbled it badly, dropped it on the ice, lost it forever.

An hour later, he awakened to an authoritative knock on the door. “Come in,” he said, and cleared his throat.

A male nurse in starched green accompanied three men and a woman, all in late maturity, all dressed conservatively. They entered and glanced around the room as if to take note of possible escape routes. The shortest of the three men stepped forward and introduced himself. He held out his hand.

“I am Emiliano Luria, of the Institute for Human Studies,” he said. “These are my colleagues at the University of Innsbruck, *Herr Professor* Friedrich Brock . . .”

Names that Mitch almost immediately forgot. The nurse brought two more chairs in from the hallway, and then stood by the door at parade rest, folding his arms and lifting his nose like a palace guard.

Luria spun his chair around, back to front, and sat. His thick round eyeglasses gleamed in the gray light through the curtained windows. He fixed his gaze on Mitch, made a small *um* sound, then glared at the nurse. “We will be fine, alone,” he said. “Please go. No stories sold to the newspapers, and no big damned goose chases for bodies on the glaciers!”

The nurse nodded amiably and left the room.

Luria then asked the woman, thin and middle-aged, with a stern, strong face and abundant gray hair tied in a bun, to make sure the nurse was not listening. She stood by the door and peered out.

“Inspector Haas in Vienna assures me they have no further interest in this matter,” Luria said to Mitch after these formalities were observed. “This is between you and us, and I will work with the Italians and the Swiss, if we must cross any borders.” He pulled a large folding map from his pocket, and Dr. Block or Brock or whatever his name was held out a box containing a number of picture books on the Alps.

“Now, young man,” Luria said, his eyes swimming behind their thick lenses. “Help us repair this damage you have done to the fabric of science. These mountains, where you were found, are not unfamiliar to us. Just one range over is where the *real* Iceman was found. There has been a lot of traffic through these mountains for thousands of years, a trade route perhaps, or paths followed by hunters.”

“I don’t think they were on any trade route,” Mitch said. “I think they were running away.”

Luria looked at his notes. The woman edged closer to the bed. “Two adults, in very good condition but for the female, with a wound of some sort in the abdomen.”

“A spear thrust,” Mitch said. The room fell silent for a moment.

“I have made some phone calls and talked to people who know you. I am told your father is coming here to take you from the hospital, and I have spoken with your mother—”

“Please get to the point, Professor,” Mitch said.

Luria raised his eyebrows and shuffled his papers. “I am told you were a very fine scientist, conscientious, an expert at arranging and carrying out meticulous digs. You found the skeleton known as Pasco man. When Native Americans protested and claimed Pasco man as one of their ancestors, you removed the bones from their site.”

“To protect them. They had washed out of a bank and were on the shore of the river. The Indians wanted them put back into the ground. The bones were too important to science. I couldn’t let that happen.”

Luria leaned forward. “I believe Pasco man died from an infected spear wound in his thigh, did he not?”

“He may have,” Mitch said.

“You have a nose for ancient tragedies,” Luria said, scratching his ear with a finger.

“Life was pretty hard back then.”

Luria nodded agreement. “Here in Europe, when we find a skeleton, there are no such problems.” He smiled at his colleagues. “We have no respect for our dead—dig them up, put them on display, charge tourists to see them. So this for us is not necessarily a big black mark, though it seems to have ended your relationship with your institution.”

“Political correctness,” Mitch said, trying to keep the acid out of his tone.

“Possibly. I am willing to listen to a man with your experience—but, Doctor Rafelson, to our chagrin, you have described a rather gross unlikelihood.” Luria pointed his pen at Mitch. “What part of your story is lie, and what part truth?”

“Why should I lie?” Mitch asked. “My life is already shot to hell.”

“Perhaps to keep a hand in the science? Not to be separated so quickly from Dame Anthropology?”

Mitch smiled ruefully. “Maybe I’d do that,” he said. “But I wouldn’t make up a story *this* crazy. The man and woman in the cave had distinct Neandertal characteristics.”

“On what criteria do you base your identification?” Brock asked, entering the conversation for the first time.

“Dr. Brock is an expert on Neandertals,” Luria said respectfully.

Mitch described the bodies slowly and carefully. He could close his eyes and see them as if they floated just over the bed.

“You are aware that different researchers use different criteria for describing so-called Neandertals,” Brock said. “Early, late, middle, from different regions, gracile or robust, perhaps different racial groups within the subspecies. Sometimes the distinctions are such that an observer might be misled.”

“These were not *Homo sapiens sapiens*.” Mitch poured himself a glass of water, offered to pour more glasses. Luria and the woman accepted. Brock shook his head.

“Well, if they *are* found, we can resolve this matter easily enough. I am curious as to your timeline on human evolution—”

“I’m not dogmatic,” Mitch said.

Luria wagged his head—*comme ci, comme ça*—and turned some pages of notes under. “Clara, please hand me the biggest book there. I’ve marked some photographs and charts, where you might have been before you were found. Do any of these look familiar?”

Mitch took the book and propped it open awkwardly on his lap. The pictures were bright, clear, beautiful. Most had been shot in full daylight with blue skies. He looked at the marked pages and shook his head. “I don’t see a frozen waterfall.”

“No guide knows of a frozen waterfall anywhere near the serac, or indeed along the main mass of the glacier. Perhaps you can give us some other clue . . .”

Mitch shook his head. “I would if I could, Professor.”

Luria folded his papers decisively. “I think you are a sincere young man, perhaps even a good scientist. I will tell you one thing, if you do not go talking to papers or TV. Agreed?”

“I have no reason to talk to them.”

“The baby was born dead or severely injured. The back of her head is broken, perhaps by the thrust of a fire-hardened pointed stick.”

*Her.* The infant had been a girl. For some reason, this shook Mitch deeply. He took another sip of water. All the emotion of his present position, the death of Tilde and Franco . . . The sadness of this ancient story. His eyes watered, threatened to spill over. “Sorry,” he said, and dabbed away the moisture with the sleeve of his gown.

Luria observed sympathetically. “This lends your story some credibility, no? But . . .” The professor lifted his hand and pointed at the ceiling, jabbing slightly, and concluding, “Still hard to believe.”

“The infant most definitely isn’t *Homo sapiens neandertalensis*,” Brock said. “She has interesting features, but she is modern in all particulars. Not, however, particularly European. More Anatolian, even Turkic, but that is just a guess for now. And I know of no specimens of that sort so recent. It would be incredible.”

“I must have dreamed it,” Mitch said, looking away.

Luria shrugged. “When you are well, would you be willing to walk the glacier with us, look for the cave again in person?”

Mitch did not hesitate. “Of course,” he said.

“I will try to arrange it. But for now—” Luria glanced down at Mitch’s leg.

“At least four months,” he said.

“Not a good time to be climbing, four months from now. In the late spring, then, next year.” Luria stood, and the woman, Clara, took his glass and hers and set them on Mitch’s tray.

“Thank you,” Brock said. “I hope you are right, Dr. Rafelson. It would be a marvelous find.”

They bowed slightly, formally, as they left.

## 12

### The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta

SEPTEMBER

Virgin females don’t get our flu,” Dicken said, looking up from the papers and graphs on his desk. “Is that what you’re telling me?” He raised his black eyebrows until his broad forehead was a dubious washboard of wrinkles.

Jane Salter reached forward to plump the documents again, nervous, laying them with a solicitous finality on his desk. The concrete walls of his subbasement office enlivened the rustling sound.

Many of the offices in the lower floors of Building 1 of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had been converted from animal labs and holding cells. Concrete dikes jutted up near the walls. Dicken sometimes imagined he could still smell the disinfectant and monkey shit.

“That’s the biggest surprise that I can pull out of the data,” Salter confirmed. She was one of the best statisticians they had, a whiz with the variety of desktop computers that did most of their tracking, modeling, and record-keeping. “Men sometimes get it, or test positive for it, but are asymptomatic. They become vectors for females, but probably not for other males. And . . .” She finger-tapped a drum roll on the desktop. “We can’t get anyone to infect themselves.”

“So SHEVA is a specialist,” Dicken said, shaking his head. “How the hell do we know that?”

“Look at the footnote, Christopher, and the wording. ‘Women in domestic partnering situations, or those who have had extensive sexual experience.’”

“How many cases so far—five thousand?”

“Six thousand two hundred women, and only about sixty or seventy men, all partners of infected women. Only constant reexposure transmits the retrovirus.”

“That’s not so crazy,” Dicken said. “It’s not unlike HIV, then.”

“Right,” Salter said, mouth twitching. “God has it in for females. Infection begins with the mucosa of nasal passages and bronchia, proceeds to the mild inflammation of alveoli, enters the bloodstream—mild inflammation of ovaries . . . and then it’s gone. Aching and some coughing, a sore tummy. And if the woman gets pregnant, there’s a very good chance she’ll miscarry.”

“Mark should be able to sell that,” Dicken said. “But let’s make his case stronger. He needs to scare a more reliable group of voters than young women. What about the geriatric set?” He looked at her hopefully.

“Older women don’t get it,” she said. “Nobody younger than fourteen or older than sixty. Look at the spread.” She leaned over and pointed to a pie chart. “Mean age of thirty-one.”

“It’s too crazy. Mark wants me to make sense of this and strengthen the surgeon general’s case by four o’clock this afternoon.”

“Another briefing?” Salter asked.

“Before the chief of staff and the science advisor. This is good, this is scary, but I know Mark. Look through the files again—maybe we can come up with a few thousand geriatric deaths in Zaire.”

“Are you asking me to cook the books?”

Dicken grinned wickedly.

“Then screw you, sir,” Salter said mildly, head cocked. “We haven’t got any more statistics out of Georgia. Maybe you could call up Tbilisi,” she suggested. “Or Istanbul.”

“They’re tight as clams,” Dicken said. “I was never able to shake much out of them, and they refuse to admit they have any cases now.” He glanced up at Salter.

Her nose wrinkled.

“Please, just one elderly passenger out of Tbilisi melting on an airplane,” Dicken suggested.

Salter let loose an explosion of laughter. She took off her glasses and wiped them, then replaced them. “It’s not funny. The charts are looking serious.”

“Mark wants to let the drama build. He’s playing this one like a marlin on a line.”

“I’m not very savvy about politics.”



“I pretend not to be,” Dicken said. “But the longer I hang around here, the more savvy I get.”

Salter glanced around the small room as if it might close in on her. “Are we done, Christopher?”

Dicken grinned. “Claustrophobia acting up?”

“It’s this room,” Salter said. “Don’t you hear them?” She leaned over the desk with a spooky expression. Dicken could not always tell whether Jane Salter was joking or serious. “The *screaming* of the monkeys?”

“Yeah,” Dicken said with a straight face. “I try to stay in the field as long as possible.”

In the director’s office in Building 4, Augustine looked at the statistics quickly, flipped through the twenty pages of numbers and computer-generated charts, and flung them down on the cafeteria table. “All very reassuring,” he said. “At this rate we’ll be out of business by the end of the year. We don’t even know if SHEVA causes miscarriages in *every* pregnant woman, or whether it’s just a mild teratogen. Christ. I thought this was the one, Christopher.”

“It’s good. It’s scary, and it’s public.”

“You underestimate how much the Republicans hate the CDC,” Augustine said. “The National Rifle Association hates us. Big tobacco hates us because we’re right in their backyard. Did you see that damned billboard just down the highway? By the airport? ‘Finally, a Butt Worth Kissing.’ What was it—Camels? Marlboros?”

Dicken laughed and shook his head.

“The surgeon general is going right into the bear’s den. She’s not very happy with me, Christopher.”

“There’s always the results I brought back from Turkey,” Dicken said.

Augustine held up his hands and rocked back in his chair, fingers gripping the edge of the desk. “One hospital. Five miscarriages.”

“Five out of five pregnancies, sir.”

Augustine leaned forward. “You went to Turkey because your contact said they had a virus that might abort babies. But why Georgia?”

“There was an outbreak of miscarriages in Tbilisi five years ago. I couldn’t get any information in Tbilisi, nothing official. A mortician and I did a little drinking together—unofficially. He told me there had been an outbreak of miscarriages in Gordi about the same time.”

Augustine had not heard this part before. Dicken had not put it in his report. “Go on,” he said, only half-interested.

“There was some sort of trouble, he wouldn’t come right out and say what. So—I drove to Gordi, and there was a police cordon around the town. I did some asking around in a few local road stops and heard about a UN investigation, Russian involvement. I called the UN. They told me that they were asking an American woman to help them.”

“That was—”

“Kaye Lang.”

“Goodness,” Augustine said, and pressed his lips into a thin smile. “Woman of the hour. You knew about her work on HERV?”

“Of course.”

“So . . . you thought somebody in the UN was on to something and needed her advice.”

“The thought crossed my mind, sir. But they called on her because she knew forensic pathology.”

“So, what were *you* thinking about?”

“Mutations. Induced birth defects. Teratogenic viruses, maybe. And I was wondering why governments wanted parents dead.”

“So there we are again,” Augustine said. “Back to wild-eyed speculation.”

Dicken made a face. “You know me better than that, Mark.”

“Sometimes I haven’t the slightest idea how you get such good results.”

“I hadn’t finished my work. You called me back and said we had something solid.”

“God knows I’ve been wrong before,” Augustine said.

“I don’t think you’re wrong. This is probably just the beginning. We’ll have more to go on soon.”

“Is that what your instincts tell you?”

Dicken nodded.

Mark drew his brows together and folded his hands tightly on the top of the desk. “Do you remember what happened in 1963?”

“I was just a baby then, sir. But I’ve heard. Malaria.”

“I was seven years old myself. Congress pulled the plug on all funding for the elimination of insect-borne illnesses, including malaria. The stupidest move in the history of epidemiology. Millions of deaths worldwide, new strains of resistant disease . . . a disaster.”

“DDT wouldn’t have worked much longer anyway, sir.”

“Who can say?” Augustine peaked two fingers. “Humans think like children, leaping from passion to passion. Suddenly world health just isn’t hot. Maybe we overstated our case. We’re backing down from the death of

the rain forests, and global warming is still just a simmer, not a boil. There haven't been any devastating worldwide plagues, and Joe Sixpack never signed on to the whole Third World guilt trip. People are getting bored with apocalypse. If we don't have a politically defensible crisis soon, on our home turf, we are going to get creamed in Congress, Christopher, and it could be 1963 all over again."

"I understand, sir."

Augustine sighed through his nose and lifted his eyes to the ranks of fluorescent lights in the ceiling. "The SG thinks our apple is still too green to put on the president's desk, so she's having a convenient megrim. She's postponed this afternoon's meeting until next week."

Dicken suppressed a smile. The thought of the surgeon general faking a headache was precious.

Augustine fixed his gaze on Dicken. "All right, you smell something, go get it. Check miscarriage records in U.S. hospitals for the last year. Threaten Turkey and Georgia with exposure to the World Health Organization. Say we'll accuse them of breaking all our cooperation treaties. I'll back you. Find out who's been to the Near East and Europe and come down with SHEVA and maybe miscarried a baby or two. We have a week, and if it's not you and a more deadly SHEVA, then I'm going to have to go with an unknown spirochete caught by some shepherds in Afghanistan . . . consorting with sheep." Augustine mocked a hangdog expression. "Save me, Christopher."

## 13

### Cambridge, Massachusetts

**K**aye was exhausted, felt like a queen, had been treated for the past week with the respect and friendly adoration of colleagues saluting one who has after some adversity been recognized as having seen farther into the truth. She had not suffered the kind of criticism and injustice others in biology had experienced in the last one hundred and fifty years—certainly nothing like what her hero, Charles Darwin, had had to face. Not even what Lynn Margulis had encountered with the theory of symbiotic evolution of eucaryotic cells. But there had been enough—

Skeptical and angry letters in the journals from old-guard geneticists

convinced she was chasing after a wild hair; comments at conferences from faintly superior, smiling men and women convinced they were closer to a big discovery . . . Farther up the ladder of success, closer to the brass ring of Knowledge and Acknowledgment.

That was fine by Kaye. That was science, all too human and better for it. But then there had been Saul's personal dustup with the editor of *Cell*, stalling any chance she had of publishing there. She had gone to *Virology* instead, a good journal, but a step down the ladder. She had never made it as far as *Science* or *Nature*. She had climbed a good distance, and then stalled out.

Now, it seemed, dozens of labs and research centers were eager to have her see the results of the work they had done to confirm her speculations. For the sake of her own peace of mind, she chose to accept invitations from those faculties, centers, and labs that had shown her some encouragement in the past few years—and in particular, the Carl Rose Center for Domain Research, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Rose Center stood on a hundred acres of pines planted in the 1950s, a thick forest surrounding a cubical lab building, the cube sitting not flat on the earth but elevated on one edge. Two floors of labs lay underground, directly beneath and to the east of the elevated cube. Funded in large part by an endowment from the enormously wealthy Van Buskirk family of Boston, the Rose Center had been doing molecular biology for thirty years.

Three scientists at Rose had been given grants by the Human Genome Project—the massive, heavily funded, multilateral effort to sequence and understand the sum total of human genetics—to analyze archaic gene fragments found in the so-called junk regions of human genes known as introns. The senior scientist managing this grant was Judith Kushner, who had been Kaye's doctoral advisor at Stanford.

Judith Kushner stood just under five and a half feet high, with salted and twisted black hair, a round, wistful face that seemed always on the edge of a smile, and small, slightly protuberant black eyes. She was known internationally as a true wizard, someone who could design experiments and make any apparatus do what it was supposed to do—in other words, to fashion those repeatable experiments necessary to make science actually work.

That she spent most of her time nowadays filling out paperwork and guiding grad students and postdocs was simply the way of modern science.

Kushner's assistant and secretary, a painfully thin young redhead named Fiona Bierce, led Kaye through the maze of labs and down a central elevator.

Kushner's office lay on the zeroth floor, below ground level but above the basement: windowless, concrete walls painted a pleasant light beige. The walls were crammed with neatly arranged texts and bound journals. Four computers hummed faintly in one corner, including a Sim Engine supercomputer donated by Mind Design of Seattle.

"Kaye Lang, I am so *proud!*" Kushner got out of her chair, beamed, and spread her arms to embrace Kaye as she entered. She gave a little squeal and waltzed her former student around the room, smiling in professorial joy. "So tell me—who have you heard from? Lynn? The old man himself?"

"Lynn called yesterday," Kaye said, blushing.

Kushner clasped her hands together and shook them at the ceiling like a prizefighter celebrating victory. "Wonderful!"

"It's really too much," Kaye said, and at Kushner's invitation, took a seat beside the Sim Engine's broad flat display screen.

"Grab it! Enjoy it!" Kushner advised lustily. "You've earned it, dear. I saw you on television three times. Jackie Oniama on Triple C Network trying to talk science—wonderfully funny! Is she so much like a little doll in person?"

"They were all very friendly, really. But I'm exhausted from trying to explain things."

"So much to explain. How's Saul?" Kushner asked, doing well to hide some apprehension.

"He's fine. We're still trying to pin down whether we'll be going into partnership with the Georgians."

"If they don't partner with you now, they have a long way to go before they can become capitalists," Kushner said, and sat beside Kaye.

Fiona Bierce seemed happy just to listen. She grinned toothily.

"So . . ." Kushner said, staring at Kaye intently. "It's been kind of a short road, hasn't it?"

Kaye laughed. "I feel so *young!*"

"I am *so* envious. None of my crackpot theories have gotten nearly as much attention."

"Just gobs of money," Kaye said.

"Gobs and gobs. Need any?"

Kaye smiled. "Wouldn't want to compromise our professional standing."

“Ah, the big new world of cash biology, so important and secret and full of itself. Remember, my dear, women are supposed to do science differently. We listen and slog and listen and slog, just like poor Rosalind Franklin, not at all like brash little boys. And all for motives of the highest ethical purity. So—when are you and Saul going to go public? My son is trying to set up my retirement account.”

“Probably never,” Kaye said. “Saul would hate reporting to stockholders. Besides, we have to be successful first, make some money, and that’s a long way down the road.”

“Enough small talk,” Kushner said with finality. “I have something *interesting* to show you. Fiona, could you run our little simulation?”

Kaye moved her chair to one side. Bierce sat by the Sim Engine keyboard and cracked her knuckles like a pianist. “Judith has slaved on this for three months now,” she said. “She based much of it on your papers, and the rest of it on data from three different genome projects, and when the word came out, we were ready.”

“We went right to your markers and found the assembly routines,” Kushner said. “SHEVA’s envelope, and its little universal human delivery system. Here’s an infection simulation based on lab results from the fifth floor, John Dawson’s group. They infected hepatocytes in dense tissue culture. Here’s what came out.”

Kaye watched as Bierce played back the simulated assembly sequence. SHEVA particles entered the hepatocytes—liver cells in a lab culture dish—and shut down certain cellular functions, co-opted others, transcribed their RNA to DNA and integrated it into the cells’ DNA, then began to replicate. In brilliant simulated colors, new virus particles formed naked within the cytosol—the cell’s streaming internal fluid. The viruses migrated to the cell’s outer membrane and pushed through to the outside world, each particle neatly wrapped in a bit of the cell’s own skin.

“They deplete the membrane, but it’s all rather gentle and controlled. The viruses stress the cells, but they don’t kill them. And it looks like about one in twenty of the virus particles are viable—five times better than HIV.”

The simulation suddenly zoomed in to molecules created along with the viruses, wrapped in cell transport packages called vesicles and pushed out with the new infectious particles. They were labeled in bright orange: PGA? and PGE?

“Hold it there, Fiona.” Kushner pointed and tapped her finger on the orange letters. “SHEVA doesn’t carry everything it needs to cause Herod’s flu. We kept finding a large clump of proteins in SHEVA-infected cells, not

coded for in SHEVA, and like nothing I've seen. And then—the clump would break down, there would be all these smaller proteins that shouldn't have been there.”

“We looked for proteins that were changing our cell cultures,” Bierce said. “Really doing a number on them. We puzzled over this for two weeks, and then we sent some infected cells over to a commercial tissue library for comparison. They separated out the new proteins, and they found—”

“This is my story, Fiona,” Kushner said, wagging her finger.

“Sorry,” Fiona said, smiling sheepishly. “It is just so cool we could do it this fast!”

“We finally decided that SHEVA turns on a gene in another chromosome. But how? We went looking . . . and found a SHEVA-activated gene on chromosome 21. It codes for our polyprotein, what we call the LPC, the large protein complex. A unique transcription factor specifically controls expression of this gene. We looked for the factor and found it in SHEVA's genome. A locked treasure chest on chromosome 21, and the necessary keys in the virus. They're partners.”

“Astonishing,” Kaye said.

Bierce ran the simulation through again, this time focusing on the action in chromosome 21—the creation of the polyprotein.

“But Kaye—darling Kaye, that is far from the last of it. We have a mystery here. The SHEVA protease cleaves three novel cyclooxygenases and lipooxygenases from the LPC, which then synthesize three different and unique prostaglandins. Two of them are new to us, really quite astonishing. All look very powerful.” Kushner used a pen to point out the prostaglandins being exported from a cell. “This could explain the talk about miscarriages.”

Kaye frowned in concentration.

“We calculate that a full-bore SHEVA infection could produce enough of the new prostaglandins to abort any fetus in a pregnant woman within a week.”

“As if that isn't strange enough,” Bierce said, and pointed to series of glycoproteins, “the infected cells make these as byproducts. We haven't analyzed them completely, but they look a lot like FSH and LH—follicle stimulating hormone and luteinizing hormone. And these peptides appear to be releasing hormones.”

“The old familiar masters of female destiny,” Kushner said. “Egg maturation and release.”

“Why?” Kaye asked. “If they've just caused an abortion . . . why force an ovulation?”

“We don’t know which activates first. It could be ovulation, then abortion,” Kushner said. “Remember, this is a *liver* cell. We haven’t even begun investigating infection in reproductive tissues.”

“It doesn’t make sense!”

“That’s the challenge,” Kushner said. “Whatever your little endogenous retrovirus is, it’s far from being harmless—at least to us women. It looks like something designed to invade, take over, and screw us up royally.”

“Are you the only ones who’ve done this work?” Kaye asked.

“Probably,” Kushner said.

“We’re sending the results to NIH and the Genome Project today,” Bierce said.

“And giving you advance notice,” Kushner added, putting her hand on Kaye’s shoulder. “I don’t want you to get stepped on.”

Kaye frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t be naïve, dear,” Kushner said, her eyes bright with concern. “What we’re looking at could be Biblical bad news. A virus that kills babies. *Lots* of babies. Someone might regard you as a messenger. And you know what they do to messengers who bring bad news.”

## 14

### Atlanta

#### OCTOBER

**D**r. Michael Voight strode ahead of Dicken on long, spidery legs down the hallway to the residents’ lounge. “Funny you should ask,” Dr. Voight said. “We’re seeing lots of obstetrics anomalies. We’ve had staff discussions already. But not about Herod’s. We see all kinds of infections, flu, of course, but we still don’t have the test kits for SHEVA.” He half-twisted to ask, “Cup of coffee?”

Atlanta’s Olympic City Hospital was six years old, built at city and federal expense to take the pressure off other hospitals in the inner city. Private donors and a special set-aside from the Olympics had made it one of the best-equipped hospitals in the state, attracting some of the best and brightest young doctors, and a few disgruntled older ones, as well. The world of HMOs and managed care was taking a toll on skilled specialists, who had seen their incomes plummet in the past decade and their patient



care practices controlled by accountants. Olympic City at least gave the specialists respect.

Voight steered Dicken into the lounge and drew a cup of coffee from a stainless-steel urn. Voight explained that interns and residents alike could use this room. "It's usually empty this time of night. It's prime time out there—time for life to lurch on and deliver its careless victims."

"What sort of anomalies?" Dicken prompted.

Voight shrugged, pulled a chair away from a Formica table, and curled up his long legs like Fred Astaire. His greens rustled; they were made of tough paper, completely disposable. Dicken sat and held his cup in his hands. He knew it might keep him awake, but he needed the focus and the energy.

"I handle extreme cases, and most of the weird ones haven't qualified for my care. But in the last two weeks . . . would you believe, seven women who can't explain their pregnancies?"

"I'm all ears," Dicken said.

Voight spread his hands and ticked off the cases. "Two that took birth control pills religiously, so to speak, and they didn't work . . . Not so unusual, maybe. Still, there was one who didn't take birth control, but said she hadn't had sex. And guess what?"

"What?"

"She was *virgo intacta*. Had heavy bleeding for a month, it went away, then morning sickness, period stopped, she went to a doctor, he told her she was pregnant, she comes here when the whole thing goes wrong. A shy young woman living with an elderly man, a real peculiar relationship. She insisted no sex was involved."

"Second coming?" Dicken asked.

"Don't be profane. I'm born again," Voight said with a twitch of his lips.

"Sorry," Dicken said.

Voight smiled half-apologetically. "Then her 'old man' comes in, tells us the real story. Turns out he's very concerned for her—wants us to know the truth so we can treat her. She's been letting him get in bed with her and rub up against her . . . Sympathy, you know. So that's how she gets pregnant the first time."

Dicken nodded. Nothing very shocking here—the versatility of life and love.

Voight continued. "It's a miscarriage. But three months later, she comes back, she's pregnant again. Two months along. Her elderly friend

shows up with her, says he hasn't been rubbing against her or anything, and he knows she hasn't been seeing another man. Do we believe him?"

Dicken tilted his head to one side, lifted his eyebrows.

"All sorts of peculiar stuff going on," Voight said softly. "More than usual, I think."

"Did they complain of illness?"

"The usual. Colds, fevers, body aches. I think we may still have a couple of specimens in the lab, if you want to look at them. Have you been over to Northside?"

"Not yet," Dicken said.

"Why not Midtown? Lot more tissue for you over there."

Dicken shook his head. "How many young women with unexplained fever, nonbacterial infections?"

"Dozens. That's not unusual either. We don't keep tests more than a week; if they're negative for bacteria, we dump them."

"All right. Let's see the tissue."

Dicken took his coffee with him as he followed Voight to the elevator. The biopsy and analysis lab was in the basement, just two doors down from the morgue.

"Lab techs go home at nine." Voight switched on the lights and did a quick search in a small steel card file.

Dicken looked the lab over: three long white benches equipped with sinks, two fume hoods, incubators, cabinets neatly arrayed with brown glass and clear glass bottles filled with reagents, neatly ordered stacks of standard test kits in slim orange and green cardboard boxes, two stainless-steel refrigerators and an older white freezer; a computer connected to an ink-jet printer with an OUT OF ORDER note posted on it; and jammed in a back room behind a Dutch door, rolling stock steel storage shelving in standard gray and putty.

"They haven't put these into the computer yet; takes us about three weeks. Looks like we have one left . . . It's procedure now for the hospital, we give mothers the choice, they can have a mortician take the tissue and arrange for a funeral. Better closure that way. But we had an indigent through here, no money, no family . . . Here." He lifted a card, walked into the back room, rotated a wheel, found the shelf number on the card.

Dicken waited by the Dutch door. Voight emerged with a small jar, held it up to the brighter light in the lab room. "Wrong number, but it's the same type. This is from six months ago. I think the one I'm looking for may still be in cold saline." He handed Dicken the jar and walked to the first refrigerator.

Dicken peered at the fetus: at twelve weeks, about the size of his thumb, curled, a tiny pale extraterrestrial that had failed its tryout for life on Earth. The anomalies struck him immediately. The limbs were mere nubs, and there were protuberances around the swollen abdomen he had not seen before even on severely malformed fetuses.

The tiny face seemed unusually pinched and vacant.

“There’s something wrong with its bone structure,” Dicken said as Voight closed the refrigerator. The resident lifted another fetus in a moisture-frosted glass beaker covered with plastic wrap, sealed with a rubber band and marked with a tape label.

“Lots of problems, no doubt about it,” Voight said, trading jars and peering at the older specimen. “God sets up little checkpoints in every pregnancy. These two did not make the grade.” He looked upward significantly. “Back to Heaven’s nursery.”

Dicken did not know whether Voight was expressing heartfelt philosophy or a more typical medical cynicism. He compared the cold beaker and the room-temperature jar. Both fetuses at twelve weeks, very similar.

“Can I take this one?” he asked, lifting the cold beaker.

“What, and rob our med students?” Voight shrugged. “Sign for it, call it a loan to CDC, shouldn’t be a problem.” He looked at the jar again. “Something significant?”

“Maybe,” Dicken said. He felt a little creep of sadness and excitement. Voight gave him a more secure jar and a small cardboard box, cotton, a piece of ice in a sealed plastic bag to keep the specimen cold. They transferred the specimen quickly with a pair of wooden tongue depressors, and Dicken sealed the box with packing tape.

“If you get any more like these, let me know immediately, okay?” Dicken asked.

“Sure.” In the elevator, Voight asked him, “You look a little funny. Is there something I might like to know about early, some little clue to help me better serve the public?”

Dicken knew he had kept his face deadpan, so he smiled at Voight and shook his head. “Keep track of all miscarriages,” Dicken said. “Especially this type. Any correlation with Herod’s flu would be dandy.”

Voight curled his lip, disappointed. “Nothing official yet?”

“Not yet,” Dicken said. “I’m working on a real long shot.”

**Boston**

**T**he spaghetti and pizza dinner with Saul's old colleagues from MIT was going very well. Saul had flown in to Boston that afternoon, and they had gathered at Pagliacci. Talk early in the evening in the dark old Italian restaurant ranged from mathematical analysis of the human genome to a chaotic predictor for dataflow systole and diastole on the Internet.

Kaye filled up on breadsticks and green peppers even before her lasagna arrived. Saul picked at a piece of buttered bread.

One of MIT's celebrities, Dr. Drew Miller, showed up at nine o'clock, unpredictable as always, to listen and throw in a few comments about the hot topic of bacterial community action. Saul listened intently to the legendary researcher, an expert on artificial intelligence and self-organizing systems. Miller moved several times, and finally tapped the shoulder of Saul's old roommate, Derry Jacobs. Jacobs grinned, got up to find another seat, and Miller placed himself beside Kaye. He picked up a breadstick from Jacobs's plate, stared at her with wide, childlike eyes, pursed his lips, and said, "You've really pissed off the old gradualists."

"Me?" Kaye asked, laughing. "Why?"

"Ernst Mayr's kids are sweating ice cubes, if they've got any sense. Dawkins is beside himself. I've been telling them for months that all that was needed was another link in the chain, and we'd have a feedback loop."

Gradualism was the belief that evolution proceeded in small moves, mutations accumulating over tens of thousands or even millions of years, usually detrimental to the individual. Beneficial mutations were selected for by conferring an advantage and increasing opportunities to gather resources and reproduce. Ernst Mayr had been a brilliant spokesman for this belief. Richard Dawkins had eloquently argued the case for the modern synthesis of Darwinism, as well as describing the so-called selfish gene.

Saul heard this and got up to stand behind Kaye, leaning over the table to hear what Miller had to say. "You think SHEVA gives us a loop?" he asked.

"Yes. Complete circle of communication between individuals in a population, outside of sex. Our equivalent of plasmids in bacteria, but of course more like phages."

“Drew, SHEVA only has eighty kb and thirty genes,” Saul said. “Can’t carry much information.”

She and Saul had already gone over this territory before she had published her article in *Virology*. They had spoken to nobody about their particular theories. Kaye found herself a little surprised that Miller should be bringing this up. He was not known as a progressive.

“They don’t need to carry all the information,” Miller said. “All they need to carry is an authorization code. A key. We still don’t know all the things SHEVA does.”

Kaye glanced at Saul, then said, “Tell us what you’ve been thinking, Dr. Miller.”

“Call me Drew, please. It’s really not my field of endeavor, Kaye.”

“It’s not like you to be cagey, Drew,” Saul said. “And we know you’re not humble.”

Miller grinned from ear to ear. “Well, I think you suspect something already. I’m sure your wife does. I’ve read your papers on transposable elements.”

Kaye sipped from her almost-empty glass of water. “We can never be sure what to say to whom,” she murmured. “We might either offend or give away the farm.”

“Don’t worry about original thinking,” Miller said. “Someone out there is always ahead of you, but they usually haven’t done the work. It’s someone who’s working all the time who will make the discovery. You do good work and write good papers, and this is a big jump.”

“We’re not sure it’s *the* big jump though,” Kaye said. “It may just be an anomaly.”

“I don’t want to push anybody into a Nobel prize,” Miller said, “but SHEVA isn’t really a disease-causing organism. Doesn’t make evolutionary sense for something to hide this long in the human genome, and then express just to cause a mild flu. SHEVA is really just a kind of mobile genetic element, isn’t it? A promoter?”

Kaye thought of the talk with Judith about the symptoms that SHEVA could cause.

Miller was perfectly willing to continue talking over her silence. “Everyone has thought that viruses, and in particular retroviruses, could be evolutionary messengers or triggers, or just random goads,” Miller said. “Ever since it was found that some viruses carry snippets of genetic material from host to host. I just think there are a couple of questions you should

ask yourselves, if you haven't already. What does SHEVA trigger? Let's say gradualism is dead. We get bursts of adaptive speciation whenever a niche opens up—new continents, a meteor clears out the old species. It happens fast, in less than ten thousand years; good old punctuated equilibrium. But there's a real problem. Where is all this proposed evolutionary change stored?"

"An excellent question," Kaye said.

Miller's eyes sparkled. "You've been thinking about this?"

"Who hasn't?" Kaye said. "I've been thinking about virus and retrovirus as contributors to genomic novelty. But it comes down to the same thing. So maybe there's a master biological computer in each species, a processor of some sort that tots up possible beneficial mutations. It makes decisions about what, where, and when something will change . . . Makes guesses, if you will, based on success rates from past evolutionary experience."

"What triggers a change?"

"We know that stress-related hormones can affect expression of genes. This evolutionary library of possible new forms . . ."

Miller grinned broadly. "Go on," he prompted.

"Responds to stress-produced hormones," Kaye continued. "If enough organisms are under stress, they exchange signals, reach a kind of quorum, and this triggers a genetic algorithm that compares sources of stress with a list of adaptations, evolutionary responses."

"Evolution evolving," Saul said. "The species with an adaptive computer can change more rapidly and more efficiently than hackneyed old species that don't control and select their mutations, that rely on randomness."

Miller nodded. "Good. Much more efficient than just allowing any old mutation to be expressed and probably destroy an individual or damage a population. Let's say this adaptive genetic computer, this evolutionary processor, only allows certain kinds of mutations to be used. Individuals store the results of the processor's work—which would, I assume, be . . ." Miller looked at Kaye for help, wagging his hand.

"Mutations that are grammatical," she said, "physiological statements that don't violate any important structural rules in an organism."

Miller smiled beatifically, then held his knee and began rocking gently back and forth. His large square cranium glinted as it caught the reddish gleam of an overhead light. He was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Where would the evolutionary information be stored—throughout the

genome, holographically, in different parts in different individuals, or just in germ-line cells, or . . . elsewhere?”

“Tags stored in a set-aside section of the genome in each individual,” Kaye said, and then bit her tongue. Miller—and Saul, for that matter—regarded an idea as a kind of food that needed to be thoroughly shared and chewed over before it could be useful. Kaye preferred certainties before she spoke. She searched for an immediate example. “Like heat-shock response in bacteria, or single-generation climate adaptation in fruit flies.”

“But a human set-aside has to be huge. We’re so much more complex than fruit flies,” Miller said. “Have we found it already, but just don’t know what it is?”

Kaye touched Saul’s arm, urging caution. They had a reputation now for riding a certain wave, and even with an old guard scientist like Miller, a gadfly with sufficient accomplishments under his belt for a dozen careers, she felt nervous giving away their most recent thinking. It could get around: *Kaye Lang says such and such . . .*

“Nobody’s found it yet,” Kaye said.

“Oh?” Miller said, searching her face with a critical gaze. She felt like a deer frozen in headlights.

Miller shrugged. “Maybe not. My guess is, it’s expressed only in germ-line cells. Sex cells. Haploid to haploid. It doesn’t get expressed, it doesn’t start work unless there’s confirmation from other individuals. Pheromones. Eye contact, maybe.”

“We think otherwise,” Kaye said. “We think the set-aside will only carry instructions for the small alterations that lead to a new species. The rest of the details remains encoded in the genome, standard instructions for everything below that level . . . Probably working as well for chimpanzees as for us.”

Miller frowned, stopped rocking. “I have to let that run around in my head for a minute.” He glanced up at the dark ceiling. “Makes sense. Protect the design that you know works, at a minimum. So will these subtle changes carried in the set-aside express as units, do you think,” Miller said, “one change at a time?”

“We don’t know,” Saul said. He folded his napkin beside his plate and thumped it with his hand. “And that’s all we’re going to tell you, Drew.”

Miller smiled broadly. “Jay Niles has been talking with me. He thinks punctuated equilibrium is on a roll, and he thinks it’s a systems problem, a network problem. Selective neural network intelligence at work. I’ve never much trusted talk about neural networks. Just a way of clouding the issue,

of not describing what you need to describe.” With complete lack of guile, Miller added, “I think I can help, if you want me to.”

“Thanks, Drew. We might call on you,” Kaye said, “but for right now, we’d like to have our own fun.”

Miller shrugged expressively, tipped his finger to his forehead, and walked back to the other end of the table, where he picked up another breadstick and began another conversation.

On the plane to La Guardia, Saul slumped in his seat. “Drew has no idea, *no* idea.”

Kaye looked up from the airplane copy of *Threads*.

“About what?” Kaye asked. “He seemed pretty on track to me.”

“If you or I or anybody in biology was to talk about any kind of intelligence behind evolution . . .”

“Oh,” Kaye said. She gave a delicate shudder. “The old spooky vitalism.”

“When Drew talks about intelligence or mind, he doesn’t mean conscious thought, of course.”

“No?” Kaye said, deliciously tired, full of pasta. She pushed the magazine into the pouch under the tray table and leaned her seat back. “What *does* he mean?”

“You’ve already thought about ecological networks.”

“Not my most original work,” Kaye said. “And what does it let us predict?”

“Maybe nothing,” Saul said. “But it orders my thinking in useful ways. Nodes or neurons in a network leading to neural net patterns, feeding back to the nodes the results of any network activity, leading to increased efficiencies for every node and for the network in particular.”

“That’s certainly clear enough,” Kaye said, making a sour face.

Saul wagged his head from side to side, acknowledging her criticism. “You’re smarter than I’ll ever be, Kaye Lang,” Saul said. She watched him closely, and saw only what she admired in Saul. The ideas had taken hold of him; he was not interested in attribution, merely in seeing a new truth. Her eyes misted, and she remembered with an almost painful intensity the emotions Saul had aroused in their first year together. Goaded her, encouraging her, driving her nuts until she spoke clearly and understood the full arc of an idea, a hypothesis. “Make it clear, Kaye. That’s what you’re good at.”

“Well . . .” Kaye frowned. “That’s the way the human brain works, or a



species, or an ecosystem, for that matter. And it's also the most basic definition of thought. Neurons exchange lots of signals. The signals can add or subtract from each other, neutralize or cooperate to reach a decision. They follow the basic actions of all nature: cooperation and competition: symbiosis, parasitism, predation. Nerve cells are nodes in the brain, and genes are nodes in the genome, competing and cooperating to be reproduced in the next generation. Individuals are nodes in a species, and species are nodes in an ecosystem."

Saul scratched his cheek and looked at her proudly.

Kaye waggled her finger in warning. "The Creationists will pop out of the woodwork and crow that we're finally talking about God."

"We all have our burdens." Saul sighed.

"Miller talked about SHEVA closing the feedback loop for individual organisms—that is, individual human beings. That would make SHEVA a neurotransmitter of sorts," Kaye said, mulling this over.

Saul pushed closer to her, his hands working to describe volumes of ideas. "Let's get specific. Humans cooperate for advantage, forming a society. They communicate sexually, chemically, but also socially—through speech, writing, culture. Molecules and memes. We know that scent molecules, pheromones, affect behavior; females in groups come into estrus together. Men avoid chairs where other men have sat; women are attracted to those same chairs. We're just refining the kinds of signals that can be sent, what kind of messages, and what can carry the message. Now we suspect that our bodies exchange endogenous virus, just as bacteria do. Is it really all that startling?"

Kaye had not told Saul about her conversation with Judith. She did not want to take the edge off their fun just yet, especially with so little actually known, but it would have to happen soon. She sat up. "What if SHEVA has multiple purposes," she suggested. "Could it also have bad side effects?"

"Everything in nature can go wrong," Saul said.

"What if it actually *has* gone wrong? What if it's been expressed in error, has completely lost its original purpose and just makes us sick?"

"Not impossible," Saul said in a way that suggested polite lack of interest. His mind was still on evolution. "I really think we should work this over in the next week and put together another paper. We have the material almost ready—we could cover all the speculative bases, bring in some of the folks in Cold Spring Harbor and Santa Barbara . . . Maybe even Miller. You just don't turn down an offer from someone like Drew. We should talk

to Jay Niles, too. Get a real firm base laid down. Shall we go ahead, put our money on the table, tackle evolution?"

In truth, this possibility scared Kaye. It seemed very dangerous, and she wanted to give Judith more time to learn what SHEVA could do. More to the point, it had no connection with their core business of finding new antibiotics.

"I'm too tired to think," Kaye said. "Ask me tomorrow."

Saul sighed happily. "So many puzzles, so little time."

Kaye had not seen Saul so energetic and content in years. He tapped his fingers in rapid rhythm on the armrest and hummed softly to himself.

## 16

### Innsbruck, Austria

**S**am, Mitch's father, found him in the hospital lobby, his single bag packed and his leg wrapped in a cumbersome cast. The surgery had gone well, the pins had been removed two days before, his leg was healing on schedule. He was being discharged.

Sam helped Mitch out to the parking lot, carrying the bag for him. They pushed the seat all the way back on the passenger side of the rented Opel. Mitch fitted his leg in awkwardly, with some discomfort, and Sam drove him through the light midmorning traffic. His father's eyes darted to every corner, nervous.

"This is nothing compared to Vienna," Mitch said.

"Yes, well, I don't know how they treat foreigners. Not as bad as they do in Mexico, I guess," Sam said. Mitch's father had wiry brown hair and a heavily freckled, broad Irish face that looked as if it might smile easily enough. But Sam seldom smiled, and there was a steely edge in his gray eyes that Mitch had never learned to fathom.

Mitch had rented a one-bedroom flat on the outskirts of Innsbruck, but had not been there since the accident. Sam lit up a cigarette and smoked it quickly as they walked up the concrete stairwell to the second floor.

"You handle that leg pretty well," Sam said.

"I don't have much choice," Mitch said. Sam helped him negotiate a corner and stabilize himself on the crutches. Mitch found his keys and opened the door. The small, low-ceilinged flat had bare concrete walls

and hadn't been heated for weeks. Mitch squeezed into the bathroom and realized he would have to take his craps from a certain angled altitude; the cast didn't fit between the toilet and the wall.

"I'll have to learn to aim," he told his father as he came out. This made his father grin.

"Get a bigger bathroom next time. Spare-looking place, but clean," Sam commented. He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Your mother and I assume you're coming home. We'd like you to."

"I probably will, for a while," Mitch said. "I'm a bit of a whipped puppy, Dad."

"Bullshit," Sam murmured. "Nothing's ever whipped you."

Mitch regarded his father with a flat expression, then swiveled around on the crutches and looked at the goldfish Tilde had given him months before. She had provided a little glass bowl and a tin of food and had set it on the counter in the small kitchen. He had cared for it even after the relationship was over.

The fish had died and was now a little raft of mold floating on the surface of the half-filled bowl. Lines marked the levels of scum as the water evaporated. It was pretty gruesome.

"Shit," Mitch said. He had completely forgotten about the fish.

"What was it?" Sam asked, peering at the bowl.

"The last of a relationship that almost killed me," Mitch said.

"Pretty dramatic," Sam said.

"Pretty anticlimactic," Mitch corrected. "Maybe it should have been a shark." He offered his father a Carlsberg from the tiny refrigerator beside the kitchen sink. Sam took the beer and swallowed about a third as he walked around the living room.

"You got any unfinished business here?" Sam asked.

"I don't know," Mitch said, carrying his suitcase into the ridiculously small bedroom with bare concrete walls and a single ceiling light fixture of clear ribbed glass. He tossed it on the sleeping mat, squidgied his way around on the crutches, returned to the living room. "They want me to help them find the mummies."

"Then let them fly you back here," Sam said. "We're going home."

Mitch thought to check the answering machine. The little message counter had gone to its maximum, thirty.

"It's time to come home and get your strength back," Sam said.

That sounded pretty good, actually. Go back home at age thirty-seven

and just stay there, let Mom cook and Dad teach him how to tie flies or whatever Sam was into now, visit with their friends, become a little kid again, not responsible for anything very important.

Mitch felt sick to his stomach. He pressed the rewind button on the answering machine tape. As it whirred back onto its spool, the phone chimed and Mitch answered.

“Excuse me,” a tenor male voice said in English. “Is this Mitch Rafelson?”

“The very one,” Mitch said.

“I just tell you this, then good-bye. Maybe you recognize my voice, but . . . no matter. They have found your bodies in the cave. The University of Innsbruck people. Without your help, I assume. They do not tell anybody yet, I don’t know why. I am not joking and this is no prank, *Herr Rafelson*.”

There was a distinct click and the line went dead.

“Who was it?” Sam asked.

Mitch sniffed and tried to relax his jaw. “Fuckers,” he said. “They’re just messing with me. I’m famous, Dad. A famous crackpot chucklehead.”

“Bullshit,” Sam said again, his face sharp with disgust and anger. Mitch stared at his father with a mix of love and shame; this was Sam at his most involved, his most protective.

“Let’s get out of this rat hole,” Sam said in disgust.

## 17

### Long Island, New York

**K**aye made Saul breakfast just after sunrise. He seemed subdued, sitting at the knotty pine table in the kitchen, slowly sipping a cup of black coffee. He had had three cups already, not a good sign. In a good mood—*Good Saul*—he never drank more than a cup a day. *If he starts smoking again . . .*

Kaye delivered his scrambled eggs and toast and sat beside him. He leaned over, ignoring her, and ate slowly, deliberately, sipping coffee between each bite. As he finished, he made a sour face and pushed the plate back.

“Bad eggs?” Kaye asked quietly.

Saul gave her a long look and shook his head. He was moving slower,

also not a good sign. "I called Bristol-Myers Squibb yesterday," he said. "They haven't cut a deal with Lado and Eliava, and apparently they don't expect to. There's something political going on in Georgia."

"Maybe that's good news?"

Saul shook his head and turned his chair toward the French doors and the gray morning outside. "I also called a friend of mine at Merck. He says there's something cooking with Eliava, but he doesn't know what it is. Lado Jakeli flew to the United States and met with them."

Kaye stopped herself in the middle of a sigh, let it out slowly, inaudibly. *Walking on eggshells again . . .* The body knew, her body knew. Saul was suffering again, worse even than he appeared. She had been through this at least five times. Any hour now he would find a pack of cigarettes, inhale the hot acrid nicotine to straighten out some of his brain chemistry, even though he hated smoking, hated tobacco.

"So . . . we're out," she said.

"I don't know yet," Saul said. He squinted at a brief ray of sun. "You didn't tell me about the grave."

Kaye's face flushed like a girl's. "No," she said stiffly. "I didn't."

"And it didn't make the newspapers."

"No."

Saul pushed his chair back and grabbed the edge of the table, then half-stood and performed a series of angled push-ups, eyes focused on the table top. When he finished, having done thirty, he sat down again and wiped his face with the folded paper towel he was using as a napkin.

"Christ, I'm sorry, Kaye," he said, his voice rough. "Do you know how that makes me feel?"

"What?"

"Having my wife experience something like that."

"You knew about my taking criminal medicine at SUNY?"

"It makes me feel funny, even so," Saul said.

"You want to protect me," Kaye said, and put her hand over his, rubbing his fingers. He withdrew his hand slowly.

"Against everything," Saul said, sweeping the hand over the table, taking in the world. "Against cruelty and failure. Stupidity." His speech accelerated. "It *is* political. We're suspect. We're associated with the United Nations. Lado can't go with us."

"It didn't seem to be that way, the politics, in Georgia," Kaye said.

"What, you went with the UN team and you didn't worry it could hurt us?"

“Of course I worried!”

“Right.” Saul nodded, then waggled his head back and forth, as if to relieve tension in his neck. “I’ll make some more calls. Try and learn where Lado is taking his meetings. He apparently has no plans to visit us.”

“Then we go ahead with the people at Evergreen,” Kaye said. “They have a lot of the expertise, and some of their lab work is—”

“Not enough. We’ll be competing with Eliava and whoever they go with. They’ll get the patents and make it to the market first. They’ll grab the capital.” Saul rubbed his chin. “We have two banks and a couple of partners and . . . lots of people who were expecting this to come through for us, Kaye.”

Kaye stood, her hands trembling. “I’m sorry,” she said, “but that grave—*they were people*, Saul. Someone needed help finding out how they died.” She knew she sounded defensive, and that confused her. “I was there. I made myself useful.”

“Would you have gone if they hadn’t ordered you to?” Saul asked.

“They did not order me,” Kaye said. “Not in so many words.”

“Would you have gone if it hadn’t been official?”

“Of course not,” Kaye said.

Saul reached out his hand and she held it again. He gripped her fingers with almost painful firmness, then his eyes grew heavy-lidded. He let go, stood, poured himself another cup of coffee.

“Coffee doesn’t work, Saul,” Kaye said. “Tell me how you are. How you feel.”

“I feel fine,” he said defensively. “Success is the medication I need most right now.”

“This has nothing to do with business. It’s like the tides. You have your own tides to fight. You told me that yourself, Saul.”

Saul nodded but would not face her. “Going to the lab today?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll call from here after I make my inquiries. Let’s put together a bull session with the team leaders this evening, at the lab. Order in pizza. A keg of beer.” He made a valiant effort to smile. “We need a fallback position, and soon,” he said.

“I’ll see how the new work is going,” Kaye said. They both knew that any revenue from current projects, including the bacteriocin work, was at least a year down the road. “How soon will we—”

“Let me worry about that,” Saul said. He sidled over with a crablike motion, waggling his shoulders, self-mocking in that way only he could

manage, and hugged her with one arm, dropping his face to her shoulder. She stroked his head.

“I hate this,” he said. “I really, really hate being like this.”

“You are very strong, Saul,” Kaye whispered into his ear.

“You’re my strength,” he said, and pushed away, rubbing his cheek like a little boy who has been kissed. “I love you more than life itself, Kaye. You know that. Don’t worry about me.”

For a moment, there was a lost, feral wildness in his eyes, cornered, nowhere left to hide. Then that passed, and his shoulders drooped and he shrugged.

“I’ll be fine. We’ll prevail, Kaye. I just have to make some calls.”

Debra Kim was a slender woman with a broad face and a smooth bowl of thick black hair. Eurasian, she tended to be quietly authoritarian. She and Kaye got along very well, though she was prickly with Saul and most men.

Kim ran the cholera isolation lab at EcoBacter with a glove of velvet-wrapped steel. The second largest lab in EcoBacter, the isolation lab functioned at level 3, more to protect Kim’s supersensitive mice than the workers, though cholera was no joke. She used severe combined immunodeficient, or SCID, mice, genetically shorn of an immune system, in her research.

Kim took Kaye through the outer office of the lab and offered her a cup of tea. They engaged in small talk for several minutes, watching through a pane of clear acrylic the special sterile plastic and steel containers stacked along one wall and the active mice within.

Kim was working to find an effective phage-based therapy against cholera. The SCID mice had been equipped with human intestinal tissues, which they could not reject; they thus became small human models of cholera infection. The project had cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and had produced slim results, but still, Saul kept it going.

“Nicki down in payroll says we may have three months left,” Kim said without warning, setting down her cup and smiling stiffly at Kaye. “Is that true?”

“Probably,” Kaye said. “Three or four. Unless we seal a partnership with Eliava. That would be sexy enough to bring in some more capital.”

“Shit,” Kim said. “I turned down an offer from Procter and Gamble last week.”

“I hope you didn’t burn any bridges,” Kaye said.

Kim shook her head. “I like it here, Kaye. I’d rather work with you and

Saul then almost anyone else. But I'm not getting any younger, and I have some pretty ambitious work in mind."

"So do we all," Kaye said.

"I'm pretty close to developing a two-pronged treatment," Kim said, walking to the acrylic panel. "I've got the gene connection between the endotoxins and adhesins. The *cholerae* attach to our little intestinal mucus cells and make them drunk. The body resists by shedding the mucus membranes. Rice-water stools. I can make a phage that carries a gene that shuts down pilin production in the cholera. If they can make toxin, they can't make pili, and they can't adhere to mucus cells in the intestine. We deliver capsules of phage to cholera-infected areas, voilà. We can even use them in water treatment programs. Six months, Kaye. Just six more months and we could hand this over to the World Health Organization for seventy-five cents a dose. Just four hundred dollars to treat an entire water purification plant. Make a very tidy profit and save several thousand lives every month."

"I hear you," Kaye said.

"Why is timing everything?" Kim asked softly, and poured herself another cup of tea.

"Your work won't stop here. If we go under, you can take it with you. Go to another company. And take the mice. Please."

Kim laughed, then frowned. "That's insanely generous of you. What about you? Are you just going to bite the bullet and sink under the debts, or declare bankruptcy and go to work for the Squibb? You could get work easily enough, Kaye, especially if you strike before the publicity dies down. But what about Saul? This company is his life."

"We have options," Kaye said.

Kim drew the ends of her lips down in concern. She put her hand on Kaye's arm. "We all know about his cycles," she said. "Is this getting to him?"

Kaye half shuddered, half shivered at this, as if to throw off any unpleasantness. "I can't talk about Saul, Kim. You know that."

Kim threw her hands up in the air. "Christ, Kaye, maybe you could use all the publicity to take the company public, get some funding. Tide us over for another year . . ."

Kim had very little sense of how business worked. She was atypical this way; most biotech researchers in private companies were very savvy about business. *No francs, no Frankenstein's monster*, she had heard one of



her colleagues say. “We couldn’t convince anybody to back us for a public offering,” Kaye said. “SHEVA has nothing to do with EcoBacter, not now at any rate. And cholera is Third World stuff. It isn’t sexy, Kim.”

“It isn’t?” Kim said, and fluttered her hands in disgust. “Well, what in hell *is* sexy in the big old bidness world today?”

“Alliances and high profits and stock value,” Kaye said. She stood and tapped the plastic panel near one of the mouse cages. The mice inside reared up and wriggled their noses.

Kaye walked into Lab 6, where she did most of her research. She had handed off her bacteriocin studies a month ago to some postdocs in Lab 5. This lab was being used by Kim’s assistants for the time being, but they were at a conference in Houston, and the lab had been closed, the lights turned off.

When she wasn’t working on antibiotics, her favorite subjects had been Henle 407 cultures, derived from intestinal cells; she had used them to meticulously study aspects of mammalian genomes, and to locate potentially active HERV. Saul had encouraged her, perhaps foolishly; she could have focused completely on the bacteriocin research, but Saul had assured her she was a golden girl. Anything she touched would advance the company.

Now, lots of glory, but no money.

The biotech industry was unforgiving at best. Maybe she and Saul simply did not have what it took.

Kaye sat in the middle of the lab on a rolling chair that had somehow lost a wheel, leaned to one side, hands on her knees and tears slicking her cheeks. A small and persistent voice in the back of her head told her that this could not go on. The same voice continued to warn her that she had made bad choices in her personal life, but she could not imagine how she could have done otherwise. Despite everything, Saul was not her enemy; far from being a brutal or abusive man, he was simply a victim of tragic biological imbalances. His love for her was pure enough.

What had started her tears was this treasonous inner voice that insisted that she should get out of this situation, abandon Saul, start over again; *no better time*. She could get work in a university lab, apply for funding for a pure research project that suited her, escape this damned and very literal rat race.

Yet Saul had been so loving, so *right* when she had returned from Georgia. The paper on evolution had seemed to rekindle his interest in sci-

ence over profit. Then . . . the setbacks, the discouragement, the downward spiral. *Bad Saul.*

She did not want to face again what had happened eight months ago. Saul's worst breakdown had tested her own limits. His attempted suicides—two of them—had left her exhausted, and, more than she cared to admit, embittered. She had fantasized about living with other men, calm and normal men, men closer to her own age.

Kaye had never told Saul about these wishes, these dreams; she wondered if perhaps she needed to see her own psychiatrist, but she had decided against it. Saul had spent tens of thousands of dollars on psychiatrists, had gone through five regimens of drug therapy, had once suffered complete loss of sexual function and weeks of being unable to think clearly. For him, the miracle drugs did not work.

What did they have left, what did *she* have left in the way of reserves, if the tide turned again and she lost Good Saul? Being around Saul in the bad times had eaten at some other reserve—a spiritual reserve, generated during her childhood, when her parents had told her, *You are responsible for your life, your behavior. God has given you certain gifts, beautiful tools . . .*

She knew she was good; once, she had been autonomous, strong, inner-directed, and she wanted to feel that way again.

Saul had an outwardly healthy body, and intellectually a fine mind, yet there were times when, through no fault of his own, he could not control his existence. What then did this say about God and the ineffable soul, the self? That so much could be skewed by mere chemicals . . .

Kaye had never been too strong on the God thing, on faith; the crime scenes in Brooklyn had stretched her belief in any sort of fairy-tale religion; stretched it, then broke it.

But the last of her spiritual conceits, the last tie she had to a world of ideals, was that you controlled your own behavior.

She heard someone come into the lab. The light was switched on. The broken chair squeaked and scraped as she turned. It was Kim.

"Here you are!" Kim said, her face pale. "We've been looking all over for you."

"Where else would I be?" Kaye asked.

Kim held out a portable lab phone. "It's from your house."

**The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta**

**M**r. Dicken, this isn't a baby. It wasn't ever going to be a baby."

Dicken looked over the photos and analysis of the Crown City miscarriage. Tom Scarry's battered old steel desk sat at the end of a small room with pale blue walls, filled with computer terminals, adjacent to Scarry's viral pathology lab in Building 15. The top of the desk was littered with computer disks, photos, and folios filled with papers. Somehow, Scarry managed to keep his projects sorted; he was one of the best tissue analysts in the CDC.

"What is it, then?" Dicken asked.

"It may have started out as a fetus, but nearly all the internal organs are severely underdeveloped. The spine hasn't closed—spina bifida would be one interpretation, but in this case, there's a whole series of nerves branching to a follicular mass in what would otherwise be the abdominal cavity."

"Follicular?"

"Like an ovary. But containing only about a dozen eggs."

Dicken drew his brows together. Scarry's pleasant drawl matched a friendly face, but his smile was sad.

"So—it would have been a female?" Dicken asked.

"Christopher, this fetus miscarried because it is the most screwed up arrangement of cellular material I've ever seen. Abortion was a major act of mercy. It might have been female—but something went very wrong in the first week of the pregnancy."

"I don't understand—"

"The head is severely malformed. The brain is just a nubbin of tissue at the end of a shortened spinal cord. There is no jaw. The eye sockets are open at the side, like a kitten's. The skull looks more like a lemur's, what there is of it. No brain function would have been possible after the first three weeks. No metabolism could have been established after the first month. This thing functions as an organ drawing sustenance, but it has no kidneys, a very small liver, no stomach or intestines to speak of. . . . A kind of heart, but again, very small. The limbs are just little fleshy buttons. It's not much more than an ovary with a blood supply. Where in hell did this come from?"

“Crown City Hospital,” Dicken said. “But don’t spread that around.”

“My lips are sealed. How many of these have they had?”

“A few,” Dicken said.

“I’d start looking for a major source of teratogens. Forget thalidomide. Whatever caused this is pure nightmare.”

“Yeah,” Dicken said, and pressed the bridge of his nose with his fingers. “One last question.”

“Fine. Then get it out of here and let me get back to a normal existence.”

“You say it has an ovary. Would the ovary function?”

“The eggs were mature, if that’s what you’re asking. And one follicle appears to have ruptured. I said that in my analysis . . .” He flipped back sheets from the paper and pointed, impatient and a little cross, more with Nature than him, Dicken thought. “Right here.”

“So we have a fetus that *ovulated* before it was miscarried?” Dicken asked, incredulous.

“I doubt it got that far.”

“We don’t have the placenta,” Dicken said.

“If you get one, don’t bring it to me,” Scarry said. “I’m spooked enough. Oh—one more thing. Dr. Branch dropped off her tissue assay this morning.” Scarry pushed a single paper across the desk, lifting it delicately to clear the other material.

Dicken picked it up. “Christ.”

“You think SHEVA could have done this?” Scarry asked, tapping the analysis.

Branch had found high levels of SHEVA particles in the fetal tissue—well over a million particles per gram. The particles had suffused the fetus, or whatever they might call the bizarre growth; only in the follicular mass, the ovary, were they virtually absent. She had posted a small note at the end of the page.

*These particles contain less than 80,000 nucleotides of single-stranded RNA. They all are associated with an unidentified 12,000+ kilodalton protein complex in the host cell nucleus. The viral genome demonstrates substantial homology with SHEVA. Talk to my office. I’d like to obtain fresher samples for accurate PCR and sequencing.*

“Well?” Scarry persisted. “Is this caused by SHEVA or not?”

“Maybe,” Dicken said.

“Does Augustine have what he needs now?”

Word spread fast at 1600 Clifton Road.

“Not a peep to anyone, Tom,” Dicken said. “I mean it.”

“No suh, massa.” Scarry zipped his lips with a finger.

Dicken shuffled the report and the analysis into a folder and glanced at his watch. It was six o'clock. There was a possibility Augustine was still in his office.

Six more hospitals in the Atlanta area, part of Dicken's network, were reporting high rates of miscarriage, with similar fetal remnants. More and more were testing for, and finding, SHEVA in the mothers.

That was something the surgeon general would definitely want to know.

## 19

### Long Island, New York

**A** bright yellow fire truck and a red Emergency Response vehicle had parked in the gravel driveway. Their rotating red and blue lights flashed and brightened the afternoon shadows on the old house. Kaye drove past the fire truck and parked behind the ambulance, eyes wide and palms damp, her heart in her throat. She kept whispering, “God, Saul. Not now.”

Clouds blew in from the east, breaking up the afternoon sun, raising a gray wall behind the brilliant emergency lights. She opened the car door, stepped out, and stared at two firemen, who blandly returned her look. A slow and warmer breeze gently combed her hair. The air smelled damp, close; there might be thunder this evening.

A young paramedic approached. He looked professionally concerned and held a clipboard. “Mrs. Madsen?”

“Lang,” she said. “Kaye Lang. Saul's wife.” Kaye turned to gather her wits and saw for the first time the police car parked on the other side of the fire truck.

“Mrs. Lang, we received a call from a Miss Caddy Wilson—”

Caddy pushed open the front screen door and stood on the porch, followed by a police officer. The door slammed woodenly behind them, a familiar, friendly sound suddenly made ominous.

“Caddy!” Kaye waved. Caddy made a little run down the steps, clutching her light cotton skirt in front of her, wisps of pale blond hair flying. She was in her late forties, thin, with strong wiry forearms and manly hands, a

handsome stalwart face, large brown eyes that now looked both concerned for Kaye and a little panicked, like a horse about to bolt.

“Kaye! I came to the house this afternoon, like always—”

The paramedic interrupted her. “Mrs. Lang, your husband is not in the house. We haven’t found him.”

Caddy stared at the medic resentfully, as if, of all people, this was without a doubt her story to tell. “The house is an incredible sight, Kaye. There’s blood—”

“Mrs. Lang, perhaps you should talk to the police first—”

“Please!” Caddy shrieked at the paramedic. “Can’t you see she’s scared?”

Kaye took Caddy’s hand and made a small shushing noise. Caddy wiped her eyes with her wrist and nodded, swallowing twice. The police officer joined them, tall and bull-bellied, skin deep black, hair swept neatly back above a high forehead and a patrician face; wise, tired eyes with golden sclera. She thought he was really quite striking, much more prepossessing than the others in the yard.

“Missus . . .” The officer began.

“Lang,” the paramedic offered.

“Missus Lang, your house is in something of a state—”

Kaye started up the porch steps. Let them work out the jurisdiction and procedure. She had to see what Saul had done before she could have any idea as to where Saul might be, what he might have done since . . . Might be doing even now.

The police officer followed. “Does your husband have a history of self-mutilation, Missus Lang?”

“No,” Kaye said through clenched teeth. “He bit his fingernails.”

The house was quiet but for the tread of another police officer descending the stairs. Someone had opened the living room windows. White curtains billowed over the overstuffed couch. The second officer, in his fifties, thin and pale, slouched at the shoulders, his face seamed with perpetual worry, looked more like a mortician or a coroner. He started to talk, his words distant and liquid, but Kaye pushed up the stairs past him. The bull-bellied man followed.

Saul had hit their bedroom hard. The drawers had been pulled out and his clothes were scattered everywhere. She knew without really thinking that he had been searching for the right piece of underwear, the right pair of socks, appropriate to some special occasion.

An ashtray on the window sill was filled with cigarette butts. Camels, unfiltered. The hard stuff. Kaye hated the smell of tobacco.

The bathroom had been lightly sprayed with blood. The tub was half-filled with pinkish water, and bloody footprints went from the yellow bath mat across the black and white checkerboard tile to the old teak floor and then into the bedroom, where they stopped showing traces of blood.

"Theatrical," she murmured, glancing up at the mirror, the thin spray of blood over the glass and across the sink. "God. Not now, Saul."

"Do you have any idea where he might have gone?" the bull-bellied officer asked. "Did he do this to himself, or is there someone else involved?"

This was certainly the worst she had seen. He must have been concealing the worst of his mood, or the break had come with vicious speed, occluding every bit of sense and responsibility. He had once described the arrival of an intense depression as long dark blankets of shadow dragged by slack-faced devils in rumpled clothing.

"It's just him, just him," she said, and coughed into her fist. Surprisingly, she did not feel sick. She saw the bed, neatly made, white cover drawn up and folded precisely under the pillows, Saul trying to make order and sense out of this darkened world, and she stopped by a small circle of splatted drops of blood on the wood beside her nightstand. "Just him."

"Mr. Madsen can be quite sad at times," Caddy said from the bedroom door, long-fingered hand pressed flat and white against the dark maple jamb.

"Does your husband have a history of suicide attempts?" the medic asked.

"Yes," she said. "Never this bad."

"Looks like he cut his wrists in the tub," said the sad thin police officer. He nodded sagely. Kaye decided she would call him Mr. Death, and the other Mr. Bull. Mr. Bull and Mr. Death could tell just as much about the house as she could, possibly more.

"He got out of the tub," Mr. Bull said, "and . . ."

"Bound his wrists again, like a Roman, trying to draw out his time on Earth," Mr. Death said. He smiled apologetically at Kaye. "Sorry, ma'am."

"And then he must have gotten dressed and left the house."

Just so, Kaye thought. They were so right.

Kaye sat on the bed, wishing she were the fainting type, blank this scene here and now, let others take charge.

"Mrs. Lang, we might be able to find your husband—"

"He did not kill himself," she said. She waved her hand at the blood,

pointed loosely toward the hall and the bathroom. She was looking for a tiny shred of hope, thought for a moment she had grasped it. “This was bad, but he . . . as you said, he stopped himself.”

“Missus Lang—” Mr. Bull began.

“We should find him and get him to the hospital,” she said, and with this sudden possibility, that he might still be saved, her voice broke and she began to quietly weep.

“The boat’s gone,” Caddy said. Kaye stood up abruptly and walked to the window. She knelt on the window seat and looked down on the small dock thrusting from the rocky sea wall into the gray-green water of the sound. The small sailboat was not at its moorage.

Kaye shook as if with chill. She could slowly accept now that this was going to be it. Bravery and denial could no longer compete with blood and things out of place, Saul gone awry, in the control of *Sad/Bad*, blanketed Saul.

“I can’t see it,” Kaye said shrilly, looking out across the choppy water. “It has a red sail. It’s not out there.”

They asked her for a description, a photograph, and she provided both. Mr. Bull went downstairs, out the front door, to the police car. Kaye followed him part of the way and turned to go into the living room. She was unwilling to stay in the bedroom. Mr. Death and the paramedic stayed to ask more questions, but she had very few answers. A police photographer and a coroner’s assistant went up the stairs with their equipment.

Caddy watched it all with owlsh concern and then cattish fascination. Finally, she hugged Kaye and said some more words and Kaye said, automatically, that she would be fine. Caddy wanted to leave but could not bring herself to do so.

At that moment, the orange cat Crickson came into the room. Kaye picked him up and stroked him, suddenly wondered if he had seen, then stooped and slipped him gently back on the floor.

The minutes seemed to last for hours. Daylight faded and rain spatted against the living room windows. Finally, Mr. Bull returned, and it was Mr. Death’s turn to leave.

Caddy watched, made guilty by her horror and fascination.

“We can’t clean this up for you,” Mr. Bull told her. He handed her a business card. “These folks have a little business. They clean up messes like this. It’s not cheap, but they do a good job. Husband and wife. Christians. Nice people.”



Kaye nodded and took the card. She did not want the house now; thought about just locking the door and leaving it.

Caddy was the last to go. "Where you going to spend the night, Kaye?" she asked.

"I don't know," Kaye said.

"You're welcome to come stay with us, dear."

"Thank you," Kaye said. "There's a cot at the lab. I think I'll sleep there tonight. Could you take care of the cats? I can't . . . think about them now."

"Of course. I'll round them up. You want me to come back?" Caddy asked. "Clean up after . . . you know? The others are done?"

"I'll call," Kaye said, close to breaking down again. Caddy hugged her with painful intensity and then went to find the cats. She left ten minutes later and Kaye was alone in the house.

No note, no message, nothing.

The phone rang. She did not answer for a time, but it continued to ring, and the answering machine had been turned off, perhaps by Saul. Perhaps it *was* Saul, she realized with a shock, hating herself for having briefly lost hope, and instantly picked up the phone.

"Is this Kaye?"

"Yes." Hoarsely. She cleared her throat.

"Mrs. Lang, this is Randy Foster at AKS Industries. I need to speak with Saul. About the deal. Is he home?"

"No, Mr. Foster."

Pause. Awkward. What to say? Who to tell just now? And who was Randy Foster, and what *deal*?

"Sorry. Tell him we've just finished with our lawyers and the contracts are done. They'll be delivered tomorrow. We've scheduled a conference call for four P.M. I look forward to meeting you, Mrs. Lang."

She mumbled something and put the phone down. For a moment she thought now she *would* break, a really big break. Instead, slowly and with great deliberation, she went back up the stairs and packed a large suitcase with the clothes she might need for the next week.

Then she left the house and drove the car to EcoBacter. The building was mostly empty by dinnertime, and she was not hungry. She used her key to open the small side office where Saul had placed a cot and blankets, then hesitated a moment before opening the door. She pushed it slowly inward.

The small windowless room was dark and empty and cool. It smelled clean. Everything in order.

Kaye undressed and got under the beige wool blanket and crisp white sheets.

That morning, early, before dawn, she awoke in a sweat, shivering, not ill, but horrified by the specter of her new self, a *widow*.

## 20

### London

**T**he reporters finally found Mitch at Heathrow. Sam sat across from him at a small table in the court around the open seafood bar while five of them, two females and three males, clustered just outside a low barrier of plastic plants surrounding the eating area and peppered him with questions. Curious and irritated travelers watched from the other tables, or brushed past carting their luggage.

“Were you the first to confirm they were prehistoric?” the older woman asked, camera clutched in one hand. She self-consciously pushed back wisps of hennaed hair, her eyes twitching left and right, finally zeroing in on Mitch for his answer.

Mitch picked at his shrimp cocktail.

“Do you think they have any connection with Pasco man in the U.S.A.?” asked one of the males, obviously hoping to provoke.

Mitch could not tell the three men apart. They were all in their thirties, dressed in rumpled black suits, carrying steno pads and digital recorders.

“That was your last debacle, wasn’t it?”

“Were you deported from Austria?” another man asked.

“How much did the dead climbers pay you to keep their secret? What were they going to charge for the mummies?”

Mitch leaned back and stretched ostentatiously, then smiled. The hennaed female duly recorded this. Sam shook his head, hunkered down as if under a rain cloud.

“Ask me about the infant,” Mitch said.

“What infant?”

“Ask me about the baby. The normal baby.”

“How many sites did you plunder?” Henna-hair asked cheerily.

“We found the baby in the cave with its parents,” Mitch said, and stood, pushing back the cast-iron chair with an ugly scraping sound. “Dad, let’s go.”

“Fine,” Sam said.

“Whose cave? The cavemen’s cave?” the middle male asked.

“Caveman and cavewoman,” the younger woman corrected.

“Do you think they kidnapped it?” Henna-hair asked, licking her lips.

“Kidnapped a baby, killed it, carried it for food perhaps into the Alps . . . Got caught in a storm, died!” Left-side-male enthused.

“What a story that would be!” Number-three-male, on the left, said.

“Ask the scientists,” Mitch said, and worked his way to the counter on crutches to pay the check.

“They give out news like it was holy dispensation!” the younger woman shouted after them.

## 21

### Washington, D.C.

**D**icken sat beside Mark Augustine in the office of the surgeon general, Doctor Maxine Kirby. Kirby was of medium height, stout, with discerning almond eyes set in chocolate skin that bore only a few character lines and belied her six decades; those lines had deepened in the last hour, however.

It was eleven P.M. and they had gone through the details twice now. For the third time, the laptop automatically cycled through its slide show of charts and definitions, but only Dicken was watching.

Frank Shawbeck, deputy director of the National Institutes of Health, returned to the room through the heavy gray door after having made a visit to the lavatory down the hall. Everyone knew that Kirby did not like others using her private washroom.

The surgeon general stared up at the ceiling and Augustine gave Dicken a small, quick scowl, concerned that the presentation had not been convincing.

She lifted her hand. “Shut that down, please, Christopher. My brain is spinning.” Dicken hit the ESCAPE key on the laptop and turned off the overhead projector. Shawbeck turned up the office lights and shoved his hands

into his pockets. He took a position of loyal support on the corner of Kirby's broad maple desk.

"These domestic stats," Kirby said, "all from area hospitals—that's a strong point, it's happening in the neighborhood . . . and we're still getting reports from other cities, other states."

"All the time," Augustine confirmed. "We're trying to be as quiet as we can, but—"

"They're getting suspicious." Kirby grabbed hold of her index finger and stared at a chipped, painted nail. The nail was teal blue. The surgeon general was sixty-one years old, but she wore teenager's enamel on her nails. "It'll be on the news any minute now. SHEVA is more than just a curiosity. It's the same as Herod's flu. Herod's causes mutations and miscarriages. By the way, that name . . ."

"Maybe a bit on the nose," Shawbeck said. "Who made it up?"

"I did," Augustine said.

Shawbeck was acting watchdog. Dicken had seen him play the adversary with Augustine before, and never knew how genuine the role was.

"Well, Frank, Mark, is this my ammunition?" Kirby asked. Before they could answer, she made an approving and speculative face, pouching out her lips, and said, "It's damned scary."

"It is that," Augustine said.

"But it doesn't make any sense," Kirby said. "Something pops out of our genes and makes monster babies . . . with a single huge ovary? Mark, what in *hell*?"

"We don't know what the etiology is, ma'am," Augustine said. "We're way behind, down to minimum staff on any single project as it is."

"We're asking for more money, Mark. You know that. But the mood in Congress is ugly. I do not want to be caught in anything like a false alarm."

"Biologically, the work is top notch. Politically, this is a ticking bomb," Augustine said. "If we don't go public soon—"

"Damn it, Mark," Shawbeck said, "we have no direct connection! People who get this flu—*all* of their tissues are suffused with SHEVA, for weeks after! What if the viruses are old and weak and don't have any oomph? They express because, what," he waved his hand, "there's less ozone and we're all getting more UV or something, like herpes coming out in a lip sore? Maybe they're harmless, maybe they have nothing to do with the miscarriages."

"I don't think they're coincidence," Kirby said. "The figures look too

close. What I want to know is, why doesn't the body eat up these viruses, shed them?"

"Because they're released continuously for months," Dicken said. "Whatever the body does with them, they're still being expressed by different tissues."

"Which tissues?"

"We're not sure yet," Augustine said. "We're looking at bone marrow and lymph."

"There's absolutely no sign of viremia," Dicken said. "No swelling of the spleen and lymph nodes. Viruses all over, but no extreme reaction." He rubbed his cheek nervously. "I'd like to go over something again."

The surgeon general returned her gaze to him, and Shawbeck and Augustine, seeing her focus, grew quiet.

Dicken pulled his chair forward a couple of inches. "The women get SHEVA from steady male partners. Women who are single—women without committed partners—don't get SHEVA."

"That's stupid," Shawbeck said, his face curled in disgust. "How in hell does a disease know whether a woman is shackled up with somebody or not?" It was Kirby's turn to frown. Shawbeck apologized. "But you know what I mean," he said defensively.

"It's in the stats," Dicken countered. "We checked this out very thoroughly. It's transmitted from males to their female partners, over a fairly long exposure. Homosexual men do not transmit it to their partners. If there is no heterosexual contact, it is not passed along. It's a sexually transmitted disease, but a selective one."

"Christ," Shawbeck said, whether in doubt or awe, Dicken could not tell.

"We'll accept that for now," the surgeon general said. "What's made SHEVA come out now?"

"Obviously, SHEVA and humans have an old relationship," Dicken said. "It might be the human equivalent of a lysogenic phage. In bacteria, lysogenic phages express themselves when the bacteria are subjected to stimuli that could be interpreted as life-threatening—stress, as it were. Maybe SHEVA reacts to things that cause stress in humans. Overcrowding. Social conditions. Radiation."

Augustine shot him a warning glance.

"We're a hell of a lot more complicated than bacteria," he concluded.

"You think SHEVA is expressing now because of overpopulation?" Kirby asked.

“Perhaps, but that isn’t my point,” Dicken said. “Lysogenic phages can actually help bacteria. They sometimes serve a symbiotic function. They help bacteria adapt to new conditions and even new sources of nutrition or opportunity by swapping genes. What if SHEVA serves a useful function in us?”

“By keeping the population down?” Shawbeck ventured skeptically. “The stress of overpopulation causes us to express little abortion experts? Wow.”

“Maybe, I don’t know,” Dicken said, nervously wiping his hands on his pants. Kirby saw this, looked up coolly, a little embarrassed for him.

“Who *does* know?” she asked.

“Kaye Lang,” Dicken said.

Augustine made a small gesture with his hand, unseen by the surgeon general; Dicken was on very thin ice. They had not discussed this earlier.

“She does seem to have gotten a leg up on SHEVA before everybody else,” Kirby said. Her eyes wide, she leaned forward over her desk and gave him a challenging look. “But Christopher, how did you know that . . . Way back in August, in the Republic of Georgia? Your hunter’s intuition?”

“I had read her papers,” Dicken said. “What she wrote about was intrinsically fascinating.”

“I’m curious. Why did Mark send you to Georgia and Turkey?” Kirby asked.

“I seldom send Christopher anywhere,” Augustine said. “He has a wolf’s instincts when it comes to finding our kind of prey.”

Kirby kept her gaze on Dicken.

“Don’t be shy, Christopher. Mark had you out scouting for a scary disease. I admire that—like preventive medicine applied to politics. And in Georgia, you encountered Ms. Kaye Lang, by accident?”

“There’s a CDC office in Tbilisi,” Augustine said, trying to be helpful.

“An office that Mr. Dicken did not visit, even for a social call,” the surgeon general said, brows coming together.

“I went looking for her. I admired her work.”

“And you said nothing to her.”

“Nothing substantive.”

Kirby sat back in her seat and looked to Augustine. “Can we bring her in?” she asked.

“She’s having some problems,” Augustine said.

“What kind of problems?” she asked.

“Her husband is missing, probably a suicide,” Augustine said.

“That was over a month ago,” Dicken said.

“There seems to be more trouble in store. Before he disappeared, her husband sold their company out from under her, to pay off an investment of venture capital she apparently did not know about.”

Dicken had not heard about this. Obviously, Augustine had been conducting his own probe on Kaye Lang.

“Jesus,” Shawbeck said. “So, she’s what, a wreck, we leave her alone until she heals?”

“If we need her, we need her,” Kirby said. “Gentlemen, I don’t like the feel of this one. Call it a woman’s intuition, having to do with ovaries and such. I want all the expert advice we can get. Mark?”

“I’ll call her,” Augustine said, giving in with uncharacteristic speed. He had read the breeze, saw the windsock swinging; Dicken had won a point.

“Do that,” Kirby said, and swiveled in her chair to face Dicken dead on. “Christopher, for the life of me, I *still* think you’re hiding something. What is it?”

Dicken smiled and shook his head. “Nothing solid.”

“Oh?” Kirby raised her eyebrows. “The best virus man in the NCID? Mark says he relies on your nose.”

“Sometimes Mark is too damned candid,” Augustine said.

“Yeah,” Kirby said. “Christopher should be candid, too. What’s your nose say?”

Dicken was a little dismayed by the surgeon general’s question, and reluctant to show his cards while his hand was still weak. “SHEVA is very, very old,” he reiterated.

“And?”

“I’m not sure it’s a disease.”

Shawbeck released a quiet snort of dubiety.

“Go on,” Kirby encouraged.

“It’s an old part of human biology. It’s been in our DNA since long before humans existed. Maybe it’s doing what it’s supposed to do.”

“Kill babies?” Shawbeck suggested tartly.

“Regulate some larger, species-level function.”

“Let’s go with what’s solid,” Augustine suggested quickly. “SHEVA is Herod’s. It causes gross birth defects and miscarriages.”

“The connection is strong enough for me,” Kirby said. “I think I can sell the president and Congress.”

“I agree,” Shawbeck said. “With some deep concerns, however. I wonder if all this mystery could catch up to us down the road a ways and bite us in the butt.”

Dicken felt some relief. He had almost blown the game but had managed to hold back an ace to play later; traces of SHEVA from the corpses in Georgia. The results had just come back from Maria Konig at the University of Washington.

“I’m seeing the president tomorrow,” the surgeon general said. “I have ten minutes with him. Get me the domestic stats on paper, ten copies, full color.”

SHEVA would soon become an official crisis. In the politics of health, a crisis tended to be resolved using familiar science and bureaucratically tried and true routines. Until the situation showed its true strangeness, Dicken did not think anybody would believe his conclusions. He could hardly believe them himself.

Outside, under felt-colored skies, a dull November afternoon, Augustine opened the door to the government Lincoln and said, over the roof, “Whenever anyone asks you what you really think, what do you do?”

“Go with the flow,” Dicken said.

“You got it, boy genius.”

Augustine drove. Despite Dicken’s near fumble, Augustine seemed happy enough with the meeting. “She’s only got six weeks left before she retires. She’s taking my name in to the White House chief of staff as a suggested replacement.”

“Congratulations,” Dicken said.

“With Shawbeck as a very close backup,” Augustine added. “But this could do it, Christopher. This could be the ticket.”

**22**

**K**aye sat in a dark brown leather chair in the richly paneled office and wondered why highly paid East Coast lawyers chose such elegantly somber trappings. Her fingers pressed the brass heads of the upholstery nails on the arm.

**New York City**



The lawyer for AKS Industries, Daniel Munsey, stood beside the desk of J. Robert Orbison, her family's lawyer for thirty years.

Her father and mother had died five years before, and Kaye had not paid Orbison's retainer. With Saul's disappearance and the all-too-stunning news from AKS and the corporate attorney for EcoBacter, now sucking up to AKS, she had gone to Orbison in a state of shock. She had found him to be a decent and caring fellow, who said he would charge no more than he had ever charged Mr. and Mrs. Lang in their thirty years of business.

Orbison was thin as a rail, hook-nosed, bald, with age spots all over his head and down his cheeks, whiskers on his moles, loose wet lips, bleary blue eyes, but he dressed in a beautiful custom-fitted pinstripe suit with wide lapels and a tie that almost filled the V of his vest.

Munsey was in his early thirties, darkly handsome, soft-spoken. He wore a smooth tobacco-colored wool suit and knew biotech almost as well as she did; in some ways, better.

"AKS may not be responsible for the failures of Mr. Madsen," Orbison said in a strong, gentle voice, "but under the circumstances, we believe your company owes Ms. Lang due consideration."

"Monetary consideration?" Munsey lifted his hands in puzzlement. "Saul Madsen could not convince his investors to keep funding him. Apparently, he had focused on a deal with a research group in the Republic of Georgia." Munsey shook his head sadly. "My clients bought out the investors. Their price was more than fair, considering what's happened since."

"Kaye put a lot of work into the company. Compensation for intellectual property—"

"She has contributed greatly to science, not to any product a potential purchaser could possibly market."

"Then surely, fair compensation for contributing to the value of EcoBacter as a name."

"Ms. Lang was not a legal co-owner. Saul Madsen apparently never regarded his wife as more than a managerial employee."

"It is a regrettable lapse that Ms. Lang did not inquire," Orbison admitted. "She trusted her husband."

"We believe she's entitled to whatever assets remain in the estate. EcoBacter is simply no longer one of those assets."

Kaye looked away.

Orbison looked down at the glass-covered desktop. "Ms. Lang is a famous biological scientist, Mr. Munsey."

“Mr. Orbison, Ms. Lang, AKS Industries buys and sells going concerns. With Saul Madsen’s death, EcoBacter is no longer a going concern. There are no valuable patents in its name, no relationships with other companies or institutions that can’t be renegotiated outside our control. The one product that could be marketable, a treatment for cholera, is actually owned by a so-called employee. Mr. Madsen was remarkably generous with his contracts. We’ll be lucky if the physical assets recoup ten percent of our costs. Ms. Lang, we can’t even make payroll for this month. Nobody’s buying.”

“We believe that given five months, using her reputation, Ms. Lang could assemble a team of solid financial backers and restart EcoBacter. Employee loyalty is very high. Many have signed letters of intent to stay with Kaye and help rebuild.”

Munsey raised his hands again: no go. “My clients follow their instincts. Perhaps Mr. Madsen should have chosen another kind of firm to sell his company to. With all respect to Ms. Lang, and nobody holds her in higher esteem than I do, she has performed no work of immediate commercial interest. Biotech is a highly competitive business, Ms. Lang, as you know.”

“The future lies in what we can create, Mr. Munsey,” Kaye said.

Munsey shook his head sadly. “You’d have my own investment in a flash, Ms. Lang. But I’m a softy. The rest of the companies . . .” He let his words trail off.

“Thank you, Mr. Munsey,” Orbison said, and made a tent with his hands, on which he rested his long nose.

Munsey seemed nonplussed by this dismissal. “I’m very sorry, Ms. Lang. We’re still having difficulty with our completion bond and insurance negotiations because of the way Mr. Madsen vanished.”

“He’s not coming back, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Kaye said, her voice breaking. “They found him, Mr. Munsey. He’s not going to come back and have a good laugh with us and tell me how to get on with my life.”

Munsey stared at her.

She could not stop. The words poured out. “They found him on the rocks in Long Island Sound. He was in terrible shape. I had to identify him from our wedding ring.”

“I’m deeply sorry. I hadn’t heard,” Munsey said.

“The final identification was made this morning,” Orbison told him quietly.

“I’m so very sorry, Ms. Lang.”

Munsey backed out and closed the door behind him.

Orbison watched her silently.

Kaye wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. “I had no idea how much he meant to me, how much we had become one brain, working together. I thought I had my own mind and my own life . . . and now, I find out different. I feel less than half a human being. He’s dead.”

Orbison nodded.

“This afternoon I’m going back to EcoBacter and I’m going to hold a little wake with all the people there. I’m going to tell them it’s time to find work, and that I’ll be there right alongside them.”

“You’re smart and young. You’ll make it, Kaye.”

“I know I’ll make it!” she said fiercely. Then, almost hearing an echo of her words, she laughed. She hit her knee with her fist. “Goddamn him. The . . . bastard. The *creep*. He had no goddamn right!”

“No goddamn right at all,” Orbison said. “It was a cheap and dirty trick to pull on someone like you.” His eyes brightened with the kind of anger and sympathy he might have carried into a courtroom, firing up his emotions like a rusty Coleman lantern.

“Yeah,” she said, staring wildly around the room. “Oh, God, it is going to be so *hard*. You know what the worst part is?”

“What, dear?” Orbison asked.

“Part of me is *glad*,” Kaye said, and she began to weep.

“Now, now,” Orbison said, an old and weary man once more.

## 23

**The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta**  
Neandertal mummies,” Augustine said. He strode across Dicken’s small office and shoved a folded paper onto Dicken’s desk. “Time marches on. And *Newsweek*, too.”

Dicken pushed aside a set of copies of infant and fetal postmortems for the last two months from Northside Hospital in Atlanta and picked up the paper. It was the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and the headline read “Ice Couple Confirmed Prehistoric.”

He skimmed the article with little interest, just to be polite, and looked up at Augustine.

“It’s getting hot in Washington,” the director said. “They’ve asked me to assemble a taskforce.”

“You’re in charge?”

Augustine nodded.

“Good news, then,” Dicken said warily, sensing storms.

Augustine looked at him, deadpan. “We used the statistics you put together and it scared the hell out of the president. The surgeon general showed him one of the miscarriages. A picture, of course. She says she’s never seen him so upset over a national health issue. He wants us to go public right away with the full details. ‘Babies are dying,’ he says. ‘If we can fix it, go fix it, and now.’ ”

Dicken waited patiently.

“Dr. Kirby thinks this could be a full-time operation. Could bring in additional appropriations, even more funds for international efforts.”

Dicken prepared to appear sympathetic.

“They don’t want to distract me by appointing me to fill her shoes.” Augustine’s eyes became beady, hard.

“Shawbeck?”

“Got the nod. But the president can make his own pick. They’ll hold a press conference on Herod’s flu tomorrow. ‘All-out war on an international killer.’ Better than polio, and politically it’s a slam dunk, unlike AIDS.”

“Kiss the babies and make them well?”

Augustine did not find that funny. “Cynicism doesn’t become you, Christopher. You’re the idealistic type, remember?”

“I blame the charged atmosphere,” Dicken said.

“Yeah. I’ve been told to put together my team for Kirby’s and Shawbeck’s approval by noon tomorrow. You’re my first choice, of course. I’ll be conferring with some folks at NIH and some scientific headhunters from New York this evening. Every agency director will want a piece of this. It’s my job in part to feed them things they can do before they try to take over the whole problem. Can you get in touch with Kaye Lang and tell her she’s going to be drafted?”

“Yes,” Dicken said. His heart felt funny. He was short of breath. “I’d like to have a few picks of my own.”

“Not a whole army, I hope.”

“Not at first,” Dicken said.

“I need a *team*,” Augustine said, “not a loose bunch of fiefdoms. No prima donnas.”

Dicken smiled. “A few divas?”

“If they sing in key. ‘Star Spangled Banner’ time. I want a background check for any sort of bad smell. Martha and Karen in human resources can arrange that for us. No flag burners, no hotheads. No fringies.”

“Of course,” Dicken said. “But that would leave me out.”

“Boy genius.” Augustine wet his finger and made a mark in the air. “I’m allowed just one. Government issue. Be in my office at six. Bring some Pepsi and Dixie cups and a tub of ice from the labs, *clean* ice, okay?”

## 24

### Long Island, New York

**T**hree moving vans stood outside the front entrance of EcoBacter as Kaye parked her car. She walked past two men dollying a stainless-steel lab refrigerator past the reception desk. Another hefted a microplate counter, and behind him, a fourth carried the body of a PC. EcoBacter was being nibbled to death by ants.

Not that it mattered. It had no blood left anyway.

She went to her office, which had not been touched yet, and closed the door forcefully behind her. Sitting in the blue office chair—worth about two hundred bucks, very comfortable—she switched on her desktop computer and logged in to her account on the International Association of Biotech Firms job board. What her agent in Boston had told her was true. At least fourteen universities and seven companies were interested in her services. She scrolled through the offers. Tenure track, start and run a small virology research lab in New Hampshire . . . professor of biological science at a private college in California, a Christian school, Southern Baptist . . .

She smiled. An offer from UCLA School of Medicine to work with an established professor of genetics—unnamed—in a research group focusing on inherited diseases and their connection with provirus activation. She marked that one.

After fifteen minutes, she leaned back and rubbed her forehead dramatically. She had always hated looking for work. But she could not let her momentum be diverted; she had not won any prizes yet, might not for years to come. It was time to take charge of her life and move out of the shallows.

She had marked three of the twenty-one offers as worth looking into, and already she was exhausted, her armpits wet with sweat.

With a sense of foreboding, she checked her e-mail. It was there that she found a curt message from Christopher Dicken at the NCID. His name sounded familiar; then she remembered, and swore at the monitor, the message it bore, the way her life was going, the whole ugly ball of wax.

Debra Kim knocked on the transparent glass of the door to her office. Kaye swore again, very loudly, and Kim peeked in, eyebrows arched.

“You yelling at me?” she asked innocently.

“I’ve been asked to join a team at the CDC,” Kaye said, and slammed her hand on the desk.

“Government work. Great health plan. Freedom to do your own research on your own schedule.”

“Saul hated working in a government lab.”

“Saul was a rugged individualist,” Kim said, and sat on the edge of Kaye’s desk. “They’re cleaning out my equipment now. I figure there’s nothing left for me to do here. I’ve got my photos and disks and . . . Christ, Kaye.”

Kaye stood up and hugged her as Kim broke into sobs. “I don’t know what I’ll do with the mice. Ten thousand dollars worth of mice!”

“We’ll find a lab that will hold them for you.”

“How can we transport them? They’re full of *Vibrio*! I’ll have to sacrifice them here before they take away the sterilization equipment and the incinerator.”

“What do the AKS people say?”

“They’re going to leave them in the containment room. They won’t do anything.”

“That’s unbelievable.”

“They say they’re my patents, they’re my problem.”

Kaye sat again, then thumbed through her Rolodex, hoping for inspiration, but it was a futile gesture. Kim had no doubt she would find work in a month or two, even be able to carry on with her research using SCID mice. But they would have to be new mice, and she might lose six months or a year of her time.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Kaye said, her voice cracking. She held up her hands, helpless.

Kim thanked Kaye—though for what, Kaye hardly knew. They hugged again, and Kim left.

There was little or nothing she could do for Debra Kim or any of the other ex-employees of EcoBacter. Kaye knew she had been as much a part

of this disaster as Saul, as responsible for it through her own ignorance. She hated fund-raising, hated finances, hated looking for jobs. Was there anything practical in this world that she *did* like to do?

She reread Dicken's message. She had to find some way to get her wind back, get on her feet, join the race again. A short-term government job might be just what she needed. She could not imagine why Christopher Dicken would want her; she barely remembered the short, plumpish man in Georgia.

Using her cell phone—the lab phone lines had been disconnected—Kaye called Dicken's number in Atlanta.

## 25

### Washington, D.C.

**W**e have test results from forty-two hospitals around the country," Augustine said to the president of the United States. "All instances of mutation and subsequent rejection of fetuses, of the type we are studying, have been positively associated with the presence of Herod's flu."

The president sat at the head of the large polished maple table in the Situation Room in the White House. Tall and portly, his curly head of white hair stood out like a beacon. He had been affectionately dubbed "Q-Tip" during his campaign, converting a derogatory term used by younger women to describe older men into an expression of pride and affection. Flanking him were the vice president; the Speaker of the House, a Democrat; the Senate majority leader, a Republican; Dr. Kirby; Shawbeck; the secretary of Health and Human Services; Augustine; three presidential aides, including the chief of staff; the White House liaison for public health issues; and a number of people Dicken couldn't identify. It was a very big table, and three hours had been set aside for their discussion.

Dicken had surrendered his cell phone, pager, and palmtop at the security check point before entering, as had all the others. An exploding "cell phone" on a tourist had caused considerable damage in the White House just two weeks before.

He was a little disappointed by the nature of the Situation Room—no state-of-the-art wall screens, computer consoles, threat boards. Just a large, ordinary room with a big table and lots of telephones. Still, the president was listening intently.

"SHEVA is the first confirmed instance of human-to-human transmis-

sion of endogenous retroviruses,” Augustine continued. “Herod’s flu is caused by SHEVA, beyond any shadow of a doubt. In my career in medicine and science, I have never seen anything quite so virulent. If a woman is in the early stages of pregnancy and contracts Herod’s, her fetus—her baby—will eventually abort. Our statistics show a possibility of over ten thousand miscarriages that can already be attributed to this virus. According to our present information, men are the only source of Herod’s flu.”

“Horrible name, that,” the president said.

“An effective name, Mr. President,” Dr. Kirby said.

“Horrible and effective,” the president conceded.

“We do not know what causes expression in males,” Augustine said, “though we suspect some sort of pheromone triggering process, perhaps from female partners. We haven’t a clue how to stop it.” He handed sheets of paper around the table. “Our statisticians tell us that we could see more than two million cases of Herod’s flu in the next year. Two million possible miscarriages.”

The president absorbed this thoughtfully, having heard most of it from Frank Shawbeck and the secretary of Health and Human Services in earlier meetings. Repetition, Dicken thought, was necessary to help lay politicians understand just how much in the dark the scientists really were.

“I still do not understand how something from inside of us could cause so much harm,” the vice president said.

“The devil within,” said the Speaker.

“Similar genetic aberrations can cause cancer,” Augustine said. Dicken felt that was a little broad, and Shawbeck seemed to agree. Now was the moment to deliver his pep talk, as top candidate for the rank of surgeon general, to replace Kirby.

“We are facing a problem new to medicine, no doubt about it,” Shawbeck said. “But we’ve got HIV on the ropes. With that experience behind us, I have confidence that we can make some breakthroughs within six to eight months. We have major research centers all around the country, the world, poised to take on this problem. We have designed a national program that utilizes the resources of the NIH, CDC, and the National Center for Infectious and Allergic Diseases. We divide the pie to consume it more quickly. Never have we, as a nation, been more ready to tackle a problem of this magnitude. As soon as this program is in place, over five thousand researchers in twenty-eight centers will go to work. We will enlist the aid of private companies and researchers around the world. An international



program is being planned right now. It all begins here. All we need is a quick and coordinated response from your respective branches, ladies and gentlemen.”

“I don’t see anybody on either side of the House who’ll stand in the way of an extraordinary funding appropriations bill,” the Speaker said.

“Or in the Senate,” added the majority leader. “I’m impressed by the work done so far, but gentlemen, I am not as enthusiastic about our scientific ability as I would like to be. Dr. Augustine, Dr. Shawbeck, it’s taken us over twenty years to even begin to get a handle on AIDS, despite pouring tens of billions of dollars into research. I know. I lost a daughter to AIDS five years ago.” He stared around the table. “If this Herod’s flu is so new to us, how can we expect miracles in six months?”

“Not miracles,” Shawbeck said. “A beginning to understanding.”

“Then how long before we have a treatment? I ask not for a cure, gentlemen. But a *treatment*? A vaccine at the very least?”

Shawbeck admitted he did not know.

“We can only proceed as fast as we can harness the power of science,” the vice president said, and looked around the table a little blankly, wondering how this might go over.

“I will say again, I have my doubts,” the majority leader said. “I’m wondering if this is a sign. Maybe it’s time to get our house in order and look deep into our hearts, make peace with our Maker. Quite clearly, we’ve disturbed some powerful forces here.”

The president touched his nose with his finger, his expression serious. Shawbeck and Augustine knew enough to keep quiet.

“Senator,” the president said, “I pray you are wrong.”

As the meeting concluded, Augustine and Dicken followed Shawbeck down a side corridor past basement offices to a rear elevator. Shawbeck was clearly angry. “What hypocrisy,” he muttered. “I hate it when they invoke God.” He shook his arms to loosen the tension in his neck and gave a small, crackling chuckle. “I vote for aliens, myself. Call in the *X-Files*.”

“I wish I could laugh, Frank,” Augustine said, “but I’m scared out of my wits. We’re in uncharted territory. Half the proteins activated by SHEVA are new to us. We have no idea what they do. This could sink like a rock. I keep asking, Why me, Frank?”

“Because you’re so *ambitious*, Mark,” Shawbeck said. “You found this particular rock and looked under it.” Shawbeck smiled a little wolfishly. “Not that you had any choice . . . in the long run.”

Augustine cocked his head to one side. Dicken could smell Augustine's nervousness. He felt a little numb, himself. *Up the wrong creek, he thought, and paddling like sons of bitches.*

## 26

## Seattle

## DECEMBER

**N**ever one to sit still for long, Mitch spent a day with his parents on their small farm in Oregon, then took Amtrak to Seattle. He rented an apartment on Capitol Hill, dipping into a former retirement fund, and bought an old Buick Skylark for two thousand dollars from a friend in Kirkland.

Fortunately, this far from Innsbruck, the Neandertal mummies aroused only mild curiosity from the press. He gave one interview: to the science editor of the *Seattle Times*, who then turned around and labeled him a two-time offender against the sober, law-abiding world of archaeology.

A week after his return to Seattle, the Five Tribes Confederation in Kumash County reburied Pasco man in an elaborate ceremony on the banks of the Columbia River in eastern Washington. The Army Corps of Engineers capped the burial ground with concrete to prevent erosion. Scientists protested, but they did not invite Mitch to join the protest.

More than anything, he wanted time to be by himself and think. He could live on his savings for six months, but he doubted that would be anywhere near enough time for his reputation to cool, for him to land a new position.

Mitch sat with cast outstretched near the apartment's prominent bay window, looking down on pedestrians on Broadway. He could not stop thinking about the mummified baby, the cave, the look on Franco's face.

He had placed the small glass tubes containing tissue from the mummies in a cardboard box filled with old photographs and stashed the box in the back of a closet. Before he did something with that tissue, he had to be clear in his own mind about what had actually been discovered.

Self-righteous anger was not productive.

He had seen the association. The female's wound matched the infant's injury. The female had given birth to the infant, or perhaps aborted it. The male had stayed with them, had taken the newborn and wrapped it in furs even though it had likely been born dead. Had the male assaulted the

female? Mitch did not think so. They were in love. He was devoted to her. They were escaping from something. And how did he know all this?

It had nothing to do with ESP or channeling spirits. A substantial part of Mitch's career had been spent interpreting the ambiguities of archaeological sites. Sometimes the answers came to him in late night musings, or while sitting on rocks, staring up at the clouds or the starry night skies. Rarely the answers arrived in dreams. Interpretation was a science and an art.

Day in, day out, Mitch drew diagrams, wrote short notes, made entries in a small vinyl-bound diary. He pasted a piece of butcher paper on the wall of the small bedroom and drew a map of the cave as he remembered it. He placed paper cutouts of the mummies on the butcher paper. He sat and stared at the butcher paper and the cutouts. He bit his fingernails to the quick.

One day, he drank a six-pack of Coors in the afternoon—one of his favorite hydrators at the end of long days of digging, but this time, without digging, without purpose, just to try something different. He got sleepy and woke up at three in the morning and went for a walk on the street, past a Jack-in-the-Box, a Mexican restaurant, a bookstore, a magazine rack, a Starbuck's coffee shop.

He returned to the apartment and remembered to check his mail. There was a cardboard box. He carried it up the stairs, shaking it gently.

From a bookstore in New York, he had ordered a back issue of *National Geographic* with an article on Ötzi, the Iceman. The magazine had arrived packed with newspapers.

*Devoted.* Mitch knew they had been devoted to each other. The way they lay next to each other. The position of the male's arms. The male had stayed with the female when he could have escaped. What the hell—use the words. The *man* had stayed with the *woman*. Neandertals were not sub-human; it was generally recognized now that they had had speech and complex social organizations. Tribes. Nomads, traders, toolmakers, hunters and gatherers.

Mitch tried to imagine what would have driven them to hide in the mountains, in a cave behind the sheets of ice, ten or eleven thousand years ago. Perhaps the last of their kind.

Having given birth to a baby indistinguishable in most respects from a modern infant.

He ripped newspaper wrappings from around the magazine, opened it, and opened the multipage spread showing the Alps, the green valleys, the

glaciers, the spot where the Iceman had been crudely hacked and chipped from the ice.

The Iceman was now on display in Italy. There had been an international dispute as to where the five-thousand-year-old corpse had been found, and after major research had been completed in Innsbruck, it was Italy that had finally claimed him.

Austria had clear title to the Neandertals. They would be studied at the University of Innsbruck, perhaps in the same facility where they had studied Ötzi; stored in deep cold, under controlled humidity, visible through a little window, lying near each other, as they had died.

Mitch closed the magazine and pressed his nose between two fingers, remembering the awful sense of entanglement after he had found Pasco man. *I lost my temper. I nearly went to jail. I went to Europe to try something new. I found something new. I got trapped and screwed it up. I have no credibility whatsoever. If I believe these impossible things, what can I do? I am a tomb raider. I am a criminal, a rogue, twice over.*

Idly, he smoothed out the crumpled wrappings, taken from the *New York Times*. His eye lit on an article at the bottom righthand corner of a torn sheet of newsprint. The headline read “Old Crimes, New Dawn in the Republic of Georgia.” Superstition and death in the shadows of the Caucasus. Pregnant women rounded up from three towns, with their husbands or partners, and taken by soldiers and police to dig their own graves outside a town named Gordi. Seven column inches next to an ad for stock trading on the Internet.

As he finished reading the piece, Mitch shook with anger and excitement.

The women had been shot in the stomach. The men had all been shot in the groin and clubbed. The scandal was rocking the Georgian government. The government claimed the murders had occurred under the regime of Gamsakhurdia, who had been ousted in the early nineties, but some of those alleged to have been involved were still in office.

Why the men and women had been murdered was not at all clear. Some residents of Gordi accused the dead women of having consorted with the devil, asserted that their murder was necessary; they were giving birth to children of the devil, and causing other mothers to miscarry.

There was some speculation these women had suffered from an early appearance of Herod’s flu.

Mitch hopped into the kitchen, catching the bare toe at the end of his cast on a chair leg. He swung back and swore, then reached down and pulled from a shallow stack of newspapers in one corner, near the gray, green, and

blue plastic recycling bins, the A section of a two-day-old *Seattle Times*. Headline: an announcement about Herod's from the president, the surgeon general, and the secretary of Health and Human Services. A sidebar—by the same science editor who had judged Mitch so severely—explained the connection between Herod's flu and SHEVA. Illness. Miscarriages.

Mitch sat in the worn chair before the window looking out over Broadway and watched his hands tremble.

"I know something nobody else knows," he said, and clamped his hands on the chair arms. "But I haven't the slightest idea *how I know it, or what in hell to do about it!*"

If ever there was a wrong man to have such an incredible insight, to make such a huge and unsubstantiated leap of judgment, it was Mitch Rafelson. Better for all concerned if he started looking for faces on Mars.

It was time to either give up and lay in several dozen cases of Coors, settle for a slow and boring decline, or to hammer together a platform he could stand on, plank by carefully researched scientific plank.

"You asshole," he said as he stood by the window, scrap of packing newspaper in one hand, front page headlines in the other. "You god-damned . . . immature . . . *asshole!*"

## 27

### The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta

LATE JANUARY

**L**ow lazy clouds, thin sunlight neutral through the windows of the office of the director. Mark Augustine stood back from the scrawl of crisscrossing lines and names on the whiteboard and clasped his elbow in his hand, rubbed his nose. At the bottom of the complex outline, below Shawbeck, the director of the NIH, and the as-yet unannounced replacement for Augustine at the CDC, lay the Taskforce for Human Provirus Research: THUPR, pronounced like "super" with a lisp. Augustine hated this name and referred to it always as the Taskforce; just the Taskforce.

He swept his hand down the management staircases. "There it is, Frank. I leave here next week and hop on over to Bethesda, at the very bottom of the whiteboard jumble. Thirty-three steps down. This is what it's come to. Bureaucracy at its finest."

Frank Shawbeck leaned back in his chair. “It could have been worse. We spent most of the month trimming it down.”

“It could be less of a nightmare. It’s still a nightmare.”

“At least you know who *your* boss is. I’m answerable to both HHS and the president,” Shawbeck said. The news had arrived two days earlier. Shawbeck would remain at NIH, but was moving up to be director. “Right in the middle of the old cyclone. Frankly, I’m glad Maxine has decided not to step down. She’s a much better lightning rod than I am.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” Augustine said. “She’s a better politician than either of us. We’ll take the bolt when it comes.”

“If it comes,” Shawbeck said, but his face was sober.

“*When, Frank,*” Augustine repeated. He gave Shawbeck his characteristic grin-grimace. “WHO wants us to coordinate on all outside investigations—and they want to come into the U.S. and run their own tests. Commonwealth of Independent States is dead in the water . . . Russia lorded it over the republics for too long. No coordination possible there, and Dicken still hasn’t been able to get a peep out of Georgia and Azerbaijan. We won’t be allowed to investigate there until the political situation stabilizes, whatever that means.”

“How bad is it there?” Shawbeck asked.

“Bad, that’s all we know. They aren’t asking for help. They’ve had Herod’s for ten or twenty years, maybe longer . . . and they’ve been dealing with it in their own way, on a local level.”

“With massacres.”

Augustine nodded. “They don’t want that to come out, and they certainly don’t want us saying SHEVA originated with them. The pride of fresh nationalism. We’re going to keep it quiet as long as we can, just to have some leverage there.”

“Jesus. What about Turkey?”

“They’ve accepted our help, let our inspectors in, but they won’t let us look along the borders with either Iraq or Georgia.”

“Where’s Dicken now?”

“In Geneva.”

“He’s keeping WHO in the loop?”

“Every step of the way,” Augustine said. “Carbon-copy reports to WHO and UNICEF. The Senate’s screaming again. They’re threatening to delay UN payments until we get a clear picture of who’s paying for what on the world scene. They don’t want us holding the tab on whatever treatment

we come up with—and they can't believe it won't be us who comes up with a treatment.”

Shawbeck lifted his hand. “It probably *will* be us. I've got meetings scheduled with four CEOs tomorrow—Merck, Schering Plough, Lilly, Bristol-Myers,” he said. “Americol and Euricol next week. They want to talk sharing and subsidies. As if that isn't enough, Dr. Gallo's coming in this afternoon—he wants to have access to all of our research.”

“This has nothing to do with HIV,” Augustine said.

“He claims there might be similar receptor activity. It's a long shot, but he's famous and he has a lot of clout on the Hill. And apparently he can help us with the French, now that they're cooperating again.”

“How are we going to treat this, Frank? Hell, my people have found SHEVA in every ape from green monkeys to highland gorillas.”

“It's too early for pessimism,” Shawbeck said. “It's only been three months.”

“We have forty thousand confirmed cases of Herod's on the Eastern Seaboard alone, Frank! *There is nothing on the horizon!*” Augustine pounded the whiteboard with his fist.

Shawbeck shook his head and held up both hands, making little shushing noises.

Augustine dropped his voice and let his shoulders slump. Then he picked up a cloth and meticulously wiped the edge of his hand where it had smeared across the ink on the board. “On the bright side, the message is getting out,” he said. “We've had two million hits on our Herod's web site. But did you hear Audrey Korda on *Larry King Live* last night?”

“No,” Shawbeck said.

“She practically calls men devils incarnate. Says women could get along without us, that we should be put in quarantine and kept away from all women . . . *Pff!*” He shot out his hand. “No more sex, no more SHEVA.”

Shawbeck's eyes glittered like little wet stones. “Maybe she's right, Mark. Have you seen the surgeon general's list of extreme measures?”

Augustine ran his hand back through his sandy hair. “I hope to hell it never leaks.”

**Long Island, New York**

**T**oothpaste dribbles lay like little blue tadpoles in the bottom of the sink. Kaye finished washing out her mouth, spat water in an arc to swirl the tadpoles down the drain, and wiped her face on a towel. She stood in the bathroom doorway and glanced down the long upstairs hall at the closed master bedroom door.

This was her last night in the house; she had slept in the guest bedroom. Another moving van—a small one—was arriving at eleven this morning to remove what few belonging she wanted to take with her. Caddy was adopting Crickson and Temin.

The house was up for sale. In a booming market, she would get top dollar. That at least was protected from their creditors. Saul had put the house in her name.

She chose her clothes for the day—plain white panties and bra, a blouse and cream sweater combination, pale blue slacks—and rolled the few items of wardrobe that hadn't already been packed into a suitcase. She was weary of dealing with stuff, apportioning this and that to Saul's sister, marking bags for Goodwill, other bags for trash.

It had taken Kaye almost a week to remove those marks of their life together that she did not want to take with her and that the real estate agent thought might “color” the place for potential buyers. She had gently explained about the detrimental effect of “All these science books, the journals . . . Too abstract. Too cold. Too much the *wrong* color.”

Kaye pictured snooty upper-class lookie-loos invading the house in critically mindless pairs, well-dressed in tweeds and penny loafers or draped silk and knee-length microfiber, shunning signs of true individuality or intellect, but finding hints of style from Sunday supplement magazines all too charming. Well, by itself, the house had plenty of that sort of charm. She and Saul had bought furniture and curtains and carpeting that did not overtly offend that sort of charm. Their own life, however, had to be expunged before the house could go on the market.

Their own life. Saul had ended his share of any more life. She was erasing the evidence of their time together; AKS was disbanding and scattering their professional life.

Mercifully, the agent had not mentioned Saul's bloody incident.



*How long would the guilt go on?* She stopped herself going down the stairs and bit the ball of her thumb. No matter how many times she tired to jerk herself up short and get back on whatever track was left to her, she would wander off into a maze of associations, emotional paths to an even deeper unhappiness. The offer from the Herod's Taskforce was a way back on a single track, her own new path, cool and solid. Nature's oddities would help her heal the oddities of her own life, and that was bizarre, but it was also acceptable, believable; she could see her life working like that.

The doorbell chimed melodiously, "Eleanor Rigby." Saul's touch. Kaye finished the descent and opened the door. Judith Kushner stood on the porch, her face tight. "I came as soon as I saw a pattern," Judith said. She wore a black wool skirt and black shoes and a white blouse, and her London Fog raincoat trailed its buckles on the step.

"Hello, Judith," Kaye said, a little at a loss. Kushner grasped the door, glanced at her to ask a sort of permission to enter, and stepped into the house. She swung off her coat and draped it over a maple silent butler.

"By pattern, I mean that I called eight people I know, and Marge Cross has contacted all of them. She drove out personally to where they live, says she's on her way to a business meeting somewhere—hell, five live around New York, so it's a good excuse."

"Marge Cross—of Americol?" Kaye asked.

"And Euricol, too. Don't think she doesn't pull all the strings overseas. Christ, Kaye, she's a great big bull of a woman—she has Linda and Herb with her now! And they're just the first."

"Please, Judith, slow down."

"Fiona was like a little mooncalf when I turned Cross down, I swear! But I hate this conglomerate shit. I hate it like fury. Call me a socialist—call me a child of the sixties—"

"Please," Kaye said, holding up her hands to stem the torrent. "It's going to take forever if you stay this angry."

Kushner stopped and glared. "You're smart, sweetie. You can figure it out."

Kaye blinked for a second or two. "Marge Cross, Americol, wants a piece of SHEVA?"

"Not only can she fill her hospitals, she can supply directly with any drug 'her' team develops. Treatment programs exclusive to Americol-associated HMOs. Plus, she announces a blue-ribbon team, and her companies' valuations go through the roof."

“She wants me?”

“I got a call from Debra Kim. She said that Marge Cross was going to put her in a lab, house her SCID mice, buy out her patent rights on the cholera treatment—for a very fair figure, enough to make her wealthy. All before there *is* a treatment. Debra wanted to know what she should tell you.”

“Debra?” This was going much too fast for Kaye.

“Marge is a master at human psychology. I know. I went to medical school with her in the seventies. She took an MBA at the same time. Lots of energy, ugly as sin, no man trouble, extra time you and I might have wasted on dating . . . She jumped off the gurney in 1987, and now look at her.”

“What does she want with me?”

Kushner shrugged. “You’re a pioneer, you’re a celebrity—Hell, Saul’s made you a bit of a martyr, especially to women . . . Women who are going to come looking for treatment. You have great credentials, great publications, credibility just smeared all over you. I thought they might shoot the messenger, Kaye. Now I think they’re going to offer you the gold ring.”

“My God.” Kaye walked into the living room with the blank walls and sat on the freshly cleaned couch. The room smelled soapy, faintly piney, like a hospital.

Kushner sniffed and frowned. “Smells like robots live here.”

“The real estate agent said it should smell clean,” Kaye said, stalling to buy time enough to get her wits together. “And when they cleaned upstairs . . . after Saul . . . it left a smell. Pine-Sol. Lysol. Something.”

“Jesus,” Kushner said softly.

“You turned down Marge Cross?” Kaye said.

“I have enough work to keep me happy for the rest of my life, sweetie. I don’t need a driven money machine calling the shots. Have you seen her on TV?”

Kaye nodded.

“Don’t believe her image.”

A car rumbled along the driveway. Kaye looked out the front bay window and saw a large hunter-green Chrysler sedan. A young man in a gray suit stepped out and opened the right rear door. Debra Kim emerged, looked around, shielded her face against a cool wind off the water. A few flakes of snow were starting to fall.

The young man in gray opened the left side door and Marge Cross unfolded, all six feet of her, wearing a dark blue wool overcoat, her graying black hair done up in a dignified bun. She said something to the young man

and he nodded, returned to the driver's side, leaned against the car as Cross and Debra Kim walked up to the porch.

"I'm flabbergasted," Kushner said. "She works faster than the speed of thought."

"You didn't know she was coming?"

"Not this soon. Should I run out the back door?"

Kaye shook her head and for the first time in days she could not help laughing. "No. I'd like to see you two argue over my soul."

"I love you, Kaye, but I know better than to argue with Marge."

Kaye stepped quickly to the front door and opened it before Cross could ring the bell. Cross broke into a broad, friendly grin, her blocky face and small green eyes brimming with motherly cheer.

Kim smiled nervously. "Hello, Kaye," she said, her face pinking.

"Kaye Lang? We haven't been introduced," Cross said.

*My God, Kaye thought. She does sound like Julia Child!*

Kaye made instant vanilla-flavored coffee from an old tin and poured it around in the china she was leaving with the house. Not for a moment did Cross make her feel as if she was serving something less than stylish and gourmet to a woman worth twenty billion dollars.

"I'm here to be up front with you. I was out seeing Debra's lab at AKS," Cross said. "She's doing very intriguing work. We have a place for her. Debra mentioned your situation . . ."

Kushner glanced at Kaye, nodded ever so faintly.

"And frankly, I've wanted to meet you for months now. I have five young men who read the literature for me—all very handsome and very smart. One of the handsomest and the smartest told me, 'Read this.' Your piece predicting expression of ancient human provirus. Wow. Now—it's more timely than ever. Kim says you're fielding an offer to work for the CDC. For Christopher Dicken."

"The Herod's Taskforce and Mark Augustine, actually," Kaye said.

"I know Mark. He delegates well. You'll be working for Christopher. He's a bright boy." Cross plowed on as if discussing gardening. "We intend to set up a world-class investigation and research team to work on Herod's. We are going to find a treatment, maybe even a cure. We'll offer the specialized treatments at all Americol hospitals, but we'll sell the kits to anybody. We have the infrastructure, my God, we have the finances . . . We partner with the CDC, and you can act as one of our reps inside HHS and

NIH. It'll be like the Apollo program, government and industry working together on a huge scale, but this time, wherever we land, we stay." Cross shifted on the couch to face Kushner. "My offer to you still stands, Judith. I'd love to have you both working for us."

Kushner gave a little laugh, almost girlish. "No thanks, Marge. I'm too old to put on a new harness."

Cross shook her head. "No chafing, guaranteed."

"I'm not at all clear about doing double duty," Kaye said. "I haven't even started work with the Taskforce."

"I'm seeing Mark Augustine and Frank Shawbeck this afternoon. If you want, you can fly with me down to Washington. We can see them together. You're invited, too, Judith."

Kushner shook her head, but this time her laugh was forced.

Kaye sat silently for a few seconds, staring down at her clasped hands, the knuckles and nails alternating white and pink as she squeezed and relaxed her fingers. She knew what she was going to say, but she wanted to hear more from Cross.

"You will never have to worry about funding for anything you care to work on," Cross said. "We'll put it in your contract. I'm that confident in you."

*But do I want to be a jewel in your crown, my queen?* Kaye asked herself.

"I work on my instincts, Kaye. I've already had you checked out by my human resources people. They think you'll be doing your best work in the decades to come. Work with us, Kaye. Nothing you ever do will be ignored or trivialized."

Kushner laughed again, and Cross smiled at them both.

"I want to get out of this house as soon as I can," Kaye said. "I wasn't going down to Atlanta until next week . . . I'm looking for an apartment down there now."

"I'll ask my people to take care of it. We'll find you something nice in Atlanta or Baltimore, wherever you settle."

"My God," Kaye said with a small smile.

"Something else I know is important to you. You and Saul did a lot of work in the Republic of Georgia. I may have the contacts to salvage that. I'd like to do a lot more research on phage therapy. I think I can persuade Tbilisi to pull back on the political pressure. It's all ridiculous anyway—a bunch of amateurs trying to run things."

Cross put a hand on her arm and squeezed gently. "Come with me now, fly to Washington, let's see Mark and Frank, meet with anybody else you might want to talk to, get a feel for things. Make your decision in a couple of days. Consult your attorney if you wish. We'll even provide a draft contract. If it doesn't work out, I leave you with the CDC, no gripes, no grudges."

Kaye turned to Kushner and saw on her mentor's face the same expression she had shown when Kaye had told her she was going to marry Saul. "What kind of restrictions are there, Marge?" Kushner asked quietly, folding her hands in her lap.

Cross sat back and pursed her lips. "Nothing out of the ordinary. Scientific credit goes to the team. The company PR office orchestrates all press releases and oversees all papers for timeliness of release of information. No prima donna tactics. Financial rewards are shared in a very generous royalties deal." Cross folded her arms. "Kaye, your lawyer is a little old and not too well versed on these things. Surely Judith can recommend a better one."

Kushner nodded. "I'll recommend a very good one . . . If Kaye is seriously considering your offer." Her voice was a little pinched, disappointed.

"I'm not used to being courted with so many boxes of Godivas and bunches of roses, believe me," Kaye said, staring off at the carpet corner beyond the coffee table. "I would like to know what the Taskforce expects of me before I make any decision."

"If you march into Augustine's office with me, he'll know what I'm up to. I think he'll go along."

Kaye surprised herself by saying, "Then I would like to fly to Washington with you."

"You deserve it, Kaye," Cross said. "And I need you. We're not walking into a funhouse here. I want the best researchers, the best armor I can get."

Outside, the snow was falling much faster. Kaye could see that Cross's chauffeur had moved inside the car and was talking on a cell phone. A different world, so fast, busy, connected, with so little time to actually think.

Maybe this was just what she needed.

"I'll call that attorney," Kushner said. Then, to Cross, she said, "I'd like to speak to Kaye alone for a few minutes."

"Of course," Cross said.

In the kitchen, Judith Kushner took Kaye by the arm and looked at her with a fixed fierceness Kaye had rarely seen in her.

“You realize what’s going to happen,” she said.

“What?”

“You’re going to be a figurehead. You’ll spend half your time in big rooms talking to people with expectant smiles who’ll tell you to your face whatever you want to hear, and then gossip behind your back. You’ll be called one of Marge’s pets, one of her waifs.”

“Oh, really,” Kaye said.

“You’ll think you’re doing great work and then one day you’ll realize she’s had you doing what she wants, and nothing else, all along. She thinks this is *her* world, and it works by her rules. Then someone will have to come along and rescue you, Kaye Lang. I don’t know if it could ever be me. And I hope for your sake there will never be another Saul.”

“I appreciate your concern. Thank you,” Kaye said quietly, but with a touch of defiance. “I work by my instincts, too, Judith. And besides, I want to find out what Herod’s is all about. That won’t be cheap. I think she’s right about the CDC. And what if we can . . . finish our work with Eliava? For Saul. In his memory.”

Kushner’s intensity melted and she braced herself against the wall, shaking her head. “All right.”

“You make Cross sound like the devil,” Kaye said.

Kushner laughed. “Not the devil. Not my cup of tea, either.”

The kitchen door swung open and Debra Kim entered. She glanced between them nervously, then, pleading, said, “Kaye, it’s you she wants. Not me. If you don’t come on board, she’ll find some way to dump my work . . .”

“I’m doing it,” Kaye said, waving her hands. “But my God, I can’t leave right now. The house—”

“Marge will take care of that for you,” Kushner said, as if having to tutor a slow student on a subject she did not herself enjoy.

“She will,” Kim affirmed quickly, her face lighting up. “She’s amazing.”

**Taskforce Primate Lab, Baltimore**

F E B R U A R Y

**G**ood morning, Christopher! How's the continent?" Marian Freedman held open the back door at the top of the concrete steps. A very cold wind rushed down the alley. Dicken pulled up his knitted scarf and made a point of rubbing one bleary eye as he climbed the steps.

"I'm still on Geneva time. Ben Tice sends his regards."

Freedman saluted briskly. "Europe on the case," she called out dramatically. "How is Ben?"

"Dead tired. They did coat proteins last week. Tougher than they thought. SHEVA doesn't crystallize."

"He should have talked to me," Marian said.

Dicken took off his scarf and coat. "Got some hot coffee?"

"In the lounge." She guided him down a concrete corridor painted a bizarre orange and motioned him through a door on the left.

"How's the building?"

"It sucks. Did you hear the inspectors found tritium in the plumbing? This was a medical waste processing facility last year, but somehow or other, they got tritium in their pipes. We didn't have time to object and start looking again. What a market! So . . . It costs us ten grand to put in monitors and retrofit. Plus we have to guide a radiation inspector from the NRC through the building with his sniffer every other day."

Dicken stood by a bulletin board in the lounge. The board was divided into two sections, one a large whiteboard, the smaller, on the left, a corkboard studded with notices. "*Wanted to share: cheaper apartment!*" "*Can someone pick up my dogs in quarantine at Dulles next Wednesday? I'm on all day.*" "*Anyone know day care in Arlington?*" "*Need a ride to Bethesda Monday. Someone from metabolic or excretion preferred: we need to talk anyway.*"

His eyes misted over. He was tired, but seeing the evidence of this thing coming alive, of people coming together, moving families and changing lives, traveling from around the world, deeply affected him.

Freedman handed him his coffee in a foam cup. "It's fresh. We do good coffee."

"Diuretic," he said. "Should help you shed that tritium."

Freedman made a face.

“Have you induced expression?” Dicken asked.

“No,” Freedman said. “But simian scattered ERV is so close to SHEVA in its genome that it’s scary. We’re just proving what we already assumed: this stuff is old. It entered the simian genome before we and the vervets parted ways.”

Dicken drank his coffee quickly and wiped his mouth. “Then it isn’t a disease,” he said.

“Whoa. I didn’t say that.” Freedman took his cup and disposed of it for him. “It expresses, it spreads, it infects. That’s a disease, wherever it comes from.”

“Ben Tice has analyzed two hundred rejected fetuses. Every single one of them contained a large follicular mass, similar to an ovary but containing only about twenty follicles. Every single one—”

“I know, Christopher. Three or fewer erupted follicles. He sent me his report last night.”

“Marian, the placentas are tiny, the amnion is just a thin little sack, and after the miscarriage, which is incredibly easy—many of the women don’t even feel pain—they don’t even shed their endometrium. It’s as if they’re still pregnant.”

Freedman was becoming very agitated. “Please, Christopher—”

Two other researchers, both young black men, came in, recognized Dicken, though they had not yet met, nodded greetings, then went to the refrigerator. Freedman lowered her voice.

“Christopher, I am not going to stand between you and Mark Augustine when the sparks fly. Yes, you’ve shown that the Georgian victims had SHEVA in their tissues. But their babies were not these misshapen egg-case things. They were normally developing fetuses.”

“I would love to get one of them for analysis.”

“Take it somewhere else, then. We are not a criminal lab, Christopher. I’ve got one hundred and twenty-three people here and thirty vervets and twelve chimpanzees and we are dedicated to a very focused mission. We are exploring endogenous virus expression in simian tissues. That’s it.” She spoke these last words in a low whisper to Dicken near the door. Then, more loudly, “So come and take a look at what we’ve done.”

She led Dicken through a small maze of cubicle offices, each with its own little flat-screen display. They passed several women in white lab coats and a technician in green overalls. The air smelled of antiseptic until Marian opened the steel door to the main animal lab. Then, Dicken smelled



the old-bread smell of monkey chow, the tang of urine and feces, and again, the smells of soap and disinfectant.

She brought him into a large concrete-walled room with three female chimpanzees, each in separate sealed plastic and steel enclosures. Each enclosure was supplied with air by its own ventilation system. A lab worker had inserted a bar clamber into the nearest enclosure, and the chimp was busily trying to push past the restraining steel posts. Slowly, the clamber closed, ratcheted down by the worker, who waited, whistling tunelessly, as the chimp finally acquiesced. The clamber held her almost flat; she could no longer bite, and only one arm waved through the bars, away from where the lab technician was going to do her work.

Marian watched, face blank, as the restrained chimp was withdrawn from the enclosure. The clamber swung around on rubber wheels and a technician took blood and vaginal swabs. The chimp shrieked protests and grimaced. Both the worker and the technician ignored her shrieks.

Marian approached the clamber and touched the chimp's extended hand. "There, Kiki. There, girl. That's my girl. We're sorry, sweetie."

The chimp's fingers brushed Marian's palm repeatedly. The chimp grimaced and squirmed but no longer shrieked. When she was returned to her enclosure, Marian swiveled to face the worker and the technician.

"I'll can the next son of a bitch that treats these animals as if they're machines," she said in a low, harsh growl. "You understand? She's socializing. She's been violated and she wants to touch somebody to feel reassured. You're the closest thing she's got to friends and family. Understand me?"

The worker and technician sheepishly apologized.

Marian steamed past Dicken and jerked her head for him to follow.

"I'm sure it's going great," Dicken said, distressed by the scene. "I trust you implicitly, Marian."

Marian sighed. "Then come back to my office and let's talk some more there."

The corridor back to the office was empty, doors closed at both ends. Dicken made broad gestures as he spoke. "I've got Ben on my side. He thinks this is a significant event, not just a disease."

"So will he go up against Augustine? All our funding is predicated on finding a treatment, Christopher! If it isn't a disease, why find a treatment? People are unhappy, sick, and they think they're losing babies."

"These rejected fetuses aren't *babies*, Marian."

“Then what in hell are they? I have to go with what I know, Christopher. If we get all theoretical—”

“I’m canvassing,” Dicken said. “I want to know what you think.”

Marian stood behind her desk, put her hands on the Formica top, tapped her short fingernails. She looked exasperated. “I am a geneticist and a molecular biologist. I don’t know shit about much else. It takes me five hours each night just to read a hundredth of what I need to keep up in my own field.”

“Have you logged on to MedWeb? Bionet? Virion?”

“I don’t get on the net much except to get my mail.”

“Virion is a little informal netzine out of Palo Alto. Private subscription only. It’s run by Kiril Maddox.”

“I know. I dated Kiril at Stanford.”

This brought Dicken up short. “I didn’t know that.”

“Don’t tell anybody, please! He was a brilliant and subversive little shmuck even then.”

“Scout’s honor. But you should check it out. There are thirty anonymous postings there. Kiril assures me they’re all legitimate researchers. The buzz is *not* about disease or treatment.”

“Yes, and when they go public, I’ll join you and march in to Augustine’s office.”

“Promise?”

“Not on your life! I am not a brilliant researcher with an international reputation to protect. I’m an assembly-line kind of gal with split ends and a lousy sex life who loves her work and wants to keep her job.”

Dicken rubbed the back of his neck. “Something’s up. Something really big. I need a list of good people to back me when I tell Augustine.”

“Try and set him straight, you mean. He will kick your ass right out of CDC.”

“I don’t think so. I hope not.” Then, with a twinkle and a squint, Dicken asked, “How do you know? Did you date Augustine, too?”

“He was a medical student,” Freedman said. “I stayed the hell away from medical students.”

Jessie’s Cougar was half a flight down from the street, fronted by a small neon sign, a cast faux-wood plaque, and a polished brass handrail. Inside the long, narrow showroom, a burly man in a fake tux and black pants served beer and wine at tiny wooden tables, and seven or eight naked

women, one after another, made generally unenthusiastic attempts to dance on a small stage.

A small hand-lettered sign on a music stand beside the empty cage said that the cougar was sick this week, so Jessie wouldn't be performing. Pictures of the limp cat and its pumped-up, smiling blond mistress lined the wall behind the small bar.

The room was cramped, barely ten feet across, and smoky, and Dicken felt bad the moment he sat down. He looked around the gawker's side of the floor and saw older men in business suits in groups of two or three, young men in denims, alone, all white, nursing beers in small glasses.

A man in his late forties approached a dancer just going off stage and whispered something to her and she nodded. He and his companions then filed off to a back room for more private entertainment.

Dicken had not had more than a couple of hours to himself in a month. By chance, he had this evening free, no social connections, nowhere to go but a small room at the Holiday Inn, so he had walked to the club district, past numerous police cars and a few beat cops on bike and on foot. He had spent a few minutes in a big chain bookstore, found the prospect of spending his free night just reading almost unbearable, and his feet had moved him automatically where he knew he had intended to go in the first place, if only to look upon a woman he was not connected with by business.

The dancers were attractive enough, in their early to late twenties, startling in their blunt nudity, breasts rarely natural, as far as he could judge, with pubic hair shaved to a universal small exclamation point. Not one of them looked at him as he entered. In a few minutes it would be money smiles and money eyes, but from the start, there was nothing.

He ordered a Budweiser—the choice was Coors or Bud or Bud Lite—and leaned back against the wall. The woman currently on stage was young, thin, with dramatically projecting breasts that did not match her narrow rib cage. He watched her with little interest, and when she was finished with her ten-minute gyration and a few marble-eyed glances around the room, she donned a rayon thigh-high robe and descended the ramp to mingle.

Dicken had never quite learned the ropes in these clubs. He knew about the private rooms, but not about what was allowed there. He found himself thinking less about the women and the smoke and his beer than about the Howard University Medical Center tour the next morning, and about the meeting with Augustine and the new team members in the late afternoon . . . Another very full day.

He looked at the next woman on stage, shorter and a little more filled out, with small breasts and a very narrow waist, and thought of Kaye Lang.

Dicken finished his beer and dropped a couple of quarters on the scuffed little table and pushed his chair back. A half-naked redheaded woman offered him her stocking for money, her robe draped over a lifted leg. Like a fool, he stuffed twenty into the garter belt and looked up at her with what he hoped was nonchalant command, and what he suspected was nothing more than a stiff little glance of uncertainty.

“That’s a start, honey,” she said, her voice small but assured. She looked around quickly. He was the biggest unaccompanied fish currently swimming in the pool. “You been working too hard, haven’t you?”

“I have,” he said.

“A little private dance is all you need, I think,” she added.

“That would be nice,” he said, his tongue dry.

“We got a place,” she said. “But you know the rules, honey? I do all the touching. Management wants you to stay in your seat. It’s fun.”

It sounded awful. He went with her anyway, into a small room near the back of the building, one of eight or ten on the second floor, each the size of a bedroom and empty of furniture except for a small stage and a folding chair or two. He sat in the folding chair as the woman let slip her robe. She wore a tiny thong.

“My name is Danielle,” she said. She put her finger to her lips when he started to speak. “Don’t tell me,” she said. “I like mystery.”

Then, from a small black purse on her arm, she withdrew a limp plastic package and unwrapped it with a practiced little sweep of her wrist. She slipped a surgical mask over her face. “Sorry,” she said, voice even smaller now. “You know how it is. The girls say this new flu cuts through everything—the pill, rubbers, you name it. You don’t even have to be, you know, nasty to get in trouble anymore. They say all the guys carry it. I got two kids already. I don’t need time off from work just to make a little freak.”

Dicken was so tired he could hardly move. She got up on stage and took a stance. “You like fast or slow?”

He stood, accidentally kicking the chair over with a loud clatter. She frowned at him, eyes narrowing and brows knitting over her mask. The mask was medicine green.

“Sorry,” he said, and handed her another twenty. Then he fled the room, stumbled through the smoke, tripped over a couple of legs near the stage,

climbed up the steps, held on to the brass rail for a moment, taking deep breaths.

He wiped his hand vigorously on his pants, as if he were the one who could get infected.

## 30

### The University of Washington, Seattle

**M**itch sat on the bench and stretched his arms out in the watery sunshine. He wore a Pendleton wool shirt, faded jeans, scuffed hiking boots, and no coat.

The bare trees lifted gray limbs over a trampled field of snow. Student pathways had cleared the sidewalks and left crisscross trails over the snowy lawns. Flakes fell slowly from the broken gray masses of clouds hustling overhead.

Wendell Packer approached with a narrow smile and a wave. Packer was Mitch's age, in his late thirties, tall and slender, with thinning hair and regular features marred only slightly by a bulbous nose. He wore a thick sweater and a dark blue down vest and carried a small leather satchel.

"I've always wanted to make a film about this quad," Packer said. He clasped his hands nervously.

"What sort?" Mitch asked, his heart aching already. He had had to force himself to make the call and come to the campus. Mitch was trying to learn to ignore the nervousness of former colleagues and scientist friends.

"Just one scene. Snow covering the ground in January; plum blossoms in April. A pretty girl walking, right about there. Slow fade: she's surrounded by falling flakes, and they turn to petals." Packer pointed along the path where students slogged to their classes. He made a swipe at the slush on the bench and sat beside Mitch. "You could have come to my office. You're not a pariah, Mitch. Nobody's going to kick you off campus."

Mitch shrugged. "I've become a wild man, Wendell. I don't get much sleep. I have a stack of textbooks in my apartment . . . I read biology all day long. I don't know where I need to catch up most."

"Yeah, well, say good-bye to *élan vital*. We're engineers now."

"I want to buy you lunch and ask a few questions. And then I want to

know if I can audit some classes in your department. The texts just aren't cutting it for me."

"I can ask the professors. Any classes in particular?"

"Embryology. Vertebrate development. Some obstetrics, but that's outside your department."

"Why?"

Mitch stared out over the quad at the surrounding walls of ochre brick buildings. "I need to learn a lot of things before I shoot my mouth off or make any more stupid moves."

"Like what?"

"If I told you, you'd know for sure that I was crazy."

"Mitch, one of the best times I've had in years was when we went out to Ginkgo Tree with my kids. They loved it, marching all over, looking for fossils. I was staring down at the ground for hours. The back of my neck got sunburned. I realized that was why you wore a little flap on your hat."

Mitch smiled.

"I'm still a friend, Mitch."

"That really means a lot to me, Wendell."

"It's cold out here," Packer said. "Where are you taking me for lunch?"

"You like Asian?"

They sat in the Little China restaurant, in a booth by the window, waiting for their rice and noodles and curry to be brought out. Packer sipped a cup of hot tea; Mitch, perversely, drank cold lemonade. Steam clouded the window looking out on the gray Ave, so-called, not an avenue in actuality but University Street, flanking the campus. A few young kids in leather jackets and baggy pants smoked and stamped their feet around a chained newspaper rack. The snow had stopped and the streets were shiny black.

"So tell me why you need to audit classes," Packer said.

Mitch spread out three newspaper clippings on Ukraine and the Republic of Georgia. Packer read them with a frown.

"Somebody tried to kill the mother in the cave. And thousands of years later, they're killing mothers with Herod's flu."

"Ah. You think the Neandertals . . . The baby found outside the cave." Packer tilted his head back. "I'm a little confused."

"Christ, Wendell, I was *there*. I saw the baby inside the cave. I'm sure the researchers in Innsbruck have confirmed that by now, they just aren't telling anybody. I've written letters, and they don't even bother to respond."

Packer thought this over, brow deeply wrinkled, trying to put together a

complete picture. “You think you stumbled onto a little bit of punctuated equilibrium. In the Alps.”

A short woman with a round pretty face brought their food and laid chopsticks beside their plates. When she left, Packer continued, “You think they’ve done a tissue match in Innsbruck and just won’t release the results?”

Mitch nodded. “It’s so far out there, as an idea, that nobody is saying a thing. It’s an incredible long shot. Look, I don’t want to belabor . . . I don’t want to drag you down with all the details. Just give me a chance to find out whether I’m right or wrong. I’m probably so wrong I should start a new career in asphalt management. But . . . *I was there, Wendell.*”

Packer looked around the restaurant, pushed aside the chopsticks, ladled a few spoons of hot pepper sauce onto his plate, and stuck a fork into his curried pork and rice. Around a mouthful, he said, “If I let you audit some classes, will you sit way in the back?”

“I’ll stand outside the door,” Mitch said.

“I was joking,” Packer said. “I think.”

“I know you were,” Mitch said, smiling. “Now I’m going to ask just one more favor.”

Packer lifted his eyebrows. “You’re pushing it, Mitch.”

“Do you have any postdocs working on SHEVA?”

“You bet,” Packer said. “The CDC has a research coordination program and we’ve signed on. You see all the women wearing gauze masks on campus? We’d like to help shine a little reason on this whole thing. You know . . . *Reason?*” He stared pointedly at Mitch.

Mitch pulled out his two glass vials. “These are very precious to me,” he said. “I do not want to lose them.” He held them out in his palm. They clinked softly together, their contents like two little snips of beef jerky.

Packer put down his fork. “What are they?”

“Neandertal tissue. One from the male, one from the female.”

Packer stopped chewing.

“How much of them would you need?” Mitch asked.

“Not much,” Packer said around his mouthful of rice. “If I was going to do anything.”

Mitch waggled his hand and the vials slowly back and forth.

“If I were to trust you,” Packer added.

“I have to trust *you*,” Mitch said.

Packer squinted at the fogged windows, the kids still milling outside, laughing and smoking their cigarettes.

“Test them for what . . . SHEVA?”

“Or something like SHEVA.”

“Why? What has SHEVA got to do with evolution?”

Mitch tapped the newspaper articles. “It would explain all this talk about the devil’s children. Something very unusual is happening. I think it’s happened before, and I found the evidence.”

Packer wiped his mouth thoughtfully. “I absolutely do not believe this.” He lifted the vials from Mitch’s hand, stared at them closely. “They’re so damned *old*. Three years ago, two of my postdocs did a research project on mitochondrial DNA sequences from Neandertal bone tissue. All that remained were fragments.”

“Then you can confirm these are the real thing,” Mitch said. “Dried out, degraded, but probably complete.”

Packer gently set the vials on the table. “Why should I do this? Just because we’re friends?”

“Because if I’m right, it’s going to be the biggest scientific discovery of our time. We may finally learn how evolution works.”

Packer removed his wallet and took out a twenty. “I’m paying,” he said. “Big discoveries make me very nervous.”

Mitch looked at him in dismay.

“Oh, I’ll do it,” Packer said grimly. “But only because I’m an idiot and a sucker. No more favors, please, Mitch.”

## 31

### The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda

**C**ross and Dicken sat opposite each other at the broad table in a small executive conference room in the Natcher Building, and Kaye sat beside Cross. Dicken fiddled with a pen, staring down at the table like a nervous little boy.

“When’s Mark going to make his grand entrance?” Cross asked.

Dicken looked up and grinned. “I’d give him five minutes. Maybe less. He’s not very happy about this.”

Cross picked her teeth with a long chipped fingernail.

“The only thing you don’t have lots of is time, right?” Dicken asked.

Cross smiled politely.

“It doesn’t seem that long since Georgia,” Kaye said, just to make conversation.



“Not long at all,” Dicken said.

“You met in Georgia?” Cross asked.

“Just briefly,” Dicken said. Before the conversation could go any further, Augustine entered. He wore an expensive gray suit that was showing a little wrinkling at the back and around the knees. He had been in a good many conferences today, Kaye guessed.

Augustine shook hands with Cross and sat. He clasped his hands loosely in front of him. “So, Marge, this is a done deal? You’ve got Kaye and we have to share?”

“Nothing’s final yet,” Cross said cheerfully. “I wanted to talk to you first.”

Augustine was not convinced. “What do we get out of it?”

“Nothing you probably wouldn’t have gotten anyway, Mark,” Cross said. “We can work out the larger features of the picture now, and pencil in the details later.”

Augustine colored a little, clamped his jaw for a moment, then said, “I do love bargaining. What do we actually need from Americol?”

“This evening I’ll be having dinner with three Republican senators,” Cross said. “Bible Belt types. They don’t much care what I do, so long as I attend their little fund-raisers. I’ll explain to them why I think the Taskforce and the whole research establishment should get even more money, and why we should set up an intranet connection between Americol, Euricol, and selected researchers in the Taskforce and the CDC. Then I’ll explain the facts of life to them. About Herod’s, that is.”

“They’re going to shout ‘Act of God,’ ” Augustine said.

“I don’t think so, actually,” Cross said. “They may be smarter than you think.”

“I’ve already explained this to every senator and most of the House of Representatives,” Augustine said.

“Then we’ll make a good tag team. I’ll make them feel sophisticated and in the loop, something I know you’re not good at, Mark. And what we share . . . will lead to a treatment, possibly even a cure, within a year. I guarantee it.”

“How can you guarantee anything like that?” Augustine asked.

“As I told Kaye on the flight down here, I took her papers seriously years ago. I set some of my key people in San Diego looking into the possibility. When the news about activation of SHEVA came down, and then Herod’s, I was ready. I handed it over to the good folks in our Sentinel program. They kind of parallel what you do, Christopher, but on a corporate

level. We already know the structure of SHEVA's capsid coat, how SHEVA crawls into human cells, which receptors it attaches to. The CDC and the Taskforce can take half the credit eventually, and we'll take on the business of getting the treatment to everybody. We'll do it for little or nothing, of course, maybe not even break even."

Augustine looked at her with genuine surprise. Cross chuckled. She leaned over the table as if to throw a punch at him and said, "Gotcha, Mark."

"I don't believe it," Augustine said.

"Mr. Dicken says he wants to work directly with Kaye. That's fine," Cross allowed.

Augustine folded his arms.

"But that intranet will really be something. Direct, fast, best we can put together. We'll chart every damned HERV in the genome to make sure SHEVA is not duplicated somewhere, to catch us by surprise. Kaye can lead that project. The pharmaceutical applications could be wondrous, absolutely *wondrous*." Her voice broke with enthusiasm.

Kaye found herself buzzing with her own enthusiasm. Cross was something else.

"What do your people tell you about these HERV, Mark?" Cross asked.

"A lot," Augustine said. "We've concentrated on Herod's, of course."

"Do you know that the largest gene turned on by SHEVA, the poly-protein on chromosome 21, differs between simian expressions and human? That it's one of only three genes in the whole SHEVA cascade that differ in apes and humans?"

Augustine shook his head.

"We're close to knowing that," Dicken said, then glanced around in some embarrassment. Cross ignored him.

"What we're looking at is an archaeological catalog of human disease, going back millions of years," Cross said. "At least one old damned visionary has seen this already and we're going to beat CDC to the ultimate description . . . Leave government research out in the cold, Mark, unless we cooperate. Kaye can help keep the channels open. Together, we can do it a whole lot faster, of course."

"You're going to save the world, Marge?" Augustine asked softly.

"No, Mark. I doubt Herod's is much more than a nasty inconvenience. But it gets us where we live. Down where we make babies. Everyone who watches TV or reads newspapers is scared. Kaye is famous, she's female,

and she's presentable. She's just what we both need. That's why Mr. Dicken here and the surgeon general thought she might be useful, isn't it? Besides her obvious expertise?"

Augustine aimed his next question at Kaye. "I assume you didn't approach Ms. Cross yourself, after agreeing to go with us."

"I didn't," Kaye said.

"What do you expect to get out of this arrangement?"

"I think Marge is right," Kaye said, feeling an almost chilly self-confidence. "We need to cooperate and find out what this is and what we can do about it." *Kaye Lang the corporate item, cool and distanced, knowing no doubt. Saul, you would be proud of me.*

"This is an international effort, Marge," Augustine said. "We're putting together a coalition of twenty different countries. WHO is a major player here. No prima donnas."

"I've already set up a crack management team to deal with that. Robert Jackson is going to head our vaccine program. Our functions will be transparent. We've been doing this on the world scene for twenty-five years. We know how to play ball, Mark."

Augustine looked at Cross, then at Kaye. He held out his hands as if to embrace Cross. "Darling," he said, and stood to blow her a kiss.

Cross cackled like an old hen.

## 32

### The University of Washington, Seattle

**W**endell Packer told Mitch to meet him in his office in the Magnuson building. The room in the E wing was small and stuffy, windowless, packed with shelves of books and two computers, one of them connected to equipment in Packer's laboratory. This screen showed a long series of proteins being sequenced, red and blue bands and green columns in pretty disarray, like a skewed staircase.

"I did this one myself," Packer said, holding up a long folded printout for Mitch. "Not that I don't trust my students, but I don't want to ruin their careers, either. And I don't want my department slammed."

Mitch took the printout and thumbed through it.

"I doubt it makes a lot of sense at first glance," Packer said. "The tis-

sues are way too old to get complete sequences, so I looked for small genes unique to SHEVA, and then I looked for products created when SHEVA enters a cell.”

“You found them?” Mitch asked, feeling his throat constrict.

Packer nodded. “Your tissue samples have SHEVA. And they’re not just contaminants from you or the people you were with. But the virus is really degraded. I used antibody probes sent to us from Bethesda that bind to proteins associated with SHEVA. There’s a follicle stimulating hormone that’s unique to SHEVA infection. Sixty-seven percent match, not bad considering the age. Then I relied on a little information theory to design and fabricate better probes, in case SHEVA has mutated slightly, or differs for other reasons. Took me a couple of days, but I got an eighty percent match. To make doubly sure, I did a Southwestern blot test with Herod’s provirus DNA. There are definitely bits of activated SHEVA in your specimens. Tissue from the male is thick with it.”

“You’re sure it’s SHEVA? No doubt, even in a court of law?”

“Considering the source, it wouldn’t survive in a court of law. But is it SHEVA?” Packer smiled. “Yes. I’ve been in this department for seven years. We have some of the best equipment money can buy, and some of the best people that equipment can seduce to join us, thanks to three very rich young folks at Microsoft. But . . . Sit down, please, Mitch.”

Mitch looked up from the printout. “Why?”

“Just sit.”

Mitch sat.

“I have a bonus. Karel Petrovich in Anthropology asked Maria Konig, just down the hall, the best in our lab, to work on a very old tissue sample. Guess where he got the sample?”

“Innsbruck?”

Packer held out another sheet of paper. “They asked Karel specifically to go to us. Our reputation, what can I say? They wanted us to search for specific markers and combinations of alleles most often used to determine parental relationship. We were given one small tissue sample, about a gram. They wanted very precise work, and they wanted it quick. Mitch, you got to swear to absolute secrecy on this.”

“I swear,” Mitch said.

“Just out of curiosity, I asked one of the analysts about the results. I won’t go into boring details. The tissue comes from a newborn. It’s at least ten thousand years old. We looked for the markers and found them. And I compared several alleles with *your* tissue samples.”

“They match?” Mitch asked, his voice breaking.

“Yes . . . and no. I don’t think Innsbruck is going to agree with me, or with what you seem to be implying.”

“I don’t imply. I *know*.”

“Yes, well, I’m intrigued, but in a courtroom, I could wriggle your male out of responsibility. No prehistoric child support. The female, however, yes. The alleles match.”

“She’s the baby’s mother?”

“Beyond a doubt.”

“But he’s not the father?”

“I just said I could wriggle him out of it in a courtroom. There’s some weird genetics going on here. Real spooky stuff that I’ve never seen before.”

“But the baby is one of us.”

“Mitch, please don’t get me wrong. I’m not going to back you up, I’m not going to help you write any papers. I have a department to protect, and my own career. You of all people should understand that.”

“I know, I know,” Mitch said. “But I can’t go it alone.”

“Let me feed you a few clues. You know that *Homo sapiens sapiens* is remarkably uniform, genetically speaking.”

“Yes.”

“Well, I don’t think *Homo sapiens neandertalensis* was all that uniform. It’s a real miracle that I can tell you that, Mitch, I hope you understand. Three years ago, it would have taken us eight months to do the analysis.”

Mitch frowned. “I’m losing you.”

“The infant’s genotype is a close match to you and me. She’s close to modern. Mitochondrial DNA in the tissue you gave me matches with samples we have from old Neandertal bone. But I’d say, if you did not look at me too critically, that the male and female that supplied your samples are her parents.”

Mitch felt dizzy. He bent over on the chair and rested his head between his knees. “Christ,” he said, his voice muffled.

“A very late contender to be Eve,” Packer said. He held up his hand. “Look at me. Now I’m trembling.”

“What *can* you do, Wendell?” Mitch asked, lifting his head to stare up at him. “I’m sitting on the biggest story in modern science. Innsbruck is going to stonewall, I can just smell it. They’ll deny everything. It’s the easy way out. What do I do? Where do I go?”

Packer wiped his eyes and blew his nose into his handkerchief. “Find some folks who aren’t all that conservative,” he said. “People outside of academics. I know people at the CDC. I talk fairly often with a friend in the labs in Atlanta, a friend of an old girlfriend, actually. We stayed on good terms. She’s done some cadaver tissue analysis for a CDC virus hunter named Dicken, on the Herod’s Taskforce. Not surprisingly, he’s been looking for SHEVA in cadaver tissues.”

“From Georgia?”

Packer did not connect this immediately. “Atlanta?”

“No, Republic of.”

“Ah . . . yes, as a matter of fact,” Packer said. “But he’s also been looking for evidence of Herod’s flu in historical records. Decades, even centuries.” Packer tapped Mitch’s hand pointedly. “Maybe he’d like to know what you know?”

## 33

**F**our women sat in the brightly lighted room. The room was equipped with two couches, two chairs, a television and video player, books, and magazines. Kaye wondered how hospital designers always managed to create an atmosphere of sterility: ash-colored wood, cool off-white walls, sanitary pastel art of beaches and forests and flowers. A bleached and calming world.

She watched the women briefly through the window of the side door as she waited for Dicken and the director of the clinical center project to catch up with her.

Two black women. One, in her late thirties and stout, sitting upright in a chair, inattentively watched something on the television, a copy of *Elle* draped across her lap. The other, in her early twenties, if that, very thin, with small pointy breasts and short cornrowed hair, sat with her cheek propped on her hand and her elbow on a couch arm, staring at nothing in particular. Two white women, both in their thirties, one bottle-blond and haggard and dazed-looking, the other neatly dressed, face expressionless, read battered copies of *People* and *Time*.

Dicken approached along the gray-carpeted hallway with Dr. Denise Lipton. Lipton was in her early forties, small, pretty in a sharp sort of way,

with eyes that looked as if they could shoot sparks when she was angry. Dicken introduced them.

“Ready to see our volunteers, Ms. Lang?” Lipton asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” Kaye said.

Lipton smiled bloodlessly. “They’re not very happy. They’ve undergone enough tests in the last few days to . . . Well, to make them not very happy.”

The women within the room looked up at the sound of voices. Lipton smoothed her lab coat and pushed the door open.

“Good afternoon, ladies,” she greeted them.

The meeting went well enough. Dr. Lipton escorted three of the women to their private rooms and left Dicken and Kaye to talk more extensively to the fourth, the older black woman, Mrs. Luella Hamilton, of Richmond, Virginia.

Mrs. Hamilton wondered if she could get some coffee. “I’ve been drained so many times. If it isn’t blood samples, it’s my kidneys acting cross.” Dicken said he would get them each a cup and left the room.

Mrs. Hamilton focused on Kaye and narrowed her eyes. “They told us you found this bug.”

“No,” Kaye said. “I wrote some papers, but I didn’t actually find it.”

“It’s just a little fever,” Mrs. Hamilton said. “I’ve had four children, and now they tell me this one won’t really be a baby. But they won’t take it out of me. They say, let the disease take its course. I’m just a big lab rat, aren’t I?”

“Seems like it. Are they treating you well?”

“I’m eating,” she said with a shrug. “The food’s good. I don’t like the books or the movies. The nurses are nice, but that Dr. Lipton—she’s a hard case. She acts nice, but I think she doesn’t like *anybody* very much.”

“I’m sure she’s doing a good job.”

“Yeah, well, lady, Miz Lang, you sit in my seat for a while and tell me you don’t want to bitch a little.”

Kaye smiled.

“It pisses me off, there’s this black nurse, a man, he keeps treating me like some sort of example. He wants me to be *strong* like his mammy.” She regarded Kaye with steady wide eyes and shook her head. “I don’t want to be strong. I want to cry when they do their tests, when I think about this baby, Miz Lang. You understand?”

“Yes,” Kaye said.

“It feels like all my others did around this time. I say maybe it *is* a baby and they’re wrong. Does that make me a fool?”

“If they’ve done the tests, they know,” Kaye said.

“They won’t let me visit my husband. That’s part of the contract. He gave me the flu and he gave me this baby, but I miss him. It wasn’t his fault. I talk to him on the phone. He sounds all right, but I know he misses me. Makes me nervous, being away, you know?”

“Who’s taking care of your children?” Kaye said.

“My husband. They let the children come and see me. That’s okay. My husband brings them by and they come in and see me and he stays out in the car. Four months it will be, four months!” Mrs. Hamilton twisted the thin gold wedding band on her finger. “He says he gets so lonely, and the kids, they ain’t easy to be with sometimes.”

Kaye grasped Mrs. Hamilton’s hand. “I *know* how brave you are, Mrs. Hamilton.”

“Call me Luella,” she said. “I say it again, I ain’t brave. What’s your first name?”

“Kaye.”

“I am scared, Kaye. You find out what’s really going on, come and tell me first, all right?”

Kaye left Mrs. Hamilton. She felt dried out and cold. Dicken walked with her to the ground floor and outside the clinical center. He kept looking at her when he thought she would not notice.

She asked to stop for a minute. She crossed her arms and stared at a stand of trees across a short stretch of manicured lawn. The lawn was surrounded by trenches. Most of the NIH campus was a maze of detours and construction sites, holes filled with raw earth and concrete and jutting forests of rebar.

“Everything all right?” Dicken asked.

“No,” she said. “I feel scattered.”

“We have to get used to it. It’s happening all over,” Dicken said.

“All of the women volunteered?” Kaye said.

“Of course. We pay for all their medical expenses and a per diem. We can’t compel this sort of thing, even in a national emergency.”

“Why can’t they see their husbands?”

“Actually, that may be my fault,” Dicken said. “I presented some



evidence at our last meeting that Herod's will lead to a second pregnancy, without sexual activity. They're going to hand the bulletin out this evening to all researchers."

"*What* evidence? My God, are we talking immaculate conception here?" Kaye put her hands on her hips and swung around to face him. "You've been tracking this thing since we ran into each other in Georgia, haven't you?"

"Since before Georgia. Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia. Herod's started hitting those countries ten, twenty years ago, maybe even earlier."

"Then you read my papers, and it all fell into place? You're a kind of scientific stalker?"

Dicken made a face, shook his head. "Hardly."

"Am I the catalyst?" Kaye asked in disbelief.

"It's not simple, Kaye."

"I wish they'd keep me in the loop, Chris!"

"Christopher, please." He looked uncomfortable, apologetic.

"I wish *you'd* keep me in the loop. You act like a shadow around here, always following, so why do I think you may be one of the most important people in the Taskforce?"

"Thank you, it's a common misperception," he said with a wry smile. "I try to keep out of trouble, but I'm not sure I'm succeeding. They listen sometimes, when the evidence is strong—as it actually is in this case, reports from Armenian hospitals, even a couple of hospitals in Los Angeles and New York."

"Christopher, we've got two hours before the next meeting," Kaye said. "I've been stuck in SHEVA conferences for two weeks now. They think they've found my niche. A safe little cubbyhole, looking for other HERV. Marge has put together a nice lab for me in Baltimore, but . . . I don't think the Taskforce has much use for me."

"Going with Americol really irritated Augustine," Dicken said. "I could have warned you."

"I'll have to focus on doing work with Americol, then."

"Not a bad idea. They have the resources. Marge seems to like you."

"Let me know more of what it's like . . . on the front? Is that what it's called?"

"The front," Dicken affirmed. "Sometimes we say we're going to meet the real troops, the people who are getting sick. We're just workers; they're the soldiers. They do most of the suffering and the dying."

"I feel like I'm on the sidelines here. Will you talk to an outsider?"

“Love to,” Dicken said. “You know what I’m up against here, don’t you?”

“A bureaucratic juggernaut. They think they know what Herod’s is. But . . . a second pregnancy, without sex!” Kaye felt a quick little chill.

“They’ve rationalized that,” Dicken said. “We’re going to discuss the possible mechanism this afternoon. They don’t think they’re hiding anything.” He screwed up his face like a boy with a dark secret. “If you ask questions I’m not prepared to answer . . .”

Kaye dropped her hands from her hips, exasperated. “What kind of questions is *Augustine* not asking? What if we’re getting this completely wrong?”

“Exactly,” Dicken said. His face reddened and he sliced the air with his hand. “*Exactly*. Kaye, I knew you would understand. While we’re talking what ifs . . . would you mind if I spill my guts to you?”

Kaye leaned back at this prospect.

“I mean, I admire your work so much—”

“I was lucky, and I had Saul,” Kaye said stiffly. Dicken looked vulnerable and she did not like that. “Christopher, what in hell are you hiding?”

“I’d be surprised if you didn’t already know. We’re all just hanging back from the obvious—what is obvious to a few of us, at any rate.” He searched her face closely through squinted eyes. “I’ll tell you what I think, and if you agree that is possible—that it’s probable—you have to let me decide when to make the case. We wait until we have all the evidence we need. I’ve been living in a land of guesswork for a year, and I know for a fact neither Augustine nor Shawbeck want to hear me out. Sometimes I think I’m not much more than a glorified errand boy. So—” He shifted on one foot. “Our secret?”

“Of course,” Kaye said, leveling her gaze on him. “Tell me what you think is going to happen to Mrs. Hamilton.”

## 34

### Seattle

**M**itch knew he was asleep, or rather, half-asleep. On rare occasions his mind would process the facts of his existence, his plans, his suppositions, separately and with stubborn independence, and always on the edge of sleep.

Many times he had dreamed of the site where he was currently digging, but with mixed frames of time. This morning, his body numb, his conscious mind an observer in a wraparound theater, he saw a young man and woman wrapped in light furs, wearing ragged reed and skin sandals laced up their ankles. The woman was pregnant. He saw them first in profile, as if in some rotating display, and amused himself for a while viewing them from different angles.

Gradually, this control came to an end, and the man and woman walked over fresh snow and windswept ice, in bright daylight, the brightest he had even seen in a dream. The ice glared and they shielded their eyes with their hands.

At first, he looked upon them as people just like himself. Soon, however, he realized these people were *not* like him. Their facial features were not what aroused this suspicion at first. It was the intricate patterns of beard and facial hair on the man, and a thick soft mane of hair circling the woman's face, leaving her cheeks, receding chin, and low forehead clear, but drawing from temple to temple through her brows. Beneath the furred brow, her eyes were soft and deep brown, almost black, and her skin had a rich olive color. Her fingers were gray and pink, heavily callused. Both had broad heavy noses.

*They are not my people, Mitch thought. But I know them.*

The man and woman were smiling. The woman reached down to scoop up snow. Slyly, she started to nibble at it, then, when the man was not looking, she formed it into a quick hard ball and threw it at his head. It hit with a thwack and he reeled, yelped, his voice clear and bell-toned, almost like a beagle's. The woman made as if to cower, then ran away, and the man chased her. He pulled her down despite her repeated grunts of supplication, then stood back and raised his arms to heaven and heaped loud words upon her. Despite the gravelly timbre of his voice, deep and rolling, she did not seem impressed. She flapped her hands at him and pouched out her lips, making loud smacking, sucking sounds.

With the lazy editing of a dream, he saw them walking single file down a muddy trail in drizzling rain and snow. Through slow cloud cover, he could see patches of forest and meadow in a valley below them, and a lake, upon which floated broad flat rafts of logs bearing reed huts.

*They're doing all right, a voice in his head told him. You look at them now and you don't know them, but they're doing all right.*

Mitch heard a bird and realized this was no bird, but his cell phone. It took him some seconds to put away the paraphernalia of his dream. The

clouds and valley floor broke like a soap bubble and he groaned as he lifted his head. His body was numb. He had been sleeping on his side with one arm curled under his head and his muscles were stiff.

The phone persisted. He answered on the sixth ring.

“I hope I’m speaking to Mitchell Rafelson, the anthropologist,” said a male voice with a British accent.

“One of them, anyway,” Mitch said. “Who’s this?”

“Merton, Oliver. I’m a science editor for the *Economist*. I’m doing a piece on the Innsbruck Neandertals. It’s been tough finding your phone number, Mr. Rafelson.”

“It’s unlisted. I’m getting tired of being chastised.”

“I can imagine. Listen, I think I can show that Innsbruck has bollixed up the whole case, but I need some details. Chance for you to explain things to a sympathetic ear. I’ll be out in Washington state day after tomorrow—to speak with Eileen Ripper.”

“Okay,” Mitch said. He considered simply closing the phone and trying to bring back the remarkable dream.

“She’s working on another dig in the gorge . . . Columbia Gorge? Do you know where Iron Cave is?”

Mitch stretched. “I’ve done some digs near there.”

“Yes, well, it hasn’t leaked to the press yet, but it will next week. She’s found three skeletons, very old, not nearly as remarkable as your mummies, but still quite interesting. Principally, my story is going to focus on her tactics. In an age of sympathy for indigenes, she’s put together a really canny consortium to protect science. Ms. Ripper solicited support from the Five Tribes Confederation. You know them, of course.”

“I do.”

“She’s got a team of pro bono lawyers and she’s kept some congressmen and senators in the loop as well. Not at all like your experience with Pasco man.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Mitch said with a scowl. He picked a piece of sleep from his eye. “That’s a day’s drive from here.”

“Is it that far? I’m in Manchester now. England. Just packed my bags and drove over from Leeds. My plane goes out in an hour. I’d love to talk.”

“I’m probably the last person Eileen wants out there.”

“She was the one who gave me your phone number. You’re not the out-cast you might think, Mr. Rafelson. She’d like to have you look at the dig. I gather she’s the motherly type.”

“She’s a whirlwind,” Mitch said.

"I'm very excited, really. I've seen digs in Ethiopia, South Africa, Tanzania. I've been to Innsbruck twice to see what they'd let me see, which isn't much. Now—"

"Mr. Merton, I hate to disappoint you—"

"Yes, well, what about the baby, Mr. Rafelson? Can you tell me more about this remarkable infant the woman had in her backpack?"

"I had a blinding headache at the time." Mitch was about to put down the phone, Eileen Ripper or not. He'd been through this too many times. He held the phone away from his ear. Merton's voice sounded tinny and harsh.

"Do you know what's going on in Innsbruck? Did you know they've actually had fistfights in the labs there?"

Mitch brought the phone back to his ear. "No."

"Did you know they've sent tissue samples to other labs in other countries to try to build some sort of consensus?"

"No-oo," Mitch said slowly.

"I'd love to bring you up to date. I think there's a good chance you could come out of this smelling like a fresh apple tree or whatever it is that blooms in Washington state. If I ask Eileen to call you, invite you out, if I tell her you're interested . . . Could we meet?"

"Why not just meet at SeaTac? That's where you're coming in, isn't it?"

Merton made a small blat with his lips. "Mr. Rafelson. I can't see you turning down the chance to sniff some dirt and sit under a canvas tent. A chance to talk about the biggest archaeological story of our time."

Mitch found his watch and looked at the date. "All right," he said. "If Eileen invites me."

When he hung up the phone, he went to the bathroom, brushed his teeth, looked in the mirror.

He had spent several days moping around the apartment, unable to decide what to do next. He had obtained the e-mail address and a phone number for Christopher Dicken, but had not yet built up sufficient courage to call him. His money was running out faster than he had expected. He was putting off hitting up his parents for a loan.

As he fixed breakfast, the phone rang again. It was Eileen Ripper.

When Mitch finished speaking to her, he sat for a moment on the ragged chair in the living room, then stood and looked out the window at Broadway. It was getting light outside. He opened the window and leaned

out. People were walking up and down the street, and cars were stopped at the red light on Denny.

He called home. His mother answered.

## 35

### The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda

It's happened before," Dicken said. He broke a sweet roll in half and dunked it into the foamy top of his latte. The huge modern cafeteria of the Natcher Building was nearly empty at this hour of the morning, and served better food than the cafeteria in Building 10. They sat near the tall tinted glass windows, well away from the few other employees. "Specifically, it happened in Georgia, in Gordi, or nearby."

Kaye's mouth made an O. "My God. The massacre . . ." Outside, sun broke through low morning clouds, sending shadows and bright patches over the campus and into the cafeteria.

"Their tissues all show SHEVA. I only got samples from three or four, but they all had it."

"And you haven't told Augustine?"

"I've been relying on clinical evidence, fresh reports from hospitals . . . What in hell difference would it make if I put SHEVA back a few years, a decade at most? But two days ago I got some files from a hospital in Tbilisi. I helped a young intern there make some contacts in Atlanta. He told me about some people in the mountains. Survivors of another massacre, this one almost sixty years ago. During the war."

"Germans never got into Georgia," Kaye said.

Dicken nodded. "Stalin's troops. They wiped out most of an isolated village near Mount Kazbeg. Some survivors were found two years ago. The government in Tbilisi protected them. Maybe they were fed up with purges, maybe . . . Maybe they didn't know anything about Gordi, or the other villages."

"How many survivors?"

"A doctor named Leonid Sugashvili made it his own little crusade to investigate. It was his report the intern sent me—a report that was never published. But pretty thorough. Between 1943 and 1991, he estimated, about thirteen thousand men, women, and even children were killed in Georgia,

Armenia, Abkhazi, Chechnya. They were killed because somebody thought they spread a disease that caused pregnant women to abort. Those who survived the first purges were hunted down later . . . because the women were giving birth to mutated children. Children with spots all over their faces, with weird eyes, children who could speak from the moment they were born. In some villages, the local police did the killing. Superstition dies hard. The men and women—mothers and fathers—they were accused of consorting with the devil. There weren't that many of them, over four decades. But . . . Sugashvili estimates there might have been instances of this sort of thing going back hundreds of years. Tens of thousands of murders. Guilt, shame, ignorance, silence."

"You think the children were mutated by SHEVA?"

"The doctor's report says that many of the women who were killed pleaded that they had cut off sexual relations with their husbands, their boyfriends. They did not want to bear the devil's offspring. They had heard about the mutated children in other villages, and once they had their fever, their miscarriage, they tried to avoid getting pregnant. Almost all the women who had the miscarriages were pregnant thirty days later, no matter what they did or did not do. Just as some of our hospitals are reporting now."

Kaye shook her head. "That is so completely unbelievable!"

Dicken shrugged. "It's not going to get any more believable, or any easier," he said. "For some time now, I just haven't been convinced that SHEVA is any known kind of disease."

Kaye's lips tightened. She put down her cup of coffee and folded her arms, remembering the conversation with Drew Miller in the Italian restaurant in Boston, and Saul saying it was time they tackle the problem of evolution. "Maybe it's a signal," she said.

"What sort of signal?"

"A code-key that opens up a genetic set-aside, instructions for a new phenotype."

"I'm not sure I understand," Dicken said, frowning.

"Something built up over thousands of years, tens of thousands of years. Guesses, hypotheses having to do with this or that trait, elaborations on a pretty rigid plan."

"To what end?" Dicken asked.

"Evolution," Kaye said.

Dicken backed his chair away and placed his hands on his legs. "Whoa."

“You said it wasn’t a disease,” Kaye reminded him.

“I said it wasn’t like any disease I know. It’s still a retrovirus.”

“You read my papers, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I dropped a few hints.”

Dicken pondered this. “A catalyst.”

“You make it, we get it, we suffer,” Kaye said.

Dicken’s cheeks reddened. “I’m trying not to turn this into a man-woman thing,” he said. “There’s enough of that going on already.”

“Sorry,” Kaye said. “Maybe I just want to avoid the real issue.”

Dicken seemed to reach a decision. “I’m stepping out of line by showing this to you.” He dug into his valise and produced a printout of an e-mail message from Atlanta. Four small pictures had been pasted on the bottom of the message. “A woman died in an automobile accident outside Atlanta. An autopsy was performed at Northside Hospital, and one of our pathologists found she was in her first trimester. He examined the fetus, clearly a Herod’s fetus. Then he examined the woman’s uterus. He found a second pregnancy, very early, at the base of the placenta, protected by a thin wall of laminar tissue. The placenta had already started to separate, but the second ovum was secure. It would have survived the miscarriage. A month later . . .”

“A grandchild,” Kaye said. “Released by the . . .”

“Intermediate daughter. Really just a specialized ovary. She creates a second ovum. That ovum attaches to the wall of the mother’s uterus.”

“What if her eggs, the daughter’s eggs, are different?”

Dicken’s throat had grown dry and he coughed. “Excuse me.” He got up to pour himself a cup of water, then walked back between the tables to sit beside Kaye.

He continued, speaking slowly. “SHEVA provokes the release of a complex of polyproteins. They break down in the cytosol outside the nucleus. LH, FSH, prostaglandins.”

“I know. Judith Kushner told me,” Kaye said, her voice little more than a squeak. “Some of them are responsible for causing the miscarriages. Others could change an ovum substantially.”

“Mutate it?” Dicken asked, still clinging to the tatters of an old paradigm.

“I’m not sure that’s the right word,” Kaye said. “It sounds kind of vicious and random. No. We may be talking about a different kind of reproduction here.”



Dicken finished his cup of water.

“This isn’t exactly new to me,” Kaye mused quietly. She clenched her fingers into fists, then lightly, nervously, rapped her knuckles on the table. “Are you willing to argue that SHEVA is part of human evolution? That we’re about to make a new kind of human?”

Dicken examined Kaye’s face, her mixed wonder and excitement, the peculiar terror of coming upon the intellectual equivalent of a raging tiger. “I wouldn’t dare to put it so bluntly. But maybe I’m being a coward. Maybe it *is* something like that. I value your opinion. God knows I need an ally here.”

Kaye’s heart thudded in her chest. She lifted her cup of coffee and the cold liquid sloshed. “My God, Christopher.” She gave a small, helpless laugh. “What if it’s true? What if we’re *all* pregnant? The whole human race?”

**PART TWO**

S H E V A

S P R I N G





**Eastern Washington State**

**W**ide and slow, the Columbia River glided like a plain of polished jade between black basalt walls.

Mitch pulled off state route 14, drove for half a mile on a dirt and gravel road through scrub trees and bushes, then turned at a bent and rusted sheet-metal sign that read IRON CAVE.

Two old Airstream trailers gleamed in the sun a few yards from the edge of the gorge. Wooden benches and tables heaped with burlap sacks and digging tools surrounded the trailers. He parked the car off the road.

A chill breeze picked at his felt Stetson. He gripped the hat with one hand as he walked from the car to the edge and stared down upon Eileen Ripper's encampment, fifty feet below.

A short young blond woman in frayed and faded jeans and a brown leather jacket stepped down from the door of the nearest trailer. In the moist air off the river, he instantly picked up the young woman's scent: Opium or Trouble or some such perfume. She looked remarkably like Tilde.

The woman paused under the outstretched awning, then stepped out and shaded her eyes against the sun. "Mitch Rafelson?" she asked.

"None other," he said. "Is Eileen down there?"

"Yeah. It's falling apart, you know."

"Since when?"

"Since three days ago. Eileen worked real hard to make her case. Didn't make much difference in the long run."

Mitch grinned sympathetically. "Been there," he said.

"The woman from Five Tribes packed up two days ago. That's why Eileen thought it would be okay for you to come out here. Nobody gets mad now if you show up."

“Nice to be popular,” Mitch said, and tipped his hat.

The woman smiled. “Eileen is feeling low. Give her some encouragement. I think you’re a hero, myself. Except maybe for those mummies.”

“Where is she?”

“Just below the cave.”

Oliver Merton sat on a folding chair in the shadow of the largest canvas canopy. About thirty, with flaming red hair, a pale broad face and short pushed-up nose, he wore a look of utter and almost fierce concentration, his lips drawn back as he punched the keyboard of a laptop computer with his index fingers.

*Hunt-and-peck*, Mitch thought. *A self-taught typist*. He checked out the man’s clothes, distinctly out of place at a dig: tweed slacks, red suspenders, a white linen dress shirt with a banded collar.

Merton did not look up until Mitch was within touching distance of the canopy.

“Mitchell Rafelson! What a pleasure!” Merton shifted the computer to the table, jumped to his feet, and held out his hand. “It’s damned gloomy here. Eileen is up the slope by the dig. I’m sure she’s eager to see you. Shall we?”

The six other workers on the site, all young interns or graduate students, looked up in curiosity as the two men passed. Merton walked ahead of Mitch and climbed over natural shelves cut by centuries of river erosion. They paused twenty feet below the bluff where an old, rust-streaked cave dug into an outcrop of basalt. Above and east of the outcrop, part of an overlying ledge of weathered stone had collapsed, scattering large blocks down the gentle slope to the shore.

Eileen Ripper stood at the outside of a posted series of carefully excavated square pits marked with topometric grids—wire and string—on the western side of the slope. In her late forties, small and dark, with deep-set black eyes and a thin nose, Ripper’s most conspicuous beauty lay in her generous lips, which contrasted appealingly with a short, unruly cap of peppered black hair.

She turned at Merton’s hail. She did not smile or call out. Instead, she put on a determined face, walked gingerly down the talus, and held out her hand to Mitch. They shook firmly.

“We got radiocarbon figures back yesterday morning,” she said. “They’re thirteen thousand years old, plus or minus five hundred . . . and if they ate a lot of salmon, they’re twelve thousand five hundred years old.

But the Five Tribes folks say that Western science is trying to strip them of the last of their dignity. I thought I could reason with them.”

“At least you made the effort,” Mitch said.

“I apologize for judging you so harshly, Mitch. I kept my cool for so long, despite little signs of trouble, and then this woman, Sue Champion . . . I thought we were friends. She advises the tribes. She comes back here yesterday with two men. The men were . . . so *smug*, Mitch. Like little boys who can piss higher up the barn door. They tell me I am fabricating evidence to support my lies. They say they have the government and the law on their side. Our old nemesis, NAGPRA.”

That stood for the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. Mitch was very familiar with the details of this legislation.

Merton stood on the loose slope, trying to keep from slipping, and made little darting glances between them.

“What evidence did you fabricate?” Mitch asked lightly.

“Don’t joke.” But Ripper’s expression loosened and she held Mitch’s hand between hers. “We took collagen from the bones and sent it to Portland. They did a DNA analysis. Our bones are from a different population, not at all related to modern Indians, only loosely related to the Spirit Cave mummy. Caucasoid, if we can use that loose term. But hardly Nordic. More Ainu, I believe.”

“That’s historic, Eileen,” Mitch said. “That’s excellent. Congratulations.”

Once started, Ripper couldn’t seem to stop. They walked down the trail to the tents. “We can’t even begin to make modern racial comparisons. That is what is so infuriating! We let our screwball notions of race and identity cloud the truth. Populations were so different back then. But modern Indians did not come from the people our skeletons belonged to. They may have competed with the ancestors of modern Indians. And they lost.”

“The Indians won?” Merton said. “They should be glad to hear it.”

“They think I’m trying to divide their political unity. They don’t care about what really happened. They want their own little dream world and the hell with truth!”

“You’re telling me?” Mitch asked.

Ripper smiled through tears of discouragement and exhaustion. “The Five Tribes have got counsel petitioning in federal court in Seattle to take the skeletons.”

“Where are the bones now?”

“In Portland. We packed them up in situ and shipped them out yesterday.”

“Across state lines?” Mitch asked. “That’s kidnapping.”

“It’s better than waiting around for a bunch of lawyers.” She shook her head and Mitch put an arm around her shoulders. “I tried to do it right, Mitch.” She wiped at her cheeks with a dusty hand, leaving muddy streaks, and forced a laugh. “Now I’ve even got the Vikings mad at us!”

The Vikings—a small group of mostly middle-aged men calling themselves the Nordic Worshippers of Odin in the New World—had come to Mitch as well, years before, to conduct their ceremonies. They had hoped that Mitch could prove their claims that Nordic explorers had populated much of North America thousands of years ago. Mitch, ever the philosopher, had let them conduct a ritual over the bones of Pasco man, still in the ground, but ultimately he had had to disappoint them. Pasco man was in fact quite thoroughly Indian, closely related to the Southern Na-dene.

After Ripper’s tests on her skeletons, the Worshippers of Odin had once again left in disappointment. In a world of fragile self-justification, the truth made no one happy.

Merton brought out a bottle of champagne and vacuum packs of smoked salmon and fresh bread and cheese as the daylight waned. Several of Ripper’s students built a large fire on the shore that snapped and crackled as Mitch and Eileen toasted their mutual insanity.

“Where’d you get this feed?” Ripper asked Merton as he spread the camp’s battered Melmac plates on the bare pine table beneath the largest canopy.

“At the airport,” Merton said. “Only place I had time to stop. Bread, cheese, fish, wine—what more does one need? Though I could use a good pint of bitter.”

“I’ve got Coors in the trailer,” a burly, balding male intern said.

“Breakfast of diggers,” Mitch said approvingly.

“Spare me,” Merton said. “And pardon me if I tell everyone to *dig in*. Everyone has a story to tell.” He took a plastic cup of champagne from Ripper. “Of race and time and migration and what it means to be a human being. Who wants to be first?”

Mitch knew he had only to keep silent for a couple of seconds and Ripper would start in. Merton took notes as she talked about the three skeletons and local politics. An hour and a half later, it was getting bitterly cold and they moved closer to the fire.

“The Altai tribes resent having ethnic Russians dig up their dead,”

Merton said. "It's an indigenous revolt everywhere. A slap on the wrist to the colonial oppressors. Do you think the Neandertals have their spokespersons in Innsbruck picketing right now?"

"Nobody wants to be a Neandertal," Mitch said dryly. "Except me." He turned to Eileen. "I've been dreaming about them. My little nuclear family."

"Really?" Eileen leaned forward, intrigued.

"I dreamed their people lived on a big raft in a lake."

"Fifteen thousand years ago?" Merton asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mitch caught something in the reporter's tone and looked at him suspiciously. "Is that your guess?" he asked. "Or have they got a date?"

"None they're releasing to the public," Merton said with a sniff. "I have a contact at the university, however . . . and he tells me they've definitely settled on fifteen thousand years. If, that is," and he smiled at Ripper, "they didn't eat a lot of fish."

"What else?"

Merton punched the air dramatically. "Pugilism," he said. "Raging arguments in the back rooms. Your mummies violate everything known in anthropology and archaeology. They're not strictly Neandertal, so claim a few in the main research team; they're a new subspecies, *Homo sapiens alpinensis*, according to one scientist. Another is betting they're late stage gracile Neandertals who lived in a large community, got less stocky and robust, looked more like you and me. They hope to explain away the infant."

Mitch lowered his head. *They don't feel this the way I do. They don't know the way I know.* Then he drew back and blanketed these emotions. He had to keep some level of objectivity.

Merton turned toward Mitch. "Did you see the baby?"

This made Mitch jerk upright in his folding chair. Merton's eyes narrowed. "Not clearly," Mitch said. "I just assumed, when they said it was a modern infant . . ."

"Could Neandertal traits be masked by infant features?" Merton asked.

"No," Mitch said. Then, with a squint, "I don't think so."

"I don't think so, either," Ripper agreed. The students had gathered close around this discussion. The fire snapped and hissed and flung up tall yellow arms that grabbed at the cold, still sky. The river lapped the gravelly shore with a sound like a clockwork dog licking a hand. Mitch felt the champagne mellowing him after a long, tiring day of driving.



“Well, implausible as it might be, it’s easier than arguing against a genetic association,” Merton said. “The people in Innsbruck pretty much have to agree that the female and the infant are related. But there are anomalies, pretty serious ones, that no one can explain. I was hoping Mitchell might be able to enlighten me.”

Mitch was saved from having to feign ignorance when a woman’s strong voice called from the top of the bluff.

“Eileen? You there? It’s Sue Champion.”

“Hell,” Ripper said. “I thought she was back in Kumash by now.” She cupped her hands to her mouth and yelled upward, “We’re down here, Sue. We’re getting drunk. Want to join us?”

One of the male students ran up the trail to the top of the bluff with a flashlight. Sue Champion followed him back down to the tent.

“Nice fire,” she observed. Over six feet tall, slender to the point of thin, with long black hair arranged in a braid draped down the front shoulder of her brown corduroy jacket, Champion looked smart, classy, and a little stiff. She might have had a ready smile, but her face was lined with fatigue. Mitch glanced at Ripper, saw the fix in her expression.

“I’m here to say I’m sorry,” Champion said.

“We’re all sorry,” Ripper said.

“Have you been out here all night? It’s cold.”

“We’re dedicated.”

Champion walked around the canopy to be near the fire. “My office got your call about the tests. The chair of the board of trustees doesn’t believe it.”

“I can’t help that,” Ripper said. “Why did you just pull out all of a sudden and sic your attorney on me? I thought we had an agreement, and if they turned out to be Indian, we’d do basic science, with minimum invasion, then turn them over to the Five Tribes.”

“We let our guard down. We were tired after the mess over Pasco man. It was wrong.” She looked again at Mitch. “I know you.”

“Mitch Rafelson,” he said, and held out his hand.

Champion did not accept it. “You ran us a merry chase, Mitch Rafelson.”

“I feel the same way,” Mitch said.

Champion shrugged. “Our people gave in against their deeper feelings. We felt sandbagged. We need the folks in Olympia and last time we upset them. The trustees sent me here because I’m trained in anthropology. I didn’t do such a good job. Now everybody’s angry.”

“Is there anything more that we can do, out of court?” Ripper asked.

“The chairman told me that knowledge isn’t worth disturbing the dead. You should have seen the pain in the board meeting when I described the tests.”

“I thought we explained the whole procedure,” Ripper said.

“You disturb the dead everywhere. We ask only that you leave our dead alone.”

The women stared at each other sadly.

“They aren’t your dead, Sue,” Ripper said, her eyes drooping. “They aren’t your people.”

“The council thinks NAGPRA still applies.”

Ripper lifted her hand; no use going over old battles. “Then there’s nothing we can do but spend more money on lawyers.”

“No. This time you are going to win,” Champion said. “We have other troubles now. Many of our young mothers are ill with Herod’s.” Champion brushed the edge of the canvas cover with one hand. “Some of us thought it was confined to the big cities, maybe to the whites, but we were wrong.”

Merton’s eyes gleamed like eager little lenses in the flickering firelight.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Sue,” Ripper said. “My sister has Herod’s, too.” She stood and put her hand on Champion’s shoulder. “Stay for a while. We have hot coffee and cocoa.”

“Thank you, no. It’s a long drive back. We will not bother with the dead for a while. We need to take care of the living.” A slight change came over Champion’s features. “Some who are ready to listen, like my father and my grandmother, say that what you have learned is interesting.”

“Bless them, Sue,” Ripper said.

Champion looked down at Mitch. “People come and go, all of us come and go. Anthropologists know that.”

“We do,” Mitch said.

“It will be hard to explain to others,” Champion said. “I will let you know what our people decide to do about the illness, if we know any medicine. Maybe we can help your sister.”

“Thank you,” Ripper said.

Champion looked around the group under the canvas canopy, nodded deeply, then gave several additional shallow nods, showing she had had her say and was prepared to leave. She climbed the trail to the lip of the bluff with the burly intern lighting the way.

“Extraordinary,” Merton said, eyes still gleaming. “Privileged insight. Maybe even native wisdom.”

“Don’t let it get to you,” Ripper said. “Sue’s good people, but she doesn’t know what’s happening any more than my sister does.” Ripper turned to Mitch. “God, you look ill,” she said.

Mitch did feel a little queasy.

“I’ve seen that look on cabinet ministers,” Merton observed quietly. “When they were stuffed full of too many secrets.”

## 37

### Baltimore

**K**aye swung her small bag out of the backseat of the cab and slipped her credit card through the driver’s-side reader. She craned her head to look at Baltimore’s newest tower condo development, Uptown Helix, thirty floors poised on two broad quadrangles of shops and theaters, all in the shadow of the Bromo-Seltzer Tower.

The remains of a dusting of snow from earlier in the morning lingered in slushy patches along the sidewalk. To Kaye, it seemed this winter was lasting forever.

Cross had told her that the condo on the twentieth floor would be fully furnished, that her belongings would be moved in and arranged, there would be food in the refrigerator and pantry, a running tab at several restaurants downstairs: everything she desired and needed, a home just three blocks from Americol’s corporate headquarters.

Kaye presented herself to the doorman in the resident’s lobby. He smiled the way servants smile at rich people and gave her an envelope containing her key. “I don’t own this, you know,” she said.

“Doesn’t matter a bit to me, ma’am,” he replied with the same cheerful deference.

She rode the sleek steel and glass elevator through the atrium of the shopping arcade to the residential floors, tapping her fingers on the hand-rail. She was alone in the elevator. *I am protected, provided for, kept busy going from meeting to meeting, no time to think. I wonder who I am anymore.*

She doubted that any scientist had ever felt so rushed as she felt now. Her conversation with Christopher Dicken at the NIH had pushed her onto

a sidetrack having little to do with the development of SHEVA therapies. A hundred different elements of her research since postgraduate days had suddenly floated to the surface of her mind, shuffled around like swimmers in a water ballet, arranged themselves in enchanting patterns. Those patterns had nothing to do with disease and death, everything to do with the cycles of human life—or every kind of life, for that matter.

She had less than two weeks before Cross's scientists would present their first candidate vaccine, out of twelve—at last count—being developed around the country, at Americol and elsewhere. Kaye had underestimated the speed with which Americol could work—and had overestimated the extent to which they would keep her informed. *I'm still just a figurehead*, she thought.

In that time, she had to make up her mind about what was actually happening—what SHEVA actually represented. What would finally happen to Mrs. Hamilton and the other women at the NIH clinic.

She emerged on the twentieth floor, found her number, 2011, fitted the electronic key into the lock, and opened the heavy door. A rush of clean, cool air, smelling of new carpet and furniture, of something else rosy and sweet, wafted out to greet her. Soft music played: Debussy, she could not remember the name of the piece, but she liked it a lot.

A bouquet of several dozen yellow roses spilled over from a crystal vase on the top of the low *étagère* in the hall.

The condominium was bright and cheerful, with elegant wood accents, beautifully furnished with two couches and a chair in suede and sunset gold fabric. *And Debussy*. She dropped the bag onto a couch and walked into the kitchen. Stainless-steel refrigerator, stove, dishwasher, gray granite countertops edged with rose-colored marble, expensive jewellike track lighting throwing little diamond glows around the room . . .

“Damn it, Marge,” Kaye said under her breath. She carried the bag into the bedroom, unzipped it on the bed, pulled out her skirts and blouses and one dress to be hung in the closet, opened the closet, and stared at the wardrobe. Had she not already met two of Cross's handsome young male companions, she would have been sure, at this point, that Marge Cross had designs on her other than corporate. She quickly flicked through the dresses, suits, silk and linen blouses, looked down at shoe racks supporting at least eight pairs for all occasions—even hiking boots—and that was enough.

Kaye sat on the edge of the bed and let out a deep, quavering sigh. She was in way over her head socially as well as scientifically. She turned to

look at the reproduction Whistler prints over the maple dresser, at the oriental scroll beautifully framed in ebony with brass finials that hung on the wall over the bed.

“Little hothouse posy in the big city.” She felt her face screwing up in anger.

The phone in her purse rang. She jumped, walked into the living room, opened the purse, answered.

“Kaye, this is Judith.”

“You were right,” Kaye said abruptly.

“Beg pardon?”

“You were right.”

“I’m always right, dear. You know that.” Judith paused for effect, and Kaye knew she had something important to say. “You asked about transposon activity in my SHEVA-infected hepatocytes.”

Kaye felt her spine stiffen. This was the stab in the not-so-dark she had made two days after speaking with Dicken. She had pored over the texts and refreshed herself with a dozen articles in six different journals. She had gone through her notebooks, where she had scribbled down mad little moments of extreme speculation.

She and Saul had counted themselves among the biologists who suspected that transposons—mobile lengths of DNA within the genome—were far more than just selfish genes. Kaye had written a solid twelve pages in the notebook on the possibility that these were very important phenotype regulators, not selfish but selfless; they could, under certain circumstances, guide the way proteins became living tissue. *Change* the way proteins created a living plant or animal. Retrotransposons were very similar to retroviruses—and thus the genetic link with SHEVA.

All together, they could be the handmaids of evolution.

“Kaye?”

“Just a moment,” Kaye said. “Let me catch my breath.”

“Well you should, dear, dear former student Kaye Lang. Transposon activity in our SHEVA-infected hepatocytes is mildly enhanced. They shuffle around with no apparent effect. That’s interesting. But we’ve gone beyond the hepatocytes. We’ve been doing tests on embryonic stem cells for the Taskforce.”

Embryonic stem cells could become any sort of tissue, very much like early growth cells in fetuses.

“We’ve sort of encouraged them to behave like fertilized human ova,”

Kushner said. “They can’t grow up to be fetuses, but please don’t tell the FDA. In these stem cells, the transposon activity is extraordinary. After SHEVA, the transposons jump around like bugs on a hot griddle. They’re active on at least twenty chromosomes. If this were random churning, the cell should die. The cell survives. It’s as healthy as ever.”

“It’s regulated activity?”

“It’s triggered by something in SHEVA. My guess is, something in the LPC—the large protein complex. The cell reacts as if it’s being subjected to extraordinary stress.”

“What do you think that means, Judith?”

“SHEVA has designs on us. It wants to change our genome, maybe radically.”

“Why?” Kaye grinned expectantly. She was sure Judith would see the inevitable connection.

“This kind of activity can’t be benign, Kaye.”

Kaye’s smile collapsed. “But the cell survives.”

“Yes,” Kushner said. “But as far as we know, the babies don’t. It’s too much change all at once. For years I’ve been waiting for nature to react to our environmental bullshit, tell us to stop overpopulating and depleting resources, to shut up and stop messing around and just *die*. Species-level apoptosis. I think this could be the final warning—a real species killer.”

“You’re passing this on to Augustine?”

“Not directly, but he’ll see it.”

Kaye looked at the phone for a moment, stunned, then thanked Judith and told her she would call her later. Kaye’s hands tingled.

Not evolution, then. Perhaps Mother Nature had judged humans to be a malignant growth, a cancer.

For a horrible moment, that made more sense than what she and Dicken had talked about. Yet what about the new children, the ones born of the ova released by the intermediate daughters? Were they going to be genetically damaged, born apparently normal, but dying soon after? Or would they simply be rejected during the first trimester, like the interim daughters?

Kaye looked through the wide glass doors over the city of Baltimore, the late morning sun glittering on wet rooftops, asphalt streets. She imagined every pregnancy leading to another equally futile pregnancy, to wombs clogged with endless, horribly distorted first-trimester fetuses.

*Shutting down human reproduction.*

If Judith Kushner was correct, the bell had just tolled for the whole human race.

**38****Americol Headquarters, Baltimore****FEBRUARY 28**

**M**arge Cross stood at stage left of the auditorium as Kaye formed a line with six scientists, prepared to field questions on the announcement.

Four hundred and fifty reporters filled the auditorium to capacity. Americol's public relations director for the eastern U.S., Laura Nilson, young, black, and very intent, tugged at the hem of the jacket of her trim olive wool suit, then took over the questions.

The health and science reporter for CNN was first in the queue. "I'd like to direct my question to Dr. Jackson."

Robert Jackson, head of the Americol SHEVA vaccine project, lifted his hand.

"Dr. Jackson, if this virus has had so many millions of years to evolve, how is it possible that Americol can announce a trial vaccine after less than three months of research? Are you smarter than Mother Nature?"

The room buzzed for a moment with mixed laughter and whispered comment. The excitement was palpable. Most of the young women in the room wore gauze masks, though that precaution had been proven ineffective. Others sucked on special mint and garlic lozenges claimed to prevent SHEVA from gaining a hold. Kaye could smell this peculiar odor even on the stage.

Jackson came to the microphone. At fifty, he looked like a well-preserved rock musician, loosely handsome, with suits only barely pressed and unruly brown hair graying at the temples.

"We began our work years before Herod's flu," Jackson said. "We've always been interested in HERV sequences, because, as you imply, there's a lot of cleverness hidden there." He paused for effect, favoring the audience with a small smile, showing his strength by expressing admiration for the enemy. "But in truth, in the last twenty years, we've learned how most diseases do their dirty work, how the agents are constructed, how they are vulnerable. By creating empty SHEVA particles, increasing the retrovirus

failure rate to one hundred percent, we make a harmless antigen. But the particles are not strictly empty. We load them with a ribozyme, a ribonucleic acid with enzymatic activity. The ribozyme locks on to, and cleaves, several fragments of SHEVA RNA not yet assembled in an infected cell. SHEVA becomes the delivery system for a molecule that blocks its own disease-causing activity.”

“Sir—” the CNN reporter tried to break in.

“I’m not done answering your question,” Jackson said. “It is *such* a good one!” The audience chuckled. “Our problem until now has been that humans do not react in any strong fashion to SHEVA antigen. So our breakthrough came when we learned how to emphasize the immune response by attaching glycoproteins associated with other pathogens for which the body automatically mounts a strong defense.”

The CNN reporter tried to ask another question, but Nilson had already moved on down the long list. Next up was SciTrax’s young on-line correspondent. “Again for Dr. Jackson. Do you know why we are so vulnerable to SHEVA?”

“Not all of us are vulnerable. Men demonstrate a strong immune response to SHEVA they do not themselves produce. This explains the course of Herod’s flu in men—a quick, forty-eight-hour sort of thing, when it happens at all. Women, however, are almost universally open to the infection.”

“Yes, but why are women so vulnerable?”

“We believe that SHEVA’s strategy is incredibly long-term, on the order of thousands of years. It may be the first virus we’ve seen that relies on the growth of populations rather than individuals for its own propagation. To provoke a strong immune response would be counterproductive, so SHEVA emerges only when it seems that populations are either under stress, or because of some other triggering event we don’t yet understand.”

The science correspondent for the *New York Times* was next. “Drs. Pong and Subramanian, you’ve specialized in understanding Herod’s flu in Southeast Asia, which is reporting over a hundred thousand cases so far. There has even been rioting in Indonesia. There were rumors last week that this was a different provirus—”

“Completely wrong,” Subramanian said, smiling politely. “SHEVA is remarkably uniform. May I make a slight correction? ‘Provirus’ refers to the viral DNA inserted into the human genetic material. Once expressed, it is simply a virus or a retrovirus, although in this case, a very interesting one.”



Kaye wondered how Subramanian could focus solely on the science, when her ears caught the singular and frightening word “riots.”

“Yes, but my next question is, why do human males mount a strong immune response to the viruses of other males, but not to their own, if the glycoproteins in the envelope, the antigens, according to your press announcement, are so simple and invariant?”

“A very good question,” Dr. Pong said. “Do we have time for a day-long seminar?”

Mild laughter. Pong continued, “We believe that male response begins after cell invasion, and that at least one gene within SHEVA contains subtle variations or mutations, which cause production of antigens on the surfaces of certain cells prior to a full-bore immune response, thereby acclimating the body to—”

Kaye listened with half her mind. She kept thinking of Mrs. Hamilton and the other women in the NIH clinic. Human reproduction shutting down. There had to be extreme reactions to any failure; the burden on the scientists was going to be enormous.

“Oliver Merton, from the *Economist*. Question for Dr. Lang.” Kaye looked up and saw a young red-haired man in a tweed coat holding the remote microphone. “Now that the genes coding for SHEVA, on their different chromosomes, have all been patented by Mr. Richard Bragg . . .” Merton glanced at his notes. “Of Berkeley, California . . . Patent number 8,564,094, issued by the United States Patent and Trademark Office on February 27, just yesterday, how will any company hoping to create a vaccine proceed without licensing and paying royalties?”

Nilson leaned toward her podium microphone. “There is no such patent, Mr. Merton.”

“There is indeed,” Merton said with an irritated wrinkle of his nose, “and I was hoping Dr. Lang could explain her deceased husband’s involvement with Richard Bragg, and how that figures in her current association with Americol and the CDC?”

Kaye stood in dumfounded silence.

Merton grinned proudly at the confusion.

Kaye entered the green room after Jackson, followed by Pong, Subramanian, and the rest of the scientists. Cross sat in the middle of a large blue couch, her expression grave. Four of her top attorneys stood in a half circle around the couch.

“What in the hell was that all about?” Jackson demanded, swinging his arm out to poke in the general direction of the stage.

“The little rooster out there is right,” Cross said. “Richard Bragg convinced somebody at the PTO that he isolated and sequenced the SHEVA genes before anyone else. He started the patent process last year.”

Kaye took a faxed copy of the patent from Cross. Listed among the inventors was Saul Madsen; EcoBacter was on the list of assignees, along with AKS Industries—the company that had purchased and then liquidated EcoBacter.

“Kaye, tell me now, tell me straight,” Cross said, “did you know anything about this?”

“Nothing,” Kaye said. “I’m at a loss, Marge. I specified locations, but I did *not* sequence the genes. Saul never mentioned Richard Bragg.”

“What does it mean for our work?” Jackson stormed. “Lang, how could you not know?”

“We’re not done with this,” Cross said. “Harold?” She glanced at the nearest gray-haired man in his immaculate pinstripe suit.

“We’ll challenge with *Genetron v. Amgen*, ‘Random patenting of retrogenes in mouse genome,’ Fed. Cir. 1999,” the attorney said. “Give us a day and we’ll have a dozen more reasons to overturn.” He pointed to Kaye and asked her, “Does AKS or any subsidiary use federal funds?”

“EcoBacter applied for a small federal grant,” Kaye said. “It was approved, but never funded.”

“We could get NIH to invoke Bayh-Dole,” the attorney mused happily.

“What if it’s solid?” Cross interrupted, her voice low and dangerous.

“It’s possible we can get Ms. Lang an interest in the patent. Unlawful exclusion of primary inventor.”

Cross thumped the couch cushions with a fist. “Then we’ll think positive,” she said. “Kaye, honey, you look like a stunned ox.”

Kaye held up her hands in defense. “I swear, Marge, I didn’t—”

“Why my own people didn’t weed this out, I’d like to know. I want to talk with Shawbeck and Augustine right away.” She turned to the attorneys. “See where else Bragg has poked his finger. Where there’s scum, there’s bound to be a slipup.”

## Bethesda

## MARCH

It was a very short trip,” Dicken said as he dropped a paper report and a diskette on Augustine’s desk. “The WHO folks in Africa told me they were handling things their way, thank you. They said cooperation on past investigations could not be assumed here. They only have one hundred and fifty confirmed cases in all of Africa, so they say, and they don’t see any reason for panic. At least they were kind enough to give me some tissue samples. I shipped them out of Cape Town.”

“We got them,” Augustine said. “Odd. If we believe their figures, Africa’s being hit much more lightly than Asia or Europe or North America.” He looked troubled—not angry, but sad. Dicken had never seen Augustine look so down before. “Where are we going with this, Christopher?”

“The vaccine, right?” Christopher asked.

“I mean you, me, the Taskforce. We’re going to have over a million infected women by the end of May in North America alone. The national security advisor has called in sociologists to tell them how the public’s going to react. The pressure is increasing every week. I’ve just come from a meeting with the surgeon general and the vice president. Just the veep, Christopher. The president considers the Taskforce a liability. Kaye Lang’s little scandal was *completely* unexpected. The only joy I got out of that was watching Marge Cross chug around this room like a derailed freight train. We’re getting pasted in the press—‘Incompetent Bungling in an Age of Miracles.’ That’s the general tone.”

“Not surprising,” Dicken said, and sat in the chair across from the desk.

“You know Lang better than I do, Christopher. How could she have let this happen?”

“I was under the impression that NIH was getting the patent reversed. Some technicality, inability to exploit a natural resource.”

“Yes—but in the meanwhile, this son of a bitch Bragg is making us look like donkeys. Was Lang so stupid as to sign *every* paper her husband thrust in front of her?”

“She signed?”

“She signed,” Augustine said. “Plain as day. Handing over control of

any discovery based on primordial human endogenous retrovirus to Saul Madsen and any partners.”

“Partners not specified?”

“Not specified.”

“Then she’s not really culpable, is she?” Dicken said.

“I don’t enjoy working with fools. She crossed me quite literally with Americol, and now she’s brought ridicule down on the Taskforce. Any wonder the president won’t meet with me?”

“It’s temporary.” Dicken bit at a fingernail but stopped when Augustine looked up.

“Cross says we go ahead with the trials and let Bragg sue us. I agree. But for the time being, I’m burying our relationship with Lang.”

“She could still be useful.”

“Then let her be anonymously useful.”

“Are you saying I should stay away from her?”

“No,” Augustine said. “Keep everything hunky-dory between you. Make her feel wanted and in the loop. I don’t want *her* going to the press—unless it’s to complain about Cross’s treatment. Now . . . for the next bit of unpleasantness.”

Augustine reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a glossy black-and-white photo. “I hate this, Christopher, but I see why it’s being done.”

“What?” Dicken felt like a little boy about to be scolded.

“Shawbeck asked the FBI to keep tabs on our key people.”

Dicken leaned forward. He had long since developed a civil servant’s instinct for keeping his reactions in check. “Why, Mark?”

“Because there’s talk about declaring a national emergency and invoking martial law. No decision has been made yet . . . it may be months away . . . But under the circumstances, we all need to be pure as the driven snow. We’re angels of healing, Christopher. The public is relying on us. No flaws allowed.”

Augustine handed him the photo. It showed him standing in front of Jessie’s Cougar in Washington, D.C. “It would have been very embarrassing if you had been recognized.”

Dicken’s face flushed with both guilt and anger. “I went there once, months ago,” he said. “I stayed fifteen minutes and left.”

“You went into a back room with a girl,” Augustine said.

“She wore a surgical mask and treated me like a leper!” Dicken said,

showing more heat than he had intended. The instinct was wearing very thin. "I didn't even want to touch her!"

"I hate this shit as much as anybody, Christopher," Augustine said stonily, "but it's just the beginning. We're all of us facing pretty intense public scrutiny."

"So I'm under probation and review, Mark? The FBI is going to ask for my little black book?"

Augustine did not feel the need to answer this.

Dicken stood and threw the photograph down on the desk. "What next? Shall I tell you the name of everyone I'm dating, and what we do together?"

"Yes," Augustine said softly.

Dicken stopped in midtirade and felt his anger fly out of him like a loose burp. The implications were so broad and frightening that he suddenly felt nothing more than cold anxiety.

"The vaccine won't be through clinical trials for at least four months, even on emergency fast track. Shawbeck and the VP are taking a new policy to the White House this evening. We're recommending quarantine. It's a good bet we're going to need to invoke some sort of martial law to enforce it."

Dicken sat down again. "Unbelievable," he said.

"Don't tell me you haven't thought about this," Augustine said. His face was gray with strain.

"I don't have that kind of imagination," Dicken said bitterly.

Augustine swiveled to look out the window. "Springtime soon. Young men's fancy and all that. A really good time to announce segregation of the sexes. All women of childbearing age, all men. OMB will have a ball figuring out how much this will slow down the GNP."

They sat in silence for a long moment.

"Why did you lead with Kaye Lang?" Dicken asked.

"Because I know what to do with her," Augustine said. "This other stuff . . . Don't quote me, Christopher. I see the necessity, but I don't know how in hell we can survive it, politically." He pulled another print from the folder and held it up for Dicken to see. It showed a man and a woman on a porch in front of an old brownstone, illuminated by a single overhead light. They were kissing. Dicken could not see the man's face, but he dressed like Augustine and had the same physique.

"Just so you don't feel bad. She's married to a freshman congressman," Augustine said. "We're finished. Time for all of us to grow up."

• •

Dicken stood outside the Taskforce center in Building 51, feeling a little ill. Martial law. Segregation of the sexes. He hunched his shoulders and walked to the parking lot, avoiding the cracks in the sidewalk.

In his car, he found a message on the cell phone. He dialed in and retrieved it. An unfamiliar voice tried to overcome a real antipathy toward leaving messages, and after a few false starts, suggested they had mutual acquaintances—two or three removed—and possibly some mutual interests.

“My name is Mitch Rafelson. I’m in Seattle now but I hope to fly East soon and meet with some people. If you’re interested . . . in historical incidents of SHEVA, ancient examples, please get in touch with me.”

Dicken closed his eyes and shook his head. Unbelievable. It seemed everyone knew about his crazy hypothesis. He took down the phone number on a small notepad, then stared at it quizzically. The man’s name sounded familiar. He marked it through once with his pen.

He rolled down the window and took a deep breath of air. The day was warming and the clouds over Bethesda were clearing. Winter would be over soon.

Against his better judgment, against any judgment worthy of the name, he punched in Kaye Lang’s number. She was not at home.

“I hope you’re good at dancing with the big girls,” Dicken murmured to himself, and started the car. “Cross is a very big girl indeed.”

## 40

### Baltimore

**T**he attorney’s name was Charles Wothering. He sounded pure Boston, dressed with ruffled flair, wore a rough-knit wool cap and a long purple muffler. Kaye offered him coffee and he accepted.

“Very nice,” he commented, looking around the apartment. “You have taste.”

“Marge set it up for me,” Kaye said.

Wothering smiled. “Marge has no taste in decoration at all. But money does wonderful things, doesn’t it?”

Kaye smiled. “No complaints,” she said. “Why did she send you here? To . . . amend our agreements?”

“Not at all,” Wothering said. “Your father and mother are dead, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Kaye said.

“I’m a middling lawyer, Ms. Lang—may I call you Kaye?”

Kaye nodded.

“Middling at law, but Marge values me as a judge of character. Believe it or not, Marge is not a very good judge of character. Lots of bravado, but a string of bad marriages, which I helped untangle and pack away into the distant past, never to be heard from again. She thinks you need my help.”

“How?” Kaye asked.

Wothering sat on the couch and took three spoons of sugar from the bowl on the serving tray. He stirred them deliberately into his cup. “Did you love Saul Madsen?”

“Yes,” Kaye said.

“And how do you feel now?”

Kaye thought this over, but did not look down from Wothering’s steady gaze. “I realize how much Saul was hiding things from me, just to keep our dream afloat.”

“How much did Saul contribute to your work, intellectually?”

“That depends which work.”

“Your endogenous virus work.”

“Only a little. Not his specialty.”

“What was his specialty?”

“He likened himself to yeast.”

“Beg your pardon?”

“He contributed to the ferment. I brought in the sugar.”

Wothering laughed. “Did he stimulate you, intellectually, I mean?”

“He challenged me.”

“Like a teacher, or a parent, or . . . a partner?”

“Partner,” Kaye said. “I don’t see where we’re going, Mr. Wothering.”

“You attached yourself to Marge because you did not feel yourself adequate to deal with Augustine and his people alone. Am I right?”

Kaye stared at him.

Wothering lifted a bushy eyebrow.

“Not exactly,” Kaye said. Her eyes stung from not blinking. Wothering blinked luxuriously and set down his cup.

“To be brief, Marge sent me here to separate you from Saul Madsen every way I can. I need your permission to conduct a thorough investigation of EcoBacter, AKS, and your contracts with the Taskforce.”

“Is that necessary? I’m sure there aren’t any more skeletons in my closet, Mr. Wothering.”

“We can never be too cautious, Kaye. You understand that things are getting very serious. Embarrassments of any sort can have a real impact on public policy.”

“I know,” Kaye said. “I’ve said I’m sorry.”

Wothering held out his hand and made a soothing face as he patted the air with his fingers. In a different age, he might have patted her knee in a fatherly fashion. “We’ll clean up the mess.” Wothering’s eyes took on a flinty look. “I don’t want to replace your own growing sense of individual responsibility with the automatic personal housekeeping of a good lawyer,” he said. “You’re a grown woman now, Kaye. But what I will do is untangle the strings, and then . . . I’ll cut them. You will owe nothing to anybody.”

Kaye bit her lip. “I’d like to make one thing clear, Mr. Wothering. My husband was sick. He was mentally ill. What Saul did or did not do is no reflection on me—nor on him. He was trying to keep his balance and get on with his life and work.”

“I understand, Ms. Lang.”

“Saul was very helpful to me, in his own way, but I resent any implication that I am not my own woman.”

“No such implication intended.”

“Good,” Kaye said, feeling her way through a subtle minefield of irritation, threatening to flare into anger. “What I need to know now is, does Marge Cross still find me useful?”

Wothering smiled and gave a tilt of his head in a way that expertly expressed acknowledgment of her irritation and the need to continue his task. “Marge never gives more than she takes, as I’m sure you will learn soon. Can you explain this vaccine to me, Kaye?”

“It’s a combination antigen coat carrying a tailored ribozyme. Ribonucleic acid with enzymelike properties. It attaches to part of the SHEVA code and splits it. Breaks its back. The virus can’t replicate.”

Wothering shook his head in amazement. “Technically wonderful,” he said. “For most of us, incomprehensible. Tell me, how do you think Marge will get women all over the world to consider using it?”

“Advertising and promotion, I suppose. She said she’d practically give it away.”

“Who will the patients *trust*, Kaye? You are a brilliant woman whose husband deceived her, kept her in the dark. Women can feel this unfairness



in their very wombs. Believe me, Marge will go to great lengths to keep you on her team. Your story just gets better and better.”

## 41

### Seattle

**M**itch pushed up in bed, in a sweat and shouting. The words leaped out in a guttural tumble even as he realized he was awake. He sat on one side of the bed, leg still tangled in the covers, and shivered. “Nuts,” he said. “I am nuts. Nuts to *this*.”

He had dreamed of the Neandertals again. This time, he had flowed in and out of the male’s point of view, a fluid sort of freedom that had at once immersed him in a very clear and unpleasant set of emotions, and then lofted him away to observe a jumbled flow of events. Crowds had formed at the edge of the village—not on a lake this time, but in a clearing surrounded by deep and ancient woods. They had shaken sharpened, fire-hardened sticks at the female, whose name he could almost remember . . . *Na-lee-ah* or *Ma-lee*.

“Jean Auel, here I come,” he murmured as he extricated his foot from the covers. “Mowgli of the Stone Tribe saves his woman. Jesus.”

He walked into the kitchen to get a glass of water. He was fighting off some virus—a cold, he was sure, and not SHEVA, considering the state of his relationships with women. His mouth tasted dry and foul and his nose was dripping. He had caught the cold somewhere on his trip to Iron Cave the week before. Maybe Merton had given it to him. He had driven the British journalist to the airport for a flight to Maryland.

The water tasted terrible, but it cleaned out his mouth. He looked out over Broadway and the post office, nearly deserted now. A March snowstorm was throwing small crystal flakes down on the streets. The orange sodium vapor streetlights turned the accumulated snow into scattered piles of gold.

“They were kicking us off the lake, out of the village,” he murmured. “We were going to have to fend for ourselves. Some hotheads were getting ready to follow us, maybe try to kill us. We . . .”

He shuddered. The emotions had been so raw and so real he could not easily shake them. Fear, rage, something else . . . a helpless kind of love.

He felt his face. They had been shedding some sort of skin from their faces, little masks. The mark of their crime.

“Dear Shirley MacLaine,” he said, pressing his forehead against the cold glass of the window. “I’m channeling cavemen who don’t live in caves. Any advice?”

He looked at the clock on the VCR perched precariously on top of the small TV. It was five in the morning. It would be eight o’clock in Atlanta. He would try that number again, and then try to log on with his repaired laptop and send an e-mail message.

In the bathroom, he stared at himself in the mirror. Hair awry, face sweaty and oily, two days’ growth of beard, wearing a ripped T-shirt and BVDs. “A regular Jeremiah,” he said.

Then he started another general cleanup by blowing his nose and brushing his teeth.

## 42

### Atlanta

**C**hristopher Dicken had returned to his small house on the outskirts of Atlanta at three in the morning. He had worked at his CDC office until two, preparing papers for Augustine on the spread of SHEVA in Africa. He had lain awake for an hour, wondering what the world was going to be like in the next six months. When he finally drifted off into sleep, he was awakened it seemed moments later by the buzzing of his cell phone. He sat up in the queen-size bed that had once belonged to his parents, wondered for a moment where he was, decided quickly he was not in the Cape Town Hilton, and switched on the light. Morning was already glowing through the window shutters. He managed to pull the phone out of his coat pocket in the closet by the fourth ring and answered it.

“Is this Dr. Chris Dicken?”

“Christopher. Yeah.” He looked at his watch. It was eight fifteen. He had managed to sleep a mere two hours, and he was sure he felt worse than if he had had no sleep at all.

“My name is Mitch Rafelson.”

This time, Dicken remembered the name and its association. “Really?” he said. “Where are you, Mr. Rafelson?”

“Seattle.”

“Then it’s even earlier where you are. I need to get back to sleep.”

“Wait, please,” Mitch said. “I’m sorry if I woke you up. Did you get my message?”

“I got *a* message,” Dicken said.

“We need to talk.”

“Listen, if you *are* Mitch Rafelson, *the* Mitch Rafelson, I need to talk to you . . . about as much as . . .” He tried to come up with a witty comparison, but his mind wouldn’t work. “I don’t need to talk with you.”

“Point made . . . but please listen anyway. You’ve been tracking SHEVA all over the world, right?”

“Yeah,” Dicken said. He yawned. “I get very little sleep thinking about it.”

“Me, too,” Mitch said. “Your bodies in the Caucasus tested positive for SHEVA. My mummies . . . in the Alps . . . the mummies at Innsbruck test positive for SHEVA.”

Dicken pressed the phone closer to his ear. “How do you know that?”

“I have the lab reports from the University of Washington. I need to show what I know to you and to whoever else is open-minded about this.”

“Nobody is open-minded about this,” Dicken said. “Who gave you my number?”

“Dr. Wendell Packer.”

“Do I know Packer?”

“You work with a friend of his. Renée Sondak.”

Dicken scratched at a front tooth with a fingernail. Thought very seriously about hanging up. His cell phone was digitally scrambled, but somebody could decode the conversation if they had a mind to. This made him flash hot with anger. Things were out of control. Everyone had lost perspective and it was not going to get better if he just played along.

“I’m pretty lonely,” Mitch said into the silence. “I need someone to tell me I’m not completely nuts.”

“Yeah,” Dicken said. “I know what that’s like.” Then, screwing up his face and stamping his foot on the floor, knowing this was going to give him far more trouble than any windmill he had ever tilted at before, he said, “Tell me more, Mitch.”

## San Diego, California

MARCH 28

The title of the international conference, arranged in black plastic letters on the convention center billboard, gave Dicken a brief thrill—brief and very necessary. Nothing much had thrilled him in the good old way of work satisfaction in the past couple of months, but the name of the conference was easily sufficient.

## CONTROLLING THE EN-VIRON-MENT:

## NEW TECHNIQUES TOWARD THE CONQUEST OF VIRAL ILLNESS

The sign was not overly optimistic or off base. In a few more years, the world might not need Christopher Dicken to chase down viruses.

The problem they all faced was that in disease time, a few years could be very long indeed.

Dicken walked just outside the shadow of the center's concrete overhang, near the main entrance, reveling in the bright sun on the sidewalk. He had not experienced this kind of heat since Cape Town, and it gave him a furnace boost of energy. Atlanta was finally warming, but the cold gripping the East had kept snow on the streets in Baltimore and Bethesda.

Mark Augustine was in town already, staying at the U.S. Grant, away from the majority of the five thousand predicted attendees, most of whom were filling the hotels along the waterfront. Dicken had picked up his convention package—a thick spiral-bound program book with a companion DVD-ROM disk—just this morning to get an early glimpse at the schedule.

Marge Cross would deliver a keynote address tomorrow morning. Dicken would sit on five panels, two of them dealing with SHEVA. Kaye Lang would be on one panel with Dicken, and on seven others beside, and she would deliver a talk before the plenary session of the World Retrovirus Eradication Research Group, held in conjunction with this conference.

The press was already hailing Americol's ribozyme vaccine as a major breakthrough. It looked good in a petri dish—very good indeed—but the human trials had not yet begun. Augustine was under considerable pressure from Shawbeck, and Shawbeck was under considerable pressure from the administration, and they were all using a very long spoon to sup with Cross.

Dicken could smell eight different kinds of disaster in the winds.

He had not heard from Mitch Rafelson for several days, but suspected the anthropologist was already in town. They had not yet met, but the conspiracy was on. Kaye had agreed to join them for a talk this evening or tomorrow, depending on when Cross's people would let her loose from a round of public relations interviews.

They would have to find a place away from prying eyes. Dicken suspected the best place would be right in the middle of everything, and to that end, he carried a second bag with a blank convention badge—"Guest of CDC"—and program book.

Kaye walked through the crowded suite, eyes darting nervously from face to face. She felt like a spy in a bad movie, trying to hide her true emotions, certainly her opinions—though she, herself, hardly knew what to think now. She had spent much of the afternoon in Marge Cross's suite—rather, her entire floor—upstairs, meeting with men and women representing wholly owned subsidiaries, professors from UCSD, the mayor of San Diego.

Marge had taken her aside and promised even more impressive VIPs near the end of the conference. "Keep bright and shiny," Cross had told her. "Don't let the conference wear you down."

Kaye felt like a doll on display. She did not like the sensation.

She took the elevator to the ground floor at five-thirty and boarded a charter bus to the opener. The event was being held at the San Diego Zoo, hosted by Americol.

As she stepped down from the bus in front of the zoo, she breathed in a scent of jasmine and the soil-rich wetness of evening sprinklers. The line at the entrance booth was busy; she queued up at a side gate and showed the guard her invitation.

Four women dressed in black carried signs and marched solemnly in front of the zoo entrance. Kaye saw them just before she was allowed in; one of their signs read OUR BODIES, OUR DESTINY: SAVE OUR CHILDREN.

Inside, the warm twilight felt magical. She had not had anything like a vacation in over a year, the last time with Saul. Everything since had been work and grief, sometimes both together.

A zoo guide took charge of a group of Americol's guests and gave them a brief tour. Kaye spent a few seconds watching the pink flamingos in their wading pool. She admired four centenarian sulfur-crested cockatoos,

including the zoo's current mascot, Ramesses, who regarded the departing crowds of day visitors with sleepy indifference. The guide then showed them to a side pavilion and court surrounded by palm trees.

A mediocre band played forties' favorites under the pavilion as men and women carried food on paper plates and found tables.

Kaye stopped by a buffet table laden with fruit and vegetables, picked up a generous helping of cheese, cherry tomatoes, cauliflower, and pickled mushrooms, then ordered a glass of white wine from the no-host bar.

As she was taking money from her purse to pay for the wine, she spotted Christopher Dicken out of the corner of her eye. He had in tow a tall, rugged-looking man dressed in a denim jacket and faded gray jeans and carrying a scuffed leather satchel under his arm. Kaye took a deep breath, fumbled her change back into her purse, and turned in time to meet Dicken's stealthy glance. In return, she gave him a surreptitious tilt of her head.

Kaye could not help giggling as Dicken pulled aside a canvas and they strolled casually away from the closed court. The zoo was nearly empty. "I feel so sneaky," she said. She still carried her glass of wine, but had managed to ditch the plate of vegetables. "What in the *world* do we think we're doing?"

There was little conviction in Mitch's smile. She found his eyes disconcerting—at once boyish and sad. Dicken, shorter and plumper, seemed more immediate and accessible, so Kaye focused on him. He carried a gift-shop bag and with a flourish pulled from it a folding map of the world's largest zoo.

"We may be here to save the human race," Dicken said. "Subterfuge is justified."

"Damn," Kaye said. "I'd hoped it was something more sensible. I wonder if anyone's listening?"

Dicken swept his hand toward the low arches of the Spanish-style reptile house as if waving a magic wand. Only a few straggling tourists remained on the zoo grounds. "All clear," he said.

"I'm serious, Christopher," Kaye said.

"If the FBI is bugging men in Hawaiian shirts or Komodo dragons, then we're goners. This is the best I can do."

Loud shrieks from howler monkeys greeted the last of the daylight. Mitch led them on down a concrete path through a tropical rain forest. Footlights illuminated the pathway and misters sprayed the air over their

heads. The charm of the setting held them all for the moment, and no one was willing to break the spell.

To Kaye, Mitch seemed all legs and arms, the kind of man who did not fit indoors. His silence bothered her. He turned, regarded her with his steady green eyes. Kaye noticed his shoes: hiking boots, the thick-treaded soles well-worn.

She smiled awkwardly and Mitch returned her smile.

"I'm out of my league," he said. "If anybody's going to start our conversation, it should be you, Ms. Lang."

"But you're the man with the revelation," Dicken said.

"How much time do we have?" Mitch asked.

"I'm free for the rest of the evening," Kaye said. "Marge wants us in tow by eight tomorrow morning. There's going to be an Americol breakfast."

They descended an escalator into a canyon and paused by a cage occupied by two Scottish wildcats. The domestic-looking brindled felines paced back and forth, grumbling softly in the dusk.

"I'm the odd man out here," Mitch said. "I know very little microbiology, barely enough to get along. I stumbled onto something wonderful, and it almost ruined my life. I'm disreputable, known to be eccentric, a two-time loser in the science game. If you were smart, you wouldn't even be seen with me."

"Remarkably candid," Dicken said. He raised his hand. "Next. I've chased diseases over half the Earth. I have a feel for how they spread, what they do, how they work. From almost the very beginning, I suspected I was tracking something new. Up until just recently, I've tried to lead a double life, tried to believe two contradictory things at once, and I can't do it anymore."

Kaye finished her glass of wine with one gulp. "We sound like we're working through a twelve-step program," she said. "All right. My turn. I'm an insecure female research scientist who wants to be kept out of all the dirty little details, so I cling to anybody who'll give me a place to work and protect me . . . and now it's time to be independent and make my own decisions. Time to grow up."

"Hallelujah," Mitch said.

"Go, sister," Dicken said.

She looked up, ready to be angry, but they were both smiling in just the right way, and for the first time in many months—since the last good time with Saul—she felt she was among friends.

Dicken reached into the shopping bag and produced a bottle of merlot. “Zoo security could bust us,” he said, “but this is the least of our sins. Some of what needs to be said may only be said if we’re properly drunk.”

“I gather you two have shared ideas already,” Mitch said to Kaye as Dicken poured the wine. “I’ve tried to read everything I could just to get ready for this, but I’m still way behind.”

“I don’t know where to begin,” Kaye said. Now that they were more relaxed, the way Mitch Rafelson looked at her—direct, honest, assessing her without being obvious about it—stirred something she had thought almost dead.

“Begin with where you two met,” Mitch said.

“Georgia,” Kaye said.

“The birthplace of wine,” Dicken added.

“We visited a mass grave,” Kaye said. “Though not together. Pregnant women and their husbands.”

“Killing the children,” Mitch said, his eyes suddenly losing their focus. “Why?”

They sat at a plastic table near a closed refreshment stand, deep in the shadows of a canyon. Brown and red roosters pecked through the bushes beside the asphalt road and beige concrete walkways. A big cat coughed and snarled in its cage and the sound echoed eerily.

Mitch pulled a file folder from his small leather satchel and laid the papers neatly on the plastic table. “This is where it all comes together.” He laid his hand on two papers on the right. “These are analyses made at the University of Washington. Wendell Packer gave me permission to show them to you. If somebody blabs, however, we could all be in deep Zoo-doo.”

“Analyses of what?” Kaye asked.

“The genetics of the Innsbruck mummies. Two sets of tissue results from two different labs at the University of Washington. I gave tissue samples of the two adults to Wendell Packer. Innsbruck, as it turned out, sent a set of samples of all three mummies to Maria Konig in the same department. Wendell was able to make comparisons.”

“What did they find?” Kaye asked.

“That the three bodies were really a family. Mother, father, daughter. I knew that already—I saw them all together in the cave in the Alps.”

Kaye frowned in puzzlement. “I remember the story. You went to the cave at the request of two friends . . . Disturbed the site . . . And the woman with you took the infant in her backpack?”



Mitch looked away, jaw muscles tight. "I can tell you what actually happened," he said.

"That's all right," Kaye said, suddenly wary.

"Just to straighten things out," Mitch insisted. "We need to trust each other if we're going to continue."

"Then tell me more," Kaye said.

Mitch went through the whole story in brief. "It was a mess," he concluded.

Dicken watched them both intently, arms folded.

Kaye used the pause to look through the analyses spread on the plastic table top, making sure the papers did not get stained by leftover catsup. She studied the results of carbon 14 dating, the comparisons of genetic markers, and finally, Packer's successful search for SHEVA.

"Packer says SHEVA hasn't changed much in fifteen thousand years," Mitch said. "He finds that astonishing, if they're junk DNA."

"They're hardly junk," Kaye said. "The genes have been conserved for as much as thirty million years. They're constantly refreshed, tested, conserved . . . Locked up in tight-packed chromatin, protected by insulators . . . They have to be."

"If you'll indulge me, I'd like to tell you both what I think," Mitch said, with a touch of boldness and shyness Kaye found both puzzling and appealing.

"Go ahead," she said.

"This was an example of subspeciation," he said. "Not extreme. A nudge to a new variety. A modern-type infant born to late-stage Neandertals."

"More like us," Kaye said.

"Right. There was a reporter named Oliver Merton in Washington state a few weeks ago. He's investigating the mummies. He told me about fights breaking out at the University of Innsbruck—" Mitch looked up and saw Kaye's surprise.

"Oliver Merton?" she asked, frowning. "Working for *Nature*?"

"For the *Economist*, at the time," Mitch said.

Kaye turned to Dicken. "The same one?"

"Yeah," Dicken said. "He does science journalism, some political reporting. Has one or two books published." He explained to Mitch. "Merton started a big ruckus at a press conference in Baltimore. He's dug pretty deeply into Americol's relationship with the CDC and the SHEVA matter."

"Maybe it's two different stories," Mitch said.

“It would have to be, wouldn’t it?” Kaye asked, looking between the two men. “We’re the only ones who have made a connection, aren’t we?”

“I wouldn’t be at all sure,” Dicken said. “Go on, Mitch. Let’s agree that there is a connection before we get fired up about interlopers. What were they arguing about in Innsbruck?”

“Merton says they’ve connected the infant to the adult mummies—which Packer confirms.”

“It’s ironic,” Dicken said. “The UN sent some of the samples from Gordi to Konig’s lab.”

“The anthropologists at Innsbruck are pretty conservative,” Mitch said. “To actually come across the first direct evidence of human speciation . . .” He shook his head in sympathy. “I’d be scared if I were them. The paradigm doesn’t just shift—it snaps in two. No gradualism, no modern Darwinian synthesis.”

“We don’t need to be so radical,” Dicken said. “First of all, there’s been a lot of talk about punctuations in the fossil record—millions of years of steady state, then sudden change.”

“Change over a million or a hundred thousand years, in some cases maybe as little as ten thousand years,” Mitch said. “Not overnight. The implications are damned scary to any scientist. But the markers don’t lie. And the baby’s parents had SHEVA in their tissues.”

“Um,” Kaye said. Again, the howler monkeys let loose with continuous musical whoops, filling the night air.

“The female was injured by something sharp, perhaps a spear point,” Dicken said.

“Right,” Mitch said. “Causing the late-term infant to be born either dead or very near death. The mother died shortly after, and the father . . .” His voice hitched. “Sorry. I don’t find it easy to talk about.”

“You sympathize with them,” Kaye said.

Mitch nodded. “I’ve been having weird dreams about them.”

“ESP?” Kaye asked.

“I doubt it,” Mitch said. “It’s just the way my mind works, putting things together.”

“You think they were pushed out of their tribe?” Dicken asked. “Persecuted?”

“Someone wanted to kill the woman,” Mitch said. “The man stayed with her, tried to save her. They were different. They had something wrong with their faces. Little flaps of skin around their eyes and nose, like masks.”

“They were shedding *skin*? I mean, when they were alive?” Kaye asked, and her shoulders shuddered.

“Around the eyes, the face.”

“The bodies near Gordi,” Kaye said.

“What about them?” Dicken asked.

“Some of them had little leathery masks. I thought it might have been . . . some bizarre product of decay. But I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Dicken said. “Let’s focus on Mitch’s evidence.”

“That’s all I have,” Mitch said. “Physiological changes substantial enough to place the infant in a different subspecies, all at once. In one generation.”

“This sort of thing had to have been going on for over a hundred thousand years before your mummies,” Dicken said. “So populations of Neandertals were living with or around populations of modern humans.”

“I think so,” Mitch said.

“Do you think the birth was an aberration?” Kaye asked.

Mitch regarded her for several seconds before saying “No.”

“It’s reasonable to conclude that you found something representative, not singular?”

“Possibly.”

Kaye lifted her hands in exasperation.

“Look,” Mitch said. “My instincts are conservative. I feel for the guys in Innsbruck, I really do! This is weird, totally unexpected.”

“Do we have a smooth, gradual fossil record leading from Neandertals to Cro-Magnons?” Dicken asked.

“No, but we do have different stages. The fossil record is usually far from smooth.”

“And . . . that’s blamed on the fact that we can’t find all the necessary specimens, right?”

“Right,” Mitch said. “But some paleontologists have been at loggerheads with the gradualists for a long time now.”

“Because they keep finding leaps, not gradual progression,” Kaye said. “Even when the fossil record is better than it is for humans or other large animals.”

They sipped from their glasses reflectively.

“What are *we* going to do?” Mitch asked. “The mummies had SHEVA. We have SHEVA.”

“This is very complicated,” Kaye said. “Who’s going to go first?”

“Let’s all write down what we believe is actually happening.” Mitch reached into his satchel and brought out three legal pads and three ballpoint pens. He spread them out on the table.

“Like schoolkids?” Dicken asked.

“Mitch is right. Let’s do it,” Kaye said.

Dicken pulled a second bottle of wine from the gift shop bag and uncorked it.

Kaye held the cap of her pen between her lips. They had been writing for ten or fifteen minutes, switching pads and asking questions. The air was getting chilly.

“The party will be over soon,” she said.

“Don’t worry,” Mitch said. “We’ll protect you.”

She smiled ruefully. “Two half-drunk men dizzy with theories?”

“Exactly,” Mitch said.

Kaye had been trying to avoid looking at him. What she was feeling was hardly scientific or professional. Writing down her thoughts was not easy. She had never worked this way before, not even with Saul; they had shared notebooks, but had never looked at each other’s notes in progress, as they were being written.

The wine relaxed her, took away some of the tension, but did not clarify her thinking. She was hitting a block. She had written:

Populations as giant networks of units that both compete and cooperate, sometimes at the same time. Every evidence of communication between individuals in populations. Trees communicate with chemicals. Humans use pheromones. Bacteria exchange plasmids and lysogenic phages.

Kaye looked at Dicken, writing steadily, crossing out entire paragraphs. Plump, yes, but obviously strong and motivated, accomplished; attractive features.

She now wrote:

Ecosystems are networks of species cooperating and competing. Pheromones and other chemicals can cross species. Networks can have the same qualities as brains; human brains are networks of neurons. Creative thinking is possible in any sufficiently complicated functional neural network.

“Let’s take a look at what we’ve got,” Mitch suggested. They exchanged notebooks. Kaye read Mitch’s page:

Signaling molecules and viruses carry information between people. The information is gathered by the individual human in life experience; but is this Lamarckian evolution?

“I think this networking stuff confuses the issue,” Mitch said.

Kaye was reading Dicken’s paper. “It’s how all things in nature work,” she said. Dicken had scratched out most of his page. What remained was:

Chase disease all my life; SHEVA causes complex biological changes, unlike any disease ever seen. Why? What does it gain? What is it trying to do? What is the end result? If it pops up once every ten thousand or hundred thousand years, how can we defend that it is, in any sense, a separate organic concern, a purely pathogenic particle?

“Who’s going to buy that all things in nature function like neurons in a brain?” Mitch asked.

“It answers your question,” Kaye said. “Is this Lamarckian evolution, inheritance of traits acquired by an individual? No. It’s the result of complex interactions of a network, with emergent thoughtlike properties.”

Mitch shook his head. “Emergent properties confuse me.”

Kaye glared at him for a moment, both challenged and exasperated. “We don’t have to posit self-awareness, conscious thought, to have an organized network that responds to its environment and issues judgments about what its individual nodes should look like,” Kaye said.

“Still sounds like the ghost in the machine to me,” Mitch said, making a sour face.

“Look, trees send out chemical signals when they’re attacked. The signals attract insects that prey on the bugs that attack them. Call the Orkin man. The concept works at all levels, in the ecosystem, in a species, even in a society. All individual creatures are networks of cells. All species are networks of individuals. All ecosystems are networks of species. All interact and communicate with one another to one degree or another, through competition, predation, cooperation. All these interactions are similar to neurotransmitters crossing synapses in the brain, or ants communicating in a colony. The colony changes its overall behavior based on ant interactions.

So do we, based on how our neurons talk to each other. And so does all of nature, from top to bottom. It's all connected."

But she could see Mitch still wasn't buying it.

"We have to describe a method," Dicken said. He looked at Kaye with a small, knowing smile. "Make it simple. You're the thinker on this one."

"What packs the punch in punctuated equilibrium?" she asked, still irritated at Mitch's density.

"All right. If there's a mind of some sort, where's the memory?" Mitch asked. "Something that stores up the information on the next model of human being, before it's turned loose on the reproductive system."

"Based on what stimulus?" Dicken asked. "Why acquire information at all? What starts it? What mechanism triggers it?"

"We're getting ahead of ourselves," Kaye said, sighing. "First, I don't like the word mechanism."

"All right, then . . . organ, organon, magic architect," Mitch said. "We know what we're talking about here. Some sort of memory storage in the genome. All the messages have to be kept there until they're activated."

"Would it be in the germ-line cells? The sex cells, sperm and egg?" Dicken asked.

"You tell me," Mitch said.

"I don't think so," Kaye said. "Something modifies a single egg in each mother, so it produces an interim daughter, but it's what's in the daughter's ovary that may produce a new phenotype. The other eggs in the mother are out of the loop. Protected, not modified."

"In case the new design, the new phenotype is a bust," Dicken said, nodding agreement. "Okay. A set-aside memory, updated over thousands of years by . . . hypothetical modifications, somehow tailored by . . ." He shook his head. "Now I'm confused."

"Every individual organism is aware of its environment and reacts to it," Kaye said. "The chemicals and other signals exchanged by individuals cause fluctuations in internal chemistry that affect the genome, specifically, movable elements in a genetic memory that stores and updates sets of hypothetical changes." Her hands waved back and forth, as if they could clarify or persuade. "This is so clear to me, guys. Why can't you see it? Here's the complete feedback loop: the environment changes, causing stress on organisms—in this case, on humans. The types of stress alter balances of stress-related chemicals in our bodies. The set-aside memory reacts and movable elements shift based on an evolutionary algorithm established

over millions, even billions of years. A genetic computer decides what might be the best phenotype for the new conditions that cause the stress. We see small changes in individuals as a result, prototypes, and if the stress levels are reduced, if the offspring are healthy and many, the changes are kept. But every now and then, when a problem in the environment is intractable . . . long-term social stress in humans, for example . . . there's a major shift. Endogenous retroviruses express, carry a signal, coordinate the activation of specific elements in the genetic memory storage. Voilà. Punctuation."

Mitch pinched the bridge of his nose. "Lord," he said.

Dicken frowned deeply. "That's too radical for me to swallow all at once."

"We have evidence for every step along the way," Kaye said hoarsely. She took another long swallow of merlot.

"But how does it get passed along? It *has* to be in the sex cells. Something has to be passed along from parent to child for hundreds, thousands of generations before it gets activated."

"Maybe it's zipped, compacted, in shorthand code," Mitch said.

Kaye was startled by this. She looked at Mitch with a little chill of wonder. "That's so crazy it's brilliant. Like overlapping genes, only more devious. Buried in the repeats."

"It doesn't have to carry the whole instruction set for the new phenotype . . ." Dicken said.

"Just the parts that are going to be changed," Kaye said. "Look, we know that between a chimp and humans, there's maybe a two percent difference in the genome."

"And different numbers of chromosomes," Mitch said. "That makes a big difference ultimately."

Dicken frowned and held his head. "God, this is getting deep."

"It's ten o'clock," Mitch said. He pointed to a security guard walking down the middle of the road through the canyon, clearly heading in their direction.

Dicken threw the empty bottles into a trash can and returned to the table. "We can't afford to stop now. Who knows when we'll be able to get together again?"

Mitch studied Kaye's notes. "I see your point about change in the environment causing stress on individual humans. Let's get back to Christopher's question. What triggers the signal, the change? Disease? Predators?"

“In our case, crowding,” Kaye said.

“Complex social conditions. Competition for jobs,” Dicken added.

“Folks,” the guard called out as he drew close. His voice echoed in the canyon. “Are you with the Americol party?”

“How’d you guess?” Dicken asked.

“You’re not supposed to be out here.”

As they walked back, Mitch shook his head dubiously. He wasn’t going to give either of them any breaks: a real hard case. “Change usually occurs at the edge of a population, where resources are scarce and competition is tough. Not in the center, where everything’s cushy.”

“There are no ‘edges,’ no boundaries for humans anymore,” Kaye said. “We cover the planet. But we’re under stress all the time just to keep up with the Joneses.”

“There’s always war,” Dicken said, suddenly thoughtful. “The early Herod’s outbreaks might have occurred just after World War II. Stress of a social cataclysm, society going horribly wrong. Humans must change or else.”

“Says who? Says what?” Mitch asked, slapping his hip with his hand.

“Our species-level biological computer,” Kaye said.

“There we go again—a computer network,” Mitch said dubiously.

“THE MIGHTY WIZARD IN OUR GENES,” Kaye intoned in a deep, fruity announcer’s voice. Then, marking the air with her finger, “The Master of the Genome.”

Mitch grinned and jabbed his finger back at her. “That’s what they’re going to say, and then they’ll laugh us out of town.”

“Out of the whole damned zoo,” Dicken said.

“That’ll cause stress,” Kaye said primly.

“Focus, focus,” Dicken insisted.

“Screw that,” Kaye said. “Let’s go back to the hotel and open the next bottle.” She swung her arms out and pirouetted. *Damn*, she thought. *I’m showing off. Hey, guys, I’m available, look at me.*

“Only as a reward,” Dicken said. “We’ll have to take a cab if the bus is gone. Kaye . . . what’s wrong with the center? What’s wrong with being in the middle of the human population?”

She dropped her arms. “Every year more and more people . . .” She stopped herself and her expression hardened. “The competition is so intense.” Saul’s face. Bad Saul, losing and not accepting it, and good Saul,



enthusiastic as a child, but still painted with that indelible marker that said, *You're going to lose. There are tougher, smarter wolves than you.*

The two men waited for her to finish.

They walked toward the gate. Kaye wiped her eyes quickly and said, in as steady a voice as she could manage, "Used to be one or two or three people would come up with a brilliant, world-shaking idea or invention." Her voice grew stronger; now she felt resentment and even anger, on behalf of Saul. "Darwin and Wallace. Einstein. Now, there's a hundred geniuses for every challenge, a *thousand* people competing to topple the castle walls. If it's that bad in the sciences, up in the stratosphere, what's it like down in the trenches? Endless nasty competition. Too much to learn. Too much bandwidth crowding the channels of communication. We can't listen fast enough. We're left standing on our tiptoes all the time."

"How is that any different from fighting a cave bear or a mammoth?" Mitch asked. "Or from watching your kids die of plague?"

"They result in different sorts of stress, affecting different chemicals, maybe. We've long since given up on growing new claws or fangs. We're social. All our major changes are pointed in the direction of communication and social adaptation."

"Too much change," Mitch said thoughtfully. "Everyone hates it, but we have to compete or we end up out on the streets."

They stood in front of the gate and listened to the crickets. Back in the zoo, a macaw squawked. The sound carried all over Balboa Park.

"Diversity," Kaye murmured. "Too much stress could be a sign of impending catastrophe. The twentieth century has been one long, frenetic, extended catastrophe. Let loose with a major change, something stored up in the genome, before the human race fails."

"Not a disease, but an upgrade," Mitch said.

Kaye looked at him again with the same brief chill. "Precisely," she said. "Everyone travels everywhere in just hours or days. What gets triggered in a neighborhood is suddenly spread all over the world. The Wizard is overwhelmed with signals." She stretched out her arms again, more restrained, but hardly sober. She knew Mitch was looking at her, and Dicken was watching them both.

Dicken peered up the drive beside the broad zoo parking lot, trying to find a cab. He saw one making a U-turn several hundred feet away and thrust out his hand. The cab pulled up at the loading zone.

They climbed in. Dicken took the front seat. As they drove, he turned to

say, “All right, so some stretch of DNA in our genome is patiently building up a model of the next type of human. Where is it getting its ideas, its suggestions? Who’s whispering, ‘Longer legs, bigger brain case, brown eyes are best this year?’ Who’s telling us what’s handsome and what’s ugly?”

Kaye spoke rapidly. “The chromosomes use a biological grammar, built into the DNA, a kind of high-level species blueprint. The Wizard knows what it can say that will make sense for an organism’s phenotype. The Wizard includes a genetic editor, a grammar checker. It stops most non-sense mutations before they ever get included.”

“We’re off into the wild blue yonder here,” Mitch said, “and they’ll shoot us down in the first minute of any dogfight.” He whipped his hands through the air like two airplanes, making the cabby nervous, then dramatically plunged his left hand into his knee, crumpling his fingers. “Scrunch,” he said.

The cabby regarded them curiously. “You folks biologists?” he asked.

“Grad students in the university of life,” Dicken said.

“Got ya,” the cabby said solemnly.

“Now we’ve earned this.” Dicken took the third bottle of wine from the bag and pulled out his Swiss Army knife.

“Hey, not in the cab,” the cabby said sternly. “Not unless I go off duty and you share.”

They laughed. “In the hotel, then,” Dicken said.

“I’ll be drunk,” Kaye said, and shook her hair down around her eyes.

“We’ll have an orgy,” Dicken said, and then flushed bright pink. “An intellectual orgy,” he added sheepishly.

“I’m worn out,” Mitch said. “Kaye’s got laryngitis.”

She gave a small squeak and grinned.

The cab pulled up in front of the Serrano Hotel, just southwest of the convention center, and let them out.

“My treat,” Dicken said. He paid the fare. “Like the wine.”

“All right,” Mitch said. “Thanks.”

“We need some sort of conclusion,” Kaye said. “A prediction.”

Mitch yawned and stretched. “Sorry. Can’t think another thought.”

Kaye watched him through her bangs: the slim hips, the jeans tight around his thighs, the square rugged face with its single line of eyebrow. Not beautifully handsome, but she heard her own chemistry, a low breathy singing in her loins, and it cared little about that. The first sign of the end of winter.

"I'm serious," she said. "Christopher?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Dicken said. "We're saying the interim daughters are not diseased, they're a stage of development we've never seen before."

"And what does that mean?" Kaye asked.

"It means the second-stage babies will be healthy, viable. And different, maybe just a little," Dicken said.

"That would be amazing," Kaye said. "What else?"

"Enough, please. We can't possibly finish it tonight," Mitch said.

"Pity," Kaye said.

Mitch smiled down on her. Kaye offered him her hand and they shook. Mitch's palm was dry as leather and rough with calluses from long years of digging. His nostrils dilated as he was near her, and she could have sworn she saw his irises grow large, as well.

Dicken's face was still pink. He slurred his words slightly. "We don't have a game plan," he said. "If there's going to be a report, we have to get all our evidence together—and I mean all of it."

"Count on it," Mitch said. "You have my number."

"I don't," Kaye said.

"Christopher will give it to you," Mitch said. "I'll be around for a few more days. Let me know when you're available."

"We will," Dicken said.

"We'll call," Kaye said as she and Dicken walked toward the glass doors.

"Interesting fellow," Dicken said on the elevator.

Kaye agreed with a small nod. Dicken was watching her with some concern.

"Seems bright," he continued. "How in the world did he get in so much trouble?"

In her room, Kaye took a hot shower and crawled into bed, exhausted and more than a little drunk. Her body was happy. She twisted the sheets and blanket around her head and rolled on her side, and almost immediately, she was asleep.

## San Diego, California

APRIL 1

**K**aye had just finished washing her face, whistling through the dripping water, when her room phone rang. She dabbed her face dry and answered it.

“Kaye? This is Mitch.”

“I remember you,” she said lightly, she hoped not *too* lightly.

“I’m flying north tomorrow. Hoped you might have some time this morning to get together.”

She had been so busy giving talks and serving on panels at the conference that there had been little time to even think about the evening at the zoo. Each night, she had fallen into bed, completely exhausted. Judith Kushner had been right; Marge Cross was absorbing every second of her life.

“That would be good,” she said cautiously. He was not mentioning Christopher. “Where?”

“I’m at the Holiday Inn. There’s a nice little coffee shop in the Serrano. I could walk over and meet you there.”

“I’ve got an hour before I have to be somewhere,” Kaye said. “Downstairs in ten minutes?”

“I’ll jog,” Mitch said. “See you in the lobby.”

She laid out her clothes for the day—a trim blue linen suit from the ever-tasteful Marge Cross collection—and was considering whether to block a small sinus headache with a couple of Tylenol when she heard muted yelling through the double-pane window. She ignored it for a moment and reached to the bed to flip a page on the convention program. As she carried the program to the table and fumbled for the badge in her purse, she grew tired of her tuneless whistling. She walked around the bed again to pick up the TV remote and pushed the power button.

The small hotel TV made the necessary background noise. Commercials for tampons, hair restorer. Her mind was full of other things; the closing ceremonies, her appearance on the podium with Marge Cross and Mark Augustine.

*Mitch.*

As she looked for a good pair of nylons, she heard the woman say, “. . . first full-term infant. To bring all our listeners up to date, this

morning, an unidentified woman in Mexico City gave birth to the first scientifically recognized second-stage Herod's baby. Reporting live from—"

Kaye flinched at the sound of metal crunching, glass breaking. She pulled back the window's gauze curtain and looked north. West Harbor Drive outside the Serrano and the convention center was covered by a thick shag of people, a packed and streaming mass flowing over curbs and lawns and plazas, absorbing cars, hotel vans, shuttle buses. The sound they made was extraordinary, even through the double panes of glass: a low, grinding roar, like an earthquake. White squares flopped about over the mass, green ribbons flexed and rippled: placards and banners. From this angle, ten floors up, she could not read the messages.

"—Apparently born dead," the TV announcer continued. "We're trying to get an update from—"

Her phone rang again. She pulled the receiver from its cradle and stretched the cord to reach the window. She could not stop watching the living river below her window. She saw cars being rocked, flipped on their backs as the crowd surged, heard more sounds of glass breaking.

"Ms. Lang, this is Stan Thorne, Marge Cross's chief of security. We want you up here on the twentieth, in the penthouse."

The writhing mass below cheered with one animal voice.

"Take the express elevator," Thorne said. "If that's blocked, take the stairs. Just get up here *now*."

"I'll be right there," she said.

She put on her shoes.

"This morning, in Mexico City—"

Even before she boarded the elevator, the bottom seemed to fall out of Kaye's stomach.

Mitch stood across the street from the convention center, shoulders hunched, hands in pockets, trying to look as uninvolved and anonymous as possible.

The crowd sought out scientists, official representatives, anyone involved in the convention, flowing toward them, waving signs, shouting at them.

He had removed the badge Dicken had provided him, and with his faded denims, suntanned face, and windblown, sandy hair, did not at all resemble the hapless pasty-skinned scientists and pharmaceutical representatives.

The demonstrators were mostly women, all colors, all sizes, but nearly all young, between the ages of eighteen and forty. They seemed to have lost all sense of discipline. Anger was quickly taking over.

Mitch was terrified, but for the moment, the crowd was moving south, and he was free. He walked with quick, stiff steps away from Harbor Drive and ran down a parking ramp, jumped a wall, and found himself in a planter strip between high-rise hotels.

Out of breath, more from alarm than exertion—he had always hated crowds—he trudged through the ice plant, climbed another wall, and lowered himself onto the concrete floor of a parking garage. A few women with stunned expressions ran awkwardly to their cars. One of them carried a drooping and battered placard. Mitch read the words as they swept by: OUR DESTINY OUR BODIES.

The aching sound of sirens echoed through the garage. Mitch pushed through a door to the elevator cubicle just as three uniformed security guards came thumping down the stairs. They rounded the corner, guns drawn, and glared at him.

Mitch held up his hands and hoped he looked innocent. They swore and locked the double glass doors. “Get up there!” one shouted at him.

He climbed the stairs with the guards close behind.

From the lobby, looking out upon West Harbor Drive, he saw small riot trucks skirt the crowd, pushing slowly and steadily into the women. The women cried out in chorus, compressed and angry voices like a crashing wave. Water cannons twisted on top of a truck like antennae on a bug’s head.

The lobby’s glass doors opened and closed as guests waggled keys at staff and were allowed in. Mitch walked to the middle of the lobby, standing in an atrium, feeling the air from outside brush past. A sharp tang caught his attention: odors of fear and rage and something else, acrid, like dog piss on a hot sidewalk.

It made his hair stand on end.

The smell of the mob.

Dicken met Kaye on the penthouse floor. A man in a dark blue suit held open the door to the penthouse level and checked their badges. Tiny voices chattered in his earplug.

“They’re already in the lobby downstairs,” Dicken told her. “They’re going nuts out there.”

“Why?” Kaye asked, baffled.

“Mexico City,” Dicken said.

“But why riot?”

“Where’s Kaye Lang?” a man shouted.

“Here!” Kaye held up her hand.

They pushed through a line of confused and chattering men and women. Kaye saw a woman in a swimsuit laughing, shaking her head, clutching a large white terry cloth towel. A man in a hotel bathrobe sat in a chair with his legs drawn up, eyes wild. Behind them, the guard yelled, “Is she the last one?”

“Check,” another answered. Kaye had never known there were so many of Marge’s security people in the hotel—she guessed twenty. Some wore sidearms.

Then she heard Cross’s high-pitched bellow.

“For Christ’s sake, it’s just a bunch of women! Just a bunch of frightened women!”

Dicken took Kaye’s arm. Cross’s personal secretary, Bob Cavanaugh, a slender man of thirty-five or forty with thinning blond hair, grabbed both of them and ushered them through the last cordon into Cross’s bedroom. She was sprawled across a king-size bed, still in her silk pajamas, watching closed circuit television. Cavanaugh draped a fringed cotton wrap over her shoulders. The view on the screen swayed back and forth. Kaye guessed the camera was on the third or fourth floor.

Riot control vehicles sprayed selective shots from water cannons and forced the mass of women farther down the street, away from the convention center entrance. “They’re mowing ’em down!” Cross shouted angrily.

“They trashed the convention floor,” the secretary said.

“We never expected this kind of reaction,” Stan Thorne said, thick arms folded across a substantial belly.

“No,” Cross said, her voice like a low flute. “And why in hell not? I always said it was a gut issue. Well, here’s the gut response! It’s a god-damned disaster!”

“They didn’t even present their demands,” said a slender woman in a green suit.

“What in hell do they hope to accomplish?” someone else said, not visible to Kaye.

“Dropping a big fat message on our doorstep,” Cross grumbled. “Something’s kicked the body politic in the groin. They want fast, fast relief, and screw the *process*.”

“This could be just what we needed,” said a small, thin man whom Kaye recognized: Lewis Jansen, the marketing director for Americol’s pharmaceutical division.

“The hell you say.” Cross cried out, “Kaye Lang, I want you!”

“Here,” Kaye said, stepping forward.

“Good! Frank, Sandra, get Kaye on the tube as soon as they clear the streets. Who’s the talent here?”

An older woman in a bathrobe, carrying an aluminum briefcase, named from memory the local television commentators and affiliates.

“Lewis, have your folks work up some talking points.”

“My folks are at another hotel.”

“Then call them! Tell the people we’re working as fast as we can, don’t want to move too fast on a vaccine or we’ll harm folks—shit, tell them all the stuff we were saying down on the convention floor. When in hell will people ever learn to sit back and listen? Are the phones out of order?”

Kaye wondered whether Mitch had been caught in the riot, if he was okay.

Mark Augustine entered the bedroom. It was getting crowded. The air was thick and hot. Augustine nodded to Dicken, smiled genially at Kaye. He seemed cool and collected, but there was something about his eyes that betrayed this camouflage.

“Good!” Cross roared. “The gang’s all here. Mark, what’s up?”

“Richard Bragg was shot to death in Berkeley two hours ago,” Augustine said. “He was out walking his dog.” Augustine tilted his head to one side and drew his lips together into a wry expression for Kaye’s benefit.

“Bragg?” someone asked.

“The patent asshole,” another answered.

Cross stood up from the bed. “Related to the news about the baby?” she asked Augustine.

“You might think so,” Augustine said. “Somebody at the hospital in Mexico City leaked the news. *La Prensa* reported the baby was severely malformed. It was on every channel by six A.M.”

Kaye turned to Dicken. “Born dead,” he said.

Augustine pointed to the window. “That might explain the mob. This was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration.”

“Let’s get to it, then,” Cross said, subdued. “We have work to do.”

Dicken looked downcast as they walked to the elevator. He spoke in an undertone to Kaye. “Let’s forget the zoo,” he said.

“The discussion?”

“It was premature,” he said. “Now is no time to stick our necks out.”

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Mitch walked along the littered street, boots crunching through shards of glass. Police barricades marked by yellow ribbon closed off the convention center and the front entrances of three hotels. Overturned cars were wrapped in yellow ribbon like presents. Signs and banners littered the asphalt and sidewalks. The air still smelled of tear gas and smoke. Police in skintight dark green pants and khaki shirts and National Guard troops in camouflage stood with folded arms along the street while city officials disembarked from vans and were led off to tour the damage. The police watched the few unofficial bystanders through dark glasses, silently challenging.

Mitch had tried to get back to his hotel room at the Holiday Inn and had been turned away by unhappy clerks working with the police. His luggage—one bag—was still in his room, but he had the satchel with him, and that was all he really cared about. He had left messages for Kaye and Dicken, but there was no fixed place for them to return his calls.

The convention appeared to be finished. Cars were being released from hotel garages by the dozens, and long lines of taxis waited a few blocks south for passengers dragging wheeled suitcases.

Mitch could not pin down how he felt about all this. Anger, jerks of adrenaline, a bitter surge of animal exultation at the damage—typical residues of being so near mob violence. Shame, the single thin coating of social veneer; after hearing about the dead baby, guilt at perhaps being so wrong. In the middle of these flashing emotions, Mitch felt most acutely a wretched sense of displacement. Loneliness.

After this morning and afternoon, what he regretted most was missing his breakfast with Kaye Lang.

She had smelled so good to him in the night air. No perfume, hair freshly washed, richness of skin, breath smelling of wine, but flowery and hardly offensive. Her eyes a little drowsy, her parting warm and tired.

He could picture himself lying next to her on the bed in her hotel room with a clarity more like memory than imagination. *Forward memory.*

He reached into his jacket pocket for his airline tickets, which he always carried with him.

Dicken and Kaye made up a lifeline, an extended purpose in his life. Somehow, he doubted Dicken would encourage that continued connection. Not that he disliked Dicken; the virus hunter seemed straightforward and very sharp. Mitch would like to work with him and get to know him better. However, Mitch could not picture that at all. Call it instinct, more forward memory.

Rivalry.

He sat on a low concrete wall across from the Serrano, gripping his satchel in two broad hands. He tried to summon the patience he had used to stay sane on long and laborious digs with contentious postdocs.

With a start, he saw a woman in a blue suit coming out of the Serrano lobby. The woman stood for a moment in the shade, speaking with two doormen and a police officer. It was Kaye. Mitch walked slowly across the street, around a Toyota with all its windows smashed. Kaye saw him and waved.

They met on the plaza in front of the hotel. Kaye had circles under her eyes.

“It’s been awful,” she said.

“I was out here, I saw it,” Mitch said.

“We’re going into high gear. I’m doing some TV interviews, then we’re flying back East, to Washington. There has to be an investigation.”

“This was all about the first baby?”

Kaye nodded. “We got some details an hour ago. NIH was tracking a woman who got Herod’s flu last year. She aborted an interim daughter, got pregnant a month later. She gave birth a month premature and the baby is dead. Severe defects. Cyclopia, apparently.”

“God,” Mitch said.

“Augustine and Cross . . . well, I can’t talk about that. But it looks as if we’re going to have to rework all the plans, maybe even conduct human tests on an accelerated schedule. Congress is screaming bloody murder, pointing fingers everywhere. It’s a mess, Mitch.”

“I see. What can we do?”

“We?” Kaye shook her head. “What we talked about at the zoo just doesn’t make sense now.”

“Why not?” Mitch asked, swallowing.

“Dickens has done a turnabout,” Kaye said.

“What kind of turnabout?”

“He feels miserable. He thinks we’ve been completely wrong.”

Mitch cocked his head to one side, frowning. “I don’t see that.”

“It’s more politics than science, maybe,” Kaye said.

“Then what about the science? Are we going to let one premature birth, one defective baby—”

“Steamroll us?” Kaye finished for him. “Probably. I don’t know.” She looked up and down the drive.

“Are any other full-term babies due?” Mitch asked.

“Not for several months,” Kaye said. “Most of the parents have been choosing abortion.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s not been talked about much. The agencies involved aren’t releasing names. There’d be a lot of opposition, you can imagine.”

“How do you feel about it?”

Kaye touched her heart, then her stomach. “Like a punch in the gut. I need time to think things over, do some more work. I asked him, but Dicken never gave me your phone number.”

Mitch smiled knowingly.

“What?” Kaye asked, a little irritated.

“Nothing.”

“Here’s my home number in Baltimore,” she said, handing him a card. “Call me in a couple of days.”

She put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed gently, then turned and walked back into the hotel. Over her shoulder, she shouted, “I mean it! Call.”

## 45

### The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda

**K**aye was hustled out of the Baltimore airport in a nondescript brown Pontiac lacking government license plates. She had just spent three hours in TV studios and six hours on the plane and her skin felt as if it had been varnished.

Two Secret Service agents sat in polite silence, one in front and one in back. Kaye sat in the back. Between Kaye and the agent sat Farrah Tighe, her newly assigned aide. Tighe was a few years younger than Kaye, with pulled-back blond hair, a pleasant broad face, brilliant blue eyes, and broad hips that challenged her companions in these tight quarters.

“We have four hours before you meet with Mark Augustine,” Tighe said.

Kaye nodded. Her mind was not in the car.

“You requested a meeting with two of the NIH mothers-in-residence. I’m not sure we can fit that in today.”

“Fit it in,” Kaye said forcefully, and then added, “Please.”

Tighe looked at her solemnly.

“Take me to the clinic before we do anything else.”

“We have two TV interviews—”

“Skip them,” Kaye said. “I want to talk with Mrs. Hamilton.”

Kaye walked through the long corridors from the parking lot to the elevators of Building 10.

On the drive from the airport to the NIH campus, Tighe had briefed her on the events of the past day. Richard Bragg had been shot seven times in the torso and head while leaving his house in Berkeley and had been declared dead at the scene. Two suspects had been arrested, both male, both husbands of women carrying first-stage Herod’s babies. The men had been captured a few blocks away, drunk, their car packed with empty cans of beer.

The Secret Service, on orders from the president, had been assigned to protect key members of the Taskforce.

The mother of the first full-term, second-stage infant born in North America, known as Mrs. C., was still in a hospital in Mexico City. She had emigrated to Mexico from Lithuania in 1996; she had worked for a relief agency in Azerbaijan between 1990 and 1993. She was currently being treated for shock and what the first medical reports described as an acute case of seborrhea on her face.

The dead infant was being shipped from Mexico City to Atlanta and would arrive tomorrow morning.

Luella Hamilton had just finished a light lunch and was sitting in a chair by the window, looking out over a small garden and the windowless corner of another building. She shared a room with another mother who was down the hall in an examination room. There were now eight mothers in the Taskforce study.

“I lost my baby,” Mrs. Hamilton told Kaye as she walked in. Kaye stepped around the bed and hugged her. She returned Kaye’s embrace with strong hands and arms and a little moan.

Tighe stood with arms folded near the door.

“She just slipped out one night.” Mrs. Hamilton held her eyes steady on Kaye’s. “I hardly felt her. My legs were wet. Just a little blood. They had a monitor on my stomach and the little alarm started to beep. I woke up and the nurses were there and they put up a tent. They didn’t show her to me. A minister came in, Reverend Ackerley, from my church, she was right there for me, wasn’t that nice?”

“I’m so sorry,” Kaye said.

“The reverend told me about that other woman, in Mexico, with her second baby . . .”

Kaye shook her head in sympathy.

“I am so scared, Kaye.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here. I was in San Diego and I didn’t know you had rejected.”

“Well, it’s not like you’re my doctor, is it?”

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot. And the others.” Kaye smiled. “But mostly you.”

“Yeah, well, I’m a strong black woman, and we make an impression.” Mrs. Hamilton did not smile as she said this. Her expression was drawn, her skin verging on olive. “I talked to my husband on the telephone. He’s coming by today and we’ll see each other, but we’ll be separated by glass. They told me they’d let me go after the baby was born. But now they say they want to keep me here. They tell me I’m going to be pregnant again. They know it’s coming. My own little baby Jesus. How can the world get along with millions of little baby Jesuses?” She started to cry. “I haven’t been with my husband or anyone else! I swear!”

Kaye held her hand tightly. “This is so difficult,” she said.

“I want to help, but my family, they’re having a hard time. My husband is half crazy, Kaye. They could run this damned railroad so much better.” She stared out the window, held on to Kaye’s hand tightly, then waved it gently back and forth, as if listening to some inner music. “You’ve had some time to think. Tell me what’s happening?”

Kaye fixed her eyes on Mrs. Hamilton and tried to think of something to say. “We’re still trying to figure that out,” she finally managed. “It’s a challenge.”

“From God?” Mrs. Hamilton asked.

“From inside,” Kaye said.

“If it’s from God, all the little Jesuses are going to die except one, then,” Mrs. Hamilton said. “That’s not good odds for me.”

“I hate myself,” Kaye said as Tighe escorted her to Dr. Lipton’s office.

“Why?” Tighe said.

“I wasn’t here.”

“You can’t be everywhere.”

Lipton was in a meeting, but interrupted it long enough to talk with Kaye. They went to a side office filled with filing cabinets and a computer.

“We did scans last night and checked out her hormone levels. She was almost hysterical. The miscarriage didn’t hurt much if at all. I think she wanted it to hurt more. She had a classic Herod’s fetus.”

Lipton held up a series of photographs. “If this is a disease, it’s a damned organized disease,” she said. “The pseudo-placenta is not very different from a normal placenta, except that it’s much reduced. The amnion is something else, however.” Lipton pointed to a process curled on one side of the shrunken shriveled amnion, which had been expelled with the placenta. “I don’t know what you’d call it, unless it’s a little fallopian tube.”

“And the other women in the study?”

“Two should reject within a few days, the rest over the next two weeks. I’ve brought in ministers, a rabbi, psychiatrists, even their friends—as long as they’re female. The mothers are deeply unhappy. No surprises there. But they’ve agreed to stay with the program.”

“No male contact?”

“Not from any male past puberty,” Lipton said. “By order of Mark Augustine, co-signed by Frank Shawbeck. Some of the families are sick of this treatment. I don’t blame them.”

“Any rich women staying here?” Kaye asked, deadpan.

“No,” Lipton said. She chuckled humorlessly. “Need you even ask?”

“Are you married, Dr. Lipton?” Kaye said.

“Divorced six months ago. And you?”

“A widow,” Kaye said.

“We’re the lucky ones, then,” Lipton said.

Tighe tapped her watch. Lipton glanced between them. “Sorry to be keeping you,” the doctor said sharply. “My people are waiting, too.”

Kaye held up the photographs of the pseudo-placenta and amniotic sac. “What do you mean when you say this is a terribly *organized* disease?”

Lipton leaned on the top of a filing cabinet. “I’ve dealt with tumors and lesions and buboes and warts and all the other little horrors diseases can build in our bodies. There’s organization, to be sure. Rearranging the blood flow, subverting cells. Sucking greed. But this amniotic sac is a highly specialized organ, different from any I’ve ever studied.”

“It’s not a product of disease, in your opinion?”

“I didn’t say that. The results are distortion, pain, suffering, and miscarriage. The infant in Mexico . . .” Lipton shook her head. “I won’t waste my time by characterizing this as anything else. It’s a new disease, a hideously inventive one, that’s all.”

## Atlanta

**D**icken climbed the gentle slope from the parking garage on Clifton Way, glancing up with a squint at clear skies with low fat-bellied puffs of cloud. He hoped the fresh cool air would clear his head.

Dicken had returned to Atlanta the night before and bought a bottle of Jack Daniels and holed up in his house, drinking until four in the morning. Walking from the living room to the bathroom, he had stumbled over a pile of textbooks, slammed his shoulder against a wall, and fallen to the floor. His shoulder and leg were bruised and sore, and his back felt as if he had been kicked, but he could walk and he was pretty sure he did not have to go to the hospital.

Still, his arm hung half-bent, and his face was ashen. His head hurt from the whiskey. His stomach hurt from not eating breakfast. And in his soul he felt like shit, confused and angry at just about everything, but mainly angry at himself.

The memory of the intellectual jam session at the San Diego Zoo felt like a burning brand. The presence of Mitch Rafelson, a loose cannon, saying little substantive but still seeming to guide the conversation, at once challenging their sophomoric theories and spurring them on; Kaye Lang, lovelier than he had ever seen her before, almost radiant, with her patented look of puzzled concentration *and no goddamned interest in Dicken beyond the professional*.

Rafelson clearly outclassed him. Once again, after having spent his entire adult life braving the worst that Earth could throw at a human male, he was coming up short in the eyes of a woman he thought he might care for.

And what the hell did it matter? What did his masculine ego, his sex life, matter in the face of Herod's?

Dicken came around the corner onto Clifton Road and stopped, confused for a moment. The attendant at the garage booth had mentioned something about picketing, but had given no hint of the scale.

Demonstrators filled the street from the small plaza and tree planter fronting the redbrick entrance of Building 1 to the American Cancer Society headquarters and the Emory Hotel across Clifton Road. Some were standing in the beds of purple azaleas; they had left a path open to the main

entrance but blocked the visitor center and the cafeteria. Dozens sat around the pillar that held the bust of Hygieia, their eyes closed, swaying gently from side to side as if in silent prayer.

Dicken estimated there were two thousand men, women, and children, in vigil, waiting for something; salvation or word at least that the world was not about to end. Many of the women and more than a few of the men still wore masks, colored orange or purple, guaranteed by half a dozen fly-by-night manufacturers to kill all viruses, including SHEVA.

The organizers of the vigil—it was not called a protest—walked among their people with water coolers and paper cups, leaflets, advice, and instructions, but those holding the vigil never spoke.

Dicken walked to the entrance of Building 1, through the crowd, attracted to them despite his sense of the danger in the situation. He wanted to see what the troops were thinking and feeling—the people on the front line.

Cameramen moved around and through the crowds slowly, or more deliberately along the pathways, cameras held at waist level to capture the immediacy, then being lifted to shoulders for the panorama, the scale.

“Jesus, what happened?” Jane Salter asked as Dicken passed her in the long hall to his office. She carried a briefcase and an armload of files in green folders.

“Just an accident,” Dicken said. “I fell. Did you see what’s going on outside?”

“I saw,” Salter said. “Creeps me out.” She followed him and stood in the open door. Dicken glanced over his shoulder at her, then pulled out the old rolling chair and sat down, his face like a disappointed little boy’s.

“Down about Mrs. C.?” Salter asked. She pushed back a wisp of brown hair with the corner of a folder. The wisp fell back and she ignored it.

“I suppose,” Dicken said.

Salter bent to set down the briefcase, then stepped forward and laid the files on his desk. “Tom Scarry has the baby,” she said. “It was autopsied in Mexico City. I guess they did a thorough job. He’ll do it all over again, just to be sure.”

“Have you seen it?” Dicken asked.

“Just a video feed when they took it from the ice chest in Building 15.”

“Monster?”

“Major,” Salter said. “A real mess.”

“For whom the bell tolls,” Dicken said.



"I've never figured out your position on this, Christopher," Salter said, leaning against the door jamb. "You seem surprised that this is a really nasty disease. We knew that going in, didn't we?"

Dicken shook his head. "I've chased diseases so long . . . this one seemed different."

"What, more sympathetic?"

"Jane, I got drunk last night. I fell in my house and cracked my shoulder. I feel like hell."

"A bender? That sounds more appropriate to a bad love life, not a misdiagnosis."

Dicken made a sour face. "Where are you going with all that?" he asked, and shoved his left forefinger at the files.

"I'm moving some stuff over to the new receiving lab. They've got four more tables. We're putting together personnel and procedures for a round-the-clock autopsy mission, L3 conditions. Dr. Sharp is in charge. I'm helping the group doing neural and epithelial analysis. I'll keep their records straight."

"Keep me in the loop? If you find something?"

"I don't even know why you're here, Christopher. You flew way above us when you went with Augustine."

"I miss the front lines. News always gets here first." He sighed. "I'm still a virus hunter, Jane. I came back to look over some old papers. See if I forgot something crucial."

Jane smiled. "Well, I did hear this morning that Mrs. C. had genital herpes. Somehow it got to little Baby C early in its development. It was covered with lesions."

Dicken looked up in surprise. "Herpes? They didn't tell us that before."

"I told you it was a mess," Jane said.

Herpes could change the whole interpretation of what happened. How did the infant contract the genital herpes while still protected in the womb? Herpes was usually passed from mother to infant in the birth canal.

Dicken was severely distracted.

Dr. Denby passed by the office, smiled briefly, then doubled back and peered through the open door. Denby was a bacterial growth specialist, small and very bald, with a cherub's face and a natty plum shirt and red tie. "Jane? Did you know they've blocked the cafeteria from outside? Hello, Christopher."

"I heard. It's impressive," Jane said.

"Now they're up to something else. Want to go look?"

“Not if it’s violent,” Salter said with a shudder.

“That’s what’s spooky. It’s peaceful and absolutely silent! Like a drill team without the band.”

Dicken walked with them and took the elevator and stairs to the front of the building. They followed other employees and doctors to the lobby beside the public display of CDC history. Outside, the crowd was milling in an orderly fashion. Leaders were using megaphones to shout orders.

A security guard stood with his hands on his hips, glaring at the crowd through the glass. “Will you look at that,” he said.

“What?” Jane asked.

“They’re breaking up, boy-girl. Segregating,” he said with a mystified look.

Banners stretched in plain view of the lobby and the dozens of cameras arrayed outside. A breeze rippled one banner. Dicken caught what it said in two sinuous flaps: VOLUNTEER. SEPARATE. SAVE A CHILD.

Within a few minutes, the crowd had parted before their leaders like the Red Sea before Moses, women and children on one side, men on the other. The women looked grimly determined. The men looked somber and shamefaced.

“Christ,” the guard muttered. “They’re telling me to leave my wife?”

Dicken felt as if he were being whipsawed. He returned to his office and called Bethesda. Augustine had not arrived yet. Kaye Lang was visiting the Magnuson Clinical Center.

Augustine’s secretary added that protesters were also on the NIH campus, several thousand of them. “Look on the TV,” she said. “They’re marching all over the country.”

## 47

### The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda

**A**ugustine drove around the campus on the Old Georgetown Road to Lincoln Street and made his way to a temporary employee parking lot near the Taskforce Center. The Taskforce had been assigned a new building at the surgeon general’s request just two weeks before. The protesters apparently did not know of this change, and were marching on the old headquarters, and on Building 10.

Augustine walked quickly in the warming sun to the ground floor entrance. NIH campus police and newly-hired private security guards stood outside the building, talking in low voices. They were eyeing knots of protesters a few hundred yards away.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Augustine,” the building’s chief of security told him as he carded himself in through the main entrance. “We’ve got the National Guard coming in this afternoon.”

“Oh, goodie.” Augustine drew in his chin and punched the elevator button. In the new office, three assistants and his personal secretary, Mrs. Florence Leighton, matronly and very efficient, were trying to reestablish a network link with the rest of the campus.

“What’s wrong, sabotage?” Augustine asked, a little savagely.

“No,” Mrs. Leighton said, handing him a sheaf of printouts. “Stupidity. The server decided not to recognize us.”

Augustine slammed the door to his office, pulled out his rolling chair, slapped the brief on the desktop. The phone cheeped. He reached over to punch the button.

“Five minutes uninterrupted, please, Florence, to put my thoughts in order?” he pleaded.

“It’s Kennealy for the vice president, Mark,” Mrs. Leighton said.

“Double goodie. Put him on.”

Tom Kennealy, the vice president’s chief of technical communications—another new position, established the week before—was first on the line, and asked Augustine if he had been told about the scale of the protests.

“I’m seeing it through my window now,” he replied.

“They’re at four hundred and seventy hospitals at last count,” Kennealy said.

“God bless the Internet,” Augustine said.

“Four demonstrations have gotten out of hand—not including the riot in San Diego. The vice president is very concerned, Mark.”

“Tell him I’m more than concerned. It’s the worst news I could imagine—a dead full-term Herod’s baby.”

“What about the herpes angle?”

“Screw that. Herpes doesn’t infect an infant until it’s born. They must not have taken any precautions in Mexico City.”

“That’s not what we’re hearing. Maybe we can offer some reassurance on this? If it is a diseased infant?”

“Quite clearly it is *diseased*, Tom. It’s Herod’s we should be focusing on here.”

“All right. I’ve briefed the vice president. He’s here now, Mark.”

The vice president came on the line. Augustine composed his voice and greeted him calmly. The vice president told him that the NIH was being afforded military security, high-security protected status, as were the CDC and five Taskforce research centers around the country. Augustine could visualize the result now—razor wire, police dogs, concussion grenades, and tear gas. A fine atmosphere in which to conduct delicate research.

“Mr. Vice President, don’t push them off campus,” Augustine said. “Please. Let them stay and let them protest.”

“The president gave the order an hour ago. Why change it?”

“Because it looks like they’re venting steam. It’s not like San Diego. I want to meet with the leaders here on campus.”

“Mark, you aren’t a trained negotiator,” the VP argued.

“No, but I’d be a hell of a lot better than a phalanx of troops in camouflage.”

“That’s the jurisdiction of the director of NIH.”

“Who *is* negotiating, sir?”

“The director and chief of staff are meeting with the protest leaders. We shouldn’t divide our effort or our voice, Mark, so don’t even consider going out there to talk.”

“What if we have another dead baby, sir? This one came at us out of nowhere—we only knew it was on its way six days ago. We tried to send a team down to help, but the hospital refused.”

“They’ve sent you the body. That seems to show a spirit of cooperation. From what Tom tells me, nobody could have saved it.”

“No, but we could have known ahead of time and coordinated our media release.”

“No division on this, Mark.”

“Sir, with all due respect, the international bureaucracy is killing us. That’s why these protests are so dangerous. We’ll be blamed whether we’re culpable or not—and frankly, I feel pretty sick to my stomach right now. I can’t be responsible where I don’t have input!”

“We’re soliciting your input now, Mark.” The VP’s voice was measured.

“Sorry. I know that, sir. Our involvement with Americol is causing all sorts of problems. Announcing the vaccine . . . prematurely, in my opinion—”

“Tom shares that opinion, and so do I.”

*What about the president?* he thought. “I appreciate that, but the cat is out

of the bag. My people tell me there's a fifty-fifty chance the preclinical trials will fail. The ribozyme is depressingly versatile. It seems to have an affinity for thirteen or fourteen different messenger RNAs. So we stop SHEVA, but we end up with myelin degradation . . . multiple sclerosis, for God's sake!"

"Ms. Cross reports that they've refined it and it's more specific now. She personally assured me there was never any chance of MS. That was just a rumor."

"Which version is FDA going to let them test, sir? The paperwork has to be refiled—"

"FDA is bending on this one."

"I'd like to set up a separate evaluation team. NIH has the people, we have the facilities."

"There's no time, Mark."

Augustine closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. He could feel his face turning beet red. "I hope we draw a good hand," he said quietly. His heart was hammering.

"The president is announcing speedier trials tonight," the vice president said. "If the preclinical trials are successful, we'll go to human trials within a month."

"I wouldn't approve that."

"Robert Jackson says they can do it. The decision's been made. It's done."

"Has the president talked to Frank about this? Or the surgeon general?"

"They're in constant touch."

"Please have the president call me, too, sir." Augustine hated to be put in the position of having to ask, but a smarter president would not have needed the reminder.

"I will, Mark. As for your response . . . follow what the NIH brass says, no division, no separation, understood?"

"I'm not a rogue, Mr. Vice President," Augustine said.

"Talk with you soon, Mark," the VP said.

Kenealy came back on the line. He sounded miffed. "Troops are being trucked in now, Mark. Hold on a second." His hand cupped over the receiver. "The VP is out of the room. Jesus, Mark, what did you do, chew him out?"

"I asked him to have the president call me," Augustine said.

"That's a hell of a note," Kenealy said coldly.

"Will someone please tell me if we learn about another baby, out of

the country?” Augustine said. “Or in? Could the State Department please coordinate with my office on a daily basis? I hope I am not treading water here, Tom!”

“Please don’t ever talk to the VP like that again, Mark,” Kennealy said, and hung up.

Augustine pressed the call button. “Florence, I need to write a cover letter and a memo. Is Dicken in town? Where’s Lang?”

“Dr. Dicken is in Atlanta and Kaye Lang is on campus. At the clinic, I believe. You’re supposed to meet with her in ten minutes.”

Augustine opened his desk drawer and took out a legal pad. On it he had sketched the thirty-one levels of command above him, thirty between him and the president—a bit of an obsession with him. He sharply slashed off five, then six, then worked his way up to ten names and offices, tearing the paper. If worst came to worst, he thought that with a little careful planning he could possibly eliminate ten of those levels, maybe twenty.

But first he had to stick out his neck and send them his report and a coverage memo, and make sure it was on everybody’s desk before the shit was airborne.

Not that he would be sticking his neck out very far. Before some White House lackey—maybe Kennealy, greasing for a promotion—whispered in the president’s ear that Augustine was not a team player, he strongly suspected there would be another incident.

A very bad incident.

## 48

### The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda

**B**urying herself in work was the only thing Kaye could think of to do right now. Confusion blocked any other option. As she left the clinic, walking briskly past the outdoor tables full of Vietnamese and Korean vendors selling toiletries and knickknacks, she looked at the task list in her daybook and ticked off the meetings and calls—Augustine first, then ten minutes in Building 15 with Robert Jackson to ask about the ribozyme binding sites, a cross-check with two NIH researchers in Buildings 5 and 6 helping her in her search for additional SHEVA-like HERV; then to half a dozen other researchers in her backup list to solicit their opinions—

She was halfway between the clinic and the Taskforce center when her cell phone rang. She pulled it out of her purse.

“Kaye, this is Christopher.”

“I don’t have any time and I feel like shit, Christopher,” she snapped. “Tell me something that will make me feel good.”

“If it’s any consolation, I feel like shit, too. I got drunk last night and there are demonstrators out front.”

“They’re here, too.”

“But listen to this, Kaye. We have Infant C in pathology now. It was born at least a month premature.”

“*It? It* had a sex, didn’t it?”

“He. He’s riddled inside and out with herpes lesions. He had no protection against herpes in the womb—SHEVA induces some sort of opportunistic opening through the placental barrier for herpes virus.”

“So they’re in league—all out to cause death and destruction. That’s cheerful.”

“No,” Dicken said. “I don’t want to talk about it on the phone. I’m coming up to NIH tomorrow.”

“Give me something to go on, Christopher. I don’t want another night like the last two.”

“Infant C might not have died if his mother hadn’t contracted herpes. They may be separate issues, Kaye.”

Kaye closed her eyes, stood still on the sidewalk. She looked around for Farrah Tighe; in her distraction, she had apparently walked out without her, against instructions. No doubt Tighe was frantically searching for her right now. “Even if they are, who will listen to us now?”

“None of the eight women at the clinic have any herpes or HIV. I called Lipton and checked. They’re excellent test cases.”

“They aren’t due for ten months,” Kaye said. “If they follow the one-month rule.”

“I know. But I’m sure we’ll find others. We need to talk again—seriously.”

“I’ll be in meetings all day, then at the Americol labs in Baltimore tomorrow.”

“This evening, then. Or doesn’t the truth mean much now?”

“Don’t lecture me about truth, damn it,” Kaye said. She could see National Guard trucks moving in along Center Drive. So far, the protesters had kept to the northern end; she could see their signs and banners from

where she stood beside a low grassy hill. She missed Dicken's next few words. She was fascinated by the distant crowds on the move.

"—I want to give your idea a fair chance," Dicken said. "The LPC carries no possible benefit for a simple virus—why use it?"

"Because SHEVA's a messenger," Kaye said, her voice soft, between dreamy and distracted. "It's Darwin's radio."

"What?"

"You've seen the afterbirth from the Herod's first-stage fetuses, Christopher. Specialized amniotic sacs . . . Very sophisticated. Not diseased."

"Like I said, I want to work on this more. Convince me, Kaye. God, if this Infant C is just a fluke!"

Three blunt little popping sounds came from the north end of the campus, small, toylike. She heard the crowd let out a startled moan, then a distant, high scream.

"I can't talk, Christopher." She shut the phone with a plastic clack and ran. The crowd was about a quarter of a mile away, breaking up, people pushing back and scattering along the roads, the parking lots, the brick buildings. No more pops. She slowed to a walk for several steps, considering the danger, then ran again. She had to know. Too much uncertainty in her life. Too much hanging back and inaction, with Saul, with everything and everybody.

Fifty feet from her she saw a stocky man in a brown suit dash out of a building's rear service door, arms and legs going like windmills. His coat flapped up over a bulging white shirt and he looked ridiculous, but he was quick as a bat out of hell and heading right for her.

For a moment she was alarmed and veered to avoid him.

"Damn it, Dr. Lang," he shouted. "Hold on there! Stop!"

She slowed to a grudging walk, out of breath. The man in the brown suit caught up with her and flashed a badge. He was from the Secret Service and his name was Benson and that was all she managed to catch before he closed the case and pocketed it again. "What in hell are you doing? Where's Tighe?" he asked her, his face beefy red, sweat pouring down his pockmarked cheeks.

"They need help," she said. "She's back at the—"

"That's gunfire. You will stay right here if I have to hold you down personally. Goddamn it, Tighe was not supposed to let you out alone!"

At that moment, Tighe came running to catch up with them. She was red-faced with anger. She and Benson exchanged quick, harsh whispers, then Tighe positioned herself beside Kaye. Benson broke into a speedy trot



toward the broken clumps of protesters. Kaye continued walking, but slower.

“Stop right here, Ms. Lang,” Tighe said.

“Somebody’s been shot!”

“Benson will take care of it!” Tighe insisted, standing between her and the crowd.

Kaye peered over Tighe’s shoulders. Men and women clutched their hands to their faces, crying. She saw dropped banners, drooping signs. The crowd swirled in complete confusion.

National Guard soldiers in camouflage, automatic rifles held at ready, took positions between brick buildings along the closest road.

A campus police car drove over the lawn and between two tall oak trees. She saw other men in suits, some talking on cell phones, walkie-talkies.

Then she noticed the lone man in the middle, arms held straight out as if he wanted to fly. Beside him, a motionless woman sprawled on the grass. Benson and a campus security officer reached them simultaneously. Benson kicked a dark object across the grass: a pistol. The security officer pulled out his own pistol and aggressively pushed back the flying man.

Benson knelt beside the woman, checked the pulse at her neck, looked up, around, his face saying it all. Then he glared at Kaye, mouthed emphatically, *Get back.*

“It wasn’t my baby,” the flying man shouted. Skinny, white, short fuzzy blond hair, in his late twenties, he wore a black T-shirt and black jeans slung low on his hips. He tossed his head back and forth as if surrounded by flies. “She made me come here. She goddamn *made me*. It wasn’t my baby!”

The flying man danced back from the guard, jerking like a marionette. “I can’t take this shit anymore. *NO MORE SHIT!*”

Kaye stared at the injured woman. Even from twenty yards she could see the blood staining her blouse around her stomach, sightless eyes staring up with a blank kind of hope at the sky.

Kaye ignored Tighe, Benson, the flying man, the troops, the security guards, the crowd.

All she could see was the woman.

**Baltimore**

**C**ross entered the Americol executive dining room on a pair of crutches. Her young male nurse pulled out a chair, and Cross sat with a relieved puff of breath.

The room was empty but for Cross, Kaye, Laura Nilson, and Robert Jackson.

“How’d it happen, Marge?” Jackson asked.

“Nobody shot me,” she piped cheerfully. “I fell in the bathtub. I have always been my own worst enemy. I am a clumsy ox. What do we have, Laura?”

Nilson, whom Kaye had not seen since the disastrous vaccine press conference, wore a stylish but severe blue three-piece suit. “The surprise of the week is RU-486,” she said. “Women are using it—a lot of it. The French have come forward with a solution. We’ve spoken to them, but they say they are tendering their offer directly to the WHO and to the Taskforce, that their effort is humanitarian, and they aren’t interested in any business liaisons.”

Marge ordered wine from the steward and wiped her forehead with the napkin before spreading it on her lap. “How generous of them,” she mused. “They’ll supply all the world needs, and no new R&D costs. Does it work, Robert?”

Jackson took up a Palmbook and poked his way through his notes with a stylus. “Taskforce has unconfirmed reports that RU-486 aborts the second-stage implanted ovum. No word yet on first-stage. It’s all anecdotal. Street research.”

Cross said, “Abortion drugs have never been to my taste.” To the steward, she said, “I’ll have the Cobb salad, side of vinaigrette, and a pot of coffee.”

Kaye ordered a club sandwich, though she was not hungry in the least. She could feel thunderheads building—an unpleasant personal awareness that she was in a very dangerous mood. She was still numb from witnessing the shooting at NIH, two days before.

“Laura, you look unhappy,” Cross said, with a glance at Kaye. She was going to save Kaye’s complaints for last.

“One earthquake after another,” Nilson said. “At least I didn’t have to experience what Kaye did.”

“Horrible,” Cross agreed. “It’s a whole barrel of worms. So, what kind of worms are they?”

“We’ve ordered our own polls. Psych profiles, cultural profiles, across the board. I’m spending every penny you gave me, Marge.”

“Insurance,” Cross said.

“Scary,” Jackson said simultaneously.

“Yes, well it might buy you another Perkin-Elmer machine, that’s all,” Nilson said defensively. “Sixty percent of married or involved males surveyed do not believe the news reports. They believe it is necessary for the women to have sex to be pregnant a second time. We’re coming up against a wall of resistance here, denial, even among the women. Forty percent of married or otherwise involved women say they would abort any Herod’s fetus.”

“That’s what they tell a pollster,” Cross murmured.

“They’d certainly go for an easy out in large numbers. RU-486 is tried and proven. It could become a household remedy for the desperate.”

“It isn’t prevention,” Jackson said, uneasy.

“Of those who wouldn’t use an abortion pill, fully half believe the government is trying to force wholesale abortion on the nation, maybe the world,” Nilson said. “Whoever chose the name ‘Herod’s’ has really skewed the issue.”

“Augustine chose it,” Cross said.

“Marge, we’re heading for a major social disaster: ignorance mixed with sex and dead babies. If large numbers of women with SHEVA abstain from sex with their partners—and get pregnant anyway—then our social science people say we’re going to see more domestic violence, as well as a huge rise in abortions, even of normal pregnancies.”

“There are other possibilities,” Kaye said. “I’ve seen the results.”

“Go ahead,” Cross encouraged.

“The 1990s cases in the Caucasus. Massacres.”

“I’ve studied those, as well,” Nilson said efficiently, flipping through her legal pad. “We don’t actually know much even now. There was SHEVA in the local populations—”

Kaye interrupted. “It’s far more complicated than any of us here can deal with,” she said, her voice cracking. “We are not looking at a disease profile. We’re looking at lateral transmission of genomic instructions leading to a transition phase.”

“Come again? I don’t understand,” Nilson said.

“SHEVA is not an agent of disease.”

“Bullshit,” Jackson said in astonishment. Marge waved her hand at him in warning.

“We keep building walls around this subject. I can’t hold back anymore, Marge. The Taskforce has denied this possibility from the very beginning.”

“I don’t know what’s being denied,” Cross said. “In brief, Kaye.”

“We see a virus, even one that comes from within our own genome, and we assume it’s a disease. We see everything in terms of disease.”

“I’ve never known a virus that didn’t cause problems, Kaye,” Jackson said, his eyes heavy-lidded. If he was trying to warn her she was treading on thin ice, this time, it wasn’t going to work.

“We keep seeing the truth but it doesn’t fit into our primitive views on how nature works.”

“Primitive?” Jackson said. “Tell that to smallpox.”

“If this had hit us thirty years from now,” Kaye persisted, “maybe we’d be prepared—but we’re still acting like ignorant children. Children who have never been told the facts of life.”

“What are we missing?” Cross asked patiently.

Jackson drummed his fingers on the table. “It’s been discussed.”

“What?” Cross asked.

“Not in any serious forum,” Kaye countered.

“What, please?”

“Kaye is about to tell us that SHEVA is part of a biological reshuffling. Transposons jumping around and affecting phenotype. It’s the buzz among the interns who’ve been reading Kaye’s papers.”

“Which means?”

Jackson grimaced. “Let me anticipate. If we let the new babies be born, they’re all going to be big-headed superhumans. Prodigies with blond hair and staring eyes and telepathic abilities. They’ll kill us all and take over the Earth.”

Stunned, near tears, Kaye stared at Jackson. He smiled half-apologetically, half in glee at having warded off any possible debate. “It’s a waste of time,” he said. “And we don’t have any time to waste.”

Nilson watched Kaye with cautious sympathy. Marge lifted her head and glared at the ceiling. “Will someone please tell me what I’ve just stepped into?”

“Pure bullshit,” Jackson said under his breath, adjusting his napkin.

The steward brought them their food.

Nilson put her hand on Kaye's. "Forgive us, Kaye. Robert can be very forceful."

"It's my own confusion I'm dealing with, not Robert's defensive rudeness," Kaye said. "Marge, I have been trained in the precepts of modern biology. I've dealt with rigid interpretations of data, but I've grown up in the middle of the most incredible ferment imaginable. Here's the solid foundation wall of modern biology, built brick by careful brick . . ." She drew the wall with her outstretched hand. "And here's a tidal wave called genetics. We're mapping the factory floor of the living cell. We're discovering that nature is not just surprising, but shockingly unorthodox. Nature doesn't give a damn *what* we think or what our paradigms are."

"That's all very well," Jackson said, "but science is how we organize our work and avoid *wasting time*."

"Robert, this is a discussion," Cross said.

"I can't apologize for what I feel in my gut is true," Kaye persisted. "I will lose everything rather than lie."

"Admirable," Jackson said. " 'Nevertheless, it moves,' is that it, dear Kaye?"

"Robert, don't be an asshole," Nilson said.

"I am outnumbered, *ladies*," Jackson said, pushing back his chair in disgust. He draped his napkin over his plate but did not leave. Instead, he folded his arms and cocked his head, as if encouraging—or daring—Kaye to continue.

"We're behaving like children who don't even know how babies are made," Kaye said. "We're witnessing a different kind of pregnancy. It isn't new—it's happened many times before. It's evolution, but it's directed, short-term, immediate, not gradual, and I have no idea what kind of children will be produced," Kaye said. "But they will not be monsters and they won't eat their parents."

Jackson lifted his arm high like a boy in a classroom. "If we're in the hands of some fast-acting master craftsman, if *God* is directing our evolution now, I'd say it's time to hire some cosmic lawyers. It's malpractice of the lowest order. Infant C was a complete botch."

"That was herpes," Kaye said.

"Herpes doesn't work that way," Jackson said. "You know that as well as I."

"SHEVA makes fetuses particularly susceptible to viral invasion. It's an error, a natural error."

“We have no evidence of that. Evidence, Ms. Lang!”

“The CDC—” Kaye began.

“Infant C was a Herod’s second-stage monstrosity with herpes added on, as a side dish,” Jackson said. “Really, ladies, I’ve had it. We’re all tired. I for one am exhausted.” He stood, bowed quickly, and stalked out of the dining room.

Marge picked through her salad with a fork. “This sounds like a conceptual problem. I’ll call a meeting. We’ll listen to your evidence, in detail,” she said. “And I’ll ask Robert to bring in his own experts.”

“I don’t think there are many experts who would openly support me,” Kaye said. “Certainly not now. The atmosphere is charged.”

“This is all-important with regard to public perception,” Nilson said thoughtfully.

“How?” Cross asked.

“If some group or creed or corporation decides that Kaye is right, we’ll have to deal with that.”

Kaye suddenly felt very exposed, very vulnerable.

Cross picked up a strip of cheese with her fork and examined it. “If Herod’s isn’t a disease, I don’t know how we’d deal with it. We’d be caught between a natural event and an ignorant and terrified public. That makes for horrible politics and nightmarish business.”

Kaye’s mouth went dry. She had no answer to that. It was true.

“If there are no experts who support you,” Cross said thoughtfully, pushing the cheese into her mouth, “how do you make a case?”

“I’ll present the evidence, the theory,” Kaye said.

“By yourself?” Cross asked.

“I could probably find a few others.”

“How many?”

“Four or five.”

Cross ate for a few moments. “Jackson’s an asshole, but he’s brilliant, he’s a recognized expert, and there are hundreds who would agree with his point of view.”

“Thousands,” Kaye said, straining to keep her voice steady. “Against just me and a few crackpots.”

Cross wagged a finger at Kaye. “You’re no crackpot, dear. Laura, one of our companies developed a morning-after pill some years ago.”

“That was in the nineties.”

“Why did we abandon it?”

“Politics and liability issues.”

“We had a name for it . . . what were we calling it?”

“Some wag code-named it RU-Pentium,” Nilson said.

“I recall that it tested well,” Marge said. “We still have the formulae and samples, I assume.”

“I made an inquiry this afternoon,” Nilson said. “We could bring it back and get production up to speed in a couple of months.”

Kaye clutched the tablecloth where it crossed her lap. She had once campaigned passionately for a woman’s right to choose. Now, she could not work her way through the conflicting emotions.

“No reflection on Robert’s work,” Cross said, “but there’s a better than fifty-fifty chance the trials on the vaccine are going to fail. And that statement does not leave this room, ladies.”

“We’re still getting computer models predicting MS as a side effect for the ribozyme component,” Kaye said. “Will Americol recommend abortion as an alternative?”

“Not all on our lonesome,” Cross said. “The essence of evolution is survival. Right now, we’re standing in the middle of a minefield, and anything that clears a path, I’m certainly not going to ignore.”

Dicken took the call in the equipment room next to the main receiving and autopsy lab. He slipped off his latex gloves while a young male computer technician held the phone. The technician was there to adjust a balky old workstation used to record autopsy results and track the specimens through the rest of the labs. He stared at Dicken, in his green robe and surgical mask, with some concern.

“Nothing catching, for you,” Dicken told him as he took the phone receiver. “Dicken here. I’m elbow deep.”

“Christopher, it’s Kaye.”

“Hello-o-o, Kaye.” He did not want to put her off; she sounded gloomy but however she sounded, to Dicken, hearing her voice was a disturbing pleasure.

“I’ve screwed things up big time,” Kaye said.

“How’s that?” Dicken waved his hand at Scarry, still in the pathology lab. Scarry wagged his arms impatiently.

“I had a tiff with Robert Jackson . . . a conversation with Marge and Jackson. I couldn’t hold back. I told them what I thought.”

“Oh,” Dicken said, making a face. “How’d they react?”

“Jackson pooh-poohed it. Treated me with contempt, actually.”

“Arrogant bastard,” Dicken said. “I always thought so.”

“He said we need evidence about the herpes.”

“That’s what Scarry and I are looking for now. We have an accident victim in our pathology lab. Prostitute from Washington, D.C., pregnant. Tests positive for *Herpes labialis* and for hepatitis A and HIV as well as SHEVA. Rough life.”

The young technician grimly folded his tool kit and left the room.

“Marge is going to match the French on their morning-after pill.”

“Shit,” Dicken said.

“We have to move fast.”

“I don’t know how fast we can go. Dead young women with the right mix of problems just don’t come rolling in off the street every day.”

“I don’t think any amount of evidence is going to convince Jackson. I’m close to my wit’s end, Christopher.”

“I hope Jackson doesn’t go to Augustine. We aren’t ready yet, and thanks to me, Mark is already touchy,” Dicken said. “Kaye, Scarry is dancing around in the lab. I’ve got to go. Keep your chin up. Call me.”

“Has Mitch spoken to you?”

“No,” Dicken said, a deceptive truth. “Call me later at my office. Kaye—I’m here for you. I’ll support you every way I can. I mean that.”

“Thank you, Christopher.”

Dicken put the receiver in its cradle and stood for a moment, feeling stupid. He had never been comfortable with these emotions. Work became all because everything else important was too painful.

“Not very good at this, are we?” he asked himself in a low voice.

Scarry tapped angrily on the glass between the office and the lab.

Dicken lifted his surgical mask and put on a new pair of gloves.

## 50

**Baltimore**

**APRIL 15**

**M**itch stood in the apartment building lobby, hands in his pockets. He had shaved very carefully this morning, staring into the long mirror in the communal bathroom at the YMCA, and just last week he had gone to a barber and had his hair styled—managed was more like it.



His jeans were new. He had dug through his suitcase and pulled out a black blazer. He had not dressed to impress in over a year, but here he was, thinking of little else but Kaye Lang.

The doorman was not impressed. He leaned on his pedestal and watched Mitch closely out of the corner of his eye. The phone rang at the pedestal and he answered it.

“Go on up,” he said, waving his hand at the elevator. “Twentieth floor. 2011. Check in with the guard up there. Serious beef.”

Mitch thanked him and stood in the elevator. As the door closed, he wondered for a panicky moment what the hell he thought he was doing. The last thing he needed in this mess was emotional involvement. Where women were concerned, however, Mitch was guided by secret masters reticent to divulge either their goals or their immediate plans. These secret masters had caused him a lot of grief.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and resigned himself to the next few hours, come what may.

On the twentieth floor, he stepped out of the elevator and saw Kaye speaking to a man in a gray suit. He had short black hair, a strong thick face, a hooked nose. The man had spotted Mitch before Mitch saw them.

Kaye smiled at Mitch. “Come on in. The coast is clear. This is Karl Benson.”

“Glad to meet you,” Mitch said.

The man nodded, folded his arms, and stepped back, allowing Mitch to pass, but not without a sniff, like a dog trying for a scent.

“Marge Cross gets about thirty death threats every week,” Kaye said as she led Mitch into the apartment. “I’ve had three since the incident at NIH.”

“The game is getting tough,” Mitch said.

“I’ve been so busy since the RU-486 mess,” Kaye said.

Mitch lifted his thick brows. “The abortion pill?”

“Didn’t Christopher tell you?”

“Chris hasn’t returned any of my calls,” Mitch said.

“Oh?” Dicken had not told her the precise truth. Kaye found that interesting. “Maybe it’s because you call him Chris.”

“Not to his face,” Mitch said, grinned, and sobered. “As I said, I’m ignorant.”

“RU-486 removes the secondary SHEVA pregnancy if it’s used at an early stage.” She looked for his reaction. “You don’t approve?”

“Under the circumstances, it seems wrong.” Mitch peered at the simple, elegant furniture, the art prints.

Kaye closed the door. "Abortion in general . . . or this?"

"This." Mitch sensed her tension and felt for a moment as if she were putting him through a quick exam.

"Americol is going to make its own abortion pill available. If it's a disease, we're close to stopping it," Kaye said.

Mitch strolled to the large plate glass window, pushed his hands into his pockets, looked over his shoulder at Kaye. "You're helping them do this?"

"No," Kaye said. "I'm hoping to convince some key people, rearrange our priorities. I don't think I'm going to succeed, but it has to be done. I'm glad you came here, though. Maybe it's a sign my luck is improving. What brings you to Baltimore?"

Mitch pulled his hands out of his pockets. "I'm not a very promising sign. I can barely afford to travel. I got some money from my father. I'm on the parental dole big time."

"Are you going on to somewhere else?" Kaye asked.

"Just to Baltimore," Mitch said.

"Oh." Kaye stood a long step behind him. He could see her reflection in the glass, her bright beige suit, but not her face.

"Well, that's not strictly true. I'm going to New York, SUNY. A friend in Oregon arranged for an interview. I'd like to teach, do field research in the summer. Maybe start over again on a different coast."

"I went to SUNY. I'm afraid I don't know anybody there now. Nobody influential. Please sit." Kaye motioned toward the couch, the armchair. "Water? Juice?"

"Water, please."

As she went to the kitchen, Mitch sniffed the flowers on the *étagère*, roses and lilies and baby's breath, then circled around the couch and sat at one end. His long legs seemed to have no place to go. He folded his hands over his knees.

"I can't just scream and shout and resign," Kaye said. "I owe it to the people I work with."

"I see. How's the vaccine coming?"

"We're well into preclinical trials. Some fast-track clinical trials in Britain and Japan, but I'm not happy about them. Jackson—he's in charge of the vaccine project—wants me moved out of his division."

"Why?"

"Because I spoke out in the dining room three days ago. Marge Cross couldn't use our theory. Doesn't fit the paradigm. Not defensible."

"Quorum sensing," Mitch said.

Kaye brought him a glass of water. "How's that?"

"A chance discovery in my reading. When there's enough bacteria, they change their behavior, get coordinated. Maybe we do the same thing. We just don't have enough scientists to make a quorum."

"Maybe," Kaye said. She stood, once more, about a step away from him. "I've been working in the HERV and genome labs at Americol most of the time. Finding out where other endogenous virus like SHEVA might express, and under what conditions. I'm a little surprised that Christopher—"

Mitch looked up at her and interrupted. "I came to Baltimore to see you," he said.

"Oh," Kaye said softly.

"I can't stop thinking about our evening at the zoo."

"It doesn't seem real now," Kaye said.

"It does to me," Mitch said.

"I think Marge is moving me off the press conference schedule," Kaye said, perversely trying to shift the conversation, or to see if he would allow it to be shifted. "Wean me away from being a spokeswoman. It'll take me some time to earn her trust again. Frankly, I'm glad to be away from the public eye. There's going to be a—"

"In San Diego," he interrupted, "I reacted pretty strongly to your presence."

"That's sweet," Kaye said, and half turned, as if to run away. She did not run, but she walked around the table and stopped on his other side, again, just a step away.

"Pheromones," Mitch said, and stood tall beside her. "The way people smell is important to me. You aren't wearing perfume."

"I never do," Kaye said.

"You don't need it."

"Hold it," Kaye said, and backed off one more step. She raised her hands and stared at him intently, lips pressed together. "I can be easily confused now. I need to keep my focus."

"You need to relax," Mitch said.

"Being around you is not relaxing."

"You're not sure about things."

"I'm certainly not sure about *you*."

He held out his hand. "Want to smell my hand first?"

Kaye laughed.

Mitch sniffed his palm. "Dial soap. Taxi cab doors. I haven't dug a hole

in years. My calluses are smoothing over. I'm out of work, in debt, and I have a reputation as a crazy and unethical son of a bitch."

"Stop being so hard on yourself. I read your papers, and old news stories. You don't cover up and you don't lie. You're interested in the truth."

"I'm flattered," Mitch said.

"And you confuse me. I don't know what to think about you. You're not much like my husband."

"Is that good?" Mitch asked.

Kaye looked him over critically. "So far."

"The customary thing would be to try things out slowly. I'd ask you out to dinner."

"Dutch treat?"

"My expense account," Mitch said wryly.

"Karl would have to come with us. He'd have to approve the restaurant. I usually eat up here, or at Americol's cafeteria."

"Does Karl eavesdrop?"

"No," Kaye said.

"The doorman said he was serious beef," Mitch said.

"I am still a kept woman," Kaye said. "I don't like it, but that's the way it is. Let's stay here and eat. We can walk in the roof garden later, if it's stopped raining. I stock some really good frozen entrées. I get them from a market in the mall down below. And salad in a bag. I'm a good cook when there's time, but there hasn't been any time." She walked back to the kitchen.

Mitch followed, looking at the other pictures on her walls, the little ones in cheap frames that were probably her own contribution to the décor. Small prints of Maxfield Parrish, Edmund Dulac, Arthur Rackham; photos of family groups. He did not see any pictures of her dead husband. Perhaps she kept them in the bedroom.

"I'd like to cook for *you* some time," Mitch said. "I'm pretty handy with a camp stove."

"Wine? With dinner?"

"I need some now," Mitch said. "I'm very nervous."

"So am I," Kaye said, and held up her hands to show him. They were trembling. "Do you have this effect on all women?"

"Never," Mitch said.

"Nonsense. You smell good," Kaye said.

They were less than a step apart. Mitch closed the gap, touched her

chin, lifted it. Kissed her gently. She pushed back a few inches, then grasped his own chin between thumb and forefinger, tugged it down, kissed him more forcefully.

"I think it's okay to be playful with you," she said. With Saul, she could never be sure how he would react. She had learned to limit her range of behaviors.

"Please," he said.

"You're solid," she said. She touched the sun wrinkles in his face, premature crow's feet. Mitch had a young face and bright eyes but wise and experienced skin.

"I'm a madman, but a solid one."

"The world goes on, our instincts don't change," Kaye said, eyes losing their focus. "We're not in charge." A part of her she had not heard from in a long time liked his face very much.

Mitch tapped his forehead. "Do you hear it? From the deep inside?"

"I think so," Kaye said. She decided to fish. "What do I smell like?"

Mitch leaned into her hair. Kaye gave a little gasp as his nose touched her ear. "Clean and alive, like a beach in the rain," he said.

"You smell like a lion," Kaye said. He nuzzled her lips, laid his ear against her temple, as if listening. "What do you hear?" she asked.

"You're hungry," Mitch said, and smiled, a full-bore, thousand-watt, little-boy smile.

This was so obviously unrehearsed that Kaye touched his lips with her fingers, in wonder, before his face returned to that protective, endearing, but ultimately disguising, casual grin. She stepped back. "Right. Food. Wine first, please," she said, and opened the refrigerator. She handed him a bottle of semillon blanc.

Mitch pulled a Swiss Army knife out of his pants pocket, extended the corkscrew, extracted the cork deftly. "We drink beer on a dig, wine when we finish," he said, pouring her a glass.

"What kind of beer?"

"Coors. Budweiser. Anything not too heavy."

"All the men I've known preferred ales or microbrews."

"Not in the sun," Mitch said.

"Where are you staying?" she asked.

"The YMCA," he said.

"I've never met a man who stayed at the YMCA."

"It isn't so bad."

She sipped her wine, wet her lips, moved up closer, lifted on her toes, and kissed him. He tasted the wine on her tongue, still slightly chilled.

“Stay here,” she said.

“What will serious beef think?”

She shook her head, kissed him again, and he wrapped his arms around her, still holding his glass and the bottle. A little wine spilled on her dress. He turned her and put the glass on the counter, then the bottle.

“I don’t know where to stop,” she said.

“I don’t either,” Mitch said. “I know how to be careful, though.”

“It’s that kind of age, isn’t it?” Kaye said regretfully, and tugged his shirt from his pants.

In Mitch’s experience, Kaye was neither the most beautiful woman he had seen naked, nor the most dynamic in bed. That would have to have been Tilde, who, despite her distance, had been very exciting. What struck him most about Kaye was his complete acceptance of every feature, from her small and slightly pendulous breasts, her narrow rib cage, wide hips, thickly flossed pubis, long legs—better than Tilde’s, he thought—to her steady and examining gaze as he made love to her. Her scent filled his nose, filled his brain, until he felt as if he were drifting on a warm and supportive ocean of necessary pleasure. Through the condom, he could feel very little, but all his other senses compensated, and it was the touch of her breasts, her cherry-pit-hard nipples, on his own chest that propelled him up and over the wave. He was still moving in her, instinctively still supplying the last of his flow, when she looked very startled, thrashed underneath, squeezed her eyes shut, and cried, “Oh, God, fuck, fuck!”

She had been mostly silent until that moment, and he looked down on her in surprise. She turned her face away and hugged him tight against her, pulling him down, wrapped her legs around him, rubbed against him vigorously. He wanted to pull out before the condom spilled, but she kept moving, and he found himself firming again, and he obliged until she gave a small shriek, this time with eyes open, her face contorted as if in great need or pain. Then her expression went slack, her body relaxed, and she closed her eyes. Mitch withdrew and checked: the condom was still secure. He removed it and deftly tied it, dropped it over the side of the bed for disposal later.

“I can’t talk,” Kaye whispered.

Mitch lay beside her, savoring their mingled scents. He did not want anything more. For the first time in years, he was happy.

• •

“What was it like to be one of the Neandertals?” Kaye asked. The twilight deepened outside. The apartment was quiet but for the far and muffled sound of traffic on the streets below.

Mitch lifted up on his elbow. “We talked about that already.”

Kaye lay on her back, naked from the waist up, a sheet pulled to her navel, listening for something much farther away than the traffic.

“In San Diego,” she said. “I remember. We talked about them having masks. About the man staying with her. You thought he must have loved her very much.”

“That’s right,” Mitch said.

“He must have been rare. Special. The woman on the NIH campus. Her boyfriend didn’t believe it was his baby.” The words started to pour out of her. “Laura Nilson—PR manager for Americol—told us that most men won’t believe it’s their baby. Most women will probably abort rather than take the risk. That’s why they’re going to recommend the morning-after pill. If the vaccine has problems, they can still stop this.”

Mitch looked uncomfortable. “Can’t we forget for a little while?”

“No,” Kaye said. “I can’t stand it anymore. We’re going to slaughter all the firstborn, just like Pharaoh in Egypt. If we keep this up, we’ll never know what the next generation looks like. They’ll all be dead. Do you want that to happen?”

“No,” Mitch said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not as frightened as the next guy.” He shook his head. “I wonder what I would have done if I were that man, back then, fifteen thousand years ago. They must have been thrown out of their tribe. Or maybe they ran away. Maybe they were just walking and they came upon a raiding party and she got hurt.”

“Do you believe that?”

“No,” Mitch said. “I really don’t know. I’m not psychic.”

“I’m spoiling the mood, aren’t I?”

“Mmm hmm,” he said.

“Our lives are not our own,” Kaye said. She ran her finger around his nipples, stroked the stiff hairs on his chest. “But we can build a wall for a little while. You’re going to stay here tonight?”

Mitch kissed her forehead, then her nose, her cheeks. “The accommodations are much nicer than the YMCA.”

“Come here,” Kaye said.

“I can’t get much closer.”

“Try.”

• •

Kaye Lang lay trembling in the dark. She was certain Mitch was asleep, but to make sure, she poked his back lightly. He squirmed but did not respond. He was comfortable. Comfortable with her.

She had never taken such a risk; from the time of her first dates she had always looked for safety and, she hoped, security, planning her safe haven where she could do her work, think her thoughts with minimal interference from the outside world.

Marrying Saul had been the ultimate achievement. Age, experience, money, business acumen—so she had thought. Now, to swing so far in the opposite direction, was all too obviously an overreaction. She wondered what she would do about it.

When he woke up in the morning, to simply tell Mitch it was all a mistake . . .

Terrified her. Not that she thought he would hurt her; he was the gentlest of men and showed few if any signs of the internal strife that had so troubled Saul.

Mitch was not as handsome as Saul.

On the other hand, Mitch was completely open and honest.

Mitch had sought her out, but she was fairly sure she had seduced *him*. Kaye certainly did not feel anything had been forced upon her.

“What in the hell are you doing?” she muttered in the dark. She was talking to another self, the stubborn Kaye that so seldom told her what was really going on. She got out of bed, put on her robe, went to the desk in the living room and opened the middle drawer, where she kept her record books.

She had six hundred thousand dollars, adding together income from the sale of her home and her personal retirement account. If she resigned from Americol and the Taskforce, she could live in moderately comfortable circumstances for years.

She spent a few minutes working out expenses, emergency budgets, food allowances, monthly bills, on a small piece of note paper, then stiffened in her chair. “This is stupid,” she said. “What am I planning?” Then, to that stubborn and secretive self, she added, “What in hell are *you* up to?”

She would not tell Mitch to go away in the morning. He made her feel good. Around him, her mind became quieter, her fears and worries less pressing. He looked as if he knew what he was doing, and maybe he did know. Maybe it was the world that was screwy, that set traps and snares and forced people to make bad choices.



She tapped the pen on the paper, pulled another sheet from the pad. Her fingers pushed the pen over the paper almost without conscious thought, sketching a series of open reading frames on chromosomes 18 and 20 that might bear a relation to the SHEVA genes, previously identified as possible HERVs but turning out not to have the defining characteristics of retrovirus fragments. She needed to look into these loci, these scattered fragments, to see if they might possibly fit together and be expressed; she had been putting this off for some time. Tomorrow would be the proper moment.

Before she followed through with anything, she needed ammunition. She needed armor.

She returned to the bedroom. Mitch seemed to be dreaming. Fascinated, she lay down quietly beside him.

At the top of a snow-covered rise, the man saw the shamans and their helpers following him and his woman. They could not avoid leaving tracks in the snow, but even on the lower grasslands, through the forest, they had been tracked by experts.

The man had brought his woman, heavy and slow with her child, to such heights in hope of crossing over into another valley where he had once gone as a child.

He glanced back at the figures a few hundred steps behind. Then the man looked at the crags and peaks ahead, like so many tumbled flints. He was lost. He had forgotten the way into the valley.

The woman said little now. The face he had once looked upon with so much devotion was hidden by her mask.

The man was filled with such bitterness. This high, the wet snow soaked through his thin shoes with their grass pads. The chill worked up his calves to his knees and made them ache. The wind cut through his skins, even with the fur turned inside, and sapped his strength, shortened his breath.

The woman plodded on. He knew he might escape if he abandoned her. The prospect made his anger darken. He hated the snow, the shamans, the mountains; he hated himself. He could not bring himself to hate the woman. She had suffered the blood on her thighs, the loss, and hidden it from him so as not to bring shame; she had daubed her face with mud to hide the marks, and then, when she could not hide, she had tried to save him by offering herself to the Great Mother, carved into the grass hillside of the valley. But the Great Mother had refused her, and she had come back to him, moaning and mewling. She could not kill herself.

His own face showed the marks. That puzzled and angered him.

The shamans and sisters of the Great Mother, of the Goat Mother, of the Grass Mother, the Snow Woman, Leopard the Loud Killer, Chancre the Soft Killer, Rain the Weeping Father, had all gathered and made their decision during the cooling times, taking painful weeks while the others—the others who had the marks—stayed in their huts.

The man had decided to run. He could not convince himself to trust the shamans and the sisters.

As they fled, they had heard the cries. The shamans and sisters had begun to kill the mothers and the fathers with the marks.

Everyone knew how the flatfaces were brought forth by the people. The women might hide, their men might hide, but all knew. Those who would bear flatface children could only make things worse.

Only the sisters of the gods and goddesses bred true, never bred flatfaces, because they trained the young men of the tribe. They had many men.

He should have let the shamans take his wife as a sister, let her train the boys, too, but she had wanted only him.

The man hated the mountains, the snow, the running. He plodded on, roughly grabbed the woman's arm, pushed her around a rock so they could find a place to hide. He was not watching closely. He was too full of this new truth, that the mothers and fathers of the sky and the ghost world around them were all blind or just lies.

He was alone, his woman was alone, no tribe, no people, no helpers. Not even Long Hairs and Wet Eyes, the most frightening of the dead visitors, the most harmful, cared about them. He was beginning to think none of the dead visitors were real.

The three men surprised him. He did not see them until they came from a cleft in the mountain and thrust their sticks at his woman. He knew them but no longer belonged to them. One had been a brother, another a Wolf Father. They were none of these things now and he wondered how he even recognized them.

Before they could run, one thrust a burned and sharpened stick and pushed it into the woman's full stomach. She spun around, reaching under the skins with scrabbling hands, cried out, and he had rocks in his hand and was throwing them, grabbed a stick from one man and thrust blindly with it, poked one in the eye, drove them off whining and yelping like pups.

He yelled at the sky, held his woman while she kept trying to catch her breath, then carried her and dragged her higher. The woman told him with

her hands and her eyes that behind the blood, behind the pain, it was her time. The new one wanted to come.

He looked higher for a place to hide and watch the new one come. There was so much blood, more than he had ever seen except from an animal. As he walked and carried the woman, he looked over his shoulder. The shamans and the others were not following now.

Mitch cried out, thrashing through the covers. He threw his legs off the bed, hands clutching the sheets, confused by the curtains and the furniture. For a moment he did not know who or where he was.

Kaye sat beside him and held him.

“A dream?” she asked, rubbing his shoulders.

“Yeah,” he said. “My God. Not psychic. No time travel. He didn’t carry any firewood. But there was a fire in the cave. The masks didn’t seem right, either. But it felt real.”

Kaye laid him back on the bed and smoothed his damp hair, touched his bristled cheek. Mitch apologized for waking her.

“I was already awake,” she said.

“Hell of a way to impress you,” Mitch murmured.

“You don’t need to impress me,” Kaye said. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” he said. “It was only a dream.”

## 51

### Richmond, Virginia

**D**icken pushed open the car door and stepped out of the Dodge. Dr. Denise Lipton handed him a badge. He shaded his eyes against the bright sun and looked up at the small sign over the clinic’s bare concrete wall: VIRGINIA CHATHAM WOMEN’S HEALTH AND FAMILY CENTER. A face briefly peered at them through a tiny wire-mesh glass window in the heavy blue-painted metal door. The intercom switched on, and Lipton gave her name and her contact at the clinic. The door opened.

Dr. Henrietta Paskow stood with thick legs planted wide apart, her calf-length gray skirt and white blouse emphasizing a strong stout plainness that made her seem older than she actually was. “Thanks for coming, Denise. We’ve been very busy.”

They followed her through the yellow and white hallway, past the doors of eight waiting rooms, to a small office in the rear. Brass-framed portraits of a large family of young children hung on the wall behind the plain wooden desk.

Lipton sat in a metal folding chair. Dicken remained standing. Paskow pushed two boxes of folders at them.

“We’ve done thirty since Infant C,” she said. “Thirteen D and Cs, seventeen morning-afters. The pills work for five weeks after the rejection of the first-stage fetus.”

Dicken looked through the case reports. They were straightforward, concise, with attending physician and nurse practitioner notes.

“There were no severe complications,” Paskow said. “The laminal tissue protects against saltwater lavage. But by the end of the fifth week, the laminal tissue has dissolved, and the pregnancy appears to be vulnerable.”

“How many requests so far?” Lipton asked.

“We’ve had six hundred appointments. Nearly all of them are in their twenties and thirties and living with a man, married or otherwise. We’ve referred half of them to other clinics. It’s a significant increase.”

Dicken laid the folders facedown on the desk.

Paskow scrutinized him. “You don’t approve, Mr. Dicken?”

“I’m not here to approve or disapprove,” he said. “Dr. Lipton and I are doing field interviews to see how our figures match the real world.”

“Herod’s is going to decimate an entire generation,” Paskow said. “A third of the women coming to us don’t even test positive for SHEVA. They haven’t had a miscarriage. They just want the baby out, then wait a few years and see what happens. We’re doing a land-office business in birth control. Our clinic classes are full. We’ve put on a third and fourth classroom upstairs. More men are coming with their wives and their girlfriends. Maybe that’s the only good thing about all this. Men are feeling guilty.”

“There’s no reason to terminate every pregnancy,” Lipton said. “The SHEVA tests are highly accurate.”

“We tell them that. They don’t care,” Paskow said. “They’re scared and they don’t trust us to know what might happen. Meanwhile, every Tuesday and Thursday, we have ten or fifteen Operation Rescue pickets outside yelling that Herod’s is a secular humanist myth, that there is no disease. Only pretty babies being needlessly killed. They claim it’s a worldwide conspiracy. They’re getting shrill and they’re very scared. The millennium is young.”

Paskow had copied key statistical records. She handed Lipton these papers.

“Thank you for your time,” Dicken said.

“Mr. Dicken,” Paskow called after them. “A vaccine would save everyone a lot of grief.”

Lipton saw Dicken to his car. A black woman in her thirties walked past them and stood at the blue door. She had wrapped herself in a long wool coat, though the day was warm. She was more than six months pregnant.

“I’ve had enough for one day,” Lipton said, her face pale. “I’m going back to the campus.”

“I have to pick up some samples,” Dicken said.

Lipton put her hand on the door and said, “The women at our clinic have to be told. None of them have STDs, but they’ve all had chicken pox and one has had hepatitis B.”

“We don’t know that chicken pox causes problems,” Dicken said.

“It’s a herpes virus. Your lab results are scary, Christopher.”

“They’re incomplete. Hell, almost everyone has had chicken pox, or mono, or cold sores. So far, we’re only positive about genital herpes and hepatitis and possibly AIDS.”

“I still have to tell them,” she said, and closed the door for him with a definite slam. “It’s about ethics, Christopher.”

“Yeah,” Dicken said. He kicked at the emergency brake release and started the engine. Lipton walked toward her own car. After a few seconds, he made a disgusted face, shut the engine off again, and sat with his arm out the window, trying to decide how he could best spend his time in the next few weeks.

Things were not going at all well in the labs. Fetal tissue and placenta analysis on samples sent from France and Japan showed reduced immune response to all manner of herpes infections. Not a single second-stage pregnancy had survived birth, of the 110 studied thus far.

It was time to make up his mind. Public health policy was in a critical state. Decisions and recommendations would have to be made, and politicians would have to react to those recommendations in ways that could be explained to clearly divided constituencies.

He might not be able to salvage the truth. And the truth seemed remarkably remote at this point. How could something as important as a major evolutionary event be sidetracked so effectively?

On the seat beside him he had dumped a pile of mail from his office in Atlanta. There had been no time to read it on the plane. He pulled out an envelope and swore under his breath. How had he not seen it right away? The postmark and handwriting were clear enough: Dr. Leonid Sugashvili, writing from Tbilisi in the Republic of Georgia.

He tore open the envelope. A snapshot-size black-and-white photograph on slick paper fell into his lap. He picked it up and examined the image: figures standing before a ramshackle old wood-frame house, two women in dresses, a man in overalls. They looked slender, perhaps even slight, but there was no way to be sure. The faces were indistinct.

Dicken pulled open the folded letter accompanying the photo.

*Dear Dr. Christopher Dicken,  
I have been sent this photograph from Atzharis AR, you call perhaps Adjaria. It was taken near Batumi ten years ago. These are putative survivors from the purges you have shown such interest in. There is little to be seen here. Some say they are still alive. Some say they are really from UFO but these people I do not believe.*

*I will look for them and inform you when the time comes. Finance is in very short supply. I would appreciate financial assistance from your organization, the NCID. Thank you for your interest. I feel they may not be "Abominable Snow People" at all, but real! I have not informed the CDC in Tbilisi. You are the one I have been told to entrust.*

*Sincerely,  
Leonid Sugashvili*

Dicken examined the photograph again. Less than no evidence. Will-o'-the-wisps.

*Death rides in on a pale horse, slicing babies right and left, he thought. And I'm teamed up with crackpots and money-grubbing eccentrics.*

## Baltimore

**M**itch called his apartment in Seattle while Kaye was taking a shower. He punched in his code and retrieved his messages. There were two calls from his father, a call from a man who did not identify himself, and then a call from Oliver Merton in London. Mitch wrote the number down as Kaye came out of the bathroom, loosely wrapped in a towel.

“You delight in provoking me,” he said. She dried her short hair with another towel, gazing at him with an appraising steadiness that was unnerving.

“Who was that?”

“Picking up my messages.”

“Old girlfriends?”

“My father, somebody I don’t know—a man—and Oliver Merton.”

Kaye lifted her eyebrow. “An old girlfriend might make me happier.”

“Mmm hmm. He wonders if I would make a trip to Beresford, New York. He wants me to meet somebody interesting.”

“A Neandertal?”

“He says he can arrange for my expenses and accommodations.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Kaye said.

“I haven’t said I’ll go. I haven’t the slightest idea what he’s up to.”

“He knows quite a bit about my business,” Kaye said.

“You could come with me,” Mitch said with a squint that showed he knew this was too hopeful.

“I’m not done here, not by a long shot,” she said. “I’ll miss you if you go.”

“Why don’t I call him and ask what he’s got in his bag of tricks?”

“All right,” Kaye said. “Do that, and I’ll fix us two bowls of cereal.”

The call took a few seconds to go through. The low trill of an English phone was quickly interrupted by a breathless, “Fuck it’s late and I’m busy. Who’s this?”

“Mitch Rafelson.”

“Indeed. Pardon me while I wrap myself. I hate talking half-naked.”

“Half!” exclaimed a perturbed woman in the same room. “Tell them I’m soon to be your wife, and you are *completely* naked.”

“Shush.” Louder, phone half-muffled, Merton called to the woman,

*“She’s getting her essentials and going into the next room.”* Merton removed his hand and brought his mouth closer to the phone. “We need to talk in private, Mitchell.”

“I’m calling from Baltimore.”

“How far from Bethesda is that?”

“A ways.”

“NIH have you in the loop yet?”

“No,” Mitch said.

“Marge Cross? Ah . . . Kaye Lang?”

Mitch winced. Merton’s instincts were uncanny. “I’m a simple anthropologist, Oliver.”

“All right. The room’s empty. I can tell you. The situation in Innsbruck has hotted up considerably. It’s gone beyond fistfights. Now they don’t even like each other. There’s been a falling-out, and one of the principals wants to talk to you.”

“Who?”

“Actually, he says he’s been a sympathizer since the beginning. Says he called you to tell you they’d found the cave.”

Mitch remembered the call. “He didn’t leave a name.”

“Nor will he now. But he’s on the level, he’s important, and he wants to talk. I’d like to be there.”

“Sounds like a political move,” Mitch said.

“I’m sure he’d like to spread some rumors and see what the repercussions are. He wants to meet in New York, not Innsbruck or Vienna. At the home of an acquaintance in Beresford. Do you know anybody there?”

“Can’t say that I do,” Mitch replied.

“He hasn’t told me what he’s thinking yet, but . . . I can put a few links together and it all makes a very nice chain.”

“I’ll think about it and call you back in a few minutes.”

Merton did not sound happy about waiting even that length of time.

“Just a few minutes,” Mitch assured him. He hung up. Kaye emerged from the kitchen with two bowls of cereal and a pitcher of milk on a tray. She had put on a calf-length black robe tied with a red cord. The robe showed off her legs, and, when she bent over, neatly revealed a breast. “Rice Chex or Raisin Bran?”

“Chex, please.”

“Well?”

Mitch smiled. “May I share breakfast with you for a thousand years.”

Kaye looked both confused and pleased. She placed the tray on the



coffee table and smoothed her robe over her hips, primping with a kind of awkward self-consciousness that Mitch found very endearing. “You know what I like to hear,” she said.

Mitch gently pulled her down to the couch beside him. “Merton says there’s a breakdown in Innsbruck, a schism. An important member of the team wants to talk to me. Merton’s going to write a story about the mummies.”

“He’s interested in the same things we are,” Kaye said speculatively. “He thinks something important is happening. And he’s following every angle, from me to Innsbruck.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Mitch said.

“Is he intelligent?”

“Reasonably. Maybe very intelligent. I don’t know; I’ve only spent a few hours with him.”

“Then you should go. You should find out what he knows. Besides, it’s closer to Albany.”

“That’s true. Ordinarily, I’d pack my small bag and hop the next train.”

Kaye poured her milk. “But?”

“I don’t just love and run. I want to spend the next few weeks with you, uninterrupted. Never leave your side.” Mitch stretched his neck, rubbed it. Kaye reached out to help him rub. “That sounds clinging,” he said.

“I want you to cling,” she said. “I feel very possessive and very protective.”

“I can call Merton and tell him no.”

“But you won’t.” She kissed him thoroughly and bit at his lip. “I’m sure you’ll have some amazing tales to tell. I did a lot of thinking last night, and now I have a lot of very focused work to do. When it’s all done, I may have some amazing tales to tell *you*, Mitch.”

## 53

### Washington, D.C.

**A**ugustine jogged briskly along the Capitol mall, following the dirt jogging path beneath the cherry trees, now dropping the last of their blossoms. An agent in a dark blue suit followed at a steady lope, turning to run backward for a moment and scan the trail behind.

Dicken stood with his hands in his jacket pockets, waiting for Augustine

to approach. He had driven in from Bethesda an hour earlier, braving rush-hour traffic, hating this clandestine nonsense with something approaching fury. Augustine stopped beside him and jogged in place, stretching his arms.

“Good morning, Christopher,” he said. “You should jog more often.”

“I like being fat,” Dicken said, his face coloring.

“Nobody likes being fat.”

“Well, in that case, I’m not fat,” Dicken said. “What are we today, Mark, secret agents? Informers?” He wondered why they had not yet assigned an agent to him. He concluded it was because he was not as yet a public figure.

“Goddamn damage control experts,” Augustine said. “A man named Mitchell Rafelson spent the night with dear Ms. Kaye Lang at her lovely condominium in Baltimore.”

Dicken’s heart sank.

“You walked around the San Diego Zoo with the two of them. Got him a badge into a closed Americol party. All very convivial. Did you introduce them, Christopher?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Dicken said, surprised at how miserable he felt.

“That wasn’t wise. Do you know his record?” Augustine asked pointedly. “The body snatcher from the Alps? He’s a nut case, Christopher.”

“I thought he might have something to contribute.”

“To support whose view in this mess?”

“A defensible view,” Dicken said vaguely, looking away. The morning was cool, pleasant, and there were quite a few joggers on the mall, getting in a little outdoors activity before sealing themselves into their government offices.

“The whole thing smells. It looks like some kind of an end run to refocus the whole project, and that concerns me.”

“We had a point of view, Mark. A defensible point of view.”

“Marge Cross tells me there’s talk about *evolution*,” Augustine said.

“Kaye has been putting together an explanation that involves evolution,” Dicken said. “It’s all predicted in her papers, Mark—and Mitch Rafelson has been doing some research along those lines, as well.”

“Marge thinks there will be severe fallout if this theory gets publicized,” Augustine said. He stopped windmilling his arms and performed neck-stretch exercises, grabbing each upper arm with the opposite hand, applying tension, sighting along the extended arm as he bent it back as far as it would go. “No reason for it to get that far. I’ll stop it right here

and now. We got a preprint from the Paul-Ehrlich-Institut in Germany this morning that they've found mutated forms of SHEVA. Several of them. Diseases mutate, Christopher. We'll have to withdraw the vaccine trials and start all over again. That pushes all our hopes onto a really bad option. My job might not survive that kind of upheaval."

Dicken watched Augustine prance in place, pounding the ground with his feet. Augustine stopped and caught his breath. "There could be twenty or thirty thousand people demonstrating on the mall tomorrow. Somebody's leaked a report from the Taskforce on the RU-486 results."

Dicken felt something twist inside him, a small little pop, combined disappointment with Kaye and with all the work he had done. All the time he had wasted. He could not see a way around the problem of a messenger that mutated, changing its message. No biological system would ever give a messenger that kind of control.

He had been wrong. Kaye Lang had been wrong.

The agent tapped his watch, but Augustine screwed up his face and shook his head in annoyance.

"Tell me all about it, Christopher," Augustine said, "and then I'll decide whether I'm going to let you keep your goddamned job."

## 54

### Baltimore

**K**aye walked with steady confidence from her building to Americol, looking up at the Bromo-Seltzer Tower—so named because it had once carried a huge blue antacid bottle on its peak. Now it carried just the name; the bottle had been removed decades ago.

Kaye could not shake Mitch from her thoughts, but oddly, he was not a distraction. Her thoughts were focused; she had a much clearer idea of what to look for. The play of sun and shadow pleased her as she walked past the alleys between the buildings. The day was so pretty she could almost ignore the presence of Benson. As always, he accompanied her to the lab floor, then stood by the elevators and the stairs, where everyone would have to pass his inspection.

She entered her lab and hung her purse and coat on a glassware drying rack. Five of her six assistants were in the next room, checking the results of last night's electrophoresis analysis. She was glad to have some privacy.

She sat at her small desk and pulled up the Americol intranet on the computer. It was just a few seconds from the first screen to Americol's proprietary Human Genome Project site. The database was beautifully designed and easy to poke through, with key genes identified and functions highlighted and explained in detail.

Kaye plugged in her password. In her original work, she had tracked down seven potential candidates for the expression and reassembly of complete and infectious HERV particles. The candidate genes she had thought most likely to be viable had turned out—luckily, she would have thought—to be associated with SHEVA. In her months at Americol, she had begun to study the six other candidates in detail, and had planned to move on to a list of thousands of possibly related genes.

Kaye was considered an expert, but what she was an expert in, compared to the huge world of human DNA, was a series of broken-down and seemingly abandoned shacks in a number of small and almost forgotten towns. The HERV genes were supposed to be fossils, fragments scattered through stretches of DNA less than a million base pairs long. Within such small distances, however, genes could recombine—jump from position to position—with some ease. The DNA was constantly in ferment—genes switching locations, forming little knots or fistulas of DNA, and replicating, a series of churning and twisting chains constantly being rearranged, for reasons no one could yet completely fathom. And yet SHEVA had remained remarkably stable over millions of years. The changes she was looking for would be both slight and very significant.

If she was right, she was about to overturn a major scientific paradigm, injure a lot of reputations, cause the scientific fight of the twenty-first century, a war actually, and she did not want to be an early casualty because she had come to the battlefield in half a suit of armor. Speculation about the cause was not sufficient. Extraordinary claims required extraordinary evidence.

Patiently, hoping it would be at least an hour before anyone else entered the lab, she once again compared the sequences found in SHEVA with the six other candidates. This time she looked closely at the transcription factors that triggered expression of the large protein complex. She rechecked the sequences several times before she spotted what she had known since yesterday must be there. Four of the candidates carried several such factors, all subtly different.

She sucked in her breath. For a moment she felt as if she stood on the brink of a tall cliff. The transcription factors would have to be specific for

different varieties of LPC. That meant there would be more than one gene coding for the large protein complex.

More than one station on Darwin's radio.

Last week Kaye had asked for the most accurate available sequences of over a hundred genes on several chromosomes. The manager of the genome group had told her they would be available this morning. And he had done his work well. Even scanning by eye, she was seeing interesting similarities. With so much data, however, the eye was not good enough. Using an in-house software package called METABLAST, she searched for sequences roughly homologous with the known LPC gene on chromosome 21. She requested and was authorized to use most of the computing power of the building's mainframe for over three minutes.

When the search was completed, Kaye had the matches she had hoped for—and hundreds more besides, all buried in so-called junk DNA, each subtly different, offering a different set of instructions, a different set of strategies.

LPC genes were common throughout the twenty-two human autosomes, the chromosomes that did not code for sex.

"Backups," Kaye whispered, as if she might be overheard, "alternates," and then she felt a chill. She pushed back from the desk and paced around the lab. "Oh, my God. What in hell am I thinking here?"

SHEVA in its present form was not working properly. The new babies were dying. The experiment—the creation of a new subspecies—was being thwarted by outside enemies, other viruses, not tame, not co-opted ages ago and made part of the human tool kit.

She had found another link in the chain of evidence. If you wanted a message delivered, you would send many messengers. And the messengers could carry different messages. Surely a complex mechanism that governed the shape of a species would not rely on one little messenger and one fixed message. It would automatically alternate subtle designs, hoping to dodge whatever bullets might be out there, problems it could not directly sense or anticipate.

What she was looking at could explain the vast quantities of HERV and other mobile elements—all designed to guarantee an efficient and successful transition to a new phenotype, a new variety of human. *We just don't know how it works. It's so complicated . . . it could take a lifetime to understand!*

What chilled her was that in the present atmosphere, these results would be completely misinterpreted.

She pushed her chair back from the computer. All of the energy she had had in the morning, all the optimism, the glow from her night with Mitch, seemed hollow.

She could hear voices down the hall. The hour had passed quickly. She stood and folded the printout of the candidate sites. She would have to take these to Jackson; that was her first duty. Then she had to talk with Dicken. They had to plan a response.

She pulled her coat from the drying rack and slipped it on. She was about to leave when Jackson stepped in from the hall. Kaye looked at him with some shock; he had never come down to her lab before. He looked tired and deeply concerned. He, too, held a slip of paper.

"I thought I should be the first to let you know," he said, waving the paper under her nose.

"Let me know what?" Kaye asked.

"How wrong you can possibly be. SHEVA is mutating."

Kaye finished the day in a three-hour round of meetings with senior staff and assistants, a litany of schedules, deadlines, the day-to-day minutiae of research in a small part of a very large corporation, mind-numbing at the best of times, but now almost intolerable. Jackson's smug condescension at the delivery of the news from Germany had almost goaded her into a sharp rejoinder, but she had simply smiled, said she was already working on the problem, and left . . . To stand for five minutes in the women's rest room, staring at herself in a mirror.

She walked from Americol to the condominium tower, accompanied by the ever-watchful Benson, and wondered if last night had just been a dream. The doorman opened the big glass door, smiled politely at them both, and then gave the agent a brotherly nod. Benson joined her in the elevator car. Kaye had never been at ease with the agent, but had managed in the past to keep up polite conversation. Now, she could only grunt to his inquiry about how her day had gone.

When she opened the door at 2011, for a moment she thought Mitch was not there, and let out her breath with a small whistle. He had gotten what he wanted and now she was alone again to face her failures, her most brilliant and devastating failures.

But Mitch came out of the small side office with a most pleasing haste and stood in front of her for a moment, searching her face, estimating the situation, before he held her, a little too gently.

"Squeeze me until I squeak," she said. "I'm having a really bad day."

That did not stop her from wanting him. Again the love was both intense and wet and full of a marvelous grace she had never felt before. She held on to these moments and when they could go on no more, when Mitch lay beside her covered with beads of sweat and the sheets beneath her were uncomfortably damp, she felt like crying.

"It's getting really tough," she said, her chin quivering.

"Tell me," he said.

"I think I'm wrong, we're wrong. I know I'm not but everything is telling me I'm wrong."

"That doesn't make sense," Mitch said.

"No!" she cried. "I predicted this, I saw it happening, but not soon enough, and they aced me. Jackson aced me. I haven't talked with Marge Cross, but . . ."

It took Mitch several minutes to work the details out of her, and even then, he could only half follow what she was saying. The short form was that she felt new expressions of SHEVA were stimulating new varieties of LPCs, large protein complexes, in case the first signal on Darwin's radio had not been effective or had met with problems. Jackson and nearly everyone else believed they were encountering a mutated form of SHEVA, perhaps even more virulent.

"Darwin's radio," Mitch repeated, mulling over the term.

"The signaling mechanism. SHEVA."

"Mmm hmm," he said. "I think your explanation makes more sense."

"Why does it make more sense? Please tell me I'm not just being pig-headed and *wrong*."

"Put the facts together," Mitch said. "Run it through the science mill again. We know speciation sometimes occurs in small leaps. Because of the mummies in the Alps, we know SHEVA was active in humans who were producing new kinds of babies. Speciation is rare even on a historical time scale—and SHEVA was unknown in medical science until just recently. There are far too many coincidences if SHEVA and evolution in small leaps aren't connected."

She rolled to face him, and ran her fingers along his cheeks, around his eyes, in a way that made him flinch.

"Sorry," she said. "It is so marvelous that you're here. You restore me. This afternoon—I have never felt so lost . . . not since Saul was gone."

"I don't think Saul ever knew what he had, with you," Mitch said.

Kaye let this lie between them for a moment, to see if she quite

understood what it meant. “No,” she said finally. “He wasn’t capable of knowing.”

“I know who and what you are,” Mitch said.

“Do you?”

“Not yet,” he confessed, and smiled. “But I’d like to try.”

“Listen to us,” Kaye said. “Tell me what you did today.”

“I went to the YMCA and cleared out my locker. I took a cab back here and lounged around like a gigolo.”

“I mean it,” Kaye said, gripping his hand tighter.

“I made some phone calls. I’m going to take a train to New York tomorrow to meet with Merton and our mysterious stranger from Austria. We’re getting together at a place that Merton describes as a ‘wonderful, thoroughly corrupting old mansion upstate.’ Then I’ll take the train to Albany for my interview at SUNY.”

“Why a mansion?”

“I have no idea,” Mitch said.

“You’re coming back?”

“If you want me to.”

“Oh, I want you to. You don’t need to worry about that,” Kaye said. “We’re not going to have much time to think, much less worry.”

“Wartime romance is the sweetest,” Mitch said.

“Tomorrow is going to be much worse,” Kaye said. “Jackson is going to make a stink.”

“Let him,” Mitch said. “In the long run, I don’t think anybody is going to be able to stop this. Slow it down, maybe, but not stop it.”

## 55

### Washington, D.C.

**D**icken stood on the Capitol steps. It was a warm evening, but he could not help but feel a little cold, listening to a sound like the sea, broken by waves of echoing voices. He had never felt so isolated, so distant, as he did now, staring out over what must have been fifty thousand human beings, stretching from the Capitol to the Washington Monument and beyond. The fluid mass pushed against the barricades along the bottom of the steps, streamed around the tent pavilions and speakers’ stands, listened



intently to a dozen different speeches being delivered, milling slowly like stirred soup in a huge tureen. He caught bits and pieces of breeze-tattered speeches, incomplete but suggestive: bits of raw language charging the mass.

Dicken had spent his life hunting down and trying to understand the diseases that affected these people, acting as if in some way he were invulnerable. Because of skill and a little luck he had never caught anything but a bout of dengue fever, bad enough but not fatal. He had always thought of himself as separate, a little superior perhaps but infinitely sympathetic. The self-delusion of an educated and intellectually isolated fool.

He understood better now. The mass called the shots. If the mass could not understand, then nothing he did, or Augustine did, or the Taskforce, would much matter. And the mass quite clearly understood nothing. The voices drifting his direction spoke of outrage at a government that would slaughter children, voices angrily denouncing "morning-after genocide."

He had thought about calling Kaye Lang earlier, to regain his composure, his sense of balance, but he hadn't. That was done with, finished in a very real way.

Dicken descended the steps, passing news crews, cameras, clumps of office workers, men in blue and brown suits and dark glasses and wearing microphones in their ears. The police and National Guard troops were determined to keep people away from the Capitol, but did not prevent individuals from joining the crowd.

He had already seen a few senators descend in a tight-packed group and join the mass. They must have sensed they could not be separate, superior, not now. They belonged with their people. He had thought them both opportunistic and courageous.

Dicken climbed over the barricades and pushed into the crowd. It was time to catch this fever and understand the symptoms. He had looked deep inside himself and did not like what he saw. Better to be one of the troops on the front line, part of the mass, ingest its words and smells, and come back infected so that he could in turn be analyzed, understood, made useful again.

That would be a kind of conversion. An end to the pain of separation. And if the mass should kill him, maybe that was what he deserved for his previous aloofness and his failures.

Younger women in the crowd wore colored masks. All the men wore white or black masks. Many wore gloves. More than just a few men wore tight-fitting black jumpers with industrial fume masks, so-called "filter"

suits, guaranteed by various enterprising merchants to prevent the shedding of “devil virus.”

People in the crowd at this end of the mall were laughing, half listening to a speaker under the nearest pavilion—a civil rights leader from Philadelphia sounding out in deep, rich tones, like caramel. The speaker talked of leadership and responsibility, what the government should do to control this plague, and possibly, just possibly, where the plague had arisen, inside the secret bowels of the government itself.

“Some cry out it has its birth in Africa, but *we* are sick, not Africa. Others cry out it is the devil’s disease that strikes us, that it is foretold, to punish—”

Dicken moved on until he came under the more frantic voice of a television evangelist. The evangelist was brightly illuminated, a large and sweating man with a square head wearing a straining black business suit. He pointed and danced around his stage, exhorting the crowd to pray for guidance, to look deep inside.

Dicken thought of his grandmother, who had liked this sort of thing. He moved on again.

It was getting dark, and he could sense a growing tension in the crowd. Somewhere, out of earshot, something had happened, something had been said. The dark triggered a change of mood. Lights turned on around the mall, casting the crowd in etched and lurid orange. He looked up and saw helicopters at a respectful altitude, buzzing like insects. For a moment, he wondered if they were all going to be tear-gassed, shot, but the disruption was not from the soldiers, the police, the helicopters.

The impulse came in a wave.

He experienced an expectant hunger, felt its advancing tide, hoped whatever was disturbing the crowd would reveal something to him. But it was not really news at all. It was simply a propulsion, first this way, then that, and he walked with the tight-packed crowd ten feet north, ten feet south, as if caught in a bizarre dance step.

Dicken’s survival instincts now told him it was time to cut the personal angst, cut the psychological crap and get out of the flow. From a speaker nearby, he heard a voice of caution. From the man next to him, dressed in a filter suit, he heard, muffled through the filters, “It’s not just one disease now. It’s on the news. There’s a new plague.”

A middle-aged woman in a flower print dress carried a small Walkman TV. She held it out for those around her, showing a tiny framed head speaking in tinny tones. Dicken could not hear these words.

He worked toward the edge, slowly and politely, as if wading through nitroglycerin. His shirt and light jacket were soaked with sweat. A few scattered others, born observers, like him, sensed the change, and their eyes flashed. The crowd smothered in its own confusion. The night was deep and humid and stars could not be seen and the orange lights along the mall and around the tents and platforms made everything look bitter.

Dicken stood near the Capitol steps again, within twenty or thirty people of the barricades, where he had stood an hour before. Mounted police, men and women on beautiful brown horses now rich amber in the unreal light, moved back and forth along the perimeter, dozens of them, more than he had ever seen before. The National Guard troops had pulled back, forming a line, but not a dense line. They were not ready. They did not expect trouble; they had no helmets or shields.

Voices immediately around him, whispering, subdued—

“Can’t”

“Children have the”

“My grandchildren will”

“The last generation”

“Book”

“Stop”

Then, an eerie quiet. Dicken was five people from the edge. They would not let him move any farther. Faces dull and resentful, like sheep, eyes blank, hands shoving. Ignorant. Frightened.

He hated them, wanted to smash their noses. He was a fool; he did not want to be among the sheep. “Excuse me.” No response. The mob’s mind had been made up; he could feel it deliberately pulsing. The mob waited, intent, vacant.

Light flared in the east and Dicken saw the Washington Monument turn white, brighter than the floodlights. From the dark muggy sky came a loose rumble. Drops of rain touched the crowd. Faces looked up.

He could smell the mob’s eagerness. Something had to change. They were being pressed by a single concern: *something had to change*.

The rain came pouring. People raised their hands over their heads. Smiles broke out. Faces accepted the rain and people spun as best they could. Others shoved the spinners and they stopped, dismayed.

The crowd spasmed and suddenly expelled him and he made it to the barricades and confronted a policeman. “Jesus,” the policeman said, dancing back three steps, and the mob shoved over the barricades. The horsemen tried to push them back, weaving through. A woman screamed. The

mob surged and swallowed the policemen mounted and on foot, before they could raise their batons or unholster their guns. A horse was pushed up onto the steps and stumbled, falling over into the mob, its rider rolling off, a boot flung high.

Dicken shouted “Staff!” and ran up the Capitol steps, between the guardsmen, who ignored him. He was shaking his head and laughing, glad to be free, waiting for the melee to really begin. But the mob was right behind him, and there was barely time to start running again, ahead of the people, the scattered gunshots, the wet and spreading and stinking mass.

56

New York

**M**itch saw the morning headlines on a rack of *Daily News* at Penn Station:

RIOT IN FRONT OF CAPITOL  
Senate Stormed  
Four Senators Die; Dozens Dead,  
Thousands Injured

He and Kaye had spent the night eating by candlelight and making love. Very romantic, very out of touch. They had parted just an hour ago; Kaye was getting dressed, choosing her colors carefully, expecting a difficult day.

He picked up a paper and boarded the train. As he took his seat and spread the paper open, the train began to pull out, picking up speed, and he wondered if Kaye was safe, whether the riot had been spontaneous or organized, whether it really mattered.

The people had spoken, or rather, snarled. They had had enough of failure and inaction in Washington. The president was meeting with security advisors, the joint chiefs of staff, the heads of select committees, the chief justice. To Mitch, that sounded like a soft approach preliminary to declaring martial law.

He did not want to be on the train. He could not see what Merton could do for him, or for Kaye; and he could not picture himself lecturing on bone-head bone-ology to college students and never setting foot on a dig again.

Mitch slipped the folded paper onto his seat and made his way down

the aisle to the public phone box at the end of the car. He called Kaye's number, but she had already left, and he did not think it would be politic to call her at Americol.

He took a deep breath, tried to calm himself, and returned to his seat.

## 57

### Baltimore

**D**icken met Kaye in the Americol cafeteria at ten. The conference was scheduled for six o'clock, and a number of visitors had been added: the vice president and the president's science advisor among them.

Dicken looked terrible. He had not slept all night. "My turn to be a basket case," he said. "I think the debate is over. We're down, we're out. We can do some more shouting, but I don't know anyone who will listen."

"What about the science?" Kaye asked plaintively. "You tried hard to bring us back in line after the herpes disaster."

"SHEVA mutates," Dickens said. He beat his hand rhythmically on the table.

"I've explained that to you."

"You've only shown that SHEVA mutated a long time ago. It's just a human retrovirus, an old one, with a slow but very clever way of reproducing."

"Christopher . . ."

"You're going to get your hearing," Dicken said. He finished his cup of coffee and stood up from the table. "Don't explain it to me. Explain it to *them*."

Kaye looked up at him, angry and puzzled. "Why change your mind after so long?"

"I started out looking for a virus. Your papers, your work, suggested it might be something else. We can all be misled. Our job is to look for evidence, and when it's compelling, we have to give up our most cherished little notions."

Kaye stood beside him and poked her finger. "Tell me this is entirely about science."

"Of course not. I was on the Capitol steps, Kaye. I could have been one of those poor bastards who got shot or beaten to death."

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Tell me you returned Mitch’s call, after our meeting in San Diego.”

“I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

Dicken glared back at her. “After last night, anything personal is trivial, Kaye.”

“Is it?”

Dicken folded his arms. “I could never present someone like Mitch to someone like Augustine and hope to build our case. Mitch had some interesting information, but it only proves that SHEVA has been with us for a long time.”

“He believed in both of us.”

“He believes in you more, I think,” Dicken said, his eyes darting away.

“Has that affected your judgment?”

Dicken flared. “Has it affected *yours*? I can’t take a pee without someone telling someone else how long I spent in the john. But you, you bring Mitch up to your *apartment*.”

Kaye crowded in on Dicken. “Augustine told you I slept with Mitch?”

Dicken would not be crowded. He pushed Kaye gently back and side-stepped. “I hate this as much as anyone, but it’s the way we have to be!”

“According to whom? Augustine?”

“Augustine’s been burned, too. We’re in a crisis. Goddamn it, Kaye, that should be obvious to everyone by now.”

“I never said I was a saint, Christopher! I trusted you not to abandon me when you brought me into this.”

Dicken lowered his head and looked to one side, then the other, his misery and anger tearing him. “I thought you might be a partner.”

“What sort of partner, Christopher?”

“A . . . supporter. An intellectual equal.”

“A girlfriend?”

For a moment, Dicken’s face put on the expression of a small boy handed a crushing bit of news. He looked at Kaye with both longing and sadness. He could hardly stand up straight he was so tired.

Kaye pulled back and reconsidered. She had done nothing to lead him on; she had never regarded herself as a raving beauty whose attractions were irresistible to men. She could not fathom the depth of this man’s feeling.

“You never told me you felt anything more than curiosity,” Kaye said.

“I never move fast enough, and I never say what I mean,” Dicken said. “I don’t blame you for not suspecting.”

“But it hurt you that I chose Mitch.”

“I can’t deny it hurts. But it doesn’t affect my scientific judgment.”

Kaye walked around the table, shaking her head. “What can we salvage from this?”

“You can present your evidence. I just don’t believe it’s going to be compelling.” He swung around and walked out of the cafeteria.

Kaye busied her tray and dishes to the kitchen conveyer belt. She glanced at her watch. She needed a strong dose of the personal, the face-to-face; she wanted to speak with Luella Hamilton. She could make it out to NIH and be back before the meeting.

At the floor security desk, she called for a company car.

## 58

### Beresford, New York

**M**itch stepped out under the soaring white tent pavilion that covered the antique train station of the small town of Beresford. He shaded his eyes against the morning sun and glanced at a planter loud with yellow daffodils, near a bright red garbage can. He was the only one getting off the train.

The air smelled of hot grease and pavement and fresh-cut grass. He looked for someone to meet him, expecting Merton. The town, visible across the tracks, accessible by a pedestrian bridge, was little more than a row of shops and the Amtrak parking lot.

A black Lexus pulled into the parking lot, and Mitch saw a redheaded man step out, look through the chicken-wire fencing at the station, and wave.

“His name is William Daney. He owns most of Beresford—his family does, that is. They have an estate about ten minutes from here that rivals Buckingham Palace. I was naïve enough to forget what kind of royalty America cherishes—old money spent in strange ways.”

Mitch listened to Merton as the journalist drove him down a winding two-lane road between splendid hardwood trees, maple and oak, new leaves so intensely green he felt as if he were in a movie. The sun threw dazzles of gold across the road. They hadn’t seen another car in five minutes.

“Daney used to be a yachtsman. Spent millions perfecting a graceful big boat, lost a few races. That was more than twenty years ago. Then he discovered anthropology. Problem is, he hates dirt. Loves water, hates dirt, hates to dig. I love driving in America. But this is almost like driving in England. I could even”—Merton swerved briefly over the center line into the left lane—“Follow my instincts.” He quickly corrected, smiled at Mitch. “Pity about the riots. England’s still relatively calm, but I’m expecting a change of government any minute. Dear old PM doesn’t get it yet. Still thinks switching to the Euro is his biggest worry. Hates the gynecological aspect of this whole mess. How’s Mr. Dicken? Ms. Lang?”

“They’re fine,” Mitch said, unwilling to talk much until he saw what he was being dragged into. He liked Merton well enough, found him interesting, but did not trust him one bit. He resented that the man seemed to know so much about his private life.

Daney’s mansion made a three-story, gray stone curve at the end of a redbrick drive flanked by beautifully manicured lawns, perfect as a putting green. A few gardeners were out trimming hedges, and an elderly woman in jodhpurs and a broad and ragged straw hat waved at them as Merton drove past. “Mrs. Daney, our host’s mum,” Merton said, waving out the window. “Lives in the housekeeper’s cottage. Nice old woman. Doesn’t go into her son’s rooms very often.”

Merton parked in front of the brownstone steps leading to the huge, double-door entrance.

“Everybody’s here,” he said. “You, me, Daney, and *Herr Professor* Friedrich Brock, formerly of the University of Innsbruck.”

“Brock?”

“Yes.” Merton smiled. “He says he met you once.”

“He did,” Mitch said. “Once.”

The interior of the Daney mansion was shadowy, a huge hall paneled with dark wood. Three parallel beams of sun dropped through a skylight onto the age-darkened limestone floor, cutting over a huge Chinese silk rug, in the middle of which rose a round table covered with a hemisphere of flowers. Just to one side of the table, in shadow, stood a man.

“William, this is Mitch Rafelson,” Merton said, taking Mitch’s elbow and leading him forward.

The man in shadow stuck out his hand into one of the shafts of sun, and three gold rings gleamed on thick, strong fingers. Mitch shook the hand



firmly. Daney was in his early fifties, tanned, with yellow-white hair receding from a Wagnerian forehead. He had small, perfect lips quick to smile, dark brown eyes, baby-smooth cheeks. His shoulders were broadened by a padded gray blazer, but his arms looked well-muscled.

"It's an honor to meet you, sir," Daney said. "I'd have bought them from your friends if they had been offered, you know. And then I would have turned them over to Innsbruck. I've told this to *Herr Professor Brock*, and he has given me absolution."

Mitch smiled to be polite. He was here to meet Brock.

"Actually, William doesn't own any human remains," Merton said.

"I'm happy with duplicates, casts, sculptures," Daney said. "I'm not a scientist, merely a hobbyist, but I hope I honor the past by trying to understand it."

"Into the Hall of Humanity," Merton said with a flourish of his hand. Daney tossed his head proudly and led the way.

The hall filled a former ballroom in the eastern curve of the mansion. Mitch had seen nothing like it outside of a museum: dozens of glass cases arranged in rows, with carpeted aisles in between, each case containing casts and replicas of every major specimen of anthropology. *Australopithecus afarensis* and *robustus*; *Homo habilis* and *erectus*. Mitch counted sixteen different Neandertal skeletons, all professionally mounted, and six of them had waxwork reconstructions of how the individuals might have looked in life. There was no attempt to avoid offending modesty: All the models were nude and hairless, avoiding any speculation on clothing or hair patterns.

Row upon row of hairless apes, illuminated by elegant and respectfully softened spots, stared blankly at Mitch as he walked past.

"Incredible," Mitch said, despite himself. "Why have I never heard of you before, Mr. Daney?"

"I only talk to a few people. The Leakey family, Björn Kurtén, a few others. My close friends. I'm eccentric, I know, but I don't like to flaunt it."

"You're among the elect now," Merton said to Mitch.

"Professor Brock is in the library." Daney pointed the way. Mitch would have enjoyed spending more time in the hall. The wax sculptures were superb and the reproductions of the specimens first rate, almost indistinguishable from the specimens themselves.

"No, actually, I am here. I couldn't wait." Brock stepped around a case and advanced. "I feel as if I know you, Dr. Rafelson. And we do have mutual acquaintances, do we not?"

Mitch shook hands with Brock, under Daney's beaming and approving

inspection. They walked several dozen yards to an adjacent library, furnished in the epitome of Edwardian elegance, three levels with railed walkways connected by two wrought-iron bridges. Huge paintings of Yosemite and the Alps in dramatic moods flanked the single high north-facing window.

They took seats around a large, low round table in the middle of the room. "My first question," Brock said, "is, do you dream of them, Dr. Rafelson? Because I do, and frequently."

Daney served the coffee himself, after it was rolled into the library by a stout, somber young woman in a black suit. He poured each of them a cup in Flora Danica china, botanical patterns in this series displaying the microscopic plants native to Denmark, based on nineteenth-century scientific art. Mitch examined his saucer, adorned with three beautifully rendered dinoflagellates, and wondered what he would do if he had all the money he could ever hope to spend.

"I myself do not believe these dreams," Brock picked up the conversation. "But these individuals do haunt me."

Mitch looked around the group, completely unsure what was expected of him. It seemed distinctly possible that associating with Daney, Brock, and even Merton, could somehow be turned to his disadvantage. Perhaps he had been battered once too often in this arena.

Merton sensed his unease. "This meeting is completely private, and will be kept secret," he said. "I don't plan to report anything said here."

"At my request," Daney said, lifting his brows emphatically.

"I wanted to tell you that you must be correct in your judgments, the judgments you have shown by seeking out certain people, and learning certain things about our own researches," Brock said. "But I have just been released from my responsibilities with regard to the Alpine mummies. The arguments have become personal, and more than a little dangerous to all our careers."

"Dr. Brock believes the mummies represent the first clear evidence of a human speciation event," Merton said, hoping to move things along.

"Subspeciation, actually," Brock said. "But the idea of a species has become so fluid in past decades, has it not? The presence of SHEVA in their tissues is most evocative, don't you think?"

Daney leaned forward in his chair, cheeks and forehead pink with the intensity of his interest.

Mitch decided he could not be reticent among such fellow travelers. "We've found other instances," he said.

"Yes, so I hear, from Oliver and from Maria Konig at the University of Washington."

"Not me, actually, but people I've talked to. I've been ineffectual, to say the least. Compromised by my own actions."

Brock dismissed this. "When I called your apartment in Innsbruck, I had forgiven you your lapse. I could sympathize, and your story rang true."

"Thank you," Mitch said, and found himself genuinely affected.

"I apologize for not revealing myself at the time, but you understand, I hope."

"I do," Mitch said.

"Tell me what's going to happen," Daney said. "Are they going to release their findings about the mummies?"

"They are," Brock said. "They are going to claim contamination, that the mummies are in fact not related. The Neandertals are going to be labeled *Homo sapiens alpinensis*, and the infant is going to be sent to Italy for study by other specialists."

"That's ridiculous," Mitch said.

"Yes, and they will not get away with this pretense forever, but for the next few years, the conservatives, the hard-liners, will rule. They will mete out information at will, to those they trust not to rock the boat, to agree with them, like zealous scholars defending the Dead Sea Scrolls. They are hoping to see their careers through without having to deal with a revolution that would topple both them and their views."

"Incredible," Daney said.

"No, *human*, and we all study the human, no? Was not our female injured by someone who didn't want her baby to be born?"

"We don't know that," Mitch said.

"I know that," Brock said. "I reserve my own irrational domains of belief, if only to defend myself against the zealots. Is this not the sequence that you dream, in some form or another, as if we have these events buried in our very blood?"

Mitch nodded.

"Perhaps this was the original sin of our kind, that our Neandertal ancestors wished to stop progress, hold on to their unique position . . . By killing the new children. Those who would become us. Now we do the same thing, perhaps?"

Daney shook his head, quietly growling. Mitch observed this with some interest, then turned to Brock. "You must have examined the DNA results," he said. "It must be available for criticism by others."

Brock reached down by his seat and brought up a briefcase. He tapped it meaningfully. "I have all the material here, on DVD-ROM, massive graphics files, tabulations, the results from different labs around the world. Oliver and I are going to make it available on the Web, announce the coverup, and let the chips fall where they may."

"What we'd really like to do is make this relevant in the broadest way imaginable," Merton added. "We'd like to present conclusive evidence that evolution is knocking on our door again."

Mitch bit his lip, thinking this over. "Have you talked with Christopher Dicken?"

"He told me he can't help me," Merton said.

This shook Mitch. "Last time I spoke with him, he seemed enthusiastic, even gung ho," Mitch said.

"He's had a change of heart," Merton said. "We need to bring Dr. Lang onboard. I think I can convince some of the University of Washington people, certainly Dr. Konig and Dr. Packer, perhaps even an evolutionary biologist or two."

Daney nodded enthusiastically.

Merton turned to Mitch. His lips straightened, and he cleared his throat. "Your look says you don't approve?"

"We can't exactly go at this like we were college freshmen in a debating society."

"I thought you were a rough-and-tumble fellow," Merton said archly.

"Wrong," Mitch said. "I love it smooth and by the book. It's life that's rough-and-tumble."

Daney grinned. "Well put. Myself, I love to be on the ground floor."

"How's that?" Merton asked.

"This is a marvelous opportunity," Daney said. "I'd like to find a willing woman and bring one of these new people into my family."

For a long moment, neither Merton, Brock, nor Mitch could find the right words to reply.

"Interesting idea," Merton said quietly, and glanced quickly at Mitch, eyebrow raised.

"If we try to kick up a storm outside the castle, we might close more doors than we open," Brock admitted.

“Mitch,” Merton said, subdued, “tell us, then, how should we go about this . . . more by the book?”

“We put together a group of true experts,” Mitch said, and thought intently for a moment. “Packer and Maria Konig make a fine start. We recruit from their colleagues and contacts—the geneticists and molecular biologists at the University of Washington, NIH, and half a dozen other universities, research centers. Oliver, you probably know whom I’m referring to . . . maybe better than I do.”

“The more progressive evolutionary biologists,” Merton said, and then frowned, as if that might be an oxymoron. “Right now, that’s pretty well limited to molecular biologists and a select few paleontologists, like Jay Niles.”

“I know only conservatives,” Brock said. “I have been drinking coffee with the wrong crowd in Innsbruck.”

“We need a scientific foundation,” Mitch said. “An overwhelming quorum of respected scientists.”

“That’ll take weeks, even months,” Merton said. “Everyone has careers to protect.”

“What if we fund more research in the private sector?” Daney said.

“That’s where Mr. Daney could be helpful,” Merton said, looking from beneath shaggy red eyebrows at their host. “You have the resources to put together a first-class conference, and that’s just what we need now. Counter the public pronouncements from the Taskforce.”

Daney’s expression dimmed. “How much would that cost? Hundreds of thousands, or millions?”

“The former rather than the latter, I suspect,” Merton said with a chuckle.

Daney gave them a troubled glance. “That much money, and I’ll have to ask Mother,” he said.

**The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda**

“I let her go,” Dr. Lipton said, sitting down behind her desk. “I let them all go. The head of clinic research said we had enough information to make our patient recommendations and bring the experiments to a halt.”

Kaye stared at her, dumfounded. “You just . . . let them out of the clinic, to go home?”

Lipton nodded, jaw lightly dimpled. “It wasn’t my call, Kaye. But I have to agree. We were beyond our ethical limits.”

“What if they need help at home?”

Lipton looked down at the desk. “We advised them that their infants were likely to be born with severe defects, and that they would not survive. We referred them to outpatient treatment at their nearest hospitals. We’re picking up all their expenses, even if there are complications. Especially if there are complications. They’re all within the period of efficacy.”

“They’re taking RU-486?”

“It’s their choice.”

“It isn’t policy, Denise.”

“I know that. Six of the women asked for the opportunity. They wanted to abort. At that point, we can’t continue.”

“Did you tell them—”

“Kaye, our guidelines are crystal clear. If there’s a judgment that the infants could endanger the mother’s health, we give them the means to terminate. I support their freedom to choose.”

“Of course, Denise, but . . .” Kaye turned around, examining the familiar office, the charts, the pictures of fetuses at different stages of development. “I can’t believe this.”

“Augustine asked us to hold off giving them the RU-486 until a clear policy could be established. But the head of clinical research calls the shots.”

“All right,” Kaye said. “Who *didn’t* ask for the drug?”

“Luella Hamilton,” Lipton said. “She took it with her, promised to check in with her pediatrician regularly, but she did not take it under our supervision.”

“It’s over, then?”

“We’ve pulled our finger out of the pie,” Lipton said softly. “We don’t have a choice. Ethically, politically, we’re going to get hit whatever we do.”

We chose ethics and support for our patients. If it were today, however . . . We have new orders from the secretary of Health and Human Services. No recommendations to abort and no dispensing of RU-486. We got out of the baby business just under the wire.”

“I don’t have Mrs. Hamilton’s home address or phone number,” Kaye said.

“You won’t get it from me, either. She has a right to privacy.” Lipton stared at her. “Don’t go outside the system, Kaye.”

“I think the system is going to eject me any minute now,” Kaye said. “Thanks, Denise.”

**60**

**New York**

**O**n the train to Albany, surrounded by the musty smells of passengers, sun-warmed fabric, disinfectant, plastic, Mitch sank into his seat. He felt as if he had just escaped from Wonderland. Daney’s enthusiasm for bringing a “new person” into the family both fascinated and frightened him. The human race had grown so cerebral, and had assumed so much control of its biology, that this unexpected and ancient form of reproduction, of creating variety in the species, could be stopped in its tracks, or engaged in as if it were some kind of game.

He stared out the window at small towns, forests of young trees, bigger towns with gray expanses of warehouses, factories dull and dirty and productive.

**61**

**Americol Headquarters, Baltimore**

**K**aye picked up the papers she had ordered from Medline through the library, twenty copies each of eight different papers, all neatly collated. She shook her head and skimmed one of the folios as she boarded the elevator.

She took an additional five minutes going through the security checkpoints on the tenth floor. Agents waved wands, scanned her photo ID, and then passed sniffers over her hands and purse. Finally, the head of the vice

president's Secret Service detail asked for someone inside the executive dining room to vouch for her. Dicken emerged, said that he knew her, and she entered the dining room fifteen minutes into the meeting.

"You're late," Dicken whispered.

"Caught in traffic. Did you know they've ended the special study?"

Dicken nodded. "They're dancing around each other now, trying to avoid making any commitments. Nobody wants to take the blame for anything."

Kaye saw the vice president sitting near the front, the science advisor beside him. The room held at least four Secret Service agents, which made her glad Benson had stayed outside.

Soft drinks, fruit, crackers, cheese, and vegetables had been set out on a table at the back, but no one was eating. The vice president clutched a can of Pepsi.

As Dicken led Kaye to a folding chair on the left side of the room, Frank Shawbeck finished a briefing on the findings of the NIH studies.

"That took just five minutes," Dicken whispered to Kaye.

Shawbeck tapped his papers on the lectern, stepped aside, and Mark Augustine walked forward. He leaned on the lectern.

"Dr. Lang is here," he announced neutrally. "Let's move on to social issues. We have suffered twelve major riots across the U.S. Most seem to have been triggered by announcements that we are going to pass out free RU-486. No such plans were ever completed, but they were of course under discussion."

"None of these drugs are illegal," Cross said irritably. She sat to the right of the VP. "Mr. Vice President, I invited the senate majority leader to attend this meeting, and he declined. I will not be held responsible for—"

"Please, Marge," Augustine said. "We'll air our grievances in a few minutes."

"Sorry," Cross said, and folded her arms. The vice president glanced over his shoulder, surveyed the audience. His eye fell on Kaye and he seemed troubled for a moment, then turned again to face front.

"The U.S. is not alone in having to deal with civil unrest," Augustine continued. "We're heading toward a social disaster of major proportions. Plainly speaking, the general public does not understand what is going on. They react according to gut instincts, or according to the dictates of demagogues. Pat Robertson, bless him, has already recommended that God blast Washington, D.C., with Hell's hottest fires if the Taskforce is allowed to go



ahead with RU-486 testing. He's not alone. There's a real likelihood that the public will knock around until they find something, anything, more palatable than the truth, and then they'll flock behind that banner, and it's likely to have a religious aspect, and science will go right out the window."

"Amen," Cross said. Nervous laughter rippled through the small audience. The VP did not smile.

"This meeting was scheduled three days ago," Augustine continued. "The events of yesterday and today make it even more urgent that we keep our ducks in a row."

Kaye thought she could see where this was going. She looked for Robert Jackson and located him seated behind Cross. He angled his head and his eyes swung left for the briefest moment, looking right at her. Kaye felt her face grow hot.

"This is about me," she whispered to Dicken.

"Don't be arrogant," Dicken warned. "We're all here to eat a little crow today."

"We're already tabling the research on RU-486 and what has very loosely, and in very bad taste, been labeled RU-Pentium," Augustine said. "Dr. Jackson."

Jackson stood. "Preclinical trials show no efficacy by any of our vaccines or ribozyme inhibitors against newly located strains of SHEVA, loosely referred to as SHEVA-X. We have reason to believe that all new incidents of Herod's in the last three months can be attributed to lateral infection by SHEVA-X, which may come in at least nine different varieties, all with different coat glycoproteins. We can't target the LPC messenger RNA in the cytoplasm because our current ribozymes do not recognize the mutated form. In short, we're dead in the water on a vaccine. We probably won't come up with alternatives for six more months."

He sat down again.

Augustine pressed his fingers together symmetrically, making a flexible polygon. The room was silent for a long interval, absorbing the news and its implications. "Dr. Phillips."

Gary Phillips, science advisor to the president, stood and approached the lectern. "The president wishes me to convey his appreciation. We had hoped for so much more, but no research effort in any other nation has done better than the NIH and the CDC Taskforce. We have to realize we face an extremely clever and versatile opponent, and we have to speak with one voice, with resolve, to avoid pushing our nation into anarchy. That is

why I have listened to Dr. Robert Jackson and to Mark Augustine. Our situation now is very sensitive, publicly sensitive, and they tell me there is a potentially divisive disagreement between some members of the Taskforce, especially within the Americol contingent.”

“Not a split,” Jackson said acidly. “A *schism*.”

“Dr. Lang, I have been informed you do not share some of the opinions expressed by Dr. Jackson and Mark Augustine. Could you please express and clarify your point of view now, so that we may judge them?”

Kaye sat in shock for a few seconds, then stood up and managed to say, “I don’t believe a fair hearing can be given now, sir. I am apparently the only person in this room whose opinion differs from the official statement you’re obviously preparing.”

“We need solidarity, but we need to be fair,” the science advisor said. “I’ve read your papers on HERV, Ms. Lang. Your work was seminal and brilliant. You could very well be nominated for a Nobel prize. Your disagreements have to be listened to, and we’re prepared to listen. I regret nobody has the luxury of sufficient time. I wish we did.”

He motioned for her to come forward. Kaye walked to the lectern. Phillips stepped aside.

“I’ve expressed my opinions in numerous conversations with Dr. Dicken, and in one conversation with Ms. Cross and Dr. Jackson,” Kaye said. “This morning, I put together a folder of supporting articles, some of them my own, and evidence gleaned from studies in the Human Genome Project, evolutionary biology, even paleontology.” She opened her briefcase and handed the stack of folders to Nilson, who passed them to her left.

“I do not yet have the conclusive linchpin that holds my theories together,” Kaye continued, then sipped from a cup of water handed to her by Augustine. “Scientific evidence from the Innsbruck mummies has not yet been released to the public.”

Jackson rolled his eyes.

“I do have preliminary reports on evidence gathered by Dr. Dicken in Turkey and the Republic of Georgia—”

She spoke for twenty minutes, focusing on specifics and on her work with transposable elements and HERV-DL3. She came to an uncertain close by describing her successful search for different versions of the LPC on the same day she heard from Jackson that mutations in SHEVA had been located. “I believe SHEVA-X is a backup or alternate response to the failure of initial lateral transmissions to produce viable children.

Second-stage pregnancies induced by SHEVA-X will not be open to herpes viral interference. They will produce healthy and viable infants. I have no direct evidence for this; no such infants have been born that I'm aware of. But I doubt we'll have to wait long. We should be prepared."

Kaye was surprised that she had spoken as coherently as she had, yet she was miserably aware she could not possibly succeed in turning the tide. Augustine watched her closely, with some admiration, she thought, and he gave her a quick smile.

"Thank you, Dr. Lang," Phillips said. "Questions?"

Frank Shawbeck raised his hand. "Does Dr. Dicken support your conclusions?"

Dicken stepped forward. "I did for a time. Recent evidence convinced me I was wrong."

"What evidence?" Jackson called out. Augustine wagged his finger in warning, but allowed the question.

"I believe SHEVA is mutating as a disease organism mutates. Nothing convinces me it is not acting as a human pathogen."

"Isn't it true, Dr. Lang, that previous supposedly noninfectious forms of HERV have been associated with some kinds of tumors?" Shawbeck asked.

"Yes, sir. But they're also expressed in noninfectious form in many other tissues, including placenta. We only now have the opportunity to understand the many roles these endogenous retroviruses may play."

"We don't understand why they are in our genome, in our tissues, do we, Dr. Lang?" Augustine asked.

"Until now, we knew of no theory that could explain their presence."

"Other than their actions as disease-causing organisms?"

"Many substances in our bodies are both positive and necessary and yet, on occasion, are implicated in disease," Kaye responded. "Oncogenes are necessary genes that can also be provoked to cause cancer."

Jackson raised his hand. "I'd like to scotch this argument with an approach from an evolutionary perspective," he said. "While I'm not an evolutionary biologist, and I've never even played one on TV . . ."

Chuckles from all in the crowd but Shawbeck and the VP, still stony faced.

". . . I believe I had enough of the paradigm drummed into me in school and university. The paradigm is that evolution proceeds by random mutations within the genome. These mutations alter the nature of the proteins or

the other components expressed by our DNA, and are usually detrimental, causing the organism to sicken or die. Yet over deep time, and under changing conditions, mutations may also create novel forms that confer positive advantages. Am I correct so far, Dr. Lang?”

“That is the paradigm,” Kaye acknowledged.

“What you seem to be implying, however, is a hitherto undiscovered mechanism whereby the genome takes control of its own evolution, somehow sensing the right time to bring about change. Correct?”

“As far as it goes,” Kaye said. “I believe our genome is much more clever than we are. It’s taken us tens of thousands of years to get to the point where we have a hope of understanding how life works. The Earth’s species have been evolving, both competing and cooperating, for billions of years. They’ve learned how to survive under conditions we can barely imagine. Even the most conservative biologist knows different kinds of bacteria can cooperate and learn from each other—but many now understand that different species of metazoans, plants and animals like us, do much the same thing when they play their roles in any ecosystem. The Earth’s species have learned how to anticipate climate change and respond to it in advance, get a head start, and I believe, in our case, our genome is now responding to social change and the stress it causes.”

Jackson pretended to work these ideas through in his head before asking, “If you were a graduate advisor and one of your students were to propose doing a thesis on this possibility, would you encourage them?”

“No,” Kaye said bluntly.

“Why not?” Jackson pursued.

“It is not a widely defended point of view. Evolution has been a very closed-minded field in biology, and only the brave few challenge the paradigm of the Darwinian Modern Synthesis. No grad student should try it alone.”

“Charles Darwin was wrong, and you’re right?”

Kaye turned to Augustine. “Is Dr. Jackson conducting this inquisition all by himself?”

Augustine stepped forward. “This is an opportunity to answer your opponents, Dr. Lang.”

Kaye swung back and faced Jackson and the audience, eyes narrowed. “I do not challenge Charles Darwin, I have immense respect for him. Darwin would have recommended we not set our ideas in stone before we understood all the principles. I do not even reject many of the principles of

the modern synthesis; quite clearly, whatever the genome devises has to pass the test of survival. Mutation is a source of unexpected and sometimes useful novelty. But there has to be more to explain what we see in nature. The modern synthesis was devised during a period when we were just beginning to learn the nature of DNA and establish the roots of modern genetics. Darwin would have been fascinated to know what we know today, about plasmids and exchange of free DNA, about error correction within the genome, about editing and transposition and hidden viruses, about markers and gene structure, about all manner of genetic phenomena, many of which do not fit at all neatly into the most rigid interpretations of the modern synthesis.”

“Does any reputable scientist support the proposition that the genome is a self-aware ‘mind,’ able to judge the environment and determine the course of its own evolution?”

Kaye took a deep breath. “It would take me several hours to correct and expand upon that proposition as you state it, but, loosely, the answer is yes. None of them are here, unfortunately.”

“Are their views noncontroversial?”

“Of course not,” Kaye said. “Nothing in this field is noncontroversial. And I try to avoid the word ‘mind,’ because it has personal and religious connotations that are not productive. I use the term network; a perceptive and adaptive network of cooperating and competing individuals.”

“Do you believe this mind, or network, could in some way be the equivalent of God?” Jackson stated this without smugness or contempt, to her surprise.

“No,” Kaye said. “Our own brains function as perceptive and adaptive networks, but I don’t believe we are gods.”

“But our own brains produce *minds*, do they not?”

“I believe the word applies, yes.”

Jackson held up his hands in puzzled query. “So we come full circle. Some sort of Mind—perhaps with a capital *M*—determines evolution?”

“Again, emphasis and semantics are important here,” Kaye said slowly, and then realized she should have simply dismissed the question with silence.

“Have you ever had the larger scope of your theories peer-reviewed and published in a major journal?”

“No,” Kaye said. “I have expressed some aspects in my published articles on HERV-DL3, which were peer-reviewed.”

“Many of your articles were rejected by other journals, were they not?”

“Yes,” Kaye said.

“By *Cell*, for example.”

“Yes.”

“Is *Virology* the most respected journal in the field?”

“It’s an important journal,” Kaye said. “It has published very important papers.”

Jackson let this go. “I haven’t had time to read all of the material in your handout. I apologize,” he continued, getting to his feet. “To the best of your knowledge, would any of the authors whose papers you have included in your handout agree with you completely on the subject of how evolution occurs?”

“Of course not,” Kaye said. “It’s a developing field.”

“It’s not just developing, it’s infantile, isn’t that right, Dr. Lang?”

“In its infancy, yes,” Kaye shot back. “Infantile would apply to those who deny compelling evidence.” She could not help looking at Dicken. He returned her look with unhappy resolve.

Augustine stepped forward again and held out his hand. “We could go on like this for days. I’m sure it would be an interesting conference. What we must do, however, is judge whether views such as those held by Dr. Lang could prove detrimental to the goals of the Taskforce. Our mission is to protect public health, not debate rarefied issues in science.”

“That isn’t exactly fair, Mark,” Marge Cross said, rising. “Kaye, does this seem like a kangaroo court to you?”

Kaye let out a small explosion of breath, half chuckle, half sigh, looked down, and nodded.

“I wish there was time,” Marge said. “I surely do. These views are fascinating, and I share many of them, dear, but we are hopelessly mired in business and politics, and we must go with what we can all support, and with what the public will understand. I do not see the support in this room, and I know we do not have time or the will to engage in a highly public debate. Unfortunately, we are stuck with science by committee, Dr. Augustine.”

Augustine was obviously not pleased by this characterization.

Kaye looked at the vice president. The vice president stared at the folio on his lap, which he had not opened, clearly embarrassed by being stuck in a race in which he had no horse he could hope to ride. He was waiting for the debate to end.

“I understand, Marge,” Kaye said. She could not keep her voice from quavering. “Thank you for making things so clear. I see no alternative but to resign from the Taskforce. My value to Americol is probably reduced by doing that, so I offer my resignation to you, as well.”

Augustine took Dicken aside in the hallway after the meeting. Dicken had tried to catch up with Kaye, but she was far down the hall toward the elevator.

“This didn’t turn out the way I would have liked,” Augustine told him. “I don’t want her out of the Taskforce. I just don’t want her going public with these ideas. Christ, Jackson may have done us a greater disservice—”

“I know Kaye Lang well enough,” Dicken said. “She’s gone for good, and yes, she’s pissed off, and I’m as responsible as Jackson.”

“Then what in hell can you do to put things right?” Augustine asked.

Dicken shrugged loose from his grip. “Nada, Mark. Zip. And don’t ask me to try.”

Shawbeck approached them, his face grim. “There’s another march on Washington planned for tonight. Women’s groups, Christians, blacks, Hispanics. They’re evacuating the Capitol and the White House.”

“Jesus H.,” Augustine said. “What are they trying to do, shut the country down?”

“The president’s agreed to a full defense. Regular Army as well as National Guard. I think the mayor is going to declare a state of emergency in the city. The VP is being flown to Los Angeles this evening. Gentlemen, we should get out of here, too.”

Dicken heard Kaye arguing with her bodyguard. He walked briskly down the hall to see what was happening, but they were in the elevator and the door had closed by the time he arrived.

Kaye stood in the ground floor lobby, hands on her hips, shouting at the top of her lungs. “I don’t *want* your protection! I don’t want any of this! I told you—”

“I don’t have any choice, ma’am,” Benson said, standing his ground like a small bull. “We are on full alert. You can’t go back to your apartment until we get more agents here, and that’s going to take at least an hour.”

The building security guards were locking the front doors and moving barricades into position. Kaye twirled, saw the barricades, the curious people beyond the glass doors. Steel barriers dropped slowly over the outside entrance.

“Can I make a phone call?”

“Not now, Ms. Lang,” Benson said. “I’d apologize all over if this were my fault, you know that.”

“Yes, like when you told Augustine who was in my apartment!”

“They asked the doorman, Ms. Lang, not me.”

“So what is it now, *us* versus *them*? I want to be outside with real people, not in here—”

“Not if they recognize you, you don’t,” Benson said.

“Karl, for God’s sake, I’ve *resigned!*”

The agent held up his hands and shook his head firmly: no matter.

“Then where am I going to stay?”

“We’re putting you with the other researchers in the executive lounge.”

“With Jackson?” Kaye bit her lip and stared at the ceiling, shaking with helpless laughter.

## 62

### The State University of New York, Albany

**M**itch stared out of the taxi window at the students marching along the tree-lined avenue. People poured out of homes and office buildings along the path of the march. This time, they carried no signs, no banners, but all held their left hands high, fingers stretched out, palms forward.

The driver, a Somali immigrant, lowered his head and peered through the window to his right. “What does that mean, raised hand?”

“I don’t know,” Mitch said.

The march had cut them off at an intersection. The university campus lay just a few blocks away, but Mitch doubted they would get that far today.

“It is scary,” the driver said, glancing over his shoulder at Mitch. “They want something to be done, yes?”

Mitch nodded. “I suppose.”

The driver shook his head. “I won’t cross that line. It’s a long line. Mister, I take you back to the station, where you’ll be safe.”

“No,” Mitch said. “Let me out here.”

He paid the driver and walked to the curb. The taxi swung around and drove away just before other cars could block it in.



Mitch's jaw clenched. He could feel and smell the tension, the social electricity, in the long line of men and women, mostly young at first, but now more and more older, emerging from the buildings, all marching with left hands held high.

Not fists; hands. Mitch found that significant.

A police car parked just a few yards from him. Two patrol officers stood by their open doors, just watching.

Kaye had joked about wearing a mask, the day they had first made love. They had made love so few times. Mitch's throat constricted. He wondered how many of the women in the march were pregnant, how many had had their tests for exposure to SHEVA return positive, and how that had affected their relationships.

"You know what's going on?" an officer called to Mitch.

"No," Mitch said.

"Think it's going to get ugly?"

"I hope not," Mitch said.

"We weren't told a damned thing," the officer grumbled, then climbed back into the patrol car. The car backed up but was hemmed in by other cars and could go no farther. Mitch thought it was wise they did not turn on their sirens.

This march was different from the march in San Diego. The people here were tired, traumatized, almost past hope. Mitch wished he could tell them all that their fear was unnecessary, that this was not a disaster, not a plague, but he was no longer sure what to believe. All belief and opinion faded in the presence of this massive tide of emotion, of fear.

He did not want the job at SUNY. He wanted to be with Kaye and protect her; he wanted to help her get through this, professionally and personally, and he wanted her to help him, as well.

It was no time to be alone. The whole world was in pain.

**Baltimore**

**K**aye opened the door to the condominium and walked in slowly. She kicked the heavy door shut with two bangs of her foot, then leaned into it with her hand to get it latched. She dropped her purse and valise on the chair and stood for a moment as if to get her bearings. She had not slept in twenty-eight hours.

It was late morning outside.

The phone message light blinked at her. She retrieved three messages. The first was from Judith Kushner, asking her to call back. The second was from Mitch, leaving an Albany phone number. The third was from Mitch also. "I've managed to get back to Baltimore, but it wasn't easy. They won't let me in the building to use the key you gave me. I tried Americol but the switchboard says they're not transferring outside calls, or you're not available, or something. I'm worried sick. It's hell out here, Kaye. I'll call in a few hours and see if you're home."

Kaye wiped her eyes and swore under her breath. She could hardly see straight. She felt as if she were stuck in molasses and no one would let her clean her shoes.

Americol had been surrounded by four thousand protesters for nine hours, shutting off traffic all around the building. Police had moved in and succeeded in roiling the crowds, breaking them into smaller and less controlled groups, and riots had broken out. Fires had been started, cars overturned.

"Where do I call, Mitch?" she murmured, taking the phone out of its recharging cradle. She was paging through the phone book, looking for the number of the YMCA, when the phone rang in her hand.

She fumbled it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Dark Intruder again. How are you?"

"Mitch, oh God, I'm okay, but I'm so tired."

"I've been walking all over downtown. They burned part of the convention center."

"I know. Where are you?"

"A block away. I can see your building and the Pepto-Bismol Tower."

Kaye laughed. "Bromo-Seltzer. Blue, not pink." She took a deep breath. "I don't want you here anymore. I mean, I don't want to be with you

*here* anymore. Mitch, I'm not making sense. I need you so badly. Please come. I want to pack and get out. The bodyguard is still here, but he's down in the lobby. I'll tell him to let you in."

"I didn't even try to get the job at SUNY," Mitch said.

"I quit Americol and the Taskforce. We're equal now."

"We're both bums?"

"Shiftless and rootless and with no visible means of support. Other than a large bank account."

"Where will we go?" Mitch asked.

Kaye reached into her purse and pulled out the two small boxes containing SHEVA test kits. She had taken them from the common stores area on the seventh floor at Americol. "How about Seattle? You have an apartment in Seattle, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Exquisite. I want you, Mitch. Let's go live forever and ever in your bachelor apartment in Seattle."

"You're nuts. I'm coming right over."

He hung up and she laughed in relief, then broke into sobs. She smoothed the phone against her cheek, realized how crazy that was, put it down. "I am really strung out," she told herself, walking to the kitchen. She kicked off her shoes, pulled a Parrish print that had belonged to her mother from the wall, laid it on the dining room table, then all the other prints that belonged to her, her family, her past.

In the kitchen, she drew a glass of cold water from the refrigerator tap. "Screw luxury, screw security. Screw propriety." She worked through a list of ten other items to screw, and at the end of the list came "goddamned stupid *me*."

Then she remembered she had better let Benson know Mitch was coming.

## 64

### Atlanta

**D**icken walked toward his old office in the subbasement of Building 1 at 1600 Clifton Road. As he walked, he fingered his way through a vinyl packet of new material—special federal-grade security pass, fresh-printed

instructions on new security procedures, talking points for arranged interviews later in the week.

He could not believe it had come to this. National Guard troops patrolled the perimeter and the grounds, and while there had not yet been any violent incidents at the CDC, phone threats arrived at the main switchboard as often as ten times a day.

He opened his office door and stood for a moment in the small room, savoring the cool and quiet. He wished he could be in Lagos or Tegucigalpa. He was much more at home working under rugged conditions in remote places; even the Republic of Georgia had been a bit too civilized, and therefore a bit too dangerous, for his tastes.

He much preferred viruses to out-of-control humans.

Dicken dropped the packet on his desk. For a moment, he could not remember why he was here. He had come to pick up something for Augustine. Then he recalled: the Northside Hospital autopsy reports on first-stage pregnancies. Augustine was working on a plan so top-secret Dicken knew nothing about it, but all the files pertaining to HERV and SHEVA in the building were being copied for his benefit.

He found the reports, then stood pensively, remembering the conversation with Jane Salter months ago, about the screaming of the monkeys in these old subbasement rooms.

He tapped his toe on the floor to the rhythm of an old and morbid child's song and murmured, "The bugs go in and the bugs go out, the monkeys will scream and the apes will shout . . ."

No doubt about it anymore. Christopher Dicken was a team player, hoping just to survive with his wits and his emotions in a few well-ordered pieces.

He picked up the vinyl packet and the folders and left the office.

## 65

**Baltimore**

**APRIL 28**

**K**aye swung the garment bag to her shoulder. Mitch grabbed two suitcases and stood in the door, held open by a rubber chock. They had already loaded three boxes into the car in the condo garage.

“They tell me to keep in touch,” Kaye said, and held up a black cell phone for Mitch’s inspection. “Marge pays for this. And Augustine tells me not to give any interviews. That I can live with. What about you?”

“My lips are sealed.”

“With kisses?” Kaye bumped him with her hip.

Benson followed them down to the garage. He watched them load Mitch’s car with a plain expression of disapproval.

“You don’t like my idea of freedom?” Kaye asked the agent with a piquant expression as she slammed the trunk. The car’s rear springs groaned.

“You’re taking everything with you, ma’am,” Benson responded stonily.

“He doesn’t approve of the company you keep,” Mitch said.

“Well,” Kaye said, standing beside Benson, brushing back her hair. “That’s because he’s a man of taste.”

Benson smiled. “You’re a fool to leave without protection.”

“Maybe,” Kaye said. “Thanks for your vigilance. Pass along my gratitude.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Benson said. “Good luck.”

Kaye hugged him. Benson blushed.

“Let’s go,” Kaye said.

Kaye fingered the door frame of the Buick, its dusty blue finish powdery and matte with wear. She asked Mitch how old the car was.

“I don’t know,” Mitch said. “Ten, fifteen years.”

“Find a dealership,” Kaye said. “I’m going to buy you a brand-new Land Rover.”

“That’s roughing it, all right,” Mitch said, lifting an eyebrow. “I’d prefer we be less obvious.”

“I love the way you do that,” Kaye said, lifting her much less impressive eyebrow dramatically. Mitch laughed.

“Screw it, then,” she said. “Drive the Buick. We’ll camp out under the stars.”

### Approaching Washington, D.C.

**T**he Air Force Falcon passenger jet rolled gently to the east. Augustine sipped a Coke and glanced frequently through the window, clearly nervous about flying. Dicken had not known this about Augustine until now; they had never flown together before.

“We can make a strong case that even should second-stage SHEVA fetuses survive birth, they’ll be carriers of a wide variety of infectious HERVs,” Augustine said.

“Whose evidence?” Jane Salter asked. Her face was a little flushed from the heat in the airplane before takeoff; she was at best mildly unimpressed by these military trappings.

“I’ve had Taskforce researchers putting together biopsy results for the last two weeks, just on a hunch. We know HERVs express under all sorts of conditions, but the particles have never been infectious until now.”

“We still don’t know what the hell purpose the noninfectious particles serve, if any,” Salter said. The other staffers, younger and less experienced, sat quietly in their seats, content to listen.

“No good purpose,” Augustine said, tapping the seat arm. He swallowed hard and looked out the window again. “The HERV continue to produce viral particles that aren’t infectious . . . Until SHEVA codes for a complete tool kit, everything necessary for a virus to assemble and escape a cell. I have six expert opinions, including Jackson’s, that SHEVA may ‘teach’ other HERV how to be infectious again. They’ll be most active in individuals with rapidly dividing cells, and that means SHEVA fetuses. We could have to deal with diseases we haven’t seen in millions of years.”

“Diseases that may no longer be pathogenic in humans,” Dicken said.

“Can we take that chance?” Augustine asked. Dicken shrugged.

“So what are you going to recommend?” Salter asked.

“Washington is already under curfew, and they’ll have it under martial law the instant someone decides to break a plate glass window or roll a car. No demonstrations, no inflammatory comments . . . Politicians hate to be lynched. It won’t be long. The common folk are like cows in a herd, and there’s been more than enough lightning to make even the cowboys nervous.”

“Infelicitous comparison, Dr. Augustine,” Salter said dryly.

“Well, I’ll refine it,” Augustine said. “I’m not at my best when I’m at twenty thousand feet.”

“You think we’re going to be under martial law,” Dicken said, “and we can sequester all pregnant women and take their babies away from them . . . for testing?”

“It’s horrible,” Augustine admitted. “Most if not all of the fetuses will probably die. But if they do survive, I think we can make a case that we’ll have to sequester them.”

“Talk about throwing gas on a fire,” Dicken said.

Augustine thoughtfully agreed. “I’ve been racking my brains trying to find a different solution. I will entertain alternatives.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t muddy the waters right now,” Salter said.

“I have no intention of saying or doing anything now. The work goes on.”

“We’d better be on firm ground,” Dicken said.

“Damned right,” Augustine said with a grimace. “*Terra firma*, and the sooner the better.”

## 67

### Leaving Baltimore

**E**veryone has a bitch,” Mitch observed as he steered them along state route 26 out of the city, staying away from the main highways. Too many demonstrations—by truckers, motorists, even bicyclists, all claiming a shot at civil disobedience—had shut down the main routes. As it was, they had to wait twenty minutes in the middle of downtown as police cleared tons of garbage dumped by protesting sanitation workers.

“We failed them,” Kaye said.

“You didn’t fail them,” Mitch said as he tried to find an alley to turn into.

“I screwed up and didn’t make my case.” Kaye hummed nervously to herself.

“Something wrong?” Mitch asked.

“Nothing,” she said briskly. “Just the whole damned planet.”

In West Virginia, they pulled into a KOA campground and paid thirty dol-

lars for a tent site. Mitch set up the lightweight dome tent he had bought in Austria before he met Tilde, and a small camp stove, under a young oak tree looking out over a low valley where two tractors sat idle in a carefully furrowed field.

The sun had gone down twenty minutes before and the sky was mottled with light clouds. The air was just beginning to cool. Kaye's hair was sticky, the elastic of her panties chafed.

One other family had set up two tents about a hundred yards away, otherwise the campground was empty.

Kaye climbed through the rainflap into the tent. "Come in here," she told Mitch. She pulled off her dress and lay back on the sleeping bag Mitch had unrolled. Mitch set the campstove down and poked his head into the tent.

"My God, woman," he said admiringly.

"Do you smell me?" she asked.

"I surely do, ma'am," he said in agent Benson's fine North Carolina accent. He slipped in beside her. "It's still a little warm."

"I smell you," Kaye said. She had a needful and serious look on her face. She helped him out of his shirt, and he kicked aside his pants before reaching for the shaving kit where he was keeping the condoms. As he started to rip open the foil package, she bent over and kissed his erect penis. "Not this time," she said. She licked him swiftly, looked up. "I want you now, nothing in between."

Mitch took hold of her head and lifted her mouth away from him. "No," he said.

"Why not?" she asked.

"You're fertile," he said.

"How the hell do you know?" Kaye asked.

"I can see it in your skin. I can smell it."

"I bet you can," she said admiringly. "Can you smell anything else?" She pushed closer to him, lifted over his head, swung her knee to the other side.

"Spring," Mitch said, returning the favor.

She arched her back, half-twisted, and deftly fondled him, as he nuzzled between her legs.

"Ballet dancer," Mitch said, his voice muffled.

"You're fertile, too," she said. "You didn't say otherwise."

"Mm."

She lifted her torso again, rolled off him, and swung around to face him. "You're shedding," she said.



Mitch screwed up his face in puzzlement. "What?"

"You're shedding SHEVA. I test positive."

"Good Christ, Kaye. You sure know how to trash a mood." Mitch pushed back and sat with his legs pulled up in the corner of the tent. "I didn't think it could happen so fast."

"Something thinks I'm your woman," Kaye said. "Nature says we're going to be together a long time. I want that to be true."

Mitch was at a complete loss. "I do, too, but we don't need to act like idiots."

"Every man wants to make love to a fertile woman. It's in their genes."

"That is complete bullshit," Mitch said, and pushed back from her. "What in hell are you doing?"

Kaye hunkered across from him and rested on her knees. She made his head throb. The entire tent smelled of both of them and he could not think straight. "We can prove them wrong, Mitch."

"About what?"

"I once worried that work and family wouldn't fit together. Now, there's no conflict. I am my own laboratory."

Mitch shook his head vehemently. "No."

Kaye lay down beside him, pillowing her head on her arms. "Pretty forward and up front, no?" she asked softly.

"We haven't the slightest idea what's going to happen," Mitch said. His eyes were brimming, warm, half from fear, half from another emotion he could not define—something close to pure physical joy. His body wanted her so intensely, wanted her *now*. If he gave in, he knew it would be the supreme sexual act of his entire life. And if he gave in now, he worried he would never forgive himself.

"I know you believe we're right, and I know you'd be a good father," Kaye said, eyes narrowed to slits. She slowly lifted one leg. "If we don't do something now, maybe it will never happen, and we'll never know. Be my man. Please."

The tears came in a rush and Mitch hid his face. She rose beside him and held him and apologized, feeling his shaking. He mumbled a confused and jerking series of words about how women simply did not understand, never could understand.

Kaye soothed him and lay down beside him and for a while the breeze blew the rain flap gently over their silence.

"It's nothing wrong," she said. She wiped his face and looked down on him, frightened at what she had provoked. "It's the only right thing there is, maybe."

• •

“I’m sorry,” Kaye said stiffly as they loaded the car. A cool current of morning air slopped up from the flat farmland below the campsite. The leaves on the oak trees whispered. The tractors stood motionless on their perfect and empty furrows.

“No reason to be sorry,” Mitch said, shaking out the tent. He folded it and rolled it into its long fabric sheath, then, with Kaye’s help, unsocketed the tent poles and clapped them together into a fasces connected top to bottom by their stretching cords.

They had not made love during the night, and Mitch had slept very little.

“Any dreams?” Kaye asked as they sipped hot coffee from the pot on the camp stove.

Mitch shook his head. “You?”

“I didn’t sleep more than a couple of hours,” Kaye said. “I dreamed of working at EcoBacter. All these people were coming in and out. You were there.” Kaye did not want to tell Mitch that in the dream she did not recognize him.

“Not very exciting,” Mitch said.

As they traveled, they saw little out of the ordinary, out of place. They drove west on the two-lane road through small towns, coal towns, old towns, tired towns, towns repainted and repaired, gussied up, with their grand old homes in the rich old neighborhoods made into bed-and-breakfasts for well-to-do young people from Philadelphia and Washington and even New York.

Mitch switched on the radio and they heard about candlelight vigils in the Capitol, ceremonies honoring the dead senators, funerals for others killed in the riot. There were stories on the vaccine effort, how scientists now believed the torch had been passed to James Mondavi or perhaps a team at Princeton. Jackson seemed on the descent, and despite all that had happened, Kaye felt sorry for him.

They ate at the High Street Grill in Morgantown, a new restaurant designed to look old and established, with Colonial décor and thick wood tables coated with clear plastic resin. The sign out front declared the restaurant to be “Just a bit older than the Millennium, and a hell of a lot less significant.”

Kaye watched Mitch closely as she picked at her club sandwich.

Mitch avoided her gaze and looked around at the customers, all

stolidly involved in fueling their bodies. Older couples sat in silence; a lone man dropped his wool cap on the table next to a foam cup of coffee; three teenage girls in a booth picked at sundaes with long steel spoons. The staff was young and friendly and none of the women wore masks.

“Makes me believe I’m just an ordinary guy,” Mitch said quietly, looking down at the bowl of chili before him. “I never thought I’d make a good father.”

“Why?” Kaye asked, equally quiet, as if they were sharing a secret.

“I’ve always focused on my work, on wandering around and going places where there was interesting stuff. I’m pretty self-centered. I never thought any intelligent woman would want me to be a father, or a husband, for that matter. Some made it perfectly clear that wasn’t why they were with me.”

“Yeah,” Kaye said, completely tuned in on him, as if every word might contain an answer essential to solving something that puzzled her.

The waitress asked if they needed more tea or dessert. They declined.

“This is so ordinary,” Mitch said, lifting his spoon and swinging it through a small arc to measure the restaurant. “I feel like a big bug in the middle of a Norman Rockwell living room.”

Kaye laughed. “There,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘there’?”

“That was you, saying that. And I just felt my insides quiver.”

“It’s the food,” Mitch said.

“It’s you.”

“I need to be a husband before I can be a father.”

“It certainly isn’t the food. I’m shaking, Mitch.” She held out her hand and he let go of the spoon to grasp it. Her fingers were cold and her teeth were chattering though the interior was warm.

“I think we should get married,” Mitch said.

“That’s a lovely idea,” Kaye said.

Mitch held out his hand. “Will you marry me?”

Kaye held her breath for a moment. “Oh, God, yes,” she said with a short puff of resolve.

“We’re crazy and we don’t know what we’re in for.”

“We don’t,” Kaye agreed.

“We’re on the edge of trying to make someone new, different from us,” Mitch said. “Don’t you find that terrifying?”

“Utterly,” Kaye said.

“And if we’re wrong, it’s just going to be disaster after disaster. Pain. Grief.”

“We are not wrong,” Kaye said. “Be my man.”

“I am your man.”

“Do you love me?”

“I love you in ways I’ve never felt before.”

“So fast. That’s incredible.”

Mitch nodded emphatically. “But I love you too much not to be a little critical.”

“I’m listening.”

“I’m troubled by you calling yourself a laboratory. That sounds cold and maybe a little out of it, Kaye.”

“I hope you see through the words. See what I hope to say and do.”

“I might,” Mitch said. “Just barely. The air feels very thin where we are, right now.”

“Like being on a mountain,” Kaye said.

“I don’t like mountains much,” Mitch said.

“Oh, I do,” Kaye said, thinking of the slopes and white peaks of Mount Kazbeg. “They give you freedom.”

“Yeah,” Mitch said. “You jump off, and you get ten thousand feet of pure freedom.”

As Mitch was paying their bill, Kaye walked toward the rest rooms. On impulse, she pulled her phone card and a piece of paper from her wallet and lifted the receiver on a pay phone.

She was calling Mrs. Luella Hamilton at her home in Richmond, Virginia. She had persuaded the number out of the hospital switchboard at the clinic.

A deep, smooth male voice answered.

“Excuse me, is Mrs. Hamilton in?”

“We’re having an early supper,” the man said. “Who wants her?”

“Kaye Lang. Dr. Lang.”

The man mumbled something, then called out “Luella!” and a few seconds passed. More voices. Luella Hamilton picked up the phone, her breath briefly pounding on the mouthpiece, then familiar and calm. “Albert says this is Kaye Lang, that right?”

“It’s me, Mrs. Hamilton.”

“Well, I’m at home now, Kaye, and don’t need no checking up on.”

“I wanted to let you know I’m no longer with the Taskforce, Mrs. Hamilton.”

"Please call me Lu. Whyever not, Kaye?"

"A parting of the ways. I'm heading west and I was worried about you."

"There's nothing to be worried about. Albert and the kids are all right and I'm just fine."

"I was just concerned. I've been thinking about you a lot."

"Well, Dr. Lipton gave me these pills that kill babies before they're very big, inside. You know about the pills."

"Yes."

"I didn't tell anybody, and we thought about it, but Albert and me, we're going ahead. He says he believes some of what the scientists say, but not all, and besides, he says I'm too ugly to be messing around behind his back." She let out a rich, disbelieving laugh. "He don't know us women and our opportunities, does he, Kaye?" Then, in an undertone, to someone beside her, "Stop that. I'm talking here."

"No," Kaye said.

"We're going to have this baby," Mrs. Hamilton said, coming down heavy on *have*. "Tell Dr. Lipton and the folks at the clinic. Whatever he or she is, he or she is *ours*, and we're going to give him or her a fighting chance."

"I'm glad to hear that, Lu."

"You are, huh? You curious, too, Kaye?"

Kaye laughed and felt her laughter catch, threaten to reverse to tears. "I am."

"You want to see this baby when he comes, don't you?"

"I would like to buy you both a present," Kaye said.

"That's nice. Then why not go find yourself a man and get this flu, and we'll visit together and compare, you and me, our two fine youngsters, all right? And I'll buy *you* a present." The suggestion carried not a hint of anger, absurdity, or resentment.

"I might do that, Lu."

"We get along, Kaye. Thanks for caring about me and you know, looking at me like I was people and not a lab rat."

"May I call you again?"

"We're moving soon, but we'll find each other, Kaye. We will. You take care."

Kaye walked down the long corridor from the rest rooms. She touched her forehead. She was hot. Her stomach was unsettled, as well. *Get this flu and we'll visit and compare.*

Mitch stood outside the restaurant with his hands in his pockets,

squinting at the passing cars. He turned and smiled at her as he heard the heavy wood door open.

“I called Mrs. Hamilton,” she said. “She’s going to have her baby.”

“Very brave of her.”

“People have been having babies for millions of years,” Kaye said.

“Yeah. Piece of cake. Where do you want to get married?” Mitch asked.

“How about Columbus?”

“How about Morgantown?”

“Sure,” Kaye said.

“If I think about this much longer, I’m going to be completely useless.”

“I doubt it,” Kaye said. The fresh air made her feel better.

They drove to Spruce Street, and there, at the Monongahela Florist Company, Mitch bought Kaye a dozen roses. Walking around the County Magistrates Building and a senior center, they crossed High Street, heading toward the tall clock tower and flagpole of the county courthouse. They stopped beside a spreading canopy of maples to examine the inlaid and inscribed bricks arranged across the courthouse square.

“‘In loving memory, James Crutchfield, age 11,’” Kaye read. The wind rustled through the maple branches, making the green leaves flutter with a sound like soft voices or old memories. “‘My love for fifty years, May Ellen Baker,’” Mitch read.

“Do you think we’ll be together that long?” Kaye asked.

Mitch smiled and clasped her shoulder. “I’ve never been married,” he said. “I’m naïve. I’d say, yes, we will.” They walked beneath the stone arch to the right of the tower and through the double doors.

Inside, in the Office of the County Clerk, a long room filled with bookshelves and tables supporting huge, scuffed black and green volumes of land transactions, they received paperwork and were told where to get their blood tests.

“It’s a state law,” the elderly clerk told them from behind her broad wooden desk. She smiled wisely. “They test for syphilis, gonorrhea, HIV, herpes, and this new one, SHEVA. A few years ago, they tried to get the blood test removed as a requirement, but that’s all changed now. You wait three days, then you can get married at a church or by a circuit court judge, any county in the state. Those are beautiful roses, honey.” She lifted her glasses where they hung on a gold chain around her neck and scanned them shrewdly. “Proof of age will not be required. What took you so long?”

She handed them their application and test papers.

“We won’t get our license here,” Kaye said to Mitch as they left the

building. "We'll fail the test." They rested on a wooden bench beneath the maples. It was four in the afternoon and the sky was clouding over swiftly. She laid her head on his shoulder.

Mitch stroked her forehead. "You're hot. Something wrong?"

"Just proof of our passion."

Kaye smelled her flowers, then, as the first drops of rain fell, held up her hand and said, "I, Kaye Lang, take you, Mitchell Rafelson, to be my wedded husband, in this age of confusion and upheaval."

Mitch stared at her.

"Raise your hand," Kaye said, "if you want me."

Mitch swiftly realized what was required, clasped her hand, braced himself to rise to the occasion. "I want you to be my wife, come hell or high water, to have and to hold, to cherish and to honor, whether they have any room at the inn or not, amen."

"I love you, Mitch."

"I love you, Kaye."

"All right," she said. "Now I'm your wife."

As they left Morgantown, heading southwest, Mitch said, "You know, I believe it. I believe that we're married."

"That's what counts," Kaye said. She moved closer to him across the broad bench seat.

That evening, on the outskirts of Clarksburg, they made love on a small bed in a dark motel room with cinder block walls. Spring rain fell on the flat roof and dripped from the eaves with a steady, soothing rhythm. They never pulled back the bedcover, lying instead naked together, limbs for blankets, lost in each other, needing nothing more.

The universe became small and bright and very warm.

## West Virginia and Ohio

Rain and mist followed them from Clarksburg. The old blue Buick's tires made a steady hum on wet roads pushing and curling through limestone cuts and low round green hills. The wipers swung short black tails, taking Kaye back to Lado's whining little Fiat on the Georgian Military Road.

"Do you still dream about them?" Kaye asked as Mitch drove.

"Too tired to dream," Mitch said. He smiled at her, then focused on the road.

"I'm curious to know what happened to them," Kaye said lightly.

Mitch made a face. "They lost their baby and they died."

Kaye saw she had touched a nerve and drew back. "Sorry."

"I told you, I'm a little wacko," Mitch said. "I think with my nose and I care what happened to three mummies fifteen thousand years ago."

"You are far from being wacko," Kaye said. She shook her hair, then let out a yell.

"Whoa!" Mitch cringed.

"We're going to travel across America!" Kaye cried. "Across the heartland, and we're going to make *love* every time we stop somewhere, and we're going to *learn* what makes this great nation tick."

Mitch pounded the wheel and laughed.

"But we aren't doing this right," she said, suddenly prim. "We don't have a big poodle dog."

"What?"

"*Travels with Charley*," Kaye said. "John Steinbeck had a truck he called Rocinante, with a camper on the back. He wrote about traveling with a big poodle. It's a great book."

"Did Charley have attitude?"

"Damn right," Kaye said.

"Then I'll be the poodle."

Kaye buzzed his hair with mock clippers.

"Steinbeck took more than a week, I bet," Mitch said.

"We don't have to hurry," Kaye said. "I don't want this to ever end. You've given me back my life, Mitch."

• •



West of Athens, Ohio, they stopped for lunch at a small diner in a bright red caboose. The caboose sat on a concrete pad and two rails off a frontage road beside the state highway, in a region of low hills covered with maples and dogwood. The food served in the dim interior, illuminated by tiny bulbs in railway lanterns, was adequate and nothing more: a chocolate malt and cheeseburger for Mitch and patty melt and bitter instant iced tea for Kaye. A radio in the kitchen in the back of the caboose played Garth Brooks and Selay Sammi. All they could see of the short-order cook was a white chef's hat bobbing to the music.

As they left the diner, Kaye noticed three shabbily dressed adolescents wandering beside the frontage road: two girls wearing black skirts and torn gray leggings and a boy in jeans and a travel-stained windbreaker. Like a lagging and downcast puppy, the boy walked several steps behind the girls. Kaye seated herself in the Buick. "What are they doing out here?"

"Maybe they live here," Mitch said.

"There's just the house up the hill behind the diner," Kaye said with a sigh.

"You're getting a motherly look," Mitch warned.

Mitch backed the car out of the gravel lot and was about to swing out onto the frontage road when the boy waved vigorously. Mitch stopped and rolled down the window. A light drizzle filled the air with silvery mist scented by trees and the Buick's exhaust.

"Excuse me, sir. You going west?" the boy asked. His ghostly blue eyes swam in a narrow, pale face. He looked worried and exhausted and beneath his clothes he seemed to be made of a bundle of sticks, and not a very large bundle.

The two girls hung back. The shorter and darker girl covered her face with her hands, peeping between her fingers like a shy child.

The boy's hands were dirty, his nails black. He saw Mitch's attention and rubbed them self-consciously on his pants.

"Yeah," Mitch said.

"I'm really *really* sorry to bother you. We wouldn't ask, sir, but it's tough finding rides and it's getting wet. If you're going west, we could use a lift for a while, hey?"

The boy's desperation and a goofy gallantry beyond his years touched Mitch. He examined the boy closely, his answer snagged somewhere between sympathy and suspicion.

"Tell them to get in," Kaye said.

The boy stared at them in surprise. "You mean, now?"

“We’re going west.” Mitch pointed at the highway beyond the long chain-link fence.

The boy opened the rear door and the girls jogged forward. Kaye turned and rested her arm on the back of the seat as they jumped in and slid across. “Where are you heading?” she asked.

“Cincinnati,” the boy said. “Or as far past as we can go,” he added hopefully. “Thanks a million.”

“Put on your seat belts,” Mitch said. “There’s three back there.”

The girl who hid her face appeared to be no more than seventeen, hair black and thick, skin coffee-colored, fingers long and knobby with short and chipped nails painted violet. Her companion, a white blonde, seemed older, with a broad, easygoing face worn down to vacancy. The boy was no more than nineteen. Mitch wrinkled his nose involuntarily; they hadn’t bathed in days.

“Where are you from?” Kaye asked.

“Richmond,” the boy said. “We’ve been hitchhiking, sleeping out in the woods or the grass. It’s been hard on Delia and Jayce. This is Delia.” He pointed to the girl covering her face.

“I’m Jayce,” said the blonde absently.

“My name is Morgan,” the boy added.

“You don’t look old enough to be out on your own,” Mitch said. He brought the car up to speed on the highway.

“Delia couldn’t stand it where she was,” Morgan said. “She wanted to go to L.A. or Seattle. We decided to go with her.”

Jayce nodded.

“That’s not much of a plan,” Mitch said.

“Any relatives out west?” Kaye asked.

“I have an uncle in Cincinnati,” Jayce said. “He might put us up for a while.”

Delia leaned back in the seat, face still hidden. Morgan licked his lips and craned his neck to look up at the car’s headliner, as if to read a message there. “Delia was pregnant but her baby was born dead,” he said. “She got some skin problems because of it.”

“I’m sorry,” Kaye said. She held out her hand. “My name is Kaye. You don’t have to hide, Delia.”

Delia shook her head, hands following. “It’s ugly,” she said.

“I don’t mind it,” Morgan said. He sat as far to the left-hand side of the car as he could, leaving a foot of space between himself and Jayce. “Girls

are more sensitive. Her boyfriend told her to get out. Real stupid. What a waste, hey.”

“It’s too ugly,” Delia said softly.

“Come on, sweetie,” Kaye said. “Is it something a doctor could help with?”

“I got it before the baby came,” Delia said.

“It’s okay,” Kaye said soothingly, and reached back to stroke the girl’s arm. Mitch caught glimpses in the rearview mirror, fascinated by this aspect of Kaye. Gradually, Delia lowered her hands, her fingers relaxing. The girl’s face was blotched and mottled, as if splattered with reddish-brown paint.

“Did your boyfriend do that to you?” Kaye asked.

“No,” Delia said. “It just came, and everybody hated it.”

“She got a mask,” Jayce said. “It covered her face for a few weeks, and then it fell off and left those marks.”

Mitch felt a chill. Kaye faced forward and lowered her head for a moment, composing herself.

“Delia and Jayce don’t want me touching them,” Morgan said, “even though we’re friends, because of the plague. You know. Herod’s.”

“I don’t want to get pregnant,” Jayce said. “We’re really hungry.”

“We’ll stop and get some food,” Kaye said. “Would you like to take a shower, get cleaned up?”

“Oh, wow,” Delia said. “That would be so great.”

“You two look decent, hey, real nice,” Morgan said, staring up at the headliner again, this time for courage. “But I have to tell you, these girls are my friends. I don’t want you doing this just so *he* can see them without their clothes on. I won’t put up with that.”

“Don’t worry,” Kaye said. “If I were your mom, I’d be proud of you, Morgan.”

“Thanks,” Morgan said, and dropped his gaze to the window. The muscles on his narrow jaw clenched. “Hey, it’s just the way I feel. They’ve gone through enough shit. Her boyfriend got a mask, too, and he was really mad. Jayce says he blamed Delia.”

“He did,” Jayce said.

“He was a white boy,” Morgan continued, “and Delia is partly black.”

“I *am* black,” Delia said.

“They were living in a farmhouse for a while until he made her leave,” Jayce said. “He was hitting her, after the miscarriage. Then she was preg-

nant again. He said she was making him sick because he had a mask and it wasn't even his baby." This came out in a mumbled rush.

"My second baby was born dead," Delia said, her voice distant. "He only had half his face. Jayce and Morgan never showed him to me."

"We buried it," Morgan said.

"My God," Kaye said. "I'm so sorry."

"It was hard," Morgan said. "But hey, we're still here." He clamped his teeth together and his jaw again tensed rhythmically.

"Jayce shouldn't have told me what he looked like," Delia said.

"If it was God's baby," Jayce said flatly, "He should have taken better care of it."

Mitch wiped his eyes with a finger and blinked to keep the road clear.

"Have you seen a doctor?" Kaye asked.

"I'm okay," Delia said. "I just want these marks to go away."

"Let me see them up close, sweetie," Kaye said.

"Are you a doctor?" Delia asked.

"I'm a biologist, but not a medical doctor," Kaye said.

"A scientist?" Morgan asked, interest piqued.

"Yeah," Kaye said.

Delia thought this through for a few seconds, then leaned forward, eyes averted. Kaye touched her chin to steady her. The sun had come out but a big panel truck growled by on the left and the wide tires showered the windshield. The watery light cast a wavering gray pall over the girl's features.

Her face bore a pattern of demelanized, teardrop-shaped dapples, mostly on her cheeks, with several symmetrical patches at the corners of her eyes and lips. As she turned away from Kaye, the marks shifted and darkened.

"They're like freckles," Delia said hopefully. "I get freckles sometimes. It's my white blood, I guess."

Athens, Ohio

MAY 1

**M**itch and Morgan stood on the wide white-painted porch outside the office of James Jacobs, MD.

Morgan was agitated. He lit up the last of his pack of cigarettes and puffed with slit-eyed intent, then walked over to a rough-barked old maple and leaned against it.

Kaye had insisted after a lunch stop that they look up a family practice doctor in the white pages and take Delia in for a checkup. Delia had reluctantly agreed.

“We didn’t do anything criminal,” Morgan said. “We didn’t have no money, hey, and she had her baby and there we were.” He waved his hand up the road.

“Where was that?” Mitch asked.

“West Virginia. In the woods near a farm. It was pretty. A nice place to be buried. You know, I am so tired. I am so sick of them treating me like a flea-bitten dog.”

“The girls do that?”

“You know the attitude,” Morgan said. “Men are contagious. They *rely* on me, I’m always here for them, then they tell me I have real boy cooties, and that’s it, hey. No *thanks*, ever.”

“It’s the times,” Mitch said.

“It’s lame. Why are we living now and not some other time, not so lame?”

In the main examining room, Delia perched on the edge of the table, legs dangling. She wore a white flower-print open-backed robe. Jayce sat in a chair across from her, reading a pamphlet on smoking-related illnesses. Dr. Jacobs was in his sixties, thin, with a close-cut and tightly curled patch of graying hair around a tall and noble dome. His eyes were large, and both wise and sad. He told the girls he would be right back, then let his assistant, a middle-aged woman with a bun of fine auburn hair, enter the room with a clipboard and pencil. He closed the door and turned to Kaye.

“No relation?” he asked.

“We picked them up east of here. I thought she should see a doctor.”

“She says she’s nineteen. She doesn’t have any ID, but I don’t think she’s nineteen, do you?”

“I don’t know much about her,” Kaye said. “I’m trying to help them, not get them in trouble.”

Jacobs cocked his head in sympathy. “She gave birth less than a week or ten days ago. No major trauma, but she tore some tissue, and there’s still blood on her leggings. I don’t like to see kids living like animals, Ms. Lang.”

“Neither do I.”

“Delia says it was a Herod’s baby and that it was born dead. Second-stage, by the description. I see no reason not to believe her, but these things should be reported. The baby should have undergone a postmortem. Laws are being put in place right now, at the federal level, and Ohio is going along . . . She said she was in West Virginia when she delivered. I understand West Virginia is showing some resistance.”

“Only in some ways,” Kaye said, and told him about the blood test requirements.

Jacobs listened, then pulled a pen from his pocket and nervously clicked it with one hand. “Ms. Lang, I wasn’t sure who you were when you came in this afternoon. I had Georgina get on the Web and find some news pictures. I don’t know what you’re doing in Athens, but I’d say you know more about this sort of thing than I do.”

“I might not agree,” Kaye said. “The marks on her face . . .”

“Some women acquire dark markings during pregnancy. It passes.”

“Not like these,” Kaye said. “They tell us she had other skin problems.”

“I know.” Jacobs sighed and sat on the corner of his desk. “I have three patients who are pregnant, probably with Herod’s second-stage. They won’t let me do amnio or any kind of scans. They’re all churchgoing women and I don’t think they want to know the truth. They’re scared and they’re under pressure. Their friends shun them. They aren’t welcome in church. The husbands won’t come in with them to my office.” He pointed to his face. “They all have skin stiffening and coming loose around the eyes, the nose, the cheeks, the corners of the mouth. It won’t just peel away . . . not yet. They’re shedding several layers of facial corium and epidermis.” He made a face and pinched his fingers together, tugging at an imaginary flap of skin. “It’s a little leathery. Ugly as sin, very scary. That’s why they’re nervous and that’s why they’re shunned. This separates them from their community, Ms. Lang. It *hurts* them. I make my reports to the state and to the feds, and I get no response back. It’s like sending messages into a big dark cave.”

“Do you think the masks are common?”

“I follow the basic tenets of science, Ms. Lang. If I’m seeing it more than once, and now this girl comes along and I see it again, from out of state . . . I doubt it’s unusual.” He looked at her critically. “Do you know anything more?”

She found herself biting her lip like a little girl. “Yes and no,” she said. “I resigned from my position on the Herod’s Taskforce.”

“Why?”

“It’s too complicated.”

“It’s because they’ve got it all wrong, isn’t it?”

Kaye looked aside and smiled. “I won’t say that.”

“You’ve seen this before? In other women?”

“I think we’re going to see more of it.”

“And the babies will all be monsters and die?”

Kaye shook her head. “I think that’s going to change.”

Jacobs replaced his pen in his pocket, put his hand on the desktop blotter, lifted its leather corner, dropped it slowly. “I won’t file a report on Delia. I’m not sure what I’d say, or who I’d say it to. I think she’d vanish before any authorities could come along to help her. I doubt we’d ever find the infant, where they buried it. She’s tired and she needs steady nourishment. She needs a place to stay and rest. I’ll give her a vitamin shot and prescribe antibiotics and iron supplements.”

“And the marks?”

“Do you know what chromatophores are?”

“Cells that change color. In cuttlefish.”

“These marks can change color,” Jacobs said. “They’re not just a hormonally induced melanosis.”

“Melanophores,” Kaye said.

Jacobs nodded. “That’s the word. Ever seen melanophores on a human?”

“No,” Kaye said.

“Neither have I. Where are you going, Ms. Lang?”

“All the way west,” she said. She lifted her wallet. “I’d like to pay you now.”

Jacobs gave her his saddest look. “I’m not running a goddamned HMO, Ms. Lang. No charge. I’ll prescribe the pills and you pick them up at a good pharmacy. You buy her food and find her a clean place to get a good night’s sleep.”

The door opened and Delia and Jayce emerged. Delia was fully dressed.

“She needs clean clothes and a good soak in a hot tub,” Georgina said firmly.

For the first time since they had met, Delia smiled. “I looked in the mirror,” she said. “Jayce says the marks are pretty. The doctor says I’m not sick, and I can have children again if I want.”

Kaye shook Jacobs’s hand. “Thank you very much,” she said.

As the three of them left through the front office, joining Mitch and Morgan on the front porch, Jacobs called out, “We live and we learn, Ms. Lang! And the faster we learn, the better.”

The little motel sported a huge red sign with TINY SUITES and \$50 crowded onto it, clearly visible from the freeway. It had seven rooms, three of them vacant. Kaye rented all three and gave Morgan his own key. Morgan lifted the key, frowned, then pocketed it.

“I don’t like being alone,” he said.

“I couldn’t think of another arrangement,” Kaye said.

Mitch put his arm around the boy’s shoulder. “I’ll stay with you,” he said, and gave Kaye a level look. “Let’s get cleaned up and watch TV.”

“We’d like you to stay in our room,” Jayce told Kaye. “We’d feel a lot safer.”

The rooms were just on the edge of being dirty. Draped on beds with distinct hollows, thin and worn quilted coverlets showed unraveled nylon threads and cigarette burns. Coffee tables bore multiple ring marks and more cigarette burns. Jayce and Delia explored and settled in as if the accommodations were royal. Delia took the single orange chair beside a table-lamp combo hung with black metal cone-shaped cans. Jayce lounged on the bed and switched on the TV. “They have HBO,” she said in a soft and wondering voice. “We can watch a movie!”

Mitch listened to Morgan in the shower in their room, then opened the front door. Kaye stood outside with her hand up, about to knock.

“We’re wasting a room,” she said. “We’ve taken on some responsibilities, haven’t we?”

Mitch hugged her. “Your instincts,” he said.

“What do *your* instincts tell you?” she asked, nuzzling his shoulder.

“They’re kids. They’ve been out on the road for weeks, months. Someone should call their parents.”



“Maybe they never had real parents. They’re desperate, Mitch.” Kaye pushed back to look up at him.

“They’re also independent enough to bury a dead baby and stay on the road. The doctor should have called the police, Kaye.”

“I know,” Kaye said. “I also know why he didn’t. The rules have changed. He thinks most of the babies are going to be born dead. Are we the only ones with any hope?”

The shower stopped and the stall door clicked open. The small bathroom was filled with steam.

“The girls,” Kaye said, and walked over to the next door. She gave Mitch a hand-open sign that he instantly recognized from the marching crowds in Albany, and he understood for the first time what the crowds had been trying to show: strong belief in and a cautious submission to the way of Life, belief in the ultimate wisdom of the human genome. No presumption of doom, no ignorant attempts to use new human powers to block the rivers of DNA flowing through the generations.

Faith in Life.

Morgan dressed quickly. “Jayce and Delia don’t need me,” he said as he stood in the small room. The holes in the sleeves of his black pullover were even more obvious now that his skin was clean. He let the dirty windbreaker dangle from one arm. “I don’t want to be a burden. I’ll go now. Give my thanks, hey, but—”

“Please be quiet and sit down,” Mitch said. “What the lady wants, goes. She wants you to stick around.”

Morgan blinked in surprise, then sat on the end of the bed. The springs squeaked and the frame groaned. “I think it’s the end of the world,” he said. “We’ve really made God angry.”

“Don’t jump to any conclusions,” Mitch said. “Believe it or not, all this has happened before.”

Jayce turned on the TV and watched from the bed while Delia took a long bath in the chipped and narrow tub. The girl hummed to herself, tunes from cartoon shows—*Scooby Doo*, *Animaniacs*, *Inspector Gadget*. Kaye sat in the single chair. Jayce had found something old and affirming on the TV: *Pollyanna*, with Hayley Mills. Karl Malden was kneeling in a dry grassy field, berating himself for his stubborn blindness. It was an impassioned performance. Kaye did not remember the movie being so compelling. She watched it with Jayce until she noticed that the girl was sound asleep. Then, turning down the volume, Kaye switched over to Fox News.

There was a smattering of show business stories, a brief political report on congressional elections, then an interview with Bill Cosby on his commercials for the CDC and the Taskforce. Kaye turned up the volume.

“I was a buddy of David Satcher, the former surgeon general, and they must have a kind of ol’ boy network,” Cosby told the interviewer, a blond woman with a large smile and intense blue eyes, “ ’cause years ago they got me, this ol’ guy, in to talk about what was important, what they were doing. They thought I might be able to help again.”

“You’ve joined quite a select team,” said the interviewer. “Dustin Hoffman and Michael Crichton. Let’s take a look at your spot.”

Kaye leaned forward. Cosby returned against a black background, face seamed with parental concern. “My friends at the Centers for Disease Control, and many other researchers around the world, are hard at work every day to solve *this problem* we’re all facing. Herod’s flu. SHEVA. Every day. Nobody’s gonna rest until it’s understood and we can cure it. You can take it from me, these people care, and when you hurt, they hurt, too. Nobody’s asking you to be patient. But to survive this, we all have to *be smart*.”

The interviewer looked away from the big screen television on the set. “Let’s play an excerpt from Dustin Hoffman’s message . . .”

Hoffman stood on a bare motion picture sound stage with his hands thrust into the pockets of tailored beige pants. He smiled a friendly but solemn greeting. “My name is Dustin Hoffman. You might remember I played a scientist fighting a deadly disease in a movie called *Outbreak*. I’ve been talking to the scientists at the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and they’re working as hard as they can, every day, to fight SHEVA and stop our children from dying.”

The interviewer interrupted the clip. “What *are* the scientists doing that they weren’t doing last year? What’s new in the effort?”

Cosby made a sour face. “I’m just a man who wants to help us get through this mess. Doctors and scientists are the only hope we’ve got, and we can’t just take to the streets and burn things down and make it all go away. We’re talking about thinking things through, working together, not engaging in riots and panic.”

Delia stood in the bathroom doorway, plump legs bare beneath the small motel towel, head wrapped in another towel. She stared fixedly at the television. “It’s not going to make any difference,” she said. “My babies are dead.”

• •

Mitch returned from the Coke machine at the end of the line of rooms to find Morgan pacing in a U around the bed. The boy's hands were knots of frustration. "I can't stop thinking," Morgan said. Mitch held out a Coke and Morgan stared at it, took it from his hand, popped the top, and chugged it back fiercely. "You know what they did, what Jayce did? When we needed money?"

"I don't need to know, Morgan," Mitch said.

"It's how they treat me. Jayce went out and got a man to pay for it, and, you know, she and Delia *blew* him, and took some money. Jesus, I ate some of that dinner, too. And the next night. Then we were hitching and Delia started having her baby. They won't let me touch them, even hug them, they won't put their arms around me, but for money, they *blow* these guys, and they don't care whether I see them or not!" He pounded his temple with the ball of his thumb. "They are so *stupid*, like farm animals."

"It must have been tough out there," Mitch said. "You were all hungry."

"I went with them because my father's nothing great, you know, but he doesn't beat me. He works all day. They needed me more than he does. But I want to go back. I can't do anything more for them."

"I understand," Mitch said. "But don't be hasty. We'll work this through."

"I am so sick of this shit!" Morgan howled.

They heard the howl in the next room. Jayce sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes. "There he goes again," she murmured.

Delia dried off her hair. "He really isn't stable sometimes," she said.

"Can you drop us off in Cincinnati?" Jayce asked. "I have an uncle there. Maybe you can send Morgan back home now."

"Sometimes Morgan's such a child," Delia said.

Kaye watched them from her chair, her face pinking with an emotion she could not quite understand: solidarity compounded with visceral disgust.

Minutes later, she met Mitch outside, under the long motel walkway. They held hands.

Mitch pointed his thumb over his shoulder, through the room's open door. The shower was running again. "His second. He says he feels dirty all the time. The girls have played a little loose with poor Morgan."

"What was he expecting?"

"No idea."

"To go to bed with them?"

“I don’t know,” Mitch said quietly. “Maybe he just wants to be treated with respect.”

“I don’t think they know how,” Kaye said. She pressed her hand on his chest, rubbed him there, her eyes focused on something distant and invisible. “The girls want to be dropped off in Cincinnati.”

“Morgan wants to go to the bus station,” Mitch said. “He’s had enough.”

“Mother Nature isn’t being very kind or gentle, is she?”

“Mother Nature has always been something of a bitch,” he said.

“So much for Rocinante and touring America,” Kaye said sadly.

“You want to make some phone calls, get involved again, don’t you?”

Kaye lifted her hands. “I don’t *know!*” she moaned. “Just taking off and living our lives seems wildly irresponsible. I want to learn more. But how much will anybody tell us—Christopher, anybody on the Taskforce? I’m an outsider now.”

“There’s a way we can stay in the game, with different rules,” Mitch said.

“The rich guy in New York?”

“Daney. And Oliver Merton.”

“We’re not going to Seattle?”

“We are,” Mitch said. “But I’m going to call Merton and say I’m interested.”

“I still want to have our baby,” Kaye said, eyes wide, voice fragile as a dried flower.

The shower stopped. They heard Morgan toweling off, alternately humming to himself and swearing.

“It’s funny,” Mitch said, almost too softly to hear. “I’ve been very uncomfortable about the whole idea. But now . . . it seems plain as anything, the dreams, meeting you. I want our baby, too. We just can’t be innocent.” He took a deep breath, raised his eyes to meet Kaye’s, added, “Let’s go into that forest with some better maps.”

Morgan stepped out onto the walkway and stared at them owlishly. “I’m ready. I want to go home.”

Kaye looked at Morgan and almost flinched at his intensity. The boy’s eyes seemed a thousand years old.

“I’ll drive you to the bus station,” Mitch said.

**The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda**

MAY 5

**D**icken met the director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Dr. Tania Bao, outside the Natcher Building, and walked with her from there. Small, precisely dressed, with a composed and ageless face, its features arranged on a slightly undulating plain, nose tiny, lips on the edge of a smile, and slightly stooped shoulders, Bao might have been in her late thirties, but was in fact sixty-three. She wore a pale blue pantsuit and tasseled loafers. She walked with small quick steps, intent on the rough ground. The never-ending construction on the NIH campus had been brought to a halt for security purposes, but had already torn up most of the walkways between the Natcher Building and the Magnuson Clinical Center.

“NIH used to be an open campus,” Bao said. “Now, we live with the National Guard watching our every move. I can’t even buy my granddaughter toys from the vendors. I used to love to see them on the sidewalks or in the hallways. Now they’ve been cleared out, along with the construction workers.”

Dicken raised his shoulders, showing that these things were outside his control. His area of influence did not even include himself anymore. “I’ve come to listen,” he said. “I can take your opinions to Dr. Augustine, but I can’t guarantee he’ll agree.”

“What happened, Christopher?” Bao asked plaintively. “Why do they not respond to what is so obvious? Why is Augustine so stubborn?”

“You’re a far more experienced administrator than I am,” Dicken said. “I know only what I see and what I hear in the news. What I see is unbearable pressure from all sides. The vaccine teams haven’t been able to do anything. Mark will do everything he can, regardless, to protect public health. He wants to focus our resources on fighting what he believes is a virulent disease. Right now, the only available option is abortion.”

“What he *believes* . . .” Bao said incredulously. “What do *you* believe, Dr. Dicken?”

The weather was coming into a warm and humid summer mood that Dicken found familiar, even comforting; it made a deep and sad part of him think he might be in Africa, and he would have much preferred that to the

current round of his existence. They crossed a temporary asphalt ramp to the next level of finished sidewalk, stepped over yellow construction tape, and walked into the main entrance of Building 10.

Two months ago, life had begun to come apart for Christopher Dicken. The realization that hidden parts of his personality could affect his scientific judgment—that a combination of frustrated infatuation and job pressure could jolt him into an attitude he knew to be false—had preyed on him like a swarm of little biting flies. Somehow, he had managed an outward appearance of calm, of going with the game, the team, the Taskforce. He knew that could not go on forever.

“I believe in work,” Dicken said, embarrassed that his thoughts had delayed a response for so long.

Simply cutting himself off from Kaye Lang, and failing to support her in the face of Jackson’s ambush, had been an incomprehensible and unforgivable mistake. He regretted it more with each day, but it was too late to retie old and broken threads. He could still build a conceptual wall and work diligently on those projects assigned to him.

They took the elevator to the seventh floor, turned left, and found the small staff meeting room in the middle of a long beige and pink corridor.

Bao seated herself. “Christopher, you know Anita, Preston.”

They greeted Dicken with little cheer.

“No good news, I’m afraid,” Dicken reported, seating himself opposite Preston Meeker. Meeker, like his colleagues within the small, close room, represented the quintessence of a child health specialty—in his case, neonatal growth and development.

“Augustine still at it?” Meeker asked, pugnacious from the start. “Still pushing RU-486?”

“In his defense,” Dicken said, and paused for a moment to collect his thoughts, to present this old false face more convincingly, “he has no alternatives. The retrovirus folks at CDC agree that the expression and completion theory makes sense.”

“Children as carriers of unknown plagues?” Meeker pushed out his lips and made a pishing noise.

“It’s a highly defensible position. Added to the likelihood that most of the new babies will be born deformed—”

“We don’t know that,” House said. House was the acting deputy director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; the former deputy director had resigned two weeks ago. A great many NIH people associated with the SHEVA Taskforce were resigning.

With hardly a pang, Dicken thought that once again Kaye Lang had proved herself a pioneer by being the very first to leave.

"It's indisputable," Dicken said, and had no trouble telling her this, because it was true: no normal infants had been born yet to a SHEVA-infected mother. "Out of two hundred, most have been reported severely deformed. All have been born dead." *But not always deformed*, he reminded himself.

"If the president agrees to start a national campaign using RU-486," Bao said, "I doubt the CDC will be allowed to remain open in Atlanta. As for Bethesda, it is an intelligent community, but we are still in the Bible Belt. I have already had my house picketed, Christopher. I live surrounded by guards."

"I understand," Dicken said.

"Perhaps, but does Mark understand? He does not return my calls or my e-mail."

"Unacceptable isolation," Meeker said.

"How many acts of civil disobedience will it take?" House added, clasping her hands on the table and rubbing them together, her eyes darting around the group.

Bao stood and took up a whiteboard marker. She quickly and almost savagely chopped out the words in bright red, saying, "Two million first-stage Herod's miscarriages, as of last month. Hospitals are flooded."

"I go to those hospitals," Dicken said. "It's part of my job to be on the front."

"We also have visited patients here and around the country," Bao said, mouth tight with irritation. "We have three hundred SHEVA mothers in this very building. I see some of them every day. *We* are not isolated, Christopher."

"Sorry," Dicken said.

Bao nodded. "Seven hundred thousand reported second-stage Herod's pregnancies. Well, here the statistics fall apart—we do not know what is happening," Bao said, and stared at Dicken. "Where have all the others gone? They are not reporting. Does Mark know?"

"I know," Dicken said. "Mark knows. It's sensitive information. We don't want to acknowledge how much we know until the president makes his policy decision on the Taskforce proposal."

"I think I can guess," House said sardonically. "Educated women with means are buying black-market RU-486, or otherwise obtaining abortions

at different stages of their pregnancy. There's a wholesale revolt in the medical community, in women's clinics. They've stopped reporting to the Taskforce, because of the new laws regulating abortion procedures. My guess is, Mark wants to make official what's already happening around the country."

Dicken paused for a moment to gather his thoughts, shore up his sagging false front. "Mark has no control over the House of Representatives or the Senate. He speaks, they ignore him. We all know the rates of domestic violence are way up. Women are being forced out of their homes. Divorce. Murder." Dicken let that sink in, as it had sunk in to his own thoughts and self in the last few months. "Violence against pregnant women is at an all-time high. Some are even resorting to quinacrine, when they can get it, to self-sterilize."

Bao shook her head sadly.

Dicken continued. "Many women know the simplest way out is to stop their second-stage pregnancies before they go anywhere near full term and other side effects appear."

"Mark Augustine and the Taskforce are reluctant to describe these side effects," Bao said. "We assume you refer to facial cauls and melanisms in both the parents."

"I also refer to whistling palate and vomeronasal deformation," Dicken said.

"Why the fathers, too?" Bao asked.

"I have no idea," Dicken said. "If NIH hadn't lost its clinical study subjects, due to an excess of personal concern, we might all know a lot more, under at least mildly controlled conditions."

Bao reminded Dicken that no one in the room had had anything to do with the closure of the Taskforce clinical studies in this very building.

"I understand," Dicken said, and hated himself with a ferocity he could barely hide. "I don't disagree. Second-stage pregnancies are being ended by all but the poor, those who can't get to clinics or buy the pills . . . or . . ."

"Or what?" Meeker asked.

"The dedicated."

"Dedicated to what?"

"To nature. To the proposition that these children should be given a chance, whatever the odds of their being born dead or deformed."

"Augustine does not seem to believe any of the children should be given a chance," Bao said. "Why?"



“Herod’s is a disease. This is how you fight a disease.” *This can’t go on much longer. You’ll either resign or you’ll kill yourself trying to explain things you don’t understand or believe.*

“I say again, we are not isolated, Christopher,” Bao said, shaking her head. “We go to the maternity wards and the surgeries in this clinic, and visit other clinics and hospitals. We see the women and the men in pain. We need some rational approach that takes into account all these views, all these pressures.”

Dicken frowned in concentration. “Mark is just looking at medical reality. And there’s no political consensus,” he added quietly. “It’s a dangerous time.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Meeker said. “Christopher, I think the White House is paralyzed. Damned if you do, and certainly damned if you don’t and things go on the way they are.”

“Maryland’s own governor is involved in this so-called States’ Health revolt,” House said. “I’ve never seen such fervor in the religious right here.”

“It’s pretty much grass roots, not just Christian,” Bao said. “The Chinese community has pulled in its horns and with good reason. Bigotry is on the rise. We are falling apart into scared and unhappy tribes, Christopher.”

Dicken stared down at the table, then up at the figures on the whiteboard, one eyelid twitching with fatigue. “It hurts all of us,” he said. “It hurts Mark, and it hurts me.”

“I doubt it hurts Mark as much as it hurts the mothers,” Bao said quietly.

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### Oregon

MAY 10

“I’m an ignorant man, and I don’t understand a lot of things,” Sam said. He leaned on the split-rail fence that surrounded the four acres, the two-story frame farmhouse, an old and sagging barn, the brick workshed. Mitch pushed his free hand into his pocket and rested a can of Michelob on the lichen-grayed fence post. A square-rump, black-and-white cow cropping a patch of the neighbor’s twelve acres regarded them with an almost com-

plete absence of curiosity. “You’ve only known this woman for what, two weeks?”

“Just over a month.”

“Some whirlwind!”

Mitch agreed with a sheepish look.

“Why be in such a hurry? Why in hell would anyone want to get pregnant, now of all times? Your mother’s been over her hot flashes for ten years, but after Herod’s, she’s still skittish about letting me touch her.”

“Kaye’s different,” Mitch said, as if admitting something. They had come to this topic on the backs of a lot of other difficult topics that afternoon. The toughest of all had been Mitch’s admission that he had temporarily given up looking for a job, that they would largely be living on Kaye’s money. Sam found this incomprehensible.

“Where’s the self-respect in that?” he had said, and shortly after they had dropped that subject and returned to what had happened in Austria.

Mitch had told him about meeting Brock at the Daney mansion, and that had amused Sam quite a bit. “It baffles science,” he had commented dryly. When they had gotten around to discussing Kaye, still talking with Mitch’s mother, Abby, in the large farmhouse kitchen, Sam’s puzzlement had blossomed into irritation, then downright anger.

“I admit I may be stuck in abysmal stupidity,” Sam said, “but isn’t it just damned dangerous to do this sort of thing now, deliberately?”

“It could be,” Mitch admitted.

“Then why in hell did you agree?”

“I can’t answer that easily,” Mitch said. “First, I think she could be right. I mean, I think she *is* right. This time around, we’ll have a healthy baby.”

“But you tested positive, *she* tested positive,” Sam said, glaring at him, hands gripping the rail tightly.

“We did.”

“And correct me if I’m wrong, but there’s *never* been a healthy baby born of a woman who tested positive.”

“Not yet,” Mitch said.

“That’s lousy odds.”

“She’s the one who found this virus,” Mitch said. “She knows more about it than anyone else on Earth, and she’s convinced—”

“That everyone else is wrong?” Sam asked.

“That we’re going to change our thinking in the next few years.”

“Is she crazy, then, or just a fanatic?”

Mitch frowned. "Careful, Dad," he said.

Sam flung his hands up in the air. "Mitch, for Christ's sake, I fly to Austria, the first time I've ever been to Europe, and it's without your mother, damn it, to pick up my son at a hospital after he's . . . Well, we've been through all that. But why face this kind of grief, take this kind of chance, I ask, in God's name?"

"Since her first husband died, she's been a little frantic about looking ahead, seeing things in a positive light," Mitch said. "I can't say I understand her, Dad, but I love her. I trust her. Something in me says she's right, or I wouldn't have gone along."

"You mean, *cooperated*." Sam looked at the cow and brushed his hands free of lichen dust on his pants legs. "What if you're both wrong?" he asked.

"We know the consequences. We'll live with them," Mitch said. "But we're not wrong. Not this time, Dad."

"I've been reading as much as I can," Abby Rafelson said. "It's bewildering. All these viruses." Afternoon sun fell through the kitchen window and lay in yellow trapezoids on the unvarnished oak floor. The kitchen smelled of coffee—too much coffee, Kaye thought, nerves on edge—and tamales, their lunch before the men had gone out walking.

Mitch's mother had kept her beauty into her sixties, an authoritative kind of good looks that emerged from high cheekbones and deep-sunk blue eyes combined with immaculate grooming.

"These particular viruses have been with us a long time," Kaye said. She held up a picture of Mitch when he was five years old, riding a tricycle on the Willamette riverfront in Portland. He looked intent, oblivious to the camera; sometimes she saw that same expression when he was driving or reading a newspaper.

"How long?" Abby asked.

"Maybe tens of millions of years." Kaye picked up another picture from the pile on the coffee table. The picture showed Mitch and Sam loading wood in the back of a truck. By his height and thin limbs, Mitch appeared to be about ten or eleven.

"What were they doing there in the first place? I couldn't understand that."

"They might have infected us through our gametes, eggs or sperm. Then they stayed. They mutated, or something deactivated them, or . . . we put them to work for us. Found a way to make them useful." Kaye looked up from the picture.

Abby stared at her, unfazed. “Sperm or eggs?”

“Ovaries, testicles,” Kaye said, glancing down again.

“What made them decide to come out again?”

“Something in our everyday lives,” Kaye said. “Stress, maybe.”

Abby thought about this for a few seconds. “I’m a college graduate. Physical education. Did Mitch tell you that?”

Kaye nodded. “He said you took a minor in biochemistry. Some pre-med courses.”

“Yes, well, not enough to be up to your level. More than enough to be dubious about my religious upbringing, however. I don’t know what my mother would have thought if she had known about these viruses in our sex cells.” Abby smiled at Kaye and shook her head. “Maybe she would have called them our original sin.”

Kaye looked at Abby and tried to think of a reply but couldn’t. “That’s interesting,” she managed. Why this should disturb her she did not know, but that it did upset her even more. She felt threatened by the idea.

“The graves in Russia,” Abby said quietly. “Maybe the mothers had neighbors who thought it was an outbreak of original sin.”

“I don’t believe it is,” Kaye said.

“Oh, I don’t believe it myself,” Abby said. She trained her examining blue eyes on Kaye now, troubled, darting. “I’ve never been very comfortable about anything to do with sex. Sam’s a gentle man, the only man I’ve felt passionate about, though not the only man I’ve invited into my bed. My upbringing . . . was not the best that way. Not the wisest. I’ve never talked with Mitch about sex. Or about love. It seemed he would do well enough on his own, handsome as he is, smart as he is.” Abby laid her hand on Kaye’s. “Did he tell you his mother was a crazy old prude?” She looked so sadly desperate and at a loss that Kaye gripped her hand tightly and smiled what she hoped was reassurance.

“He told me you were a wonderful mother and caring,” Kaye said, “and that he was your only son, and that you’d grill me like a pork chop.” She squeezed Abby’s hand tighter.

Abby laughed and something of the electricity fell from the air between them. “He told me you were headstrong and smarter than any woman he had ever met, and that you cared so much about things. He said I’d better like you, or he’d have a talk with me.”

Kaye stared at her, aghast. “He did not!”

“He did,” Abby said solemnly. “The men in this family don’t mince words. I told him I’d do my best to get along with you.”

“Good grief!” Kaye said, laughing in disbelief.

“Exactly,” Abby said. “He was being defensive. But he knows me. He knows I don’t mince words, either. With all this original sin popping out all over, I think we’re in for a world of change. A lot of ways men and women do things will change. Don’t you think?”

“I’m sure of it,” Kaye said.

“I want you to work as hard as you can, please, dear, my new daughter, please, to make a place where there will be love and a gentle and caring center for Mitch. He looks tough and sturdy but men are really very fragile. Don’t let all this split you up, or damage him. I want to keep as much of the Mitch I know and love as I can, as long as I can. I still see my boy in him. My boy is strong there still.” There were tears in Abby’s eyes, and Kaye realized, holding the woman’s hand, that she had missed her own mother so much, for so many years, and had tried unsuccessfully to bury those emotions.

“It was hard, when Mitch was born,” Abby said. “I was in labor for four days. My first child, I thought the delivery would be tough, but not that tough. I regret we did not have more . . . but only in some ways. Now, I’d be scared to death. I *am* scared to death, even though there’s nothing to worry about between Sam and me.”

“I’ll take care of Mitch,” Kaye said.

“These are horrible times,” Abby said. “Somebody’s going to write a book, a big, thick, book. I hope there’s a bright and happy ending.”

That evening, over dinner, men and women together, the conversation was pleasant, light, of little consequence. The air seemed clear, the issues all rained out. Kaye slept with Mitch in his old bedroom, a sign of acceptance from Abby or assertion from Mitch or both.

This was the first real family she had known in years. Thinking about that, lying cramped up beside Mitch in the too-small bed, she had her own moment of happy tears.

She had bought a pregnancy test kit in Eugene when they had stopped for gas not far from a big drug store. Then, to make herself feel she was really making a normal decision despite a world so remarkably out of kilter, she had gone to a small bookstore in the same strip mall and bought a Dr. Spock paperback. She had shown the paperback to Mitch, and he had grinned, but she had not shown him the test kit.

“This is so normal,” she murmured as Mitch snored lightly. “What we’re doing is so *natural* and normal, please, God.”

## Seattle, Washington / Washington, D.C.

MAY 14

**K**aye drove through Portland while Mitch slept. They crossed the bridge into Washington state, passed through a small rainstorm and then back into bright sun. Kaye chose a turnoff and they ate lunch at a small Mexican restaurant near no town that had a name that they would know. The roads were quiet; it was Sunday.

They paused to nap for a few minutes in the parking lot and Kaye nestled her head on Mitch's shoulder. The air was slow and the sun warmed her face and hair. A few birds sang. The clouds moved in orderly ranks from the south and soon covered the sky, but the air stayed warm.

After their nap, Kaye drove on through Tacoma, and then Mitch drove again, and they continued in to Seattle. Once through the downtown, passing under the highway-straddling convention center, Mitch felt anxious about taking her straight to his apartment.

"Maybe you'd like to see some of the sights before we settle in," he said.

Kaye smiled. "What, your apartment is a mess?"

"It's clean," Mitch said. "It just might not be . . ." He shook his head.

"Don't worry. I'm in no mood to be critical. But I'd love to look around."

"There's a place I used to visit a lot when I wasn't digging . . ."

Gasworks Park sprawled below a low grassy promontory overlooking Lake Union. The remains of an old gas plant and other factory buildings had been cleaned out and painted bright colors and turned into a public park. The vertical gasworks tanks and decaying walkways and piping had not been painted, but had been fenced in and left to rust.

Mitch took her by the hand and led her from the parking lot. Kaye thought the park was a little ugly, the grass a little patchy, but for Mitch's sake, said nothing.

They sat on the lawn beside the chain-link fence and watched passenger seaplanes landing on Lake Union. A few lone men and women, or women with children, walked to the playground beside the factory buildings. Mitch said the attendance was a little low for a sunny Sunday.

“People don’t want to congregate,” Kaye said, but even as she spoke, chartered buses were arriving in the parking lot, pulling into spaces marked off by ropes.

“Something’s up,” Mitch said, craning his neck.

“Nothing you planned for me?” she asked lightly.

“Nope,” Mitch said, smiling. “But maybe I don’t remember, after last night.”

“You say that every night,” Kaye said. She yawned, holding her hand over her mouth, and tracked a sailboat crossing the lake, and then a wind surfer in a wetsuit.

“Eight buses,” Mitch said. “Curious.”

Kaye’s period was three days late, and she had been regular since going off the pill, after Saul’s death. This caused a steely kind of concern. When she thought about what they might have started, her teeth ground together. *So quickly. Old-fashioned romance. Rolling downhill, gathering speed.*

She had not told Mitch yet, in case it was a false alarm.

Kaye felt separated from her body when she thought too hard. If she pulled back from the steely concern and just explored her sensations, the natural state of tissues and cells and emotions, she felt fine; it was the context, the implications, the *knowing* that interfered with simply feeling good and in love.

Knowing too much and never knowing enough was the problem.

*Normal.*

“Ten buses, whoops, eleven,” Mitch said. “Big damn crowd.” He stroked the side of her neck. “I’m not sure I like this.”

“It’s your park. I don’t want to move for a while,” Kaye said. “It’s nice.” The sun threw bright patches over the park. The rusty tanks glowed dull orange.

Dozens of men and women in earth-colored clothes walked in small groups from the buses toward the hill. They seemed in no hurry. Four women carried a wooden ring about a yard wide, and several men helped roll a long pole on a dolly.

Kaye frowned, then chuckled. “They’re doing something with a yoni and a lingam,” she said.

Mitch squinted at the procession. “Maybe it’s a giant hoop game,” he said. “Horseshoes or something.”

“Do you think?” Kaye asked with that familiar and uncritical tone he instantly recognized as no-holds-barred disagreement.

“No,” he said, smacking his temple with his palm. “How could I have not seen it right away? It’s a yoni and a lingam.”

“And you an anthropologist,” she said, lightly doubling the syllables. Kaye got up on her knees and shaded her eyes. “Let’s go see.”

“What if we’re not invited?”

“I doubt it’s a closed party,” she said.

Dicken went through the security check—pat-down, metal detection wand, chemical sniff—and entered the White House through the so-called diplomatic entrance. A young Marine escort immediately took him downstairs to a large meeting room in the basement. The air conditioning was running full blast and the room felt cold as a refrigerator compared to the eighty-five-degree heat and humidity outside.

Dicken was the first to arrive. Other than the Marine and a steward arranging place settings—bottles of Evian and legal pads and pens—on the long oval conference table, he was alone in the room. He sat in a chair reserved for junior aides at the back. The steward asked him if he’d like something to drink—a Coke or glass of juice. “We’ll have coffee down here in a few minutes.”

“Coke would be great,” Dicken said.

“Just fly in?”

“Drove from Bethesda,” Dicken said.

“Going to be some miserable weather this afternoon,” the steward said. “Thunderstorms by five, so the weather people say at Andrews. We get the best weather reports here.” He winked and smiled, then left and returned after a few minutes with a Coke and a glass of chopped ice.

More people began arriving ten minutes later. Dicken recognized the governors of New Mexico, Alabama, and Maryland; they were accompanied by a small group of aides. The room would soon hold the core of the so-called Governors’ Revolt that was raising hell with the Taskforce across the country.

Augustine was going to have his finest hour, right here in the basement of the White House. He was going to try to convince ten governors, seven from very conservative states, that allowing women access to a complete range of abortion measures was the only humane course of action.

Dicken doubted the plea would be met with approval, or even polite disagreement.

Augustine entered some minutes later, accompanied by the White



House–Taskforce liaison and the chief of staff. Augustine put his valise on the table and walked over to Dicken, his shoes clicking on the tile floor.

“Any ammunition?” he asked.

“A rout,” Dicken said quietly. “None of the health agencies felt we had a chance of taking control again. They feel the president has lost his grip on the issue, too.”

Augustine’s eyes wrinkled at the edges. His crow’s feet had grown noticeably deeper in the last year, and his hair had grayed. “I suppose they’re going it on their own—grass-roots solutions?”

“That’s all they see. The AMA and most of the side branches of the NIH have withdrawn their support, tacitly if not overtly.”

“Well,” Augustine said softly, “we sure as hell don’t have anything to offer to get them back in the fold—yet.” He took a cup of coffee from the steward. “Maybe we should just go home and let everyone get on with it.”

Augustine turned to look as more governors entered. The governors were followed by Shawbeck and the secretary of Health and Human Services. “Here come the lions, followed by the Christians,” he said. “That’s only as it should be.” Before leaving to sit at the opposite end of the table, in one of the three seats where no tiny flags flew, he said, in a very low voice, “The president’s been talking with Alabama and Maryland for the last two hours, Christopher. They’ve been arguing with him to delay his decision. I don’t think he wants to. Fifteen thousand pregnant women were murdered in the last six weeks. *Fifteen thousand*, Christopher.”

Dicken had seen that figure several times.

“We should all bend over and get our butts kicked,” Augustine growled.

Mitch estimated there were at least six hundred people in the crowd moving toward the top of the hill. A few dozen onlookers followed the resolute group with its wooden ring and pillar.

Kaye took his hand. “Is this a Seattle thing?” she asked, pulling him along. The idea of a fertility ritual intrigued her.

“Not that I’ve heard of,” Mitch said. Since San Diego, the smell of too many people gave him the willies.

At the top of the promontory, Kaye and Mitch stood on the edge of a large flat sundial, about thirty feet across. It was made of bas-relief bronze astrological figures, numerals, outstretched human hands, and calligraphic letters showing the four points of the compass. Ceramics, glass, and colored cement completed the circle.

Mitch showed Kaye how the observer became the gnomon on the dial, standing between parallel lines with the seasons and dates cast into them. It was two o'clock, by her estimation.

"It's beautiful," she said. "Kind of a pagan site, don't you think?" Mitch nodded, keeping his eye on the advancing crowd.

Several men and boys flying kites moved out of the way, pulling and winding their strings, as the group climbed the hill. Three women carried the ring, sweating beneath the weight. They lowered it gently to the middle of the sundial. Two men carrying the pillar stood to one side, waiting to set it down.

Five older women dressed in light yellow robes walked into the circle with hands clasped, smiling with dignity, and surrounded the ring in the center of the compass. The group said not a word.

Kaye and Mitch descended to the south side of the hill, overlooking Lake Union. Mitch felt a breeze coming from the south and saw a few low banks of cloud moving over downtown Seattle. The air was like wine, clean and sweet, temperature in the low seventies. Cloud shadows swung dramatically over the hill.

"Too many people," Mitch told Kaye.

"Let's stay and see what they're up to," Kaye said.

The crowd compacted, forming concentric circles, all holding hands. They politely asked Kaye and Mitch and others to move farther down the hill while they completed their ceremony.

"You're welcome to watch, from down there," a plump young woman in a green shift told Kaye. She explicitly ignored Mitch. Her eyes seemed to track right past him, through him.

The only sound the gathering people made was the rustling of their robes and the motion of their sandaled feet in the grass and over the bas-relief figures of the sundial.

Mitch shoved his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders.

The governors were seated at the table, leaning right or left to speak in murmurs with their aides or adjacent colleagues. Shawbeck remained standing, hands clasped in front of him. Augustine had walked around one quarter of the table to speak with the governor of California. Dicken tried to puzzle out the seating arrangements and then realized that someone was following a clever protocol. The governors had been arranged not by seniority, or by influence, but by the geographic distribution of their states. California was

on the western side of the table, and the governor of Alabama sat close to the back of the room in the southeastern quadrant. Augustine, Shawbeck, and the secretary sat near where the president would sit.

That meant something, Dicken surmised. Maybe they were actually going to bite the bullet and recommend that Augustine's policies be carried out.

Dicken was not at all sure how he felt about that. He had listened to presentations on the medical cost of taking care of second-stage babies, should any survive for very long; he had also listened to figures showing what it would cost for the United States to lose an entire generation of children.

The liaison for Health stood by the door. "Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the United States."

All rose. The governor of Alabama got to his feet more slowly than the others. Dicken saw that his face was damp, presumably from the heat outside. But Augustine had told him that the governor had been in conference with the president for the past two hours.

A Secret Service agent dressed in a blazer and golf shirt walked past Dicken, glanced at him with that stony precision Dicken had long since become used to. The president entered the room first, tall, with his famous shock of white hair. He seemed fit but a little tired; still, the power of the office swept over Dicken. He was pleased that the president looked in his direction, recognized him, nodded solemnly in passing.

The governor of Alabama pushed back his chair. The wooden legs groaned on the concrete floor. "Mr. President," the governor said, too loudly. The president stopped to speak with him, and the governor took two steps forward.

Two agents glanced at each other and swung about to politely intervene.

"I love the office and I love our great country, sir," the governor said, and wrapped the president in his arms, as if delivering a protective bear hug.

The governor of Florida, standing next to them, grimaced and shook his head in some embarrassment.

The agents were mere feet away.

*Oh*, Dicken thought, nothing more; just a blank and prescient awareness of being suspended in time, a train whistle not yet heard, brakes not yet pressed, arm willed to move but as yet limp by his side.

He thought perhaps he should get out of the way.

The blond young man in a black robe wore a green surgical mask and kept his eyes lowered as he advanced up the hill to the compass rose. He was

escorted by three women in brown and green, and he carried a small brown cloth bag tied with golden rope. His wispy, almost white hair blew back and forth in the breeze that was quickening on the hill.

The circles of women and men parted to let them through.

Mitch watched with a puzzled expression. Kaye stood with arms folded beside him. "What are they up to?" he asked.

"Some sort of ceremony," Kaye said.

"Fertility?"

"Why not?"

Mitch mulled this over. "Atonement," he said. "There are more women than men."

"About three to one," Kaye said.

"Most of the men are older."

"Q-Tips," Kaye said.

"What?"

"That's what young women call men who are old enough to be their fathers," Kaye said. "Like the president."

"That's insulting," Mitch said.

"It's true," Kaye said. "Don't blame me."

The young man was hidden from their view as the crowd closed again.

A large burning hand picked up Christopher Dicken and carried him to the back of the wall. It shattered his eardrums and collapsed his chest. Then the hand pulled back and he slumped to the floor. His eyes flickered open. He saw flames rush along the crushed ceiling in concentric waves, tiles falling through the flames. He was covered with blood and bits of flesh. White smoke and heat stung his eyes, and he shut them. He could not breathe, could not hear, could not move.

The chanting began low and droning. "Let's go," Mitch told Kaye.

She looked back at the crowd. Now something seemed wrong to her, as well. The hair on her neck rose. "All right," she said.

They circled on a walkway and turned to walk down the north side of the hill. They passed a man and his son, five or six years old, the son carrying a kite in his small hands. The boy smiled at Kaye and Mitch. Kaye looked at the boy's elegant almond eyes, his long close-shaven head so Egyptian, like a beautiful and ancient ebony statue brought to life, and she thought, *What a beautiful and normal child. What a beautiful little boy.*

She was reminded of the young girl standing by the side of the street in

Gordi, as the UN caravan left the town; so different in appearance, yet provoking such similar thoughts.

She took Mitch's hand in hers just as the sirens began. They looked north toward the parking lot, and saw five police cars skidding to a halt, doors flung open, officers emerging, running through the parked cars and across the grass, up the hill.

"Look," Mitch said, and pointed at a lone middle-aged man dressed in shorts and a sweatshirt, talking on a cellular phone. The man looked scared.

"What in hell?" Kaye asked.

The droning prayer had strengthened. Three officers rushed past Kaye and Mitch, guns still holstered, but one had pulled out his baton. They pushed through the outer circles of the crowd on the top of the hill.

Women shrieked abuse at them. They fought with the officers, shoving, kicking, scratching, trying to push them back.

Kaye could not believe what she was seeing or hearing. Two women jumped on one of the men, shouting obscenities.

The officer with the baton began to use it to protect his fellows. Kaye heard the stomach-twisting chunk of weighted plastic on flesh and bone.

Kaye started back up the hill, but Mitch grabbed her arm.

More officers plowed into the crowd, batons swinging. The chanting stopped. The crowd seemed to lose all cohesion. Women in robes broke away, hands clutched to their faces in anger and fear, screaming, crying, their voices high and frantic. Some of the robed women collapsed and pounded the scruffy yellow grass with their fists. Spittle dribbled from their mouths.

A police van pushed over the curb and over the grass, engine roaring. Two female officers joined in the rout.

Mitch backed Kaye off the mound, and they came to the bottom, facing uphill to keep an eye on the crowd still massed around the sundial. Two officers pushed out of this assembly with the young man in black. Red dripping slashes marked his neck and hands. A woman officer called for an ambulance on her walkie-talkie. She passed within yards of Mitch and Kaye, face white and lips red with anger.

"Goddamn it!" she shouted at the onlookers. "Why didn't you try to stop them?"

Neither Kaye nor Mitch had an answer.

The young man in the black robe stumbled and fell between the two officers supporting him. His face, warped by pain and shock, flashed white as the clouds against the hard-packed dirt and yellow grass.

## Seattle

**M**itch drove them south on the freeway to Capitol Hill, then turned off and headed east on Denny. The Buick chugged up the grade.

“I wish we hadn’t seen that,” Kaye said.

Mitch swore under his breath. “I wish we’d never even stopped.”

“Is everybody crazy? It’s just too much,” Kaye said. “I can’t figure out where we stand in all this.”

“We’re going back to the old ways,” Mitch said.

“Like in Georgia.” Kaye pressed a knuckle against her lips and teeth.

“I hate to have women blame *men*,” Mitch said. “It makes me want to throw up.”

“I don’t blame anybody,” Kaye said. “But you have to admit, it’s a natural reaction.”

Mitch shot her a scowl that bordered on a dirty look, the first such he had ever given her. She sucked in her breath privately, feeling both guilty and sad, and turned to look out her window, peering down the long straight stretch of Broadway: brick buildings, pedestrians, young men wearing green masks, walking with other men, and women walking with women.

“Let’s forget about it,” Mitch said. “Let’s get some rest.”

The second-floor apartment, neat and cool and a little dusty from Mitch’s long absence, overlooked Broadway and gave a view of the brick-front post office, a small bookstore, and a Thai restaurant. As Mitch carried the bags through the door, he apologized for clutter that did not exist, as far as Kaye was concerned.

“Bachelor digs,” he said. “I don’t know why I kept up the lease.”

“It’s nice,” Kaye said, running her fingers along the dark wood trim of the windowsill, the white enamel on the wall. The living room had been warmed by the sun and smelled slightly stuffy, not unpleasant, just closed in. With some difficulty, Kaye opened the window. Mitch stood beside her and closed the window slowly. “Gas fumes from the street,” he said. “There’s a window in the bedroom that looks out over the back of the building. Gets a good draft.”

Kaye had thought that seeing Mitch’s apartment would be romantic,

pleasant, that she would learn a lot about him, but it was so neat, so sparsely furnished, that she felt let down. She examined the books in a ceiling-high case near the kitchen nook: textbooks on anthropology and archaeology, some tattered biology texts, a box full of science magazines and photocopies. No novels.

"The Thai restaurant is good," Mitch said, putting his arms around her as she stood before the bookcase.

"I'm not hungry. This is where you did your research?"

"Right here. Stroke of lightning. You were inspirational."

"Thank you," she said.

"Want to just take a nap? There are beers in the refrigerator—"

"Budweiser?"

Mitch grinned.

"I'll take one," Kaye said. He let go of her and rummaged in the refrigerator.

"Damn. There must have been an outage. Everything in the freezer melted . . ." A cool sour smell wafted from the kitchen. "The beer's still good, though." He brought her a bottle and deftly unscrewed the cap. She took it and sipped it. Barely any flavor. No relief.

"I need to use the bathroom," Kaye said. She felt numb, far from anything that mattered. She carried her purse into the bathroom and removed the pregnancy kit. It was sweet and simple: two drops of urine on a test strip, blue if positive, pink if negative. Results in ten minutes.

Suddenly, Kaye was desperate to know.

The bathroom was immaculately clean. "What can I do for him?" she asked herself. "He lives his own life here." But she put that aside and dropped the lid on the toilet to sit.

In the living room, Mitch turned on the TV. Through the old solid-pine door Kaye heard muffled voices, a few stray words. ". . . also injured in the blast was the secretary—"

"Kaye!" Mitch called.

She covered the strip with a Kleenex and opened the door.

"The president," Mitch said, his face contorted. He pounded his fists at nothing. "I wish I'd never turned the damned thing on!"

Kaye stood in the living room before the small television, stared at the announcer's head and shoulders, her moving lips, the run of mascara from one eye. "The count so far is seven dead, including the governors of Florida, Mississippi, and Alabama, the president, a Secret Service agent, and two not yet identified. Among the survivors are the governors of New

Mexico and Arizona, director of the Herod's Taskforce Mark Augustine, and Frank Shawbeck of the National Institutes of Health. The vice president was not in the White House at this time—"

Mitch stood beside her, shoulders slumped.

"Where was Christopher?" Kaye asked in a small voice.

"No explanation has yet been given for how a bomb could have been smuggled into the White House through such intense security. Frank Sesno is outside the White House now."

Kaye pushed free of Mitch's arm. "Excuse me," she said, patting his shoulder nervously. "Bathroom."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." She shut the door and locked it, took a deep breath, and lifted away the Kleenex. Ten minutes had passed.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Mitch called outside the door.

Kaye held the strip up to the light, looked at the two test patches. The first test showed blue. The second test showed blue. She read the instructions again, the color comparisons, and leaned an elbow against the door, feeling dizzy.

"It's done," she said softly. She straightened and thought, *This is a horrible time. Let it wait. Let it wait if you can possibly wait.*

"Kaye!" Mitch sounded close to panic. He needed her, needed some reassurance. She leaned on the sink, could barely stay upright, she felt such a mix of horror and relief and awe at what they had done, at what the world was doing.

She opened the door and saw tears in Mitch's eyes.

"I didn't even vote for him!" he said, his lips trembling.

Kaye hugged him tightly. That the president was dead was significant, important, it mattered, but she could not feel it yet. Her emotions were elsewhere, with Mitch, with his mother and father, with her own absent mother and father; she felt even a mild concern for herself, but curiously enough, no real connection with the life inside her.

Not yet.

This was not the actual baby.

Not yet.

*Don't love it. Don't love this one. Love what it does, what it carries.*

Quite against her will, as she held Mitch and patted his back, Kaye fainted. Mitch carried her into the bedroom, brought a cold cloth.

She floated for a while in closed darkness, then became aware of a dryness in her mouth. She cleared her throat, opened her eyes.



She looked up at her husband, tried to kiss his hand as it passed the cloth over her cheeks and chin.

“Such a fool,” she said.

“Me?”

“Me. I thought I’d be strong.”

“You are strong,” Mitch said.

“I love you,” she said, and that was all she could manage.

Mitch saw that she was sound asleep and pulled the blanket over her on the bed, turned out the light, and returned to the living room. The apartment seemed so different now. Summer twilight glowed beyond the windows, casting a fairy-tale pallor over the opposite wall. He sat in the worn armchair before the TV, its muted sound still clear in the quiet room.

“Governor Harris has declared a state of emergency and called out National Guard troops. A curfew of seven P.M. has been declared for weekdays, five P.M. for Saturday and Sunday, and if martial law is declared at the federal level, we presume by the vice president, as seems very likely, then throughout the state, no groups will be allowed to gather in public places without special permission from the Emergency Action Office in each community. This official state of emergency is open-ended, and is in part, so officials say, a response to the situation in the nation’s capital, and in part an attempt to bring under control the extraordinary and continuing unrest in Washington state itself . . .”

Mitch tapped the plastic test strip on his chin. He switched channels just to have a feeling of control.

“. . . is dead. The president and five out of ten visiting state governors were killed this morning in the situation room of the White House—”

And again, punching the button on the small remote.

“. . . The governor of Alabama, Abraham C. Darzelle, leader of the so-called States’ Revolt movement, *embraced* the president of the United States just before the explosion. Both the governors of Alabama and Florida, and the president, were blown apart by the blast—”

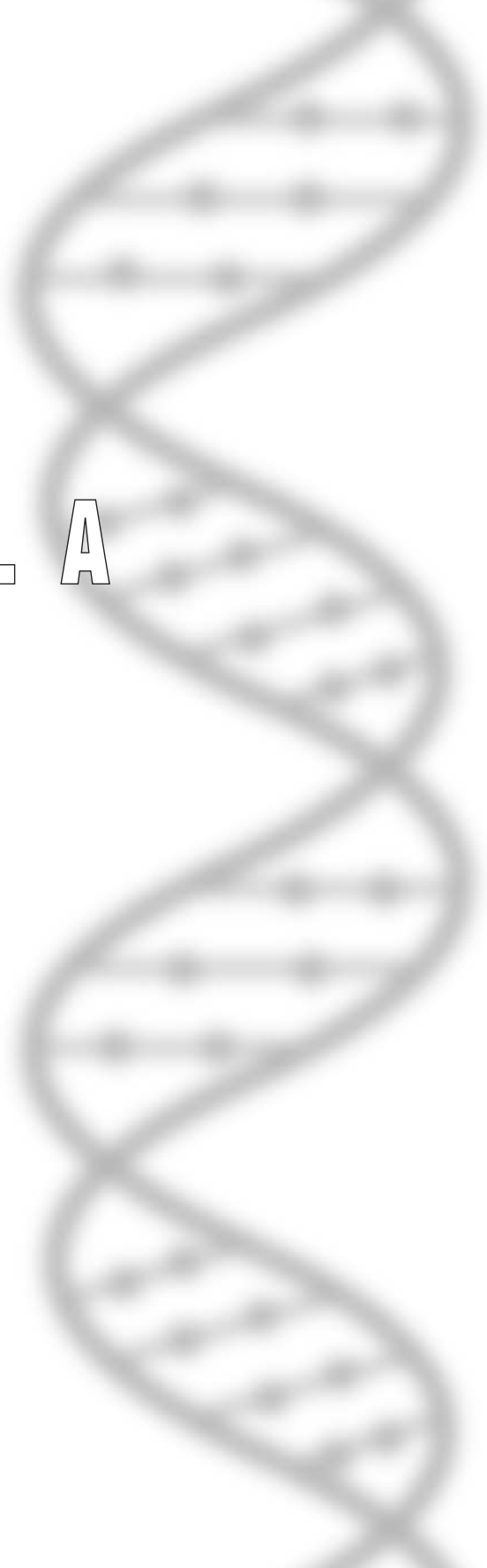
Mitch turned the TV off. He returned the plastic strip to the bathroom and went to lie beside Kaye. He did not pull the covers back and did not undress, to avoid disturbing her. Kicking off his shoes, he curled up with one leg laid gently over her blanketed thighs, and pushed his nose against her short brown hair. The smell of her hair and scalp was more soothing than any drug.

For far too short a moment, the universe once again became small and warm and entirely sufficient.

**PART THREE**

**S T E L L A**

**N O V A**





Seattle

JUNE

**K**aye arranged her papers on Mitch's desk and picked up the manuscript for *The Queen's Library*. Three weeks ago, she had decided to write a book about SHEVA, modern biology, all she felt the human race might need to know in the coming years. The title referred to her metaphor for the genome, with all of its ferment and movable elements and self-interested players, rendering service to the genome queen with one side of their nature, selfishly hoping to be installed in the Queen's Library, the DNA; and sometimes putting on another face, another role, more selfish than useful, parasitic or predatory, causing trouble or even disaster . . . A political metaphor that seemed perfectly apt now.

In the past two weeks, she had written over a hundred and sixty pages on her laptop computer, printing them out on a portable printer, partly as a way of getting her thoughts together before the convention.

*And to pass the time. The hours sometimes drag when Mitch is away.*

She knocked the papers together on the wood, satisfied by the solid thunk they made, then placed them before the picture of Christopher Dicken that stood in a small silver frame near a portrait of Sam and Abby. The last picture in her box of personal items was a black-and-white glossy of Saul, taken by a professional photographer on Long Island. Saul appeared able, grinning, confident, wise. They had sent copies of that picture with the business prospectus for EcoBacter to venture capital firms over five years ago. An age.

Kaye had spent very little time looking back on her past, or gathering memorabilia. Now she regretted that. She wanted their baby to have a sense of what had happened. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she

appeared almost peachlike in her health and vitality. Pregnancy was treating her very well.

As if she could not get enough of writing, recording, she had begun a diary three days ago, the first diary she had ever kept.

*June 10*

*We spent last week preparing for the conference and looking for a house. Interest rates have gone through the roof, now at twenty-one percent, but we can afford something larger than the apartment, and Mitch isn't particular. I am. Mitch is writing more slowly than I am, about the mummies and the cave, sending it page by page to Oliver Merton in New York, who is editing it, sometimes a little cruelly. Mitch takes it quietly, tries to improve. We have become so literary, so self-observant, maybe a little self-important, since there is not much else to keep us occupied.*

*Mitch is gone this afternoon talking to the new director of the Hayer, hoping to get reinstated. (He never travels more than twenty minutes from the apartment, and we bought another cell phone the day before yesterday. I tell him I can take care of myself, but he worries.)*

*He has a letter from Professor Brock describing the nature of the current controversy. Brock has been on a few talk shows. Some newspapers have carried the story, and Merton's piece in NATURE is drawing a lot of attention and a lot of criticism.*

*Innsbruck still holds all the tissue samples and will not comment or release, but Mitch is working on his friends at UW to get them to go public with what they know, to undermine Innsbruck's secrecy. Merton believes the gradualists in charge of the mummies have at most another two or three months to prepare their reports and make them public, or they'll be removed, replaced, Brock hopes, by a more objective team, and clearly he hopes to be in charge. Mitch might be on that team, too; though that seems too much to hope for.*

*Merton and Daney were unable to convince the New York Emergency Action Office to hold the conference in Albany. Something about 1845 and Governor Silas Wright and rent riots; they don't want a repeat under this "experimental" and "temporary" Emergency Act.*

*We petitioned the Washington Emergency Action Office through Maria Konig at UW, and they allowed a two-day conference at Kane Hall, one hundred attendees maximum, all to be approved by the office. Civil liberties haven't been completely forgotten, but almost. Nobody*

wants to call it martial law, and in fact the civil courts are still in full operation, but they work with approval of the Office in each state.

*Nothing like it since 1942, Mitch says.*

*I feel spooky: healthy, vital, energetic, and I don't look very pregnant. The hormones are the same, the effect the same.*

*I go in for my sonogram and scan tomorrow at Marine Pacific, and we'll do amnio and chorionic villi despite the risks because we want to know the character of the tissues.*

*The next step won't be so easy.*

*Mrs. Hamilton, now I'm a lab rat, too.*

## 75

### Building 10, The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda

JULY

**D**icken propelled himself with one hand down the long corridor on the tenth floor of the Magnuson Clinical Center, spun around with what he hoped was true wheelchair grace—again, with one hand—and dimly saw the two men walking in his return path. The gray suit, the long, slow stride, the height, told him one of the men was Augustine. He did not know who the other might be.

With a low moan, he lowered his right hand and pushed himself toward the pair. As he got closer, he could see that Augustine's face was healing well enough, though he would always have a slightly rugged look. What was not covered with the bandages of continuing plastic surgery, crossing his head laterally over his nose and in patches on both cheeks and temples, still bore the marks of shrapnel. Both of Augustine's eyes had been spared. Dicken had lost one eye, and the other had been hazed by the heat of the blast.

"You're still a sight, Mark," Dicken said, braking with one hand and lightly dragging a slippered foot.

"Ditto, Christopher. I'd like you to meet Dr. Kelly Newcomb."

They shook hands gingerly. Dicken sized up Newcomb for a moment, then said, "You're Mark's new traveler."

"Yes," Newcomb said.

"Congratulations on getting the appointment," Dicken said to Augustine.

“Don’t bother,” Augustine said. “It’s going to be a nightmare.”

“Gather all the children under one umbrella,” Dicken said. “How’s Frank doing?”

“He’s leaving Walter Reed next week.”

Another silence. Dicken could think of nothing more to say. Newcomb folded his hands uncomfortably, then adjusted his glasses, pushing them up his nose. Dicken hated the silence, and just as Augustine was about to speak again, he broke in with, “They’re going to keep me for another couple of weeks. Another surgery on my hand. I’d like to get off the campus for a while, see what’s going on in the world.”

“Let’s go into your room and talk,” Augustine suggested.

“Be my guests,” Dicken said.

When they were inside, Augustine asked Newcomb to shut the door. “I’d like Kelly to spend a couple of days talking with you. Getting up to speed. We’re moving into a new phase. The president has put us under his discretionary budget.”

“Great,” Dicken said thickly. He swallowed and tried to bring up some spit to wet his tongue. Drugs for pain and antibiotics were playing hell with his chemistry.

“We’re not going to do anything radical,” Augustine said. “Everyone agrees we’re in an incredibly delicate state.”

“State with a capital *S*,” Dicken said.

“For the moment, no doubt,” Augustine said quietly. “I didn’t ask for this, Christopher.”

“I know,” Dicken said.

“But should any SHEVA children be born alive, we have to move quickly. I have reports from seven labs that prove SHEVA can mobilize ancient retroviruses in the genome.”

“It kicks around all manner of HERV and retrotransposons,” Dicken said. He had been trying to read the studies on a special viewer in the room. “I’m not sure they’re actually viruses. They may be—”

“Whatever you call them, they have the requisite viral genes,” Augustine interrupted. “We haven’t faced them for millions of years, so they’ll probably be pathogenic. What worries me now is any movement that might encourage woman to bring these children to term. There’s no problem in Eastern Europe and Asia. Japan has already started a prevention program. But here, we’re more cussed.”

That was putting it mildly. “Don’t cross that line again, Mark,” Dicken advised.

Augustine was in no mood for wise counsel. "Christopher, we could lose more than just a generation of children. Kelly agrees."

"The work is sound," Newcomb said.

Dicken coughed, controlled the spasm, but his face flushed with frustration. "What are we looking at . . . Internment camps? Concentration nurseries?"

"We estimate there will be one or two thousand SHEVA children born alive in North America by the end of the year, at most. There may be *none*, zero, Christopher. The president has already signed an emergency order giving us custody if any are born alive. We're working out the civil details now. God only knows what the E.U. is going to do. Asia is being very practical. Abortion and quarantine. I wish we could be so bold."

"To me, this does not sound like a major health threat, Mark," Dicken said. His throat caught again and he coughed. With his damaged eyesight, he could not make out Augustine's expression behind the bandages.

"They're *reservoirs*, Christopher," Augustine said. "If the babies get out in the general public, they'll be vectors. All it took for AIDS was a few."

"We admit it stinks," Newcomb said, glancing at Augustine. "I feel that in my gut. But we've done computer analysis on some of these activated HERV. Given expression of viable *env* and *pol* genes, we could have something much worse than HIV. The computers point to a disease like nothing we've seen in history. It could burn the human race, Dr. Dicken. We could just flake away like dust."

Dicken pushed up out of his chair and sat on the edge of his bed. "Who disagrees?" he asked.

"Dr. Mahy at the CDC," Augustine said. "Bishop and Thorne. And of course James Mondavi. But the Princeton people agree, and they have the president's confidence. They want to work with us on this."

"What do the opponents say?" Dicken asked Newcomb.

"Mahy thinks any released particles will be fully adapted retroviruses, but nonpathogenic, and that the worst we'll see is a few cases of some rare cancers," Augustine said. "Mondavi also sees no pathogenesis. But that's not why we're here, Christopher."

"Why, then?"

"We need your personal input. Kaye Lang has gotten herself pregnant. You know the father. It's a first-stage SHEVA. She'll have her miscarriage any day now."

Dicken turned away.



“She’s sponsoring a conference in Washington state. We tried to get the Emergency Action Office to shut it down—”

“A scientific conference?”

“More mumbo-jumbo about evolution. And, no doubt, encouragement for new mothers. This could be a PR disaster, very bad for morale. We don’t control the press, Christopher. Do you think she’ll be extreme on the subject?”

“No,” Dicken said. “I think she’ll be very reasonable.”

“That could be worse,” Augustine said. “But it’s also something we can use against her, if she claims the support of Science with a capital *S*. Mitch Rafelson’s reputation is pure mud.”

“He’s a decent fellow,” Dicken said.

“He’s a liability, Christopher,” Augustine said. “Fortunately, he’s her liability, not ours.”

## 76

### Seattle

AUGUST 10

**K**aye carried her yellow legal pad from the bedroom to the kitchen. Mitch had been at the University of Washington since nine that morning. The first reaction to his visit at the Hayer Museum had been negative; they were not interested in controversy, whatever his support from Brock or any other scientist. Brock himself, they had sagely pointed out, was controversial, and according to unnamed sources had been “let go from” or even “forced out of” the Neandertal studies at the University of Innsbruck.

Kaye had always loathed academic politics. She set the notebook and a glass of orange juice on a small table by Mitch’s worn chair, then sat down with a small moan. With nothing coming to her this morning and no sense of where to take the book next, she had started a general short essay that she might use at the conference in two weeks . . .

But the essay had abruptly stalled as well. Inspiration was simply no competitor for the peculiar tangled feeling in her abdomen.

It had been almost ninety days. Last night, in her journal, she had written, “Already it is about the size of a mouse.” And nothing more.

She used Mitch’s remote to turn on the old TV. Governor Harris was

giving yet another press conference. He went on the air every day to report on the Emergency Act, how Washington state was cooperating with Washington, D.C., what measures he was resisting—he was very big on resistance, playing to the rugged individualists east of the Cascades—and explaining very carefully where he thought cooperation was beneficial and essential. Once more he went through a bleak litany of statistics.

*“In the Northwest, from Oregon to Idaho, the law enforcement officials tell me there have been at least thirty acts of human sacrifice. When we add this to the estimated twenty-two thousand incidents of violence against women around the country, the Emergency Act seems long overdue. We are a community, a state, a region, a nation, out of control with grief and panicked by an incomprehensible act of God.”*

Kaye rubbed her stomach gently. Harris had an impossible job. The proud citizens of the U.S.A., she thought, were adopting a very Chinese attitude. With the favor of Heaven so obviously withdrawn, their support for any and all governments had diminished drastically.

A roundtable discussion with two scientists and a state representative followed the governor’s conference. The talk turned to SHEVA children as carriers of disease; this was utter nonsense and something she did not want or need to hear. She shut the television off.

The cell phone rang. Kaye flipped it open. “Hello?”

“Oh beauteous one . . . I’ve got Wendell Packer, Maria Konig, Oliver Merton, and Professor Brock, all sitting in the same room.”

Kaye’s face warmed and relaxed at the sound of Mitch’s voice.

“They’d like to meet you.”

“Only if they want to be midwives,” Kaye said.

“Jesus—do you feel anything?”

“A sour stomach,” Kaye said. “Unhappy and uninspired. But no, I don’t think it’s going to be today.”

“Well, be inspired by this,” Mitch said. “They’re going to go public with their analysis of the Innsbruck tissue samples. And they’re going to give papers at the conference. Packer and Konig say they’ll support us.”

Kaye closed her eyes for a moment. She wanted to savor this. “And their departments?”

“No go. The politics is just too intense for department heads. But Maria and Wendell are going to work on their colleagues. We’re hoping to have dinner together. Are you up for it?”

Her roiling stomach had settled. Kaye thought she might actually be

hungry in an hour or so. She had followed Maria Konig's work for years, and admired her enormously. But in that masculine crew, perhaps Konig's greatest asset was that she was female.

"Where are we eating?"

"Within five minutes of Marine Pacific Hospital," Mitch said. "Other than that, I don't know."

"Maybe a bowl of oatmeal for me," Kaye said. "Should I take the bus?"

"Nonsense. I'll be there in a few minutes." Mitch kissed at her over the phone, and then, Oliver Merton asked to say something.

"We haven't met yet, to shake hands," Merton said breathlessly, as if he had just been arguing loudly or had run up a flight of stairs. "Christ, Ms. Lang, I'm nervous just talking with you."

"You trounced me pretty badly in Baltimore," Kaye said.

"Yes, but that was then," Merton said without a hint of regret. "I can't tell you how much I admire what you and Mitch are planning. I am *agog* with wonder."

"We're just doing what comes natural," Kaye said.

"Wipe the past clean," Merton said. "Ms. Lang, I'm a friend."

"We'll see about that," Kaye said.

Merton chuckled and handed her back to Mitch.

"Maria Konig suggests a good Vietnamese *phô* restaurant. That's what she craved when she was pregnant. Sound right?"

"After my oatmeal," Kaye said. "Does Merton have to be there?"

"Not if you don't want him."

"Tell him I'm going to stare daggers at him. Make him suffer."

"I'll do that," Mitch said. "But he thrives under criticism."

"I've been analyzing tissues from dead people for ten years now," Maria Konig said. "Wendell knows the feeling."

"I do indeed," Packer said.

Konig, sitting across from her, was more than just beautiful—she was the perfect model for what Kaye wanted to look like when she reached fifty. Wendell Packer was very handsome, in a lean and compact sort of way—quite the opposite of Mitch. Brock wore a gray coat and black T-shirt, dapper and quiet; he seemed lost in even deeper thought.

"Each day, you get a FedEx box or two or three," Maria said, "and you open them up, and inside are little tubes or bottles from Bosnia or East Timor or the Congo, and there's this little sad chunk of skin or bone from

one or another *victim*, usually innocent, and an envelope with copies of records, more tubes, blood samples or cheek swabs from relatives of victims. Day after day after day. It never stops. If these babies are the next step, if they're better than we are at living on this planet, I can't wait. We're in need of a change."

The small waitress taking their orders stopped writing on her small pad. "You name dead people for UN?" she asked Maria.

Maria looked up at her, embarrassed. "Sometimes."

"I from Kampuchea, Cambodia, come here fifteen years ago," she said. "You work on Kampuchean?"

"That was before my time, honey," Maria said.

"I still very mad," the woman said. "Mother, father, brother, uncle. Then they let the murderers go without punishing. Very bad men and women."

The table fell silent as the woman's large black eyes sparked with memory. Brock leaned forward, clasping his hands and touching his nose with the knuckle of his thumb.

"Very bad now, too. I going to have baby anyway," the woman said. She touched her stomach and looked at Kaye. "You?"

"Yes," Kaye said.

"I believe in future," the woman said. "It got to get better."

She finished taking their orders and left the table. Merton picked up his chopsticks and fumbled them aimlessly for a few seconds. "I shall have to remember this," he said, "the next time I feel oppressed."

"Save it for your book," Brock said.

"I *am* writing one," Merton told them with raised brows. "No surprise. The most important bit of science reporting of our time."

"I hope you're having more luck than I am," Kaye said.

"I'm jammed, absolutely stuck," Merton said, and pushed up his glasses with the thick end of a chopstick. "But that won't last. It never has."

The waitress brought spring rolls, shrimp and bean sprouts and basil leaves wrapped in translucent pancake. Kaye had lost her urge for bland and reassuring oatmeal. Feeling more adventurous, she pinched one of the rolls with her chopsticks and dipped it into a small ceramic bowl of sweet brown sauce. The flavor was extraordinary—she could have lingered on the bite for minutes, picking out every savory molecule. The basil and mint in the roll were almost too intense, and the shrimp tasted rich and crunchy and oceanic.

All her senses sharpened. The large room, though dark and cool, seemed very colorful, very detailed.

"What do they put in these?" she asked, chewing the last bite of her roll.

"They *are* good," Merton said.

"I shouldn't have said anything," Maria said apologetically, still feeling the emotion of the waitress's bit of history.

"We all believe in the future," Mitch said. "We wouldn't be here if we were stuck in our own little ruts."

"We need to figure out what we can say, what our limitations are," Wendell said. "I can only go so far before I'm outside my expertise and way outside what the department will tolerate, even if I claim to speak for myself alone."

"Courage, Wendell," Merton said. "A solid front. Freddie?"

Brock sipped from his foamy glass of pale lager. He looked up with a hangdog expression.

"I cannot believe we are all here, that we have come this far," he said. "The changes are so close, I am frightened. Do you know what is going to happen when we present our findings?"

"We're going to get crucified by nearly every scientific journal in the world," Packer said, and laughed.

"Not *Nature*," Merton said. "I've laid some groundwork there. Pulled off a journalistic and scientific coup." He grinned.

"No, please, friends," Brock said. "Step back a moment and think. We are just past the millennium, and now we are about to learn how we came to be human." He removed his thick glasses and wiped them with his napkin. His eyes were distant, very round. "In Innsbruck, we have our mummies, caught in the late stages of a change that took place across tens of thousands of years. The woman must have been tough and brave beyond our imagining, but she knew very little. Dr. Lang, you know a great deal, and you proceed anyway. Your courage is perhaps even more wonderful." He lifted his glass of beer. "The least I can do is offer you a heartfelt toast."

They all raised their glasses. Kaye felt her stomach flip again, but it was not a bad sensation.

"To Kaye," Friedrich Brock said. "The next Eve."

## Seattle

AUGUST 12

**K**aye sat in the old Buick to stay out of the rain. Mitch walked along the row of cars in the small lot off Roosevelt, searching for the kind she had specified—small, late nineties, Japanese or Volvo, maybe blue or green—and looked up to where she sat curbside, window rolled down for air.

He pulled off his wet felt Stetson and smiled. “How about this beauty?” He pointed to a black Caprice.

“No,” Kaye said emphatically. Mitch loved big old American cars. He felt at home in their roomy interiors. Their trunks could carry tools and slabs of rock. He would have loved to buy a truck, and they had discussed that for a few days. Kaye was not averse to four-wheel-drive, but they had seen nothing she thought they could afford. She wanted a huge reserve in the bank for emergencies. She had set a limit of twelve thousand dollars.

“I’m a kept man,” he said, holding his hat mournfully and bowing his head before the Caprice.

Kaye pointedly ignored that. She had been in an ill humor all morning—had snapped at him twice over breakfast, chastisements that Mitch had accepted with infuriating commiseration. What she wanted was a real argument, to get her blood going, her thoughts moving—to get her *body* moving. She was sick of the gnawing sensation in her gut that had persisted for three days. She was sick of waiting, of trying to come to grips with what she was carrying.

What Kaye wanted above all else was to lash out at Mitch for agreeing to get her pregnant and start this awful, dragged-out process.

Mitch strode over to the second row and peered at stickers. A woman with an umbrella came down the wooden steps from the small office trailer and conferred with him.

Kaye watched them suspiciously. She hated herself, hated her screwball and chaotic emotions. Nothing she was thinking made any sense.

Mitch pointed to a used Lexus. “Way too expensive,” Kaye murmured to herself, biting her cuticle. Then, “Oh, shit.” She thought she had wet her panties. The trickle continued, but it was not her bladder. She felt between her legs.

“Mitch!” she yelled. He came running, flung open the driver’s-side door, jumped in, started the motor when the first poked fist of blunt pain doubled her over. She nearly slammed her hand against the dash. He pulled her back with one hand. “Oh, God!” she said.

“We’re going,” he said. He peeled out along Roosevelt and turned west on 45th, dodging cars on the overpass and swinging hard left onto the freeway.

The pain was not so intense now. Her stomach seemed filled with ice water and her thighs trembled.

“How is it?” Mitch asked.

“Scary,” she said. “So strange.”

Mitch hit eighty.

She felt something like a small bowel movement. So rude, so natural, so *unspeakable*. She tried to clamp her legs together. She was not sure what she felt, what exactly had happened. The pain was almost gone.

By the time they pulled into the emergency entrance at Marine Pacific, she was reasonably sure it was all over.

Maria Konig had referred them to Dr. Felicity Galbreath after Kaye met resistance from several pediatricians reluctant to take on a SHEVA pregnancy. Her own health insurance had canceled her; SHEVA was covered as a disease, a prior condition, certainly not as a natural pregnancy.

Dr. Galbreath worked at several hospitals but kept her offices at Marine Pacific, the big brown Depression-era Art Deco hospital that looked down across the freeway, Lake Union, and much of west Seattle. She also taught two days a week at Western Washington University, and Kaye wondered where she found time to have any other life.

Galbreath, tall and plump, with round shoulders, a pleasantly unchallenging face, and a tight, short head of mousy blond hair, came into Kaye’s shared room twenty minutes after she was admitted. Kaye had been cleaned up and briefly examined by the resident nurse and an attending physician. A nurse midwife Kaye had never met before also checked on her, having heard about Kaye’s case from a brief article in the *Seattle Weekly*.

Kaye sat up in her bed, her back aching, but otherwise comfortable, and drank a glass of orange juice.

“Well, it’s happened,” Galbreath said.

“It’s happened,” Kaye echoed dully.

“They tell me you’re doing fine.”

“I feel better now.”

“Very sorry not to be here sooner. I was over at UW Medical Center.”

"I think it was over before I was admitted," Kaye said.

"How do you feel?"

"Lousy. Healthy enough, just lousy."

"Where's Mitch?"

"I told him to bring me the baby. The fetus."

Galbreath glared at her with mixed irritation and wonder. "Aren't you taking this scientist bit too far?"

"Bullshit," Kaye said fiercely.

"You could be in emotional shock."

"Double bullshit. They took it away without telling me. I need to see it. I need to know what happened."

"It's a first-stage rejection. We know what they look like," Galbreath said softly, checking Kaye's pulse and looking at the attached monitor. As a precaution, she was on saline drip.

Mitch returned with a small steel pan covered with a cloth. "They were sending it down to . . ." He looked up, his face pale as a sheet. "I don't know where. I had to do some yelling."

Galbreath looked at them both with an expression of forceful self-control. "It's just tissue, Kaye. The hospital has to send them to an approved Taskforce autopsy center. It's the law."

"She's my *daughter*," Kaye said, tears trickling down her cheeks. "I want to see *her* before they take her." The sobs began and she could not control them. The nurse looked in, saw Galbreath was with them, stood in the doorway with a helpless and concerned expression.

Galbreath took the pan from Mitch, who was happy to be relieved of it. She waited until Kaye was quiet.

"Please," Kaye said. Galbreath placed the pan gently on her lap.

The nurse left and shut the door behind her.

Mitch turned away as she pulled back the cloth.

Lying on a bed of crushed ice, in a small plastic bag with a Ziploc top, no larger than a small lab mouse, lay the interim daughter. *Her* daughter. Kaye had been nurturing and carrying and protecting this for over ninety days.

For a moment, she felt distinctly uneasy. She reached down with a finger to trace the outline in the bag, the short and curled spine beyond the edge of the torn and tiny amnion. She stroked the comparatively large and almost faceless head, finding small slits for eyes, a wrinkled and rabbitlike mouth kept tightly closed, buttons where arms and legs might be. The small purple placenta lay beneath the amnion.



“Thank you,” Kaye said to the fetus.

She covered the tray. Galbreath tried to remove it, but Kaye gripped her hand. “Leave her with me for a few minutes,” she said. “I want to make sure she isn’t lonely. Wherever she’s going.”

Galbreath joined Mitch in the waiting room. He sat with his head in his hands in a pale bleached-oak armchair beneath a pastel seascape framed in ash.

“You look like you need a drink,” she said.

“Is Kaye still asleep?” Mitch said. “I want to be with her.”

Galbreath nodded. “You can go in any time. I examined her. Do you want the details?”

“Please,” Mitch said, rubbing his face. “I didn’t know I’d react that way. I’m sorry.”

“No need. She’s a bold woman who thinks she knows what she wants. Well, she’s still pregnant. The secondary mucus plug seems to be in position. There was no trauma, no bleeding; the separation was textbook, if anybody has bothered to write a textbook about this sort of thing. The hospital did a quick biopsy. It’s definitely a first-stage SHEVA rejection. Chromosome number is confirmed.”

“Fifty-two?” Mitch asked.

Galbreath nodded. “Like all the others. It should be forty-six. Gross chromosomal abnormalities.”

“It’s a different kind of normal,” Mitch said.

Galbreath sat beside him and crossed her legs. “Let’s hope. We’ll do more tests in a few months.”

“I don’t know how a woman feels after something like this,” he said slowly, folding and unfolding his hands. “What do I say to her?”

“Let her sleep. When she wakes up, tell her that you love her, and that she’s brave and magnificent. This part will probably feel like a bad dream.”

Mitch stared at her. “What do I tell her if the next one doesn’t work, either?”

Galbreath leaned her head to one side and smoothed her cheek with one finger. “I don’t know, Mr. Rafelson.”

Mitch filled out the discharge papers and looked over the attached medical report, signed by Galbreath. Kaye folded a nightgown and put it into the small overnight case, then walked stiffly into the bathroom and packed up

her toothbrush. “I ache all over,” she said, her voice hollow through the open door.

“I can get a wheelchair,” Mitch said. He was almost out the door before Kaye left the bathroom and put a hand on his shoulder.

“I can walk. This part is done with, and that makes me feel much better. But . . . Fifty-two chromosomes, Mitch. I wish I knew what that meant.”

“There’s still time,” Mitch said quietly.

Kaye’s first impulse was to give him a stern look, but his expression told her that would not be fair, that he was as vulnerable as she. “No,” she said, simply and gently.

Galbreath knocked on the door frame.

“Come in,” Kaye said. She closed and latched the lid on the overnight case. The doctor entered with a young, ill-at-ease man dressed in a gray suit.

“Kaye, this is Ed Gianelli. He’s the Emergency Action legal representative for Marine Pacific.”

“Ms. Lang, Mr. Rafelson. I’m sorry for the difficulty. I have to obtain some personal information and a signature, under the state of Washington compliance agreements with the federal Emergency Act, as agreed to by the state legislature on July 22 of this year, and signed by the governor on July 26. I apologize for the inconvenience during a painful time—”

“What is it?” Mitch asked. “What do we have to do?”

“All women carrying SHEVA second-stage fetuses should register with the state Emergency Action Office and agree to follow-up medical tracking. You can arrange to have those visits with Dr. Galbreath, as the obstetrician of record, and she will carry out the standardized tests.”

“We won’t register,” Mitch said. “Are you ready to go?” he asked Kaye, putting his arm around her.

Gianelli shifted his stance. “I won’t go into the reasons, Mr. Rafelson, but registration and follow-up are mandated by the King County Board of Health, in agreement with state and federal law.”

“I don’t recognize the law,” Mitch said firmly.

“The penalty is a fine of five hundred dollars for each week you refuse,” Gianelli said.

“Best not to make a big deal out of it,” Galbreath said. “It’s a kind of addendum to a birth certificate.”

“The infant hasn’t been born yet.”

“Then think of it as an addendum to the postrejection medical report,” Gianelli said, his shoulders rising.

“There was no rejection,” Kaye said. “What we’re doing is natural.”

Gianelli held out his hands in exasperation. “All I need is your current residence and a waiver to access your pertinent medical records, with Dr. Galbreath and your lawyer, if you wish, overseeing what we look at.”

“My God,” Mitch said. He moved Kaye past Galbreath and Gianelli, then paused to say to the doctor, “You know what this means, don’t you? People will stay away from hospitals, from their physicians.”

“My hands are pretty much tied,” Galbreath said. “The hospital fought this until just yesterday. We still plan to appeal to the Board of Health. But for now—”

Mitch and Kaye left. Galbreath stood in the doorway, face mottled.

Gianelli followed them down the hall, agitated. “I have to remind you,” he said, “that these fines are cumulative—”

“Give it up, Ed!” Galbreath shouted, slamming her hand on the wall. “Just give it up and let them go, for Christ’s sake!”

Gianelli stood in the middle of the hallway, shaking his head. “I hate this shit!”

“*You* hate it?” Galbreath shouted at him. “Just leave my patients the hell alone!”

## 78

### Building 52, The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda

OCTOBER

**Y**our face looks pretty good,” Shawbeck said. He advanced into Augustine’s office on a pair of crutches. His aide helped him lower himself into the chair. Augustine was finishing a corned beef sandwich. He wiped his lips and folded the top of the foam box, latching it.

“All right,” Shawbeck said when he was seated. “Weekly meeting of the survivors of July twentieth, *der Führer* presiding.”

Augustine lifted his eyes. “Not a bit funny.”

“When’s Christopher going to join us? We should keep a bottle of brandy, and the last survivor gets to toast the departed.”

“Christopher is getting more and more disaffected,” Augustine said.

“And you aren’t?” Shawbeck asked. “How long since you met with the president?”

“Three days,” Augustine said.

“Black budget discussions?”

“Emergency Action reserve finances,” Augustine said.

“He didn’t even mention them to me,” Shawbeck said.

“It’s my ball now. They’re going to hang the old toilet seat around my neck.”

“Because you put together the rationale,” Shawbeck said. “So—these new babies are not only going to be born dead, but if any happen to be born alive, we take them away from their parents and put them into specially financed hospitals. We’ve gone pretty far on this one.”

“The public seems to be with us,” Augustine said. “The president’s describing it as a major public health risk.”

“I wouldn’t be in your shoes for anything on Earth, Mark. It’s going to be political suicide. The president has to be in shock to be promoting this.”

“To tell the truth, Frank, after all those years in the White House’s shadow, he’s feeling his oats a little. He’s going to drag us around the old bridle path getting past mistakes straightened out, and pushing through a martyr’s agenda.”

“And you’re going to spur him on?”

Augustine angled his head back. He nodded.

“Incarcerate sick babies?”

“You know the science.”

Shawbeck smirked. “You get five virologists to agree that it’s possible that these infants—and the mothers—could be breeding grounds for ancient viruses. Well, thirty-seven virologists have gone on record saying it’s bogus.”

“Not as prominent, and not nearly as influential.”

“Thorne and Mahy and Mondavi and Bishop, Mark.”

“I have my instincts, Frank. Remember, this is my area, too.”

Shawbeck dragged his chair forward. “What are we now, petty tyrants?”

Augustine’s face went livid. “Thanks, Frank,” he said.

“The public starts to turn against the mothers and the unborn children. What if the babies are *cute*? How long until they swing back, Mark? What will you do then?”

Augustine did not answer.

“I know why the president refuses to meet with me,” Shawbeck said. “You tell him what he wants to hear. He’s afraid, and the country’s out of control, so he picks a solution and you back him up. It isn’t science, it’s politics.”

“The president agrees with me.”

“Whatever we call it—July twentieth, the Reichstag fire—the bombing doesn’t give you *carte blanche*,” Shawbeck said.

“We’re going to survive,” Augustine said. “I didn’t deal us this hand.”

“No,” Shawbeck said. “But you’ve sure stopped the deck from being shuffled and dealt out fairly.”

Augustine stared straight ahead.

“They’re calling it ‘original sin,’ you know that?”

“I hadn’t heard that,” Augustine said.

“Tune in the Christian Broadcasting Network. They’re splitting constituencies all across America. Pat Robertson is telling his audience these monsters are God’s final test before the arrival of the new Kingdom of Heaven. He says our DNA is trying to purge itself of all our accumulated sins, to . . . what was his phrase, Ted?”

The aide said, “Clean up our records before God calls Judgment Day.”

“That was it.”

“We still don’t control the airwaves, Frank,” Augustine said. “I can’t be held responsible—”

“Half a dozen other televangelists say these unborn children are the devil’s spawn,” Shawbeck continued, building up steam. “Born with the mark of Satan, one-eyed and hare-lipped. Some are even saying they have cloven hooves.”

Augustine shook his head sadly.

“They’re your support group now,” Shawbeck said, and waved his arm for the aide to step forward. He struggled to his feet, shoved the crutches into his armpits. “I’m tendering my resignation tomorrow morning. From the Taskforce and from the NIH. I’m burned out. I can’t take any more of this ignorance—my own or anybody else’s. Just thought you should be the first to know. Maybe you can consolidate *all* the power.”

When Shawbeck was gone, Augustine stood behind his desk, hardly breathing. His knuckles were white and his hands shook. Slowly, he took control of his emotions, forcing himself to breathe deeply and evenly.

“It’s all in the follow-through,” he said to the empty room.

## Seattle

DECEMBER

**T**hey moved the last of the boxes out of Mitch's old apartment in the snow. Kaye insisted on carrying a few small ones, but Mitch and Wendell had done all the heavy hauling in the early morning hours, packing everything into a big orange and white U-Haul rental truck.

Kaye climbed into the truck beside Mitch. Wendell drove.

"Good-bye, bachelor days," Kaye said.

Mitch smiled.

"There's a tree farm near the house," Wendell said. "We can pick up a Christmas tree on the way in. Should be terrifically cozy."

Their new home stood in a patch of low brush and woods near Ebey Slough and the town of Snohomish. Rustic green and white, with a single front-facing gable window and a large screened-in front porch, the two-bedroom house lay at the end of a long country road surrounded by pines. They were renting from Wendell's parents, who had owned the house for thirty-four years.

They were keeping their change of address a secret.

As the men unloaded the truck, Kaye made sandwiches and slipped a six-pack of beer and a few fruit drinks into the freshly scrubbed refrigerator. Inside the bare and clean living room, standing in her socks on the oak floor, Kaye felt at peace.

Wendell carried a lamp into the living room and set it on the kitchen table. Kaye handed him a beer. He took a deep swallow gratefully, his throat bobbing. "Did they tell you?" he asked.

"Who? Tell us what?"

"My folks. I was born here. This was their first house." He waved his hands around the living room. "I used to carry a microscope outside in the garden."

"That's wonderful," Kaye said.

"This is where I became a scientist," Wendell said. "A sacred place. May it bless you both!"

Mitch lugged in a chair and a magazine rack. He accepted a Full Sail ale and toasted them, clinking his glass against Kaye's Snapple.

"Here's to becoming moles," he said. "To going underground."

Maria Konig and half a dozen other friends came four hours later and helped arrange furniture. They were almost done when Eileen Ripper knocked on the door. She carried a lumpy canvas bag. Mitch introduced her, then saw two others waiting on the outside porch.

"I brought some friends," Eileen said. "Thought we'd celebrate with news of our own."

Sue Champion and a tall older man with long black hair and a well-disciplined barrel of a belly stepped forward, more than a little ill at ease. The tall man's eyes glinted white like a wolf's.

Eileen shook hands with Maria and Wendell. "Mitch, you've met Sue. This is her husband, Jack. And this is for the wood stove," she said to Kaye, dropping the bag by the fireplace. "Scrap maple and cherry. Smells wonderful. What a beautiful house!"

Sue nodded to Mitch and smiled at Kaye. "We've never met," Sue said. Kaye opened and closed her mouth like a fish, at a loss for words, until they both laughed nervously.

They had brought baked ham and steelhead for dinner. Jack and Mitch circled around each other like wary boys sizing each other up. Sue seemed unconcerned, but Mitch did not know what to say. A little tipsy, he apologized for not having any candles and decided the occasion called for Coleman lanterns.

Wendell switched off all the lights. The living room became a camp tent with long shadows and they ate in the bright center amid the stacked boxes. Sue and Jack conferred for a moment in a corner.

"Sue tells me she likes you both," Jack said when they returned. "But I'm the suspicious type, and I say you're all crazy."

"I won't disagree," Mitch said, lifting his beer.

"Sue told me about what you did on the Columbia."

"That was a long time ago," Mitch said.

"Be good, now," Sue warned her husband.

"I just want to know why you did it," Jack said. "He might have been one of my ancestors."

"I wanted to know whether he *was* one of your ancestors," Mitch said.

"Was he?"

"I think so, yes."

Jack squinted at the Coleman's bright hissing light. "The ones you found in the cave in the mountains. They were ancestors to all of us?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Jack shook his head quizzically. “Sue tells me the ancestors can be brought back to their people, whoever their people might be, if we learn their real names. Ghosts can be dangerous. I’m not so sure this is the way to keep them happy.”

“Sue and I have drummed up another agreement,” Eileen said. “We’ll get it right eventually. I’m going to be a special consultant to the tribes. Whenever anyone finds old bones, I’ll be called in to take a look at them. We’ll do quick measurements and take a small sample, and then return them to the tribes. Jack and his friends have put together what they call a Wisdom Rite.”

“Their names lie in their bones,” Jack said. “We tell them we’ll name our children after them.”

“That’s grand,” Mitch said. “I’m pleased. Flabbergasted, but pleased.”

“Everybody thinks Indians are ignorant,” Jack said. “We just care about some different things.”

Mitch leaned across the lantern and held out his hand to Jack. Jack looked up at the ceiling, his teeth working audibly. “This is too new,” he said. But he took Mitch’s extended hand and shook it so firmly they almost knocked the lantern over. For a moment, Kaye thought it might turn into an arm-wrestling contest.

“But I’m telling you,” Jack said when they were done. “You should behave yourself, Mitch Rafelson.”

“I’m out of the bone business for good,” Mitch said.

“Mitch dreams about the people he finds,” Eileen said.

“Really?” Jack was impressed by this. “Do they talk to you?”

“I become them,” Mitch said.

“Oh,” Jack said.

Kaye was fascinated by them all, but in particular by Sue. The woman’s features were more than strong—they were almost masculine—but Kaye thought she had never met anyone more beautiful. Eileen’s relationship with Mitch was so easy and intuitive that Kaye wondered if they might have been lovers once.

“Everybody’s scared,” Sue said. “We have so many SHEVA pregnancies in Kumash. That’s one of the reasons why we’re working with Eileen. The council decided that our ancestors can tell us how to survive these times. You’re carrying Mitch’s baby?” she asked Kaye.

“I am,” Kaye said.

“Has the little helper come and gone?”

Kaye nodded.



"Me, too," Sue said. "We buried her with a special name and our gratitude and love."

"She was Tiny Swift," Jack said quietly.

"Congratulations," Mitch said, just as softly.

"Yes, that is right," Jack said, pleased. "No sadness. Her work is done."

"The government can't come and take names on the council lands," Sue said. "We won't let them. If the government becomes too scary, you come stay with us. We've fought them off before."

"This is so wonderful," Eileen said, beaming.

But Jack looked over his shoulder into the shadows. His eyes narrowed, he swallowed hard, and his face became deeply lined. "It's so hard to know what to do or what to believe," he said. "I wish the ghosts would speak more clearly."

"Will you help us with your knowledge, Kaye?" Sue asked.

"I'll try," Kaye said.

Then, to Mitch, hesitantly, Sue said, "I have dreams, too. I dream about the new children."

"Tell us about your dreams," Kaye said.

"Maybe they're personal, honey," Mitch warned her.

Sue put her hand on Mitch's arm. "I'm glad you understand. They *are* personal, and sometimes they're frightening, too."

Wendell came down from the attic on a ladder with a cardboard box in one arm. "My folks said they were still here, and they are. Ornaments—God, what memories! Who wants to put the tree up and decorate it?"

### Building 52, The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda

JANUARY

**H**ere are your meetings for the next two days." Florence Leighton gave Augustine a small sheet of paper he could fit in his shirt pocket for instant reference, as he liked. The list was growing; this afternoon he would be seeing the governor of Nebraska, and if there was time, he would meet with a group of financial columnists.

And he was looking forward to dinner at seven with a lovely woman

who cared not a damn for his prominence in the news and his reputation as a tireless workaholic. Mark Augustine squared his shoulders and ran his finger down the list before he folded it, which was his way of telling Mrs. Leighton the list was approved and final.

“And here’s an odd one,” she added. “He has no appointment but says he’s sure you’ll want to see him.” She dropped a business card onto his desk and gave him an arch look. “A pixie.”

Augustine stared down at the name and felt a small twinge of curiosity.

“You know him?” she asked.

“He’s a reporter,” Augustine said. “A science writer with his finger in a number of steaming pies.”

“Fruit or cow?” Mrs. Leighton asked.

Augustine smiled. “All right. I’ll call his bluff. Tell him he has five minutes.”

“Bring in your coffee?”

“He’ll want tea.”

Augustine arranged his desk and put two books into a drawer. He did not want anyone snooping on what he was currently reading. One was a thin monograph, *Movable Elements as Sources of Genomic Novelty in Grasses*. The second was a popular novel by Robin Cook, just published, about the outbreak of a major and unexplained disease by a new kind of organism, possibly from space. Augustine generally enjoyed outbreak novels, though he had stayed away from them for the past year. Reading this one was a sign of his new confidence.

He stood and smiled as Oliver Merton entered. “Good to see you again, Mr. Merton.”

“Thank you for seeing me, Dr. Augustine,” Merton said. “I’ve been through quite the shakedown outside. They even took my notepad.”

Augustine made an apologetic face. “There’s very little time. I’m sure you have something interesting to say.”

“Right.” Merton glanced up as Mrs. Leighton entered with a tray and two cups.

“Tea, Mr. Merton?” she asked.

Merton smiled sheepishly. “Coffee, actually. I’ve been in Seattle the last few weeks and I’m rather off tea.”

Mrs. Leighton stuck her tongue out at Augustine and went back for a cup of coffee.

“She’s bold,” Merton observed.

"We've worked together through some tough times," Augustine said. "Pretty dark times, too."

"Of course," Merton said. "First, congratulations on getting the University of Washington conference on SHEVA postponed."

Augustine looked puzzled.

"Something about NIH grants being withdrawn if the conference proceeded, is all I've managed to wrinkle out of a few sources at the university."

"It's news to me," Augustine said.

"Instead, we're going to hold it at a little motel off campus. And maybe have it catered by a famous French restaurant with a sympathetic chef. Sweeten the lemon juice. If we're going to be complete and unaffiliated rogues, we'll enjoy ourselves."

"You sound less than objective, but I wish you luck," Augustine said.

Merton's expression shifted to a challenging grin. "I've just heard this morning from Friedrich Brock that there's been a wholesale rearrangement of the staff overseeing the Neandertal mummies at the University of Innsbruck. An internal scientific review concluded that key facts were being ignored and that gross scientific errors had been made. *Herr Professor* Brock has been summoned to Innsbruck. He's on his way there now."

"I don't know why I should be interested," Augustine said. "We have about two minutes."

Mrs. Leighton returned with a cup of coffee. Merton took a strong swallow. "Thank you. They're going to treat the three mummies as a family group, related genetically. And that means they're going to acknowledge the first solid evidence of human speciation. SHEVA has been found in these specimens."

"Very good," Augustine said.

Merton pressed his palms together. Florence watched him with a kind of idle curiosity.

"We've arrived at the verge of the long fast slope to the truth, Dr. Augustine," Merton said. "I was curious how you would take the news."

Augustine sucked in a small breath through his nose. "Whatever happened tens of thousands of years ago doesn't affect our judgment of what is happening now. Not a single Herod's fetus has gone to full term. In fact, yesterday, we were told by scientists working with the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases that not only are these second-stage fetuses subject to first trimester rejection at a catastrophic rate, but that they are especially vulnerable to virtually every known herpes virus,

including Epstein-Barr. Mononucleosis. Ninety-five percent of everyone on Earth has Epstein-Barr, Mr. Merton.”

“Nothing will change your views, Doctor?” Merton asked.

“My one good ear still rings from the bomb that killed our president. I’ve rolled with every punch. Nothing can shake me but facts, present-day, relevant facts.” Augustine came around the desk and sat on the corner. “I wish the Innsbruck people all the best, whoever does the investigating,” he said. “There are enough mysteries in biology to last us until the end of time. The next time you’re in Washington, drop by again, Mr. Merton. I’m sure Florence will remember—no tea, coffee.”

Tray balanced on his lap, Dicken pushed his wheelchair through the Natcher Building cafeteria, saw Merton, and rolled himself to the end of the table. He set his tray down with one hand.

“Good train ride?” Dicken asked.

“Glorious,” Merton said. “I thought you should know that Kaye Lang keeps a photo of you on her desktop.”

“That’s an odd sort of *message*, Oliver,” Dicken said. “Why in hell should I care?”

“Because I believe you felt something more than scientific camaraderie for her,” Merton said. “She sent you letters after the bombing. You never answered.”

“If you’re going to be bloody-minded, I’ll eat elsewhere,” Dicken said, and lifted the tray again.

Merton raised his hands. “Sorry. My slash and reveal instincts at work.”

Dicken pushed the tray in and arranged his wheelchair. “I spend half my day waiting for myself to heal, worried that I’ll never recover full use of my legs or my hand . . . Trying to have faith in my body. The other half of the day I’m in rehab, pushing until it hurts. I don’t have time to moon over lost opportunities. Do you?”

“My girl in Leeds dumped me last week. I’m never at home. Besides, I turned positive. Scared her.”

“Sorry,” Dicken said.

“I just stopped by Augustine’s inner sanctum. He seems cocky enough.”

“The polls support him. Public health crisis blossoms into international policy. Fanatics push us into repressive legislation. It’s martial law in all but name, and the Emergency Action Taskforce sets down the medical

decrees—which means they rule nearly everything. Now that Shawbeck has stepped down, Augustine is number two in the country.”

“Frightening,” Merton said.

“Show me something now that isn’t,” Dicken said.

Merton conceded that. “I’m convinced that Augustine is pulling strings to get our Northwestern conference on SHEVA shut down.”

“He’s a consummate bureaucrat—which means, he’ll protect his position using all the tools available.”

“What about the truth?” Merton said, his brow wrinkling. “I’m just not used to seeing government manage scientific debate.”

“You’re not usually so naïve, Oliver. The British have done it for years.”

“Yes, yes, I’ve dealt with enough cabinet ministers to know the *drill*. But where do you stand? You helped bring Kaye’s coalition together—why doesn’t Augustine just fire you and move on?”

“Because I saw the light,” Dicken said glumly. “Or rather, the dark. Dead babies. I lost hope. Even before that, Augustine worked me around pretty well—kept me on as an apparent balance, let me be involved in policy meetings. But he never gave me enough rope to make a noose. Now . . . I can’t travel, can’t do the research we need to do. I’m ineffective.”

“Neutered?” Merton ventured.

“Castrated,” Dicken said.

“Don’t you at least whisper in his ear, ‘It’s science, O mighty Caesar, you could be wrong?’”

Dicken shook his head. “The chromosome numbers are pretty damning. Fifty-two chromosomes, as opposed to forty-six. Trisomal, tetrasomal . . . They could all end up with something like Down syndrome or worse. If Epstein-Barr doesn’t get them.”

Merton had saved the best for last. He told Dicken about the changes in Innsbruck. Dicken listened intently, with a squint in his blind eye, then turned his good eye to stare off at the wall of windows and the bright spring sunshine beyond.

He was remembering the conversation with Kaye before she had ever met Rafelson.

“So Rafelson is going to Austria?” Dicken poked with a fork at the steamed sole and wild rice on his plate.

“If they invite him. He might still be too controversial.”

“I await the report,” Dicken said. “But I’m not going to hold my breath.”

“You think Kaye is making a terrible leap,” Merton suggested.

“I don’t know why I even bought this food,” Dicken said, laying down the fork. “I’m not hungry.”

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### Seattle

#### FEBRUARY

**T**he baby seems to be doing fine,” Dr. Galbreath said. “Second trimester development is normal. We’ve done our analysis, and it’s what we expect for a SHEVA second-stage fetus.”

This seemed a little cold to Kaye. “Boy or girl?” Kaye asked.

“Fifty-two XX,” Galbreath said. She opened a brown cardboard folder and gave Kaye a copy of the sample report. “Chromosomally abnormal female.”

Kaye stared at the paper, her heart thumping. She had not told Mitch, but she had hoped for a girl, to at least remove some of the distance, the number of differences, she might have to contend with. “Is there any duplication, or are they new chromosomes?” Kaye asked.

“If we had the expertise to decide that, we’d be famous,” Galbreath said. Then, less stiffly, “We don’t know. cursory glance tells us they may not be duplicated.”

“No extra chromosome 21?” Kaye asked quietly, staring at the sheet of paper with its rows of numbers and brief string of explanatory words.

“I don’t think the fetus has Down syndrome,” Galbreath said. “But you know how I feel about this now.”

“Because of the extra chromosomes.”

Galbreath nodded.

“We have no way of knowing how many chromosomes Neandertals had,” Kaye said.

“If they’re like us, forty-six,” Galbreath said.

“But they weren’t like us. It’s still a mystery.” Kaye’s words sounded fragile even to her. Kaye stood up, one hand on her stomach. “As far as you can tell, it’s healthy.”

Galbreath nodded. “I have to ask, though, what do I know? Next to nothing. You test positive for herpes simplex type one, but negative for

mono—that is, Epstein-Barr. You never had chicken pox. For God’s sake, Kaye, stay away from anyone with chicken pox.”

“I’ll be careful,” Kaye said.

“I don’t know what more I can tell you.”

“Wish me luck.”

“I wish you all the luck on Earth, *and* in the heavens. It doesn’t make me feel any better as a doctor.”

“It’s still our decision, Felicity.”

“Of course.” Galbreath flipped through more papers until she came to the back of the folder. “If *this* were my decision, you’d never see what I have to show you. We’ve lost our appeal. We have to get all our SHEVA patients to register. If you don’t agree, we have to register for you.”

“Then do so,” Kaye said evenly. She played with a fold on her slacks.

“I know that you’ve moved,” Galbreath said. “If I hand in an incorrect registration, Marine Pacific could get in trouble, and I could be called up before a review board and have my license revoked.” She gave Kaye a sad but level look. “I need your new address.”

Kaye stared at the form, then shook her head.

“I’m begging you, Kaye. I want to remain your doctor until this is over.”

“Over?”

“Until the delivery.”

Kaye shook her head again, with a stubbornly wild look, like a hunted rabbit.

Galbreath stared down at the end of the examination table, tears in her eyes. “I don’t have any choice. None of us has any choice.”

“I don’t want anyone coming to take my baby,” Kaye said, her breath short, hands cold.

“If you don’t cooperate, I can’t be your doctor,” Galbreath said. She turned abruptly and walked from the room. The nurse peered in a few moments later, saw Kaye standing there, stunned, and asked if she needed some help.

“I don’t have a doctor,” Kaye said.

The nurse stood aside as Galbreath entered again. “Please, give me your new address. I know Marine Pacific is fighting any local attempts by the Taskforce to contact its patients. I’ll put extra warnings on this file. We’re on your side, Kaye, believe me.”

Kaye wanted desperately to speak to Mitch, but he was in the University district, trying to finalize hotel arrangements for the conference. She did not want to break in on that.

Galbreath handed Kaye a pen. She filled out the form, slowly. Galbreath took it back. “They would have found out one way or another,” she said tightly.

Kaye carried the report out of the hospital and walked to the brown Toyota Camry they had purchased two months ago. She sat in the car for ten minutes, numb, bloodless fingers clutching the wheel, and then turned the key in the ignition.

She was rolling down her window for air when she heard Galbreath calling after her. She gave half a thought to simply pulling out of the parking space and driving on, but she reapplied the emergency brake and looked left. Galbreath was running across the parking lot. She put her hand on the door and peered in at Kaye.

“You wrote down the wrong address, didn’t you?” she asked, huffing, her face red.

Kaye simply looked blank.

Galbreath closed her eyes, caught her breath. “There’s nothing wrong with your baby,” she said. “I don’t see anything wrong with it. I don’t understand anything. Why aren’t you rejecting her as foreign tissue—she’s completely different from you! You might as well be carrying a gorilla. But you tolerate her, nurture her. All the mothers do. Why doesn’t the Task-force study *that?*”

“It’s a puzzle,” Kaye admitted.

“Please forgive me, Kaye.”

“You’re forgiven,” Kaye said with no real conviction.

“No, I mean it. I don’t care if they take away my license—they could be wrong about this whole thing! I want to be your doctor.”

Kaye hid her face in her hands, exhausted by the tension. Her neck felt like steel springs. She lifted her head and put her hand on Galbreath’s. “If it’s possible, I’d like that,” she said.

“Wherever you go, whatever you do, promise me—let me be there to deliver?” Galbreath pleaded. “I want to learn everything I can about SHEVA pregnancies, to be prepared, and I want to deliver your daughter.”

Kaye parked across the street from the old, square University Plaza Hotel, across the freeway from the University of Washington. She found her



husband on the lower level, waiting for a formal bid from the hotel manager, who had retired to his office.

She told him what had happened at Marine Pacific. Mitch banged the door of the meeting room with his fist, furious. "I should never have left you—not for a minute!"

"You know that's not practical," Kaye said. She put a hand on his shoulder. "I handled it pretty well, I think."

"I can't believe Galbreath would do that to you."

"I know she didn't want to."

Mitch circled, kicked at a metal folding chair, waved his hands helplessly.

"She wants to help us," Kaye said.

"How can we trust her now?"

"There's no need to be paranoid."

Mitch stopped short. "There's a big old train rolling down the tracks. We're in its headlights. I *know that*, Kaye. It's not just the government. Every pregnant woman on Earth is suspect. Augustine—that absolute *bastard*—he's making sure that you're all pariahs! I could *kill* him!"

Kaye took hold of his arms and tugged gently, then hugged him. He was angry enough to try to shrug her off and continue stalking around the room. She held on tighter. "Please, enough, Mitch."

"And now you're out here—exposed to anybody who might walk by!" he said, arms quivering.

"I refuse to become a hothouse flower," Kaye said defensively.

He gave up and dropped his shoulders. "What can we do? When are they going to send police vans with *thugs* in them to round us up?"

"I don't know," Kaye said. "Something's got to give. I believe in this country, Mitch. People won't put up with this."

Mitch sat in a folding chair at the end of an aisle. The room was brightly lit, with fifty empty chairs arranged in five rows, a linen-covered table and coffee service at the back. "Wendell and Maria say the pressure is just incredible. They've filed protests, but no one in the department will admit to anything. Funding gets cut, offices reassigned, labs harassed by inspectors. I'm losing all my faith, Kaye. I saw it happen to me after . . ."

"I know," Kaye said.

"And now the State Department won't let Brock return from Innsbruck."

"When did you hear that?"

"Merton called from Bethesda this afternoon. Augustine is trying to

shut this down completely. It'll be just you and me—and you'll have to go into hiding!"

Kaye sat beside him. She had heard nothing from any of her former colleagues back east. Nothing from Judith. Perversely, she wanted to talk with Marge Cross. She wanted to reach out for all the support left in the world.

She missed her mother and father terribly.

Kaye leaned over and put her head on Mitch's shoulder. He rubbed her scalp gently with his big hands.

They had not even discussed the real news of the morning. Important things got lost so quickly in the fray. "I know something you don't know," Kaye said.

"What's that?"

"We're going to have a daughter."

Mitch stopped breathing for a moment and his face wrinkled up. "My God," he said.

"It was one or the other," Kaye said, grinning at his reaction.

"It's what you wanted."

"Did I say that?"

"Christmas Eve. You said you wanted to buy dolls for her."

"Do you mind?"

"Of course not. I just get a little shock every time we take a new step, that's all."

"Dr. Galbreath says she's healthy. There's nothing wrong with her. She has the extra chromosomes . . . but we knew that."

Mitch put his hand on her stomach. "I can feel her moving," he said, and got on the floor in front of Kaye to lay his ear against her. "She's going to be so *beautiful*."

The hotel manager walked into the meeting room with a clutch of papers and looked down on them in surprise. In his fifties, with a full head of curly brown hair and a plump, nondescript face, he could have been anyone's mediocre uncle. Mitch got up and brushed off his pants.

"My wife," Mitch said, embarrassed.

"Of course," the manager said. He narrowed his pale blue eyes and took Mitch aside. "She's pregnant, isn't she? You didn't tell me about that. There's no mention in here . . ." He shuffled through the papers, looked up at Mitch accusingly. "None at all. We have to be so careful now about public gatherings and exposures."

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Mitch leaned against the Buick, chin in hand, rubbing. His fingers made a small rasping sound though he had shaved that morning. He pulled his hand back. Kaye stood before him.

“I’m going to drive you back to the house,” he said.

“What about the Buick?”

He shook his head. “I’ll pick it up later. Wendell can give me a ride.”

“Where do we go from here?” Kaye asked. “We could try another hotel. Or rent a lodge hall.”

Mitch made a disgusted face. “The bastard was *looking* for an excuse. He knew your name. He called somebody. He checked up, like a good little Nazi.” He flung his hands in the air. “Long live America the free!”

“If Brock can’t enter the country again—”

“We’ll hold the conference on the Internet,” Mitch said. “We’ll figure out something. But it’s you I’m concerned about right now. Something’s bound to happen.”

“What?”

“Don’t you feel it?” He rubbed his forehead. “The look in that manager’s eyes, that cowardly bastard. He’s like a frightened goat. He doesn’t know jack shit about biology. He lives his life in small safe moves and he doesn’t buck the system. Nearly everybody is like him. They get pushed around and they run in the direction they’re pushed.”

“That sounds so cynical,” Kaye said.

“It’s political reality. I’ve been so stupid up until now. Letting you travel alone. You could be picked up, exposed—”

“I don’t want to be kept in a *cave*, Mitch.”

Mitch winced.

Kaye put her hand on his shoulder. “I’m sorry. You know what I mean.”

“Everything’s in place. Kaye. You saw it in Georgia. I saw it in the Alps. We’ve become *strangers*. People hate us.”

“They hate me,” Kaye said, her face going pale. “Because I’m pregnant.”

“They hate me, too.”

“But they’re not asking you to register like you were a Jew in Germany.”

“Not yet,” Mitch said. “Let’s go.” He wrapped his arm around her and escorted her to the Toyota. Kaye found it awkward to match his long stride. “I think we may have a day or two, maybe three. Then . . . somebody’s going to do something. You’re a thorn in their sides. A double thorn.”

“Why double?”

“Celebrities have power,” Mitch said. “People know who you are, and you know the truth.”

Kaye got into the passenger side and rolled down the window. The inside of the car was warm. Mitch closed the door for her. “Do I?”

“You’re damn right you do. Sue made you an offer. Let’s look into it. I’ll tell Wendell where we’re going. Nobody else.”

“I like the house,” Kaye said.

“We’ll find another,” Mitch said.

## 82

**Building 52, The National Institutes of Health, Bethesda**  
**M**ark Augustine seemed almost feverish in his triumph. He laid the pictures out for Dicken and slipped the videotape into the office player. Dicken picked up the first picture, held it close, squinted. The usual medical photo colors, strange orange and olive flesh and bright pink lesions, out-of-focus facial features. A man, in his forties perhaps, alive but far from happy. Dicken picked up the next picture, a closeup of the man’s right arm, marked with roseate blotches, a yellow plastic ruler laid alongside to indicate size. The largest blotch spread over a diameter of seven centimeters, with an angry sore at the center, crusted with thick yellow fluid. Dicken counted seven blotches on the right arm alone.

“I showed these to most of the staff this morning,” Augustine said, holding out the remote and starting the tape. Dicken went on to the next few pictures. The man’s body was covered with more large roseate lesions, some forming huge blisters, proud, assertive, and no doubt intensely painful. “We have samples in for analysis now, but the field team did a quick serology check for SHEVA, just to confirm. The man’s wife is in her second trimester with a second-stage SHEVA fetus and still shows SHEVA type 3-s. The man is now clear of SHEVA, so we can rule out the lesions are caused by SHEVA, which we wouldn’t expect at any rate.”

“Where are they?” Dicken asked.

“San Diego, California. Illegal immigrant couple. Our Commissioned Corps people did the investigation and sent this material to us. It’s about three days old. Local press is being kept out for the time being.”

Augustine’s smile came and went like small flashes of lightning. He

turned in front of his desk, fast-forwarding through scenes of the hospital, the ward, the room's temporary containment features—plastic curtains taped to walls and door, separate air. He lifted his finger from the remote and returned to play mode.

Doctor Ed Sanger, Mercy Hospital's Commissioned Corps Taskforce member, in his fifties, with lank and sandy hair, identified himself and droned self-consciously through the diagnosis. Dicken listened with a rising sense of dread. *How wrong I can be. Augustine is right. All his guesses were dead on.*

Augustine shut off the tape. "It's a single-stranded RNA virus, huge and primitive, probably around 160,000 nucleotides. Like nothing we've ever seen before. We're working to match its genome with known HERV coding regions. It's incredibly fast, it's ill-adapted, and it's deadly."

"He looks in bad shape," Dicken said.

"The man died last night." Augustine turned off the tape. "The woman seems to be asymptomatic, but she's having the usual trouble with her pregnancy." Augustine folded his arms and sat on the edge of the desk. "Lateral transmission of an unknown retrovirus, almost certainly excited and equipped by SHEVA. The woman infected the man. This is the one, Christopher. This is the one we need. Are you up to helping us go public?"

"Go public, how?"

"We're going to quarantine and/or sequester women with second-stage pregnancies. For that kind of violation of civil liberties, we have to lay some heavy foundations. The president is prepared to go forward, but his team says we need personalities to put the message across."

"I'm no personality. Get Bill Cosby."

"Cosby is signing off on this one. But you . . . You're practically a poster child for the brave health worker recovering from wounds inflicted by fanatics desperate to stop us." Augustine's smile flickered again.

Dicken stared down at his lap. "You're certain about this?"

"As certain as we're going to be, until we do all the science. That could take three or four months. Considering the consequences, we can't afford to wait."

Dicken looked up at Augustine, then moved his gaze to the patchy clouds and trees in the sky through the office window. Augustine had hung a small square of stained glass there, a fleur-de-lis in red and green.

"All the mothers will have to have stickers in their houses," Dicken said. "*Q*, or *S*, maybe. Every pregnant woman will have to prove she isn't carrying a SHEVA baby. That could cost billions."

“Nobody’s concerned about funding,” Augustine said. “We’re facing the biggest health threat of all time. It’s the biological equivalent of Pandora’s box, Christopher. Every retroviral illness we ever conquered but couldn’t get rid of. Hundreds, maybe thousands of diseases we have no modern defenses against. There’s no question of our getting enough funding on this one.”

“The only problem is, I don’t believe it,” Dicken said softly.

Augustine stared at him, strong lines forming beside his lips, brows drawing inward.

“I’ve chased viruses most of my adult life,” Dicken said. “I’ve seen what they can do. I know about retroviruses, I know about HERV. I know about SHEVA. HERV were probably never eliminated from the genome because they provided protection against other, newer retroviruses. They’re our own little library of protection. And . . . our genome uses them to generate novelty.”

“We don’t know that,” Augustine said, his voice grating with tension.

“I want to wait for the science before we lock up every mother in America,” Dicken said.

As Augustine’s skin darkened with irritation, then anger, the patches of shrapnel scars became vivid. “The danger is just too great,” he said. “I thought you’d appreciate a chance to get back into the picture.”

“No,” Dicken said. “I can’t.”

“Still holding on to fantasies about a new species?” Augustine asked grimly.

“I’m way beyond that,” Dicken said. The weary gravel in his voice startled him. He sounded like an old man.

Augustine walked around his desk and opened a file drawer, pulling out an envelope. Everything in his posture, the small, self-conscious strut in his walk, the cementlike set of his features, evoked a kind of dread in Dicken. This was a Mark Augustine he had not seen before: a man about to administer the coup de grâce. “This came for you while you were in the hospital. It was in your mail slot. It was addressed to you in your official capacity, so I took the liberty of having it opened.”

He handed the thin papers to Dicken.

“They’re from Georgia. Leonid Sugashvili was sending you pictures of what he called possible *Homo superior* specimens, wasn’t he?”

“I hadn’t checked him out,” Dicken said, “so I didn’t mention it to you.”

“Wisely. He’s been arrested for fraud in Tbilisi. For bilking families of

those missing in the troubles. He promised grieving relatives he could show them where their loved ones were buried. Looks like he was after the CDC, too.”

“That doesn’t surprise me, and it doesn’t change my mind, Mark. I’m just burned out. It’s hard enough healing my own body. I’m not the man for the job.”

“All right,” Augustine said. “I’ll put you on long-term disability leave. We need your office at the CDC. We’re moving in sixty special epidemiologists next week to begin phase two. With our space shortage, we’ll probably put three in your office to start.”

They watched each other in silence.

“Thanks for carrying me this long,” Dicken said without a hint of irony.

“No problem,” Augustine said with equal flatness.

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### Snohomish County

**M**itch piled the last of the boxes near the front door. Wendell Packer was coming with a panel truck in the morning. He looked around the house and set his lips in a wry, crooked line. They had been here just over two months. One Christmas.

Kaye carried the phone in from the bedroom, line dangling. “Turned off,” she said. “They’re prompt when you’re dismantling a home. So—how long have we been here?”

Mitch sat in the worn lounge chair he had had since his student days. “We’ll do okay,” he said. His hands felt funny. They seemed larger, somehow. “God, I’m tired.”

Kaye sat on the arm of the chair and reached around to massage his shoulders. He leaned his head against her arm, rubbed his bristly cheek against her peach cardigan.

“Damn,” she said. “I forgot to charge the batteries in the cell phone.” She kissed the top of his head and returned to the bedroom. Mitch noticed she walked straight enough, even at seven months. Her stomach was prominent but not huge. He wished he had had more experience with pregnancy. To have this be his first time—

“Both batteries are dead,” Kaye called from the bedroom. “They’ll take an hour or so.”

Mitch stared at various objects in the room, blinking. Then he held out his hands. They seemed swollen, stuck on the ends of Popeye-like forearms. His feet felt large, though he did not look at them. This was extremely discomfiting. He wanted to go to sleep but it was only four in the afternoon. They had just eaten a dinner of canned soup. It was still bright outside.

He had hoped to make love to Kaye in the house for the last time. Kaye returned and pulled up the footstool.

“You sit here,” Mitch said, starting to get out of the chair. “More comfortable.”

“I’m fine. I want to sit up straight.”

Mitch paused half out of the chair, woozy.

“Something wrong?”

He saw the first jag of light. He closed his eyes and fell back into the chair. “It’s coming,” he said.

“What?”

He pointed at his temple, and said, softly, “Bang.” He had had bodily distortions occur before and during his headaches when he had been a boy. He remembered hating them, and now he was almost beside himself with resentment and foreboding.

“I’ve got some Naproze in my purse,” Kaye said. He listened to her walking around the room. With his eyes closed, he saw ghostly lightning and his feet felt as big as an elephant’s. The pain was like a round of cannon fire advancing across a wide valley.

Kaye pressed two tablets into his hand and a tumbler full of water. He swallowed the tablets, drank the water, not at all confident they would do any good. Perhaps if he had had any decent warning, taken them earlier in the day . . .

“Let’s get you into bed,” Kaye said.

“What?” Mitch asked.

“Bed.”

“I want to go away,” he said.

“Right. Sleep.”

That was the only way he might even hope to escape. Even then, he might have horrid and painful dreams. He remembered those, as well; dreams of being crushed beneath mountains.



He lay down in the cool of the bare bedroom, on the linens they had left here for their last night, beneath a comforter. He pulled the comforter up over his head, leaving a small space to breathe through.

He barely heard Kaye tell him she loved him.

Kaye pulled back the comforter. Mitch's forehead felt clammy, cold as ice. She was concerned, guilty that she could not share his pain; then, could not help rationalizing that Mitch would not share the pain of bringing their baby into the world.

She sat on the bed beside him. His breath came in shallow pants. She reflexively felt her tummy beneath the cardigan, lifted up the sweater, rubbed her skin, stretched so smooth it was almost shiny. The baby had been subdued for several hours after a bout of kicking this afternoon.

Kaye had never felt her kidneys being pummeled from the inside; she didn't relish the experience. Nor did she enjoy going to the bathroom every hour on the hour, or the continuous rounds of heartburn. At night, lying in bed, she could even feel the rhythmic motion of her intestines.

All of it made her apprehensive; it also made her feel intensely alive and aware.

But she was pulling away from thinking about Mitch, about his pain. She settled down beside him and he suddenly rolled over, tugging the comforter and turning away.

"Mitch?"

He didn't answer. She lay on her back for a moment, but that was uncomfortable, so she shifted on her side, facing away from Mitch, and backed into him slowly, gently, for his warmth. He did not move or protest. She stared at the gray-lit and empty wall. She thought she might get up and try to work on the book for a few minutes, but the laptop computer and her notebooks were all packed away. The impulse passed.

The silence in the house bothered her. She listened for any sound, heard only Mitch's breathing and her own. The air was so still outside. She couldn't even hear the traffic on Highway 2, less than a mile away. No birds. No settling beams or creaking floors.

After half an hour, she made sure that Mitch was asleep, then sat up, pushed herself to the edge of the bed, stood, and went into the kitchen to heat a kettle of water for tea. She stared out the kitchen window at the last of the twilight. The water in the kettle slowly came to a whistling boil and she poured it over a bag of chamomile in one of the two mugs they had left

out on the white tile counter. As the tea steeped, she felt the smooth tiles with her finger, wondering what their next home would be like, probably within hailing distance of the Five Tribes' huge Wild Eagle casino. Sue had still been making the arrangements this morning and promised only that eventually there would be a house, a nice one. "Maybe a trailer at first," she had added over the phone.

Kaye felt a small throb of helpless anger. She wanted to stay here. She felt comfortable here. "This is so strange," she said to the window. As if in response, the baby kicked once.

She picked up the mug and dropped the tea bag in the sink. As she took her first sip, she heard the sound of engines and tires on the gravel driveway.

She walked into the living room and stood, watching headlights flash outside. They were expecting no one; Wendell was in Seattle, the truck would not be available at the rental agency until tomorrow morning, Merton was in Beresford, New York; she had heard that Sue and Jack were in eastern Washington.

She thought of waking Mitch, wondered if she could wake him in his condition.

"Maybe it's Maria or somebody else."

But she would not approach the door. The living room lights were off, the porch lights off, the kitchen lights on. A flash played through the front window against the south wall. She had left the drapes open; they had no near neighbors, nobody to peer in.

A sharp rap rattled the front door. Kaye looked at her watch, pushed the little button to turn on its blue-green light. Seven o'clock.

The rap sounded again, followed by an unfamiliar voice. "Kaye Lang? Mitchell Rafelson? County Sheriff's Department, Judicial Services."

Kaye's breath caught. What could this be? Surely nothing involving her! She walked to the front door and twirled the single dead bolt, opened the door. Four men stood on the porch, two in uniform, two in civilian clothes, slacks and light jackets. The flashlight beam crossed her face as she switched on the porch light. She blinked at them. "I'm Kaye Lang."

One of the civilians, a tall, stout man with close-cut brown hair on a long oval face stepped forward. "Miz Lang, we have—"

"Mrs. Lang," Kaye said.

"All right. My name is Wallace Jurgenson. This is Dr. Kevin Clark of the Snohomish Health District. I'm a Commissioned Corps public health

service representative for the Emergency Action Taskforce in the state of Washington. Mrs. Lang, we have a federal Emergency Action Taskforce order verified by the Olympia Taskforce office, state of Washington. We're contacting women known to be possibly infectious, bearing a second-stage—"

"That's bull," Kaye said.

The man stopped, faintly exasperated, then resumed. "A second-stage SHEVA fetus. Do you know what this means, ma'am?"

"Yes," Kaye said, "but it's all wrong."

"I'm here to inform you that in the judgment of the federal Emergency Action Taskforce Office and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—"

"I used to work for them," Kaye said.

"I know that," Jurgenson said. Clark smiled and nodded, as if pleased to meet her. The deputies stood back beyond the porch, arms folded. "Miz Lang, it's been determined that you may present a public health threat. You and other women in this area are being contacted and informed of their choices."

"I choose to stay where I am," Kaye said, her voice shaky. She stared from face to face. Pleasant-looking men, clean shaven, earnest, almost as nervous as she was, and not happy.

"We have orders to take you and your husband to a county Emergency Action shelter in Lynnwood, where you will be sequestered and provided medical care until it can be determined whether or not you present a public health risk—"

"No," Kaye said, feeling her face heat up. "This is absolute bullshit. My husband is ill. He can't travel."

Jurgenson's face was stern. He was preparing to do something he did not like. He glanced at Clark. The deputies stepped forward, and one nearly stumbled on a rock. After swallowing, Jurgenson continued. "Dr. Clark can give your husband a brief examination before we move you." His breath showed on the night air.

"He has a *headache*," Kaye said. "A migraine. He gets them sometimes." On the gravel drive waited a sheriff's department car and a small ambulance. Beyond the vehicles, the scrubby wide lawn of the house stretched to a fence. She could smell the damp green and the country soil on the cold night air.

"We have no choice, Miz Lang."

There was not much she could do. If Kaye resisted, they would simply come back with more men.

“I’ll come. My husband shouldn’t be moved.”

“You may both be carriers, ma’am. We need to take both of you.”

“I can examine your husband and see whether his condition might respond to medical treatment,” Clark said.

Kaye hated the first sensation of tears coming. Frustration, helplessness, aloneness. She saw Clark and Jurgenson look over her shoulder, heard someone moving, whirled as if she might be taken by ambush.

It was Mitch. He walked with a distinct jerk, eyes half-closed, hands extended, like Frankenstein’s monster. “Kaye, what is it?” he asked, his voice thick. Simply talking made his face wrinkle with pain.

Clark and Jurgenson moved back now, and the nearest deputy unlatched his holster. Kaye turned and glared at them. “It’s a migraine! He has a *migraine!*”

“Who are they?” Mitch asked. He nearly fell over. Kaye went to him, helped him remain standing. “I can’t see very well,” he murmured.

Clark and Jurgenson conferred in whispers. “Please bring him out on the porch, Miz Lang,” Jurgenson said, his voice strained. Kaye saw a gun in the deputy’s hand.

“What is this?”

“They’re from the Taskforce,” Kaye said. “They want us to come with them.”

“Why?”

“Something about being infectious.”

“No,” Mitch said, struggling in her grasp.

“That’s what I told them. But Mitch, there isn’t anything we can do.”

“No!” Mitch shouted, waving one arm. “Come back when I can see you, when I can talk! Leave my wife alone, for God’s sake.”

“Please come out on the porch, ma’am,” the deputy said. Kaye knew the situation was getting dangerous. Mitch was in no condition to be rational. She did not know what he might do to protect her. The men outside were afraid. These were awful times and awful things could happen and nobody would be punished; they might be shot and the house burned to the ground, as if they had plague.

“My wife is pregnant,” Mitch said. “Please leave her alone.” He tried to move toward the front door. Kaye stood beside him, guiding him.

The deputy kept his gun pointed toward the porch, but held it with both

hands, arms straight. Jurgenson told him to put the gun away. He shook his head. "I don't want them doing something stupid," he said in a low voice.

"We're coming out," Kaye said. "Don't be idiots. We're not sick and we're not infectious."

Jurgenson told them to walk through the door and step down off the porch. "We have an ambulance. We'll take you both to where they can look after your husband."

Kaye helped Mitch outside and down the porch steps. He was sweating profusely and his hands were damp and cold. "I still can't see very well," he said into Kaye's ear. "Tell me what they're doing."

"They want to take us away." They stood in the yard now. Jurgenson motioned to Clark and he opened the back of the ambulance. Kaye saw there was a young woman behind the wheel of the ambulance. The driver stared owlishly through the rolled-up window. "Don't do anything silly," Kaye said to Mitch. "Just walk steadily. Did the pills help?"

Mitch shook his head. "It's bad. I feel so stupid . . . leaving you alone. Vulnerable." His words were thick and his eyes almost closed. He could not stand the glare of the headlights. The deputies turned on their flashlights and aimed them at Kaye and Mitch. Mitch hid his eyes with one hand and tried to turn away.

"Do not move!" the deputy with the gun ordered. "Keep your hands in the open!"

Kaye heard more engines. The second deputy turned. "Cars coming," he said. "Trucks. Lots of them."

She counted four pairs of headlights moving down the road to the house. Three pickup trucks and a car pulled into the yard, kicking up gravel, brakes squealing. The trucks carried men in the back—men with black hair and checkered shirts, leather jackets, windbreakers, men with ponytails, and then she saw Jack, Sue's husband.

Jack opened the driver's-side door of his truck and stepped down, frowning. He held up his hand and the men stayed in the backs of the pickups.

"Good evening," Jack said, his frown vanishing, his face suddenly neutral. "Hello, Kaye, Mitch. Your phones aren't working."

The deputies stared at Jurgenson and Clark for guidance. The gun remained pointed down at the gravel drive. Wendell Packer and Maria Konig got out of the car and approached Mitch and Kaye. "It's all right,"

Packer told the four men, now forming an open square, defensive. He held up his hands, showing they were empty. "We brought some friends to help them move. Okay?"

"Mitch has a migraine," Kaye called. Mitch tried to shrug her off, stand on his own, but his legs were too wobbly.

"Poor baby," Maria said, walking in a half circle around the deputies. "It's all right," she told them. "We're from the University of Washington."

"We're from the Five Tribes," Jack said. "These are our friends. We're helping them move." The men in the pickups kept their hands in the open but smiled like wolves, like bandits.

Clark tapped Jurgenson on the shoulder. "Let's not make any headlines," he said. Jurgenson agreed with a nod. Clark got into the ambulance and Jurgenson joined the deputies in the Caprice. Without another word, the two vehicles backed up, turned, and grumbled down the long gravel drive into the twilight.

Jack stepped forward with his hands in his jeans pockets and a big, energized smile. "That was fun," he said.

Wendell and Kaye helped Mitch squat on the ground. "I'll be fine," Mitch said, head in hands. "I couldn't do anything. Jesus, I couldn't do anything."

"It's all right," Maria said.

Kaye knelt beside him, touching her cheek to his forehead. "Let's get you inside." She and Maria helped him to his feet and half carried him toward the house.

"We heard from Oliver in New York," Wendell said. "Christopher Dicken called him and said something ugly was coming down fast. He said you weren't answering your phones."

"That was late this afternoon," Maria said.

"Maria called Sue," Wendell said. "Sue called Jack. Jack was visiting Seattle. Nobody had heard from you."

"I was out here taking a meeting at the Lummi casino," Jack said. He waved at the men in the trucks. "We were talking about new games and machines. They volunteered to come along. Good thing, I suppose. I think we should go to Kumash now."

"I'm ready," Mitch said. He walked up the steps on his own power, turned, and held out his hands, staring at them. "I can do this. I'll be fine."

"They can't touch you there," Jack said. He stared down the drive, his eyes glittering. "They're going to make Indians out of everybody. God-damn bastards."

**Kumash County, Eastern Washington**

MAY

**M**itch stood on the crest of a low chalky mound overlooking the Wild Eagle Casino and Resort. He tilted his hat back and squinted at the bright sun. At nine in the morning, the air was still and already hot. In normal times the casino, a gaudy button of red and gold and white in the bleached earth tones of southeastern Washington, employed four hundred people, three hundred from the Five Tribes.

The reservation was under quarantine for not cooperating with Mark Augustine. Three Kumash County Sheriff's Patrol pickups had been parked on the main road from the highway. They were providing backup for federal marshals enforcing an Emergency Action Taskforce health threat advisory that applied to the entire Five Tribes reservation.

There had been no business at the casino for over three weeks. The parking lot was almost empty and the lights on the signs had been turned off.

Mitch scuffed the hard-packed dirt with his boot. He had left the air-conditioned single-wide trailer and come up to the hill to be by himself and think for a while, and so, when he saw Jack walking slowly along the same trail, he felt a little sting of resentment. But he did not leave.

Neither Mitch nor Jack knew whether they were destined to like each other. Every time they met, Jack asked certain questions, by way of challenge, and Mitch gave certain answers that never quite satisfied.

Mitch squatted and picked up a round rock crusted with dry mud. Jack climbed the last few yards to the top of the hill.

"Hello," he said.

Mitch nodded.

"I see you have it, too." Jack rubbed his cheek with a finger. The skin on his face was forming a Lone Ranger-like mask, peeling at the edges, but thickening near the eyes. Both men looked as if they were peering through thin mud packs. "It won't come off without drawing blood."

"Shouldn't pick at it," Mitch said.

"When did yours start?"

"Three nights ago."

Jack squatted beside Jack. "I feel angry sometimes. I feel maybe Sue could have planned this better."

Mitch smiled. "What, getting pregnant?"

"Yeah," Jack said. "The casino is empty. We're running out of money. I've let most of our people go, and the others can't come to work from outside. I'm not too happy with myself, either." He touched the mask again, then looked at his finger. "One of our young fathers tried to sand it off. He's in the clinic now. I told him that was stupid."

"None of this is easy," Mitch said.

"You should come to a trustees meeting sometime."

"I'm grateful just to be here, Jack. I don't want to make people angry."

"Sue thinks maybe they won't be angry if they meet you. You're a nice enough guy."

"That's what she said over a year ago."

"She says if I'm not angry, the others won't be. That's right, maybe. Though there is an old Cayuse woman, Becky. They sent her away from Colville and she came here. She's a nice old grandmother, but she thinks it's her job to disagree with whatever the tribes want. She might, you know, look at you, poke you a little." Jack made a cantankerous face and stabbed the air with a stiff finger.

Jack was seldom so voluble and had never talked about affairs on the board.

Mitch laughed. "Do you think there's going to be trouble?"

Jack shrugged. "We want to have a meeting of fathers soon. Just the fathers. Not like the clinic birth classes with the women there. They're embarrassing to the men. Are you going tonight?"

Mitch nodded.

"First time for me with this skin. It's going to be rough. Some of the new fathers watch the TV and they wonder when they'll get their jobs back, and then they blame the women."

Mitch understood that there were three couples still expecting SHEVA babies on the reservation, besides himself and Kaye. Among the three thousand and seventy-two people on the reservation, making up the Five Tribes, there had been six SHEVA births. All had been born dead.

Kaye worked with the clinic pediatrician, a young white doctor named Chambers, and helped conduct the parenting classes. The men were a little slow and perhaps a lot less willing to accept things.

"Sue is due about the same time as Kaye," Jack said. He folded his legs



into a lotus and sat directly on the dirt, something Mitch was not good at. "I tried to understand about genes and DNA and what a virus is. It's not my kind of language."

"It can be difficult," Mitch said. He did not know whether he should reach out and put his hand on Jack's shoulder. He knew so little about the modern people whose ancestors he studied. "We might be the first to have healthy babies," he said. "The first to know what they'll look like."

"I think that is true. It could be very . . ." Jack paused, his lips turned down as he thought. "I was going to say an honor. But it isn't our honor."

"Maybe not," Mitch said.

"For me, everything stays alive forever. The whole Earth is filled with living things, some wearing flesh, others not. We are here for many who came before. We don't lose our connection to the flesh when we cast it off. We spread out after we die, but we like to come back to our bones and look around. See what the young ones are doing."

Mitch could feel the old debate starting again.

"You don't see it that way," Jack said.

"I'm not sure how I see things anymore," Mitch said. "Having your body jerked around by nature is sobering. Women experience it more directly, but this has got to be a first for the men."

"This DNA must be a spirit in us, the words our ancestors pass on, words of the Creator. I can see that."

"As good a description as any," Mitch said. "Except I don't know who the Creator might be, or whether one even exists."

Jack sighed. "You study dead things."

Mitch colored slightly, as he always did when discussing these matters with Jack. "I try to understand what they were like when they were alive."

"The ghosts could tell you," Jack said.

"Do they tell you?"

"Sometimes," Jack said. "Once or twice."

"What do they tell you?"

"That they want things. They aren't happy. One old man, he's dead now, he listened to the spirit of Pasco man when you dug him out of the riverbank. The old man said the ghost was very unhappy." Jack picked up a pebble and tossed it down the hill. "Then, he said he didn't talk like our ghosts. Maybe he was a different ghost. The old man only told that to me, not to anybody else. He thought maybe the ghost wasn't from our tribe."

"Wow," Mitch said.

Jack rubbed his nose and plucked at an eyebrow. "My skin itches all the time. Does yours?"

"Sometimes." Mitch always felt as if he were walking along a cliff edge when he talked about the bones with Jack. Maybe it was guilt. "No one is special. We're all humans. The young learn from the old, dead or alive. I respect you and what you say, Jack, but we may never agree."

"Sue makes me think things through," Jack said with a shade of petulance, and glanced at Mitch with deep-set black eyes. "She says I should talk to you because you listen, and then you say what you think and it's honest. The other fathers, they need some of that now."

"I'll talk with them if it will help," Mitch said. "We owe you a lot, Jack."

"No, you don't," Jack said. "We'd probably be in trouble anyway. If it wasn't the new ones, it would be the slot machines. We like to shove our spears at the bureau and the government."

"It's costing you a lot of money," Mitch said.

"We're sneaking in the new credit-card roller games," Jack said. "Our boys drive them over the hills in the backs of their trucks where the troopers aren't watching. We may get to use them for six months or more before the state confiscates them."

"They're slot machines?"

Jack shook his head. "We don't think so. We'll make some money before they're removed."

"Revenge against the white man?"

"We skin 'em," Jack said soberly. "They love it."

"If the babies are healthy, maybe they'll end the quarantine," Mitch said. "You can reopen the casino in a couple of months."

"I don't count on nothing," Jack said. "Besides, I don't want to go out on the floor and act like a boss if I still look like this." He put his hand on Mitch's shoulder. "You come talk," he said, standing. "The men want to hear."

"I'll give it a shot," Mitch said.

"I'll tell them to forgive you for that other stuff. The ghost wasn't from one of our tribes anyway." Jack pushed to his feet and walked off down the hill.

**Kumash County, Eastern Washington**

**M**itch worked on his old blue Buick, parked in the dry grass of the trailer's front yard, while afternoon thunderheads piled up to the south.

The air smelled tense and exciting. Kaye could hardly bear to sit. She pushed back from the desk by the window and left off from pretending to work on her book while spending most of her time watching Mitch squint at wire harnesses.

She put her hands on her hips to stretch. This day had not been so hot and they had stayed at the trailer rather than ride down to the air-conditioned community center. Kaye liked to watch Mitch play basketball; sometimes she would go for a swim in the small pool. It was not a bad life, but she felt guilty.

The news from outside was seldom good. They had been on the reservation for three weeks and Kaye was afraid the federal marshals would come and gather up the SHEVA mothers at any time. They had done so in Montgomery, Alabama, breaking into a private maternity center and nearly causing a riot.

"They're getting *bold*," Mitch had said as they watched the TV news. Later, the president had apologized and assured the nation that civil liberties would be preserved, as much as possible, considering the risks that might be faced by the general public. Two days later, the Montgomery clinic had closed under pressure from picketing citizens, and the mothers and fathers had been forced to move elsewhere. With their masks, the new parents looked strange; judging from what she and Mitch heard on the news, they were not popular in very many places.

They had not been popular in the Republic of Georgia.

Kaye had learned nothing more about new retroviral infections from SHEVA mothers. Her contacts were equally silent. This was a charged issue, she could tell; nobody felt comfortable expressing opinions.

So she pretended to work on her book, drafting perhaps a good paragraph or two every day, writing sometimes on the laptop, sometimes in longhand on a legal pad. Mitch read what she wrote and made marginal notes, but he seemed preoccupied, as if stunned by the prospect of being a father . . . Though she knew that was not what concerned him.

*Not being a father. That concerns him. Me. My welfare.*

She did not know how to ease his mind. She felt fine, even wonderful, despite the discomforts. She looked at herself in the spotted mirror in the bathroom and felt that her face had filled out rather well; not gaunt, as she had once believed, but healthy, with good skin—not counting the mask, of course.

Every day the mask darkened and thickened, a peculiar caul that marked this kind of parenthood.

Kaye performed her exercises on the thin carpet in the small living room. Finally, it was just too muggy to do much of anything. Mitch came in for a drink of water and saw her on the floor. She looked up at him.

“Game of cards in the rec room?” he asked.

“I want to be alone,” she intoned, Garbo-like. “Alone with you, that is.”

“How’s the back?”

“Massage tonight, when it’s cool,” she said.

“Peaceful here, isn’t it?” Mitch asked, standing in the door and flapping his T-shirt to cool off.

“I’ve been thinking of names.”

“Oh?” Mitch looked stricken.

“What?” Kaye asked.

“Just a funny feeling. I want to see her before we come up with a name.”

“Why?” Kaye asked resentfully. “You talk to her, sing to her, every night. You say you can even smell her on my breath.”

“Yeah,” Mitch said, but his face did not relax. “I just want to see what she looks like.”

Suddenly, Kaye pretended to catch on. “I don’t mean a *scientific name*,” she said. “Our name, our name for *our* daughter.”

Mitch gave her an exasperated look. “Don’t ask me to explain.” He looked pensive. “Brock and I came up with a scientific name yesterday, on the phone. Though he thinks it’s premature, because none of the—”

Mitch caught himself, coughed, shut the screen door, and walked into the kitchen.

Kaye felt her heart sink.

Mitch returned with several ice cubes wrapped in a wet towel, knelt beside her, and dabbed at the sweat on her forehead. Kaye would not meet his eyes.

“Stupid,” he murmured.

“We’re both grownups,” Kaye said. “I want to think of names for her. I want to knit booties and shop for sleepers and buy little crib toys and behave as if we’re normal parents and *stop thinking about all that bullshit.*”

“I know,” Mitch said, and he looked completely miserable, almost broken.

Kaye got up on her knees and laid her hands lightly on Mitch’s shoulders, sweeping them back and forth as if dusting. “Listen to me. I am fine. She is fine. If you don’t believe me . . .”

“I believe you,” Mitch said.

Kaye bumped her forehead against his. “All right, *Kemosabe.*”

Mitch touched the dark, rough skin on her cheeks. “You look very mysterious. Like a bandit.”

“Maybe we’ll need new scientific names for us, too. Don’t you feel it inside . . . something deeper, beneath the skin?”

“My bones itch,” he said. “And my throat . . . my tongue feels different. Why am I getting a mask and all the rest, too?”

“You make the virus. Why shouldn’t it change you, too? As for the mask . . . maybe we’re getting ready to be recognized by her. We’re social animals. Daddies are as important to babies as mommies.”

“We’ll look like her?”

“Maybe a little.” Kaye returned to the desk chair and sat. “What did Brock suggest for a scientific name?”

“He doesn’t foresee a radical change,” Mitch said. “Subspecies at most, maybe just a peculiar variety. So . . . *Homo sapiens novus.*”

Kaye repeated the name softly and smirked. “Sounds like a windshield repair place.”

“It’s good Latin,” Mitch said.

“Let me think on it,” she said.

“They paid for the clinic with the money from the casino,” Kaye said as she folded towels. Mitch had carried the two baskets back to the trailer from the laundry shed before sundown. He sat on the queen-size bed in the tiny little bedroom of the single-wide because there was hardly any room to stand. His big feet could barely wedge between the walls and the bed frame.

Kaye took four panties and two new nursing bras and folded them, then laid them to one side to put in the overnight case. She had been keeping the case handy for a week, and it seemed the right time to pack it.

“Got a dopp bag?” she asked. “I can’t find mine.”

Mitch pushed and crawled off the end of the bed to dig around in his suitcase. He came up with a battered old brown leather bag with a zipper.

“Army Air Force bomber’s shaving kit?” she asked, lifting the bag by its strap.

“Guaranteed authentic,” Mitch said. He watched her like a hawk and that made her feel both reassured and a little bitchy. She continued to fold laundry.

“Dr. Chambers says all the mothers-to-be look healthy. He delivered three of the others. He could tell there was something wrong with them months before, so he says. Marine Pacific sent him my records last week. He’s filling out some of the Taskforce forms, but not all. He had a lot of questions.”

She finished the laundry and sat on the end of the bed. “When she twitches like this, it makes me think I’ve started labor.”

Mitch bent down before her and placed his hand on her prominent stomach, his eyes bright and large. “She’s really moving around tonight.”

“She’s happy,” Kaye said. “She knows you’re here. Sing her the song.”

Mitch looked up at her, then sang his version of the ABCs tune. “*Ah, beh, say, duh, eh, fuh, gah, aitch, ihh, juh, kuh, la muh-nuh, oh puh . . .*”

Kaye laughed.

“It’s very serious,” Mitch said.

“She loves it.”

“My father used to sing it to me. Phonetic alphabet. Get her ready for the English language. I started reading when I was four, you know.”

“She’s kicking time,” Kaye said in delight.

“She is not.”

“I swear it, feel!”

She actually liked the small trailer with its battered light oak plywood cabinets and old furniture. She had hung her mother’s prints in the living room. They had enough food and it was warm enough at night, too hot in the daytime, so Kaye went to work with Sue in the Administration Building and Mitch walked around the hills with his cell phone in his pocket, sometimes with Jack, or spoke with the other fathers-to-be in the clinic lounge. The men liked to keep to themselves here, and the women were content with that. Kaye missed Mitch in the hours he was away, but there was a lot to think about and prepare for. At night, he was always with her, and she had never been happier.

She *knew* the baby was healthy. She could feel it. As Mitch finished the song, she touched the mask around his eyes. He did not flinch when she did

this, though he used to, the first week. Their masks were both quite thick now and flaky around the edges.

“You know what I want to do,” Kaye said.

“What?”

“I want to crawl off into a dark hole somewhere when it’s time.”

“Like a cat?”

“Exactly.”

“I can see doing that,” Mitch said agreeably. “No modern medicine, dirt floor, savage simplicity.”

“Leather thong in my teeth,” Kaye added. “That’s the way Sue’s mother gave birth. Before they had the clinic.”

“My father delivered me,” Mitch said. “Our truck was stuck in a ditch. Mom climbed into the back. She never let him forget that.”

“She never told me that!” Kaye said with a laugh.

“She calls it ‘a difficult delivery,’ ” Mitch said.

“We’re not that far from the old times,” Kaye said. She touched her stomach. “I think you sang her to sleep.”

The next morning, when Kaye awoke, her tongue felt thick. She pushed out of bed, waking Mitch, and walked into the kitchen to get a drink of the flat-tasting reservation tap water. She could hardly talk. “Mitth,” she said.

“Wha?” he asked.

“Awh we gehhing somhinh?”

“Wha?”

She sat beside him and poked out her tongue. “Ih’s aw custy,” she said.

“My, hoo,” he said.

“Ih’s li owah faces,” she said.

Only one of the four fathers could talk that afternoon in the clinic side room. Jack stood by the portable whiteboard and ticked off the days for each of their wives, then sat and tried to talk sports with the others, but the meeting broke up early. The clinic’s head physician—there were four doctors working at the clinic, besides the pediatrician—examined them all but had no diagnosis. There did not seem to be any infection.

The other mothers-to-be had it, too.

Kaye and Sue did their shopping together at the Little Silver Market down the road from the resort’s Biscuit House coffee shop. Others in the market stared at them but said nothing. There was a lot of grumbling among

the casino workers, but only the old Cayuse woman, Becky, spoke her mind in the trustee meetings.

Kaye and Sue agreed that Sue was going to deliver first. "I ca't way," Sue said. "Neither cah Jack."

## 86

### Kumash County, Eastern Washington

**M**itch was there again. It began vague, and then clicked into a wicked reality. All his memories of being Mitch were tidily packed away in that fashion peculiar to dreams. The last thing he did as Mitch was feel his face, pull at the thick mask, the mask that sat on new and puffy skin.

Then he was on the ice and rock again. His woman was screaming and crying, almost doubled up with pain. He ran ahead, then ran back and helped her to her feet, all the time ululating, his throat sore, his arms and legs bruised from the beating, the taunting, back on the lake, in the village, and he *hated* them, all laughing and hooting, as they swung their sticks and sounded so ugly.

The young hunter who had pushed a stick into his woman's belly was dead. He had beaten that one to the ground and made him writhe and moan, then stamped on his neck, but too late, there was blood and his woman was hurt. The shamans came into the crowd and tried to push the others away with guttural words, choppy dark singing words, not at all like the watery light bird noises he could make now.

He took his woman into their hut and tried to comfort her, but she hurt too much.

The snow came down. He heard the shouting, the mourning cries, and he knew their time was up. The family of the dead hunter would be after them. They would have gone to ask the permission of the old Bull-man. The old Bull-man had never liked masked parents or their Flat Face children.

It was the end, the old Bull-man had often murmured; the Flat Faces taking all the game, driving the people farther into the mountains each year,



and now their own women were betraying them and making more Flat Face children.

He carried his woman out of the hut, crossed the log bridge to the shore, listening to the cries for vengeance. He heard the Bull-man leading the charge. The chase began.

He had once used the cave to store food. Game was difficult to find and the cave was cold, and he had kept rabbit and marmot, acorns and wild grass and mice there for his woman when he had been on hunting duty. Otherwise she might not have gotten enough to eat from the village rations. The other women with their hungry children had refused to care for her as she grew round-bellied.

He had smuggled the small game from the cave into the village at night and fed her. He loved his woman so much it made him want to yell, or roll on the ground and moan, and he could not believe she was badly hurt, despite the blood that soaked her furs.

He carried his woman again, and she looked up at him, pleading in her high and singing voice, like a river flowing rather than rolling rocks, this new voice he had, too. They both sounded like children now, not adults.

He had once hidden near a Flat Face hunting camp and watched them sing and dance around a huge bonfire in the night. Their voices had been high and watery, like children. Maybe he and his woman were becoming Flat Faces and would go and live with them when the child was born.

He carried her through the soft and powdery snow, his feet numb like logs. She was quiet for a time, asleep. When she awoke, she cried and tried to curl up in his arms. In the twilight, as the golden glow filled the snow-misted high rocky places, he looked down on her and saw that the carefully shaved furry parts on her temples and cheeks, where the mask did not cover, and all the rest of her hair, looked dull and matted, lifeless. She smelled like an animal about to die.

Up over rocky terraces slippery with new snow. Along a snow-covered ridge, and then down, sliding, tumbling, the woman still in his arms. He got to his feet again at the bottom, turned to orient himself to the flat walls of the mountain, and suddenly wondered why this seemed so familiar, like something he had practiced over and over again with the hunter-trainers in the mountain goat seasons.

Those had been good times. He thought of those times as he carried his woman the final distance.

He had used the rabbit atlatl, the smaller throwing-stick, since child-

hood, but had never been allowed to carry the elk and bison atlatl until the itinerant hunter-trainers had come to the village in the year his balls had ached and he had spewed seed in his sleep.

Then he had gone with his father, who was with the dream people now, and met the hunter-trainers. They were lone and ugly men, unkempt, scarred, with thick locks of hair. They had no village, no laws of grooming, but went from place to place and organized the people when the mountain goats or the deer or the elk or the bison were ready to share their flesh. Some grumbled that they went to the Flat Face villages and trained them to hunt in one season, and indeed, some of the hunter-trainers might have been Flat Faces who covered their features with matted beard and hair. Who would question them? Not even the Bull-man. When they came, everyone ate well, and the women scraped the skins and laughed and ate irritating herbs and drank water all day, and all pissed together in leather buckets and chewed and soaked the skins. It was forbidden to hunt the big animals without the hunter-trainers.

He came to the mouth of the cave. His woman whined softly, rhythmically, as he carried and rolled and pushed her inside. He looked back. The snow was covering the drops of blood they left behind.

He knew then that they were finished. He hunkered down, his thick shoulders barely fitting, and rolled her gently onto a skin he used to cover the meat while it froze in the cave. He slid and pushed and then pulled her back into the cave, and went out to get moss and sticks from an overhang where he knew they would be dry. He hoped she would not die before he came back.

*Oh, God, let me wake up, I do not want to see.*

He found enough sticks for a small fire and carried them back to the cave, where he lined them up and then spun the stick, first making sure the woman could not see. Making fire was man's stuff. She was still asleep. When he was too weak to twirl the stick anymore, and still there was no curl of smoke, he took out a flint and chipped it. For a long time, until his fingers were bruised and numb, he struck the flints into the moss, blew on the moss, and suddenly, the Sun Bird opened its eye and spread little orange wings. He added sticks.

His woman moaned again. She curled up on her back and told him in her watery squeaky voice to go away. This was woman's stuff. He ignored her, as was sometimes allowed, and helped her bring the baby.

It was very painful for her and she made loud noises, and he wondered how she had so much life left in her, with so much blood gone, but the baby came out quickly.

*No. Please, let me wake up.*

He held the baby, and showed it to the woman, but her eyes were flat and her hair was stiff and dry. The baby did not cry or move, no matter how he kneaded it.

He put the baby down and slammed his fist on the rock walls. He screamed hoarsely and curled up beside his woman, who was quiet now, and tried to keep her warm as smoke filled the top of the cave and the embers began to gray and the Sun Bird folded its wings and slept.

The baby would have been his daughter, supreme gift from the Dream Mother. The baby did not look so very different from other babies in the village, though its nose was small and its chin stuck out. He supposed it would have grown up to be a Flat Face. He tried to stuff dry grass into the hole in the back of the baby's head. He thought maybe the stick had punched the baby there. He took his neck skin, the finest and softest, and wrapped the baby in that and then pushed it to the back of the cave.

He remembered the dumb man's groans as he had stamped on his neck, but it did not help much.

Everything was gone. Caves had been proper places for burial since the times of story, before they had moved to wooden villages and lived like the Flat Faces, though everyone said the People had invented wooden villages. This was an old way to die and be buried, in the back of a cave, so it was okay. The dream people would find the baby and take it home, where it would have been missing for only a little while, so maybe it would be born quickly again.

His woman was growing as cold as the rock. He arranged her arms and legs, her tousled furs and skins, pushed back the loose mask still stuck to her brows, peered into her dull and blind eyes. No energy to mourn.

After a while he felt warm enough not to need the skins, so he pushed them off. Maybe she was warm, too. He pushed the skins off his woman so she would be almost naked, easier for the dream people to recognize.

He hoped the dream people of her family would make an alliance with the dream people of his family. He would like to be with her in the dream place, too. Maybe he and his woman would find the baby again. He believed the dream people could do so many good things for you.

Maybe this, maybe that, maybe so many things, happier things. He grew warmer.

For a little while, he didn't hate anyone. He stared at the darkness where his woman's face was and whispered flint words, words against dark,

as if he could strike up another Sun Bird. It was so good not to move. So warm.

Then his father strolled into the cave and called his true name.

Mitch stood in his shorts in front of the trailer and stared up at the moon, the stars over Kumash. He blew his nose quietly. The early morning was cool and still. The sweat on his face and skin dried slowly and made him shiver. He was covered with goose bumps. A few quail rustled in the bushes alongside the trailer.

Kaye pushed open the screen door with a squeak and a hiss of the cylinder and walked out to stand beside him in her nightgown.

“You’ll get cold,” he said, and put his arm around her. The swelling on his tongue had gone down in the last few days. There was a peculiar ridge on the left side of his tongue now, but talking was easier.

“You soaked the bed with sweat,” she said. She was so round, so different from the small, slender Kaye he still pictured in his head. Her heat and her smell filled the air like vapor from a rich soup. “Dream?” she asked.

“The worst,” he said. “I think it was the last one.”

“They’re all the same?”

“They’re all different,” Mitch said.

“Jack’ll want to hear the gory details,” Kaye said.

“And you don’t?”

“Uh uh,” Kaye said. “She’s restless, Mitch. Talk to her.”

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### Kumash County, Eastern Washington

MAY 18

**K**aye’s contractions were coming regularly. Mitch called to make sure the clinic was ready and Dr. Chambers, the pediatrician, was on his way from his brick house on the north end of the reservation. As Kaye put the last toiletry items in the dopp bag and found a few pieces of clothing she thought might be nice to wear after, Mitch called Dr. Galbreath again, but the answering service picked up.

“She must be on her way,” Mitch said as he folded the phone. If the

deputies would not let Galbreath through the checkpoint off the main road—a real possibility that infuriated Mitch—then Jack had arranged for two men to meet her five miles south and smuggle her in on a wash road through the low hills.

Mitch pulled out a box and dug for the small digital camera he had once used to record site details. He made sure the battery was charged.

Kaye stood in the living room holding her stomach and breathing in small huffs. She smiled at him as he joined her.

“I am so scared,” she said.

“Why?”

“God, you ask why?”

“It’s going to be fine,” Mitch said, but he was pale as a sheet.

“That’s why your hands are like ice,” Kaye said. “I’m early. Maybe it’s a false alarm.” Then she made a funny grunt and felt between her legs. “I think my water just broke. I’ll get some towels.”

“Never mind the damned towels!” Mitch shouted. He helped her to the Toyota. She pulled the seat belt low around her stomach. *Nothing like the dreams*, he thought. The thought became a kind of prayer, and he repeated it over and over.

“Nobody’s heard from Augustine,” Kaye said as Mitch pulled onto the paved road and began the two-mile drive to the clinic.

“Why would we?”

“Maybe he’ll try to stop us,” she said.

Mitch gave her a funny look. “That’s as crazy as my dreams.”

“He’s the bogeyman, Mitch. He scares me.”

“I don’t like him either, but he’s no monster.”

“He thinks we’re diseased,” she said, and there were tears on her cheeks. She winced.

“Another?” Mitch asked.

She nodded. “It’s okay,” she said. “Every twenty minutes.” They met Jack’s truck coming from the East Ridge Road and stopped long enough to confer through the windows. Sue was with Jack. Jack followed them.

“I want to have Sue help you coach me,” Kaye said. “I want her to see us. If I’m okay, it will be so much easier for her.”

“Fine with me,” Mitch said. “I’m no expert.”

Kaye smiled and winced again.

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Room number one in the Kumash Wellness Clinic was quickly being converted into a labor and delivery room. A hospital bed had been rolled in, and a bright round surgical lamp on a tall steel pole.

The nurse midwife, a plump, high-cheeked, middle-aged woman named Mary Hand, arranged the medical tray and helped Kaye change into a hospital gown. The anesthesiologist, Dr. Pound, a young, wan-looking man with thick black hair and a pug nose, arrived half an hour after the room was prepared and conferred with Chambers while Mitch crushed ice in a plastic bag in the sink. Mitch put ice chips into a cup.

“Is it now?” Kaye asked Chambers as he checked her.

“Not for a while,” he said. “You’re at four centimeters.”

Sue pulled up a chair. On her tall frame, her pregnancy seemed much less obvious. Jack called to her from the door, and she turned. He tossed her a small bag, stuffed his hands in his pockets, nodded to Mitch, and backed out. She placed the bag on the table next to the bed. “He’s embarrassed to come in,” she told Kaye. “He thinks this is woman stuff.”

Kaye lifted her head to peer at the bag. It was made out of leather and tied with a beaded string.

“What’s in the bag?”

“All sorts of things. Some of them smell good. Some don’t.”

“Jack’s a medicine man?”

“God, no,” Sue said. “You think I’d marry a medicine man? He knows some good ones, though.”

“Mitch and I thought we’d like this one to come naturally,” Kaye told Dr. Pound as he brought in a rolling table with his tanks and tubes and syringes.

“Of course,” the anesthesiologist said, and smiled. “I’m here just in case.”

Chambers told Kaye and Mitch there was a woman living about five miles away who was going into labor, not a SHEVA birth. “She insists on a home delivery. They have a hot tub and everything. I may have to go there for a while this evening. You said Dr. Galbreath would be here.”

“She should be on her way,” Mitch said.

“Well, let’s hope it works out. The baby’s head down. In a few minutes we’ll attach a fetal health monitor. All the comforts of a big hospital, Ms. Lang.”

Chambers took Mitch aside. He glanced at Mitch’s face, his eyes tracking the outline of the skin mask.

“Fetching, isn’t it?” Mitch said nervously.

“I’ve delivered four SHEVA second-stage babies,” Chambers said. “I’m sure you know the risk, but I have to spell out some complications that might happen, so we can all be prepared.”

Mitch nodded, gripped his trembling hands.

“None of them were born alive. Two looked perfect, no visible defects, just . . . dead.” Chambers stared at Mitch with a critical expression. “I don’t like these odds.”

Mitch flushed. “We’re different,” he said.

“There can also be a shock response in the mothers if the delivery gets complicated. Something to do with hormone signals from a SHEVA fetus in distress. Nobody understands why, but the infant tissues are so different. Some women do not react well. If that happens, I’m going to do a C-section and get the baby out as quickly as possible.” He put a hand on Mitch’s shoulder. Chambers’s pager beeped. “Just as a precaution, I’m going to take extra care with spilled fluids and tissues. Everybody will wear viral filter masks, even you. We’re in new territory here, Mr. Rafelson. Excuse me.”

Sue was feeding Kaye ice and they were talking, heads together. It seemed to be a private moment, so Mitch backed out, and besides, he wanted to sort through some difficult emotions.

He walked into the lobby. Jack sat in a chair by the old card table there, staring at a pile of *National Geographics*. The fluorescent lights made everything seem blue and cold.

“You look mad,” Jack said.

“They’ve almost got the death certificate signed,” Mitch said, his voice trembling.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Sue and I think maybe we’ll have the birth at home. No doctors.”

“He says it’s dangerous.”

“Maybe it is, but we did it before,” Jack said.

“When?” Mitch asked.

“Your dreams,” Jack said. “The mummies. Thousands of years ago.”

Mitch sat in the other chair and put his head on the table. “Not a happy time.”

“Tell me,” Jack said.

Mitch told him about the last dream. Jack listened intently.

“That was a bad one,” he said. “I won’t tell Sue about it.”

“Say something comforting,” Mitch suggested wryly.

“I’ve been trying to have dreams to help me figure out what to do,” Jack said. “I just dream about big hospitals and big doctors poking at Sue. The white man’s world gets in the way. So I’m no help.” Jack scratched his eyebrows. “Nobody is old enough to know what to do. My people have been on this land forever. But my grandfather tells me the spirits have nothing to say. They don’t remember either.”

Mitch pushed his hand through the magazines. One slid off and hit the floor with a smack. “That doesn’t make any sense, Jack.”

Kaye lay back and watched Chambers attach the fetal health monitors. The steady beep and pulse of the tape on the machine by the bed gave her confirmation, another level of reassurance.

Mitch came back with a Popsicle and unwrapped it for her. She had emptied her cup and took the sweet raspberry ice gratefully.

“No sign of Galbreath,” Mitch said.

“We’ll manage,” Kaye said. “Five centimeters and holding. All this for just one mother.”

“But what a mother,” Mitch said. He started working on her arms, pushing the tension out, and then moved to her shoulders.

“The mother of all mothers,” she muttered as another contraction hit. She bore down into it, held up the bare Popsicle stick. “Another, please,” she grunted.

Kaye had become acquainted with every inch of the ceiling. She got off the bed carefully and walked around the room, gripping the metal rolling stand that held the monitoring equipment, wires trailing from beneath her gown. Her hair felt stiff, her skin oily, and her eyes stung. Mitch looked up from the *National Geographic* he was reading as she duck-walked into the rest room. She washed her face and he was by the door. “I’m fine,” she said.

“If I don’t help you, I’ll go nuts,” Mitch said.

“Don’t want that,” Kaye said. She sat on the side of the bed and took several deep breaths. Chambers had told them he would be back in an hour. Mary Hand entered with her filter mask on, looking like a high-tech soldier prepared for a gas attack, and told Kaye to lie back. The midwife inspected her. She smiled beatifically and Kaye thought, *Good, I’m ready*, but she shook her head. “Still at five centimeters. It’s okay. Your first baby.” Her voice was muffled beneath the mask.

Kaye stared up at the ceiling again and bore into a contraction. Mitch



encouraged her to take puffing breaths until the wave passed. Her back ached abominably. For a bitter moment at the end of the contraction she felt trapped and angry, and wondered what it would be like if everything went wrong, if she died, if the baby was born alive but without a mother, if Augustine was right and both she and her child were a source of horrible disease. *Why no confirmation?* she wondered. *Why no science one way or the other on that?* She calmed herself with slow breaths and tried to rest.

When she opened her eyes again, Mitch was dozing in the chair beside the bed. The clock said it was midnight. *I will be in this room forever.*

She needed to go to the bathroom again. "Mitch," she said. He didn't wake up. She looked for Mary Hand or Sue, but he was the only one in the room. The monitor beeped and rolled its tape. "Mitch!"

He jerked and stood up and sleepily helped her into the bathroom. She had wanted to have a bowel movement before going to the clinic, but her body had not cooperated, and she worried about that. She felt a mix of anger and wonder at her present state. The body was taking charge, but she was not at all sure it knew what to do. *I am my body. Mind is the illusion. The flesh is confused.*

Mitch walked around the room, sipping a cup of bad coffee from the clinic lounge. The cold blue fluorescent lights were etched into his memory. He felt as if he had never seen bright sun. His eyebrows itched abominably. *Go into the cave. Hibernate and she'll give birth while we sleep. That's the way bears do it. Bears evolve while they're asleep. Better way.*

Sue came to be with Kaye while he took a break. He walked outside and stood beneath the clear, starry sky. Even out here, with so few people, there was a streetlight to blind him and cut back on the immensity of the universe.

*God, I've come so far, but nothing has changed. I'm married, I'm going to be a father, and I'm still unemployed, living on the—*

He blocked that line of thought, waved his hands, shook out the nervous jangles from the coffee. His thoughts drifted all over, from the first time he had had sex—and worried about the girl getting pregnant—to the conversations with the director of the Hayer Museum before he was fired, to Jack, trying to put all this into an Indian perspective.

Mitch had no perspective other than the scientific. All his life he had tried to be objective, tried to remove himself from the equation, to see clearly what his digging had revealed. He had traded bits of his life for what were probably inadequate insights into the lives of dead people. Jack be-

lieved in a circle of life where no one was ever truly isolated. Mitch could not believe that. But he hoped Jack was right.

The air smelled good. He wished he could take Kaye out here and let her smell the fresh air, but then a pickup truck drove by, and he smelled exhaust and burned oil.

Kaye dozed off between contractions but for only a few minutes. Two o'clock in the morning, and she was still at five centimeters. Chambers had come before her little nap, inspected her, peered at the monitor tape, smiled reassurance. "We can try some pitocin soon. That will speed things up. We call it Bardahl for babies," he said. But Kaye did not know what Bardahl was and did not understand.

Mary Hand took her arm, swabbed it down with alcohol, found a vein and introduced a needle, taped it off, attached a plastic tube, hung a bottle of saline on another stand. She arranged little vials of medicine on a blue sheet of disposable paper on the steel tray beside the bed.

Kaye normally hated shots and needle pricks, but this was nothing compared to the rest of her discomfort. Mitch seemed to grow more distant, though he was right by her side, massaging her neck, bringing more ice. She looked at him and saw not her husband, not her lover, but just a man, another of the figures coming in and out of her squeezed-down and compressed and endless life. She frowned, watching his back as he spoke with the nurse midwife. She tried to focus and find that emotional component necessary to fit him into the puzzle, but it had been lifted away. She was liberated of all social sensibilities.

Another contraction. "Oh, shit!" she cried.

Mary Hand checked her and stood with a concerned expression. "Did Dr. Chambers say when he would administer pitocin?"

Kaye shook her head, unable to respond. Mary Hand went off to find Chambers. Mitch stayed with her. Sue came in and sat on the chair. Kaye closed her eyes and found that the universe in that personal darkness was so small she almost panicked. She wanted this to be over. No menstrual cramps had ever had the authority of her contractions. In the middle of the spasm, she thought her back might break.

She knew that flesh was all and spirit was nothing.

"Everyone is born this way," Sue told Mitch. "It's good you're here. Jack says he'll be with me when I deliver, but it's not traditional."

"Woman's stuff," Mitch said. Sue's mask fascinated him. She stood,

stretched. Tall, stomach prominent but balanced, she seemed the essence of strong womanhood. Assured, calm, philosophical.

Kaye moaned. Mitch leaned over and caressed her cheek. She was lying on her side, trying to find some position that was comfortable. "God, give me drugs," she said with a weak smile.

"There's that sense of humor," Mitch said.

"I mean it. No, I don't. I don't know what I mean. Where is Felicity?"

"Jack came by a few minutes ago. He sent some trucks out, but he hasn't heard from them."

"I need Felicity. I don't know what Chambers is thinking. Give me something to make this happen."

Mitch felt miserable, helpless. They were in the hands of the Western medical establishment—such as it was in the Five Tribes Confederation. Frankly, he was not at all confident about Chambers.

"Oh, goddamn *SHIT*," Kaye yelled, and rolled on her back, her face so contorted Mitch could not recognize her.

Seven o'clock. Kaye looked at the clock on the wall through slitted eyes. More than twelve hours. She did not remember when they had arrived. Had it been in the afternoon? Yes. More than twelve hours. Still no record. Her mother had told her, when she was a little girl, that she had been in labor for over thirty hours with Kaye. *Here's to you, Mother. God, I wish you could be here.*

Sue was not in the room. There was Mitch, working on her arm, easing the tension, moving to the other arm. She felt a distant affection for Mitch, but doubted seriously she would ever have sex with him again. Why even think about it. Kaye felt she was a giant balloon trying to burst. She had to go pee and the thought equaled the deed and she did not care. Mary Hand came and removed the soaked paper pad and replaced it.

Dr. Chambers came in and told Mary to start the pitocin. Mary inserted the vial into the appropriate receptacle and adjusted the machine that controlled the drip. Kaye took an extreme interest in the procedure. Bardahl for babies. She could vaguely remember the list of peptides and glycoproteins Judith had found in the large protein complex. Bad news for women. Maybe so.

Maybe so.

The only thing in the universe was pain. Kaye sat on top of the pain like a small, stunned fly on a huge rubber ball. She vaguely heard the anestheti-

ologist moving around her. She heard Mitch and the doctor talking. Mary Hand was there. “You’re almost ready,” she said. “Eight centimeters.”

Chambers said something completely irrelevant, something about storing cord blood for a transfusion later if the baby needed it, or to pass on to science: blood from the umbilical cord, rich with stem cells.

“Do it,” Kaye said.

“What?” Mitch asked. Chambers asked her if she wanted to have an epidural.

“God, yes,” Kaye said, without the least guilt at having failed to stick it through.

They rolled her on her side. “Hold still,” said the anesthesiologist, what was his name. She couldn’t remember. Sue’s face appeared before her.

“Jack says they’re bringing her in.”

“Who?” Kaye asked.

“Dr. Galbreath.”

“Good.” Kaye thought she should care.

“They wouldn’t let her through the quarantine.”

“Bastards,” Mitch said.

“Bastards,” Kaye mouthed.

She felt a prick in her back. Another contraction. She started to tremble. The anesthesiologist swore and apologized. “Missed. You’ll have to hold still.” Her back hurt. Nothing new about that. Mitch applied a cold cloth to her forehead. Modern medicine. She had failed modern medicine.

“Oh, shit.”

Somewhere way outside her sphere of consciousness, she heard voices like distant angels.

“Felicity is here,” Mitch said, and his face, hovering right over her, shone with relief. But Dr. Galbreath and Dr. Chambers were arguing, and the anesthesiologist was involved, too.

“No epidural,” Galbreath said. “Get her off the pitocin, now. How long? How much?”

While Chambers looked at the machine and read off numbers, Mary Hand did something to the tubes. The machine wheeped. Kaye looked at the clock. Seven-thirty. What did that mean? Time. Oh, that.

“She’s going to have to go it on her own,” Galbreath said. Chambers responded with irritation, sharp quiet words behind his awful filter mask, but Kaye did not listen to him.

They were denying her drugs.

Felicity leaned over Kaye and entered her visual cone. She was not

wearing a filter mask. The big surgical light was turned on and Felicity was not wearing a filter mask, bless her.

“Thank you,” Kaye said.

“You may not thank me for long, dear,” Felicity said. “If you want this baby, we can’t do anything more with drugs. No pitocin, no anesthetic. I’m glad I caught you. It kills them, Kaye. Understand?”

Kaye grimaced.

“One damned insult after another, right, dear? So delicate, these new ones.”

Chambers complained about interference, but she heard Jack and Mitch, voices fading, escorting him from the room. Mary Hand looked to Felicity for guidance.

“The CDC is good for something, dear,” Felicity told her. “They sent out a special bulletin about live births. No drugs, particularly no anesthetics. Not even aspirin. These babies can’t stand it.” She worked busily for a moment between Kaye’s legs. “Episiotomy,” she said to Mary. “No local. Hold on, honey. This will hurt, like losing your virginity all over again. You’re at nine. Mitch, you know the drill.”

Push to ten. Let breath out. Bear down, puff, push to ten. Kaye’s body like some horse knowing how to run but appreciating a little guidance. Mitch rubbing vigorously, standing close to her. She clenched his hand and then his arm until he winced. She bore down, *push to ten. Let breath out.*

“All right. She’s crowning. There she is. God, it’s taken so long, such a long, strange road, huh? Mary, there’s the cord. That’s the problem. A little dark. One more, Kaye. Do it, honey. Do it now.”

She did it and something released, a massive rush, pumpkin seed between clenched fingers, a burst of pain, relief, more pain, aching. Her legs shivered. A charley horse hit her calf but she hardly noticed. She felt a sudden shove of happiness, of welcome emptiness, then a knifelike stab in her tailbone.

“She’s here, Kaye. She’s alive.”

Kaye heard a thin wail, a sucking sound, and something like a musical whistle.

Felicity held up the baby, pink and bloody, cord dangling down between Kaye’s legs. Kaye looked at her daughter and felt nothing for a moment, and then something large and feathery, enormous, brushed her soul.

Mary Hand laid the baby on a blue blanket on her abdomen and cleaned her with quick swipes.

• •  
Mitch looked down on the blood, the baby.

Chambers returned, still wearing his mask, but Mitch ignored him. He focused on Kaye and on the baby, so small, wriggling. Tears of exhaustion and relief flowed down Mitch's cheeks. His throat hurt it was so tight and full. His heart pounded. He hugged Kaye and she hugged him back with remarkable strength.

"Don't put anything in her eyes," Felicity instructed Mary. "It's a whole new ball game."

Mary nodded happily behind the filter mask.

"Afterbirth," Felicity said. Mary held up a steel tray.

Kaye had never been sure she would make a good mother. Now, none of that mattered. She watched as they lifted the baby to the scales and thought, *I didn't get a good look at her face. It was all wrinkled.*

Felicity wielded a stinging swab of alcohol and a large surgical sewing needle between Kaye's legs. Kaye did not like this, but simply closed her eyes.

Mary Hand performed the various small tests, finished cleaning the baby, while Chambers drew cord blood. Felicity showed Mitch where to cut the cord, then carried the baby back to Kaye. Mary helped her pull her gown up over her swollen breasts and lifted the baby to her.

"It's okay to breastfeed?" Kaye asked, her voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

"If it isn't, the grand experiment might as well be over," Felicity said with a smile. "Go ahead, honey. You have what she needs."

She showed Kaye how to stroke the baby's cheek. The small pink lips opened and fastened onto the large brown nipple. Mitch's mouth hung loose. Kaye wanted to laugh at his expression, but she focused again on that tiny face, hungry to see what her daughter looked like. Sue stood beside her and made small, happy sounds to the mother and the baby.

Mitch looked down on the girl and watched her suckle at Kaye's breast. He felt an almost blissful calm. It was done; it was just beginning. Either way, this was really something he could fasten onto, a center, a point of reference.

The baby's face was red and wrinkled but the hair was abundant, fine and silky, pale reddish brown. Her eyes were shut, lids pressed together in concern and concentration.

“Nine pounds,” Mary said. “Eight on the Apgar. Good, strong Apgar.” She removed her mask.

“Oh, God, she’s here,” Sue said, hand going to her mouth, as if suddenly shocked into awareness. Mitch grinned like a fool at Sue, then sat beside Kaye and the baby and put his chin on Kaye’s arm, his face just inches from his daughter’s.

Felicity finished cleaning up. Chambers told Mary to put all the linens and disposables in a special hazards bag for burning. Mary quietly complied.

“She’s a miracle,” Mitch said.

The girl tried to turn her head at the sound of his voice, opened her eyes, tried to locate him.

“Your daddy,” Kaye said. Colostrum dribbled thick and yellow from her nipple. The girl dropped her head and fastened on again with a little push from Kaye’s finger. “She lifted her head,” Kaye said in wonder.

“She’s beautiful,” Sue said. “Congratulations.”

Felicity spoke to Sue for a moment while Kaye and Mitch and the baby filled the spot of solar brightness beneath the surgical lamp.

“She’s here,” Kaye said.

“She’s here,” Mitch affirmed.

“We’ve done it.”

“You sure did,” Mitch said.

Again, their daughter lifted her head, opened her eyes, this time wide.

“Look at that,” Chambers said. Felicity bent over, nearly knocking heads with Sue.

Mitch met his daughter’s stare with fascination. She had tawny brown pupils flecked with gold. He leaned forward. “Here I am,” he said to the baby.

Kaye reached out to show her the nipple again, but the baby resisted, head bobbing with surprising strength.

“Hello, Mitch,” his daughter said, her voice like the mewing of a kitten, not much more than a squeak, but very clear.

The hair rose on the back of his neck. Felicity Galbreath gasped and backed away as if stung.

Mitch pushed against the edge of the bed and stood. He shivered. The infant resting on Kaye’s breast seemed for a moment more than he could stand; not just unexpected, but *wrong*. He wanted to run. Still, he could not take his eyes off the little girl. Heat rose into his chest. The shape of her

tiny face came into a kind of focus. She seemed to be trying to speak again, her lips pushing out and drawing to one side, small and pink. A milky yellow bubble appeared in the corner of her mouth. Small dapples of fawn-color, lion-color, flushed across her cheeks and brows.

Her head rolled and she stared up at Kaye's face. A puzzled frown wrinkled the space between her eyes.

Mitch Rafelson reached with his big, raw-boned hand and callused fingers to touch the little girl. He bent over to kiss Kaye, then the baby, and stroked her temple with great gentleness. With a touch of his thumb, he turned her rose-colored lips back to the rich nipple. She gave a breathy sigh, a small whistling sound, and with a squirm, fastened onto her mother's teat and suckled vigorously. Her tiny hands flexed perfect golden-brown fingers.

Mitch called Sam and Abby in Oregon and told them the news. He was barely able to focus on their words; his father's trembling voice, his mother's piercing squeal of joy and relief. They spoke for a while and then he told them he could barely stand. "We need to sleep," he said.

Kaye and the baby were already asleep. Chambers told him they would stay there for two more days. Mitch asked for a bunk to be brought into the room, but Felicity and Sue persuaded him that everything would be all right.

"Go on home and rest," Sue said. "She'll be fine."

Mitch shifted uncertainly on his feet. "They'll call if there's any trouble?"

"We'll call," Mary Hand said as she walked past with a bag of linens.

"I'll have two friends stay outside the clinic for the day," Jack said.

"I need a place to stay tonight," Felicity said. "I want to check them over tomorrow."

"Stay in our house," Jack suggested.

Mitch's legs wobbled as he walked with them from the clinic to the Toyota.

In the trailer, he slept through the afternoon and evening. When he awoke, it was twilight. He knelt on the couch and stared out the wide picture window at the scrub and gravel and distant hills.

Then he showered, shaved, dressed. Looked for more things Kaye and the baby might need that had been forgotten.

Looked at himself in the bathroom mirror.



Wept.

Walked back to the clinic alone, in the lovely gloaming. The air was clean and clear and carried smells of sage and grass and dust and water from a low creek. He passed a house where four men were removing an engine from an old Ford, using an oak tree and a chain hoist. The men nodded at him, looked away quickly. They knew who he was; they knew what had happened. They were not comfortable with either him or the event. He picked up his pace. His eyebrows itched, and now his cheeks. The mask was very loose. Soon it would come off. He could feel his tongue against the sides of his mouth; it felt different. His head felt different.

More than anything, he wanted to see Kaye again, and the baby, the girl, his daughter, to make sure it was all real.

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#### Arlington, Virginia

**T**he wedding party spread out over much of the half-acre backyard. The day was warm and misty, alternating patches of sun and light overcast. Mark Augustine stood in the reception line beside his bride for forty minutes, smiling, shaking hands, giving polite hugs. Senators and congressional representatives walked through the line, chatting politely. Men and women in unisex black-and-white livery carried trays of champagne and canapés over the golf-green manicured lawn. Augustine looked at his bride with a fixed smile; he knew what he felt inside, love and relief and accomplishment, all slightly chilled. The face he showed to the guests, to the few reporters who had picked winning tickets in the press pool lottery, was calm, warmly loving, dutiful.

Something had occupied his mind all day, however, even through the wedding ceremony. He had flubbed his simple lines of declaration, provoking mild laughter in the front rows in the chapel.

Babies were being born alive. In the quarantine hospitals, in specially appointed Taskforce community clinics, and even in private homes, new babies were arriving.

The possibility that he was wrong had occurred to him lightly, in passing, a kind of itch, until he heard that Kaye Lang's baby had been born alive, delivered by a doctor working from emergency bulletins issued by

the Centers for Disease Control, the very same epidemiological study team that had been put in place at his orders. Special procedures, special precautions; the babies were different.

So far, twenty-four SHEVA infants had been dropped off at community clinics by single mothers or parents the Taskforce had not been tracking.

Anonymous, alive foundlings, now under his care.

The reception line came to an end. Feet aching in the tight black dress shoes, he hugged his bride, whispered in her ear, and motioned for Florence Leighton to join him in the main house.

“What did Allergy and Infectious Diseases send us?” he asked. Mrs. Leighton opened the briefcase she had carried all day and handed him a fresh fax page.

“I’ve been waiting for an opportunity,” she said. “The president called earlier, sends his best wishes, and wants you at the White House sometime this evening, earliest convenience.”

Augustine read the fax. “Kaye Lang had her baby,” he said, looking up at her, eyebrows peaking.

“So I heard,” Mrs. Leighton said. Her expression was professional, attentive, and revealed nothing.

“We should send her congratulations,” Augustine said.

“I’ll do that,” Mrs. Leighton said.

Augustine shook his head. “No, you won’t,” he said. “We still have a course to follow.”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

“Tell the president I’ll be there by eight.”

“What about Alyson?” Mrs. Leighton asked.

“She married me, didn’t she?” Augustine answered. “She knows what she’s getting into.”

**Kumash County, Eastern Washington**

**M**itch supported Kaye by one arm as she walked and waddled from one side of the room to the other.

“What are you going to call her?” Felicity asked. She sat in the room’s single blue vinyl chair, rocking the sleeping baby gently in her arms.

Kaye looked up at Mitch expectantly. Something about naming her child made her feel vulnerable and pretentious, as if this was a right even a mother did not deserve.

“You did most of the work,” Mitch said with a smile. “You have the privilege.”

“We need to agree,” Kaye said.

“Try me.”

“She’s a new kind of star,” Kaye said. Her legs were still wobbly. Her stomach felt slack and sore, and sometimes the pain between her legs made her feel a little ill, but she was improving rapidly. She sat on the side of the bed. “My grandmother was named Stella. That means star. I was thinking we’d name her Stella Nova.”

Mitch took the baby from Felicity. “Stella Nova,” he repeated.

“Sounds bold,” Felicity said. “I like it.”

“That’s her name,” Mitch said, lifting the baby close to his face. He smelled the top of her head, the moist rich heat of her hair. She smelled of her mother and much more. He could feel cascades of emotions like tumbling blocks falling into place inside, laying a firm foundation.

“She commands your attention even when she’s asleep,” Kaye said. Half-consciously, she reached up to her face and removed a dangling piece of mask, revealing the new skin beneath, pink and tender, with a radiance of tiny melanophores.

Felicity walked over and bent to examine Kaye more closely. “I don’t believe I’m seeing this,” she said. “I’m the one who should feel privileged.”

Stella opened her eyes and shuddered as if in alarm. She gave her father a long and puzzled look, then began to cry. Her cry was loud and alarming. Mitch quickly handed Stella to Kaye, who pulled aside her robe. The baby settled in and stopped crying. Kaye again savored the wonder of her milk letting down, the sensual loveliness of the child at her nipple. The child’s eyes surveyed her mother, and then she turned her head, tugging the breast

with her, and peered around the room at Felicity and Mitch. The tawny gold-flecked eyes made Mitch's insides melt.

"So advanced," Felicity said. "She's a charmer."

"What did you expect?" Kaye asked softly, her voice taking on a faint warble. With a small shock, Mitch recognized some of the baby's tone in her mother's.

Stella Nova warbled lightly as she suckled, like a small sweet bird. She sang as she nursed, showing her contentment, her delight.

Mitch's tongue moved behind his lips in restless sympathy. "How does she do that?" he asked.

"I don't know," Kaye said. And it was evident that for the moment she did not care.

"She's like a baby of six months, in some ways," Felicity said to Mitch as he carried the bags in from the Toyota to the trailer. "She seems to be able to focus already, recognize faces . . . voices . . ." She *hmm*ed to herself, as if avoiding the one thing that really separated Stella from other newborns.

"She hasn't spoken again," Mitch said.

Felicity held the screen door open for him. "Maybe we were hearing things," she said.

Kaye laid the sleeping child in a small crib in the corner of the living room. She arranged a light blanket over Stella and straightened with a small groan. "We heard right," she said. She went to Mitch and lifted a patch of mask from his face.

"Ow," he said. "It's not ready."

"Look," Kaye said, suddenly scientific. "We have melanophores. She has melanophores. Most if not all of the new parents are going to have them. And our tongues . . . Connected to something new in our heads." She tapped her temple. "We're equipped to deal with her, almost as equals."

Felicity appeared baffled by this shift from new mother to objective, observing Kaye Lang. Kaye returned her look with a smile. "I didn't spend my pregnancy like a cow," she said. "Judging from these new tools, our daughter is going to be a very difficult child."

"How so?" Felicity asked.

"Because in some ways she's going to run rings around us," Kaye said.

"Maybe in all ways," Mitch added.

"You don't mean that, literally," Felicity said. "At least she wasn't born mobile. The skin color—the melanophores, as you call them—may be . . ." She waved her hand, unable to finish her thought.

“They’re not just color,” Mitch said. “I can *feel* mine.”

“So can I,” Kaye said. “They change. Imagine that poor girl.” She glanced at Mitch. He nodded, then explained to Felicity their encounter with the teenagers in West Virginia.

“If I were in the Taskforce, I’d be setting up psychiatric stations for parents whose new children have died,” Kaye said. “They might face a new kind of grieving.”

“All dressed up, and no one to talk to,” Mitch said.

Felicity took a deep breath and held her hand to her forehead. “I’ve been in pediatrics for twenty-two years,” she said. “Now I feel like I should give up and go hide in the woods.”

“Get the poor lady a glass of water,” Kaye said. “Or would you like wine? I need a glass of wine, Mitch. I haven’t had a drink in over a year.” She turned to Felicity. “Did the bulletin mention no alcohol?”

“No problems. Wine for me, too, please,” Felicity said.

Kaye put her face close to Mitch’s in the small kitchen. She stared at him intently, and her eyes lost their focus for a second. Her cheeks pulsed fawn and gold.

“Jesus,” Mitch said.

“Get that mask off,” Kaye said, “and we’ll *really* have something to show each other.”

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### Kumash County, Eastern Washington

JUNE

**L**et’s call it a Brave New Species party,” Wendell Packer said as he came in through the screen door and handed Kaye a bouquet of roses. Oliver Merton followed with a box of Godiva chocolates and a big smile and eagerly darted his eyes around the inside of the trailer.

“Where’s the little wonder?”

“Asleep,” Kaye said, accepting his hug. “Who else is here?” she called out, delighted.

“We smuggled in Wendell and Oliver and Maria,” Eileen Ripper said. “And, lo and behold . . .”

She swung out her arms to the dusty old van sitting on the gravel drive

under the lone oak tree. Christopher Dicken was climbing down from the front passenger side with some difficulty, his legs stiff. He took a pair of crutches from Maria Konig and turned to the trailer. His one good eye met Kaye's and for a moment she thought she was going to cry. But he lifted a crutch and wagged it at her and she smiled.

"It's bumpy out here," he called.

Kaye ran past Mitch to gingerly hug Christopher. Eileen and Mitch stood together as Kaye and Christopher talked.

"Old friends?" Eileen asked.

"Probably soul mates," Mitch said. He was glad to see Christopher, as well, but could not help feeling a little twinge of masculine concern.

The living room was too small to hold them all, so Wendell braced his arm against the cabinet in the hall and looked down on the rest. Maria and Oliver sat together on the couch under the picture window. Christopher sat in the blue vinyl chair, with Eileen perched on one arm. Mitch came in from the kitchen with bouquets of wine glasses in each fist and a bottle of champagne under each arm. Oliver helped set them down on the round table beside the couch, and carefully popped the corks.

"From the airport?" Mitch asked.

"Portland airport. Not as big a selection," Oliver said.

Kaye brought out Stella Nova in a pink bassinet and placed her on the small, scuffed coffee table. The baby was awake. Her eyes moved sleepily around the room and she blew a tiny bubble of spit. Her head wobbled a bit. Kaye reached down to adjust her pajamas.

Christopher stared at her as if she were a ghost. "Kaye . . ." he began, his voice breaking.

"No need," Kaye said, and touched his red-scarred hand.

"There *is* a need. I feel like I don't deserve to be here with you and Mitch, with her."

"Shush," Kaye said. "You were there at the beginning."

Christopher smiled. "Thank you," he said.

"How old is she?" Eileen whispered.

"Three weeks," Kaye said.

Maria reached out first and tucked her finger into Stella's hand. The baby's fingers closed tightly around it, and she tugged gently. Stella smiled.

"That reflex is still there," Oliver said.

"Oh, shut up," Eileen said. "She's still a baby, Oliver."

“Yes, but she looks so . . .”

“Beautiful!” Eileen insisted.

“Different,” Oliver persisted.

“I don’t see it much now,” Kaye said, knowing what he meant, but feeling a little defensive.

“We’re different, too,” Mitch observed.

“You both look fine, even stylish,” Maria said. “It’s going to be all the rage once the fashion magazines see you. Petite, beautiful Kaye . . .”

“Rugged, handsome Mitch,” Eileen said.

“With squid cheeks,” Kaye finished for them. They laughed, and Stella jerked in her bassinet. Then she warbled, and again the room fell silent. She honored each of the guests in turn with a second, lingering look, her head wobbling as she tracked them around the room, coming full circle to Kaye and then jerking again as she saw Mitch. She smiled at Mitch. Mitch felt his cheeks flush, like warm water running beneath his skin. The last of the skin masks had fallen away eight days before, and looking at his daughter was something of an experience.

Oliver said, “Oh, my God.”

Maria stared at all three of them, her jaw open.

Stella Nova sent waves of fawn and gold over her cheeks, and her pupils dilated slightly, the muscles around her eyes and eyelids drawing the skin down in delicate and complex curves.

“She’s going to teach *us* how to talk,” Kaye said proudly.

“She is absolutely stunning,” Eileen said. “I’ve never seen a more beautiful baby.”

Oliver asked permission to get closer and leaned in to examine Stella. “Her eyes really aren’t that large, they just look large,” he said.

“Oliver thinks the next humans should look like UFO aliens,” Eileen said.

“Aliens?” Oliver said indignantly. “I deny that statement, Eileen.”

“She’s totally human, totally now,” Kaye said. “Not separate, not distant, not different. She’s our child.”

“Of course,” Eileen said, blushing.

“Sorry,” Kaye said. “We’ve been out here for too long, with too much time to think.”

“I know about *that*,” Christopher said.

“She has a really spectacular nose,” Oliver said. “So delicate, yet broad at the base. And the shape—I do believe she’s going to be a spectacular beauty.”

Stella watched him soberly, her cheeks colorless, then looked away, bored. She tried to find Kaye. Kaye moved into the baby's field of view.

"Mama," Stella chirped.

"Oh, my God," Oliver said again.

Wendell and Oliver drove out to the Little Silver store and bought sandwiches. They all ate at a small picnic table behind the trailer in the cooling afternoon. Christopher had said very little, smiling stiffly as the others spoke. He ate his sandwich on a patch of straw-dry lawn, sitting in a rickety camp chair.

Mitch approached and settled down beside him on the grass. "Stella's asleep," he said. "Kaye's with her."

Christopher smiled and took a sip from a can of 7UP. "You want to know what brings me all this way out here," he said.

"All right," Mitch said. "That's a start."

"I'm surprised Kaye was so forgiving."

"We've gone through a lot of changes," Mitch said. "I must say it seemed you abandoned us."

"I've gone through a lot of changes, too," Christopher said. "I'm trying to piece things back together. I'm going down to Mexico day after tomorrow. Ensenada, south of San Diego. On my own."

"Not a vacation?"

"I'm going to look into the lateral transmission of old retroviruses."

"It's bullshit," Mitch said. "They made it up to keep the Taskforce going."

"Oh, something's real enough," Christopher said. "Fifty cases so far. Mark's not a monster."

"I'm not so sure of that." Mitch stared grimly at the desert and the trailer.

"But I am thinking it may not be caused by the virus they've found. I've been looking over old files on Mexico. I found similar cases from thirty years ago."

"I hope you set them straight soon. It's been nice here, but we could have done a lot better . . . under other circumstances."

Kaye came out of the trailer holding a portable baby monitor. Maria handed her a sandwich on a paper plate. She joined Mitch and Christopher.

"What do you think of our lawn?" she asked.

"He's looking into the Mexican illnesses," Mitch said.



“I thought you quit the Taskforce.”

“I did. The cases are real, Kaye, but I don’t think they’re directly related to SHEVA. We’ve been through so many twists and turns on this—herpes, Epstein-Barr. I guess you got the bulletin from the CDC on anesthesia.”

“Our doctor did,” Mitch said.

“We might have lost Stella without it,” Kaye said.

“More SHEVA babies are being born alive now. Augustine’s got to deal with that. I just want to level the field a little by finding out what’s going on in Mexico. All the cases are down there.”

“You think it’s from another source?” Kaye asked.

“I’m going to find out. I can walk a little now. I’m hiring an assistant.”

“How? You’re not rich.”

“I’ve got a grant from a rich eccentric in New York.”

Mitch’s eyes widened. “Not William Daney!”

“The same. Oliver and Brock are trying to put together a journalistic coup. They thought I could gather evidence. It’s a job, and hell, I believe in it. Seeing Stella . . . Stella Nova . . . really brings it home. I just didn’t have the faith.”

Wendell and Maria walked over from the oak tree and Wendell pulled a magazine out of a paper sack. “Though you might like to see this,” Maria said, handing it to Kaye.

She looked at the cover and laughed out loud. It was a copy of *WIRED*, and on the brilliant orange cover was printed the black silhouette of a curled fetus with a green question mark across the middle. The log line read “*Human 3.0: Not a Virus, but an Upgrade?*”

Oliver joined them. “I’ve seen that,” he said. “*WIRED* doesn’t have much clout in Washington these days. The news is almost all grim, Kaye.”

“We know,” Kaye said, brushing back a wisp of hair as the breeze picked up.

“But here’s some good. Brock says *National Geographic* and *Nature* have finished peer review on his piece on the Innsbruck Neanderthals. They’re going to publish jointly in six months. He’s going to call it a confirmed evolutionary event, a subspeciation, and he’s going to mention SHEVA, though not prominently. Did Christopher tell you about Daney?”

Kaye nodded.

“We’re going to make an end run,” Oliver said, his eyes fierce. “All Christopher has to do is track down this virus in Mexico and out-think seven national laboratories.”

“You can do it,” Mitch said to Christopher. “You were there first, even before Kaye.”

The visitors were packing up for their long trip through the northern badlands and out of the reservation. Mitch helped Christopher into the passenger seat and they shook hands. As Kaye held a sleepy Stella and hugged the others, Mitch saw Jack’s pickup rolling down the dirt road.

Sue was not with him. The truck’s brakes squealed as Jack stopped in the drive, just to one side of the van. Mitch walked over to talk as Jack opened the door. He did not get out.

“How’s Sue?”

“Still holding,” Jack said. “Chambers can’t use any drugs to get her going. Dr. Galbreath is watching things. We’re just waiting.”

“We’d like to see her,” Mitch said.

“She’s not happy. She snaps at me. Maybe tomorrow. Now I’m going to smuggle your friends back out on the old wash road.”

“We appreciate this, Jack,” Mitch said.

Jack blinked and turned down his lips, his way of shrugging. “There was a special meeting this afternoon,” he said. “That Cayuse woman is at us again. Some of the casino workers formed a little group. They’re mad. They say the quarantine is going to ruin us. They wouldn’t listen to me. They say I’m biased.”

“What can we do?”

“Sue calls them hotheads, but they’re hotheads with a real cause. I just wanted to let you know. We all got to be prepared.”

Mitch and Kaye waved and watched their friends drive off down the road. Night settled over the country. Kaye sat in the last of the warmth in the folding chair under the oak tree, nursing Stella until it was time for a diaper change.

Changing diapers never failed to bring Mitch down to earth. As he wiped his daughter clean, she sang sweetly, her voice like finches among windblown branches. Her cheeks and brow flushed almost red with her new comfort, and she gripped his finger tightly.

He carried Stella around, swaying gently from his hips, and followed Kaye as she packed dirty diapers into a plastic bag to take them to the laundry. Kaye looked over her shoulder as they walked to the shed where the machines were kept. “What did Jack say?” she asked.

Mitch told her.

“We’ll live out of our bags,” she said matter-of-factly. She had been expecting worse. “Let’s pack them again tonight.”

## 91

**Kumash County, Eastern Washington**

**M**itch awoke from a sound and dreamless sleep and sat up in bed, listening. “What?” he murmured.

Kaye lay beside him, motionless, snoring softly. He looked across the bed to Stella’s small shelf bolted against the wall, and the battery-powered clock that sat there, its hands glowing green in the dark. It was two-fifteen in the morning.

Without thinking, he pushed down to the end of the bed and stood, naked except for his boxers, rubbing his eyes. He could have sworn somebody had said something, but the house was quiet. Then his heart started to race and he felt alarm pump through his arms and legs. He looked over his shoulder at Kaye, thought about waking her, and decided against it.

Mitch knew he was going to check the house, make sure it was secure, prove to himself that nobody was walking around outside, preparing to lay an ambush. He knew this without thinking much about it, and he prepared by grabbing a piece of steel rebar he had stashed under the bed for just such an eventuality. He had never owned a gun, did not know how to use one, and wondered as he walked into the living room whether that was stupid.

He shivered in the cold. The weather was turning cloudy; he could not see any stars through the window over the couch. He stumbled on a diaper pail in the bathroom. Then, abruptly, he knew he had been summoned from inside the house.

He returned to the bedroom. Half in, half out of the shallow closet at the end of the bed, on Kaye’s side, the baby’s bassinet seemed somehow outlined in the dark.

His eyes were growing more accustomed to the dark, but he was not sensing the bassinet with his eyes. He sniffed; his nose was running. He sniffed again and leaned over the bassinet, then recoiled and sneezed loudly.

“What is it?” Kaye sat up in bed. “Mitch?”

“I don’t know,” Mitch said.

“Did you ask for me?”

“No.”

“Did Stella?”

“She’s quiet. I think she’s asleep.”

“Turn on the light.”

That seemed sensible. He switched on the overhead light. Stella looked up at him from the bassinet, tawny eyes wide, her hands forming little fists. Her lips were parted, giving her a babyish, pouting Marilyn Monroe aspect, but she was silent.

Kaye crawled to the end of the bed and looked down at their daughter.

Stella made a small coo. Her eyes tracked them intently, going in and out of focus and sometimes crossing, as was her way. Still, it was obvious she was seeing them, and that she was not unhappy.

“She’s lonely,” Kaye said. “I fed her an hour ago.”

“So what is she, psychic?” Mitch asked, stretching. “Calling us with her mind?” He sniffed again, and again he sneezed. The bedroom window was closed. “What is it in here?”

Kaye squatted before the bassinet and picked up Stella. She nuzzled her and then looked up at Mitch, her lips drawn back in an almost feral snarl. She sneezed, too.

Stella cooed again.

“I think she has colic,” Kaye said. “Smell her.”

Mitch took Stella from Kaye. The baby squirmed and looked up at him, brows wrinkled. Mitch could have sworn she became brighter, and that someone was calling his name, either in the room or outside. Now he was really spooked.

“Maybe she *is* out of *Star Trek*,” he said. He sniffed her again and his lips curled.

“Right,” Kaye said skeptically. “She isn’t psychic.” Kaye took the baby, who was waving her fists, quite happy with the commotion, and carried her into the kitchen.

“Humans aren’t supposed to have them, but a few years ago, scientists found that we do.”

“Have what?” Mitch asked.

“Active vomeronasal organs. At the base of the nasal cavity. They process certain molecules . . . vomerophrins. Like pheromones. My guess is, ours just got a whole lot better.” She hefted the baby on her hips. “Your lips drawing back—”

“You did it, too,” Mitch said defensively.

“That’s a vomeronasal response. Our family cat used to do that when

she smelled something really interesting—a dead mouse or my mother’s armpit.” Kaye lifted the baby, who squealed softly, and sniffed at her head, her neck, her tummy. She sniffed behind the baby’s ears again. “Sniff here,” she said.

Mitch sniffed, drew back, stifled a sneeze. He delicately felt behind Stella’s ears. She stiffened and started to be unhappy, giving little pre-crying gurks. “No,” she said quite distinctly. “No.”

Kaye loosed her bra and gave Stella suck before she became really upset.

Mitch withdrew his finger. The tip was slightly oily, as if he had touched behind the ear of a teenager, not a baby. But the oil was not precisely skin oil. It felt waxy and a little rough as he rubbed, and it smelled like musk.

“Pheromones,” he said. “Or what did you call them?”

“Vomeropherins. Baby-type come-hither. We have a lot to learn,” Kaye said sleepily as she carried Stella into the bedroom and lay down with her. “You woke up first,” Kaye murmured. “You always had a good nose. Good night.”

Mitch felt behind his own ears and sniffed his finger. Abruptly, he sneezed again, and stood at the end of the bed, wide awake, his nose and palate tingling.

It was no more than an hour after he managed to get back to sleep that he came awake again and jumped out of bed and instantly started slipping on his pants. It was still dark. He tapped Kaye’s foot with his hand.

“Trucks,” he said. He had just finished buttoning the front of his shirt when someone banged on the front door. Kaye pushed Stella to the middle of the bed and quickly put on slacks and a sweater.

Mitch opened the front door with his shirt cuffs still undone. Jack stood on the porch, his lips forming a hard, upside-down U, his hat pulled low, almost hiding his eyes. “Sue’s gone into labor,” he said. “I got to go back to the clinic.”

“We’ll be right down,” Mitch said. “Is Galbreath there?”

“She won’t be coming. You should get out of here now. The trustees voted last night while I was with Sue.”

“How—” Mitch began, and then saw the three trucks and seven men on the gravel and dirt of the front yard.

“They decided the babies are sick,” Jack said miserably. “They want them taken care of by the government.”

“They want their damned jobs back,” Mitch said.

“They won’t talk to me.” Jack touched his mask with a strong, thick finger. “I persuaded the trustees to let you go. I can’t go with you, but these men will take you up a dirt road to the highway.” Jack held out his hands helplessly. “Sue wanted Kaye to be with her. I wish you could be there. But I gotta go.”

“Thanks,” Mitch said.

Kaye came up behind him, carrying the baby in the car seat. “I’m ready,” she said. “I want to go see Sue.”

“No,” Jack said. “It’s that old Cayuse woman. We should have sent her to the coast.”

“It’s more than her,” Mitch said.

“Sue needs me!” Kaye cried.

“They won’t let you into that part of town,” Jack said miserably. “Too many people. They heard it on the news—dead Mexicans near San Diego. No way. It’s hard, like stone, what they think now. They’ll go after us next, probably.”

Kaye wiped her eyes in anger and frustration. “Tell her we love her,” she said. “Thanks for everything, Jack. Tell her.”

“I will. I gotta go.”

The seven men backed away as Jack walked to his truck and got in. He started the engine and spun out, throwing a plume of dust and gravel.

“The Toyota’s in better shape,” Mitch said. He hefted their two suitcases to the trunk under the watchful eyes of the seven men. They muttered to each other and stayed well clear as Kaye carried Stella out in her arms and fastened her into the car seat in the back. Some of the men avoided her eyes and made small signs with their hands. She slid in beside the baby.

Two of the pickups had gun racks and shotguns and hunting rifles. Her throat closed as she settled into the back of the Toyota beside Stella. She rolled up the window and buckled her seat belt and sat with the meaty sour smell of her own fear.

Mitch carried out her laptop and box of papers and pushed them into the back of the trunk, then slammed the lid. Kaye was pushing buttons on her cell phone.

“Don’t do that,” Mitch said gruffly as he got into the driver’s seat. “They’ll know where we are. We’ll call from a pay phone someplace when we’re on the highway.”

Kaye’s dapples flared red for an instant.

Mitch watched her with a stricken, wondering face. "We're aliens," he muttered. He started the engine. The seven men got into the three trucks and led them down the road.

"You have any cash for gas?" Mitch asked.

"In my purse," Kaye said. "You don't want to use credit cards?"

Mitch avoided answering that. "We got almost a full tank."

Stella squalled briefly, then grew quiet as a pink dawn started over the low hills and behind the scattered oak trees. The overcast lay open and ragged on the horizon and they saw curtains of rain ahead. The dawn light was bright and unreal against the low black clouds.

The dirt road north was rough but not impassable. The trucks accompanied them to the very end, where a sign marked the edge of the reservation and also, coincidentally, advertised the Wild Eagle Casino. Scrub and tumbleweeds lay sad and battered against a bent and twisted barbed wire fence.

The thick underbellies of the clouds drizzled light rain on the windshield, turning the dust into wiper-whipped mud as they came off the dirt road, up an embankment, and onto the state highway heading east. A brilliant shaft of morning light, the last they saw that day, caught them like a searchlight as Mitch brought the Toyota up to speed on the two-lane asphalt.

"I liked that place," Kaye said, her voice rough. "I was happier in that trailer than I can remember ever being, anywhere else in my life."

"You thrive in adversity," Mitch said, and reached over his shoulder to grasp her hand.

"I thrive with you," Kaye said. "With Stella."

## 92

### Northeastern Oregon

**K**aye walked back from the phone booth. They had parked in a strip mall parking lot in Bend to buy food at a market. Kaye had done the shopping and then had called Maria Konig. Mitch had stayed in the car with Stella.

"Arizona still hasn't set up an Emergency Action Office," Kaye said.

"What about Idaho?"

"They have one as of two days ago. Canada, too."

Stella coo-whistled in her safety seat. Mitch had changed her a few minutes before and she usually performed for a short while afterward. He

was almost getting used to her musical sounds. She was already adept at making two different notes at once, splitting one note away, raising and lowering it; the effect was uncannily like two theremins arguing. Kaye looked through the window. The baby seemed in another world, lost in discovering what sounds she could make.

"They stared at me in the market," Kaye said. "I felt like a leper. Worse, like a *nigger*." She kicked out the word between clenched teeth. She shoved the grocery bag into the passenger seat and dug into it with a tense hand. "I took out money at the ATM and got food and then I got these," she said, and pulled out bottles of makeup, foundation and powder. "For our dapples. I don't know what I'll do about her singing."

Mitch got behind the wheel.

"Let's go," Kaye said, "before somebody calls the police."

"It isn't that bad," Mitch said as he started the car.

"Isn't it?" Kaye cried. "We're *marked*! If they find us, they'll put Stella in a camp, for Christ's sake! God knows what Augustine has planned for us, for all the parents. Get sharp, Mitch!"

Mitch pulled the car out of the parking lot in silence.

"I'm sorry," Kaye said, her voice breaking. "I'm sorry, Mitch, but I'm so frightened. We have to think, we have to plan."

Clouds followed them, gray skies and light rain without break. They crossed the border into California at night, pulled off onto a lonely dirt road, and slept in the car with rain drumming on the roof.

Kaye applied makeup to Mitch in the morning. He clumsily painted her face with foundation and she touched up in the rearview mirror.

"We'll rent a room today in a motel," Mitch said.

"Why take the risk?"

"We look pretty good, I think," he said, smiling encouragement. "She needs a bath and so do we. We are not animals and I refuse to act like one."

Kaye thought about this as she nursed Stella. "All right," she said.

"We'll go to Arizona, and then, if necessary, we'll go to Mexico or even farther south. We'll find someplace we can live until things get settled down."

"When will that be?" Kaye asked softly.

Mitch did not know, so he did not answer. He drove back along the deserted farm road onto the highway. The clouds were breaking up now and brilliant morning light fell on the forests and fields of grass to either side of the highway.

"Sun!" said Stella, and waved her fists lustily.





# EPILOGUE

Tucson, Arizona

THREE YEARS LATER

**A** plump little girl with short brown hair and brown skin and sweated streaks of powder on her face stood in the alley and peered between the dust-colored garages. She whistled softly to herself, interweaving two variations of a Mozart piano trio. Someone who did not look too closely might have mistaken her for one of the many Latino children who played along the streets and ran through the alleys.

Stella had never been allowed to go this far from the small house her parents rented, a few hundred steps away. The world of the alley was fresh. She sniffed the air lightly; she always did that, and she never found what she wanted to find.

But she heard the excited voices of children playing, and that was enticement enough. She walked on red concrete squares along the stucco side wall of a small garage, pushed open a swinging metal gate, and saw three children tossing a half-inflated basketball in a small backyard. The children paused their game and stared at her.

“Who are you?” asked a black-haired girl, seven or eight.

“Stella,” she answered clearly. “Who are you?”

“We’re playing here.”

“Can I play?”

“You got a dirty face.”

“It comes off, look,” and Stella wiped at the powder with her sleeve, leaving fleshy stains on the cloth. “It’s hot today, isn’t it?”

A boy about ten looked her over critically. “You got spots,” he said.

“They’re freckles,” Stella said. Her mother had told her to tell people that.

“Sure, you can play,” said a second girl, also ten. She was tall and had long skinny legs. “How old are you?”

“Three.”

“You don’t sound three.”

“I can read and whistle, too. Listen.” She whistled the two tunes together, watching their reactions with interest.

“Jesus,” the boy said.

Stella felt proud at his amazement. The tall skinny girl threw her the ball and Stella caught it deftly and smiled. “I love this,” she said, and her face flushed a lovely shade of pale beige and gold. The boy stared after her with jaw agape, then sat down to watch as the girls played together on the dry summer grass. A sweet musky scent followed Stella wherever she ran.

Kaye searched all the rooms and the closets frantically, twice, calling out her daughter’s name. She had been absorbed reading a magazine article after putting Stella down for a nap and had not heard the girl leave. Stella was smart and not likely to walk out into a road or get into any obvious danger, but the neighborhood was poor and there was still strong prejudice against children like her, and fear about the diseases that sometimes followed in the wake of SHEVA pregnancies.

The diseases were real; ancient recurrences of old retroviruses, sometimes fatal. Christopher Dicken had discovered that in Mexico three years ago, and it had almost cost him his life. The danger passed a few months after birth, but Mark Augustine had been right. Nature was never other than two-faced about her gifts.

If a police officer saw Stella, or somebody reported her, there could be trouble.

Kaye called Mitch at the Chevrolet dealership where he worked, a few miles from their house, and he told her he’d come right home.

The children had never seen anything quite like this odd little girl. Just being around her made them feel friendly and good, and they did not know why, nor did they care. The girls chatted about clothes and singers, and Stella imitated some of the singers, especially Salay Sammi, her favorite. She was an excellent mimic.

The boy stood to one side, frowning in concentration.

The younger girl went next door to invite other friends over, and they in turn invited others, and soon the backyard was filled with boys and girls. They played house, and the boys played police, and Stella provided sound effects and something else, a smile, a presence, that soothed and energized them at once. Some had to go home and Stella said she was glad to meet

them and smelled behind their ears, which made them laugh and draw back in embarrassment, but none of them felt angry.

They were all fascinated by the gold and brown dapples on her face.

Stella seemed completely at ease, happy, but she had never been among so many children before. When two nine-year-old girls, identical twins, asked her different questions at once, Stella answered them both, at once. They could almost understand what she said, and they broke out laughing, asking the funny plump little girl where she had learned to do that.

The older boy's frown changed to determination. He knew what he had to do.

Kaye and Mitch called her name along the street. They did not dare ask the police for help; Arizona had finally gone along with the Emergency Action and was sending its new children for special study and education in Iowa.

Kaye was beside herself. "It was just a minute, just—"

"We'll find her," Mitch said, but his face gave him away. He looked incongruous in his dark blue suit, walking on the dusty street between the small old houses. A hot dry wind soaked up their sweat. "I hate this," he said for the millionth time. It had become a familiar mantra, part of the bitterness inside him. Stella made him feel complete; Kaye could still give him some of the old life. But when he was alone, the strain filled him to the brim, and in his head he would say over and over how much he hated this.

Kaye held his arm and told him again how sorry she was.

"Not your fault," he said, but he was still very angry.

The thin girl showed Stella how to dance. Stella knew a lot of ballet music; Prokofiev was her favorite composer, and the difficult scores came out in complexes of piping and whistling and clucking. One little blond boy, younger than Stella, stayed as close as he could to her, brown eyes big with interest.

"What do we want to play now?" the tall girl asked when she grew tired of trying to stand *en pointe*.

"I'll get Monopoly," said an eight-year-old boy with the more familiar kind of freckles.

"Or maybe we can play Othemo?" Stella asked.

They had been searching for an hour. Kaye stopped for a moment on a broken patch of sidewalk and listened. The alley that ran behind their

homes opened onto this side street, and she thought she heard children playing. Lots of children.

She and Mitch walked quickly between the garages and board fences, trying to catch Stella's voice, or one of her many sounds.

Mitch heard their daughter first. He pushed open the metal swinging gate and they entered.

The small yard was packed with children like birds around a feeder. Kaye noticed immediately that Stella was not the center of attention; she was simply there, off to one side, playing a game of Othello, with decks of cards that made sounds when pressed. If the sounds matched or made a tune, the players got to discard. The players who emptied their hands first won. This was one of Stella's favorites.

Mitch stood behind Kaye. Their daughter did not see them at first. She was chattering happily with the twins and another boy.

"I'll get her," Mitch said.

"Wait," Kaye said. Stella appeared so happy. Kaye was willing to risk a few minutes for this.

Then Stella looked up, pushed to her feet, and let the musical cards fall from her hands. She circled her head in the air and sniffed.

Mitch saw another child, a boy, enter the yard from a gate in the front. He was about Stella's age. Kaye saw him, too, and recognized him immediately. They heard a woman's frantic calls in Spanish and Kaye knew what they were, what they meant.

"We have to leave," Mitch said.

"No," Kaye said, and held him back with her arm. "Just for a moment. Please. Watch!"

Stella and the boy approached each other. The other children one by one fell silent. Stella circled the young boy, face blank for a long moment. The boy made small sighs, his chest heaving as if he had been running. He rubbed at his face with quick dabs of spit on his sleeve. Then he bent over and sniffed behind Stella's ear. Stella sniffed behind his ear and they held hands.

"I'm Stella Nova," Stella said. "Where are you from?"

The small boy just smiled, and his face twitched in ways Stella had not seen before. She found her own face responding. She felt the rush of blood to her skin and she laughed out loud, a delighted, high-pitched shriek. The boy smelled of so much—of his family and the way his home smelled and of the food his mother cooked, and his cats, and Stella watched his face and

understood a little of what he was saying. He was so *rich*, this little boy. Their dapples colored madly, almost at random. She watched the boy's pupils fleck with color, rubbed her fingers on his hands, feeling the skin, the shivers of response.

The boy spoke in broken English and Spanish simultaneously. His mouth moved in a way that Stella was familiar with, shaping the sounds passing along both sides of his ridged tongue. Stella knew a fair amount of Spanish and tried to answer. The boy jumped up and down with excitement; he understood her! Talking to people was usually so frustrating for Stella, but this was even worse, because suddenly she knew what talking might *really* be.

Then she looked to one side and saw Kaye and Mitch.

Simultaneously, Kaye saw the woman in the kitchen window, using her phone. The woman did not look at all happy.

"Let's go," Mitch said, and Kaye did not disagree.

"Where are we going now?" Stella asked from her safety seat in the back of the Chevy Lumina as Mitch drove south.

"Mexico, maybe," Kaye said.

"I want to see more like the boy," Stella said, pouting fiercely.

Kaye closed her eyes and saw the boy's terrified mother, grabbing him away from Stella, shooting a dirty look at Kaye; loving and hating her own child. No hope for bringing the two together again. And the woman in the window, too afraid to even come outside and talk with her.

"You will," Kaye said dreamily. "You were very beautiful with the boy."

"I know," Stella said. "He was one of me."

Kaye leaned over the back of the seat and looked at her daughter. Her eyes were dry, she had thought about this for so long, but Mitch rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Why did we have to leave?" Stella asked.

"It's cruel to keep her away from them," Kaye told Mitch.

"What are we going to do, ship her off to Iowa? I love my daughter and I want to be her father and have her in this family. A normal family."

"I know," Kaye said distantly. "I know."

"Are there many like the boy, Kaye?" Stella asked.

"About a hundred thousand," Kaye said. "We've told you that."

"I would love to talk with them *all*," Stella said.

“She probably could, too,” Kaye said with a smile at Mitch.

“The boy told me about his cat,” Stella said. “He has two kittens. And the kids liked me, Kaye, Momma, they *really* liked me.”

“I know,” Kaye said. “You were beautiful with them, too.” Kaye was so proud and yet her heart ached for her daughter.

“Let’s go to Iowa, Mitch,” Stella suggested.

“Not today, Sweet Rabbit,” Mitch said.

The highway ran straight south through the desert.

“No sirens,” Mitch observed flatly.

“Did we make it again, Mitch?” Stella asked.

## AFTERWORD

I've made a substantial effort in this novel to make the science accurate and the speculations plausible. The ongoing revolution in biology is far from over, however, and it is very likely that many of the speculations here will turn out to be wrong.

As I've done my research and spoken to scientists around the world, I've come away with an unshakable sense that evolutionary biology is about to undergo a major upheaval—not in the next few decades, but in the next few *years*.

Even as I finish revisions, articles are appearing in the scientific literature that support a number of speculative details. Fruit flies, it seems, can adapt in only a few generations to gross changes in climate. The implications of this are still controversial. The most recent, in the December–January 1998–99 issue of *New Scientist*, points up the contributions that human endogenous retroviruses might make to the progress of HIV, the AIDS virus; Eric Towler, of the Science Applications International Corporation, says he “has evidence that HERV-K enzymes may help HIV to evade potent drugs.” This is similar to the mechanism of swapped viral tool kits that frightens Mark Augustine.

The mystery, as it unfolds, will be absolutely fascinating; we truly are on the verge of discovering the secrets of life.





## A SHORT BIOLOGICAL PRIMER

**H**umans are metazoans, that is, we are made up of many cells. In most of our cells there is a *nucleus* that contains the “blueprint” for the entire individual. This blueprint is stored in DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid); DNA and its complement of helper proteins and organelles make up the molecular computer that contains the memory necessary to construct an individual organism.

Proteins are molecular machines that can perform incredibly complicated functions. They are the engines of life; DNA is the template that guides the manufacture of those engines.

DNA in eucaryotic cells is arranged in two interwoven strands—the “double helix”—and packed tightly into a complex structure called chromatin, which is arranged into chromosomes in each cell nucleus. With a few exceptions, such as red blood cells and specialized immune cells, the DNA in each cell of the human body is complete and identical. Researchers estimate that the human *genome*—the complete collection of genetic instructions—consists of between sixty thousand and a hundred thousand *genes*. Genes are heritable traits; a gene has often been defined as a segment of DNA that contains the code for a protein or proteins. This code can be *transcribed* to make a strand of RNA (ribonucleic acid); ribosomes then use the RNA to *translate* the original DNA instructions and synthesize proteins. (Some genes perform other functions, such as making the RNA constituents of ribosomes.)

Many scientists believe that RNA was the original coding molecule of life, and that DNA is a later elaboration.

While most cells in the body of an individual carry identical DNA, as the person grows and develops, that DNA is *expressed* in different ways

within each cell. This is how identical embryonic cells become different tissues.

When DNA is transcribed to RNA, many lengths of nucleotides that do not code for proteins, called *introns*, are snipped out of the RNA segments. The segments that remain are spliced together; they code for proteins and are called *exons*. On a length of freshly transcribed RNA, these exons can be spliced together in different ways to make different proteins. Thus, a single gene can produce a number of products at different times.

*Bacteria* are tiny single-celled organisms. Their DNA is not stored in a nucleus but is spread around within the cell. Their genome contains no *introns*, only *exons*, making them very sleek and compact little critters. Bacteria can behave like social organisms; different varieties both cooperate and compete with each other to find and use resources in their environment. In the wild, bacteria frequently come together to create biofilm “cities”; you may be familiar with these cities from the slime on spoiled vegetables in your refrigerator. Biofilms can also exist in your intestines, your urinary tract, and on your teeth, where they sometimes cause problems, and specialized ecologies of bacteria protect your skin, your mouth, and other areas of your body. Bacteria are extremely important and though some cause disease, many others are necessary to our existence. Some biologists believe that bacteria lie at the root of all life-forms, and that eucaryotic cells—our own cells, for example—derive from ancient colonies of bacteria. In this sense, we may simply be spaceships for bacteria.

Bacteria swap small circular loops of DNA called *plasmids*. Plasmids supplement the bacterial genome and allow them to respond quickly to threats such as antibiotics. Plasmids make up a universal library that bacteria of many different types can use to live more efficiently.

Bacteria and nearly all other organisms can be attacked by *viruses*. Viruses are very small, generally encapsulated bits of DNA or RNA that cannot reproduce by themselves. Instead, they hijack a cell’s reproductive machinery to make new viruses. In bacteria, the viruses are called *bacteriophages* (“eaters of bacteria”) or just *phages*. Many phages carry genetic material between bacterial hosts, as do some viruses in animals and plants.

It is possible that viruses originally came from segments of DNA within cells that can move around, both inside and between chromosomes. Viruses are essentially roving segments of genetic material that have learned how to “put on space suits” and leave the cell.

## SHORT GLOSSARY OF SCIENTIFIC TERMS

**Amino acid:** building block for proteins. Most living things use only twenty amino acids.

**Antibody:** molecule that attaches to an antigen, inactivates it, and attracts other defenses to the intruder.

**Antibiotics:** a large class of substances manufactured by many different kinds of organisms that can kill bacteria. Antibiotics have no effect on viruses.

**Antigen:** intruding substance or part of an organism that provokes the creation of antibodies as part of an immune response.

**Bacteria:** procaryotes, tiny living cells whose genetic material is not enclosed in a nucleus. Bacteria perform much important work in nature and are the base of all food-chains.

**Bacteriophage:** see *phage*.

**Bacteriocin:** one of many substances created by bacteria that can kill other bacteria.

**Chromosome:** arrangement of tightly packed and coiled DNA. Diploid cells such as body cells in humans have two sets of twenty-three chromosomes; haploid cells such as gametes—sperm or ova—have only a single set of chromosomes.

**Cro-Magnon:** early variety of modern human, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, from Cro-Magnon in France. *Homo* is the genus, *sapiens* the species, *sapiens* the subspecies.

**DNA:** deoxyribonucleic acid, the famous double-helix molecule that codes for the proteins and other elements that help construct the *phenotype* or body structure of an organism.

**ERV or endogenous retrovirus:** virus that inserts its genetic material into the DNA of a host. The integrated *provirus* lies dormant for a time.

ERVs may be quite ancient and fragmentary and no longer capable of producing infectious viruses.

**Exon:** regions of DNA that code for proteins or RNA.

**Gamete:** a sex cell, such as egg or sperm, capable of joining with an opposite gamete—egg plus sperm—to make a *zygote*.

**Gene:** The definition of a gene is changing. A recent text defines a gene as “a segment of DNA or RNA that performs a specific function.” More particularly, a gene can be thought of as a segment of DNA that codes for some molecular product, very often a protein. Besides the nucleotides that code for the protein, the gene also consists of segments that determine how much and what kind of protein is expressed, and when. Genes can produce different combinations of proteins under different stimuli. In a very real sense, a gene is a tiny factory and computer within a much larger factory-computer, the genome.

**Genome:** sum total of genetic material in an individual organism.

**Genotype:** the genetic character of an organism or distinctive group of organisms.

**HERV or human endogenous retrovirus:** Within our genetic material are many remnants of past infections by retroviruses. Some researchers estimate that as much as one third of the sum total of our genetic material may consist of old retroviruses. No instance is yet known of these ancient viral genes producing infectious particles (*virions*) that can move from cell to cell, in *lateral* or *horizontal transmission*. Many HERV do produce viruslike particles within the cell, however, and whether these particles serve a function or cause problems is not yet known.

All HERV are part of our genome and are transmitted vertically when we reproduce, from parent to offspring. Infection of gametes by retroviruses is the best explanation so far for the presence of HERV in our genome. (ERV, endogenous retrovirus, are found in many other organisms, as well.)

**Homosome:** the complete complement of usable genetic material both inside and outside a cell or organism. Bacteria exchange circular loops of DNA called plasmids and may have some genes carried by lysogenic phages; this total pool of genetic material constitutes the bacterial homosome.

**Immune response (immunity, immunization):** the provoking and marshaling of defensive cells within an organism to ward off and destroy pathogens, disease-causing organisms such as viruses or bacteria.

Immune response may also identify nonpathogenic cells as foreign, not part of the normal body complement of tissues; transplanted organs cause an immune response and may be rejected.

**Intron:** regions of DNA that do not generally code for proteins. In most eucaryotic cells, genes consist of mingled exons and introns. Introns are clipped out of transcribed messenger RNA (mRNA) before it is processed by ribosomes; ribosomes use the code contained in lengths of mRNA to assemble specific proteins out of amino acids. Bacteria lack introns.

**Lysogenic phage:** phage that attaches to a bacterial capsule and inserts genetic material into the bacterial host, where it then forms a circular loop, integrates with the host DNA, and lies dormant for a time. During this stage, the host bacterium reproduces the *prophage* or integrated phage genome with its own. Damage or “stress” to a host bacterium may result in the transcription of the phage genes, which then replicate new phages, releasing them by *lysing* or breaking open the host. In this stage, they are called *lytic* phage. Lysogenic/lytic phages may also transcribe and carry host genes, along with their own, from one bacterium to another.

Many bacteria that cause severe disease in humans, such as cholera, can have their toxicity triggered by the transfer of genetic material by lysogenic phages. Such phages, understandably, are dangerous in their natural form and useless in controlling bacterial pathogens.

**Marker:** distinctive or unique arrangement of bases or a distinctive or unique gene within a chromosome.

**Modern human:** *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Genus *Homo*, species *sapiens*, subspecies *sapiens*.

**Movable element (mobile element):** movable segment of DNA. *Transposons* can move or have their DNA copied from place to place in a length of DNA using DNA polymerase. *Retrotransposons* contain their own *reverse transcriptase*, which gives them some autonomy within the genome. Movable elements have been shown by Barbara McClintock and others to generate variety in plants; but some believe these are, more often than not, so-called “selfish genes,” which are duplicated without being useful to the organism. Others believe that movable elements in the DNA contribute to novelty in all genomes, and perhaps even help regulate evolution.

**Mutation:** alteration in a gene or segment of DNA. May be accidental and unproductive or even dangerous; may also be useful, leading to the

production of a more efficient protein. Mutations may lead to variation in phenotype, or the physical structure of an organism. Random mutations are usually either neutral or bad for the health of the organism.

**Neandertal:** *Homo sapiens neandertalensis*. Possibly ancestral to humans. Modern anthropologists and geneticists are currently engaged in a debate about whether Neandertals are our ancestors, based on evidence of mitochondrial DNA extracted from ancient bones. More than likely, the evidence is confusing because we simply do not yet know how species and subspecies separate and develop.

**Pathogen:** disease-causing organism. There are many different varieties of pathogen: viruses, bacteria, fungi, protists (formerly known as protozoa), and metazoans such as nematodes.

**Phage:** virus that uses bacteria as hosts. Many kinds of phages kill their hosts almost immediately and can be used as antibacterial agents. Many bacteria have at least one and often many phages specific to them. Phages and bacteria are always in a contest to outrun each other, evolutionarily speaking. (See *Lysogenic phage*.)

**Phenotype:** the physical structure of an organism or distinctive group of organisms. *Genotype* expressed and developed within an environment determines *phenotype*.

**Protein:** Genes often code for proteins, which help form and regulate all organisms. Proteins are molecular machines made up of chains of twenty different types of amino acids. Proteins can themselves chain or clump together. Collagen, enzymes, many hormones, keratin, and antibodies are just a few of the different types of proteins.

**Provirus:** the genetic code of a virus while it is contained within the DNA of a host.

**Retrotransposon, retroposon, retrogene:** see *movable elements*.

**Retrovirus:** RNA-based virus that inserts its code into a host's DNA for later replication. Replication can often be delayed for years. AIDS and other diseases are caused by retroviruses.

**RNA:** Ribonucleic acid. Intermediate complementary copy of DNA; messenger RNA or mRNA is used by ribosomes as templates to construct proteins.

**SHEVA (HERV-DL3, SHERVA-DL3):** fictitious human endogenous retrovirus that can form an infectious virus particle, or *virion*; an *infectious* HERV. No such HERV is yet known.

**Sequencing:** determining the sequence of molecules in a polymer such as a protein or nucleic acid; in genetics, discovering the sequence of bases

in a gene or a length of DNA or RNA, or in the genome as a whole. In a few years, we will understand the sequence of the entire human genome.

**Sex chromosomes:** in humans, the X and Y chromosomes. Two X chromosomes results in a female; an X and a Y results in a male. Other species have different types of sex chromosomes.

**Transposon:** see *movable elements*.

**Trisomy, trisomal:** having an extra copy of a chromosome in a diploid cell. In humans, having three copies of chromosome 21 leads to Down syndrome.

**Vaccine:** a substance that produces an immune response to a disease-causing organism.

**Virion:** infectious virus particle.

**Virus:** nonliving but organically active particle capable of entering a cell and commandeering the cell's reproductive capacity to produce more virus. Viruses consist of DNA or RNA, usually surrounded by a protein coat, or capsid. This capsid may in turn be surrounded by an envelope. There are hundreds of thousands of known viruses, and potentially millions not yet described.

**Zygote:** the combination of two gametes; a fertilized ovum.





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Even with the help of all these excellent readers, errors certainly remain. They belong to me, not them. Also, at every step of the way, these scientists have expressed both support and doubts about my theories, sometimes severe doubts. Their aid in no way implies that they agree with any or all of the theories in *Darwin's Radio*.

## A CONVERSATION WITH GREG BEAR

**Q:** *In much of your fiction, you've explored the cultural, biological, psychological, and evolutionary implications of nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and related biotech fields. Is there a kind of mutation going on now as a result of social and technological change similar to what you describe in Darwin's Radio? What will it mean to be human fifty or one hundred years from now?*

**A:** Nanotechnology and biotechnology point toward a time, not too far off, when we can have complete control of our bodies and even of the way we think. These choices lead to some fascinating possibilities, including designer bodies and designer minds, and the rather disturbing notion of fashion adopting the biosciences. I think we may have to understand who we actually are right now to understand what we could be, given fifty or a hundred years of this development. In other words, we have to redefine what it means to be human, because some of our offspring will really be pushing the envelope.

**Q:** *The title of the book, Darwin's Radio, is very interesting. Where did it come from?*

**A:** I'm always on the lookout for a good title. This one emerged as a description of the core element in the story—viruses in our genome that function as carriers of evolutionary tidings—genetic radio. I've always been interested in the notion of viruses as transports for genetic information, and this seemed a poetic description of such a process.

**Q:** *William Burroughs believed language was a virus. But language can incorporate many different means of organizing and propagating information through space and time: in bytes, for example, or in DNA. Are viruses carriers of information or is information itself a kind of virus?*

**A:** All living things communicate in a variety of codes, all of which I loosely collect under the term "language." Information does not start out as language or code—but our senses quickly convert what we perceive into code to be processed and incorporated, or rejected as memory. If incorporated, it becomes part of our chemistry and it affects how we behave afterwards. We can then exchange this "digested" information with others who share our spoken or written language; and it then becomes cultural knowledge. Bacteria go through a similar process with what they learn: how many bacteria there are in a given place; what kind of resources are available to them; how to avoid or neutralize antibiotics. These useful bits of knowledge are passed on through diffused chemicals or loops of DNA called plasmids, which are like genetic recipes.

DNA is one of the deepest and most fundamental codes we know, yet we have just begun to understand the language of genetics.

**Q:** *The notion that modern humans evolved quite rapidly from Neanderthals is central to your book. Ever since reading Darwin's Radio, I've been amazed by the steady stream of discoveries announced by paleoanthropologists, biologists, and archeologists on the genetic and geographic closeness of Neanderthals and Homo sapiens.*

**A:** There's considerable uncertainty as to how, even if, humans evolved from Neanderthals, and how long it might have taken. Some theorize that the change happened in one place, and populations radiated outward; others, that it happened in many places. I tend to think that the change happened in many places, at many different times, with many varieties produced in different regions. All (possibly including Neanderthals and modern humans) were likely able to interbreed, and this makes for an incredibly complicated picture, with many subtleties. As we discover more about genetics, some questions will be answered, but many others may well remain lost in history.

**Q:** *What about the mechanism of that evolutionary process or change, the fossilized retroviruses that Kaye Lang discovers in human DNA? Do these pieces of so-called "junk" DNA actually exist as you describe them? How much of what Kaye discovers in the human genome is fact? How much is fiction?*

**A:** HERV (human endogenous retroviruses) exist, and are much discussed in the literature. None of these fossil viruses are able to pass from one individual to another; they aren't contagious, so far as we've been able to discover. But some do produce inactive particles inside cells, perhaps feebly reminiscing over past glories! The only speculation in Kaye Lang's initial discovery is that she has found bits of HERV able to assemble to create an infectious retrovirus. I then draw on an analogy with lysogenic phages (viruses that infect bacteria), which sometimes do have a role in altering bacterial capabilities by ferrying snippets of DNA. These phages are at once both diseases and helpers, a complex relationship which could have its analogs in humans.

**Q:** *How so?*

**A:** Some viruses, when they insert themselves into DNA and then express and create new viruses, pick up trailing ends of host DNA and carry them to a new host. This genetic swapping could be very powerful, but we're just beginning to explore the implications. If HERV can express and carry genetic signals, then a situation like that in *Darwin's Radio* could very well be possible.

**Q:** *Your work is often described as "hard" science fiction. What does that term mean to you? Do you agree with the assessment?*

**A:** Gregory Benford described hard SF as playing tennis with the net up, and I agree. Doing so captures a vividness and authenticity that resonate with the readers who genuinely do want to experience the world in all its peril and

glory. Writing about science is an artistic game with some flexibility; I can describe things that do not yet exist, or play with theories regarded by some as impossible. I just have to show how we can get from where we are now to where my story is, without magic, using science.

**Q:** *Darwin's Children* (Del Rey, April 2003) is quite a different book from *Darwin's Radio*. How would you describe their relationship?

**A:** *Darwin's Radio* is about the hardships of getting born—from both the parents' and the children's perspectives. I don't think there's anything in *Darwin's Radio* that is other than a thematic dramatization (and exaggeration, maybe) of what any parent goes through having a child. It's a tough old world out there, and the fears we experience, contemplating our children's future, are pretty universal. When a *species* decides to have a new kind of offspring, to reshape itself in response to a changing environment, is it possible to even begin to imagine the process, the risks involved?

*Darwin's Children* is about childhood and adolescence, and then young adulthood. Because of the fear felt by the old for the new, the New Children—some call them Virus Children, a pejorative—have a particularly difficult time growing up.

But there's an almost equally difficult time in parenting when you have to let your children fend for themselves . . . face the slings and arrows of an unfair society and a difficult world. Children grow away from their parents, and the parents must both protect, nurture, educate . . . and let go. That's the hardest time of all, and that's what *Darwin's Children* is about on a world-wide as well as a personal scale.

**Q:** How have scientists reacted to *Darwin's Radio*, and how do you think they'll react to *Darwin's Children*?

**A:** I've had tremendous support from a great many working biologists. Not only have they enthusiastically read and corrected my manuscripts, but they've engaged in correspondence and personal debate on nearly all the scientific and even political issues involved. That said, a fair number have voiced concern that the severely revised Darwinism of these two books could "aid and comfort" their opponents in the Creationist camp, or even the newly emerging dissenters who seek signs of "intelligent design." I'm not worried so much about aiding and comforting—or fitting into any particular scientific camp—because my main concern is finding facts and theories that explain what we see in nature, not what academics or religious people think we *should* be seeing.

The bottom line is, the theories explored in my novels should provide no comfort to those who support Creationism. I'm describing a biological system that runs with little or no outside interference, that is intelligent in its own right, and self-designing in a literal way. This approach is controversial and unlikely to win friends in any of the extreme camps. It's not even a middle ground—it's just what I see, and what a fair number of other scientists have seen over the decades. And day by day, in journals published all over the world,

the evidence is growing that something like what I describe in *Darwin's Radio* is actually happening.

Self-design in species through interactions of population-wide genetic components with environmental stimuli is a scientifically testable hypothesis, and if someone proves it wrong with solid empirical evidence, I'll move on.

**Q:** *But there's something else going on in Darwin's Children that could raise some eyebrows. You have a main character experiencing a true religious epiphany. How do you think scientists will react to that?*

**A:** It happens. People undergo just this sort of epiphany—some estimates run as high as half of the human race has experienced something very like what my character faces. And it's a worldwide phenomenon, spread across all religions and, so far as we know, all of history. The experiences seem to be remarkably similar.

To ignore this phenomenon is dishonest. In fact, every day we experience emotional and mental states that cannot be checked out or quantified (so far) in any scientific way. The limits of science—and the limits of faith—are actually quite clear to me, and I believe I make those limits explicit in *Darwin's Children*.

I also challenge those who seem to believe that God interferes constantly in our everyday lives, and micromanages the natural world, as well.

**Q:** *And the answer is . . . ?*

**A:** I hope my readers will read these novels carefully and decide for themselves. Knee-jerk reactionaries of any persuasion need not reply. This is a matter of tremendous interest and importance, and defending dogma of any sort just doesn't interest me. I'm interested in telling stories and seeing what there is to see in the world around us. It's tremendous fun—and sometimes its very scary.

What more could a writer ask for?



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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

GREG BEAR is the author of twenty-five books, which have been translated into seventeen languages. He has been awarded two Hugos and five Nebulas for his fiction. He is married to Astrid Anderson Bear. They are the parents of two children, Erik and Alexandra.





# DARWIN'S CHILDREN

GREG  
BEAR



BALLANTINE BOOKS

**DARWIN'S  
CHILDREN**

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DARWIN'S  
CHILDREN

**GREG  
BEAR**



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NEW YORK

*Darwin's Children* is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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**TO MY FATHER,  
DALE FRANKLIN BEAR**



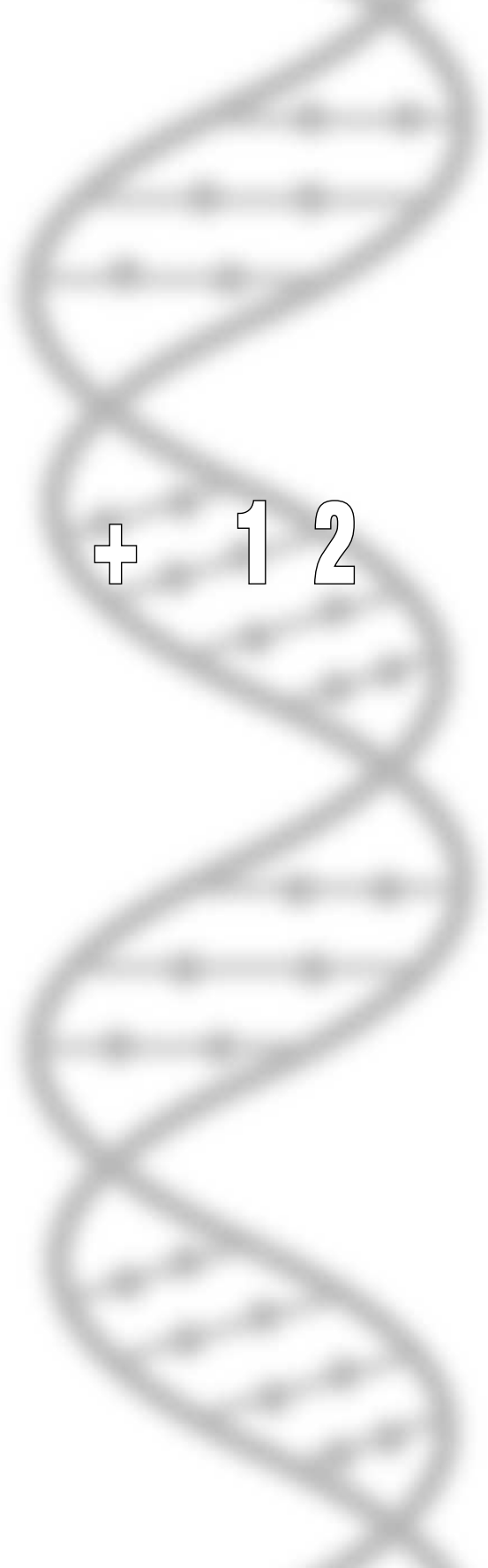


**DARWIN'S  
CHILDREN**



**PART ONE**

S H E V A + 1 2



“America’s a cruel country. There’s a whole lot of people would just as soon stomp you like an ant. Listen to talk radio. Plenty of dummies, damned few ventriloquists.”

“There’s a wolf snarl behind the picnics and Boy Scout badges.”

“They want to kill our kids. Lord help us all.”

—Anonymous Postings, ALT.NEWCHILD.FAM

“Citing ‘severe threats to national security,’ Emergency Action this week has requested of the U.S. Justice Department the authority to hack and shut down SHEVA parent Web sites and even e-journals and newspapers guilty of spreading inaccurate information—‘lies’—against EMAC and the U.S. government. Some parent advocacy groups complain this is already the norm. Mid-level Justice Department officials have passed the request along to the office of the attorney general for further legal review, according to sources who wish to remain anonymous.

“Some legal experts say that even legitimate newspaper sites could be hacked or shut down without warning should approval be granted, and the granting of such approval is likely in itself to be kept secret.”

—Seattle *Times-PI Online*

“God had nothing to do with making these children. I don’t care what you think about creationism or evolution, we’re on our own now.”

—Owen Withey, *Creation Science News*

**Spotsylvania County, Virginia**

**M**orning lay dark and quiet around the house. Mitch Rafelson stood with coffee cup in hand on the back porch, dopey from just three hours of sleep. Stars still pierced the sky. A few persistent moths and bugs buzzed around the porch light. Raccoons had been at the garbage can in back, but had left, whickering and scuffling, hours ago, discouraged by lengths of chain.

The world felt empty and new.

Mitch put his cup in the kitchen sink and returned to the bedroom. Kaye lay in bed, still asleep. He adjusted his tie in the mirror above the dresser. Ties never looked right on him. He grimaced at the way his suit hung on his wide shoulders, the gap around the collar of his white shirt, the length of sleeve visible beyond the cuff of his coat.

There had been a row the night before. Mitch and Kaye and Stella, their daughter, had sat up until two in the morning in the small bedroom trying to talk it through. Stella was feeling isolated. She wanted, *needed* to be with young people like her. It was a reasonable position, but they had no choice.

Not the first time, and likely not the last. Kaye always approached these events with studied calm, in contrast to Mitch's evasion and excuses. Of course they were excuses. He had no answers to Stella's questions, no real response to her arguments. They both knew she ultimately needed to be with her own kind, to find her own way.

Finally, too much, Stella had stomped off and slammed the door to her room. Kaye had started crying. Mitch had held her in bed and she had gradually slipped into twitching sleep, leaving him staring at the darkened ceiling, tracking the play of lights from a truck grumbling down the country road outside, wondering, as always, if the truck would come up their drive, come for their daughter, come to claim bounty or worse.

He hated the way he looked in what Kaye called his Mr. Smith duds—as in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. He lifted one hand and rotated it, studying the palm, the long, strong fingers, wedding ring—though he and Kaye had never gotten a license. It was the hand of a hick.

He hated to drive into the capital, through all the checkpoints, using his congressional appointment pass. Slowly moving past all the army trucks full of soldiers, deployed to stop yet another desperate parent from setting off another suicide bomb. There had been three such blasts since spring.

And now, Riverside, California.

Mitch walked to the left side of the bed. “Good morning, love,” he whispered. He stood for a moment, watching his woman, his wife. His eyes moved along the sleeve of her pajama top, absorbing every wrinkle in the rayon, every silken play of pre-dawn light, down to slim hands, curled fingers, nails bitten to the quick.

He bent to kiss her cheek and pulled the covers over her arm. Her eyes fluttered open. She brushed the back of his head with her fingers. “G’luck,” she said.

“Back by four,” he said.

“Love you.” Kaye pushed into the pillow with a sigh.

Next stop was Stella’s room. He never left the house without making the rounds, filling his eyes and memory with pictures of wife and daughter and house, as if, should they all be taken away, should this be the last time, he could replay the moment. Fat good it would do.

Stella’s room was a neat jumble of preoccupations and busyness in lieu of having friends. She had pinned a farewell photo of their disreputable orange tabby on the wall over her bed. Tiny stuffed animals spilled from her cedar chest, beady eyes mysterious in the shadows. Old paperback books filled a small case made of pine boards that Mitch and Stella had hammered together last winter. Stella enjoyed working with her father, but Mitch had noticed the distance growing between them for a couple of years now.

Stella lay on her back in a bed that had been too short for over a year. At eleven, she was almost as tall as Kaye and beautiful in her slender, round-faced way, skin pale copper and tawny gold in the glow of the night-light, hair dark brown with reddish tints, same texture as Kaye’s and not much longer.

Their family had become a triangle, still strong, but with the three sides stretching each month. Neither Mitch nor Kaye could give Stella what she really needed.

And each other?

He looked up to see the orange line of sunrise through the filmy white curtains of Stella's window. Last night, cheeks freckling with anger, Stella had demanded to know when they would let her out of the house on her own, without makeup, to be with kids her own age. Her kind of kids. It had been two years since her last "play date."

Kaye had done wonders with home teaching, but as Stella had pointed out last night, over and over again, with rising emotion, "*I am not like you!*" For the first time, Stella had formally proclaimed: "*I am not human!*"

But of course she was. Only fools thought otherwise. Fools, and monsters, and their daughter.

Mitch kissed Stella on the forehead. Her skin was warm. She did not wake up. Stella as she slept smelled like her dreams, and now she smelled the way tears taste, tang of salt and sadness.

"Got to go," he murmured. Stella's cheeks produced waves of golden freckles. Mitch smiled.

Even asleep, his daughter could say good-bye.

## 2

### Center for Ancient Viral Studies, United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases: USAMRIID

FORT DETRICK, MARYLAND

**"P**eople died, Christopher," Marian Freedman said. "Isn't that enough to make us cautious, even a little crazy?"

Christopher Dicken walked beside her, tilting on his game leg, staring down the concrete corridor to the steel door at the end. His National Cancer Institute ID badge still poked from his jacket pocket. He clutched a large bouquet of roses and lilies. The two had been engaged in debate from the front desk through four security checkpoints.

"Nobody's diagnosed a case of Shiver for a decade," he said. "And nobody ever got sick from the children. Isolating them is politics, not biology."

Marian took his day pass and ran it through the scanner. The steel door opened to a horizontal spread of sunglass-green access tubes, suspended like a hamster maze over a two-acre basin of raw gray concrete. She held out her hand, letting him go first. "You know about Shiver firsthand."

“It went away in a couple of weeks,” Dicken said.

“It lasted five weeks, and it damned near killed you. Don’t bullshit *me* with your virus hunter bravado.”

Dicken stepped slowly onto the catwalk, having difficulty judging depth with just one eye, and that covered by a thick lens. “The man beat his wife, Marian. She was sick with a tough pregnancy. Stress and pain.”

“Right,” Marian said. “Well, that certainly wasn’t true with Mrs. Rhine, was it?”

“Different problem,” Dicken admitted.

Freedman smiled with little humor. She sometimes revealed biting wit, but did not seem to understand the concept of humor. Duty, hard work, discovery, and dignity filled the tight circle of her life. Marian Freedman was a devout feminist and had never married, and she was one of the best and most dedicated scientists Dicken had ever met.

Together, they marched north on the aluminum catwalk. She adjusted her pace to match his. Tall steel cylinders waited at the ends of the access tubes, shaft housings for elevators to the chambers beneath the seamless concrete slab. The cylinders wore big square “hats,” high-temperature gas-fired ovens that would sterilize any air escaping from the facilities below.

“Welcome to the house that Augustine built. How is Mark, anyway?”

“Not happy, last time I saw him,” Dicken said.

“Why am I not surprised? Of course, I should be charitable. Mark moved me up from studying chimps to studying Mrs. Rhine.”

Twelve years before, Freedman had headed a primate lab in Baltimore, during the early days when the Centers for Disease Control had launched the task force investigating Herod’s plague. Mark Augustine, then director of the CDC and Dicken’s boss, had hoped to secure extra funding from Congress during a fiscal dry spell. Herod’s, thought to have caused thousands of hideously malformed miscarriages, had seemed like a terrific goad.

Herod’s had quickly been traced to the transfer of one of thousands of Human Endogenous Retroviruses—HERV—carried by all people within their DNA. The ancient virus, newly liberated, mutated and infectious, had been promptly renamed SHEVA, for Scattered Human Endogenous Viral Activation.

In those days, viruses had been assumed to be nothing more than selfish agents of disease.

“She’s been looking forward to seeing you,” Freedman said. “How long since your last visit?”

“Six months,” Dicken said.



“My favorite pilgrim, paying his respects to our viral Lourdes,” Freedman said. “Well, she’s a wonder, all right. And something of a saint, poor dear.”

Freedman and Dicken passed junctions with tubes branching southwest, northeast, and northwest to other shafts. Outside, the summer morning was warming rapidly. The sun hung just above the horizon, a subdued greenish ball. Cool air pulsed around them with a breathy moan.

They came to the end of the main tube. An engraved Formica placard to the right of the elevator door read, “MRS. CARLA RHINE.” Freedman punched the single white button. Dicken’s ears popped as the door closed behind them.

SHEVA had turned out to be much more than a disease. Shed only by males in committed relationships, the activated retrovirus served as a genetic messenger, ferrying complicated instructions for a new kind of birth. SHEVA infected recently fertilized human eggs—in a sense, hijacked them. The Herod’s miscarriages were first-stage embryos, called “interim daughters,” not much more than specialized ovaries devoted to producing a new set of precisely mutated zygotes.

Without additional sexual activity, the second-stage zygotes implanted and covered themselves with a thin, protective membrane. They survived the abortion of the first embryo and started a new pregnancy.

To some, this had looked like a kind of virgin birth.

Most of the second-stage embryos had gone to term. Worldwide, in two waves separated by four years, three million new children had been born. More than two and a half million of the infants had survived. There was still controversy over exactly who and what they were—a diseased mutation, a subspecies, or a completely new species.

Most simply called them virus children.

“Carla’s still cranking them out,” Freedman said as the elevator reached the bottom. “She’s shed seven hundred new viruses in the last four months. About a third are infectious, negative-strand RNA viruses, potentially real bastards. Fifty-two of them kill pigs within hours. Ninety-one are almost certainly lethal to humans. Another ten can probably kill both pigs and humans.” Freedman glanced over her shoulder to see his reaction.

“I know,” Dicken said dryly. He rubbed his hip. His leg bothered him when he stood for more than fifteen minutes. The same White House explosion that had taken his eye, twelve years ago, had left him partially disabled. Three rounds of surgery had allowed him to put aside the crutches but not the pain.

“Still in the loop, even at NCI?” Freedman asked.

“Trying to be,” he said.

“Thank God there are only four like her.”

“She’s our fault,” he said, and paused to reach down and massage his calf.

“Maybe, but Mother Nature’s still a bitch,” Freedman said, watching him with her hands on her hips.

A small airlock at the end of the concrete corridor cycled them through to the main floor. They were now fifty feet below ground. A guard in a crisp green uniform inspected their passes and permission papers and compared them with the duty and guest roster at her workstation.

“Please identify,” she told them. Both placed their eyes in front of scanners and simultaneously pressed their thumbs onto sensitive plates. A female orderly in hospital greens escorted them to the cleanup area.

Mrs. Rhine was housed in one of ten underground residences, four of them currently occupied. The residences formed the center of the most redundantly secure research facility on Earth. Though Dicken and Freedman would never come any closer than seeing her through a four-inch-thick acrylic window, they would have to go through a whole-body scrub before and after the interview. Before entering the viewing area and staging lab, called the inner station, they would put on special hooded undergarments impregnated with slow-release antivirals, zip up in plastic isolation suits, and attach themselves to positive pressure umbilical hoses.

Mrs. Rhine and her companions at the center never saw real human beings unless they were dressed to resemble Macy’s parade balloons.

On leaving, they would stand under a disinfectant shower, then strip down and shower again, scrubbing every orifice. The suits would be soaked and sterilized overnight, and the undergarments would be incinerated.

The four women interned at the facility ate well and exercised regularly. Their quarters—each roughly the size of a two-bedroom apartment—were maintained by automated servants. They had their hobbies—Mrs. Rhine was a great one for hobbies—and access to a wide selection of books, magazines, TV shows, and movies.

Of course, the women were becoming more and more eccentric.

“Any tumors?” Dicken asked.

“Official question?” Freedman asked.

“Personal,” Dicken said.

“No,” Freedman said. “But it’s only a matter of time.”

Dicken handed the flowers to the orderly. “Don’t boil them,” he said.

“I’ll process them myself,” the orderly promised with a smile. “She’ll get them before you’re done here.” She passed them two sealed white paper bags containing their undergarments and showed them the way to the scrub stalls, then to the tall cabinets that held the isolation suits, as glossy and green as dill pickles.

Christopher Dicken was legendary even at Fort Detrick. He had tracked Mrs. Rhine to a motel in Bend, Oregon, where she had fled after the death of her husband and daughter. He had talked her into opening the door to the small, spare room, and had spent twenty minutes with her, unprotected, while Emergency Action vans gathered in the parking lot.

He had done all this, despite having already contracted Shiver from a woman in Mexico the year before. That woman, a plump female in her forties, seven months pregnant, had been severely beaten by her husband. A small, stupid, jackal-like man with a long criminal record, he had kept her alone and without medical help in a small room at the back of a shabby apartment for three months. Her baby had been born dead.

Something in the woman had produced a defensive viral response, enhanced by SHEVA, and her husband had suffered the consequences. In his darkest early morning vigils of pacing, tending phantom twitches and pains in his leg, alone and wide awake, Dicken had often thought of the husband’s death as natural justice, and his own exposure and subsequent illness as accidental blow-by—an occupational hazard.

Mrs. Rhine’s case was different. Her problems had been caused by an interplay of human and natural forces no one could have possibly predicted.

In the late nineties, she had suffered from end-stage renal disease and had been the recipient of an experimental xenotransplant—a pig kidney. The transplant had worked. Three years later, Mrs. Rhine had contracted SHEVA from her husband. This had stimulated an enthusiastic release of PERV—Porcine Endogenous Retrovirus—from the pig cells. Before Mrs. Rhine had been diagnosed and isolated at Fort Detrick, her pig and human retroviruses had shuffled genes—recombined—with latent herpes simplex virus and had begun to express, with diabolical creativity, a Pandora’s box of long-dormant diseases, and many new ones.

*Ancient viral tool kits*, Mark Augustine had called them, with true prescience.

Mrs. Rhine’s husband, newborn daughter, and seven relatives and

friends had been infected by the first of her recombined viruses. They had all died within hours.

Of forty-one individuals who had received pig tissue transplants in the United States, and had subsequently been exposed to SHEVA, the women at the center were the only survivors. Perversely, they were immune to the viruses they produced. Isolated as they were, the four women never caught colds or flu. That made them extraordinary subjects for research—deadly but invaluable.

Mrs. Rhine was a virus hunter's dream, and whenever Dicken did dream about her, he awoke in a cold sweat.

He had never told anyone that his approach to Mrs. Rhine in that motel room in Bend had had less to do with courage than with a reckless indifference. Back then, he simply had not cared whether he lived or died. His entire world had been turned upside down, and everything he thought he knew had been subjected to a harsh and unmerciful glare.

Mrs. Rhine was special to him because they had both been through hell.

"Suit up," Freedman said. They took off their clothes in separate stalls and hung them in lockers. Small video screens mounted beside the multiple shower heads in each stall reminded them where and how to scrub.

Freedman helped Dicken pull his undergarment over his stiff leg. Together, they tugged on thick plastic gloves, then slipped their hands into the mitts of the pickle-green suits. This left them with all the manual dexterity of fur seals. Fingerless suits were tougher, more secure, and cheaper, and nobody expected visitors to the inner station to do delicate lab work. Small plastic hooks on the thumb side of each glove allowed them to pull up the other's rear zipper, then strip away a plastic cover on the inner side of a sticky seam. A special pinching tool pressed the seam over the zipper.

This took twenty minutes.

They walked through a second set of showers, then through another airlock. Confined within the almost airless hood, Dicken felt perspiration bead his face and slide down his underarms. Beyond the second airlock, each hooked the other to their umbilicals—the familiar plastic hoses suspended on clanking steel hooks from an overhead track.

Their suits plumped with pressure. The flow of fresh cool air revived him.

The last time, at the end of his visit, Dicken had emerged from his suit with a nosebleed. Freedman had saved him from weeks of quarantine by diagnosing and stanching the bleeding herself.

“You’re good for the inner,” the orderly told them through a bulkhead speaker.

The last hatch slid open with a silky whisper. Dicken walked ahead of Freedman into the inner station. In sync, they turned to the right and waited for the steel window blinds to ratchet up.

The few incidents of Shiver had started at least a hundred crash courses in medical and weapons-related research. If abused women, and women given xenotransplants, could all by themselves design and express thousands of killer plagues, what could a generation of virus children do?

Dicken clenched his jaw, wondering how much Carla Rhine had changed in sixth months.

*Something of a saint, poor dear.*

### 3

#### Office of Special Reconnaissance

LEESBURG, VIRGINIA

**M**ark Augustine walked with a cane down a long underground tunnel, following a muscular red-headed woman in her late thirties. Big steam pipes lined the tunnel on both sides and the air in the tunnel was warm. Conduits of fiber optic cables and wires were bundled and cradled in long steel trays slung from the concrete ceiling, and away from the pipes.

The woman wore a dark green silk suit with a red scarf and running shoes, gray with outdoor use. Augustine’s hard-soled Oxfords scuffed and tapped as he trailed several steps behind, sweating. The woman showed no consideration for his slower pace.

“Why am I here, Rachel?” he asked. “I’m tired. I’ve been traveling. There’s work to do.”

“Something’s developing, Mark. I’m sure you’ll love it,” Browning called back over her shoulder. “We’ve finally located a long-lost colleague.”

“Who?”

“Kaye Lang,” Browning replied.

Augustine grimaced. He sometimes pictured himself as a toothless old tiger in a government filled with vipers. He was perilously close to becoming a figurehead, or worse, a clown over a drop tank. His only remaining survival tactic was a passive appearance of being outpaced by young and

vicious career bureaucrats attracted to Washington by the smell of incipient tyranny.

The cane helped. He had broken his leg in a fall in the shower last year. If they thought he was weak and stupid, that gave him an advantage.

The maximum depth of Washington's soulless vacancy was the proud personal record of Rachel Browning. A specialist in law enforcement data management, married to a telecom executive in Connecticut whom she rarely saw, Browning had begun as Augustine's assistant in EMAC—Emergency Action—seven years ago, had moved into foreign corporate interdiction at the National Security Agency and had finally jumped aisle again to head the intelligence and enforcement branch of EMAC. She had started the Special Reconnaissance Office—SRO—which specialized in tracking dissidents and subversives and infiltrating radical parent groups. SRO shared its satellites and other equipment with the National Reconnaissance Office.

Once upon a time, in a different lifetime, Browning had been very useful to him.

“Kaye Lang Rafelson is not someone you just lure and bust,” Augustine said. “Her daughter is not just another notch on the handle of our butterfly net. We have to be very careful with all of them.”

Browning rolled her eyes. “She's not off limits according to any directive I've received. I certainly do not regard her as a sacred cow. It's been seven years since she was on Oprah.”

“If you ever feel the need to learn political science, much less public relations, I know of some excellent undergraduate courses at City College,” Augustine said.

Browning smiled her patent leather smile once again, bulletproof, certainly proof against a toothless tiger.

They arrived at the elevator together. The door opened. A Marine with a holstered nine millimeter greeted them with hard gray eyes.

Two minutes later, they stood in a small private office. Four plasma displays like a Japanese screen rose on steel stands beyond the central desk. The walls were bare and beige, insulated with close-packed, sound-absorbing foam panels.

Augustine hated enclosed spaces. He had come to hate everything he had accomplished in the last eleven years. His entire life was an enclosed space.

Browning took the only seat and laid her hands over a keyboard and

trackball. Her fingers danced over the keyboard, and she palmed the trackball, sucking on her teeth as she watched the monitor. “They’re living about a hundred miles south of here,” she murmured, focusing on her task.

“I know,” Augustine said. “Spotsylvania County.”

She looked up, startled, then cocked her head to one side. “How long have you known?”

“A year and a half,” Augustine said.

“Why not just take them? Soft heart, or soft brain?”

Augustine dismissed that with a blink revealing neither opinion nor passion. He felt his face tighten. Soon his cheeks would begin to hurt like hell, a residual effect from the blast in the basement of the White House, the bomb that had killed the president, nearly killed Augustine, and taken the eye of Christopher Dicken. “I don’t see anything.”

“The network is still assembling,” Browning said. “Takes a few minutes. Little Bird is talking to Deep Eye.”

“Lovely toys,” he commented.

“They were your idea.”

“I’ve just come back from Riverside, Rachel.”

“Oh. How was it?”

“Awful beyond belief.”

“No doubt.” Browning removed a Kleenex from her small black purse and delicately blew her nose, one nostril at a time. “You sound like someone who wants to be relieved of command.”

“You’ll be the first to know, I’m sure,” Augustine said.

Rachel pointed to the monitor, snapped her fingers, and like magic, a picture formed. “Deep Eye,” she said, and they looked down upon a small patch of Virginia countryside flocked with thick green trees and pierced by a winding, two-lane road. Deep Eye’s lens zoomed in to show the roof of a house, a driveway with a single small truck, a large backyard surrounded by tall oaks.

“And . . . here’s Little Bird,” Browning’s voice turned husky with an almost erotic approval.

The view switched to that of a drone swooping up beside the house like a dragonfly. It hovered near a small frame window, then adjusted exposure in the morning brightness to reveal the head and shoulders of a young girl, rubbing her face with a washcloth.

“Recognize her?” Browning asked.

“The last picture we have is from four years ago,” Augustine said.

“That must be from an inexcusable lack of trying.”

“You’re right,” Augustine admitted.

The girl left the bathroom and vanished from view. Little Bird rose to hover at an altitude of fifty feet and waited for instructions from the unseen pilot, probably in the back of a remoter truck a few miles from the house.

“I think that’s Stella Nova Rafelson,” Browning mused, tapping her lower lip with a long red fingernail.

“Congratulations. You’re a voyeur,” Augustine said.

“I prefer ‘paparazzo.’”

The view on the screen veered and dropped to take in a slender female figure stepping off the front porch and onto the scattered gravel walkway. She was carrying something small and square in one hand.

“Definitely our girl,” Browning said. “Tall for her age, isn’t she?”

Stella walked with rigid determination toward the gate in the wire fence. Little Eye dropped and magnified to a three-quarter view. The resolution was remarkable. The girl paused at the gate, swung it halfway open, then glanced over her shoulder with a frown and a flash of freckles.

*Dark freckles*, Augustine thought. *She’s nervous.*

“What is she up to?” Browning asked. “Looks like she’s going for a walk. And not to school, I’m thinking.”

Augustine watched the girl amble along the dirt path beside the old asphalt road, out in the country, as if taking a morning stroll.

“Things are moving kind of fast,” Browning said. “We don’t have anyone on site. I don’t want to lose the opportunity, so I’ve alerted a stringer.”

“You mean a bounty hunter. That’s not wise.”

Browning did not react.

“I do not want this, Rachel,” Augustine said. “It’s the wrong time for this kind of publicity, and certainly for these tactics.”

“It’s not your choice, Mark,” Browning said. “I’ve been told to bring her in, and her parents as well.”

“By whom?” Augustine knew that his authority had been sliding off late, perhaps drastically since Riverside. But he had never imagined that Riverside would lead to an even more severe crackdown.

“It’s a sort of test,” Browning said.

The secretary of Health and Human Services shared authority over EMAC with the president. Forces within EMAC wanted to change that and remove HHS from the loop entirely, consolidating their power. Augustine had tried the same thing himself, years ago, in a different job.



Browning took control from the remoter truck and sent Little Bird down the road, buzzing quietly a discreet distance behind Stella Nova Rafelson. “Don’t you think Kaye Lang should have kept her maiden name when she married?”

“They never married,” Augustine said.

“Well, well. The little bastard.”

“Fuck you, Rachel,” Augustine said.

Browning looked up. Her face hardened. “And fuck *you*, Mark, for making me do your job.”

## 4

### MARYLAND

**M**rs. Rhine stood in her living room, peering through the thick acrylic pane as if searching for the ghosts of another life. In her late thirties, she was of medium height, with stocky arms and legs but a thin torso, chin strong and pointed. She wore a bright yellow dress and a white blouse with a patchwork vest she had made herself. What they could see of her face between gauze bandages was red and puffy, and her left eye had swollen shut.

Her arms and legs were completely covered in Ace bandages. Mrs. Rhine’s body was trying to eliminate trillions of new viruses that could craftily claim they were part of her *self*, from her genome; but the viruses were not making her sick. Her own immune response was the principle cause of her torment.

Someone, Dicken could not remember who, had likened autoimmune disease to having one’s body run by House Republicans. A few years in Washington had eerily reinforced the aptness of this comparison.

“Christopher?” Mrs. Rhine called out hoarsely.

The lights in the inner station switched on with a click.

“It’s me,” Dicken answered, his voice sibilant within the hood.

Mrs. Rhine decorously sidestepped and curtsied, her dress swishing. Dicken saw that she had placed his flowers in a large blue vase, the same vase she had used the last time. “They’re beautiful,” she said. “White roses. My favorites. They still have some scent. Are you well?”

“I am. And you?”

“Itching is my life, Christopher,” she said. “I’m reading *Jane Eyre*. I

think, when they come here to make the movie, down here deep in the Earth, as they will, don't you know, that I will play Mr. Rochester's first wife, poor thing." Despite the swelling and the bandages, Mrs. Rhine's smile was dazzling. "Would you call it typecasting?"

"You're more the mousy, inherently lovely type who saves the rugged, half-crazed male from his darker self. You're Jane."

She pulled up a folding chair and sat. Her living room was normal enough, with a normal decor—couches, chairs, pictures on the walls, but no carpeting. Mrs. Rhine was allowed to make her own throw rugs. She also knitted and worked on a loom in another room, away from the windows. She was said to have woven a fairy-tale tapestry involving her husband and infant daughter, but she had never shown it to anyone.

"How long can you stay?" Mrs. Rhine asked.

"As long as you'll put up with me," Dicken said.

"About an hour," Marian Freedman said.

"They gave me some very nice tea," Mrs. Rhine said, her voice losing strength as she looked down at the floor. "It seems to help with my skin. Pity you can't share it with me."

"Did you get my package of DVDs?" Dicken asked.

"I did. I loved *Suddenly, Last Summer*," Mrs. Rhine said, voice rising again. "Katharine Hepburn plays mad so well."

Freedman gave him a dirty look through their hoods. "Are we on a theme here?"

"Hush, Marian," Mrs. Rhine said. "I'm fine."

"I know you are, Carla. You're more sane than I am."

"That is certainly true," Mrs. Rhine said. "But then I don't have to worry about *me*, do I? Honestly, Marian's been good to me. I wish I had known her before. Actually, I wish she'd let me fix her hair."

Freedman lifted an eyebrow, leaning in toward the window so Mrs. Rhine could see her expression. "Ha, ha," she said.

"They really aren't treating me too badly, and I'm passing all my psychological profiles." Mrs. Rhine's face dropped some of the overwrought, elfin look it assumed when she engaged in this kind of banter. "Enough about me. How are the *children* doing, Christopher?"

Dicken detected the slightest hitch in her voice.

"They're doing okay," Dicken said.

Her tone became brittle. "The ones who would have gone to school with my daughter, had she lived. Are they still kept in camps?"

"Mostly. Some are hiding out."

“What about Kaye Lang?” Mrs. Rhine asked. “I’m especially interested in her and her daughter. I read about them in the magazines. I saw her on the Katie Janeway show. Is she still raising her daughter without the government’s help?”

“As far as I know,” Dicken said. “We haven’t kept in touch. She’s kind of gone underground.”

“You were good friends, I read in the magazines.”

“We were.”

“You shouldn’t lose touch with your friends,” Mrs. Rhine said.

“I agree,” Dicken said. Freedman listened patiently. She understood Mrs. Rhine with more than clinical thoroughness, and she also understood the two feminine poles of Christopher Dicken’s busy but lonely life: Mrs. Rhine, and Kaye Lang, who had first pinpointed and predicted the emergence of SHEVA. Both had touched him deeply.

“Any news on what they’re doing inside me, all those viruses?”

“We have a lot to learn,” Dicken said.

“You said some of the viruses carry messages. Are they whispering inside me? My pig viruses . . . are they still carrying pig messages?”

“I don’t know, Carla.”

Mrs. Rhine held out her dress and dropped down in her overstuffed chair, then brushed back her hair with one hand. “*Please*, Christopher. I killed my family. Understanding what happened is the one thing I need in this life. Tell me, even the little stuff, your guesses, your dreams . . . anything.”

Freedman nodded. “Good or bad, we tell her all we know,” she said. “It’s the least she deserves.”

In a halting voice, Dicken began to outline what had been learned since his last visit. The science was sharper, progress had been made. He left out the weapons research aspect and focused on the new children.

They were remarkable and in their own way, remarkably beautiful. And that made them a special problem to those they had been designed to replace.

## SPOTSYLVANIA, VIRGINIA

“I hear you smell as good as a dog,” the young man in the patched denim jacket said to a tall, slender girl with speckled cheeks. He reverently set a six-pack of Millers on the Formica countertop and slapped down a twenty-dollar bill. “Luckies,” he told the minimart clerk.

“She doesn’t smell *good as* a dog,” the second male said with a dull smile. “She smells worse.”

“You guys cut it out,” the clerk warned, putting away the bill and getting his cigarettes. She was rail thin with pale skin and tormented blonde hair. A haze of stale cigarettes hung around her coffee-spotted uniform.

“We’re just talking,” the first male said. He wore his hair in a short ponytail tied with a red rubber band. His companion was younger, taller and stooped, long brown hair topped by a baseball cap.

“I’m warning you, no trouble!” the clerk said, her voice as rough as an old road. “Honey, you ignore him, he’s just fooling.”

Stella pocketed her change and picked up her bottle of Gatorade. She was wearing shorts and a blue tank top and tennis shoes and no makeup. She gave the two men a silent sniff. Her nostrils dimpled. They were in their mid-twenties, paunchy, with fleshy faces and rough hands. Their jeans were stained by fresh paint and they smelled sour and gamy, like unhappy puppies.

They weren’t making much money and they weren’t very smart. More desperate than some, and quick to suspicion and anger.

“She doesn’t look *infeckshus*,” the second male said.

“I mean it, guys, she’s just a little girl,” the clerk insisted, her face going blotchy.

“What’s your name?” Stella asked the first male.

“I don’t care you should know,” he said, then looked to his friend with a cocky smile.

“Leave her be,” the clerk warned one more time, worn down. “Honey, you just go home.”

The stooped male grabbed his six-pack by its plastic sling and started for the door. “Let’s go, Dave.”

Dave was working himself up. “She doesn’t fucking *belong* here,” he said, wrinkling his face. “Why in shit should we put up with this?”

“You stop that language!” the clerk cried. “We get kids in here.”

Stella drew herself up to a lanky five feet nine inches and extended her long-fingered hand. “Pleased to meet you, David. I’m Stella,” she said.

Dave stared at her hand in disgust. “I wouldn’t touch you for ten million dollars. Why ain’t you in a *camp*?”

“*Dave!*” the stooped fellow snapped.

Stella felt the fever scent rise. Her ears tingled. It was cool inside the minimart and hot outside, hot and humid. She had been walking in the sun for half an hour before she had found the Texaco and pushed through the swinging glass doors to buy a drink. She wasn’t wearing makeup. The others could see clearly whatever the dapples on her cheeks were doing. So be it. She stood her ground by the counter. She did not want to yield to Dave, and the clerk’s halfhearted defense rankled.

Dave picked up his Luckies. Stella liked the smell of tobacco before it was lit but hated the burning stink. She knew that worried men smoked, unhappy men, nervous and under stress. Their knuckles were square and their hands looked like mummy hands from sun and work and tobacco. Stella could learn a lot about people just by a sniff and a glance. “Our little radar,” Kaye called her.

“It’s nice in here,” Stella said, her voice small. She held a small book in front of her as if for protection. “It’s cool.”

“You are *something*, you know it?” Dave said with a touch of admiration. “An ugly little turd, but brave as a skunk.”

Dave’s friend stood by the glass doors. The sweat on the man’s hand reacted with the steel of the handle and reeked like a steel spoon dipped in vanilla ice cream. Stella could not eat ice cream with a steel spoon because the odor, like fear and madness, made her ill. She used a plastic spoon instead.

“Fuck it, Dave, let’s *go!* They’ll come get her and maybe they’ll take us, too, if we get too close.”

“My people aren’t really *infeckshus*,” Stella said. She stepped toward the man by the counter, long neck craned, head poking forward. “But you never know, Dave.”

The clerk sucked in her breath.

Stella had not meant to say that. She had not known she was so mad. She backed off a few inches, wanting to apologize and explain herself, say two things at once, speaking on both sides of her tongue, to make them hear and feel what she meant, but they would not understand; the words, doubled so, would jumble in their heads and only make them angrier.

What came out of Stella's mouth in a soothing alto murmur, her eyes focused on Dave's, was, "Don't worry. It's safe. If you want to beat me up, my blood won't hurt you. I could be your own little Jesus."

The fever-scent did its thing. The glands behind her ears began to pump defensive pheromones. Her neck felt hot.

"Shit," the clerk said, and bumped up against the tall rack of cigarettes behind her.

Dave showed the whites of his eyes like a skittish horse. He veered toward the door, giving her a wide berth, the deliberate smell of her in his nose. She had snuffed the fuse of his anger.

Dave joined his friend. "She smells like fucking *chocolate*," he said, and they kicked the glass doors open with their boots.

An old woman at the back of the store, surrounded by aisles jammed with puffed bags of potato chips, stared at Stella. Her hand shook a can of Pringles like a castanet. "Go away!"

The clerk moved in to defend the old woman. "Take your Gatorade and go home!" she barked at Stella. "Go home to your mama and don't you *never* come back here."

## 6

### The Longworth House Office Building

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**"W**e've been over and over this," Dick Gianelli told Mitch, dropping a stack of scientific reprints on the coffee table between them. The news was not good.

Gianelli was short and round and his usually pale face was now a dangerous red. "We've been reading everything you sent us ever since the congressman was elected. But they have twice as many experts, and they send twice as many papers. We're drowning in papers, Mitch! And the *language*." He thumped the stack. "Can't your people, all the biologists, just write to be understood? Don't they realize how important it is to get the word out to everybody?"

Mitch let his hands drop by his sides. "They're not my people, Dick. My people are archaeologists. They tend to write sparkling prose."

Gianelli laughed, stood up from the couch and shook out his arms, then

tipped a finger under his tight collar, as if letting out steam. His office was part of the suite assigned to Representative Dale Wickham, D., Virginia, whom he had faithfully served as director of public science for two of the toughest terms in U.S. history. The door to Wickham's office was closed. He was on the Hill today.

"The congressman has made his views clear for years now. Your colleagues, scientists all, have hopped on the gravy train. They've joined up with NIH and CDC and Emergency Action, and they pay their visits mostly across the aisle. Wilson at FEMA and Doyle at DOJ have undercut us every step of the way, squirming like puppies to get their funding treats. Opposing them is like standing outside in a hail of cannonballs."

"So what can I take home with me?" Mitch asked. "To cheer up the missus. Any good news?"

Gianelli shrugged. Mitch liked Gianelli but doubted he would live to see fifty. Gianelli had all the markers: pear shape, excessive girth, ghostly skin, thinning black hair, creased earlobes. He knew it, too. He worked hard and cared too much and swallowed his disappointments. A good man in a bad time. "We got caught in a medical bear trap," he said. "We've never been prepared. Our best model for an epidemic was military response. So now we've had ten years of Emergency Action. We've practically signed away our country to Beltway bureaucrats with military and law enforcement training. Mark Augustine's crew, Mitch. We've given them almost absolute authority."

"I don't think I'm capable of understanding how those people think," Mitch said.

"I thought I did, once," Gianelli said. "We tried to build a coalition. The congressman roped in Christian groups, the NRA, conspiracy nuts, flag burners and flag lovers, anybody who's ever expressed a shred of suspicion about the gov'ment. We've gone hat in hand to every decent judge, every civil libertarian still above ground, literally and figuratively. We've been checked every step of the way. It was made very clear to the congressman that if he threw up any more dust, he, personally, all on his lonesome, could force the president to declare martial law."

"What's the difference, Dick?" Mitch asked. "They've suspended habeas corpus."

"For a special class, Mitch."

"My daughter," Mitch growled.

Gianelli nodded. "Civil courts still operate, though under special guidelines. Nothing much has changed for the frightened average citizen, who's

kind of fuzzy about civil rights anyway. When Mark Augustine put together Emergency Action, he wove a tight little piece of legislative fabric. He made sure every agency ever involved in managing disease and preparing for natural disaster had a piece of the pie—and a very smelly pie it is. We've created a new and vulnerable underclass, with fewer civil protections than any since slavery. This sort of stuff attracts the real sharks, Mitch. The monsters."

"All they have are hatred and fear."

"In this town, that's a full house," Gianelli said. "Washington eats truth and shits spin." He stood. "We can't challenge Emergency Action. Not this session. They're stronger than ever. Maybe next year."

Mitch watched Gianelli pace a circuit of the room. "I can't wait that long. Riverside, Dick."

Gianelli folded his hands. He would not meet Mitch's eyes.

"The mob torched one of Augustine's goddamned camps," Mitch said. "They burned the children in their barracks. They poured gasoline around the pilings and lit them up. The guards just stood back and watched. Two hundred kids roasted to death. Kids just like my daughter."

Gianelli put on a mask of public sympathy, but underneath it, Mitch could see the real pain.

"There haven't even been arrests," he added.

"You can't arrest a city, Mitch. Even the *New York Times* calls them virus children now. Everyone's scared."

"There hasn't been a case of Shiver in ten years. It was a fluke, Dick. An excuse for some people to trample on everything this country has ever stood for."

Gianelli squinted at Mitch but did not challenge this appraisal. "There isn't much more the congressman can do," he said.

"I don't believe that."

Gianelli reached into his desk drawer and took out a bottle of Tums. "Everyone around here has fire in the belly. I have heartburn."

"Give me something to take home, Dick. Please. We need hope," Mitch said.

"Show me your hands, Mitch."

Mitch held up his hands. The calluses had faded, but they were still there. Gianelli held his own hands beside Mitch's. They were smooth and pink. "Want to really learn how to suck eggs, from an old hound dog? I've spent ten years with Wickham. He's the smartest hound there is, but he's up against a bad lot. The Republicans are the country's pit



bulls, Mitch. Barking in the night, all night, every night, right or wrong, and savaging their enemies without mercy. They claim to represent plain folks, but they represent those who vote, when they vote at all, on pocket-books and fear and gut instinct. They control the House and the Senate, they stacked the court the last three terms, their man is in the White House, and bless them, they speak with one voice, Mitch. The president is dug in. But you know what the congressman thinks? He thinks the president doesn't want Emergency Action to be his legacy. Eventually, maybe we can do something with that." Gianelli's voice dropped very low, as if he were about to blaspheme in the temple. "But not now. The Democrats can't even hold a bake sale without arguing. We're weak and getting weaker."

He held out his hand. "The congressman will be back any minute. Mitch, you look like you haven't slept in weeks."

Mitch shrugged. "I lie awake listening for trucks. I hate being so far from Kaye and Stella."

"How far?"

Mitch looked up from under his solid line of eyebrow and shook his head.

"Right," Gianelli said. "Sorry."

## 7

### SPOTSYLVANIA COUNTY

**T**he old frame house snapped and popped in the morning heat. A moist breeze blew through the small rooms in lazy swirls. Kaye walked from the bedroom to the bathroom, rubbing her eyes. She had awakened from a peculiar dream in which she was an atom slowly rising to connect with a much larger molecule, to fit in and complete something truly impressive. She felt at peace for the first time in months, despite the barbed memory of last night's fight.

Kaye massaged the fingers of her right hand, then wriggled her wedding ring over a swollen knuckle into its familiar groove. Bees droned in the oleanders outside the window, well into their day's work.

"Some dream," she told herself in the bathroom mirror. She pulled down one eyelid with a finger and stared at herself speculatively. "Under a little stress, are we?"

A few freckles remained under each eye from her pregnancy with Stella; when she was upset, they could still change from pale tan to ruddy ocher. Now, they were darker but not vivid. She splashed water on her cheeks and clipped her hair back, preparing for the hot day, ready to face more difficulties. Families were about staying together and healing.

*If the bees can do it, so can I.*

“Stella,” she called, knocking on her daughter’s bedroom door. “It’s nine o’clock. We slept in.”

Kaye padded into the small office in the laundry room and switched on the computer. She read the lines she had written before the squabble last night, then scrolled back through the last few pages:

*“The role of SHEVA in the production of a new subspecies is but one function performed by this diverse and essential class of viruses. ERV and transposons—jumping genes—play large roles in tissue differentiation and development. Emotion and crisis and changing environments activate them, one variety at a time, or all together. They are mediators and messengers between cells, ferrying genes and coded data around many parts of the body, and even between individuals.*

*“Viruses and transposons most likely arose after the invention of sex, perhaps because of sex. To this day, sex brings them opportunity to move and carry information. They may have also emerged during the tumultuous genetic shuffling of our early immune system, like soldiers and cops running wild.*

*“Truly they are like original sin. How does sin shape our destiny?”*

Kaye used a stylus to circle that last awkward, overreaching sentence. She marked it out and read some more.

*“One thing we know already: We depend on retroviral and transposon activity during nearly every stage of our growth. Many are necessary partners.*

*“To assume that viruses and transposable elements are first and foremost causes of disease is like assuming that automobiles are first and foremost meant to kill people.*

*“Pathogens—disease-causing organisms—are like hormones and other signaling molecules, but their message is challenge and silence. Our own internal lions, pathogens test us. They winnow the old and weak. They sculpt life.*

*“Sometimes they bring down the young and the good. Nature is painful. Disease and death are part of our response to challenge. To fail, to die, is still to be part of nature, for success is built on many failures, and silence is also a signal.”*

Her frame of mind had become increasingly abstract. The dream, the drone of the bees . . .

*You were born with a caul, my dear.*

Kaye suddenly remembered the voice of her maternal grandmother, Evelyn; words from nearly four decades ago. At the age of eight, Evelyn had told her something that her mother, a practical woman, had never thought to mention. “You came into this world with your tiny head covered. You were born with a caul. I was there, in the hospital with your mother. I saw it myself. The doctor showed it to me.”

Kaye remembered squirming with delicious anticipation in her grandmother’s ample lap and asking what a caul was. “A cap of loose flesh,” Evelyn had explained. “Some say it’s a mark of extraordinary understanding, even second sight. A caul warns us that you will learn things most others will never comprehend, and you will always be frustrated trying to explain what you know, and what seems so obvious to you. It’s supposed to be both a blessing and a curse.” Then the older woman had added, in a soft voice, “I was born with a caul, my dear, and your grandfather has *never* understood me.”

Kaye had loved Evelyn very much, but at times had thought her a little spooky. She returned her attention to the text on the monitor. She did not delete the paragraphs, but she did draw a large asterisk and exclamation point beside them. Then she saved the file and pushed the chair under the desk.

Four pages yesterday. A good day’s work. Not that it would ever see the light of day in any respectable journal. For the last eight years, all of her papers had appeared on clandestine Web sites.

Kaye listened closely to the morning house, as if to measure the day ahead. A curtain pull flapped against a window frame. Cardinals whistled in the maple tree outside.

She could not hear her daughter stirring.

“Stella!” she called, louder. “Breakfast. Want some oatmeal?”

No answer.

She walked in flapping slippers down the short hallway to Stella’s room. Stella’s bed was made but rumped, as if she had been lying on it,

tossing and turning. A bouquet of dried flowers, tied with a rubber band, rested on the pillow. A short stack of books had been tipped over beside the bed. On the sill, three stuffed Shrooz, about the size of guinea pigs, red and green and the very rare black and gold, hung their long noses into the room. More cascaded from the cedar chest at the foot of the bed. Stella loved Shrooz because they were grumpy; they whined and squirmed and then groaned when moved.

Kaye searched the big backyard, tall brown grass faded into ivy and kudzu under the big old trees at the edge of the property. She could not afford to let her attention lapse even for a minute.

Then she returned to the house and Stella's bedroom. She got down on her knees and peered under the bed. Stella had made a scent diary, a small blank book filled with cryptic writing and dated records of her emotions, scents collected from behind her ears and dabbed on each page. Stella kept it hidden, but Kaye had found it once while cleaning and had figured it out.

Kaye pushed her hands through the balls of dust and cat toys beneath the bed and thrust her fingers deep into the shadows. The book was not there.

Peace the illusion, peace the trap, no rest, no letting down her guard. Stella was gone. Taking the book meant she was serious.

Still shod in slippers, Kaye pushed through the gate and ran up the oak-lined street. She whispered, "Don't panic, keep it together, *God damn it.*" The muscles in her neck knotted.

A quarter of a mile away, in front of the next house down the road in the rural neighborhood, she slowed to a walk, then stood in the middle of the cracked asphalt road, hugging herself, small and tense, like a mouse waiting for a hawk.

Kaye shaded her eyes against the sun and looked up at bloated gray clouds advancing shoulder to shoulder along the southern horizon. The air smelled sullen and jumpy.

If Stella had planned this, she would have run off after Mitch left for Washington. Mitch had left between six and seven. That meant her daughter had at least an hour's head start. That realization shoved an icicle down Kaye's spine.

Calling the police was not wise. Five years ago, Virginia had reluctantly acquiesced to Emergency Action and had begun rounding up the new children and sending them to camps in Iowa, Nebraska, and Ohio. Years

ago, Kaye and Mitch had withdrawn from parent support groups after a rash of FBI infiltrations. Mitch had assumed that Kaye in particular was a target for surveillance and possibly even arrest.

They were on their own. They had decided that was the safest course.

Kaye took off her slippers and ran barefoot back to the house. She would have to think like Stella and that was difficult. Kaye had observed her daughter as a mother and as a scientist for eleven years, and there had always been a small but important distance between them that she could not cross. Stella deliberated with a thoroughness Kaye admired, but reached conclusions she often found mystifying.

Kaye grabbed her handbag with her wallet and ID, pulled on her garden shoes, and exited through the back door. The small primer gray Toyota truck started instantly. Mitch maintained both their vehicles. She ground the tires down the dirt driveway, then caught herself and drove slowly along the country lane.

“Please,” she muttered, “no rides.”

## 8

**W**alking along the dirt margin of the asphalt road, Stella swung the plastic Gatorade bottle, rationing herself to a sip every few minutes. An old farm field plowed and marked for a new strip mall stretched to her right. Stella tightrope-walked a freshly cured concrete curb, not yet out of its mold boards. The sun was climbing in the east, black clouds stacked high in the south, and the air spun hot and full of the fragrances of dogwood and sycamore. The exhaust of cars going by, and a descending tail of carbon from a diesel truck, clogged her nose.

She felt at long last that she was doing something worthwhile. There was guilt, but she pushed aside concern for what her parents would think. Somewhere on this road she might meet someone who would not argue with her instincts, who would not feel pain simply because Stella existed. Someone like herself.

All her life she had lived among one kind of human, but she was another. An old virus called SHEVA had broken loose from human DNA and rearranged human genes. Stella and a generation of children like her were the result. This was what her parents had told her.

Not a freak. Just a different kind.

Stella Nova Rafelson was eleven years old. She felt as if she had been peculiarly alone all her life.

She sometimes thought of herself as a star, a bright little point in a very big sky. Humans filled the sky by the billions and washed her out like the blinding sun.

## 9

**K**aye swung left just beyond the courthouse, turned the corner, drove half a block, and pulled into a gas station. When she had been a child, there had been little rubber-coated trip wires that caused a bell to ding whenever a car arrived. There were no longer any wires, no bell, and nobody came out to see what Kaye needed. She parked by the bright red-and-white convenience store and wiped tears from her eyes.

She sat for a minute in the Toyota, trying to focus.

Stella had a red plastic coin purse that held ten dollars in emergency money. There was a drinking fountain in the courthouse, but Kaye thought Stella would prefer something cold, sweet, and fruity. Odors of artificial strawberry and raspberry that Kaye found repugnant, Stella would wallow in like a cat in a bed of catnip. "It's a long walk," Kaye told herself. "It's hot. She's thirsty. It's her day out, away from mom." She bit her lip.

Kaye and Mitch had protected Stella like a rare orchid throughout her short life. Kaye knew that, hated the necessity of it. It was how they had stayed together. Her daughter's freedom depended on it. The chat rooms were full of the agonized stories of parents giving up their children, watching them be sent to Emergency Action schools in another state. The camps.

Mitch, Stella, and Kaye had lived a dreamy, tense, unreal existence, no way for an energetic, outgoing young girl to grow up, no way for Mitch to stay sane. Kaye tried not to think too much about herself or what was happening between her and Mitch, she might just snap, and then where would they be? But their difficulties had obviously had an effect on Stella. She was a daddy's girl, to Kaye's pride and secret sadness—she had once been a daddy's girl, too, before both her parents had died, over twenty years ago—and Mitch had been gone a lot lately.

Kaye entered the store through the glass double doors. The clerk, a

thin, tired-looking woman a little younger than Kaye, had out a mop and bucket and was grimly spraying the counter and floor with Lysol.

“Excuse me, did you see a girl, tall, about eleven?”

The clerk raised the mop like a lance and poked it at her.

## 10

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**A** tall, stooped man with thinning white hair sauntered into the office carrying a worn briefcase. Gianelli stood up. “Congressman, you remember Mitch Rafelson?”

“I do, indeed,” Wickham said, and held out his hand. Mitch shook it firmly. The hand was dry and hard as wood. “Does anybody know you’re here, Mitch?”

“Dick snuck me in, sir.”

Wickham appraised Mitch with a slight tremor of his head. “Come over to my office, Mitch,” the congressman said. “You, too, Dick, and close the door behind you.”

They walked across the hall. Wickham’s office was covered with plaques and photos, a lifetime of politics.

“Justice Barnhall had a heart attack this morning at ten,” Wickham said.

Mitch’s face fell. Barnhall had consistently championed civil rights, even for SHEVA children and their parents.

“He’s in Bethesda,” Wickham said. “They don’t hold out much hope. The man is ninety years old. I’ve just been speaking with the Senate minority leader. We’re going to the White House tomorrow morning.” Wickham laid his briefcase down on a couch and stuck his hands in the pockets of his chocolate brown slacks. “Justice Barnhall was one of the good guys. Now the president wants Olsen, and he’s a corker, Mitch. We haven’t seen his like since Roger B. Taney. A lifelong bachelor, face like a stoat, mind like a steel trap. Wants to undo eighty years of so-called judicial activism, thinks he’ll have the country by the balls, six to three. And he probably will. We’re not going to win this round, but we can land a few punches. Then, they’ll lash us on the votes. We’re going to get creamed.” Wickham stared sadly at Mitch. “I do love a fair fight.”

The secretary knocked on the door jamb. “Congressman, is Mr. Rafelson here?” She looked right at Mitch, one eyebrow cocked.

Gianelli asked, "Who wants to know?"

"Won't use her name and sounds upset. System board says she's on a disposable cell phone using an offshore line. That's no longer legal, sir."

"You don't say," Wickham said, looking out the window.

"My wife knows I'm here. No one else," Mitch said.

"Get her number and call her back, Connie," Wickham said. "Put it on the puzzler, and route it through, oh, Tom Haney's office in Boca Raton."

"Yes, sir."

Wickham gestured toward his desk phone. "We can link her line to a special scrambler for congressional office communications," he said, but tapped his wristwatch. "Starts and ends with garbage, and unless you know the key, it all sounds like garbage. We change the key every call. Takes NSA about a minute or so to break it, so keep it short."

The secretary made the connection. Mitch stared between the two men, his heart sinking, and picked up the receiver on the desk.

## 11

### SPOTSYLVANIA COUNTY

**S**tella sat in the shade of an old wooden bus shelter, clutching her book to her chest. She had been sitting there for an hour and a half. The Gatorade bottle was long since empty and she was thirsty. The morning heat was stifling and the sky was clouding over. The air had thickened with that spooky electric dampness that meant a big storm was brewing. All of her emotions had flip-flopped. "I've been really stupid," she told herself. "Kaye will be so mad."

Kaye seldom showed her anger. Mitch, when he was home, was the one who paced and shook his head and clenched his fists when things got tense. But Stella could tell when Kaye was angry. Her mother could get just as angry as Mitch, though in a quiet way.

Stella hated anger in the house. It smelled like old cockroaches.

Kaye and Mitch never took it out on Stella. Both treated her with patient tenderness, even when they clearly did not want to, and that made Stella feel what she called *steepy*, odd and different and apart.

Stella had made up that word, *steepy*, and lots of others, most of which she kept to herself.

It was tough to be responsible for a lot, and maybe all, of their anger.



Hard to know she was to blame for Mitch not being able to go dig up pottery and middens, old garbage dumps, and for Kaye not being able to work in a lab or teach or do anything but write articles and books that somehow never got published or even finished.

Stella knit her long fingers and raised her knee, filling the hollow of the fingers and tugging her arms straight. She heard a vehicle and pushed back into the shadow of the enclosure, lifting her feet into the gloom. A red Ford pickup drove slowly by, clean, new, with a smooth white plastic camper on the back. The camper had a square shiny little door made of smoky plastic in the rear. It looked expensive, much nicer than the little Toyota truck or Mitch's old Dodge Intrepid.

The red truck slowed, stopped, shifted smoothly into reverse, and backed up. Stella tried to squeeze into the corner, her back pressed against splintery wood. She suddenly just wanted to go home. She could find her way back, she was sure of it; she could find it by the smell of the trees. But car exhaust and pretty soon rain would make that harder. The rain would make it much harder.

The truck stopped and the engine switched off. The driver opened his door and got out on the side away from Stella. She could only see a little bit of him through the truck's tinted windows. He had gray hair and a beard. He walked slowly around the truck bed and camper, the shadows of his legs visible under the frame.

"Hello, Miss," he said, stopping a respectful four or five yards from where she was trying to hide. He put his hands in the pockets of his khaki shorts. In his mouth he clenched an unlit pipe. He adjusted the pipe with one hand, removed it, pointed it at her. "You live around here?"

Stella nodded in the shadow.

His goatee was all gray and neatly trimmed. He was potbellied but dressed neatly, and his calf-high socks and running shoes were clean and white. He smelled confident, what she could smell behind thick swipes of deodorant and the rum-and-cherry-scented tobacco tamped into the pipe.

"You should be with your family and friends," he said.

"I'm heading home," Stella said.

"Bus won't come by again until this evening. Only two stops a day here."

"I'm walking."

"Well, that's fine. You shouldn't take rides with strangers."

"I know."

"Can I help? Make a phone call to your folks?"

Stella said nothing. They had one secure phone at home, strictly for emergencies, and they bought disposable cell phones for occasional use. They always used a kind of family code when they talked, even with the disposables, but Mitch said they could identify your voice no matter how much you tried to change it.

She wanted the man in shorts to go away.

“Are your folks at home, Miss?”

Stella looked up at the sun peeking through the clouds.

“If you’re alone, I know some people who can help,” he said. “Special friends. Listen. I made a recording of them.” He dug in his back pocket and pulled out a small recorder. He pressed a button and held out the machine for her to listen.

She had heard such songs and whistles before, on TV and on the radio. When she had been three, she had heard a boy sing songs like that, too. And a few years ago, in the house in Richmond, the big brick house with the iron gate and the guard dogs and four couples, nervous, thin people who seemed to have a lot of money, bringing their children together to play around an indoor swimming pool. She vividly remembered listening to their singing and being too shy to join in. Sweet interweaves of tunes, like meadowlarks singing their hearts out in a berry patch, as Mitch had said.

That was what she heard coming from the recorder.

Voices like hers.

Big drops of rain left crayon-jabs of wetness on the road and in the dirt. The sky and trees behind the man with the goatee flared icy white against the charcoal gray of the sky.

“It’s going to get wet,” the man said. “Miss, it isn’t good to be out here by yourself. Heck, this shelter could even attract lightning, who knows?” He pulled a cell phone from his back pocket. “Can I call someone for you? Your mom or dad?”

He didn’t smell bad. In fact, he did not smell of much at all except for the rum-and-cherry tobacco. She had to learn how to judge people and even take chances. It was the only way to get along. She made a decision. “Could you call?” Stella asked.

“Sure,” he said. “Just tell me their number.”

## LEESBURG

**M**ark Augustine placed his hand on the back of Rachel Browning's chair. The room was quiet except for the hum of equipment fans and a faint clicking noise.

They were watching the plump man in khaki shorts, the red truck, the lanky, awkward girl that was Kaye Lang Rafelson's daughter.

A virus child.

"Is that your stringer, Rachel?"

"I don't know," Browning said.

"A good Samaritan, maybe?" Augustine asked. Internally, he was furious, but would not give Browning the satisfaction of showing it. "He could be a child molester."

For the first time, Browning revealed uncertainty. "Any suggestions?" she asked.

Augustine felt no relief that she was asking his advice. This would simply involve him in her chain of decisions, and that was the last thing he wanted. Let her hang herself, all by herself.

"If things are going wrong, I need to make some calls," he said.

"We should wait," Browning said. "It's probably okay."

The Little Bird hovered about thirty feet above the red truck and the bus stop, the paunchy middle-aged man and the young girl.

Augustine's hand tightened on the back of the chair.

## SPOTSYLVANIA COUNTY

**T**he rain fell heavily and the air got darker as they climbed into the truck. Too late Stella noticed that the man had stuffed waxed cotton up his nose. He sat on the bench seat behind the wheel and offered her a mint Tic-Tac, but she hated mint. He popped two into his mouth and gestured with the phone. "Nobody answers," he said. "Daddy at work?"

She turned away.

"I can drop you at your house, but maybe, if it's okay with you, I know some people would like to meet you," he said.

She was going against everything her parents had ever told her, to give him the house number, to sit in his truck. But she had to do something, and it looked as if today was the day.

She had never walked so far from home. The rain would change everything about the air and the smells. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Fred," the man answered. "Fred Trinket. I know you'd like to meet them, and they surely would like to meet you."

"Stop talking that way," Stella said.

"What way?"

"I'm not an idiot."

Fred Trinket had clogged his nose with cotton and his mouth sang with shrill mint.

"Of course," he said reasonably. "I know that, honey. I have a shelter. A place for kids in trouble. Would you like to see some pictures?" Trinket asked. "They're in the glove box." He watched her, still smiling. He had a kind enough face, she decided. A little sad. He seemed concerned about how she felt. "Pictures of my kids, the ones on the recorder."

Stella felt intensely curious. "Like me?" she asked.

"Just like you," Fred said. "You're sparking real pretty, you know that? The others spark the same way when they're curious. Something to see."

"What's sparking?"

"Your freckles," Fred said, pointing. "They spread out on your cheeks like butterfly wings. I'm used to seeing that at my shelter. I could call your house again, see if somebody's home, tell your daddy or mama to meet us. Should I?"

He was getting nervous. She could smell that much, not that it meant anything. Everybody was nervous these days. He did not want to hurt her, she was pretty sure; there was nothing horny about his scent or his manner, and he did not smell of cigarettes or alcohol.

He did not smell anything like the young men in the convenience store.

She told herself again she would have to take chances if she wanted to get anywhere, if she wanted anything to change. "Yes," she said.

Fred pushed redial. The cell phone beeped the tune of the house number. Still no answer. Her mother was probably out looking for her.

"Let's go to my house," Fred said. "It's not far and there are cold drinks in the ice chest. Strawberry soda. Genuine Nehi in long-necked bottles. I'll call your mama again when we get there."

She swallowed hard, opened the glove box, and pulled out a packet of color photos, five by sevens. The kids in the first photo, seven of them, were having a party, a birthday party, with a bright red cake. Fred stood in the background beside a plump older woman with a blank look. Other than Fred and the older woman, the kids at the party were all about her age. One boy might have been older, but he was standing in the background.

All like her. SHEVA children.

“Jesus,” Stella said.

“Easy on that,” Fred said amiably. “Jesus is Lord.”

The bumper sticker on Fred’s truck said that. On the tailgate was glued a golden plastic fish. The fish, labeled “Truth,” was eating another fish with legs, labeled “Darwin.”

Fred turned on the motor and put the truck in gear. The rain was falling in big hard drops, tapping on the roof and the hood like a million bored fingers.

“Battle of the Wilderness took place not far from here,” Fred said as he drove. He turned right carefully, as if worried about jostling precious cargo. “Civil War. Holy place in its way. Real quiet. I love it out this way. Less traffic, fewer condo-minimums, right?”

Stella leafed through the pictures again, found some more stuck in a plastic pocket. Seven different kids, mugging for the camera or staring at it seriously, some sitting in big chairs in a big house.

One boy had no expression at all. “Who’s this?” she asked Fred.

Fred spared a quick look. “That is Will. Strong Will, Mother calls him. He lived off snakes and squirrels before he came to our shelter.” Fred Trinket smiled and shook his head at the thought. “You’ll like him. And the others, too.”

## 14

**T**he red truck pulled up to a two-story house with tall white columns. Two long brick planters filled with scrawny, dripping oleanders bordered the white steps. Fred Trinket had done nothing overt to upset Stella, but now they were at his house.

“It’s about lunchtime,” Trinket said. “The others will be eating. Mother feeds them about now. I eat later. It’s my digestion. None too good.”

“You eat oatmeal,” Stella said.

Trinket beamed. "That is right, young lady. I eat oatmeal for breakfast. Sometimes a single slice of bacon. What else?"

"You like garlic."

"For dinner, I have spaghetti with garlic, that's right." Trinket shook his head happily. "Marvelous. You smell all that."

He opened his door and came around. Stella got out and he pointed up the porch steps to the house. A big white door stood there, solid and patient, flanked by two tall, skinny windows. The paint was new. The doorknob reeked of Brasso, a smell she did not like. She did not touch the door. Trinket opened it for her. The door was not locked.

"We trust people," Trinket said. "Mother!" he called. "We have a guest."

## 15

**M**itch pulled into the dirt driveway beneath a sodden gray sky. Kaye was not in the house when he arrived. She honked at him from the road as he came out after searching the empty house. His long legs took him in five quick strides to the old truck.

"How long?" Mitch asked, leaning in. He touched her wet cheeks through the driver's side window.

"Three or four hours," Kaye said. "I took a nap and she was gone."

He got in beside her. Just as she put the truck in gear, Mitch held up his hand. "Phone," he said. She cut the engine and they both listened. From the house came a faint ringing.

Mitch ran to the house. The screen door slammed behind him and he picked up on the fourth ring.

"Hello?"

"Is this Mr. Bailey?" a man asked.

That was the name they had told Stella to use.

"Yeah," Mitch said, wiping rain from his brow and eyes. "Who's this?"

"My name is Fred Trinket. I did not know you were living so near, Mr. Bailey."

"I'm in a hurry, Mr. Trinket. Where's my daughter?"

"Please don't be upset. She's in my house right now, and she's very worried about you."

“We’re worried about her. Where are you?”

“She’s fine, Mr. *Rafelson*. We’d like you to come and see something we think is interesting and important. Something you may very well find fascinating.” The man who called himself Trinket gave directions.

Mitch rejoined Kaye in the truck. “Someone has Stella,” he said.

“Emergency Action?”

“A teacher, a crank, somebody,” Mitch said. No time now to mention the man knew his real name. He did not think Stella would have told anyone that. “About ten miles from here.”

Kaye was already spinning the truck around on the road.

## 16

“**T**here,” Trinket said, putting away the phone and drying his short hair with a towel. “Have you ever met with more than one or two of the children at a time?”

Stella did not answer for a moment, it was such an odd question. She wanted to think it over, even though she knew what he meant. She looked around the living room of the big house. The furniture was *colonial*, she knew from reading catalogs and magazines: maple with antique print fabric—butter churns, horse tack, plows. It was really ugly. The wallpaper was dark green flocked velvet with floral patterns that looked like sad faces. The entire room smelled of a citronella candle burning on a small side table, too sweet even for Stella’s tastes. There had been chicken cooking in the past hour, and broccoli.

“No,” she finally said.

“That is *sad*, isn’t it?”

The old woman, the same as in the photos, entered the room and looked at Stella with little interest. She walked in rubber-soled slippers with hardly any sound and held out a long-necked bottle of Nehi strawberry soda, brilliant red in the room’s warm glow.

Trinket was at least fifty. Stella guessed his mother might be seventy, plump, with strong-looking, corded arms, peach-colored skin with only a few wrinkles, and thin white hair arranged neatly on a pallid, taut scalp, like the worn head of a much-loved doll.

Stella was thirsty, but she did not take the bottle.

“Mother,” Trinket said, “I’ve called Stella’s parents.”

“No need,” the woman said, her tone flat. “We have groceries.”

Trinket winked at Stella. “We do indeed,” he said. “And chicken for lunch. What else, Stella?” he asked.

“Huh?”

“What else do we have to eat?”

“It’s not a game,” Stella said huffily.

“Broccoli, I’d guess,” Trinket answered for her, his lips forming a little bow. “Mother is a good cook, but predictable. Still, she helps me with the children.”

“I do,” the woman said.

“Where are they?” Stella asked.

“Mother does her best, but my wife was a better cook.”

“She died,” the old woman said, touching her hair with her free hand.

Stella looked at the floor in frustration. She heard someone talking, far off in the back.

“Is that them?” she asked, fascinated despite herself. She made a move toward the long, picture-lined hall on the right, following the sound of voices.

“Yes,” Trinket said. He shot a quick glance at the book in her hands. “Your parents kept you secluded, didn’t they? How selfish. Don’t we know, Mother, how selfish that would be for someone like Stella?”

“Alone,” his mother said, and abruptly turned and set the bottle down on the small table beside the candle. She rubbed her hands on her apron and waddled down the hallway. The combined sweetness of candle and Nehi threatened to make Stella dizzy. She had seen dogs whining to be with other dogs, to sniff them and exchange doggy greetings. That memory brought her up short.

She thought of the two men in the Texaco minimart.

*You smell as good as a dog.*

She shivered.

“Your parents were protecting you, but it was still cruel,” Trinket said, watching her. Stella kept her eyes on the hallway. The wish that had haunted her for weeks now, months if she thought back that far, was suddenly strong in her, making her dull and steepy.

“Not to be with your own kind, not to bathe in the air of another, and not to speak the way you all do, such lovely doubling, that is painfully lonely-making, isn’t it?”



Her cheeks felt hot. Trinket studied her cheeks. “Your people are so beautiful,” he said, his eyes going soft. “I could watch you all day.”

“Why?” Stella asked sharply.

“Beg pardon?” Trinket smiled, and this time there was something in the smile that was wrong. Stella did not like being the center of attention. But she wanted to meet the others, more than anything on Earth or in the heavens, as Mitch’s father might have said.

Stella’s grandfather, Sam, had died five years ago.

“I do not run an accredited school, nor a day care, nor a center of learning,” Trinket said. “I try to teach what I can, but mostly I—Mother and I—create a brief refuge, away from the cruel people who hate and fear. We neither hate nor fear. We admire. In my way, I’m an anthropologist.”

“Can I meet them now?” Stella asked.

Trinket sat on the couch with a radiant grin. “Tell me more about your mother and father. They’re well known in some circles. Your mother discovered the virus, right? And your father found the famous mummies in the Alps. The harbingers of our own fate.”

The sweet scents in the room blocked some human odors, but not aggression, not fear. Those she would still be able to smell, like a steel spoon stuck in vanilla ice cream. Trinket did not smell mean or fearful, so she did not feel she was in immediate danger. Still, he wore nose plugs. And how did he know so much about Kaye and Mitch?

Trinket leaned forward on the couch and touched his nostrils. “You’re worried about these.”

Stella turned away. “Let me see the others,” she said.

Trinket snorted a laugh. “I can’t be in a crowd of you without these,” Trinket said. “I’m sensitive, oh yes. I had a daughter like you. My wife and I acquired the masks and knew the special scents my daughter made. Then, my wife died. She died in pain.” He stared at the ceiling, his eyes wet pools of sentiment. “I miss her,” Trinket said, and slapped his hand suddenly on the bolster of the couch. “Mother!”

The blank-faced woman returned.

“See if they’ve finished their lunch,” Trinket said. “Then let’s introduce Stella.”

“Will she eat?” the older woman asked, her eyes unconcerned either way.

“I don’t know. That depends,” Fred Trinket said. He looked at his watch. “I hope your parents haven’t lost their way. Maybe you should call them . . . in a few minutes, just to make sure?”

**K**aye pulled the Toyota truck to the side of the rutted dirt road and dropped her head onto the wheel. The rain had stopped, but they had nearly gotten their wheels stuck in mud several times. She moaned.

Mitch threw open the door. "This is the road. This is the address. Shit!"

He flung the crumpled piece of paper into a wet ditch. The only house here had been boarded up for a long time, and half of it had slumped into cinders after a fire. Five or six acres of weed-grown farm ground surrounded them, sullen behind a veil of low mist. Streamers of cloud played hide-and-seek with a watery sun. The house was bright, then dark, beneath the coming and going of those wide gray fingers.

"Maybe he doesn't have her." Kaye looked at Mitch through the open door.

"I could have transposed a number," Mitch said, leaning against the cab.

His cell phone rang. They both jerked as if stuck with pins. Mitch pulled the phone out and said, "Yes." The phone recognized his voice and announced that the calling party's number was blocked, then asked if he would take the call anyway.

"Yes," he said, without thinking.

"Daddy?" The voice on the other end was tense, high-pitched, but it sounded like Stella's.

"Where are you?"

"Is that you? Daddy?" The voice went through a digital bird fight and steadied. He had never heard that sort of sound before and it worried him.

"It's me, honey. Where are you?"

"I'm at this house. I saw the house number on the mail box."

Mitch pulled a pen and pad from his inside coat pocket and wrote down the number and road.

"Stay tight, Stella, and don't let anyone touch you," he said, working to steady his voice. "We're on our way." He reluctantly said good-bye and closed the phone. His face was like red sandstone, he was so furious.

"Is she okay?"

Mitch nodded, then opened the phone again and punched in another number.

"Who are you calling?"

“State police,” he said.

“We can’t!” Kaye cried. “They’ll take her!”

“It’s too late to worry about that,” Mitch said. “This guy’s going for bounty, and he wants all of us.”

## 18

**S**o many pictures in the hall leading to the back of the house. Generation after generation of Trinkets, Stella assumed, from faded color snapshots clustered in a single frame to larger, sepia-colored prints showing men and women and children wearing stiff brown clothes and peering with pinched expressions, as if the eyes of the future scared them.

“Our legacy,” Fred Trinket told her. “Old genes. All those arrangements, gone!” He grinned and walked ahead, his shoulders rolling with each step. He had a fat back, Stella saw. Fat neck and fat back. His calves were taut, however, as if he did a lot of walking, but pale and hairy. Perhaps he walked at night.

Trinket pushed open a screen door.

“Let me know if she wants lunch,” the mother said from the kitchen, halfway up the hall and to the left. As Mrs. Trinket dried a dish, Stella saw a dark, damp towel flick out of the kitchen like a snake’s tongue.

“Yes, Mother,” Trinket murmured. “This way, Miss Rafelson.”

He descended a short flight of wooden steps and walked across the gravel path to a long, dark building about ten paces beyond. Stella saw a doghouse but no dog, and a small orchard of clothes trees spinning slowly in the wind after the storm, their lines empty.

*Along would come Mother Trinket, Stella thought, and pin up the laundry, and it would be clothes tree springtime. When the clothes were dry she would pull them down and stuff them in her basket and it would be winter again.* Expressionless Mother Trinket was the seasonal heart of the old house, mistress of the backyard.

Stella’s mouth was dry. Her nose hurt. She touched behind her ears where it itched when she was nervous. Her finger came away waxy. She wanted to take a washcloth and remove all the old scents, clean herself for the people in the long outbuilding. A word came to her: *prensing*, preening and cleansing. It was a lovely word and it made her tremble like a leaf.

Trinket unlocked the door to the rear building. Inside, Stella saw fluorescent lights sputter on, bright and blue, over workbenches, an old refrigerator, stacked cardboard boxes, and, to the right, a strong wire mesh door.

The voices grew louder. Stella thought she heard three or four. They were speaking in a way she could not understand—low, guttural, with piping high exclamations. Someone coughed.

“They’re inside,” Trinket said. He unlocked the wire door with a brass key tied to a dirty length of twine. “They just finished eating. We’ll fetch the trays for Mother.” He pulled the mesh door open.

Stella did not move. Not even the promise of the voices, the promise that had brought her this far, could persuade her to take another step.

“There are four inside, just like you. They need your help. I’ll go in with you.”

“Why the lock?” Stella asked.

“People drive around, sometimes they have guns . . . take potshots. Just not safe,” Trinket said. “It’s not safe for your kind. Since my wife’s death, I’ve made it one of my jobs, my duty, to protect those I come across on the road. Youngsters like you.”

“Where’s your daughter?” Stella asked.

“She’s in Idaho.”

“I don’t believe you,” Stella said.

“Oh, it’s true. They took her away last year. I’ve never been to visit her.”

“They let parents visit sometimes.”

“I just can’t bear the thought of going.” His expression had changed, and his smell, too.

“You’re lying,” Stella said. She could feel her glands working, itching. Stella could not smell it herself, could not in fact smell anything her nose was so dry, but she knew the room was thick with her persuasion scent.

Trinket seemed to deflate, arms dropping, hands relaxing. He pointed to the wire mesh door. He was thinking, or waiting. Stella moved away. The key dangled from the rope in his hand. “Your people,” he said, and scratched his nose.

“Let us go,” Stella said. It was more than a suggestion.

Trinket shook his head slowly, then lifted his eyes. She thought she might be having an effect on him, despite his nose plugs and the mints.

“Let us all go,” Stella said.

The old woman came in so quietly Stella did not hear her. She was sur-

prisingly strong. She grabbed Stella around the ribs, pinning her arms and making her squeak like a mouse, and shoved her through the door. Her book fell to the floor. Trinket swung up and caught the key on its string, then slammed and locked the gate before Stella could turn around.

"They're lonely in there," Trinket's mother told Stella. She wore a clothespin on her nose and her eyes were watering. "Let my son do his work. Fred, maybe now she'd like some lunch."

Trinket took out a handkerchief and blew his nose, expelling the plugs. He looked at them in disgust, then pushed a button mounted on the wall. A lock clicked and buzzed and another wire door behind her popped open. Stella faced them through the mesh of the first door. She could not make a sound at first, she was so startled and so angry.

Trinket rubbed his eyes and shook his head. He gave a little kick and spun her book into the far corner. "Damn," he said. "She's good. She almost had me. Hellish little skunk."

She stood shivering in the little cubicle. Trinket turned out the fluorescent lights. That left only the reflected glow from the rooms behind her.

A hand touched her elbow.

Stella screamed.

"What?"

She backed up against the mesh and stared at a boy. He was ten or eleven, taller than her by a couple of inches, and, if anything, skinnier. He had scratches on his face and his hair was unkempt and tufty.

"I didn't mean to scare you," the boy said. His cheeks flushed in little spots of pink and brown. His gold-flecked eyes followed her as she sidled to the left, into the corner, and held up her fists.

The boy's nose wrinkled. "Wow," he said. "You're really shook."

"What's your name?" she asked, her voice high.

"What sort of name?" he asked. He leaned over, twisted his head, inhaled the air in front of her, and made a sour face.

"They scared me," she explained, embarrassed.

"Yeah, I can tell."

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Look," he said, leaning forward, and his cheeks freckled again.

"So?"

He looked disappointed. "Some can do it."

"What do your parents call you?"

"I don't know. Kids call me Kevin. We live out in the woods. Mixed group. Not anymore. Trinket got me. I was stupid."

Stella straightened and lowered her fists. "How many are in here?"

"Four, including me. Now, five."

She heard the coughing again. "Somebody sick?"

"Yeah."

"I've never been sick," Stella said.

"Neither have I. Free Shape is sick."

"Who?"

"I call her Free Shape. It's not her name, probably. She's almost as old as me."

"Is Strong Will still here?"

"He doesn't like that name. They call us names like that because they say we stink. Come on back. Nobody's going anywhere soon, right? They sent me out here to see who else old Fred snared."

Stella followed Kevin to the back of the long building. They passed four empty rooms equipped with cots and folding chairs and cheap old dressers.

At the very back, three young people sat around a small portable television. Stella hated television, never watched it. She saw that the television's control panel had been covered with a metal plate. Two—an older boy, Will, Stella guessed, and a younger girl, no more than seven—sat on a battered gray couch. The third, a girl of nine or ten, curled up on a blanket on the floor.

The girl smelled bad. She smelled sick. She coughed into her palm and wiped it on her T-shirt without taking her eyes away from the television.

Will pushed off the couch and stood. He looked Stella over cautiously, then stuck his hands in his pockets. "This is Mabel," he said, introducing the younger girl. "Or Maybelle. She doesn't know. Girl on the floor doesn't say much. I'm Will. I'm the oldest. I'm always the oldest. I may be the oldest alive."

"Hello," Stella said.

"New girl," Kevin explained. "She smells really shook."

"You *do*," Mabel said and lifted her upper lip, then pinched the end of her nose.

Will looked back at Stella. "I can see your freckle name. But what's your other name?"

"I think maybe her name is Rose or Daisy," Kevin said.

"My parents call me Stella," she said, her tone implying she wasn't stuck with it; she could change the name anytime. She knelt beside the sick girl. "What's wrong with her?"

“It isn’t a cold and it isn’t flu,” Will said. “I wouldn’t get too close. We don’t know where she comes from.”

“She needs a doctor,” Stella said.

“Tell that to the old mother when she brings your food,” Kevin suggested. “Just kidding. She won’t do anything. I think they’re going to turn us in, all at once, together.”

“That’s the way Fred makes his moochie,” Will said, rubbing his fingers together. “Bounty.”

Stella touched the sick girl’s shoulder. She looked up at Stella and closed her eyes. “Don’t look. Nothing to see,” the girl said. Her cheeks formed simple patterns, shapeless. Free Shape. Stella pushed harder on the girl’s arm. The arm went limp and she rolled onto her back. Stella shook her again and her eyes opened halfway, unfocused. “Mommy?”

“What’s your name?” Stella asked.

“Mommy?”

“What does Mommy call you?”

“Elvira,” the girl said, and coughed again.

“Ha ha,” Will said without humor. That was a cruel joke name.

“You have parents?” Kevin asked the girl, following Stella’s lead and kneeling.

Stella touched Elvira’s face. The skin was dry and hot and there was a bloody crust under her nose and also behind her ears. Stella felt beneath her jaw and then lifted her arms and felt there. “She has an infection,” Stella said. “Like mumps, maybe.”

“How do you know?”

“My mother is a doctor. Sort of.”

“Is it Shiver?” Will asked.

“I don’t think so. We don’t get that.” She looked up at Will and felt her cheeks signal a message, she did not know what: embarrassment, maybe.

“Look at me,” Will said. Stella got to her feet and faced him.

“You know how to talk this way?” he asked. His cheeks freckled and cleared. The dapple patterns came and went quickly, and synchronized somehow with the irises of his eyes, his facial muscles, and little sounds he made deep in his throat. Stella watched, fascinated, but had no idea what he was doing, what he was trying to convey. “I guess not. What do you smell, little deer?”

Stella felt her nose burn. She drew back.

“Practically illiterate,” Will said, but his smile was sympathetic. “It’s the Talk. Kids in the woods made it up.”

Stella realized Will wanted to be in charge, wanted people to think he was smart and capable. There was a weakness in his scent, however, that made him seem very vulnerable. *He's broken*, she thought.

Elvira moaned and called for her mother. Will knelt and touched the girl's forehead. "Her parents hid her in an attic. That's what the kids in the woods said. Her mom and dad left for California, and she stayed behind with her grandmother. Then the grandmother died. Elvira ran away. She got caught on the street. She was raped, I think, more than once." He cleared his throat and his cheeks were dark with angry blood. "She had the start of this cold or whatever it is, so she couldn't fever-scent and make them stop. Fred found her two days after he found me. He took some pictures. He keeps us here until he has enough to get a good bounty."

"One million dollars a head," Kevin said. "Dead or alive."

"Don't be dramatic," Will said. "I don't know how much he gets, and they don't pay if we're dead. If we're injured, he could even go to jail. That's what I heard in the woods. The bounty is federal not state, so he tries to avoid the troopers."

Stella was impressed by this show of knowledge. "It's awful," she said, her heart thumping. "I want to go home."

"How did Fred catch you?" Will asked.

"I went for a walk," Stella said.

"You ran away from home," Will said. "Do your parents care?"

Stella thought of Kaye waking up to find her gone and wanted to cry. That made her nose hurt more, and her ears started to ache.

The wire mesh door rattled. Will pointed, and Kevin left to see what was going on. Stella glanced at Will and then followed Kevin. Mother Trinket was at the cage door. She had just finished shoving a cafeteria tray under the mesh frame. The tray held a paper plate covered with fried chicken backs and necks, a small scoop of dry potato salad, and several long spears of limp broccoli. The old woman watched them, eyes milky, chin withdrawn, strong mottled arms hanging like two birch logs.

"Yuck," Kevin said, and picked up the tray. He gave it to Stella. "All yours," he said.

"How's the girl?" Mother Trinket asked.

"She's really sick," Kevin said.

"People coming. They'll take care of her," Mother Trinket said.

"What do you care?" Kevin asked.



The old woman blinked. "It's my son," she said, then turned and waddled through the door. She closed and locked it behind her.

The girl, Free Shape, was breathing in short, thick gasps as they carried Stella's tray into the back room.

"She smells bad," Mabel said. "I'm scared for her."

"So am I," Will said.

"Will is Papa here," Mabel said. "Will should get help."

Will looked miserably at Stella and fell back on the couch. Stella put the tray on a small folding table. She did not feel like eating. Both she and Kevin squatted by Elvira. Stella stroked the girl's cheeks, making her freckles pale. They remained pale. The patches had steadied in the last few minutes, and were now even more meaningless and vague.

"Can we make her feel better?" Stella asked.

"We're not angels," Will said.

"My mother says we all have minds deep inside of us," Stella said, desperate to find some answer. "Minds that talk to each other through chemicals and—"

"What the hell does she know?" Will asked sharply. "She's human, right?"

"She's Kaye Lang Rafelson," Stella said, stung and defensive.

"I don't care who she is," Will said. "They hate us because we're new and better."

"Our parents don't hate us," Stella ventured hopefully, looking at Mabel and Kevin.

"Mine do," Mabel said. "My father hates the government so he hid me, but he just took off one day. My mother left me in the bus station."

Stella could see that these children had lived lives different from her own. They all smelled lonely and left out, like puppies pulled from a litter, whining and searching for something they had lost. Beneath the loneliness and other emotions of the moment lay their fundamentals: Will smelled rich and sharp like aged cheddar. Kevin smelled a little sweet. Mabel smelled like soapy bathwater, steam and flowers and clean, warm skin.

She could not detect Elvira's fundamental. Underneath the illness she seemed to have no smell at all.

"We thought about escaping," Kevin said. "There's steel wire in all the walls. Fred told us he made this place strong."

"He hates us," Will said.

"We're worth money," Kevin said.

“He told me his daughter killed his wife,” Will said.

That kept them all quiet for a while, all but Free Shape, whose breath rasped.

“Teach me how to talk with my dapples,” Stella asked Will. She wanted to take their minds off the things they could not hope to do, like escape.

“What if Elvira dies?” Will asked, his forehead going pale.

“We’ll cry for her,” Mabel said.

“Right,” Kevin said. “We’ll make a little cross.”

“I’m not a Christian,” Will said.

“I am,” Mabel said. “Christ was one of us. I heard it in the woods. That’s why they killed him.”

Will shook his head sadly at this naïveté. Stella felt ashamed at the words she had spoken to the men in the Texaco minimart. She knew she was nothing like Jesus. Deep inside, she did not feel merciful and charitable. She had never admitted that before, but watching Elvira gasping on the floor taught her what her emotions really were.

She hated Fred Trinket and his mother. She hated the federals coming for them.

“We’ll have to fight to get out,” Will said. “Fred is careful. He doesn’t come inside the cage. He won’t even call a doctor. He just calls for the vans. The vans come from Maryland and Richmond. Everyone wears suits and carries cattle prods and tranquilizer guns.”

Stella shivered. She had called her parents; her parents were coming. They might be captured, too.

“Sometimes when the vans come, the children die, maybe by accident, but they’re still dead,” Will continued. “They burn the bodies. That’s what we heard in the woods.” He added, “I don’t feel like teaching you how to freckle.”

“Then tell me about the woods,” Stella said.

“The woods are free,” Will said. “I wish the whole world was woods.”

**T**he rain came back as drizzle. Kaye pulled off and parked just north of the private asphalt road that led to the big, white-pillared brick house and out-buildings. The sky was dark enough that the occupants of the house had turned on the interior lights. The black steel mailbox, mounted on a chest-high brick base, showed five gold reflective numbers.

“This is it,” Mitch said. He peered through the wet windshield and rolled down his window. A red pickup and camper had been parked in front. There were no other vehicles.

“Maybe we’re too late,” Kaye said, fighting back tears.

“It’s only been ten or fifteen minutes.”

“It took us twenty minutes. The sheriff might have come and gone.”

Mitch quietly opened the door. “If I can grab her, I’ll come right back.”

“No,” Kaye said. “I won’t be left alone. I don’t think I can stand it.” Her fingers gripped the steering wheel like cords of rope.

“Stay here, please,” Mitch said. “I’ll be okay. I can carry her. You can’t.”

“You’d be surprised,” Kaye said. Then, “Why would you have to carry her?”

“For speed,” Mitch said. “For speed, that’s all.”

He opened the glove box and took out a cloth-wrapped bundle, pulled open the cloth, smelling of lubricant, and removed a pistol. He tucked the gun into his suit coat pocket. They had three handguns, all of them unregistered and illegal. Getting charged with gun possession was the last thing Mitch and Kaye lost sleep over. Nevertheless, they both looked on the guns with loathing, knowing that weapons give a false sense of security.

Mitch had cleaned and oiled all three last week.

He took a deep breath and stepped out, walking to the rear of the truck. Kaye released the brake and put the truck into neutral. Mitch pushed, grunting softly in the drizzle. Kaye stepped down and helped, steering with one hand, and together they rolled the truck up the asphalt road, stopping about halfway to the house. Kaye spun the wheel and turned the truck until it blocked the way. Hedges and brick walls lined the drive, and no vehicle would be able to get around the truck going in or out. She sat in the cab. Mitch took her face in his hands and kissed her cheek and she squeezed his arms. Then he walked toward the house, shoving his hands into the pockets of his slacks. He never looked comfortable in a suit. His shoulders and his hands were too big, his neck too long. He did not have the face for a suit.

Kaye watched with heart pounding, her mind a thicket.

The pillars and porch stood dark, the door closed. Mitch walked up the steps as softly as his hard-soled shoes allowed and peered through the tall, narrow window on the right.

Kaye watched him turn without knocking and descend the steps. He walked around the side of the house, out of sight. She started to sob and

jammed her knuckles against her teeth and lips. They had been standing on tiptoes for eleven years. It was cruel, and whenever she felt she was used to the extremes of their life together, as she had this morning, almost, so close to feeling normal and productive and contented, working on her scientific paper, napping in front of her computer, she would come up short with some spontaneous vision of how they could lose it all. They had been lucky, she knew.

But rarely did her worst visions meet the level of this nightmare.

Mitch walked along the neatly trimmed grass margin, crouching below the windows along the side of the house. He heard a rasping, flacketing buzz, like a big insect, and glanced up with a scowl into the stormy gloom. Saw nothing.

His heart almost stopped when he realized the cell phone was still on. He reached into his left pocket and switched it off.

A gravel path reached from the back porch out to a long frame outbuilding behind the house. He avoided the path and the scrunching sound his shoes would make there, and walked along the soft margin, stepping from the grass, patchy and dead, onto the outbuilding's concrete stoop. He peered through the small, square window set into the steel door. Why a steel door? And new, at that.

In the room beyond the small window he saw a heavy mesh gate. He quietly tried the doorknob. It was locked, of course. He stepped backward, dropped his heel in a depression in the grass, caught his balance with a hop, then walked around the side, quickening his pace. The sheriff might arrive any second. Mitch preferred recovering Stella without official help. Besides, he knew Kaye could not hold out much longer. He had to finish his reconnaissance in a hurry, locate his daughter, and decide what to do next.

Mitch had never been one to make quick decisions. He had spent too many years patiently scraping and brushing through packed layers of soil, uncovering millennia of silent, unwritten history. The peace that had filled his soul on those digs had turned out not to be a survival trait.

He had thrown that peace away, along with the digging, the history, and almost all of his past life, and replaced it with a desperate and protective fury.

## LEESBURG

**M**ark Augustine twitched his lips at the arrival of the man and the woman in the old truck. Little Bird gave them a series of clear, frozen pictures, at the ends of blurry swoops, the pictures cameoed on the big screens in blue-wrapped squares.

Two names came up on the last screen. Facial matching had led to an identification that Augustine did not need. The man walking around the house was Mitch Rafelson. The woman in the truck was Kaye Lang Rafelson.

“Good,” Browning said. “The gang’s all here.” She looked up at Augustine.

Augustine pinched his lips. “Enforcement is hardly an exact science,” he said. “Where are the vans?”

“About two minutes away,” Browning said. Once more, she was completely in control and confident.

## SPOTSYLVANIA COUNTY

**K**aye heard engines. She looked over the hedge to the road and saw two blue-and-white Virginia State Police patrol cars coming from one direction and from the other, no sirens or flashing lights, a long, blocky white utility van, like a cross between a prison bus and an ambulance. She could not see Emergency Action’s red-and-gold shield on the side, but she knew it was there.

She stood quietly as the patrol cars slowed and then nosed off with the van to see who would turn first into the private road.

“No snooping,” the old woman said. “You with the gas company?” The woman was forty feet away, nothing more than a frizz-headed silhouette. She had come out of the house very quietly as Mitch had transited the back of the long building. She was carrying a shotgun.

Mitch turned and looked up the right side of the long building, facing the back of the house. He had made his circuit and found no other entrance.

“Don’t be silly,” he called, trying to sound amiable. “I’m looking for my daughter.”

“We don’t have parties,” the woman said.

“Mother!” A man slammed open the screen door and stood beside her on the back porch. “Put that damned gun away. There are troopers out front.”

“Caught him,” the woman said. She pointed.

“Come right on up here. Let me see you. You with the troopers?”

“Emergency Action,” Mitch said.

“That’s not what he said,” the woman commented, lowering the shotgun.

The man took the gun away from her with a jerk and stepped back into the house. The woman stood staring at Mitch. “You come to get your daughter,” she murmured.

Mitch walked warily around her, then to the left, seeing the headlights of a car and a van at the end of the road behind their old truck.

“Damn it, you’ve parked all wrong,” the man shouted from inside the house. Mitch heard feet stamping on wooden floors, saw lights go on and off through the rooms, heard the door open on the front porch.

As Mitch came around the corner, a plump, active man in shorts stood on the porch between the pillars, hands up as if surrendering. “What are they up to?” the man muttered.

Mitch’s hopes were very low. He could not find Stella without making a lot of noise, and there was no way now he could imagine getting her away from the house even if he carried her. The woods behind the house and across a field looked thick. Bugs were humming and chirping all around him now that the rain had let up. The air smelled dusty and sweet with moisture and wet grass and dirt.

Kaye faced the main road and the newly arrived vehicles. Two men in two-tone gray uniforms got out of the patrol cars and walked toward her. The younger man cast a confused backward glance at the van.

“Did you call us, ma’am?” the older trooper asked. He was large, in his late forties, with a deep but crackling bull voice.

“Our daughter’s been kidnapped. She’s in there,” Kaye said.

“In the house?”

“We just got here. She called us and told us where to find her.”

The troopers regarded each other briefly, faces professionally blank, then turned toward the two figures emerging from the van: a tall, cadaverous male in a shiny black jumpsuit and a stocky female in plastic isolation whites. They slipped on gloves and face masks and approached the troopers.

“This is our jurisdiction, officers,” the thin man said. “We’re federal.”

“We have a kidnapping complaint,” the older trooper said.

“Ma’am, what’s your business here?” the woman asked Kaye.

“Show me your ID,” Kaye demanded.

“Look at the damned van. They aren’t cheap, you know,” said the thin man in the black jumpsuit, his voice haughty. “You the mother?”

The troopers stood back. The big one scowled at the thin man.

“You are here to pay bounty,” Kaye said, her voice scratchy. “I have no idea how many kids are here, but I know this is not legal. Not in this state.”

The big trooper stood his ground with arms folded. “That true?” he asked the woman in the plastic suit.

“We have jurisdiction. This is federal,” the tall man repeated. “Sherry,” he called out to his partner, “get the office.”

“Maryland plates,” the younger trooper observed.

Kaye studied the big trooper’s face. He was red-cheeked and his nose was a swollen network of broken veins, probably from rosacea, but it could also have been drink.

“Why are you outside of your county?” the big trooper asked the pair from the van.

“It’s federal; it’s official,” the stout little woman said defiantly. “You can’t stop us.”

“Take off that damned mask. I can’t understand you,” the big trooper said.

“It’s policy to leave the mask on, officer,” the woman announced formally. Her outfit rustled and squeaked as she walked. There was an air of disarray about the team that did not inspire confidence. The big trooper’s uniform was pressed and fit tightly over a strong frame going to fat. He looked sad and tired, but strong on self-discipline. Kaye thought he looked like an old football player. He was not impressed. He turned his attention back to Kaye. “Who called the state police, ma’am?”

“My husband. Someone snatched our daughter. She’s in that house.”

“Are we talkin’ about virus children?” the trooper asked softly.

Kaye studied his expression, his dark eyes, the lines around his jowls. "Yes," she said.

"How long you been living here?" the big trooper asked.

"In Spotsylvania County, almost four years," Kaye said.

"Hiding out?"

"Living quietly."

"Yeah," the trooper said with somber resignation. "I hear that." He swung around to the Emergency Action team. "You got paperwork?" He waved his hand at his partner. "Check out the house."

"My husband is armed," Kaye said, and pointed toward the house. "They kidnapped our child. Please, he won't shoot at you. Let him surrender his gun."

The big trooper unclipped his pistol with a swift motion of both hands. He squinted at the big pillared house, then saw Mitch and the old woman walking up the side yard.

His partner, younger by at least ten years, stooped and immediately drew his own pistol. "I hate this shit," he said.

"Let us do our work," the stout woman demanded. The mask slipped and she looked even more ridiculous.

"I haven't seen any paperwork, and you are out of your jurisdiction," the big trooper growled, keeping his eyes on the house. "I need to see EMAC documents authorizing this extraction."

Neither responded at once. "We're filling in for the Spotsylvania County team. They're on another assignment," the thin man admitted, some of his bravado gone.

"I know the ones," the big trooper said. He looked sadly at Kaye. "They took my son four years ago. My wife and I haven't seen our boy once, not once, since then. He is in Indiana now, outside Terre Haute."

"You're brave to still be together," Kaye said, as if a spark had passed and they understood each other and their troubles.

The big trooper dropped his chin but still watched everyone with beady, alert eyes. "Don't you know it," he said. He waved his hand at his partner. "William, retrieve the father's little pistol and let's check the house. Let's see what you all have got going here."

Mitch slung his gun by its trigger guard on his pointing finger and held it high up in the air. He regretted carrying it at all now; he felt foolish, like an actor in a cop show. Still, the thought that Stella was inside the house or the long building or somewhere else on the property made him feel volatile



and dangerous. Anything might provoke him, and that was frightening. The intensity of his devotion was like a blowtorch in his head, brilliant and blinding.

It had always been that way. There would never be any escape.

The younger trooper slogged across the wet grass in his boots.

The plump man in shorts finally decided to speak. "How can I help, officer?" he asked.

The younger trooper took Mitch's gun and backed away. "Are you holding children on these premises?" he asked the man in shorts.

"We are," the man said. "Strays and runaways. We protect them until the truck comes and takes them to where they can be taken care of. Where they belong."

Mitch looked at the trooper from beneath lowered, bushy brows. He had always possessed what amounted to a single eyebrow over his eyes and with age, the woolly caterpillar of hair had thickened and gone wild. At the best of times, he looked formidable, even a little crazy. "Our daughter is not a runaway," he said. "She was kidnapped."

The big trooper approached with Kaye and the two collectors close behind. "Where are the children?" he asked.

"Round back," said the man in shorts. "Sir, my name is Fred Trinket. I'm a longtime resident, and my mother has lived here all her life."

"To hell with that," the big trooper said. "Show us the kids, now."

Something whickered over their heads like a big insect. They all looked up.

"Damn," the younger trooper said, flinching and dropping his shoulders. "Sounds like federal surveillance."

The big trooper drew himself up and circled his eyes warily around the dark skies. "I do not see a thing," he said. "Let's go."

**T**he arrival of the troopers did not please Rachel Browning.

“I think we should alert the Frederick County office,” she said. She blew her nose again. “And let’s get the state’s attorney general in on this. She’ll want to know what her people are up to.”

“There won’t be time,” Augustine said. “It’s Virginia, Rachel. They don’t like the feds telling them what to do. And the situation is highly irregular, even for an official kidnapping.”

Browning tilted her head to one side, jerking her gaze between Augustine and the displays. “I didn’t hear what the big guy said.” The Little Bird had backed off about fifty feet and was hovering. Its little fuel cell would be depleted soon, and it would have to return or be retrieved by the command vehicle.

“The trooper said his son was taken,” Augustine told her. “He is not likely to be sympathetic.”

“Shit,” Browning said. “You’re happy about this, aren’t you?”

Augustine did not smile, but his lips twitched.

“I will not take responsibility,” Browning insisted.

“Your own machines are recording everything,” Augustine said, pointing at the console. “Better whisk Little Bird out of there, and quickly, if you want to escape a district court spanking.”

“You’re as culpable as I am,” Browning said.

“I’ve never authorized bounty,” Augustine reminded her. “That’s your division.”

The phone on the desk wheedled.

“Whoops,” Augustine said. “Someone’s been tuning in.”

Browning answered. She covered the mouthpiece and looked up desperately at Augustine. “It’s the surgeon general,” she said, eyes wide.

Augustine expressed his sympathy with a lift of his brows and a sigh. Then he turned and walked toward the door. The rubber tip of his cane made squeaking noises on the hard floor.

## SPOTSYLVANIA COUNTY

**F**red Trinket gently pushed his mother aside as he led the group around the right side of the house. Mitch hated this place, the plump man in khaki shorts, the collectors. His head was like a balloon filled with gasoline waiting to be torched off.

Kaye felt his anger like heat from a stove. She gripped his arm. If Stella was harmed, in any way, then . . . If their daughter was harmed, then . . .

She could not finish that sequence of thoughts.

“We’ve fed the runaways a chicken lunch, very nutritious,” Trinket explained. His face was like blotchy marble and he was sweating like a stuck pig. He was beginning to realize the big trooper did not like the way Trinket made money.

Mitch made a jerk in Trinket’s direction. Kaye drew him back and squeezed his arm until he winced. He did not object, just looked at the gray, square board face of the long building behind the house, the asphalt shingled roof, the steel door with its tiny window and concrete stoop.

“We keep good, clean facilities,” Trinket said. He had moved ahead of Mitch and Kaye and flanked the big trooper. The younger trooper and the collectors took up the rear. “We’ve had a number of runaways through here,” Trinket continued, louder now with the distance to the door decreasing, his secret soon to be revealed. “We’re a conscientious clearing house. We take good care of them.”

“Shut up,” Kaye demanded.

“Keep your temper, ma’am, please,” the big trooper requested, but his own voice was shaky.

Stella heard the lock in the big steel door and rushed from Elvira’s side down the hall to the inner cage gate. She stood there as the lights came on in the first little room, with the boxes, and saw a big man in a leather jacket and a khaki uniform and behind him, Fred Trinket.

Stella smelled Kaye and Mitch almost immediately.

“Mommy,” she said, as if she were three years old again.

“Open that door,” the big trooper ordered Trinket. There were tears on

the trooper's cheeks. Stella had not seen many police officers in her life, and she had certainly never seen one cry.

Trinket mumbled and drew the brass key on its string.

"Mommy, she's dead!" Stella cried. "She just died, just right now/ We couldn't do anything!" Her voice split and she spoke in two high-pitched, singing, weirdly beautiful streams, as if two young girls stood by the mesh gate, one inside the other. Kaye could not understand, but her heart almost exploded with joy and grief.

"Open it now!" Kaye shouted, pushing through. Her fingernails raked Fred Trinket's cheek. He recoiled, dropped the key and squealed in protest.

Kaye tried to reach Stella through the mesh. The distance between the two doors separated them.

"Lord almighty," the younger trooper said. Mitch scooped up Trinket's key and tossed it to Kaye, then grabbed the man and held him. The big trooper stood back. Kaye opened the mesh gate and then the inner gate and grabbed Stella.

"Get the others," Stella said.

"How many?" the big trooper asked Trinket.

"Five," Trinket said.

"Sir, it's our duty to assemble and transport all virus children," the stocky collector asserted, shouldering into the first room. Her tall, thin colleague remained outside, staring at the ground, the steps, anything but what was happening within the long building.

Kaye, Mitch, and the big trooper walked down the hall. Stella followed her mother closely. Mitch gave his daughter a squeeze around the shoulders and she hugged him close. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

Mabel and Kevin sat on the couch. Will stood by Elvira. The television blared an old episode of *I Love Lucy*. Kaye bent beside the prone girl and examined her, face wrinkling in pity. She saw the bloody crust under the girl's nose, turned her head gently, found more crust behind her ears, felt the lumps under her jaw and in her armpits.

"How long?" Kaye asked Stella.

"Five, six minutes," Stella said. "She just coughed real bad and lay still."

Kaye looked over her shoulder at Mitch and the big trooper. Trinket winced but wisely kept quiet.

"Let me see," the stocky collector said. She knelt briefly beside the girl. Then she pushed to her feet with a whuff of air and a sharp look at the others and stumbled hastily back down the hall.

“Is she sick?” Trinket asked. “Can you help her?”

“What the hell do you care?” the big trooper asked.

Kaye heard the collector calling for the first aid kit. “It’s too late,” she murmured.

“You a doctor?” the big trooper asked, bending low over Kaye and the girl on the floor.

“Close enough,” Kaye said.

“Get your daughter out of here,” he said.

“I might help,” Kaye suggested, looking up at the big trooper’s jowls, his intense blue eyes.

Mitch let go of Trinket and pulled Stella close.

“Just get her out of here,” the trooper repeated. “We’ll take care of this. Go far away. Stay together.”

“Can Will and Kevin and Mabel come?” Stella asked.

Will regarded them all with slit-eyed defiance. Kevin and Mabel focused on the television, their cheeks gold and pink with fear and shame.

“I’m sorry,” Kaye said.

“Mother . . .”

“We have to travel light and fast,” Kaye said. *And they might all be sick.*

Stella pulled loose from Mitch and ran to Will. She grabbed Will’s shoulders and they stared at each other for several seconds.

Kaye and Mitch watched them, Mitch twitching, Kaye oddly calm and fascinated. She hadn’t seen her daughter with another *Homo sapiens novus* in two years. She was ashamed it had been so long, but ashamed for whom, she could not say. Maybe for the whole troubled human race.

The two separated. Kaye took Stella by the hand and gave her the secret signal that she had taught her daughter years ago, a scrape of her pointing finger across Stella’s palm that meant they had to go now, no questions, no hesitation. Stella jerked but followed.

“Remember the woods,” Will sang out. “Woods everywhere. Woods for the whole world.”

As they ran down the asphalt road to the truck, they heard the trooper arguing with Trinket and the collectors. “We don’t take kindly to child theft, not in this county.”

He was buying Stella and her parents time.

So was the dead girl.

• •

Mitch drove around the van. The hedge scraped Kaye's door. "We should take them with us, all of them!" she cried, and hugged Stella fiercely. "God, Mitch, we should save them all."

Mitch did not stop.

## 24

### WASHINGTON, D.C., OHIO

**A**t Dulles, Augustine's limo was flagged through and driven directly to the waiting government jet, its engines idling on the tarmac. As he boarded, an Air Force staff officer handed him a locked attaché case. Augustine asked the attendant for a ginger ale then took his seat midplane, over the wing, and buckled himself in.

He removed an e-sheet from the attaché case and folded the red corner to activate it. A keypad appeared in the lower half. He entered the code of the day and read his briefing from the Emergency Action Special Reconnaissance Office. Interdictions were up 10 percent in the last month, due in large part to Rachel Browning's efforts.

Augustine could no longer bear to watch TV or listen to the radio. So many loud voices shouting lies for their own advantage. America and much of the rest of the world had entered a peculiar state of pathology, outwardly normal, inwardly prone to extraordinary fear and anger: a kind of powder keg madness.

Augustine knew he could take responsibility for a considerable share of that madness. He had once fanned the flames of fear himself, hoping to rise in the ranks to director of the National Institutes of Health and procure more funds from a reluctant Congress.

Instead, the president's select committee on Herod's issues had promoted him laterally to become czar of SHEVA, in charge of more than 120 schools around the country.

Parent opposition groups called him the commandant, or Colonel Klink.

Those were the kind names.

He finished reading, then crimped the corner of the e-paper until it broke, automatically erasing the memory strip. The display side of the paper turned orange. He handed the attendant the scrap and received his ginger ale in exchange.

“Takeoff in six minutes, sir,” the attendant said.

“Am I traveling alone?” Augustine asked, looking around the back of his seat.

“Yes, sir,” the attendant said.

Augustine smiled, but there was no joy in it. His face was lined and gray. His hair had turned almost white in the past five years. He looked twenty years older than his chronological age of fifty-nine.

He peered through the window at the welcome storm blowing in fits and starts over most of Virginia and Maryland. Tomorrow was going to be dry once again and mercilessly sunny with a high of ninety-three. It would be warm when he gave his little propaganda speech in Lexington.

The South and East were in the fourth year of a dry spell. Kentucky was no longer a state of blue grass. Much of it looked like California at the end of a parched summer. Some called it punishment, though there had been record corn and wheat crops.

Jay Leno had once cracked that SHEVA had pushed global warming onto a back burner.

Augustine fidgeted with the clasp on the attaché case. The plane taxied. With nothing but raindrop-blurred runway visible outside the window, he pulled out the paper edition of the *Washington Post*. That and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* were the only two true newspapers he read now. Most of the other dailies around the country had succumbed to the deep recession. Even the *New York Times* was published only in an electronic edition.

Some wags called the online journals “electrons.” Whereas paper had two sides, electrons were biased toward the negative. The online journals certainly had nothing good to say about Emergency Action.

“*Mea maxima culpa*,” Augustine whispered, his nervous little prayer of contrition. Infrequently, that mantra of guilt changed places with another voice that insisted it was time to die, to put himself at the mercy of a just God.

But Augustine had practiced medicine, studied disease, and struggled in politics too long to believe in a kind or generous deity. And he did not want to believe in the other.

The one that would be most interested in Mark Augustine’s soul.

The plane reached the end of the runway and ascended quickly, efficiently, on the wind from a rich bass roar.

The attendant touched his shoulder and smiled down on him. Augustine had somehow managed a catnap of perhaps ten minutes, a blessing. He felt

almost at peace. The plane was at altitude, flying level. “Dr. Augustine, something’s come up. We have orders to take you back to Washington. There’s a secure satellite channel open for you.”

Augustine took the handheld and listened. His face became, if that was possible, even more ashen. A few minutes later, he returned the phone to the attendant and left his seat to walk gingerly down the aisle to the wash-room. There, he urinated, bracing the top of his head and one hand against the curved bulkhead. The plane was banking to make a turn.

He was scheduled for an emergency meeting with the secretary of Health and Human Services, his immediate superior, and representatives from the Centers for Disease Control.

He pushed the little flush button, zipped up, washed his hands thoroughly, rinsed his gray, surprisingly corpselike face, and stared at himself in the narrow mirror. A little turbulence made the jet bounce.

The mirror always showed someone other than the man he had wanted to become. The last thing Mark Augustine had ever imagined he would be doing was running a network of concentration camps. Despite the educational amenities and the lack of death houses, that was precisely what the schools were: isolated camps used to park a generation of children at high expense, with no in and out privileges.

No peace. No respite. Only test after test after cruel test for everyone on the planet.

## 25

### SPOTSYLVANIA COUNTY

**S**tella watched her parents strip the house. She wept silently.

Kaye dragged a wooden box stacked high with the computer and the most important of their books and papers out to the Dodge. Mitch burned documents in a rusty oil drum in the backyard.

Kaye tersely told Stella to throw the clothes she really wanted into a single small suitcase and anything else into a plastic garbage bag, which they would take if there was room left in the car.

“I didn’t mean to do this,” Stella said softly. Kaye did not hear or, more likely, did not think it best to listen to her daughter now. Louder, Stella added, “I like this house.”



“So do I, honey. So do I,” Kaye said, her face stony.

In the kitchen, Mitch smashed the cell phone and pulled out the little plastic circuit boards, then jammed them in his pocket. He would throw them out the window or drop them in a garbage can in another state. He then smashed the answering machine.

“Don’t bother,” Kaye said as she lugged the plastic bag full of clothes down the hall. “We’re probably the most listened-to family in America.”

“Old habit,” Mitch said. “Leave me to my illusions.”

“I’ve made trouble and I’m putting you in danger,” Stella said. “I should just go away. I should just go into a camp.”

“Us, in danger?” Kaye stopped and spun around at the end of the hall. “Are you testing me?” she demanded. “We are not worried for *ourselves*, Stella. We have *never been worried about ourselves*.” Her hands moved in small arcs from hips to shoulders, and then she crossed her arms.

“I don’t understand why this has to happen,” Stella said. “Please, let’s stay here and if they come, they come, all right?”

Kaye’s face turned white.

Stella could not stop talking. “You say you’re afraid for me, but are you really afraid for *yourselves*, for how you’ll feel if—”

“Shut up, Stella,” Kaye said, shaking, then regretted the sharp words. “Please. We have to get out of here quickly.”

“I’d know others like me. I could find out what we really need to do. They have to accept us someday.”

“They could just as easily kill you all,” Mitch said, standing behind Kaye.

“That’s crazy,” Stella said. “Their own children?”

Mitch and Kaye faced off against their daughter down the length of the hall. Kaye seemed to recognize this symbolism and turned halfway, not looking directly at Stella, but at the plasterboard, the cornice, the paint, her eyes searching these blank things as if they might be sacred texts.

“I don’t think they would,” Stella said.

“That is not your concern,” Mitch said.

Stella desperately wrinkled her face in what she hoped was a smile. Her tears started to flow. “If it isn’t my concern, whose is it?”

“Not yours, alone, not yet,” Mitch said, his voice many degrees softer, and so full of painful, angry love that Stella’s throat itched. She scratched her neck with her fingers.

Kaye looked up. “Damn,” she said, reminded of something. She stared

at her fingers and her nails and rushed into the bathroom. There, she lathered and rinsed her hands for several minutes.

Steam billowed from the sink as Stella stood by the door.

“Fred stuff?” Stella asked.

“Fred,” Kaye confirmed grimly.

“You took a good swipe,” Stella said.

“Mom cat,” Kaye said. She scrubbed back and forth with a stiff little bristle brush, then looked up at the ceiling through the steam and the lavender of the soap. *“I’m going to wash that man right off of my hands,”* she sang. This was so close to the edge, so fraught, that Stella forgot her guilt and frustration and reached out for her mother.

Kaye knocked aside her daughter’s long arms.

“Mother,” Stella said, shocked. “I’m sorry!” She reached out again. Kaye let out a wail, slapping at Stella’s hands until Stella caught her around her chest. As mother and daughter slumped to the ragged throw rug on the bathroom floor, too exhausted to do anything but shake and clutch, Mitch sucked in his breath and finished the work. He loaded a second suitcase with clothes, zipped it shut, and tossed it into the trunk of the Dodge along with the garbage bag. He imagined himself a rugged frontier father getting ready to pull out of the sod house and hightail it into the woods because Indians were coming.

But it wasn’t Indians. They had spent time with Indians—Stella had been born in a reservation hospital in Washington state. Mitch had studied and admired Indians for decades. He had also dug up ancient North American bones. That had been a long time ago. He didn’t think he would do that now.

Mitch was no longer a white man. He wanted little or nothing to do with his own race, his own species.

It was the cavalry that he feared.

They took the Dodge and left the old gray Toyota truck in the dirt driveway. Kaye did not look back at the house, but Stella, sitting beside her mother in the backseat, swung around.

“We buried Shamus there,” she said. Shamus had come into their lives three years ago, an old, battered tomcat with a rope looped around his neck. Kaye had cut off the rope, sewn up a slashed ear, and put in a shunt to drain a pus-filled wound behind one eye. To keep the orange tabby from scratching out the stitches, Mitch had wrapped his head in a ridiculous plastic shield that had made him look, Stella said, like Frankenspuss.

For a half-wild old tom, he had been a remarkably sweet and affectionate cat.

One evening last winter, Shamus had not shown up for table scraps or his usual siesta on Kaye's lap. The tom had wandered off into the far corner of the backyard, well away from Stella's sense of smell. He had pushed his way under a swelling lobe of kudzu, hidden from crows, and curled up.

Two days later, acting on a hunch, Mitch had found him there, head down, eyes closed, feet tucked under as if asleep. They had buried him a few yards away wrapped in a scrap of knitted afghan he had favored as a bed.

Mitch had said that cats did that, wandered off when they knew the end was near so their bodies would not attract predators or bring disease to the family, the pride.

"Poor Shamus," Stella said, peering out the rear window. "He has no family now."

## 26

**T**hey drove. Stella remembered many such trips. She lay in the backseat, nose burning, arms folded tightly, fingers and toes itching, her head in Kaye's lap and when Kaye drove, in Mitch's.

Mitch stroked her hair and looked down on her. Sometimes she slept. For a time, the clouds and then the sun through the car windows filled her up. Thoughts ran around in her head like mice. Even with her parents, she hated to admit, she was alone. She hated those thoughts. She thought instead of Will and Kevin and Mabel or Maybelle and how they had suffered because their parents were stupid or mean or both.

The car stopped at a service station. Late afternoon sun reflected from a shiny steel sign and hurt Stella's eyes as she pushed through the hollow metal door into the restroom. The restroom was small and empty and forbidding, the walls covered with chipped, dirty tile. She threw up in the toilet and wiped her face and mouth.

Now the backs of her ears stung as if little bees were poking her. In the mirror, she saw that her cheeks would not make colors. They were as pale as Kaye's. Stella wondered if she was changing, becoming more like her mother. Maybe being a virus child was something you got over, like a birthmark that faded away.

• •  
Kaye felt her daughter's forehead as Mitch drove.

The sun had set and the storm had passed.

Stella lay in Kaye's lap, face almost buried. She was breathing heavily. "Roll over, sweetie," Kaye said. Stella rolled over. "Your face is hot."

"I threw up back there," Stella said.

"How far to the next house?" Kaye asked Mitch.

"The map says twenty miles. We'll be in Pittsburgh soon."

"I think she's sick," Kaye said.

"It isn't Shiver, is it, Kaye?" Stella asked.

"You don't get Shiver, honey."

"Everything hurts. Is it mumps?"

"You've had shots for everything." But Kaye knew that couldn't possibly be true. Nobody knew what susceptibilities the new children might have. Stella had never been sick, not with colds or flu; she had never even had a bacterial infection. Kaye had thought the new children might have improved immune systems. Mitch had not supported this theory, however, and they had given Stella all the proper immunizations, one by one, after the FDA and the CDC had grudgingly approved the old vaccines for the new children.

"An aspirin might help," Stella said.

"An aspirin would make you ill," Kaye said. "You know that."

"Tylenol," Stella added, swallowing.

Kaye poured her some water from a bottle and lifted her head for a drink. "That's bad, too," Kaye murmured. "You are very special, honey."

She pulled back Stella's eyelids, one at a time. The irises were bland, the little gold flecks clouded. Stella's pupils were like pinpricks. Her daughter's eyes were as expressionless as her cheeks. "So fast," Kaye said. She set Stella down into a pillow in the corner of the backseat and leaned forward to whisper into Mitch's ear. "It could be what the dead girl had."

"Shit," Mitch said.

"It isn't respiratory, not yet, but she's hot. Maybe a hundred and four, a hundred and five. I can't find the thermometer in the first aid kit."

"I put it there," Mitch said.

"I can't find it. We'll get one in Pittsburgh."

"A doctor," Mitch said.

"At the safe house," Kaye said. "We need a specialist." She was working to stay calm. She had never seen her daughter with a fever, her cheeks and eyes so bland.

The car sped up.  
 “Keep to the speed limit,” Kaye said.  
 “No guarantees,” Mitch said.

## 27

### OHIO

**C**hristopher Dicken got off the C-141 transport at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. At Augustine’s suggestion, he had hitched a late-afternoon ride from Baltimore with a flight of National Guard troops being moved into Dayton.

He was met on the concrete apron by a neatly dressed middle-aged man in a gray suit, the civilian liaison, who accompanied him through a small, austere passenger terminal to a black Chevrolet staff car.

Dicken looked at two unmarked brown Fords behind the Chevrolet. “Why the escort?” he asked.

“Secret Service,” the liaison said.

“Not for me, I hope,” Dicken said.

“No, sir.”

As they approached the Chevrolet, a much younger driver in a black suit snapped to military attention, introduced himself as Officer Reed of Ohio Special Needs School Security, and opened the car’s right rear door.

Mark Augustine sat in the backseat.

“Good afternoon, Christopher,” he said. “I hope your flight was pleasant.”

“Not very,” Dicken said. He hunched awkwardly into the staff car and sat on the black leather. The car drove off the base, trailed by the two Fords. Dicken stared at huge billows of clouds piling up over the green hills and suburbs beside the wide gray turnpike. He was glad to be on the ground again. Changes in air pressure bothered his leg.

“How’s the leg?” Augustine asked.

“Okay,” Dicken said.

“Mine’s giving me hell,” Augustine said. “I flew in from Dulles. Flight got bumpy over Pennsylvania.”

“You broke your leg?”

“In a bathtub.”

Dicken conspicuously rotated his torso to face his former boss and looked him over coldly. “Sorry to hear that.”

Augustine met his gaze with tired eyes. “Thank you for coming.”

"I didn't come at your request," Dicken said.

"I know. But the person who made the request talked to me."

"It was an order from HHS."

"Exactly," Augustine said, and tapped the armrest on the door. "We're having a problem at some of our schools."

"They are not *my* schools," Dicken said.

"Have we made clear how much of a pariah I am?" Augustine asked.

"Not nearly clear enough," Dicken said.

"I know your sympathies, Christopher."

"I don't think you do."

"How's Mrs. Rhine?"

*The goddamned high point of Mark Augustine's career*, Dicken thought, his face flushing. "Tell me why I'm here," he said.

"A lot of new children are becoming ill, and some of them are dying," Augustine said. "It appears to be a virus. We're not sure what kind."

Dicken took a slow breath. "The CDC isn't allowed to investigate Emergency Action schools. Turf war, right?"

Augustine tipped his head. "Only in a few states. Ohio reserved control of its schools. Congressional politics," he said. "Not my wish."

"I don't know what I can do. You should be shipping in every doctor and public health worker you can get."

"Ohio school medical staff by half last year, because the new children were healthier than most kids. No joke." Augustine leaned forward in the seat. "We're going to what may be the school most affected."

"Which one?" Dicken asked, massaging his leg.

"Joseph Goldberger."

Dicken smiled ruefully. "You've named them after public health heroes? That's sweet, Mark."

Augustine did not deviate from his course. His eyes looked dead, and not just from being tired. "Last night, all but one of the doctors deserted the school. We don't yet have accurate records on the sick and the dead. Some of the nurses and teachers have walked, too. But most have stayed, and they're trying to take up the slack."

"Warriors," Dicken said.

"Amen. The director, against my express orders but at the behest of the governor, has instituted a lockdown. Nobody leaves the barracks, and no visitors are allowed in. Most of the schools are in a similar situation. That's why I asked you to join me, Christopher."

Dicken watched the highway, the passing cars. It was a lovely afternoon and everything appeared normal. “How are they handling it?”

“Not well.”

“Medical supplies?”

“Low. Some interruption in the state supply chain. As I said, this is a state school, with a state-appointed director. I’ve ordered in federal emergency supplies from EMAC warehouses, but they may not get here until later tomorrow.”

“I thought you put together an iron web,” Dicken said. “I thought you covered your ass when they handed you all this, your little fiefdom.”

Augustine did not react, and that in itself impressed Dicken. “I wasn’t clever enough,” Augustine said. “Please listen and keep your head clear. Only select observers are being allowed into the schools until the situation is better understood. I’d like you to conduct a thorough investigation and take samples, run tests. You have credibility.”

Dicken felt there was little sense in accusing or tormenting Augustine any more. His shoulders drooped as he relaxed his back muscles. “And you don’t?” he asked.

Augustine looked down at his hands, inspected his perfectly manicured fingernails. “I am perceived as a disappointed warden who wants out of his job, which I am, and a man who would trump up a health crisis to protect his own hide, which I would not. You, on the other hand, are a celebrity. The press would wash your little pink toes to get your side of this story.”

Dicken made a soft nose-blow of dismissal.

Augustine had lost weight since Dicken last saw him. “If I don’t get the facts and plug them into some tight little bureaucratic columns in the next few days, we may have something that goes far beyond sick children.”

“Goddammit, Mark, we know how Shiver works,” Dicken said. “Whatever this is, it is *not* Shiver.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Augustine said. “But we need more than facts. We need a hero.”

## PENNSYLVANIA

**G**rief had been tracking Mitch Rafelson like a hunter. It had him in its eye-beams, painting him like a target, preparing to bring him down and settle in for a long feast.

He felt like stopping the Dodge on the side of the road, getting out, and running. As always, he stuffed these dark thoughts into a little drawer in the basement of his skull. Anything that demonstrated he was other than a loving father, all the emotions that had not been appropriate for eleven years and more, he hid away down there, along with the old dreams about the mummies in the Alps.

All the spooky little guesses about the situation of the long-dead Neandertals, mother and father, and the mummified, modern infant they had made before dying in the cold, in the long deep cave covered with ice.

Mitch no longer had such dreams. He hardly dreamed at all. But then, there wasn't much else left of the old Mitch, either. He had been burned away, leaving a thin skeleton of steel and stone that was Stella's daddy. He did not even know anymore whether his wife loved him. They hadn't made love in months. They didn't have time to think about such things. Neither complained; that was just the way it was, no energy or passion left after dealing with the stress and worry.

Mitch would have killed Fred Trinket if the police and the van hadn't been there. He would have broken the man's neck, then looked into the bastard's startled eyes as he finished the twist. Mitch ran that image through his head until he felt his stomach jump.

He understood more than ever how the Neandertal papa must have felt.

Seven miles. They were on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. The road was surrounded by blaring ads trying to get him to buy cars, buy tract homes, spend money he did not have. The houses beyond the freeway were packed close, crowded and small, and the big brick industrial buildings were dirty and dark. He hardly noticed a tiny park with bright red swings and plastic picnic tables. He was looking for the right turnoff.

"There it is," he told Kaye, and took the exit. He glanced into the back-seat. Stella was limp. Kaye held her. Together like that, they reminded him of a statue, a Pietà. He hated that metaphor, common enough on the fringe sites on the Internet: the new children as martyrs, as Christ. Hated it with a



passion. Martyrs died. Jesus had died horribly, persecuted by a blind state and an ignorant, bloodthirsty rabble, and that was certainly not going to happen to Stella.

Stella was going to live until long after Mitch Rafelson had rotted down to dry, interesting bones.

The safe house was in the rich suburbs. The tree-filled estates here were nothing like the land around the little frame house in Virginia. Smooth asphalt and concrete roads served big new houses from the last hot run of the economy. Here the streets were lined on both sides with fresh-cut stone walls set behind mature pines and broken only by black iron gates topped with spikes.

He found the number painted on the curb and pulled the Dodge up to a hooded security keypad. The first time, he fumbled the number and the keypad buzzed. A small red light blinked a warning. The second time, the gate rolled open smoothly. Leaves rustled in the maple trees overarching the driveway.

“Almost there,” he said.

“Hurry,” Kaye said quietly.

## 29

### **Joseph Goldberger School for Children with Special Needs, Emergency Action Ohio, Central District Authority**

**A** small contingent of Ohio National Guard trucks—Dicken counted six, and about a hundred troops—had drawn up at the crossroads. A perennial around the school, blooming every spring and summer, dying back in the winter, protesters stood in clumps away from the troops and the alarm trip wires. Dicken guessed that today they numbered three or four hundred today, more than usual and more energetic as well. Most of the protesters were younger than thirty, many younger than twenty. Some wore brightly tie-dyed T-shirts and baggy slacks and had felted their hair in long bleached dreadlocks. They sang and shouted and waved signs denouncing “Virus Abominations” genetically engineered by corporate mad scientists. Two news trucks poked their white dish antennae at the sky. Reporters were out interviewing the protesters, feeding the hungry broadband predigested opinion and some visuals. Dicken had seen all this many times.

On the news, the protesters’ standard line was that the new children

were artificial monsters designed to help corporations take over the world. *GM Kids*, they called them, or *Lab Brats*, or *Monsanto's Future Toadies*.

Pushed back almost into the grass and gravel of a makeshift parking lot were a few dozen parents. Dicken could easily tell them apart from the protesters. The parents were older, conservatively dressed, worn down and nervous. For them, this was no game, no bright ritual of youthful passage into a dull and torpid maturity.

The staff car and its two escorts approached the first perimeter gate through a weave of concrete barricades. Protesters swarmed the fence, swinging their signs in the direction of the protected road. The largest sign out front, scrawled in red marker and brandished by a skinny boy with prominent bad teeth, read, HEY HEY USA/ DON'T FUCK WITH NATURE'S DNA!

"Just shoot them," Dicken muttered.

Augustine nodded his tight-lipped concurrence.

*Damn, we agree on something,* Dicken thought.

In the beginning, the protesters had nearly all been parents, arriving at the schools by the thousands, some hangdog and guilty, some grim and defiant, all pleading that their children be allowed to go home. Back then, the nursery buildings had been filled and the dorms under construction or empty. The parents had mounted their vigils year-round, even in the dead of winter, for more than five years. They had been the best of citizens. They had surrendered their children willingly, trusting government promises that they would eventually be returned.

Mark Augustine had been unable to fulfill that promise, at first because of what he thought he knew, but in later years because of grim political reality.

Americans by and large believed they were safer with the virus children put away. Sealed up, out of sight. Out of range of contagion.

Dicken watched Augustine's expression change from studied indifference to steely impassivity as the staff car climbed the sloping road to the plateau. There the massive complex sat flat and ugly like a spill of children's blocks on the Ohio green.

The car maneuvered around the barricades and pulled up to the dazzling concrete gatehouse, whiter even than the clouds. As the guards checked their schedule of appointments and consulted with the Secret Service agents, Augustine stared east through the car window at a row of four long, ocher-colored dormitories.

It had been a year since Augustine had last inspected Goldberger. Back

then, lines of kids had moved between classrooms, dormitories, and cafeteria halls, attended by teachers, interns, security personnel. Now, the dormitories seemed deserted. An ambulance had been parked by the inner gate to the barracks compound. It, too, was unattended.

“Where are the kids?” Dicken asked. “Are they *all* sick?”

## 30

### PENNSYLVANIA

**S**tella saw and felt everything in ragged jerks. Being moved was an agony and she cried out, but still, the shadows insisted on hurting her. She saw asphalt and stone and gray bricks, then a big upside-down tree, and finally a bed with tight pink sheets. She saw and heard adults talking in the light of an open door. Everything else was dark, so she turned toward the darkness—it hurt less—and listened with huge ears to voices in another room. For a moment, she thought these were the voices of the dead, they were saying such incredible things, harmonizing with a weird joy. They were discussing fire and hell and who was going to be eaten next, and a mad woman laughed in a way that made her flesh crawl.

The flesh did not stop crawling. It just kept on going, and she lay in the bed with no skin, staring up at cobwebs or ghostly arms or just floaters inside her eyeballs, tiny chains of cells magnified to the size of balloons. She knew they were not balloons. It did not matter.

Kaye was beyond exhaustion. Iris Mackenzie sat her down in a chair with a cup of coffee and a cookie. The house was huge and bright inside with the colors and tones rich folks choose: creams and pale grays, Wedgwood blues and deep, earthy greens.

“You have to eat something and rest,” Iris told her.

“Mitch . . .” Kaye began.

“He and George are with your girl.”

“I should be with her.”

“Until the doctor arrives, there’s nothing you can do.”

“A sponge bath, get that temperature down.”

“Yes, in a minute. Now rest, Kaye, please. You nearly fainted on the front porch.”

“She should be in a hospital,” Kaye said, her eyes going a little wild. She managed to stand, pushing past Iris’s gentle hands.

“No hospital will take her,” Iris said, turning restraint into a hug and sitting her down again. Iris pressed her cheek against Kaye’s and there were tears on it. “We called everyone on the phone tree. Lots of the new children have it. It’s on the news already, hospitals are refusing admissions. We’re frantic. We don’t know about our son. We can’t get through to Iowa.”

“He’s in a camp?” Kaye was confused. “We thought the network was just active parents.”

“We are *very* active parents,” Iris said with iron in her tone. “It’s been two months. We’re still listed, and we will stay listed as long as we can help. They can’t hurt us any more than they already have, right?”

Iris had the brightest green eyes, set like jewels in a face that was farmer’s daughter pretty, with light, florid Irish cheeks and dark brown hair, a slender physique, thin, strong fingers that moved rapidly, touching her hair, her blouse, the tray, and the kettle, pouring hot water into the bone china cups and stirring in instant coffee.

“Does the disease have a name?” Kaye asked.

“No name yet. It’s in the schools—the camps, I mean. Nobody knows how serious it is.”

Kaye knew. “We saw a girl. She was dead. Stella may have got it from her.”

“God *damn* it,” Iris said, teeth clenched. It was a real curse, not just an exclamation.

“I’m sorry I’m so scattered,” Kaye said. “I need to be with Stella.”

“We don’t know it isn’t catching . . . for us. Do we?”

“Does it matter?” Kaye said.

“No. Of course not,” Iris said. She wiped her face. “It absolutely does not matter.” The coffee was being ignored. Kaye had not taken a sip. Iris walked off. Turning, she said, “I’ll get some alcohol and a bath sponge. Let’s get her temperature down.”

The director greeted the staff car at the tangent where the wide circular drive met the steps to the colonnade of the administration building. He wore a brown suit and stood six feet tall, with wheat-colored hair thinning at the crown, a bulbous nose, and almost no cheek bones. Two women, one large and one short, dressed in green medical scrubs, stood at the top of the steps. Their features were obscured by the shadow of a side wall that blocked the low sun.

Augustine opened the door and got out without waiting for the driver. The director dried his hands on his pants leg, then offered one to shake. "Dr. Augustine, it's an honor."

Augustine gave the man's hand a quick grip. Dicken pushed his leg out, grasped the handle over the door, and climbed from the car. "Christopher Dicken, this is Geoffrey Trask," Augustine introduced him.

Behind them, the two Secret Service cars made a V, blocking the drive. Two men stepped out and stood by the open car doors.

Trask mopped his brow with a handkerchief. "We're certainly glad to have both of you," he said. At six thirty in the evening, the heat was slowly retreating from a high of eighty-five degrees.

Trask flicked his head to one side and the two women descended the steps. "This is Yolanda Middleton, senior nurse and paramedic for the pediatric care center."

Middleton was in her late forties, heavy-set, with classic Congolese features, short-cut wild hair, immense, sad eyes, and a bulldog expression. Her uniform was wrinkled and stained. She nodded at Dicken, then examined Augustine with blunt suspicion.

"And this is Diana DeWitt," Trask continued. DeWitt was small and plump-faced with narrow gray eyes. Her green pants hung around her ankles and she had rolled up her sleeves. "A school counselor."

"Consulting anthropologist, actually," DeWitt said. "I travel and visit the schools. I arrived here three days ago." She smiled sadly but with no hint that she felt put-upon. "Dr. Augustine, we have met once before. This would be a pleasure, Dr. Dicken, under other circumstances."

"We should get back," Middleton said abruptly. "We're very short-staffed."

“These people are essential, Ms. Middleton,” Trask admonished.

Middleton flared. “Jesus himself could visit, Mr. Trask, and I’d make him pitch in. You know how bad it is.”

Trask put on his most royal frown—a poor performance—and Dicken moved in to defuse the tension. “We don’t know,” he said. “How bad is it?”

“We shouldn’t talk out here,” Trask looked nervously at the small crowd of protesters beyond the fence, more than two hundred yards away. “They have those big ears, you know, listening dishes? Yolanda, Diana, could you accompany us? We’ll carry on our discussion inside.” He walked ahead through the false columns.

One agent joined them, following at a discreet distance.

All of the older buildings were a jarring shade of ocher. The architecture screamed prison, even with the bronze plate on the wall and the sign over the front gate insisting that this was a school.

“On orders from the governor, we have a press blackout,” Trask said. “Of course, we don’t allow cell phones or broadband in the school, and I’ve taken the central switchboard offline for now. I believe in a disciplined approach to getting out our message. We don’t want to make it seem worse than it is. Right now, my first priority is procuring medical supplies. Dr. Kelson, our lead physician, is working on that now.”

Inside the building, the corridors were cooler, though there was no air conditioning. “Our plant has been down, my apologies,” Trask said, looking back at Augustine. “We haven’t been able to get repair people in. Dr. Dicken, this is an honor. It truly is. If there’s anything I can explain—”

“Tell us how bad it is,” Augustine said.

“Bad,” Trask said. “On the verge of being out of control.”

“We’re losing our children,” Middleton said, her voice breaking. “How many today, Diane?”

“Fifty in the past couple of hours. A hundred and ninety today, total. And sixty last night.”

“Sick?” Augustine asked.

“Dead,” Middleton said.

“We haven’t had time for a formal count,” Trask said. “But it is serious.”

“I need to visit a sick ward as soon as possible,” Dicken said.

“The whole school is a sick ward,” Middleton said.

“It’s tragic,” DeWitt said. “They’re losing their social cohesion. They rely on each other so much, and nobody’s trained them how to get along when there’s a disaster. They’ve been both sheltered and neglected.”

“I think their physical health is our main concern now,” Trask said.

“I assume there’s some sort of medical center,” Dicken said. “I’d like to study samples from the sick children as quickly as possible.”

“I’ve already arranged for that,” Trask said. “You’ll work with Dr. Kelson.”

“Has the staff given specimens?”

“We took samples from the sick children,” Trask said, and smiled helpfully.

“But not from the staff?” Dicken blinked impatiently at Trask.

“No.” The director’s ears pinked. “Nobody saw the need. We’ve been hearing rumors of a full quarantine, a complete lockdown, everyone, no exceptions. Most of us have families . . .” He let them draw their own conclusions about why he did not want the staff tested. “It’s a tough choice.”

“You sent samples to the Ohio Department of Health and the CDC?”

“They’re waiting to go out now,” Trask said.

“You should have sent them as soon as the first child became ill,” Dicken said.

“There was complete confusion,” Trask explained, and smiled. Dicken could tell Trask was the sort of man who hid doubt and ignorance behind a mask of pleasantries. Nothing wrong here, friends. All is under control. As if expressing a confidence, Trask added, “We are used to them being so healthy.”

Dicken glanced at Augustine, hoping for some clue as to what was really going on here, what relationship or control Augustine had over a person like Trask, if any. What he saw frightened him. Augustine’s face was as calm as a colorless pool of water on a windless day.

This was not the Mark Augustine of old. And who this new man might become was not something Dicken wanted to worry about, not now.

They passed an elevator and a flight of stairs.

“My office is up there, along with the communications and command center,” Trask said. “Dr. Augustine, please feel free to use it. It’s on the second floor, with the best view of the school, well, besides the view from the guard towers, which we use mostly for storage now. First, we’ll visit the medical center. You can begin work there immediately—away from the confusion.”

“I’d like to see the children right away,” Dicken insisted.

“By all means,” Trask said, eyes shifting. “It will be hard to miss the children.” The director walked ahead at a near lope, then looked over his shoulder, saw that Dicken was not nearly as nimble, and doubled back.

DeWitt seemed eager to say something, but not while Trask was in earshot.

“Let me describe our facilities,” Trask said. “Joseph Goldberger is the largest school in Ohio, and one of the largest in the country.” His hands waved as if outlining a box. “It was built six years ago on the site of the Warren K. Pernicke Corrections Center, a corporate facility administered by Namtex Limited. Pernicke was shut down after the change in drug laws and the subsequent twenty percent drop in the prison population.” He was sounding more and more like a tour guide working from a prepared lecture, adding to the surreality. “The contract to convert the complex to hold SHEVA children was let out to CGA and Nortent, and they finished their work in nine months, a record. Four new dorms were erected a hundred yards east of the maximum security building, which was first constructed in 1949. The old hospital and farm buildings were made into research and clinical facilities. The business training building was converted into a nursery, and now it’s an education center. The four-hundred-bed special offenders compound now holds our mentally ill and developmentally disabled. We call it our Special Treatment Facility. It’s the only one in the state.”

“How many children are kept there?” Dicken asked.

“Three hundred and seven,” Trask said.

“They were more isolated,” Middleton said.

“Dr. Jurie or Dr. Pickman can tell you more about that,” Trask said. For the first time, his pleasant demeanor flickered. “Although . . .”

“I haven’t seen them,” Middleton said.

“Someone told me they left early this morning,” DeWitt said. “Perhaps to get supplies,” she added hopefully.

“Well.” Trask’s Adam’s apple bobbed like a swallowed walnut and he shook his head with a waxy kind of concern. “As of yesterday, the school housed a total of five thousand four hundred children.” He stole a quick look at his watch. “We simply don’t have what we need.” He escorted them to the west end of the building, and then down a wide connecting corridor lined with old refrigerators. The old white boxes were sealed with black and yellow tape. Empty equipment carts and stacked steel trays littered the passageway. The air was redolent of Pine-Sol.

DeWitt walked beside Dicken like a shipwrecked passenger hoping for a scrap of wood. “They use the Pine-Sol to disrupt scenting and frithing,” she said in an undertone. Frithing was a way SHEVA children drew scent into their mouths. They lifted their upper lips and sucked air through their



teeth with a faint hiss. The air passed over their vomeronasal organs, glands for detecting pheromones far more sensitive than those found in their parents. “The security and many of the staff wear nose plugs.”

“That’s pretty standard in the schools,” Middleton said to Dicken, with a fleeting look at Augustine. She opened a battered steel storage cabinet and pulled out scrub uniforms and surgical masks. “So far, thank God, none of the staff has gotten sick.”

Dicken and Augustine put the uniforms on over their street clothes, strapped on the masks, and slipped their hands into the sterile gloves. They paused as an older man, in his late sixties or early seventies, stooped and eagle-nosed, pushed through the swinging doors at the end of the hall.

“Here’s Dr. Kelson now,” Trask said, his back stiffening.

Kelson wore a surgical gown and cap, but the gown hung on him, straps loose, and his hands were bare. He approached Augustine, gave him a brusque nod, then turned to Middleton. “Gloves,” he demanded. Middleton reached into the locker and handed him a pair of examination gloves. Kelson snapped them on and held them up for inspection. “No go with Department of Health. I asked for a NuTest, antivirals, hydration kits. Not available, they claimed. Hell, I know they have what we need! They’re just holding on to them in case this breaks loose.”

“It will not break loose,” Trask said, his smile faltering.

“Did Trask tell you about our shortage?” Kelson inquired of Augustine.

“We understand it’s a crisis,” Augustine said.

“It’s goddamned *murder!*” Kelson roared. DeWitt jumped. “Three months ago, state Emergency Action officials stripped us of more than half of our medical equipment and drugs. Our entire emergency supply was looted. We have ‘healthy children,’ they told us. The supplies could be better used elsewhere. Trask did nothing to stop them.”

“I would disagree with that characterization,” Trask said. “There was nothing I *could* do.”

“Last ditch effort, I took a truck into town,” Kelson continued. “I smeared mud on the doors and the license plates but they knew. Dayton General told me to stay the hell away. I got nothing. So I came back and slipped in through the Miller’s Road entrance. Now even that is blocked.” Kelson waved his hand, drunk with exhaustion, and turned his heartsick, skim-milk blue eyes on Dicken. “Who are you?”

Augustine introduced them.

Kelson pointed a knobby gloved finger at Dicken. “You are my

witness, Dr. Dicken. The infirmary filled first. It's down this way. We're removing bodies by the hundreds. You should see. You should see."

## 32

### PENNSYLVANIA

**M**itch tended to Stella in the bedroom's dim light. She would not hold still. He used all the gentle phrases and tones of voice he could muster; none of them seemed to get through to her.

George Mackenzie watched from the doorway. He was in his early forties and beyond plump. He had a young face with inquiring eyes, his forehead overarched by a styled shock of premature gray hair, and his lip sported a light dust of mustache.

"I need an ear or rectal thermometer," Mitch said. "She might convulse and bite down on an oral one. We'll have to hold her."

"I'll get one," George said, and was gone for a moment, leaving Mitch alone with the tossing child. Her forehead was as dry as a heated brick.

"I'm here," Mitch whispered. He pulled the covers back completely. He had undressed Stella and her bare legs looked skeletal against the pink sheets. She was so sick. He could not believe his daughter was so sick.

George returned holding a blue plastic sheath in one hand and the thermometer in the other, followed by the women. Kaye carried a basin of water filled with ice cubes, and Iris held a washcloth and a bottle of rubbing alcohol. "We never bought an ear thermometer," George said apologetically. "We never felt the need."

"I'm not afraid now," Iris said. "George, I was afraid to touch their little girl. I am so ashamed."

They held Stella and took her temperature. It was 107. Her normal temperature was 97. They frantically sponged her, working in shifts, and then moved her into the bathroom, where Kaye had filled a tub with water and ice. She was so hot. Mitch saw that she had bleeding sores in her mouth.

Grief looked on, dark and eager.

Kaye helped Mitch take Stella back to the bed. They did not bother to towel her off. Mitch held Kaye lightly and patted her back. George went downstairs to heat soup. "I'll put on some chicken broth for the girl," George said.

“She won’t take it,” Kaye said.

“Then some soup for us.”

Kaye nodded.

Mitch watched his wife. She was almost not there, she was so tired and her face was so drawn. He asked himself when the nightmare would be over. *When your daughter is gone and not before.*

Which of course was no answer at all.

They ate in the darkened room, sipping the hot broth from cups. “Where’s the doctor?” Kaye asked.

“He has two others ahead of us,” George said. “We were lucky to get him. He’s the only one in town who will treat new children.”

## 33

### OHIO

**T**he infirmary was on the first floor of the medical center, an open room about forty feet square meant to house at most sixty or seventy patients. The curtained separators had been pushed against the walls and at least two hundred cots, mattresses, and chair pads had been moved in.

“We filled this space in the first six hours,” Kelson said.

The smell was overwhelming—urine, vomit, the assaulting miasma of human illness, all familiar to Dicken, but there was more to it—a tang both sharp and foreign, disturbing and pitiful all at once. The children had lost control of their scenting. The room was thick with untranslatable pheromones, vomeropherins, the arsenal and vocabulary of a kind of human communication that was, if not new, at least more overt.

Even their urine smelled different.

Trask took a handkerchief from his pocket and covered his already masked mouth and nose. Augustine’s Secret Service agent took a position in the corner and did the same, visibly shaken.

Dicken approached a corner cot. A boy lay on his side, his chest barely moving. He was seven or eight, from the second and last wave of SHEVA infants. A girl the same age or a little older squatted beside the cot. She held the boy’s fingers around a tiny silvery digital music player, to keep him from dropping it. The headphones dangled over the side of the bed. Both were brown-haired, small, with brown skin and thin, flaccid limbs.

The girl looked up at Dicken as he came near. He smiled back at her.

Her eyes rolled up and she tipped her tongue through her lips, then dropped her head on the cot beside the boy's arm.

"Bond friends," DeWitt said. "She has her own cot, but she won't stay there."

"Then move the cots together," Augustine suggested with a brief look of distaste or distress.

"She won't move more than a few inches away from him," DeWitt said. "Their health probably depends on each other."

"Explain," Dicken said softly.

"When they're brought here, the children form frithing teams. Two or three will get together and establish a default scenting range. The teams coalesce into larger groups. Support and protection, perhaps, but mostly I think it's about defining a new language." DeWitt shook her head, wrapped her masked mouth in the palm of one hand, and gripped her elbow. "I was learning so much . . ."

Dicken took the boy's chin and gently turned it: head flopping on a scrawny neck. The boy opened his eyes and Dicken met the blank gaze and stroked his forehead, then ran his rubber-gloved finger over the boy's cheek. The skin stayed pale.

"Capillary damage," he murmured.

"The virus is attacking their endothelial tissues," Kelson said. "They have red lesions between the fingers and toes, some of them vesicular. It's goddamned tropical in its weirdness."

The boy closed his eyes. The girl lifted her head. "I'm not his perf," she said, her voice like a high sough of wind. "He lost his perf last night. I don't think he wants to live."

DeWitt knelt beside the girl. "You should go back to your cot. You're sick, too."

"I can't," the girl said, and again lay down her head.

Dicken stood and tried desperately to clear his mind.

The director tsked in pity. "Absolute confusion," Trask said, voice muffled by the handkerchief. His phone rang in his pocket. He apologized, lowered the cloth, then half turned to answer it. After a few mumbled replies, he closed the phone. "Very good news. I'm expecting a truck filled with supplies from Dayton any minute, and I want to be there. Dr. Kelson, Ms. Middleton—I leave these people with you. Dr. Augustine, do you want to work from my office or would you prefer to stay here? I imagine you have many administrative duties . . ."

"I'll stay here," Augustine said.

“Your privilege,” Trask said. With some astonishment, they watched the director toss a nonchalant, almost dismissive wave and make his way around the rows of cots to the door.

Kelson rolled his milky eyes. “Good fucking riddance,” he murmured.

“The children are losing all social cohesion,” DeWitt said. “I’ve tried to tell Trask for months that we needed more trained observers, professional anthropologists. Losing bond friends—sometimes they call them perfs—do you realize what that *means* to them?”

“Diana’s their angel,” Kelson said. “She knows what they’re thinking. That may be as important as medicine in the next few hours.” He shook his head, jowls jiggling beneath his chin. “They are innocents. They do not deserve this. Nor do *we* deserve Trask. That state-appointed son of a bitch is in on this, I’m sure of it. He’s squeezing profits somewhere.” Having said his piece, Kelson looked up at the ceiling. “Pardon me. It’s the goddamned truth. I have to get back. The medical center is at your disposal, Dr. Dicken, such as it is.” He turned and walked down a row of cots, through the door on the opposite side of the infirmary.

“He’s a good man,” Middleton said. She used a key to open the back door to the main compound, opening on to the infirmary loading dock. She lifted an eyebrow at Dicken. “Used to be pretty cushy around here, room and board, easy work, best school in the world, the kids were so easy, we said. Then *they* up and ran, the bastards.”

Middleton led them down the loading ramp to a golf cart parked in the receiving area. DeWitt sat beside her. “Get on, gentlemen.”

“Any guesses?” Augustine asked Dicken in an undertone as they climbed onto the middle bench seat. The Secret Service agent, now almost invisible to Dicken, sat on the rear-facing backseat and murmured into a lapel mike.

Dicken shrugged. “Something common—coxsackie or enterovirus, some kind of herpes. They’ve had trouble with herpes before, prenatal. I need to see more.”

“I could have brought a NuTest, if there had been some warning,” Augustine said.

“Wouldn’t help us much,” Dicken said. Something new and unfamiliar had struck the children. If a new virus flooded the first rank of a person’s defenses—the innate immune system—and spread to others quickly enough, in close quarters, among confined populations, it could overwhelm any more refined immune response and bring down a huge number of victims in days. He doubted that contact immunity could have had any

influence in this outbreak. Another of Mother Nature's little screwups. Or not. He still had a lot to unlearn when it came to viruses and disease, a lot of assumptions to reexamine.

Dicken needed to map the river of this illness before he would venture an answer, chart it back from whatever tributary they were at now to its source. He wanted to know the virus when it was asleep, what he called glacial virus—learn where it hid as frozen snow in the high valleys of the human and animal population, before it melted and became the torrent they were now seeing.

If he found anything closer to that ideal source, that beginning, things might fall into place. He might understand.

Or not.

What they all needed to know as a practical matter was whether this flood would jump its banks and find another run. Taking specimens from the staff would begin to answer that question. But he already had a gut feeling that this disease, attacking a new and juicy population, would not readily cross over to old-style humans.

Proving *that* would, in any sane world, stop the political nightmare building outside.

They passed a crate of body bags the end of the loading dock.

“No trouble getting *those*,” Middleton said. “They’re going to be filled in a couple of hours.”

## 34

### PENNSYLVANIA

**M**itch washed his face for the fourth or fifth time in the bathroom adjacent to the bedroom. He stared at the brass light fixtures, the antique gold faucets, the tile floor. He had never been much for luxuries, but it would have been nice to provide more than just a run-down shack in the Virginia countryside. They had been plagued by ants and by roaches. The big yard had been nice, though. He had liked to sit there with Stella and drag a string for the ever-willing Shamus.

The doctor arrived. He was in his early thirties, hair spiked and frosted. He looked very young. He wore a short-sleeved shirt and carried a black bag and a NuTest diagnostic unit the size of a data phone. He was as worn-out as they were, but he immediately inspected Stella. He took blood and

sputum from the girl, who hardly noticed the prick of the little needle. The spit was harder to obtain; Stella's mouth was as dry as a bone. He smeared these fluids on the business end of the NuTest arrays—little sheets of grooved plastic—then inserted them. A few minutes later, he read the results.

"It's a virus," he said. "A picornavirus. No surprise there. Some sort of enterovirus. A variety of Cocksackie, probably. But . . ." He looked at them with a quizzical, worried expression. "There are some polymorphisms that aren't in the NuTest library. I can't make a final determination here."

"Were the baths the right thing to do?" Mitch asked.

"Absolutely," the doctor said. "She's four degrees elevated. Coming down, maybe, but it could spike again. Keep her cool, but don't wear her down. She's skin and bones now."

"She's naturally slender," Kaye said.

"Good. She'll grow up to be a model," the doctor said.

"Not if I can help it," Kaye said.

The doctor stared at Kaye. "Don't I know you?"

"No," she said. "You don't."

"Right," the doctor said, coming to his senses. He gave Stella the first injection, a broad-spectrum antiviral with multiplex immunoglobulin and B vitamins. "Used these when measles hit a bunch of old kids in Lancaster," he said, then grimaced and shook his head. "'Old kids.' Listen to me. We're talking in tangles. This isn't measles, but the shot can't hurt. It's only good in a series, however. I'll report her arrays anonymously to Atlanta. Part of the field program. Completely anonymous."

Mitch listened without reaction. He was almost beyond caring about anonymity. He looked up as the doctor glanced at the NuTest display and said, "Whoops. Shit." The display was blinking rapidly, reflecting on the doctor's face.

"What?"

"Nothing," the doctor said, but Mitch thought he looked guilty, as if he had screwed up. "Can I have some of that coffee?" the doctor asked. "Cold is fine. I've got two more patients tonight."

He felt Stella under her jaw and behind the ears, then turned her over and inspected her buttocks. A rash was forming on both cheeks. "She's spiking again." He turned her over and helped carry her to the bathtub. George had emptied the kitchen ice machine and driven off to get more from the local grocery. They sponged her down with cold tap water. Stella was convulsing by the time George returned.

Mitch lifted Stella out of the tub by her underarms, soaking his clothes.

George emptied four bags of ice into the water. Then they lowered her in again.

“It’s too *cold*,” Stella shrieked thinly.

Mitch’s daughter seemed to weigh almost nothing. She was ephemeral. The illness was stealing her away so quickly he could not react.

The doctor left to get another injection ready.

Kaye held up her daughter’s hand. It was pale and blue. She saw small sores between the girl’s fingers. With a gasp, she dropped the hand and leaned to lift Stella’s foot. She showed the sole to Mitch. Small lesions spotted the flesh between Stella’s toes. “They’re on her hands, too,” Kaye said.

Mitch shook his head. “I don’t know what that is.”

George pushed back from the tub and stood, his face showing alarm. The doctor returned with another syringe. As he was injecting Stella he looked at the girl’s fingers and nodded. He pulled back Stella’s lips and looked into her mouth. Stella moaned.

“Could be herpangina, vesicular stomatitis—” He took a deep breath. “I can’t make the call here with just a NuTest. Treatment with a targeted antiviral would work best, and that requires a positive ID. That should be done in a reference lab, and she should be hospitalized. I just don’t have that kind of equipment.”

“No one will admit her,” George said. “Blanket ban.”

“Disgraceful,” the doctor said, his voice flat from exhaustion. He looked up at George. “It could be communicable. You’ll want to sterilize this bathroom and bleach the sheets.”

George nodded.

“There’s someone who might be able to help,” Mitch said to Kaye, taking her aside.

“Christopher?” Kaye asked.

“Call him. Ask him what’s happening. You know his phone number.”

“His home,” Kaye said. “It’s an old number. I’m not sure where he works now.”

The doctor had dialed up a sentinel CDC report page on his Web phone. “There’s no warning posted,” he said. “But I’ve never seen pediatric warnings for virus children.”

“New children,” George corrected.

“Is it a reportable disease?” Kaye asked.

“It’s not even listed,” the doctor said, but there was something in his face that disturbed Kaye. *The NuTest. It’s got a GPS and a broadband*



*hookup to the Department of Health. And from there, to NIH or the CDC. I'm sure of it.*

But there was nothing they could do. She shrugged it off.

"Call," Mitch told Kaye.

"I don't know who he's working for now," Kaye said.

"We have a secure satellite phone," George said. "No one will back trace. Not that it matters, for us. Our son is already in a camp."

"There is *nothing* secure," Mitch said.

George seemed about to debate this slur on his masculine grasp of crypto-technology.

Kaye held up her hand. "I'll call," she said. It would be the first time she had spoken with Christopher Dicken in over nine years.

But all she got was the answering machine in his apartment. *"This is Christopher. I'm on the road. My house is occupied by cops and wrestlers. Better yet, remember that I collect strange plagues and store them next to my valuables. Please leave your message."*

"Christopher, this is Kaye. Our daughter is sick. Coxsackie something. Call if you have any clues or advice."

And she left the number.

## 35

### OHIO

**T**he infirmary stood adjacent to the southwest corner of the equipment barn: two blocks connected by a short corridor with barred windows. The bright security lights drew angular trapezoids of shadow over the concrete courtyard between the buildings, obscuring a lone boy. Tall and chunky, about ten years old, he leaned or slumped against the door to the research wing, arms folded.

"Who's that?" Middleton called out.

"Toby Smith, ma'am," the boy said, standing straight. He wobbled and stared at them with tired, blank eyes.

"You sick, Toby?"

"I'm fine, ma'am."

"Where's the doctor?" Middleton pulled the cart up ten feet from the boy. Dicken saw the boy's pallid cheeks, almost free of freckles.

The boy turned and pointed into the research wing. “Doctor Kelson is in the gym. My sister’s dead,” he said.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Toby,” Dicken said, swinging out of the seat of the golf cart. “I’m very sorry to hear it. My sister died some time ago.”

Dicken approached him. The boy’s eyes were rheumy and crusted.

“What did your sister die of?” Toby asked, squinting at Dicken.

“A disease she caught from a mosquito bite. It was called West Nile Virus. May I see your fingers, Toby?”

“No.” The boy hid his hands behind his back. “I don’t want you to shoot me.”

“You ignore that crap, Toby,” Middleton said. “I won’t let them shoot anybody.”

“May I see, Toby?” Dicken persisted. He removed his goggles. Something in his tone, some sympathy, or perhaps the way he smelled—if Toby could still smell him—made the boy look up at Dicken with narrowed eyes and present his hands. Dicken gently reversed the boy’s hand and inspected the palm and the skin between the fingers. No lesions. Toby screwed up his face and wriggled his fingers.

“You’re a strong young man, Toby,” Dicken said.

“I’ve been in the infirmary, helping, and now I’m on break,” Toby said. “I should go back.”

“The kids are so gentle,” DeWitt said. “They bond so tight, like family, all of them. Tell that to the world out there.”

“They don’t want to listen,” Dicken said under his breath.

“They’re scared,” Augustine said.

“Of me?” Toby asked.

The cart’s small walkie-talkie squawked. Middleton pulled away to answer. Her lips drew together as she listened. Then she turned to Augustine. “Security saw the director’s car go out the south entrance ten minutes ago. He was alone. They think he’s skipped.”

Augustine closed his eyes and shook his head. “Someone alerted him. The governor has probably ordered complete quarantine. We’re on our own, for the time being.”

“Then we have to move fast,” Dicken said. “I need specimens from the remaining staff, and from as many of the children as is practical. I need to learn where this virus came from. Maybe we can get word out and stop this insanity. Have the children in special treatment had contact with the children outside?”

“None that I’ve heard of,” Middleton said. “But I am not responsible

for that building. That was Aram Jurie's domain. He and Pickman were part of Trask's inner circle."

"Pickman and Jurie said the specials should be kept separate," DeWitt added. "Something about mental disease being additive in SHEVA children. I think they were interested in the effects of madness and stress."

*Viral triggers*, Dicken thought. He was torn between disgust and elation. He might find all the clues he needed, after all. "Who's there now?"

"There are six nurses left, I think." Middleton looked away, tears brimming.

"I'll need specimens from those nurses in particular. Nose swabs, fingernail scrapings, sputum, and blood. I think we should do that now."

"Christopher is the point man," Augustine said. "Do whatever he asks."

"I can take you," DeWitt said. She squeezed Middleton's arm supportively. "Yolanda wants to get back to the kids. They need her. I'm baggage for now."

"Let's go," Dicken said. He walked over to Toby. "Thank you, Toby. You've been very helpful."

## 36

### P E N N S Y L V A N I A

**G**eorge Mackenzie shook Mitch's shoulder. Mitch lurched up in the bed. The pastel walls of the tidy bedroom swam around him; he did not feel at all rested. He had fallen asleep without pulling back the covers on the bed, still dressed in his rumpled Mr. Smith suit.

"Where's Kaye? How long have I been asleep?"

"She's with your daughter," George said. He looked miserable. "You've been out about an hour. Sorry to wake you. Come take a look at the TV."

Mitch walked into the next room first. Kaye sat on the side of the bed, hands folded between her knees, head bowed. She looked up as Mitch checked Stella, now under the covers. He felt Stella's forehead. "Fever's down."

"Broke about an hour ago. I think. Iris brought some tea and we just sat with her."

Mitch stared at his daughter's sleeping face, so pale on the sky blue pillow, topped by a damp, matted thatch of hair. Her breath came in ragged puffs. "What's with that?"

"She's been breathing that way since the fever broke. She's not badly

congested. I don't know what it means. The doctor said he'd be back . . .” She checked the clock on the nightstand. “By now.”

“He hasn't come,” George said. “I don't think he's going to.”

“George wants me to watch the news,” Mitch said.

Kaye nodded and waved her hand; she would stay.

George led Mitch down the hall to the den and the flat wall-mounted screen. Huge faces sat behind a fancy rosewood desk, talking . . . Mitch tried to focus.

“I am as liberal as the next fellow, but this scares me,” said a middle-aged male sporting a crew cut. Mitch did not watch much television and did not know who this was.

“Brent Tucker, commentator for Fox Broadband,” George explained. “He's interviewing a school doctor from Indiana. That's where our son, Kelly, is.”

“Haven't we been expecting this?” Tucker was asking. “Isn't this why we've agreed to put the children in these special schools?”

“The footage you've just shown, of parents dropping off their children, finally coming forward and cooperating, is very encouraging—” the doctor said.

Tucker interrupted with a stern expression. “You left your post this morning. Were you afraid?”

“I've been helping explain the situation to the president's staff. I'm going back this afternoon to resume my duties.”

“The scientists we've interviewed on this show insist that the children could pose a severe risk to the population at large if allowed to roam free. And there are still tens of thousands of them out there, even now. Isn't it—”

“I cannot agree with that characterization,” the doctor said.

“Yes, well, you left your school, and that says it all, don't you think?”

The doctor opened and closed his mouth. Tucker moved in, eyes wide, sensing a kill. “The public can't be fooled. They know what this is about. Let's look at our forum instant messages and what the public is telling us right now.”

The figures came up on the screen.

“Ten to one, they want you to arrest parents who don't cooperate, get all the children where we can watch them, and do it now. Ten to one.”

“I do not think that is even practicable. We don't have the facilities.”

“We built the schools and support your work with taxpayer dollars.

You are a public servant, Dr. Levine. These children are the result of a hideous disease. What if it spreads to all of us, and there are no more normal children born, ever?"

"Do you advocate we should exterminate them, for the public good?" Levine asked.

Mitch watched with grim fascination, jaw clamped, as if witnessing a car crash.

"*Nobody* wants that," Tucker said with an expression of affronted reason. "But there is an imminent health risk. It's a matter of survival."

The doctor put his hands on the rosewood counter. "No illness has spread to staff in any of the schools I'm aware of."

"Then why aren't you in the school now, Dr. Levine?"

"They are *children*, Mr. Tucker. I will be going back to them."

Mitch clenched his fists until his fingernails dug into his palms.

Tucker smiled, showing perfect white teeth, and turned to the camera, which zoomed to a close shot. "I believe in the people and what they have to say. That is the strength of this nation, and it is also the Fox Media philosophy, fair and balanced, and I am not ashamed to agree with it. I believe there is an instinct for preservation at work among the people, and that is *news*. That is *survival*. You'll catch more details here, Fox Multicast, and touch your screen to check our expanded coverage on the Web—"

George turned off the TV. His voice was thin and choked. "Neighbor must have seen you arrive. He told me he's going to turn us in for harboring a virus child. A sick child." He held up and jangled three keys on a ring. "Iris and I have a cabin. It's about two hours from here, up in the mountains. On a small lake. Real nice, away from everybody. There's food for at least a week. You can mail back the keys. Your girl is doing better. I'm sure of it. The crisis is past."

Mitch tried to figure out what their options were—and how adamant Mackenzie was. "She's not breathing right," he said.

"I've been out of work for five months," George said. "We're running out of money. Iris is on the edge of a breakdown. We can't be a safe house anymore. This neighborhood is like Sun City for the wealthy. They're old and scared and mean." George looked up. "If the feds come here and find you, they'll put your daughter someplace where the care is worse than you can imagine. That's where our child is, Mitch."

Kaye stood behind Mitch and touched his elbow, startling him. "Take the keys," she said.

George suddenly fell back into a chair and shook his head. "Stay here until dawn," he said. "The neighbors are asleep. I hope to God everybody is asleep. Get some rest. Then, I'm sorry, you have to leave."

## 37

### OHIO

**T**he Special Treatment center occupied a long, flat, single-story building with reinforced concrete walls. Dicken and DeWitt walked around the empty school trailers and crossed the asphalt square in the brilliant glow of a dozen intense white security lights.

The door to the center hung open. A tangle of sheets and rubber mats had been tossed out like a filthy, lolling tongue. Two iron-barred and wire-reinforced windows gleamed like flat, blank eyes on either side. The building looked dead.

Inside, the air was cooler but not by much, and stank. Beneath the cacophony of stench wavered a weak chord of Pine-Sol. Dicken did not pause, though DeWitt held back and coughed under her mask. He had smelled worse; the professional refrain of a virus hunter.

Beyond the security office and the open double gates of the checkpoint, the doors to all the cells stretched down a long corridor. About half, in no particular order, had been opened. No nurses or guards were in sight.

The body of a boy of eight or nine lay on a mattress in the corridor. Dicken knew the boy was dead from several yards away. He put down his bag of specimen kits, knelt with difficulty beside the soiled mattress, examined the boy with what he hoped was clear-eyed respect, then pushed on the floor and one knee and got up again. He shook his head vigorously at DeWitt's offer of assistance.

"Don't touch anything," he warned. "Yolanda said there were nurses."

"They probably moved the children into the exercise area. The center has its own yard, at the south end."

They checked each room, peering through the observation slit or pushing open the heavy steel doors. Some of the rooms held bodies. Most were empty. A black line drawn on the floor marked the division between rooms equipped for children who need restraints or protection: the padded rooms. All of the doors to these rooms had been opened.

Two rooms contained bodies lying on cots in restraints, one male, one female, both with abnormally large heads and hands.

“It’s a condition unique to SHEVA children,” DeWitt said. “I’ve only seen three like this.”

“Congenital?”

“Nobody knows.”

Dicken counted twenty dead by the time they reached the door at the end. This door was a rolling wall of steel bars covered with thick sheets of acrylic.

“I think this is where Jurie and Pickman ordered the violent children kept,” DeWitt said.

Someone had jammed a broken cinder block into the track to prevent the door from automatically closing, and a red light and LED display flashed a security warning. Behind thickly shaded glass, the guard booth was empty, and the alarm had been hammered into silence.

“We don’t have to go through here,” DeWitt said. “The yard is that way.” She pointed down a short hall to the right.

“I need to see more,” Dicken said. “Where are the nurses?”

“With the living children, I presume. I hope.”

They squeezed through the narrow opening. All the doors beyond were locked by a double bar system, one lateral, one reaching from the ceiling to the floor and slipping into steel-clad holes. Each room held a lone, unmoving child. One stared in frozen surprise at the ceiling. Some appeared to be asleep. It did not look as if they had received any attention. There were at least eight children in these rooms, and no way to confirm they were all dead.

None of them moved.

Dicken stepped back from the last thick view port, shoved his back against the concrete wall, then, with an effort, pushed off and faced DeWitt. “The yard,” he said.

About ten paces beyond the door, they met two of the treatment center nurses. They were sharing a cigarette and sprawling on plastic chairs in the shade at the end of a broad corridor lined with padded picnic tables. The two women were in their fifties, very large, with beefy arms and large, fat hands. They wore dark green uniforms, almost black in the overhead glare. They looked up listlessly as Dicken and DeWitt came into view.

“We done everything we could,” one of them said, eyes darting.

Dicken nodded, simply acknowledging their presence—and perhaps their courage.

“There are more out there,” said the other nurse, louder, as they walked past. “It’s damned near midnight. We needed a break!”

“I’m sure you did your best,” DeWitt said. Dicken instantly caught the contrast: DeWitt’s voice, precise and academic, educated; the nurses’, pragmatic and blue collar.

The nurses were townies.

“Fuck you,” the first nurse tried to shout, but it came out a wan croak. “Where was everybody? Where’re the doctors?”

Brave townies. They cared. They could have bolted, but they had stayed.

Dicken stood in the yard. A canvas tent had been pulled over a concrete quadrangle about fifty feet on a side and surrounded by tan, stucco-covered walls. The lighting was inadequate, just wall-mounted pathway illumination surrounding the open square. The center was a shadowy pit.

Cots and mattresses had been laid out on the concrete in rows that began with some intention of order and ended in scattered puzzles. There were at least a hundred children under the tent, most of them lying down. Four women, two men, and one child walked between the cots, carrying buckets and ladles, giving the children water if they were strong enough to sit up.

Moonlight and starry sky showed through gaps and vent flaps. The quadrangle was still almost unbearably hot. All the water coolers in the building had been carried here, and a few hoses hung out of plastic barrels surrounded by fading gray rings of water slop.

A hardy few of the children, most of them younger than ten, sat under the pathway lights with their backs against the stucco walls, staring at nothing, shoulders slumped.

A woman in a white uniform approached DeWitt. She was smaller than the others, tiny, actually, with walnut-colored skin and black almond eyes and short black hair pushed up under a baseball cap. “You’re the counselor, Miss DeWitt?” she asked with an accent. Filipino, Dicken guessed.

“Yes,” DeWitt said.

“Are the doctors coming back? Is there more medicine?” she asked.

“We’re under complete quarantine,” DeWitt said.

The woman looked at Dicken and her face creased with helpless anger. As an outsider, he had failed them all; he had brought nothing useful. “To-



day and last night was a horror. All my children are gone. I work in special needs. Their only fault was slow wisdom. They were my joy.”

“I’m sorry,” Dicken said. He held up his bag of specimen kits. “I’m an epidemiologist. I need samples from all of the nurses working here.”

“Why? They’re afraid it’s going to spread outside?” She shook her head defiantly. “None of us is sick. Only the children.”

“Knowing what happened here, and how it happened, is important to the children who are still alive.”

“Do you justify *this*, Mister . . . whoever the hell you are?” the walnut-colored woman hissed.

“You’ve done your best,” Dicken said. “I know that. We have to keep trying. Keep working.” He swallowed. Tonight was already stacking up to be the worst, the most awful he had ever seen. Nightmare bad.

The woman’s arms trembled. She turned away, then turned back slowly, and her eyes were as flat and dark as the windows at the entrance. “Food would help” she said as if speaking to one of her less intelligent charges. *Slow wisdom*. “We have to feed those who are still alive.”

“I think there’s enough food,” DeWitt said.

“How many, outside?” the woman asked, hand making a helpless, rotating gesture. “How many have died?”

Dicken had seen such a gesture years ago, at the beginning of all this; he had seen a female chimp reach out for solace and Marian Freedman, who now studied Mrs. Rhine, had grasped the hand and tried to comfort her.

DeWitt held the woman’s hand in just that way. “We don’t know, honey,” she said. “Let’s just take care of our own.”

“I’m going to need the doors to the cells opened,” Dicken said.

The tiny woman covered her mouth with her hand. “We didn’t go in there,” she said, staring at him with huge eyes. “We couldn’t let them out. Some are violent. Oh, God, I’ve been afraid to look.”

“If they’ve had no contact with adults, then it’s all the more important that I get some specimens,” Dicken said.

The woman dropped her hand from her mouth—it shook as if with palsy—and stared at DeWitt.

“Come on,” DeWitt said, taking her elbow and guiding her. “I’ll help.”

“What if some are still alive?” the small woman asked plaintively.

Some were.

## PENNSYLVANIA

**M**itch glanced down at the digital receiver in the Mackenzies' Jeep. Kaye leaned forward between the seats and touched his arm. "Is that what I think it is?"

"It appears to be," Mitch said. "Webcasts. Catches everything for at least an hour back."

"We've been married too long," Kaye said. "You don't even ask what I'm talking about."

"Do you think?" Mitch said, with precisely Kaye's tone and phrasing.

Stella lay quietly beside Kaye in the backseat. She had gone through one more convulsion, but her fever had not spiked again. She was resting under a thin child's blanket, her head in Kaye's lap.

They had caught less than an hour's nap before leaving the Mackenzie house. Kaye had had a nightmare in which someone very important to her, someone like her father or Mitch, had told her she was a miserable mother, an awful human being, and some shadowy institution was withdrawing all support, which meant life support; she had thought she was running out of oxygen and could not breathe. She had struggled awake and sleep after that was impossible.

The sun was peeking over the highway behind them.

"Turn it on," Kaye said.

Mitch turned on the receiver. The dashboard display showed a map with a red spot, their position, and the radio tuned automatically to a Philadelphia station, giving stock market news for the morning.

"Did he—"

"George turned off the TheftWave years ago," Mitch said. "I checked. It's unplugged. We're just tracking GPS, not sending."

"Good." Kaye reached forward with a grunt, shifting Stella's head, and pulled out a remote folding keypad. "Fancy," she said.

Mitch glanced at her in the rearview mirror. She looked haggard, and her eyes were too bright. He could only see part of the gently breathing, blanketed form beside her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine." She studied the keypad, then experimented with a few buttons. "Looks like HFMD to me."

“That’s not a radio station,” Mitch said.

“Hand, foot, and mouth disease. It’s usually a minor viral infection in infants and children. I’m sure she’s been exposed before. Something’s changed. Whatever, we need to stock up on drugs and fluids.”

“Drugstore?”

Kaye shook her head. “I’m sure by now they’ve made this a reportable illness. Every pharmacy in the country will be on the alert, and the hospitals are refusing to take cases . . . Let’s hear what the world is saying.” The broadband sites were full of digital music, digital advertising, Rush Limbaugh thundering and buzzing away from somewhere in Florida, Dick Richelieu on building that new home, rants by evangelicals, and then BBC World News direct from London. They caught the story in progress. Kaye worked the touch pad and backed up several minutes to the beginning.

“Conditions in Asia and the United States have quickly deteriorated to what can only be described as panic. The prospect of the so-called virus children producing an unknown pathogen capable of causing a pandemic has haunted world governments for a decade, certainly since the strange and disturbing case of Mrs. Rhine seven years ago. And yet the children have remained healthy, in their schools and camps and with their beleaguered families. Now, this new and so-far unexplained illness—given no official diagnosis—is causing widespread disruption in North America, Japan, and Hong Kong. International and even some local airports are blocking flights from affected areas. In the past forty-eight hours, public and private hospitals in the United States have closed their doors to this new illness for fear of becoming part of a proposed general quarantine. Other hospitals in the UK, France, and Italy, announced that should the disease spread to these shores, which some regard as inevitable, they will accept SHEVA children and their relatives only in isolated wards.”

“If you see a vet’s office, stop,” Kaye told him.

“Okay,” Mitch said.

“The illness has not yet spread to Africa, which has the smallest population of SHEVA children, some say because of the prevalence of HIV infection. In Washington, Emergency Action denies that it has begun taking measures based on a top-secret presidential decision directive, a confidential order dating from the early years of Herod’s plague. On some widely touched Web sites, the specter of bioterrorism is being invoked with alarming frequency.”

Kaye turned off the radio and squared her clasped hands in her lap. They were passing through a small town in the middle of fields and grassy

plains. "There's a pet hospital," Kaye said, pointing to a strip mall on their right.

Mitch swung off the road into the parking lot and parked opposite a square blue-and-gray stucco building. Kaye drew the sun shades in the Jeep's windows, though the sun was still low in the east and the air was actually cool. "Stay in the back with her," she said as they both got out. Mitch tried to give Kaye a brief, encouraging hug. She squirmed out of his arms like a cat, made a vexed face, and jogged across the asphalt.

Mitch looked over his shoulder to see if they were being watched, then climbed into the backseat, lifted his daughter's head, and placed it on his lap. Stella drew breath in short jerks. Her face was covered with small red spots. She curled her knees up and flexed her fingers. "Mitch, my head hurts," she whispered. "My neck hurts. Tell Kaye."

"Mom will be back in a few minutes," Mitch said, feeling a gnawing helplessness. He might as well have been a ghost watching from the land of the dead.

Kaye peered through the venetian blinds in the glass door and saw lights inside and figures moving in a hallway in the back. She banged on the door until a young woman in a blue medical uniform approached with a puzzled look and opened the door a crack.

"We're just starting the day," the woman said. "Is this an emergency?" She was in her midtwenties, plump but not heavysset, with strong arms, bleached blonde hair, and pleasant brown eyes.

"I'm sorry to bother you, but we have some trouble with our cat," Kaye said, and smiled with her most ingratiating and harried expression. The woman opened the door and Kaye entered the hospital's small lobby. She turned nervously and looked at the admissions counter, the racks of specialized pet food and other products. The woman walked behind the counter, perked up, and smiled. "Well then, welcome. What can we do for you?" Her pocket tag showed a smiling cartoon puppy and the name Betsy.

*The good caring women of this Earth*, Kaye thought. *They are hardly ever beautiful, they are the most beautiful of all.* She did not know where this came from and shoved it aside, but first used the emotion to put a sympathetic spark into her smile.

"We're traveling," Kaye began. "We're taking Shamus with us, poor thing. He's our cat."

"What's wrong?" Betsy asked with genuine concern.

“He’s just old,” Kaye said. “Failed kidneys. I thought I brought our supplies with us, but . . . they’re back in Brattleboro.”

“Do you have a doctor’s sheet? A phone number, someone we can talk with?”

“Shamus hasn’t seen the doctor in months. We moved recently. We’ve been taking care of him on our own. We’ve already been to one pet hospital, up the road a ways . . . They got mad. It’s so early, and we’ve been up all night. They turned me down flat.” She wrung her hands. “I was hoping you could help.”

Betsy’s eyes glinted with the merest shade of suspicion. “We can’t supply narcotics or pain killers,” she warned.

“Nothing like that,” Kaye said, her heart thumping. She smiled and drew a breath. “Oh, forgive me, I’m so worried about the poor thing. We’ll need Lactated Ringer’s, four or five liters, if you have it, with butterfly clamp, and as many sets of tubes and needles—twenty-five-gauge needles.”

“That’s a little thin for a cat. Take forever to fill her up.”

“It’s a he,” Kaye said. “It’s all he’ll put up with.”

“All right,” Betsy said doubtfully.

“Methyl prednisone,” Kaye said. “To calm him while he’s traveling.”

“We have Depo-Medrol.”

“That’s fine. Do you have vidarabine?”

“Not for cats,” the young woman said, frowning. “I’ll have to check all this with the doctor.”

“He’s at the cabin—our cat. He’s doing poorly, and it’s all my fault. I should have known better.”

“You’ve handled this before . . . haven’t you?”

“I’m an expert,” Kaye said, and put on a brave, tearful grin.

The young woman entered the list onto a flat-screen monitor. “I’m not sure I even know what vidarabine is.”

Kaye searched her memory, trying to remember the long hours she had spent searching PediaServe, MediSHEVA, and a hundred other sites and databases, years ago, preparing for some unknown disaster. “There’s a new one we use sometimes. It’s called picornavene, enterovene, something like that?”

“We have equine picornavene. Surely that’s not what you’re looking for.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“It comes in quite large doses.”

“Fine. Famicyclovir?”

“No,” Betsy said, very suspicious now. “Drugstore might have that. What kind of life has your cat lived?”

“He was a wild one,” Kaye said.

“If he’s that sick . . .”

“He means so much to us.”

“You should wait for the vet. He’ll be back in an hour.”

“I’m not sure we have that long,” Kaye said, looking at her watch with a desperate expression she did not have to fake.

“You’re positive you’ve done all this before, you know how it works?”

“We’ve kept him alive for a year. I’ve had him for eighteen years. He’s a brave old tom. I don’t know what I’d do without him.”

The assistant shook her head, dubious but sympathetic. “I could get in trouble.”

Kaye felt no guilt whatsoever. If she had had a gun, she would have held them up, right now, for everything she needed. “I wouldn’t want that,” she said, staring right at the woman.

The assistant waggled her head. “What the hell,” she said. “Old cats. Pain in the butt, huh?”

“You know it,” Kaye said.

“And it’s not like we’re in the big city. Five liters Ringer’s, two hundred mils equine picornavene—that’s the smallest we’ve got—and the Depo-Medrol—” Betsy picked up the printed list. “Credit or debit?”

“Cash,” Kaye said.

## 39

### OHIO

**Y**olanda Middleton followed Dicken through the school trailers to the old farm buildings. She caught up with him easily and shook out a ring of keys. “We ransacked Trask’s office,” she said. “Found master keys to all the buildings. There’s a tag from when this was a prison. Some of the nurses say there could still be supplies out here, but nobody knows.”

“Great. Did Kelson ever come out here?”

“I don’t think so. This was Dr. Jurie’s lab,” Middleton said. “Dr. Pickman was his assistant. Both were authorized to do research. They stayed away from the rest of us.”

“What sort of research?” Dicken asked.

Middleton shook her head.

Dicken stood on the asphalt path and tapped his shoe lightly on the curb, thinking. He looked over his shoulder at the converted barn, the old business education building, and the three blank-faced concrete cubes between. Then he set off. Middleton followed.

A double steel door marked one side of the closest cube. This was labeled “NO ADMITTANCE” in white letters on the door’s blue enamel.

“What’s in here?”

“Well, among other things, a temporary morgue,” she said. “That’s what they told me. I don’t know that it was ever used.”

“Why here?”

“Dr. Jurie told us we had to keep the bodies of any children who died. The county coroner wouldn’t take them, even though she was supposed to.”

“Were the parents notified?”

“We tried,” Middleton said. “Sometimes they move without giving any forwarding address. They just leave the children behind.”

“Is there a graveyard for the school?”

“Not that I ever heard of. Honestly, Dr. Jurie took care of all that.” Middleton looked distinctly uncomfortable. “We assumed they went to a potter’s field somewhere outside of town. There weren’t that many, really. Two or three, maybe, since the school opened, and only one since I’ve been here. Trask didn’t let word about deaths circulate very far. He called it a private matter.”

Dicken rubbed his fingers together. “Key?”

Middleton looked for a newer key on the ring, and held one up for his inspection. It was labeled R1-F, F for Front, presumably—and *R for what, Research?* They agreed with a look that this was the best choice. As she pushed the key into the lock, Dicken turned his gaze up the face of concrete, pale gray in the morning light. He narrowed his eye, as he had learned over the years, to help the fogged lens focus on the vent covers near the top, a few pipes sticking out, a thick power line going to a pole and across to the junction box near the old barn.

Middleton pulled the door open. Inside, it was cool enough to make him shiver.

“The air-conditioner works here, at least,” he said.

“It’s separate from the main plant,” Middleton said. “This building’s newer than the rest.”

Dicken took a deep breath. He felt as if he were on a wild goose chase.

There might be medicine in these buildings, but he doubted it. More likely they would find laboratory supplies—unless Trask had conspired with the doctors to sell those, too. Still, the lab might be better equipped than the small medical facility adjacent to the infirmary. But these were just excuses.

Something else was bringing him here, an instinctive suspicion that had come to him as he walked among the cots in the special treatment center. *We're curious monkeys*, he thought. *We never miss opportunities.*

He found a light switch on the wall inside the door and pushed it. Fluorescents bathed the interior in a cool, sterile glow. The north wall of the room was covered by stainless steel refrigerators, huge lab units equipped with tiny blue temperature displays. Expensive, and very unlike the small, hump-shouldered units outside the infirmary.

"When did Jurie and Pickman leave?" he asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Did they take anything?"

Middleton shrugged. "I didn't see them go. I can't be everywhere."

"Of course not," Dicken said. The mask itched. He reached up to rub his nose, then thought better of it.

"How long will this take?" Middleton asked.

Dicken ignored her. The refrigerators were locked and equipped with push-button keypads. He ran his fingers across one of the pads and shook his head.

Middleton found a key on the ring that opened the door across the room. This led to a small pathology lab with a single steel autopsy table, shining clean. All the tools lay neatly in their trays or in cabinets along the far wall. Some tools had been left in an autoclave, but otherwise the lab was beautifully organized and maintained.

"When was the last autopsy conducted here?" Dicken asked.

"I don't think there have ever been any," Middleton said. "I haven't heard of any, at least. Wouldn't we have to get permission from the county?"

"Not if they refuse responsibility. Maybe Mark will know." But he was beginning to doubt that Augustine knew anything. It was beginning to look as if his old CDC boss, the putative director of Emergency Action, had finally been hamstrung—perhaps castrated was the better word—by the political wolves in Washington.

Down a short hall and to the right, they came upon the unexpected



mother lode: a fully equipped molecular biology and genetics lab, six hundred square feet of space under a high ceiling, crammed with equipment. Tissue centrifuge sorters provided specimen flow to racked analyzers—matrix and variable-probe sequencers specializing in polynucleotides, RNAs and DNAs; proteomizers capable of discerning complete complements of proteins; glycome and lipidome units for isolating and labeling sugars and fats and related compounds. More racks stood at the ends of broad steel lab benches.

The sorter and analyzers were connected by steel and white plastic automated specimen tracks, running like a little railroad through diffraction molecular imagers, inoculator/incubators, and a variety of video microscopes—including two up-to-the-minute carbon force counters. All magnificently automated. A one- or at most two-person lab.

Everything on and around the benches was hooked up to a small, square, bright red Cenomics Ideator, a dedicated computer capable of three-D imaging and real-time gene and protein description and identification.

There was more than a wealth of equipment here: What Dicken saw as he walked around the room amounted to obscene overkill for a typical school medical facility. He had visited labs in rich biotech firms that wouldn't have been able to compete.

“Wow,” Dicken said in awe. “This is the whole damned *Delta Queen*.”

Middleton raised an eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“Nothing.” He walked between the benches, then paused to reach out with his gloved hand and stroke the Ideator. He had his riverboat. He had everything he needed to track the virus back up the river of disease to the far, frozen north—to its sleeping, glacial form.

If no one else was willing to do it, he was sure he could do it all by himself, right here, and screw the unreasoning outside world. *With the help of a few manuals*. Some of this equipment he had seen only in catalogs.

Dicken leaned over to look at steel tags, identifiers, shipping labels. “Who paid for all this?”

Middleton shook her head. She was as stunned as he, but probably did not fully appreciate the magnitude of their discovery.

He found what he was searching for on the back of one of the carbon force counters. A steel tag read, “PROPERTY OF AMERICOL, INC., U.S.A. FEDERALLY REGISTERED CORPORATE LOAN EQUIPMENT.”

“Marge Cross,” he said. “Large Marge.”

“What?”

Dicken murmured a quick explanation. Marge Cross was the CEO and majority shareholder of both Americol and Eurocol, two of the world’s largest pharmaceutical and medical equipment manufacturers. He did not add that for a time Marge Cross had employed Kaye Lang.

Dicken said, “Let’s find some way to open those refrigerators. And that.” He pointed to the unmarked stainless steel door—more of a hatch, actually—at the back of the lab.

Middleton shuddered. “I’m not sure I want to,” she said.

Dicken scowled. “We’re tired, aren’t we?”

Chastened, she handed him the ring of keys. “I’ll look for the codes,” she said.

## 40

### THE POCONOS, PENNSYLVANIA

**M**itch shifted into four-wheel drive, then pushed the Jeep through a previously broken and mangled section of guardrail—just as George had described it. The Jeep rumbled down the embankment.

Kaye cradled Stella once more in the backseat. Stella did not react to the bumps and lurches. Kaye stared straight ahead, through the windshield, seeing nothing, really, and thinking furiously. She could not shut down her mind, filled with scenes and plans that did not connect in any useful way. She was at the end of her rope, about to be jerked up hard; she knew it, and there was nothing she could do about it.

She was more than half convinced they were going to lose Stella. Making plans for a time after Stella certainly seemed appropriate, but she could not bring herself to do so. Her thoughts became jagged and incomplete, painful.

She could feel her throat starting to constrict, as it had in the nightmare.

“There,” Mitch said. He pointed.

“What?” Kaye wheezed.

“A road.”

As George had told them, they now straddled an almost overgrown path, just barely deserving to be called a road. He swung the Jeep left.

The path wound through scrub forest for a quarter of a mile, then connected to a state highway. This way would avoid quarantine roadblocks on the county line.

Mitch's intuition had been finely honed over the last ten years. He had sharp criminal instincts. He could almost picture Department of Health or FEMA roadblocks, INS agents, or the Philadelphia National Guard checking each vehicle on the main highway, CDC deputy inspectors waiting in the back of an Emergency Action van . . .

He had seen it all before, while traveling, looking for a new home, seven years ago. During the panic after the discovery of Mrs. Rhine.

Kaye crooned to Stella as she had when Stella was a baby. Stella's lips were cracked and her forehead hot. Her head lolled until Kaye cradled it in her elbow. She brushed back the luxurious, short-cut hair with her fingers, watched her daughter's cheeks, alternately flushing and blanching, like a signal light trying to decide whether to stay on. Stella smelled rank in a particularly disturbing way, a *sick offspring* smell that made Kaye deeply uneasy.

Kaye had not entirely lost the enhanced sense of smell she had developed as the mother of a SHEVA infant, even though she could no longer produce her own communicative pheromones. The pores behind her ears had closed up after two years. Mitch's had closed even earlier, and their cheek patches, the variegated melanophores, had faded back to normal as well, though in Kaye's case they had left small, trapped pools of freckles.

Stella's lips moved. She started speaking, babbling really, in two streams at once. Kaye stroked her daughter's chin and lips until they stopped their restless action, and Stella reduced the volume to a whisper:

*"I want to see the woods/*

*"There's so little time/ Leave me in the woods/*

*"Please./ Please. Please."*

"We're in the woods, honey," Kaye told Stella. "We're in the forest."

Stella opened her eyes, then, blinded by the light in her face, swung her arm up, nearly knocking Kaye's nose bloody. Kaye pushed the arm down and covered Stella's eyes with her hand.

"How much longer?" she asked Mitch.

"Not sure. Maybe an hour."

"We might lose her before then."

"She's not going to die," Mitch said. "She's doing better."

“She won’t drink.”

“You gave her water before we left.”

“She peed on the seat. She’s hot. She won’t drink. How do you know? I don’t know she won’t die.”

“I’m the spooky guy,” Mitch said. “Remember?”

“This isn’t a joke, Mitch,” Kaye said, her voice rising.

“Can’t you smell her?” Mitch asked.

“I smell her better than you do,” Kaye said.

“She isn’t dying. I’d know.”

“Please stop arguing,” Stella murmured, and rolled over, kicking feebly at the door. Her bare feet made the weakest little thumps. “My head hurts. Let me out/ I want to get out.”

Kaye held her daughter against her brief struggles. With a discouraged sigh, the girl went limp again. Kaye looked at the back of Mitch’s head, the uneven cut of his nape, a bad haircut. You saved money where you could. Mitch had never enjoyed haircuts anyway. For a moment, she hated her husband. She wanted to bite and scratch and hit him.

No one knew more about her daughter than she did. Nobody. If Mitch spoke one more time, Kaye thought she would scream.

## 41

### OHIO

**T**rask or someone working for him had shut down the server that handled all the school’s internal and external landline and satellite communications, and it would not start up without a password. None of the teachers or nurses or Kelson knew that password, and Trask of course was no longer available.

Augustine could guess on motives, but it did not matter. Nothing mattered but doing whatever he could to shake loose the needed supplies. Dicken did not carry a phone. The only working phone at the moment was Augustine’s Web phone.

Personally, and through his secretary in the EMAC office in Indiana, he had sent messages—voice and email—to the heads of all the agencies on his list, confirming his previous calls for supplies. Anything. They had told him they would do their best, but the situation was very tight, and it might take a day or two.

Augustine knew they did not have that long.

One intrepid deputy to an undersecretary at Health and Human Services had suggested he call local media and make his case. "Phones are ringing off the hook over here."

Augustine had declined. He knew how that would go. The beleaguered and unpopular director of Emergency Action would be picked apart by reporters trying to prove him a liar.

He needed facts to avoid panicking the public even further, and Dicken had not yet delivered anything useful.

Now Augustine sat in a worn secretary's chair at a small desk near the corner, and used his Web phone to call up reports on the internal NIH Web site. At least they had not locked out his personal account; he was not completely *persona non grata*.

He studied the freshly posted morning statistics, the numerical anatomy of the disaster, on the phone's small color screen.

The first case had probably occurred in California, at the Pelican Bay school. Three California penal corporations had won the contracts to house SHEVA children in the Golden State; all had been particularly reluctant to work with any Washington-based authority. Augustine had come to hate those administrators, and those schools; the culture of the California penal system had become inbred, defensive, and arrogant during the last decade of the twentieth century, the Drug War years. He was not surprised that Pelican Bay had not reported the spread of the disease until the day before yesterday. First to notice, next to last to report.

The disease had struck almost simultaneously at fifteen other schools, from Oregon to Mississippi. Dicken would be interested in that fact. Where was the reservoir? Where were the vectors? How had the virus spread before it erupted into pandemic?

How and why had it lain dormant for so long?

Pelican Bay had lost twelve hundred students out of six thousand. One in five. San Luis Obispo and Port Hueneme were reporting smaller percentages, but half the students at Kalispell, almost a thousand, were already gone, and more were expected to die within the next twelve hours. El Cajon, fifty-six out of three hundred.

His eye swept east through the maps and charts. Phoenix, two thousand out of eight thousand. Two thirds had fallen ill in Tucson; half of those were dead. Provo had lost half, but with less than one hundred students. Mormons tended not to hand over their kids without a fight, and there were fewer than a thousand SHEVA children in the three schools in Utah.

Augustine wondered how many of the “home-schooled,” as some agencies called them, the underground virus children, had become ill and died. The disease would spread to them soon enough, he guessed.

In Ohio, Iowa, and Indiana, in twelve schools holding sixty-three thousand children gathered from across the Midwest, over thirteen thousand SHEVA children were now dead.

He was looking at the stats for Illinois when the phone beeped. He answered.

It was Rachel Browning from the SRO.

“Hello, Mark. I hear you called. Sad day,” Browning said.

“Rachel, how nice to hear from you,” Augustine said. “We need supplies here immediately—”

“Hold for a sec. Have to take this one.” Light jazz played over the line. That was too much; he almost snapped the phone shut. But he held his palm away from the cover. Patience was the watchword, certainly now, and certainly for a wraith, a wisp whose tenuous authority could simply wink out at any moment.

Browning came back. “One in four, Mark,” she began, as if it were a sports score.

“We’re counting one in five, averaged across the country, Rachel. We need—”

“You’re stuck way out in the middle of it, I hear. Looks like seventy plus percent rate of contagion,” Browning interrupted. “Aerosol vital for at least three hours. Horrendous. It’s outside of anyone’s control.”

“It’s slowing.”

“There aren’t many left to infect, not in the schools.”

“We could cut the losses to almost nothing with proper medical care,” Augustine said. “We need doctors and equipment.”

“The Ohio district director is a corrupt son of a bitch,” Browning said. “At least we can agree on that. He diverted medical supplies from school warehouses because the kids were so healthy. The rumor is some of his staffers sold the supplies for ten cents on the dollar to Russian bosses in Chicago, and now they’re on the black market in Moscow.”

“I did not know that,” Augustine said, tapping his fingernail on the desktop.

“You should have, Mark. Justice is moving in on little leopard feet,” Browning said. “That does not help you or the virus kids. Worse still, there are a lot of brown BVDs in Washington, Mark. They’re scared. So am I.”

“None of the adults here are ill. It is not a threat to us. We know the eti-

ology and nature of the disease.” This was a lie, but he had to show some strength.

“If this illness has anything to do with ancient viruses, and I suspect it does—don’t you?—we’re going to full-blown biological emergency. PDD 298, Mark.”

It had been three years since Augustine had read the details of Presidential Decision Directive 298.

“Hayford has a crisis bill on the House floor now,” Browning continued. “No virus child will be tolerated outside a federal school. *None*. Not even on the reservations or in Utah. All schools will come under direct EMAC federal control. You’ll like that. The bill increases violation penalties and authorizes *tripling* the staff for interdiction and arrest. We’ll be hiring every fat security guard with a bigger gun than a dick, and every yahoo who ever failed cop school. They’ll double our budget, Mark.”

Augustine looked at his Rolex. “It’s eleven in the morning there,” he said. “Can anyone in Washington get doctors out here?”

“Not for a day, at least,” Browning said. “Everyone’s taking care of their own, and the governor of Ohio hasn’t asked yet. And, frankly, why should I trust you? You’ll help me best where you are—screwing everything up royally. But I don’t hold grudges. I’m here to offer some charity. I know where Kaye Lang will be hiding in a couple of hours. Do you?”

“No. I’ve been busy, Rachel.”

“I think you’re telling the truth.”

Augustine worked quickly through the possible ways Rachel Browning could have discovered such a thing as Kaye’s whereabouts. “You squeezed someone?”

“A GPS NuTest report out of Pittsburgh and neighbor complaints led us to a particular house. I got needed medical attention to a particular virus child at a school in Indiana. His parents are very happy. The doctors say he’s going to live, Mark.” Browning sounded ebullient, relating this tale of detection and shakedown.

“With so much power, I know you could help us here,” Augustine said.

“Honestly. I can’t. Did you hear that France offered to send in wide-spectrum antivirals, and President Ellington refused?”

“I did not.”

“All the precious beltway schools are well-supplied. Nobody raided *their* medical stores. And remember, Ohio did not go for Ellington, last election.”

Augustine pinched the bridge of his nose. He had had a headache for

the last two hours, and it showed no signs of going away. "I hear no charity, Rachel. Why the call?"

"Because the shit that passes for opinion around here is starting to scare even me. I can't get through to the NRO or NSA bosses. Secretary of Health and Human Services is unavailable. I think they're all in conference in their secure little rabbit holes in Annapolis and Arlington. Mark, you know as well as I do that everyone in the House and Senate had their kids well before SHEVA. Only two senators and four representatives have SHEVA grandkids. Tough luck. Statistically it should be more. Sixty-four percent of our aging electorate favored shoot-on-sight policies against fugitive virus kids in a CNN-Gallup Poll yesterday evening. Two out of three, Mark."

"How secure is this line, Rachel?" Augustine asked.

Browning made a sharp raspberry between her teeth. "Can you guess what's coming down from the beltway?"

The headache pounded. He leaned over the desk. "All too easily."

"Queen's X, Mark?"

"Who's Queen today?"

"That would be me. I'll authorize a special pickup for Kaye Lang and her daughter. People I know and trust."

Augustine thought this over for a few seconds. He had never been angrier in his life, or weaker. "I'm obliged, Rachel."

He could hear the triumph in her voice. "I'm not as stupid as you think I am, Mark. Alive, she's a pain in the ass. Dead, she's a martyr."

"Do what you can, Rachel."

"I always do. No timetables, though. I'll do this on my own schedule and tell you as little as possible."

"All right."

"If this works, you owe me, Mark. Now, here's what—"

Abruptly, the phone died. He shook it and punched the on button several times. The phone flashed to life, but, receiving no signal, turned off again to conserve power.

Very likely, SRO had taken over the wireless networks and shut down cell towers around all the schools. First stage of PDD 298.

Augustine put the phone down just as DeWitt returned to the room.

"Dr. Dicken wants to see you," she said. "They've found something."

"Supplies?" Augustine asked hopefully.

DeWitt shook her head.



## PENNSYLVANIA

**O**n the state route, the traffic was light, three or four cars in the last fifteen minutes. Nobody wanted to be caught driving. Simply being out on the road would be suspicious. George had said the turnoff to the cabin was tricky, hard to see. He had nailed a red plastic strip to a large pine tree to mark the spot.

Mitch drove more slowly, looking for the red plastic strip and a wooden plaque that joy-riding vandals tended to splinter with ball bats.

Suddenly, the interior of the Jeep filled with shadow. He felt immersed in inky night. The sensation passed, but it scared him; he could almost smell the darkness, like crankcase oil.

“Too damned tired,” he told himself, and wondered whether they had heard him in the backseat. He could feel both of them back there, both alive, both quiet. Stella’s breathing had lost some of its harshness, but Mitch knew her fever was high.

Maybe he was coming down with it, too. That would be more than Kaye could stand, he suspected. *So, I will not become sick.*

Whistling in the dark. In the oily dark.

## OHIO

**“J**urie left the number codes in a desk drawer,” Middleton said as Augustine and DeWitt followed her into the concrete cube of the research building. “Dr. Dicken told me to bring you all here.”

Dicken came through the opposite door, carrying a thick folder of papers. He glared at Augustine. “You rotten son of a bitch,” he said.

Augustine took this without blinking. “You’ve found something,” he said.

“You’re goddamned right I’ve found something. How much did Ameri-col pump into the schools? The *camps*?”

“To my knowledge, nothing.”

“You’re going to blame it all on Trask, right?”

Augustine shook his head cautiously. He looked around the big room and focused on the wall of steel refrigerators. "I don't even know what *it* is."

"What would Marge Cross want with all these children?" Dicken held out the folder. Augustine reached forward, leaning on his cane, and Dicken pulled it back, then dropped it on a desk next to the stainless steel cold storage units. Photographs spilled out: color photographs of autopsy proceedings. Even from a distance, it was obvious the subjects were children, some of them infants.

Dicken took a step away, as if too disgusted to let Augustine come near him.

Augustine shifted his eyes from face to face, facial lines deepening. He pushed aside the photos, then lifted the cover page on the folder and leafed through it.

"I know you too well," Dicken said. "You wouldn't be stupid enough to just let this happen."

"Show me the rest," Augustine said.

Middleton punched in the code numbers that unlocked the first stainless steel refrigerator door. Fog fell, revealing ranks of jars. Augustine immediately recognized the contents for what they were. The jars on top were small and contained anonymous meaty lumps in colorless fluid.

The jars below, on taller shelves, contained whole internal organs.

Middleton's skin had faded to a sickly shade of olive, and her eyes were almost closed.

"How many?" Augustine asked.

"There're the remains of maybe sixty or seventy children here, and more scattered throughout the building," Dicken said.

"What do you think . . . what purpose?"

"I won't even hazard a guess," Dicken said.

"We never lost this many children," Middleton said, "and Dr. Jurie . . . Dr. Pickman . . . left before . . ." She did not finish. She closed the first door and opened the second. Trays of thousands of frozen tissue samples, mounted on slides or stored in solution in smaller bottles, had been stacked to the top of the compartment.

Augustine surveyed the trays, then stepped forward and motioned for Middleton to open the third door, and the fourth. His cane made rubbery squeaks on the linoleum floor. "You're positive none of these were from the last two days," he said, grasping at some reasonable explanation for

all the jars and tubes and dishes sealed, neatly numbered, and marked with yellow-and-red biohazard labels.

“It’s a tissue library,” Dicken said. “Healthy tissue, pathological specimens, whatever they could get. There’s a fully equipped laboratory for analyzing them. Jurie and Pickman autopsied all the children who died at this school, and all the schools in this region. I presume they were bringing the dead here from wherever they could get them,” Dicken said. “A central clearing house for cadavers.”

“Cross paid for the equipment?” Augustine asked. His demeanor was so quiet, his expression so utterly devastated, that Dicken pushed back his anger.

“Americol,” he said.

“Mm hm,” Augustine said. He took the list of codes from Middleton and unlocked and examined the next three doors. Two contained the by now familiar stacked trays of specimens. The last contained five cadavers, wrapped in transparent plastic, suspended by hooks and slings from rails at the top of the compartment.

“My God,” DeWitt said.

“I should have known,” Augustine murmured. “That’s certain. I should have known.”

Middleton approached the open compartment. “Autopsies would be standard, wouldn’t they? Is that what we’re looking at, a pathology study being done on behalf of the students, to protect them?”

“No,” Augustine said abruptly. “No studies were ever passed up to Washington, and I doubt they were even sent to the Ohio Central authority, or I would have heard of it. Before this week began, a total of three hundred and seventy-nine children in custody of the schools have died. Very low mortality, statistically speaking. Many of them are probably here. They were supposed to be returned to their families or buried if left unclaimed.” Augustine closed the door. “I did not authorize this.”

Dicken stepped forward. “Was there any value to the children in doing this . . . research?”

“I don’t know,” Augustine said. “Possibly. Doubtful, however. Anatomically, the children are so much like us that storage of organs or whole cadavers for research never seemed strictly necessary. Biopsies and specific tissue samples from the dead were all I ever authorized. You would have done the same.”

Dicken admitted this with a quick nod.

“This implies some sort of large-scale morbidity study. Whole body assessments, thousands of tissue analyses . . . I need to sit down.”

DeWitt brought a chair. Augustine slumped into it and leaned forward, shaking his head. “I’m trying to make sense of it,” he said.

“Try harder,” Dicken urged.

“I know of no reason other than retrovirus expression,” Augustine said. “Tracking expression of novel HERV in the new children. A statistical sampling of expression in dozens or hundreds of individuals, correlated with known biographies, stress patterns. That would require an unprecedented effort. Monumental.”

“To what end?”

“It could be an attempt to understand the whole process. What the ancient viruses are up to. What dangers they might present.”

“To predict incidence of Shiver?” Dicken asked. “That’s being done elsewhere. Why do it here, unauthorized?”

“Because nowhere else do they have access to so many new children, dead or alive,” Augustine said.

“This is making me sick,” DeWitt said, and leaned on the small desk, pushing aside the folder.

Augustine looked up at Dicken. “I’m not the puppet master, Christopher. They broke me in the ranks months ago. I’ve been trying to keep whatever responsibility was left to me in order to maintain some sense of order.” He waved his arm feebly at the stainless steel doors. “People died, Christopher.”

“That’s what Marian Freedman said, last time I visited Fort Detrick. Some excuse. Anything goes. You’re not the bad guy here?” Dicken asked.

“Were they bad guys, really?” Augustine asked. “Do we know that?”

“What about the parents?” DeWitt asked.

“Sentiment must be considered,” Augustine said. “Medical ethics should prevail even in an emergency. But we’ve never faced this kind of problem before.”

Dicken took Augustine’s arm and lifted him to his feet. “One last bit of evidence,” he said.

Augustine walked slowly through the benches in the molecular biology lab, taking in the collection of expensive machinery with impassivity, long past the possibility of surprise. Dicken opened the hatch at the back of the lab and switched on the fluorescent lights, revealing a long, narrow room. All hesitated before entering.

Steel shelves reaching to the ceiling held hundreds of long cardboard boxes. Dicken pulled out one and opened the hinged lid. Within were bones: femurs, tagged and arranged according to size. Another box held phalanges. Bigger boxes on the lower right, none more than four feet in length, held complete skeletons.

Augustine leaned against the edge of the frame. "There's nothing I can do here," he said. "Nothing any of us can do."

"This isn't all," Dicken said. "There's an upper floor. It's still locked."

"What do you think they keep up there?" DeWitt asked, her face ashen.

"No excuses, Christopher," Augustine said. "We should not forget this, but what in hell does anger do for us, now? For the sick children?"

"Not a goddamned thing," Dicken admitted. "Let's go."

## 44

### THE POCONOS, PENNSYLVANIA

**E**leven in the morning, the dashboard display said. Mitch looked left on the two-lane asphalt road and saw, about a hundred feet ahead, the red plastic strip hanging on a big old pine. He slowed and rolled down the window.

The signpost was still standing, though it had been knocked askew. The wooden plaque read:

*MACKENZIE*

*George and Iris and Kelly*

Mitch got out, unlocked the pipe, and pushed it back through its iron hoop. He took the plaque down from the signpost and stashed it in the back of the Jeep.

The cabin was made of whole stripped logs just beginning to gray with exposure. It sat on the shore of a private half-acre lake, alone in the pines. The air was scented by pine needles and dry dirt. Mitch could smell the moisture from the lake, the greenness of shallows filled with reeds. Sunlight slanted down through the trees onto the Jeep, illuminating Kaye in the backseat.

Mitch walked up onto the porch, his heavy shoes clomping on the wood. He unlocked the door, deactivated the burglar alarm with the six-number code, then returned to the Jeep.

Kaye was already halfway up the walk from the driveway, carrying Stella.

“Get a bag of Ringer’s and set up an IV,” she said. “A lamp hook, flower-pot hook, anything. I’ll spread some blankets.” She carried Stella into the cabin. The air inside was cool and sweetly stuffy.

Mitch spread a sleeping bag on the floor behind a big leather couch and took down an empty hanging pot, then slung the bag of Ringer’s solution, inserted the long, clear plastic tube into the bag, opened the butterfly clamp, let the clear fluid push through the tube and drip from the needle. Kaye lay Stella on the bag, tapped her arm to bring up a vein, poked in the needle, strapped it to the girl’s arm with medical tape.

Stella could barely move.

“She should be in a hospital,” Kaye said, kneeling beside her daughter.

Mitch looked down on them both, hands opening and closing helplessly. “In a better world,” he said.

“There is no goddamned better world,” Kaye said. “Never has been, never will be. There’s just ‘suffer the little children.’ ”

“That’s not what that means,” Mitch said.

“Screw it, then,” Kaye said. “I hope I know what the hell I’m doing.”

“Her head hurts,” Mitch said.

“She has aseptic meningitis. I’m going to bring the swelling down with prednisone, treat those mouth sores with famicyclovir.”

They had found the famicyclovir, medical tape, and other supplies in a small drugstore near the pet hospital. Kaye had also managed to score a box of disposable syringes. Her excuses had worn thin at the last. She had told the pharmacist, perched in his little elevated booth in the back of the store, that she was using the needles for a cloth dyeing project.

That would not have gone over well in the big city.

She prepared to give Stella an injection.

“I’m not even sure about the dose,” she murmured.

Mitch was half convinced he could walk out the door, drive off, and Kaye would never notice he was gone. He looked at his hands, smooth from lack of digging. How had this happened? He knew, he remembered, but none of it seemed real. Even the shadow of grief—was that what he had felt in the Jeep?—even that seemed unimportant.

Mitch could feel his soul winking down to nothing.

The drip of lactated Ringer’s slid down the long plastic tube.

“I’ll watch her,” he said.

“Get some sleep,” Kaye said. She slipped the used syringe needle into its plastic cap for disposal.

“You first,” he said.

“Get some sleep, damn it,” Kaye said, and her glance up at him was like the slap of a flat, dull knife.

## 45

### OHIO

“It begins,” Augustine said. “I’ve dreaded this day for years.”

Standing in the number two tower, surrounded by stacked boxes, dusty old desks, and outdated desktop computers, Augustine and Dicken—and Augustine’s ever-vigilant agent—watched the Ohio National Guard troops set up their perimeter and cut off the school’s entrance. Their view encompassed the main road, the water tower to the west, a barren gravel field broken by lozenges of bare concrete, a line of scrub oaks beyond that, and a state highway slicing through low grassy hills.

DeWitt climbed up the last flight of steps and leaned against the wall, out of breath. DeWitt nodded. “Governor’s office called . . . the director’s line. The governor is jumping ahead . . . of the feds and declaring,” she sucked in her breath with a small whoop, “a stage five public health emergency. We’re under complete quarantine. Nobody in or out . . . Not even you, Dr. Augustine.” She nailed him with a glare. “Main gate reports twenty more . . . National Guard trucks . . . moving in. They’re surrounding the school.”

Augustine turned to the Secret Service agent, who tapped his earpiece and made a wry face. “We’re in for the duration,” the agent affirmed.

“What about the supplies?” DeWitt asked.

“They can drop them off at the entrance and we can send someone to pick them up, no contact,” Dicken said. “But they have to get here first.”

Augustine seemed less hopeful. “Not difficult to isolate us,” he said dryly. “It’s a prison to start with. As for supplies—they’ll have to go through state lines, state inspection. The state can intercept them and hold them. The governor will try to protect his votes, act ignorant, and shift our supplies to the big cities, the rich neighborhoods, the most visible and well-funded hospitals with the loudest administrators. Stockpile against a potential plague.”

“Leave us with nothing? I can’t believe they’ll be that stupid,” DeWitt said. “They’ll have a revolt.”

“By whom? The parents?” Dicken asked. “They’ll hunker down and hunker for the best. Dr. Augustine made sure of that years ago.”

Augustine looked through the tower window and did not take Dicken’s bait. “All it takes to get elected in twenty-first-century America is a mob of frightened sheep and a wolf with a nice smile,” he said softly. “We have plenty of sheep. Ms. DeWitt, could I speak with Christopher in private, please? But stay close.”

DeWitt looked between them, not knowing what to think, and then left, closing the door behind her.

“It’s worse than any of them can imagine,” Augustine said, his voice low. “I think the starting pistol has been fired.”

“You mentioned that in the car. What in hell does it mean?”

“If we’re lucky, the president can put a stop to it . . . But I do not know Ellington. He’s kept his distance ever since he was elected. I do not know what he will do.”

“Put a stop to what?”

“If the situation gets any worse, I believe the governor will call Washington and ask for permission to clean up the schools. Sterilize the premises. He may ask for sanction to kill the children.”

Dicken stood up. “You have got to be shitting me.”

Augustine shook his head and looked him steadily in the eye. “State autonomous self-protection, as specified under Presidential Decision Directive 298, Emergency Action Gray Book. It’s called the Military and Biological Security Protocol, Part Four. It was enacted seven years ago during a secret session of the Senate oversight committee. It gives discretion to state authorities on the scene to use all necessary force, under well-defined emergency conditions.”

“Why was I never told?”

“Because you chose to stay a soldier. The contents of the directive are confidential. At any rate, I opposed the rule as extreme, but there were a lot of scared senators in the room. They were shown pictures of Mrs. Rhine’s family, incidents of Shiver in Mexico. They saw pictures of you, Christopher. The statute was signed by the president, and has never been revoked.”

“Is there any chance they’ll listen to reason?”

“Slim to none. But we have to try. The race is on. You have work to do, and so do I.” He raised his voice. “Ms. DeWitt?”



DeWitt opened the door. As requested, she had not gone far; Augustine wondered if she had heard anything.

“I want to talk to Toby Smith.”

“Why?” DeWitt asked, as if the thought of Augustine seeing the boy again disgusted her.

“We’re going to need their help,” he said.

“They’re hardly trained for this sort of thing,” Dicken said, following Augustine down the concrete stairs. His voice echoed from the hard gray walls.

“You’d be surprised,” Augustine said. “We need answers by tomorrow. Is that possible?”

“I don’t know.” Dicken was amazed at the transformation. This was the old Mark Augustine, jerked back to life like some sort of political zombie. His skin was regaining color, his eyes were hard, and the perpetual grimace of determination had returned.

“If we don’t have answers by then, they could move in and kill us all.”

Dicken, Augustine, Middleton, DeWitt, Kelson, and Toby Smith gathered in Trask’s office.

Toby stood before Augustine with a paper cup of water in one hand. Behind him stood Dr. Kelson and the two remaining school police officers. The officers wore surgical masks. The doctor did not seem to care very much whether he was protected.

“Toby, we’re short staffed,” Augustine said.

“Yeah,” Toby said.

“And we have a lot of sick people to take care of. All of them your friends.”

Toby looked around the office. The square, metal-framed windows let in the bright afternoon sun and a whiff of warm air that smelled of the miles of dry grass beyond the compound.

“How many students are healthy enough to help us do some work around here?”

“A few,” Toby said. “We’re all tired. Pretty koobered.”

“Koobered?”

“A word,” Toby said, squinting at Dicken, then looking around the room at the others.

“They have a lot of words,” DeWitt said. “Most are special to this school.”

“We think,” Kelson added, and scratched his arm through the sleeve,

then looked around to see if anyone had caught him doing this. "I'm fine," he said to Dicken. "Dry skin."

"What does 'koobered' mean?" Augustine asked Toby.

"Not important," Toby said.

"Okay. But we're going to spend a lot of time together, if that's all right with you. I'd like to learn these words, if you're willing to teach me."

Toby shrugged.

"Can you put some teams together and pick up some basic nursing skills from the doctors, from Ms. Middleton and the teachers?"

"I guess," Toby said.

"Some of them are already doing that in the gym and in the infirmary," Middleton said. "Helping keep kids comfortable, deliver water."

Augustine smiled. He had pulled himself together, straightened his rumpled shirt and pants, washed his face in Trask's executive bathroom sink. "Thanks, Yolanda. I'm speaking with Toby now, and I want him to tell me what's what. Toby?"

"I'm not the best at doing that kind of stuff. Not even the best who's still up and standing around."

"Who is?"

"Four or five of us, maybe. Six, if you count Natasha."

"Are you fever-scenting, Toby?" Middleton asked. "Do I have to strap on my sachet again?"

"I'm just seeing if I can, Ms. Middleton," Toby said.

Augustine recognized the chocolate-like scent. Toby was nervous. "I'm glad you're feeling better, Toby, but we all need to think clearly."

"Sorry."

"I'd like for you to represent me and Mr. Dicken and all the school staff, okay? And ask the right kids—the right individuals—to put together teams for more training. Ms. Middleton will help us train, and Dr. Kelson. Toby, can these teams become clouded?"

Toby smiled, one pupil growing larger, the other shrinking. The gold flecks in both irises seemed to move.

"Probably," Toby said. "But I think you mean we should *cloud*. Join up."

"Of course. Sorry. Can you help us learn who's going to get better and who isn't?"

"Yes," Toby said, very serious now, and both irises large.

Augustine turned to Dicken. "I think that's where we should begin. We're not going to get any help from outside, no deliveries, nothing. We're

cut off. As far as the children are concerned, we need to focus our efforts and our supplies on those for whom we can do the most good with what we have. The children are better equipped to determine that than we are. Is this clear, Toby?"

Toby nodded slowly.

"I don't like giving children such decisions," Middleton said, eyes thinning. "They are very loyal to each other."

"If we do nothing, more will die. This thing is going through the new children like a crown fire. It's spreading by breath and touch—aerosol."

"What's that mean for us?" Dr. Kelson asked, looking between Dicken and Augustine.

"I don't think we'll catch it from the kids unless we engage in really stupid behavior—pick our noses, that sort of thing," Dicken said, glancing at Augustine. *Damn him, he's pulling us together.* "The aerosol forms of the viruses are probably not infectious for us."

"It has a smell," Toby volunteered. "When it's in the air it smells like soot spread over snow. When someone is going to get sick, and maybe die, they smell like lemons and ham. When they're going to get sick but not die, they smell like mustard and onions. Some of us just smell like water and dust. We won't get sick. That's a good, safe smell."

"What do you smell like, Toby?"

Toby shrugged. "I'm not sick."

Augustine gripped Toby's shoulder. "You're our guy," he said.

Toby returned his stare without expression, but his cheeks flared.

"Let's start," Augustine said.

"It's come to them saving themselves," DeWitt said, finding the logic bitter. "God help us all."

**T**he woods became dark and still. The rooms inside the cabin were quiet, stuffy from months of being closed up. Beneath the table lamp in the living room, Stella Nova shuddered at the end of each exhale of breath, but her lungs were not congested, and the air did not go in and out of her with the harsh whicker Kaye had heard earlier.

She changed the bag of Ringer's. Stella still did not awaken. Kaye stooped beside her daughter, listening and watching, then straightened. She looked around the cabin, seeing for the first time the homey and decorative touches, the carefully chosen personal items of the Mackenzie family. On an end table, a silver frame with characters from Winnie-the-Pooh in bas-relief held a picture of George and Iris and their son, Kelly, perhaps three years younger than Stella at the time the picture was taken.

To some, all the new children looked alike. People chose the simplest markers to differentiate between one another. Some people, Kaye had learned, were little more than social drones, going through the motions of being human beings, like little automatons, and teaching these people to see Stella and her kind with any sense of discrimination or understanding was almost impossible.

She hated that amorphous mob, lined up in her imagination like an endless army of unthinking robots, all intent on misunderstanding, hurting, killing.

Kaye checked Stella once again, found her signs steady if not improving, then walked from room to room to find her husband. Mitch sat on the porch in an Adirondack chair, facing the lake, eyes fixed on a point between two big pines. The fading light of dusk made him look sallow and drained.

"How are you?" Kaye asked.

"I'm fine," Mitch said. "How's Stella?"

"Resting. The fever is steady, but not dangerous."

"Good," Mitch said. His hands gripped the ends of the square wooden armrests. Kaye surveyed those hands with a sudden and softening sense of nostalgia. Big, square knuckles, long fingers. Once, simply looking at Mitch's hands would have made her horny.

"I think you're right," Kaye said.

"About what?"

"Stella's going to be okay. Unless there's another crisis."

Mitch nodded. Kaye looked at his face, expecting relief. He just kept nodding.

"We can take turns sleeping," Kaye suggested.

"I won't sleep," Mitch said. "If I sleep, someone will die. I have to stay awake and watch everything. Otherwise, you'll blame me."

This astonished Kaye, to the extent she even had enough energy to feel astonished. "I'm sorry, what?"

“You were angry with me for being in Washington when Stella ran away.”

“I was not.”

“You were furious.”

“I was upset.”

“I can’t betray you. I can’t betray Stella. I’m going to lose both of you.”

“Please talk sense. That is *loony*, Mitch.”

“Tell me that’s not exactly how you felt, because I was away when it began.”

Why did the burden rest upon her? How often had Mitch been away, and Stella had decided it was time to pull something, to challenge, stretch, reach out and test? “I was stressed out,” Kaye said.

“I’ve never blamed you. I’ve tried to do everything you wanted me to do, and be everything I’ve needed to be.”

“I know,” Kaye said.

“Then cut me some slack.” At another time, those words might have hit Kaye like a slap, but his voice was so drained and desperate, they felt more like the brush of a wind-blown curtain. “Your instincts are no stronger than mine. Just because you are a woman and a mother does not give you the right to . . .” He waved a hand helplessly. “Go off on me.”

“I did not ‘go off on you,’ ” Kaye said, but she knew she had, and felt defensively that she did indeed have that right. Yet the way Mitch was behaving, the words he was saying, scared her. He had never been one to complain or to criticize. She could not remember having this sort of conversation in their twelve years of being together.

“I feel things as strongly as you,” Mitch said.

Kaye sat on the chair arm, nudging his elbow inward. He folded his arm across his chest. “I know,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Mitch said. “I know it isn’t the right time to talk like this.” His breath hitched. He was trying to hold back sobs. “But right now I feel like curling up and dying.”

Kaye leaned over to kiss the top of his head. His face was cold and hard under her fingers, as if he were already in some other place, dead to her. Her heart started to beat faster.

Mitch cleared his throat. “There’s this voice in my head, and it says over and over again, ‘You are not fit to be a father.’ If that’s true, the only option is to die.”

“Shush,” Kaye said, very cautiously.

“If I go to sleep, I’ll let something get in. A little crack. Something will creep in and kill my family.”

“The hell with that,” she said, again gently, softly, as if her breath might shatter him. “We’re tough. We’ll make it. Stella’s doing better.”

“I’m tapped out. Broken.”

“Shush, please. You *are* strong, I know you are, and I apologize if I’ve been acting stupid. It’s the situation, Mitch. Don’t be hard on either of us.”

He shook his head, clearly unconvinced. “I need you to tuck me in,” he said, his voice hollow. “Put me in that big bed and pull up the frilly sheets and kiss me on the cheek and say good night. I’ll be all right in a little while. Just wake me if Stella has a problem, or if you need me.”

“All right,” Kaye said. She felt an immense sadness as he looked up and met her eyes.

“I try all the time,” he said. “I give you both all I have, all the time.”

“I know.”

“Without you and Stella, I am a dead man. You know that.”

“I know.”

“Don’t break me, Kaye.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

He stood. Kaye took his hand and led him into the bedroom like a frightened boy or an old, old man. She pulled back the down comforter and the blanket and top sheet. Mitch unbuttoned his shirt and removed his pants and stood by the side of the bed, lost.

“Just lie down and get some rest,” she said.

“Wake me if Stella gets any worse,” Mitch said. “I want to see her and tell her I love her.” He looked at her, eyes unfocused. Kaye tucked the sheets in around him, her heart thumping. She kissed him on the cheek. No tears, his face cold and hard as stone, all Mitch’s blood flowing away to somewhere far from her, taking him to where she could not go.

“I love you,” Kaye said. “I believe in you. I believe in what we’ve done.”

His eyes focused on hers, then, and she felt embarrassed at the power she had over this large, strong man. The blood returned to his face, and his lips came alive under hers.

Then, like a light going out, he was asleep.

Kaye stood beside the bed and watched Mitch, eyes wide. Her chest felt wrapped in steel bands. She was as frightened as if she had just missed driving them all off a cliff. She stood vigil over him for as long as she could before she had to leave and check on Stella. She hated the conflict, husband or daughter, but went with her judgment and the nature inside her, and crossed the few steps into the living room.

• •  
The cabin was completely dark.

“What?”

Kaye sat up on the floor. She had fallen asleep beside Stella, with only the flap of the sleeping bag between her and the hard wood, and now she had the distinct impression someone other than her daughter was in the room.

It wasn't Mitch. She could see the blanketed hill of his toes through the bedroom door.

“Who's there?” she whispered.

Crickets and frogs outside, a couple of large flies buzzing around the cabin.

She switched on a table lamp, checked her daughter for the hundredth time, found the fever way down, the breathing more regular.

She thought about moving Stella into the second bedroom, but the hook supporting the bag of Ringer's solution would have to be moved as well, and Stella seemed comfortable on the sleeping bag, as comfortable as she would have been in a bed.

Kaye looked in on Mitch. He, too, was sleeping quietly. For a few minutes, Kaye stood in the short, narrow hallway, then leaned against the wall. “It's better,” she said to the shadows. “It has got to be better.”

She turned suddenly. For a moment, she had thought she might see someone in the hall, someone beloved and familiar. Her father.

*Dad is dead. Mom is dead. I'm an orphan. All the family I have is in this house.*

She rubbed her forehead and neck. Her muscles were so tense, not least from sleeping beside Stella on the wooden floor. Her sinuses felt congested, as if she had been crying. It was a peculiar, not unpleasant sensation; the byproduct of some deeply buried emotion.

She needed to get some air. She checked Stella again, obsessive; knelt to touch her daughter's forehead and feel her pulse, then walked around the couch, through the porch door, down the steps, and across the path through the grass to the boat dock.

The dock was thirty feet long and ten feet wide, ridiculously large on such a small lake. It supported a single overturned rowboat and a pile of moldy life vests. Grass blades poked out of the vests, shimmering in the moonlight.

Kaye stood at the end of the dock and crossed her arms. Absorbed the night. Crickets stroked out the degrees of heat, frogs thrummed with sexy,

alien dignity out there in the shallows, among the reeds. Gnats hummed their desperate little ditties.

“Do any of you know what it is to be sad?” Kaye asked the lake and its inhabitants, then looked back toward the house. “Are *you* sad when your children are ill?” The single lamp in the living room burned golden through the windows of the porch.

She closed her eyes. Something large, completing a connection . . . something *huge* passing over, sweeping the lake, the forest—touching all the living things around her.

The frogs fell silent.

And touching *her*.

Kaye jumped as if someone had cracked through a flimsy wooden wall. Her shoulders rose and her fingers tensed. “Hello?” she whispered.

Any neighbors were at least a mile away, up the road, beyond the thick trees. She saw nothing, heard nothing.

“Wow,” she said, and immediately felt stupid. She looked around the lake, toward the reedy shallows, searching for the source of another voice, though no one had spoken. The reeds were empty. The lake fell silent, not even a breath of air. The night was so still Kaye could hear her heart beating in her chest.

Something had *touched* her, not her skin, deeper. At first it was just the awareness that she was not alone. By herself, on the dock, in her bare feet, she now shared her space with someone as real as she—as welcome and strangely familiar as a beloved friend.

She felt years of burden lift. For a moment, she basked in a warm sensation of infinite reprieve.

*No judgment. No punishment.*

Kaye shivered. Her tongue moved over her lips. A trickle of silvery water seemed to run through her head. The trickle became a rivulet, then an insistent creek flowing down the back of her neck into her chest. It was cool and electric and pure, like stepping out of the sweltering heat of a summer day into an underground spring. But this spring *spoke*, though never with words. It had a particular and distinctive perfume, like astringent flowers.

It was alive, and she could not shake the feeling that she had known about it all along. Like molecules finally fitting, making a whole—yet not. Nothing biological whatsoever. Something *other*.

Kaye touched her forehead. “Am I having a stroke?” she whispered. She fingered her lips. They were trying to form a smile. She bent them



straight. "I can't be weak. Not now. Who's there?" she repeated, as if locked into a pointless ritual.

She *knew* the answer.

The visitor, the *caller*, possessed no features, no face or form. Nevertheless, being bathed in this cool, lovely fount was like having all of her great-grandmothers, her great-grandfathers, all the wise and sweet and wonderful and powerful members of her family whom she had never met, all at once and together bestowing the unconditional approval and love they would have bestowed had they cradled her as an infant in their sheltering arms. There was that much in it, and more.

But the caller, at once gentle and unbelievably intense, was nothing like her fleshly kin.

"Please, not now," she begged. With relief came fear that she was losing her tenuous link to reality. The caller was known to her, yet long denied and evaded; but it showed no anger, no resentment. Its only response to her long denial was unconditional sympathy.

Yet was there also trepidation? The caller exposed an extraordinary longing to touch and show itself despite all the rules, the dangers. The caller quite charmingly *yearned*.

Kaye suddenly opened her mouth and let air fill her lungs. Funny, that she had stopped breathing for a moment. Funny, and not scary at all; like a personal joke. "Hello," she said with the exhale, dropping her shoulders and relaxing, pushing aside the doubts and giving up to the sensation. She wanted this to last forever. She knew already it could not. To go back to the way she had felt just a few minutes ago, and all of her life before that, would hurt.

But she knew the pain was necessary. The world was not done with her, and the caller wanted her to be free to make her own choices, without its addictive interference.

Kaye walked back to the cabin to check on the sleeping Stella and to look in on Mitch. Both were quiet. Stella's color seemed to be stronger. Patches of freckles came and went on her cheeks. She was definitely past the crisis.

Kaye returned to the dock and stood staring into the early-morning forest, hoping that the loveliness, the peace, would never leave. She wanted it all, now and forever. There had been so much grief and pain and fear.

But despite her own yearning, Kaye understood.

*Can't go on. Not yet. Miles to go before I sleep.*  
Then, she lost track of time.

Dawn arrived in the east, on the other side of the trees, like gray velvet by candlelight.

She stood beside the overturned rowboat, shivering. How long had it been since she had returned to the dock?

Without words, the fount had spent hours sluicing her soul, (she was not comfortable using that word but there it was), wetting and revealing dusty thoughts and memories, becoming reacquainted in real and human time. Wherever it flowed, she knew its unalloyed delight.

It found her very *good*.

"Is Stella going to be all right?" Kaye asked, her voice soft as a child's in the shaded close of the trees. "Are we all going to be together and well again?"

No response came to these specific questions. The caller did not deal in knowledge, as such, but it did not resent being asked.

She had never imagined such a moment, such a relationship. The few times she had wondered at all what this experience might be like, as a girl, she had conceived of it as guilt and thunder, recrimination, being assigned onerous tasks: a moment of desperate self-deception, justifying years of ignorance and misbegotten faith. She had never imagined anything so simple. Certainly not this intense yet amused upwelling of friendship.

No judgment. No punishment.

And no answers.

*I did not call for this. The body has prayed the prayers of desperate flesh, not me.*

Her conscious and discerning mind, most concerned with practicalities, the mistress in starched skirts who stared out sternly over Kaye's life, told her, "You're playing Ouija with your brain. It doesn't make sense. This is going to mean nothing but trouble."

And then, as if it were shouting a kind of curse, Kaye's tense and adult voice flew to the trees, "You are having an *epiphany*."

The crickets and frogs started their racket again, answering.

Finally, the conflict became too much. She dropped slowly to her knees on the dock, feeling that she carried precious cargo, it must not spill. She bent over and laid her hands flat on the rough, weathered wood.

She had to lie down to keep from falling over. With a long, slow release of breath, Kaye stretched out her legs.

**A**ugustine had divided them into two teams, the first with eight students, the second with seven. Toby's team had worked first, from ten in the evening until three in the morning. Teachers and nurses carried those chosen by the team to an exercise field, laying them in rows under the blue glare of tall pole lamps, in the warm early-morning air.

Silently—with little more than a touch of palms and a whiff behind each ear—Toby passed his duties to a girl named Fiona, and the first team fell onto cots laid out in Trask's office.

Fiona and the others on the second team went out with Augustine, back down the steel stairs to the main floor.

Until dawn, Fiona and the six helped Augustine sort through other buildings, walking up to each child on the cots or on bedding spread over concrete or wood floors, on bunks in the former cells and in the dormitories; bending over and smelling above the heads of the sick, showing with one finger, or two, who was strongest, who would probably live another day.

One finger meant the child was likely to die.

After eight hours of work, they had processed about six hundred children, starting with the worst, and consequently, had already visited the most dead and dying, and the children on both teams were quiet and tired.

More children volunteered, forming a third, fourth, and fifth team. Toby did not object, nor did Augustine.

While the first two teams slept, the new teams examined another nine hundred children, separating out four hundred, most of them able to walk with the teachers to the field, where they were assigned to old tents marked "Inmate Overflow."

And round into the dawn and beyond ten o'clock, the kids worked with the remaining teachers, nurses, and security officers—the bravest of the brave—carrying bodies wrapped in sheets or in the last remaining body bags, or even in doubled plastic garbage bags, out to the farthest area within the fence, the employee parking lot, where the dead were laid out between the few and scattered cars.

Middleton worked to rearrange accommodations so that they could set up a morgue in the main gymnasium, adjacent to the infirmary. By eleven, the bodies had been removed from the parking lot and placed out of the sun.

Augustine estimated they had perhaps ten or fifteen hours before the dead would become a horrible nuisance, and twenty before they became a health hazard.

At noon, Augustine fell over after stumbling, half-blind with exhaustion, between a row of inmate tents. The children carried him back to the infirmary, with the help of DeWitt.

There, DeWitt fed Augustine a little canned soup, gave him some water. He said he was feeling better and went back out with the rested first team.

All through the morning and afternoon, their labors were watched by rows of stone-faced National Guard troops patrolling beyond the razor wire perimeter fences.

At two in the afternoon, Augustine was compelled once again to go up to the office and lie down. Dicken emerged from the research lab with another bag full of specimen kits and met him there.

Four children who had worked with the teams slept in the corner, arms around each other, snoring lightly.

Dicken looked down on his former boss. Augustine was trembling, but his face had lost that distant, defeated look.

“You are a surprising fellow, Mark,” Dicken admitted.

“Not really,” Augustine croaked. He touched his throat. “Sorry. My voice is shot. How’s the lab work going?”

“Your turn,” Dicken said, and bent down to draw blood. When he was finished, he had Augustine scrape a plastic depressor on his tongue, and sealed that into a little plastic bag.

“Anything conclusive?” Augustine asked.

“Still getting specimens from the staff.”

“What next?”

“I’m going out into the field with Toby. Carry on while you rest. Can’t let an old bastard like you act the humanitarian all by your lonesome.”

Augustine nodded. “Conversion of Saul. Go forth,” he advised piously, and crossed the air between them.

Dicken stretched. His whole body felt stiff.

Augustine rolled on his side. “I’m not doing this out of pure charity, I confess,” he murmured. Dicken bent over to hear the soft words. “I have done a nasty thing, Christopher. I have played a card I vowed I would never play, to give my enemies—our enemies—the rope I need to hang them all.”

“What card?” Dicken said.

“I’m still a bastard. But I do begin to understand them, Christopher.”

“The children?”

“All our sweet little albatrosses.”

“Good for you,” Dicken said, his neck hair prickling, and turned to leave.

## 48

### PENNSYLVANIA

**T**he sun was high in the sky when Kaye raised her head. She might have slept for another hour or two; she did not remember.

She rolled over on the dock.

*It’s gone, she said. It was a dream. Or worse.*

She stood and brushed off her jeans, prepared to feel a resigned sadness. *I should get a checkup. There’s been so much stress . . .* Her nose and forehead still felt stuffy. Was that a symptom of embolism or a burst aneurysm? Had wires crossed in her head, pouring signals from one side of the brain to the other? A short circuit?

She turned to look back along the dock at the house, took a step . . .

And let out a squeak like a surprised mouse. She stretched out her arms.

The presence was *still* with her. Quiet, calm, other; patient and real. At the same time Kaye was relieved and terrified.

She ran to the cabin. Mitch knelt on the floor beside Stella. He looked up as she came through the porch door. His hair was tousled and his face looked like a rumpled rag.

“Her fever’s gone, I think,” Mitch said, searching Kaye’s features. His brows twitched. “The spots are smaller. The spots on her butt are gone.”

Stella rolled over. Her cheeks had regained more of their color. The sleeping bag was gone, and in its place Mitch had laid out an air mattress covered with a bright yellow sheet and a lime green blanket.

Kaye stared at them both. Her hands hung by her sides, her shoulders slumped.

“Are you all right?” Mitch asked.

Stella rubbed her eyes and reached out to Kaye. Their fingers touched and Kaye moved in and gripped her hand.

"You smell different," Stella said.

Kaye bent down and hugged her daughter as fiercely as she dared.

"She's asleep again." Mitch rejoined Kaye in the cabin's small, neat kitchen. "She looks better, doesn't she?"

"Yes. Much." Kaye bit the inside of her lip and glanced at her husband. "The Mackenzies laid in a wide selection of teas," she said. She opened the box of teabags, confused, desperate.

Mitch returned her look, patient but tired. "Does she need more medicine?"

"Her neck doesn't hurt. Her head doesn't hurt. She's not feverish. I removed the needle because she drank some orange juice. I don't think she'll need any more antiviral."

"She wet the sleeping bag."

"I know. Thank you for changing it."

"You were on the dock. You were asleep."

Kaye looked out the kitchen window at the dock, now bright in the full sun. "You should have awakened me."

"You looked peaceful. I'm sorry if I said anything strange last night."

"You?" She laughed and fumbled the box of tea bags, picked up the spilled ones, then took down two mugs from a rack over the kitchen window. One mug said *Kiss a Clown, You Know You Want to*. The other was from Smith College, gold emblem of a gate on dark blue. "Not at all," Kaye murmured, and filled a kettle with water. Somewhere, a pump started chuckling, and the water jerked from the tap, finally flowing in a steady stream. She swished her hand back and forth, fingers spreading through the coldness.

*Not at all the same.*

"How are we, Kaye?" Mitch asked, standing beside her at the sink.

"Stella is going to be fine," Kaye said before she could think.

"How are we, Kaye?"

Kaye reached out and gripped Mitch's hand on the counter. She had not spent much time lately simply touching her husband. He had been gone so much, and so often, of course.

She must have looked miserable and lost. But what she felt was very, very physical.

Mitch pulled her close. He was always the one to make the first move; except that she had made the move that had produced Stella. Mitch had held back, worried about Kaye, or perhaps just scared at the thought of be-

ing a parent to a new kind of human being. They had been so in love, and the problem was, Kaye could not answer Mitch's question now, not truthfully, because she did not know.

There was still love. What kind of love? "We are going to be better," she said into his shoulder. "There is certainly better to be."

"They shouldn't hound us," he said with the boyish sternness of the night before.

"I don't think we have any control over that."

"We won't stay here long," he said, and glared out the window at the woods, the dock, the sunshine. "This place is too nice. I don't trust it."

"It *is* nice. Why not stay a while? The Mackenzies would never tell anyone."

Mitch brushed her cheek with his palm. "Their son is in a camp. The children in the camps are getting sick."

Kaye drew her eyebrows together. She could not follow this line of reasoning.

"Mark Augustine has been looking for you, for us. He's been waiting for the right moment to reel us in. The illness is scaring people badly. This is his moment."

Kaye squeezed his forearm hard, as if to punish him.

"Ow," he said.

She loosened her grip. "We need to keep Stella quiet and calm. She needs to rest for a few days at least. She can't rest in a bouncing Jeep."

"All right," Mitch said.

"We'll stay here," Kaye said. "Will it be okay?"

"It'll have to be," Mitch said.

Kaye leaned her head against Mitch's chest. Her eyes lost focus and then closed. "Is she still asleep?" she asked.

"Let's check," Mitch said, and they walked together into the living room.

She was. Kaye took Mitch's hand and led him into the bedroom. They took off their clothes, and Kaye pulled back the covers on the bed until the bottom sheet was completely revealed.

"I need you," she said.

Her fingers on his lips smelled of tea leaves.

**D**icken had prepared and racked up his seventy specimen sets. He used a Kim Wipe to take the sting of sweat out of his eyes. His sense of urgency was extreme but counterproductive. He could work no faster than produced good results. Anything less would be worse than not having worked at all.

He had labored nine hours straight, first separating and classifying the specimens based on his labels and field notes, then preparing them for the automated lab equipment. Most of the manual labor involved preparing specimens and racking them up for runs through the instruments.

PCR instruments had been the size of large suitcases when he had been a student. Now he could hold one in the palm of his hand. The racks carried what had been the equivalent of a whole building full of equipment fifteen years ago.

Oligos—small but highly specific segments of DNA mounted in each tiny square cell of the whole-genome array chips—attached themselves to complementary segments of RNA expressed by the cell, including viral genes, if any, and labeled them with fluorescent markers. Scanners would count the markers and approximate their positions in the chromosome sequence.

From a prepared set of serological fractions, the sequencers would amplify and analyze the exact genetic code of any viruses in the samples. The proteomizers would list all proteins found within the targeted cells—both viral and host proteins. Proteins could then be matched by the Ideator to the open reading frames of the sequenced genes.

All this would give him a road map of the disease at the cellular level.

He tapped commands into the server controlling the lab machines. Fortunately, the code gaining entry to this computer had been simple to guess. He had tried combinations of JURIE and ARAM and, finally, ARAM-JURIE#1, and that had worked.

The lab filled with humming and faint clicking, first to his right, then to his left. Dicken stood up and checked the progress of the little plastic tubes marching in their metal tracks one by one into the prissy little mouths of the white-and-silver machines. He had to admire the way the doctors had set up the lab. It was economical, the equipment neatly arranged, with good flow-through from task to task.

Jurie and Pickman had known their business.



Still, virus hunters who fled at the first signs of a disease were not highly regarded by their peers. Very likely, Jurie and Pickman had never chased down viruses in the field. They had behaved more like lab lizards, pale from lack of tropical sun, utter cowards when confronted by their real prey.

For a moment, Dicken felt a chill. How dumb of him not to think of it earlier. Jurie and Pickman had already done the work, discovered the results; that was why they had run away. *The results had been very bad.*

But Dicken had found no sign of specimen kits anywhere in the lab. The equipment had barely been used, it was so new.

The chill passed, but slowly.

An hour later, he tapped the space bar on the keyboard to turn off the screen saver. A flashing green bar with “Eureka!” written across it told him he had results. The results were displayed first as thumbnails on a grid, then, at his command, as a slide show.

With grim satisfaction, Dicken saw that he had isolated a recombined variety of unencapsulated RNA virus from the blood and sputum of all the afflicted children, in titers sufficient to suggest massive infection. No other titers were so prominent.

From the beginning, seeing the buccal lesions and stomatitis, Dicken had suspected coxsackie A, known to cause most of the symptoms in the sick SHEVA children. But this strain was seldom associated with fatal illness. Coxsackie B, however, sometimes produced myocarditis, inflammatory heart disease, in infants and children. According to Dr. Kelson, myocarditis was a possible cause of death in the outbreak. Kelson had said, “There’s massive tissue damage. The heart just stops.”

Coxsackie A and B typically spread by fecal contact or exchange of saliva. He did not know of any historical instances where it had spread by skin contact or in aerosols—droplets of moisture from breath or sneezing—or through residues left on surfaces, yet those kinds of transmission were necessary to explain the outbreak’s rapid and pervasive expansion.

Something had changed. Coxsackie A or B, or both, had suddenly become easier to spread, and targeted to a particular population not heretofore known to be vulnerable to most common childhood viruses.

Now that he knew the type of virus, he could focus on the origin of the disease and its etiology—how it had mutated, how it spread, and where it would be expected to spread next.

Dicken typed in a request for numerical results from each set of specimens, with identification of individuals and their circumstances. The computer prepared a table, but it was complicated and unintuitive.

Dicken took out a piece of paper and began organizing the results in his own favored plot. Using a small marker, he drew three large circles on the paper. Within the first circle he swooped a C, representing the children. Inside he drew a smaller circle, labeled IC for Infected Children. Outside the first, he drew a second large circle and labeled it BT for brave teachers and staff, those who had remained.

The third circle he labeled Tr, for traitors, those who had fled.

He picked up a red felt-tip pen and began categorizing the specimen ID numbers and marking them + or – for their viral status. He then recorded them within the appropriate circles. Two of the circles rapidly filled with numbers and status marks. For now, there were no numbers in the Tr circle—he was leaving that open in case information from outside became available.

He now had points of proximity or actual contact and, presumably, opportunities for viral transmission. The pattern he saw emerging was already clear, but he refused to jump to conclusions. He did not trust either intuition or instinct. He trusted hard facts, indisputable associations, and repeated correlations.

He drew the results a second way, in columns and rows. When he had completed his chart, he drew a new table, reversing the order, and filled the boxes with the categorized numbers.

Dicken cleaned up his work and tapped the plastic end of the pen on the columns, marching down, climbing back up, sweeping the marker to the right across the rows, color-coding the associations.

Any way he drew it out, the pattern was clear.

Within the special treatment center, children who had had no contact with teachers or other students for more than three days had not contracted the virus. Eight children had been in isolation cells and had been abandoned when the staff evacuated. Three had died, but all of their specimens tested negative.

Five hours ago, Middleton had phoned the lab to tell Dicken that one of the rescued children had fallen ill, and Kelson said she was likely to die. That child had almost certainly been exposed after her “rescue.”

Dicken had taken specimens from six children who had been locked in a shower room by a fleeing teacher, and not found until late yesterday. One had died from lack of special medication. None had had any contact with teachers or staff for the past forty-eight hours. Their specimens tested negative.

DeWitt and Middleton had identified fifty children whom they knew

had had close contact with teachers and staff in the past sixty hours. Of these, forty had fallen ill, and twenty had died. All of their specimens tested positive. Somehow, ten had managed to avoid exposure.

He looked over the results for twenty-two teachers, staff, and security officers. All had had continuous contact with infected children for the past forty-eight hours. They were exhausted, stressed, worn down. Six of these—four nurses from the main pool and one teacher from the special treatment wing, and the counselor, Dewitt—tested positive for the virus, but in low titers compared to infected children. None showed symptoms of infection.

Neither he nor Mark Augustine tested positive.

Dicken held up his chart once more. The conclusions were compelling. Only infected SHEVA children showed symptoms.

SHEVA children lacking recent adult contact tested negative for the virus and showed no symptoms.

Contagion did not spread from the children to adults with much efficiency, if at all; and if it was passed on, did not cause illness in adults.

Contagion probably *did* spread from child to child, but the chain always began with children who had had recent contact with adults.

He had not gathered specimens from every child, alive or dead, or from all the adults that had been at the school; it was possible that an asymptomatic child was the source; it was also possible that exposed adults would get ill, eventually.

But he doubted it. The children were almost certainly not the source. And adults did not get sick. The river flowed in only one direction, downstream from teachers and staff, adults, to the new children.

The computer chimed again. Dicken looked at the screen. The Ideator had identified a sequence from its standard human genomic library. He touched a box on the screen. It expanded outward, showing a gene map for an obscure and defective HERV. Coxsackie viruses—for that matter, the superfamily of Picornaviridae—had never been known to recombine with legacy retroviral genes. Yet he was looking at a protein traced to a gene from the suspect virus, and it was very similar—90 percent homologous—to a protein once coded for by an ancient human endogenous retrovirus found in two chromosomes.

The presence of the protein converted a relatively benign RNA virus into one that killed, in large numbers.

He typed in another search. The Ideator scanned the Genesys bank for a match within the 52-chromosome genome of the new children. According

to the Genesys bank, that particular defective primordial HERV did not exist in any SHEVA child.

Both of its copies had been discarded during the supermitotic splitting and rearrangement of the old chromosomes.

Dicken stared at the screen for several minutes, thinking furiously. His vision blurred. He grabbed the crumpled wipe and dabbed again at his face. His left leg cramped. He pushed away from the bench and walked around the small lab room, bracing on tables, equipment.

What Augustine and the Emergency Action people feared most had happened. Ancient viruses had somehow self-corrected and contributed one or more novel genes to a common virus, producing a deadly disease. But the recombination had not taken place in SHEVA-affected children.

It had begun in adults.

Adults were creating viruses that could infect and kill the SHEVA children. Those same viruses did not harm the adults. Dicken could yet be sure, but he suspected that the viral protein took advantage of yet another protein expressed only in the children—two units not in themselves toxic, but lethal in combination.

*A new role for viruses: agents of a species-level immune response. Biological warfare, one generation against another.*

*An old species trying desperately to kill the new? Or just an awful mistake, a slip-up with deadly consequences?*

He secured the samples, backed up the computer files, made a set of printouts, locked up the lab, and brutally shoved the outer door of the research building. It slammed open, and he walked out into the glare of the afternoon sun.

**M**itch had put on one of George Mackenzie's white terry robes to check on Stella. He now lay on the bed beside Kaye, the robe ridiculously short over his long legs. His breathing was even. She could feel his hand, large and wide, with long, thick fingers, resting on her arm.

Kaye rolled over and put her head on his chest, where the robe had pulled open. "Have I been acting a little crazy?" she asked.

Mitch shook his head. “Defensive.”

“Do you remember before we were together? You were doing archaeology. I was working away madly, and confused.”

“I wasn’t doing much archaeology,” Mitch said. “I’ve been out of action for longer than I’ve known you. My own damned fault.”

“I loved your rough hands. All the calluses. What would we be without Stella?”

Mitch’s eyes narrowed. Wrong question.

“Right,” Kaye said. She lay back on the pillow. “I insisted. We don’t have any other life now.”

“I helped,” Mitch said.

“I’ve neglected you. In so many ways.”

Mitch shrugged.

“What do you want for Stella?” Kaye asked.

“A reasonably normal life.”

“What will that be? She isn’t like us, not really.”

“She’s more like us than she’s different.”

Kaye wiped her eyes with the back of her hands. She could still feel the caller, and when she *touch*ed it with her thoughts, waves of comfort surged through her and her eyes flowed over. She could not understand this feeling of glorious ease in the midst of their fear.

Mitch touched her cheek. His finger gently dabbed the wet corner of one eye.

“What’s it like to have a stroke?” she asked. “Or a seizure?”

“You’re the doctor,” Mitch said, taken aback.

“Sam had a stroke,” Kaye said. Sam was Mitch’s father.

“He went down like a tree,” Mitch said.

“He was paralyzed and he died in a couple of hours.”

“It was fast. What are you getting at?”

“Do people have seizures that make them feel *good*? They wouldn’t go to the doctor for that, would they?”

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” Mitch said.

“But it wouldn’t be reported, would it, unless they happened to catch it . . . on an MRI or CAT scan or something. The brain is so mysterious.”

“What brings this on?” Mitch asked. “We make love and you talk about having good strokes.” He tried to smile. “It’s called *having an orgasm*, little lady.”

Kaye lifted her head and rolled over to face him, refusing to be amused.

“Have you ever felt something or someone touch your thoughts? Approving of everything about you, filling you with understanding?”

“No-o-oo,” Mitch said. He did not like this conversation at all. There was a glow about Kaye’s face that reminded him of when she was pregnant, a soft and intimate light in her eyes.

“Is it rare? What do people do, who do they talk to, when it happens that way?”

“What way?”

Kaye sat up and put her hands on his shoulders, staring at him imploringly, helpless. “Is that what makes people religious?”

The look on Mitch’s face was so serious, she had to smile. “Maybe I’m becoming a priestess. A shaman.”

“Generally,” Mitch began, putting on a professorial tone, “shamans are a little crazy. The tribe feeds them and puts them to work. Shamans are more entertaining than reading entrails or tossing knucklebones.”

Kaye clenched her jaw. “I’m trying to understand something.”

“Out on the dock, did you feel like you were having a stroke?” Mitch asked, unable to keep the concern from his voice.

“I don’t know.” She smiled as if at a pleasant memory. “It’s still with me.”

“You’re pregnant again, morning sickness?”

“No, damn it,” Kaye said, poking his arm. “You’re not *listening*.”

“I’m not hearing anything I can understand. Tell me, straight . . . did it feel like an episode, a breakdown? We’ve been under a lot of stress.” He stood up by the side of the bed, leaving the short robe behind. Kaye watched him, his forearms and chest and the tops of his shoulders covered with coarse hair, and her gaze dropped to his genitals hanging at postcoital parade rest, waving with the nervous swing of his arms.

She laughed.

This stopped Mitch cold. He stood like a statue, staring down on her. He had not heard Kaye laugh like that, at him, at the ridiculousness of life, in well over a year, maybe two; he couldn’t remember the last time.

“You sound happy,” he said.

“I’m not *happy*,” Kaye insisted indignantly. “Life’s a bowl of shit, but our daughter . . .” Her face crumpled. Through her fingers, she sobbed, “She’s going to live, Mitch. That’s a blessing, isn’t it? Is that what I’m feeling—thankfulness, relief?”

“Thankful to what?” Mitch said. “The god who gives little children nasty diseases?”

Kaye spread out her arms, gesturing with her fingers at the bedroom, the lace coverlet, wood-paneled walls, pressed flowers under glass in ornate gold frames, the decorative water pitcher on the little white wicker table by the nightstand. Mitch watched her puffy eyes and red face with real concern. “We *are* luckier than others,” she said. “We are so lucky our daughter is alive.”

“God didn’t do that,” Mitch said, his voice turning sour. “We did that. *God* would have killed her. *God* is killing thousands like Stella right now.”

“Then what am I feeling?” Kaye asked. She held out her hands and Mitch gripped them. A blackbird sang. Mitch’s eyes went to the window.

“You’re bouncing back,” he said, his anger smoothing. “We can’t feel like shit all the time or we’d just give up and die.” He pulled her up on her knees on the bed, and expertly hugged her until her back popped.

“Ow,” she said.

“That did not hurt,” Mitch said. “You feel better now.”

“I do,” Kaye affirmed, arms around his neck.

Stella pushed through the door. “I’ve got this thing on my wrist,” she said, tugging at the medical tape. “My skin hurts.” She stared at them, naked, together. There was no use keeping secrets from her; she could smell everything in the room. Stella had seemed to instinctively understand the whys and wherefores of sex even as a toddler. Nevertheless, Mitch released Kaye, swung his body away, and reached for the robe.

Kaye pulled the coverlet into a wrap and went to her daughter. Stella leaned into her arms and Kaye and Mitch carried her back to her bed.

## 51

### OHIO

“**O**ur last link to the outside world,” Augustine said, holding up a satellite phone. “Secret Service, bless them. But I had to think of it. They’re hiding out in their cars, and they did not volunteer.” He climbed the flight of steps to Trask’s office. Dried vomit—not his own—ran in streaks down his leg.

Dicken sidled up the steps behind Augustine. “The school has a secure server. I have Jurie’s password for the lab computers, but not the password to go outside the school.”

"I know. What are we looking at, anyway?"

"Coxsackie, a new strain," Dicken said. "The children have hand, foot, and mouth disease."

Augustine pushed the door to the office open. "Like the cattle?"

Dicken shook his head. "You're tired. Listen to me. Not foot and mouth, it's HFMD. Hand, foot, and mouth. Common childhood viral infection."

"Recombined?" Augustine sat behind the desk and propped the phone on the desk. He punched a number, got a rasping and wheedling noise, then swore and punched another.

"Yes," Dicken said.

"With old endogenous viruses?"

"Yes."

"Shit. How is that possible?"

"It's a mechanism I haven't seen before."

"Then why bother to call?" Augustine stopped in mid-dial, disgusted. His fingernails were black with dirt and secretions. "It's all over."

"No, it isn't. The recombined genes can't possibly be from the children," Dicken said. "They don't have them. They were excised and discarded when their chromosomes reformed during supermitosis."

Augustine raised his chin. "*We* helped the virus recombine?"

Dicken nodded. "It may have traveled in us and mutated silently for years. Now it's making its move—against the children."

"Proof?"

"Proof enough," Dicken said. "Most of what we need, anyway. We can send in my results. The CDC just needs to do their own analysis, compare my findings with their own. I'm sure they'll match. Then, we tell Ohio to back off and get Emergency Action to calm down. This is not a killer plague—not for us."

"Will anyone listen?" Augustine asked.

"They have to. It's the truth."

Augustine did not seem convinced that would be enough to turn the tide. "Who's the best contact at CDC?"

Dicken thought quickly. "Jane Salter. She's in charge of statistical analysis at National Center for Infectious Diseases. She never did put in with the Emergency Action people, but they respect her judgment. She's trusted and objective." He took the handset from Augustine and dialed Salter's direct number in Atlanta.

They were in luck, finally. The call went through, and Salter answered in person.



“Jane, it’s Christopher.”

“The famous Christopher Dicken? Long time, Christopher. Forgive me, I’m a little loopy. I’ve been up for days, crunching numbers.”

“I’m in Ohio, at the Goldberger School. I have something important.”

“About a certain recombined Cocksackie virus?”

“That’s the one. Population dynamics, virus flow, analysis,” Dicken said.

“You don’t say.”

“You’ll want my results.”

He heard a click.

“I’m recording, Christopher,” Salter said. “Make it quick. There’s a key meeting in five minutes. Go or no go, if you know what I mean.”

Augustine looked up at a distant roaring noise. He walked to the window and looked across the traffic circle, beyond the main gate. “What the hell is that?” He swung up a pair of binoculars from the windowsill and peered through them. “Helicopters.”

DeWitt stamped up the stairs, screaming, “Helicopters are coming!”

“Troops moving in?” Dicken asked.

“They wouldn’t dare. We’re in quarantine.” Augustine tried to hold the image steady. “They’re civilian. Who in hell would fly them down here?”

“Someone bringing in supplies,” Dicken suggested.

“Is that possible?”

“Someone rich who has a kid here,” Dicken said.

“There’s two of them,” Augustine said. “Not nearly enough.” Then, his voice breaking, “Goddamn. I don’t believe it. They’re shooting. The troops are shooting at them!”

“What’s happening?” Salter asked on the phone.

“Just listen to me,” Dicken said. He could hear the crackle of assault weapons on the school perimeter. “And for God’s sake, work fast.”

He began reading her his results.

## 52

### PENNSYLVANIA

**T**he air was cooling and clouds were sliding in above the trees. Mitch sat on the dock. Kaye was in the house, sleeping beside Stella in the big bed, which Stella preferred now that she was feeling a little better.

It could be days before she could travel, but Mitch knew their time

would come sooner than that. Somehow, though, he could not bring himself to roust them and pile them in the back of the Jeep.

It wasn't just Stella's health that concerned him.

There was something else, and small as it might seem in retrospect, it disturbed him, the way Kaye had looked, talking about what she had felt on the dock. If after all these years, his partner, his wife, was faltering . . .

Kaye had always been the reservoir of their strength, the rooted tree.

The air was heavy and moist. He watched the overcast move in and felt the first spatters of rain, big drops that changed the air's taste and smell. His nose twitched. He could smell the forest getting ready for the storm. His sense of smell had been sensitive even before they had had Stella. He had once told Kaye "I think with my nose." But that ability had been enhanced by being a SHEVA parent, and for two years after Stella's birth, Mitch had reveled in what it brought into his life. Even now, he smelled things acutely that others could only vaguely detect, if at all.

The lake was not exactly a healthy lake, but sat like a pretty little pocket of green, taking the drainage from the forest during the winter and spring and then drying up and concentrating all the nutrients during the summer, turning ripe with algae. It had no outlet. Still, it was okay; it was pretty. It was probably happy enough, as lakes went, isolated from the big doings of other lakes and rivers, dreaming in its own muted way of the seasons.

Mitch would never have built a cabin on this lake because of the potential for mosquitoes, but was glad the cabin was here, nonetheless. Besides, there were only a few mosquitoes about, he didn't know why.

The last few years, Kaye's scent in his nostrils had been perpetually active, sharp, stressed, and concerned; he had smelled other SHEVA mothers, and mothers in general, and had found a similar watchful odor. In bed a few hours ago, there had been a hint of contentment, of confirmation. Or was he just making that up?

Wishful thinking, that his wife would be happy for a little while?

Stella had noticed it, too.

Perhaps their family had become like the lake, isolated, ingrown, not entirely healthy. And that was why Stella had run away. His thoughts scattered like wavelets under the moving finger of a downdraft.

After a few minutes, Mitch just sat and tried to be empty. Gradually, another concern surfaced, about where they would go when the time came, where they would flee next. He did not know the answer, did not want to

believe they were anywhere near the end of their rope, so he put the concern away on a shelf with other impossible worries and looked into the emptiness once more.

The emptiness was comfortable but never lasted long.

He had never asked Kaye how he smelled to her. Kaye did not like to discuss such things. He had fallen in love with a sad and outer-facing Kaye, lived with a woman who had not opened herself to him in months or years, until last night.

Mitch held up his hands and stared at the smooth fingers. He could almost feel himself on a site, with a shovel or trowel or brush or toothbrush in his hand, unearthing some bit of bone or pot. He could almost feel the sweat running down the back of his neck under the hot sun, in the shade of his cap and neck flap.

He wondered what the Neandertal father had thought about, at the last, lying in that Alpine cave, freezing beside his already-dead wife and still-born child. That was where it had all begun for Mitch, finding the mummies. From that point on, his life had corkscrewed; he had met Kaye, had become part of her world. Mitch's life had acquired tremendous depth but had narrowed in scope and range.

The Neandertal father had never had a chance to feel guilty about the good old lost days of carefree mammoth and bison hunting, cave-bear baiting, swilling fermented berries or bags of honey wine with the boys.

At least once a day, Mitch went through such a sequence of thoughts, interrupting the desired emptiness. Then the thoughts faded and he stared into himself and saw a frightened child hiding among shadows. *You never know what it is like to be a child, even as a child. You have to have one of your own, and then it comes to you.*

*You understand for the first time.*

The rain pattered on the dock, leaving dark brown splats. Drops beaded in the blades of grass shooting up from the moldering life vests. His hand walked along the wood and found an interesting chunk of bark, about six inches long, weathered and gray. He ran his fingers over the bark, pinched its corky edge.

Kaye stood behind him. He had not heard her until the dock creaked. She moved quietly; she always had. "Did you see a flash out here?" she asked.

"Lightning?"

"No, over there." Kaye pointed into the woods. "Like a glint."

Mitch stared with a frown. "Nothing."

Kaye sighed. "Come inside," she said. "Stella's having some chicken soup. You should eat, too."

Watching his daughter slurp soup would be a treat. Mitch stood and walked with Kaye, arm in arm, back to the house.

A man in a black baseball cap stepped out of the cabin's shadows and met them at the porch door. Kaye gasped. He was young, in his late twenties at most, buff, with tanned arms. He wore a bulletproof vest over a black T-shirt and khaki pants and he carried a small black pistol. Silhouettes moved through the cabin. Mitch instinctively pushed Kaye behind him.

The man in the black cap smelled like burned garlic. He rattled off some words. Mitch's attention was too divided to listen closely.

"Did you hear me? I'm Agent John Allen, Federal Enforcement for Emergency Action. We have an arrest and sequester warrant. Hold out your arms and let me see your hands." The agent looked left, past Mitch. "Are you Kaye Lang?"

Another man, older, walked through the double door. He held out a piece of paper in a blue folder. Mitch glanced at the paper, then focused again on the cabin. Over the young man's shoulder, through the patio doors and past the couch, Mitch saw two men taking Stella out the front door. They had wrapped his daughter in a plastic sheet.

She mewled like a weak kitten.

Mitch raised his hand. Too late, he remembered the piece of bark from the dock, still clenched in his fingers.

The young man jerked up his pistol.

Mitch heard the report and the forest and house spun. The slug felt like a Major League batter connecting with Mitch's arm. The chunk of bark sailed. He landed on his face and chest. A big man sat on him and others planted their running shoes around his head and someone lifted Kaye's feet off the ground. Mitch tried to look up and the big man shoved his face into the pebbled concrete of the walkway. He could not breathe—the whack of the slug and then the fall had pushed out all his air. They twisted his hands behind him. Something parted in his shoulder. That hurt like hell. They were all talking at once, and a couple of people were shouting. He heard Kaye scream. The rain hadn't been so bad. The lake had been fine, and so had the house. He should have known better. Mitch smelled his own blood and started to choke.

## PENNSYLVANIA-ARIZONA

**S**tella Nova Rafelson stood on wobbly legs in the long steaming shower stall and watched pink disinfectant swirl down the tile drain. Men and women wearing masks and plastic hoods and rubber gloves walked along the line with clipboards and cameras, recording the children as they stood naked.

“Name,” asked a stout young woman with a husky voice.

“Stella,” she answered. Her joints ached.

In a clinic somewhere, humans gave her injections and strapped her onto a bed surrounded by curtains. They kept her there for at least a day as she worked through the last obvious signs of her illness. Once, when she was released to use a bedpan, she tried to get up and walk away. A nurse and a police officer stopped her. They did not want to touch her. They used long plastic pipes to prod her back into bed.

The next day, she was tied to a gurney and rolled into the back of a white van. The van took her to a big warehouse. There, she saw hundreds of children lying on rows of camp beds. Crushed and dusty crates had been pushed into a pile at the back of the warehouse. The floor blackened her bare feet. The whole building smelled of old wood and dust and disinfectant.

They gave her soup in a squeeze bottle, cold soup. It tasted awful. All that night she cried out for Kaye and for Mitch in a voice so hoarse and weak she could barely hear it herself.

The next trip—in a bus across the desert and through many towns and cities—took a day and a night. She rode with other boys and girls, sitting upright and even sleeping on a bench seat.

She heard the guard and driver talking about the nearest city, Flagstaff, and understood she was in Arizona. As the bus slowed and jolted off the two-lane highway, Stella saw shiny metallic letters cemented into a brick arch over a heavy steel gate: *Sable Mountain Emergency Action School*.

Time came in confused jerks. Memory and smell mingled and it seemed that her past, her life with Kaye and Mitch, had gone down the drain with the disinfectant.

After they finished taking pictures again and recording their names, the attendants segregated the boys and girls and gave them hospital robes that flapped open at the back and moved the girls in a line across a concrete walkway, under the open evening air, into a mobile trailer unit, twelve new kids in all.

The trailer already held fourteen girls.

One of the girls stood by the bed where Stella lay and said, "Hello/ Sorry."

Stella looked up. The girl was tall and black-haired and had wide, deep brown eyes flecked with green.

"How are you feeling-KUK?" the girl asked her. She seemed to have a speech problem.

"Where am I?"

"It's kind of like-KUK home," the girl said.

"Where are my parents?" Stella asked, before she could stop herself. Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and fear.

"I don't know," the girl answered.

The fourteen gathered around the new girls and held out their hands. "Touch palms," the black-haired girl told them. "It'll make you feel better."

Stella tucked her hands into her armpits. "I want to know where my parents are," she said. "I heard guns."

The black-haired girl shook her head slowly and touched Stella under the nose with the tip of her finger. Stella jerked her head back.

"You're with us now," she said. "Don't be afraid."

But Stella *was* afraid. The room smelled so strange. There were so many and they were all fever-scenting, trying to persuade the new girls. As she felt the scent doing its job, Stella wanted to get away and run.

This was nothing like she had imagined.

"It's o-KUK-ay," the black-haired girl said. "Really. It's okay here."

Stella cried out for Kaye. She was stubborn. It would be weeks before she stopped crying at night.

She tried to resist joining the other children. They were friendly but she desperately wanted to go back and live in the house in Virginia, the house that she had once tried to run away from; it seemed the best place on Earth.

Finally, as weeks passed into months and no one came for her, she started listening to the girls. She touched their hands and smelled their scenting. She started to belong and did not resist anymore.

The days at the school were long and hot in summer, cold in winter. The sky was huge and impersonal and very different from the tree-framed sky in Virginia. Even the bugs were different.

Stella got used to sitting in classrooms and being visited by doctors.

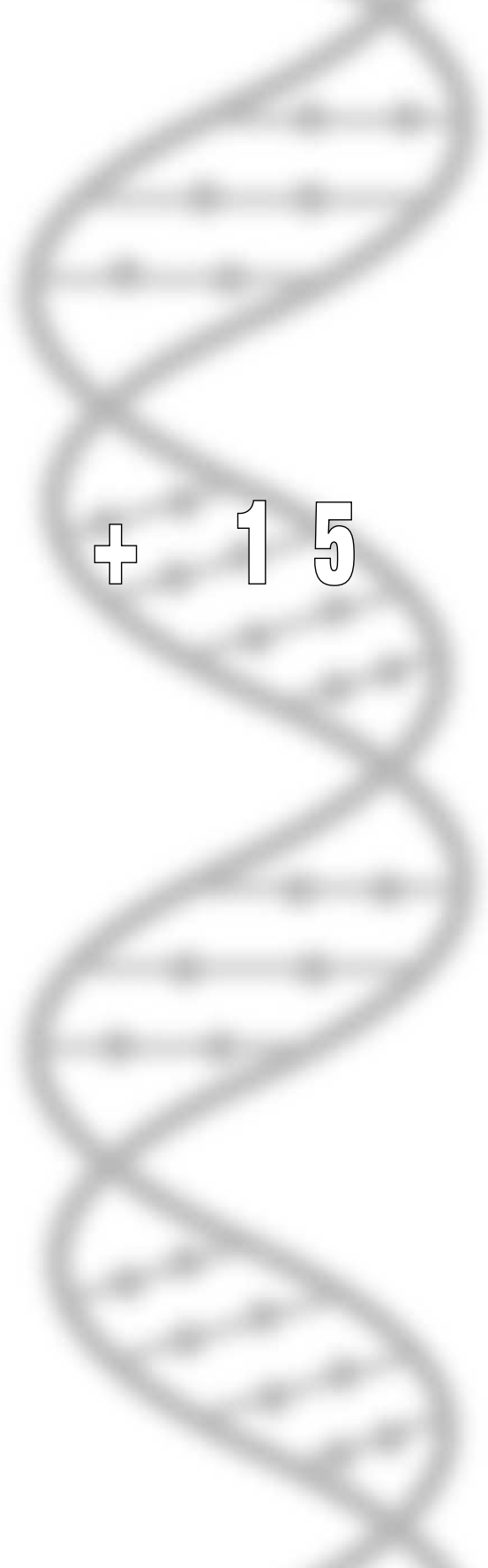
In a blur of growth and young time, she tried to forget. And even in their sleep, her friends could soothe her.





**PART TWO**

S H E V A + 1 5



“Activist SHEVA parents held in federal detention for two years or more without charges, under Emergency Action rules, may finally have their cases reviewed by state circuit courts, in apparent defiance of secret Presidential Decision Directives, says an unnamed source in the office of California’s attorney general.”

“Visitation rights for SHEVA parents at EMAC schools may be restored on a case-by-case basis, according to Cabinet-level administration officials testifying before Congress. No further details have been made available. Civilian Review of National Health and Safety, a government watchdog group associated with the Green Party, says it will protest this change in policy.”

—*New York Times E-line National Crisis Shorts*

“ ‘They set off bombs. They torch themselves and block traffic. Their children carry diseases we can’t begin to imagine. Hell, the parents themselves can make us sick and even kill us. If it’s a choice between *their* civil liberties and keeping my own beautiful, normal children disease free, then to hell with liberty. I say screw the ACLU. Always have, always will.’ ”

—*Representative Harold Barren, R-North Carolina; speaking for the House Floor Liberty Minute*

“Fifteen years and the strain is killing us. It cannot go on.

“When we suspend habeas corpus and nobody blinks, when our neighbors and relatives and even our children are hauled away in unmarked trucks and we huddle in fearful relief, the end of an entire way of life, of the American philosophy and psychology, is near, too near, perhaps upon us already.

“A government based on fear attracts the worst elements, who corrupt it from within. A shaky edifice, a government against its people, any of its people, must soon collapse.”

—Jeremy Willis, *The New Republic*

## WASHINGTON, D.C.

**T**he clouds over the capital were swollen and green with rain. The air felt close and sticky. Kaye took a government car from Dulles. She wore a trim gray suit with a pale yellow blouse, ruffled collar and sleeves, sensible walking shoes, dress pumps in her bag. She had carefully made up her face late in the morning and touched up in a restroom at Dulles. She knew how she looked: pale, thin, face a deeper shade of powdery beige than her wrists. Middle-aged and frail. Too much time spent in laboratories, not enough looking at the sun or seeing the sky.

She could have been any one of ten thousand professional workers leaving the long blocky tan-and-gray buildings around Washington, waiting for traffic to clear, stopping off for a drink or a coffee, meeting coworkers for dinner. She preferred the anonymity.

Last night, Kaye had carefully studied the briefing folio from Senator Gianelli's office. What she had read in that folio she could clearly see on the drive from Dulles. The capital was losing the last of its self-respect. On some streets, garbage pickups had been delayed for weeks without explanation. National guard and regular army troops walked around the streets in trios, firearms slung and clips loaded. Military and security vehicles—Humvees, bomb-squad trucks, armored personnel carriers—sat on key streets, humped up on sidewalks or blocking intersections. Concrete barriers that shifted every day and multiple checkpoints with armored ID kiosks made travel to government buildings tortuous.

The capital even smelled sick. Washington had become a city of long, sad lines, drawn faces, rumpled clothing. Everyone feared people in long coats, delivery trucks, boxes left on streets, and posters taped to walls

demanding obscure justice and hiding thin, nasty bombs beneath to blow up those who would try to take them down.

Only the clowns and the monsters looked healthy and happy. Only clowns and monsters found their careers advancing in Washington, D.C., in the fifteenth year of SHEVA.

The driver told her the hearing had been delayed and they had some time to kill. Kaye asked him to stop in front of a Stefano's bookstore on K Street. She thought about eating but she could not rouse an appetite. She just wanted to be alone for a few minutes to think.

Kaye pulled up the strap on her shoulder bag and entered the retail-grade checkpoint outside the bookstore. A large, heavy guard in an ill-fitting uniform with all the buttons straining looked her over with a blank expression and motioned for her to apply thumb to scanner, then waved her through the metal detector. Sniffers whuffed, checking for traces of explosives or suspicious volatiles.

Perfume had become a no-no in the city.

"Clear," the guard said, his voice like soft thunder. "Y'all have a good evening."

Outside, the rain began to fall. Kaye looked back through a display window and saw trash floating down the gutters, paper bags and cups bobbing along. The gutters were clogging and water would soon back up.

She knew she needed some food. She should not attend the hearing on an empty stomach, and she had not eaten since ten that morning. It was five now. Soup and sandwiches were available at a small café inside the store. But Kaye walked past the menu board without stopping, on some sort of autopilot. Her walking shoes made damp sucking sounds on the linoleum as she passed several deep aisles of bookshelves. Fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed overhead. A young man with long felted hair sat on a patched chair, half-empty knapsack crumpled in his lap, asleep. A paperback Bible lay open facedown on the arm of the chair.

*God sleeping.*

Without thinking, Kaye turned right and found herself in the religion section. Most of the shelves were filled with brightly colored apocalypse novels. E-paper holograms leaped from lurid covers as she passed: end time, rapture, revelation, demons and dark angels. Most of the books had speaker chips that could read out the entire story. The same chips replaced jacket copy with vocal come-ons. The shelves murmured softly in a wave, like ghosts triggered by Kaye's brief passage.

Serious theology texts had been crowded out. She found a single shelf concealed high in the back, near the brick wall. It was cold in that corner and the books were worn and dusty.

Eyes wide, ill at ease, Kaye touched the spines and read one title, then another. None seemed right. Most were contemporary Christian commentaries, not what she was looking for. Some lashed out angrily at Darwinism and modern science.

She turned slowly and looked down the aisle, listening to the books, their competing voices sibilant like falling leaves. Then she frowned and returned to the lone shelf. She was determined to find something useful. She tugged out a book called *Talking With the Only God*. Skimming through five pages, she found big print, wide margins, self-righteous but simple instructions on how to live a Christian life in troubled times. *Not good. Not what I need.*

She replaced the book with a grimace and turned to leave. An older man and woman blocked the aisle, smiling at her. Kaye held her breath, eyes shifting. She was sure her driver had come into the store but could not remember seeing him.

“Are you seeking?” the man asked. He was tall and skeletally thin with a short cap of braided white hair. He wore a black suit. The way his coat sleeves rode up his wrists reminded Kaye of Mitch, but the man himself did not. He looked determined and a little fake, like a mannequin or a bad actor. The woman was equally tall, thin through the waist but with fleshy arms. She wore a long dress that clung to her thighs.

“I beg your pardon?” Kaye asked.

“There are better places to seek, and better texts to find,” the man said.

“Thanks, I’m fine,” Kaye said. She looked away and reached for another book, hoping they would leave her alone.

“What *are* you seeking?” the woman asked.

“I was just browsing. Nothing specific,” Kaye said, avoiding their eyes.

“You won’t find answers here,” the man said.

The driver was not in sight. Kaye was on her own, and this probably wasn’t serious anyway. She tried to appear friendly and unconcerned.

“There’s only one valid translation of the Lord’s words,” the man said. “We find them in the King James Bible. God watched over King James like a holy flame.”

“I’ve heard that,” Kaye said.

“Which church do you attend?”

“No church,” she said. She had come to the end of the aisle and the pair had not moved. “Excuse me. I have an appointment.” Kaye clutched her purse to her side.

“Have you made peace with God?” the woman asked.

The man lifted his hand as if in benediction. “We lose our families, the families of God. In our sin, in homosexuality and promiscuity and following the ways of the Arab and the Jew, the pagan gods of the Web and TV, we stray from the path of God and God’s punishment is swift.” He swept his hand with a scowl at the whispering books on the shelves. “It is useless to seek His truth in the voices of the devil’s machines.”

Kaye’s eyes crinkled. She suddenly felt angry and perversely in control, even predatory, as if she were the hawk and *they* were the pigeons. The woman noticed the change. The man did not. “Terence,” the woman said and touched the man’s elbow. He looked down from the ceiling, meeting Kaye’s steady glare and reeling in his spiel with a surprised galumph and a bobble of his Adam’s apple.

“I’m alone,” Kaye said. She offered this like bait, hoping they would bite and she would have them. “My husband just got out of prison. My daughter is in a school.”

“I’m so sorry. Are you all right?” the woman asked Kaye with an equal mix of suspicion and solicitude.

“What *kind* of daughter?” the man asked. “A daughter of sin and disease?” The woman tugged hard on his sleeve. His Adam’s apple bobbed again, and their eyes darted over her clothes as if looking for suspicious bulges.

Kaye squared her shoulders and shoved out her hand to get through.

“I know you,” the man continued, despite his wife’s tugging. “I recognize you now. You’re the scientist. You discovered the sick children.”

Confined by the aisle, Kaye’s throat closed in. She coughed. “I have to go.”

The man made one last attempt, brave enough, to get through to her. “Even a scientist in self-centered love with her own mind, suffocating in the fame of television exposure, can learn to know God.”

“You’ve spoken to Him?” Kaye demanded. “You’ve talked to God?” She grabbed his arm and dug into the fabric and the flesh beneath with her fingernails.

“I pray all the time,” the man said, drawing back. “God is my Father in Heaven. He is always listening.”

Kaye tightened her grip. “Has God ever answered you?” she asked.

“His answers are many.”

“Do you ever feel God in your head?”

“Please,” the man said, wincing.

“Let him go,” the woman insisted, trying to push her arm between them.

“God doesn’t talk to you? How *weird*.” Kaye advanced, pushing both back. “Why wouldn’t God talk to *you*?”

“We fear God, we pray, and He answers in many ways.”

“God doesn’t stick around when things get ugly. What kind of God is that? He’s like a recorded message, some sort of God service that puts you on hold when you’re screaming. Explain it to me. God says he loves me but dumps me into a world of pain. You, so full of hate, so ignorant, he leaves alone. Self-righteous bigots he doesn’t even touch. *Explain that to me!*”

She let go of the man’s arm.

The couple turned with stricken looks and fled.

Kaye stood with the murmuring books lapsing into silence behind her. Her chest heaved and her cheeks were flushed and moist.

“All right,” she said to the empty aisle.

After a decent interval, to avoid meeting the couple outside, she left the store. She ignored the guard’s irritated glower.

She stood under the eaves breathing in the heat and the humidity and listening to real thunder, far off over Virginia. The government car came around the corner and stopped at the black-striped yellow curb in front of the store. “Sorry,” the driver said. Kaye looked through the limo’s window and saw for the first time how young the driver was, and how worried. “Store security ignored my license. No place to park. Goddamned guard fingered his holster at me. Jesus Christ, Mrs. Rafelson, I’m sorry. Is everything okay?”

## 2

### Hart Senate Office Building

#### Plenary session of the Senate Emergency Action Oversight Committee, closed hearing

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**M**ark Augustine waited patiently in the antechambers until called to take his seat. It was duly noted that he was the former director of Emergency

Action. The nine senators assembled for this unusual evening session—five Republicans and four Democrats—exchanged edgy pleasantries for a few minutes. Two of the Democrats observed, for the record, that the current director was late. As well, Senator Gianelli was not present.

The chair, Senator Julia Thomasen of Maryland, expressed her aggravation and wondered who had called the meeting. No one was clear on that.

The meeting began without the director and Gianelli, and lacking any obvious point or focus, soon devolved into a testy debate about the events that had led to Mark Augustine's dismissal three years earlier.

Augustine sat back in his chair, folded his hands in his lap, and let the senators argue. He had come to the Hill to testify fifty-three times in his career. Power did not impress him. Lack of power impressed him. Everyone in this room, as far as he was concerned, was almost completely powerless.

And—if the rumors were true—what they did not know was about to bite them right on the ass.

The minority Democrats held sway for a few minutes, deftly entering their comments into the record. Senator Charles Chase of Arizona began the questioning of Augustine as a matter of senatorial courtesy. His questions soon led to the role of the state of Ohio in the death of SHEVA children.

"Madam Chair," bellowed Senator Percy from Ohio, "I resent the implication that the state of Ohio was in any way responsible for this debacle."

"Senator Percy, Senator Chase has the floor," Senator Thomasen reminded him.

"I resent the entire subject area," Percy bellowed.

"Noted. Please continue, Senator Chase."

"Madam Chair, I am only following the line of questioning begun last week by Senator Gianelli, who is not, I hope, indisposed today, not with a virus, at least."

No laughter in the Senate chamber. Chase continued without missing a beat. "I mean no disrespect to the honorable senator from Ohio."

Senator Percy flipped his hand out over the chamber as if he would have gladly tossed them all through a window. "Personal corruption should not reflect ill on such a fine state."

"Nor am I impugning the reputation of Ohio, which is where I was born, Madam Chair. May I continue my questions?"

"What in hell made you move, Charlie?" Percy asked. "We could use your eagle eye." He grinned to the nearly empty room. Only a grandstanding senator—or an aging vaudevillian—could imagine an audience where



there was none, Augustine mused. He unfolded his hands to tap his finger lightly on the table.

“Chair asks for a minimum of unchecked camaraderie.”

“I’m done, Madam Chair,” Percy announced, sitting back and wrapping his hands behind his neck.

Augustine sipped slowly from a glass of water.

“Perhaps our questions should be more pointed, dealing more with responsibility and less with geography,” Thomasen suggested.

“Hear, hear,” Percy said.

“When you were in charge of the school system for Emergency Action, did you supply all schools—even state-controlled schools—with the federally mandated allotments for medical supplies?” Chase continued.

“We did, Senator,” Augustine said.

“These supplies included the very antivirals that might have saved these unfortunate children?”

“They did.”

“In how many states was there sufficient supply of these antivirals to treat sick children?”

“Five; six, if we include the territory of Puerto Rico.”

“My state, doctor, was one of those five?”

“It was, Senator,” Augustine said.

The senator paused to let that sink in. “The supply of antivirals was sufficient to take care of the children in our custody—our care. Arizona did not lose nearly as many children as most. And that supply was insured because Arizona did not seek to control and divert the federal allotments and allocations for Emergency Action schools, a hijacking sponsored by the Republican majority, if I remember correctly?”

“Yes, Senator.” Augustine tapped his finger again on the table. Now was not the time to bring up Arizona’s current record. There were rumors that the children of dissidents were being warehoused in schools there. He no longer had access to the lists, of course.

“Is it fair to say that you lost your job because of this fiasco?” Chase asked.

“It was part of the larger picture,” Augustine said.

“A large part, I presume.”

Augustine gave the merest nod.

“Do you continue to consult for the Emergency Action Authority?”

“I serve as adviser on viral affairs to the director of the National Institutes of Health. I still have an office in Bethesda.”

Chase searched his papers for more material, then added, “Your star is not completely out of the firmament in this matter?”

“I suppose not, Senator.”

“And what is the authority’s budget this year?” Chase looked up innocently.

“You of all people should know that, Charlie,” Senator Percy grumbled.

“Emergency Action’s budget is not subject to yearly congressional review, nor is it available for direct public scrutiny,” Augustine said. “I don’t have exact figures myself, but I would estimate the present budget at over eighty billion dollars—double what it was when I served as director. That includes research and development in the private and public sector.”

Thomassen looked around the room with a frown. “The director is tardy.”

“She is not here to defend herself,” Percy observed with amusement. Thomassen nodded for Chase to continue, and then conferred with an intern.

Chase closed in on his favorite topic. “Emergency Action has become one of the biggest government programs in this nation, successfully fighting off all attempts to limit its scope and investigate its constitutionality in a time of drastic fiscal cutbacks, has it not?”

“All true,” Augustine said.

“And with this budget, approved by both Republican and Democratic administrations year after year, EMAC has spent tens of millions of dollars on lawyers to defend its questionable legality, has it not?”

“The very best, Senator.”

“And does it pay any attention to the wishes of Congress, or of this oversight committee? Even to the extent that the director arrives on time when summoned?”

Senator Percy from Ohio exhaled over his microphone, creating the sensation of a great wind in the chamber. “Where are we going, Madam Chair? Haven’t we enough black eyes to go around?”

“We lost seventy-five thousand children, Senator Percy!” Chase roared.

Percy riposted immediately. “They were killed by a *disease*, Senator Chase, not by my constituents, nor indeed by any of the normal citizens—the true citizens—of my great state, or this fine country.” Percy avoided the hawklike gaze of the senator from Arizona.

“Dr. Augustine, is it not the scientific conclusion that this new variety of virus—hand, foot, and mouth disease—arose within the so-called normal

adult population, in part through recombination of ancient viral genes not found within SHEVA children?" Chase asked.

"It is," Augustine said.

"Many prominent scientists disagree," Percy said, and lifted his hand as if to fend off the sudden rap of the gavel.

"And did you predict that just the reverse would happen, fourteen years ago, a statement that practically led to the creation of Emergency Action?"

"The reverse being . . ." Augustine said, lifting his brows.

"That the children would create new viruses that would kill *us*, Doctor."

Augustine nodded. "I did."

"And is that not still a scientific possibility, Dr. Augustine?" Percy demanded.

"It hasn't happened, Senator," Augustine said mildly.

Percy moved in. "Come on, Dr. Augustine. It's your theory. Is it not likely that this deadly viral outbreak will happen soon, given the possibility that these children might perceive that they are under *threat*, and that many of these old viruses respond to the chemicals, steroids, or whatever, that we make when we are unhappy or stressed?"

Augustine subdued a twitch of his lips. The senator was showing some education. "I suggest that perhaps the children have already turned the other cheek, and it is time now for us to show some charity. We could relieve some of their stress. And we *should* recognize them for what they are, not what we fear they might become."

"They are the mutated products of a deadly viral disease," Percy said, straightening his microphone with a scraping noise.

"They are our children," Augustine said.

"Never!" Percy shouted.

### 3

#### Sable Mountain Emergency Action School

ARIZONA

**W**ithout explanation, Stella's evening study hour had been canceled and she had been told to go to the gym. The building was empty and the basketball made a clapping echo with each resonant bounce.

Stella ran toward the end of the court, worn sneakers squeaking on the rubbery paint that covered the hard concrete. She spun around for a layup and watched the ball circle the hoop, hiccup, then drop through. There was no net to slow its fall. She deftly grabbed the ball as it fell and ran around the court to do it again. Mitch had taught her how to shoot hoops when she was eight. She remembered a little about the rules, though not much.

Stella's bunkmate, black-haired Celia Northcott, wandered into the gym fifteen minutes later. Celia was a year younger but seemed more mature. She had been born as a twin but her sister had died while only a few months old. This was common among SHEVA twins; usually, only one survived. Celia made up for a tendency toward sadness with a brittle cheer that sometimes irritated Stella. Celia was full of schemes, and was probably the most avid constructor of demes—social groupings of SHEVA children—and plans about how to live when they grew up.

She was nursing her arm—a bandage covered her wrist—and grimaced as Stella held the ball and queried her with a freckle flash and stare.

“Blood,” Celia said, and sat cross-legged on the side of the court. “About a gallon.”

“Why?” Stella asked.

“How should I know? KUK/ I had a nightmare last night.” Celia's tongue caught and she made her signature glottal click, which almost obscured her underspeech. Celia was not very good at double speaking. Someone, she never said who, had tried to mutilate her tongue when she was eight years old. This she had revealed to Stella late at night, when Stella had found her huddled in a corner of the barracks, crying and smelling of electric onions. The facile ridge found in most of the children was a white scar on Celia's tongue, and she sometimes slurred her words, or inserted a hard clucking sound.

Stella squatted beside Celia and lightly bounced her palm off the ball, held in the nest of her legs. Nobody knew why the counselors took so much blood, but visits to the hospital usually followed upsets or unusual behavior; that much Stella had deduced. “How long did they keep you?”

“Until morning.”

“Anything new in the hospital?” That was what they called the administration building, adjacent to the counselor and teacher dormitories, all beyond a razor-wire topped fence that surrounded the boys' and girls' compounds.

Celia shook her head. “They gave me oatmeal and eggs for breakfast,” she said. “And a big glass of orange juice.”

“Did they do a biopsy?”

Celia bit her lip and let her eyes grow large. “No. Who’s had-KUK a biopsy?”

“Beth Fremont says one of the boys told her. Right out of his . . . you know.” She pointed down and tapped the basketball.

“*Kweeee*,” Celia whistle-tongued.

“What did you dream?” Stella asked.

“I don’t remember. I just woke up with a screech.”

Stella licked her palms, tasting the paint on the court and the old rubber of the ball and a little of the dust and dirt of other shoes, other players. Then she held out her palms for Celia to clasp. Celia’s palms were damp. Celia squeezed and rubbed their hands together, sighed, and let go after a moment. “Thanks,” she said, eyes downcast. Her cheeks turned a steady mottled copper and stayed that way for a while.

Stella had learned the spit trick from another girl a few weeks after her arrival.

The door to the gym opened and Miss Kinney came in with ten other girls. Stella knew LaShawna Hamilton and Torry Butler from her dorm; she knew most of the others by name, but had never shared a deme with any of them. And she knew Miss Kinney, the girl’s school coach. Miss Kinney led the other girls onto the court. Slung over her shoulder was a duffel bag filled with more balls.

“How about a little practice?” she asked Celia and Stella.

“Her arm hurts,” Stella said.

“Can you bounce and throw?” Miss Kinney asked Celia. Miss Kinney stood about five feet nine inches tall, a little shorter than Stella. The gym teacher was thin and strong, with a long, well-shaped nose and large green eyes, like a cat’s.

Celia got to her feet. She never turned down a challenge from a counselor or a teacher. She thought she was tough.

“Good,” Miss Kinney said. “I brought some jerseys and shorts. They’re ragged, but they’ll pass. Let’s go put them on. Time to see what you can do.”

Stella adjusted the baggy shorts with a grimace and tried to focus on the ball. Miss Kinney shouted encouragement from the sidelines to Celia. “Don’t just sniff the breeze. Take a shot!”

All the girls on the court had come to a halt in the middle of hoop practice. Stella looked to Celia, the best at sinking baskets in her group of five.

Miss Kinney strode forward, exasperated, and put on her best *I'm being patient* face. Stella would not meet her steady gaze.

"What is so hard about this?" Miss Kinney asked. "Tell me. I want to know."

Stella lowered her eyes farther. "We don't understand the point."

"We're going to try something different. You'll *compete*," Miss Kinney said. "You'll play against each other and get exercise and learn physical coordination. It's fun."

"We could all make more baskets if we formed our own teams," Stella said. "One team could have three slowing others down, if they were coming in too fast. Seven could play opposite and make baskets." Stella wondered if she sounded obtuse, but she truly wasn't understanding what Miss Kinney expected of them.

"That isn't the way it's done," Miss Kinney said, growing dangerously patient. Miss Kinney never got really angry, but it bothered Stella that she could hold in so much irritation and not express it. It made the teacher smell unpleasant.

"So, tell us how it's-KUK done," Celia said. She and LaShawna approached. Celia stood an inch taller than Stella, almost five eleven, and LaShawna was shorter than Miss Kinney, about five seven. Celia had the usual olive-to-brown skin and flyaway reddish hair that never seemed to know what to do or how to hold together on her head. LaShawna was darker, but not much, with finely kinked black hair that formed a slumped nimbus around her ears and down to her shoulders.

"It's called a game. Come on, girls, you know what a game is."

"We play," Stella said defensively.

"Of course you play. All of us monkeys *play*," the teacher said.

Stella and LaShawna smiled. Sometimes Miss Kinney was more open and direct than the other teachers. They liked her, which made frustrating her even more distressing.

"This is *organized* play. You guys are good at organizing, aren't you? What's not to understand?"

"Teams," LaShawna said. "Teams are like demes. But demes choose themselves." She lifted her hands and spread them beside her temples, making little elephant ears. It was a sign; many of the new children did such

things without really understanding why. Sometimes the teachers thought they were acting smart; but not Miss Kinney.

She glanced at LaShawna's "ears," blinked, and said for the tenth time, "Teams are not demes. Work with me here. A team is temporary and fun. *I* choose sides for you."

Stella wrinkled her nose.

"I pick players with complementary abilities. I can help sculpt a team. You understand how that works, I'm sure."

"Sure," Stella said.

"Then you play against another team, and that makes all of you better players. Plus, you get exercise."

"Right," Stella said. So far, so good. She bounced the ball experimentally.

"Let's try it again. Just the practice part. Celia, cover Stella. Stella, go for the basket."

Celia stood back and dropped into a crouch and spread her arms, as Miss Kinney had told her to do. Stella bounced the ball, made a step forward, remembered the rules, then dribbled toward the basket. The floor of the court was marked with lines and half circles. Stella could smell Celia and knew what she was going to do. Stella moved toward her, and Celia stepped aside with a graceful sweep of her arms, but without any signs or suggestions for adjustment, and Stella, in some confusion, threw the ball. It bounced off the backboard without touching the basket.

Stella made a face at Celia.

"You are supposed to try to *stop* her," Miss Kinney told Celia.

"I didn't *help* her." Celia glanced apologetically at Stella.

"No, I mean, actively *try to stop her*."

"But that would be a foul," Celia said.

"Only if you chop her arms or push her or run into her."

Celia said, "We all want to make baskets and be happy, right? If I stop her from getting a basket, won't that reduce the number of baskets?"

Miss Kinney raised her eyes to the roof. Her face pinked. "You want to get the most baskets for your team, and keep the other team from getting *any* baskets."

Celia was getting tired of thinking this through. Tears started in her eyes. "I thought we were trying to get the most baskets."

"For your *team*," Miss Kinney said. "Why isn't that clear?"

"It hurts to make others fail," Stella said, looking around the court as if to find a door and escape.

“Oh, puh-leeze, Stella, it’s *only* a game! You play against one another. It’s called *sport*. Everyone can be friendly afterward. There’s no harm.”

“I saw soccer riots on TV once,” LaShawna said. Miss Kinney lifted her eyes to the ceiling. “People got hurt,” LaShawna added doubtfully.

“There’s a lot of passion in sport,” Miss Kinney admitted. “People care, but usually the players don’t hurt each other.”

“They run into each other and lay down for a long time. Someone should have warned them they were about to collide,” said Crystal Newman, who had silver-white hair and smelled like some new kind of citrus tree.

Miss Kinney motioned the twelve girls to go over to the metal chairs lined up outside the lines. They pulled the chairs into a circle and sat.

Miss Kinney took a deep breath. “I think maybe I’m missing something,” she said. “Stella, how would you *like* to play?”

Stella thought about this. “For exercise, we could push-pull and swing, mosey, you know, like a dance. If we wanted to learn how to run better, or make baskets better, we could set up running academies. Girls could form wavy channels and ovals and others could run the channels. The girls in the wavy channels could tell them how they aren’t doing it right.” She pointedly did not tell Miss Kinney about spit-calming, all the players slapping palms, which she had seen athletes do in human games. “Then the runners could shoot baskets from inside the channels and at different distances, until they could sink them from all the way across the court. That’s more points, right?”

Miss Kinney nodded, going along for the moment.

“We’d switch out a runner and a channel each time. In a couple of hours, I bet most of us could sink baskets really well, and if we added up the points, the teams would have more points than if they, you know, fought with each other.” Stella thought this over very earnestly for an instant and her face lit up. “Maybe a thousand points in a game.”

“Nobody would want to watch,” Miss Kinney said. She was showing her exhaustion now, but also making a funny little grin that Stella could not interpret. Stella looked at the blinking red light on the nosey on Miss Kinney’s belt. Miss Kinney had turned off the nosey before practice, perhaps because the girls often triggered its tiny little wheeping alarm when they exercised, no matter how much self-control they displayed.

“I would watch!” Celia said, leaning into the words. “I could learn how to train people in motion with, you know, signs.” Celia glanced at Stella conspiratorially, and undered, */Signs and smells and spit, eyes that twirl and brows that knit*. It was a little song they sometimes sang in the dorm before sleep; softly. “That would really be fun.”



The other girls agreed that they understood that sort of game.

Miss Kinney lifted her hand and twisted it back and forth like a little flag. “What is it? You don’t like competition?”

“We like push-pull,” Stella said. “We do it all the time. On the playground, in the walking square.”

“Is that when you do those little dances?” Miss Kinney asked.

“That’s mosey or maybe push-pull,” said Harriet Pincher, the stockiest girl in the group. “Palms get sweaty with mosey. They stay dry with push-pull.”

Stella did not know how to begin to explain the difference. Sweaty palms in a group touch could make all sorts of changes. Individuals could become stronger, more willing to lead, or less aggressive in their push to lead, or simply sit out a deme debate, if one happened. Dry palms indicated a push-pull, and that was less serious, more like play. A deme needed to adjust all the time, and there were many ways to do that, some fun, some more like hard work.

Rarely, a deme adjustment involved stronger measures. The few attempts she had seen had resulted in some pretty nasty reactions. She didn’t want to bring that up now, though Miss Kinney seemed genuinely interested.

Adjusting to humans was a puzzle. The new children were supposed to do all the adjusting, and that made it hard.

“Come on,” said Miss Kinney, getting up. “Try again. Humor me.”

## 4

**Pathogenics Center  
Viral Threat Assessment Division  
Sandia Labs**

NEW MEXICO

**“W**e trade a lot of aptronyms to let off steam,” Jonathan Turner said as he spun the golf cart up to the concrete guard box.

“Aptronyms?” Christopher Dicken asked.

The sun had set in typical New Mexico fashion—suddenly and with some drama. Halogen lamps were switching on all over the facility, casting the plain and often downright ugly architecture into stark artificial day.

“Names that suit the job. I’ll give you an example,” Turner said. “We have a doctor here at Sandia named Polk. Asa Polk.”

“Ah,” Dicken said. The guard box stood empty. Something small and white moved back and forth behind smoked glass windows. A long steel tube jutted from the side. He used a handkerchief to wipe sweat from his cheeks and forehead. The sweat was not just from the heat. He did not like this new role. He did not like secrets.

In particular, he did not like stepping into the belly of the beast.

Turner followed his gaze. “Nobody home,” he said. “We still use people at the main gates, but here it’s an automated sentry.” Dicken caught a glimpse of a grid of purple beams scooting over Turner’s face, then his own.

A green light glowed beside the gate.

“You are who we say you are, Dr. Dicken,” Turner said. He reached into a small box under the dash and took out a plastic bag marked BIOHAZARD. “The rag, please, Kleenex in your pockets, anything used to sop. Nothing like that is allowed in or out. Clothing is bad enough.”

Dicken dropped the handkerchief into the bag, and Turner sealed it and slipped it into a small metal drop box. The concrete and iron barriers sank and drew back.

“In accounting, we have Mr. Ledger,” Turner said as he drove through. “And in statistics, Dr. Damlye.”

“I once worked with a pathologist named Boddy,” Dicken said.

Turner nodded provisional approval. “One of our arbovirus geniuses is named Bugg.”

The cart hummed past a dark gray water tower and five pressurized gas cylinders painted lime green, then crossed a median to a fenced enclosure containing a large white satellite dish. With a flourish, Turner did a 360 around the dish, then drove up to a row of squat bungalows. Behind the bungalows, and beyond several electrified fences topped with razor wire, lay five concrete warehouses, all of them together code-named Madhouse. The fences were patrolled by squat gray robots and soldiers toting automatic weapons.

“I once knew a plastic surgeon named Scarry,” Dicken said.

Turner smiled approval. “An auto mechanic named Torker.”

“A nuclear chemist named Mason.”

Turner grimaced. “You can do better. It may be essential to your sanity, working here.”

“I’m fresh out,” Dicken admitted.

“I could go on for days. Hundreds and hundreds, all on file and verified. None of this urban legend crap.”

“I thought you said just personal acquaintances.”

“I may have been handicapping you,” Turner admitted, and pulled the cart into a parking space marked in cargo letters on a white placard: #3 MADHOUSE HONCHO. “A gynecologist named Box.”

“An anthropologist named Mann,” Dicken said, peering right at the sunning cages for the more hirsute residents of the Madhouse, now empty. “Mustn’t let down the team.”

“A dog trainer named Doggett.”

“A traffic cop named Rush.” Dicken felt himself warming to the game.

“A cabby named Parker,” Turner countered.

“A compulsive gambler named Chip.”

“A proctologist named Poker,” Turner said.

“You used that one.”

“Scout’s honor, it’s another,” Turner said. “And I *was* a scout, believe it or not.”

“Merit badge in hemorrhagic fevers?”

“Lucky guess.”

They walked toward the plain double doors and the white-lit corridor beyond. Dicken’s brow furrowed. “A pathologist named Thomas Shew,” he said, and smiled sheepishly.

“So?”

“T. Shew.”

Turner groaned and opened the door for Dicken. “Welcome to the Madhouse, Dr. Dicken. Initiation begins in half an hour. Need to make a pit stop first? Restrooms to your right. The cleanest loos in Christendom.”

“Not necessary,” Dicken said.

“You should, really. Initiation begins with drinking three bottles of Bud Light, and ends with drinking three bottles of Becks or Heinekens. This symbolizes the transition from the halls of typical piss-poor science to the exalted ranks of Sandia Pathogenics.”

“I’m fine.” Dicken tapped his forehead. “A libertarian named State,” he offered.

“Ah, that’s a different game entirely,” Turner said.

He rapped on the closed door to an office and stood back, folding his hands. Dicken looked along the cinder block hallway, then down to the concrete gutters on each side, then up at sprinkler heads mounted every six feet. Long red or green tags hung from the sprinkler heads, twisting in a slow current of air flowing north to south. The red tags read: CAUTION: ACID SOLUTION AND DETERGENT. A second pipe and sprinkler system on the left

side of the corridor carried green tags that read: EXTREME CAUTION: CHLORINE DIOXIDE.

At the southern end of the corridor, a large fan mounted in the wall slowly turned. During an emergency, the fan would switch off to allow the corridor to fill with sterilizing gas. Once the area had been decontaminated, the fan would evacuate the toxic atmosphere into big scrubbing chambers.

The office door opened a crack. A plump man with thick black hair and beard and critical dark green eyes watched them suspiciously through the crack, then smiled and stepped into the hall. He quietly closed the door behind him.

“Christopher Dicken, this is Madhouse Honcho number five, or maybe number four, Vassili Presky,” Turner said.

“Proud to meet you,” Presky said, but did not offer his hand.

“Likewise,” Dicken said.

“He happens *not* to be a computer geek,” Turner added.

Dicken and Presky stared at him with quizzical half-smiles. “Pardon?” Presky said.

“*Press-key*,” Turner explained, astounded by their density.

“We will pardon Dr. Turner,” Presky said with a pained expression.

“We’re at step two of the initiation,” Turner said. “On our way to the party. Vassili is Speaker to Animals. He runs the zoo and does research, as well.”

Presky smiled. “You want it, we have it. Mammals, marsupials, monotremes, birds, reptiles, worms, insects, arachnids, crustaceans, planaria, nematodes, protists, fungi, even a horticultural center.” He snapped his fingers and opened his door again. “I forgot, this is formal. Let me get my coat.”

He emerged wearing a gray tweed jacket with worn cuffs.

The labs spun out like spokes from a hub. Turner and Presky led Dicken through broad double glass doors, then navigated in quicktime a maze of corridors, guiding him toward the center of Sandia Pathogenics. Dicken’s ears throbbed with the surge in air pressure as the doors hissed shut behind them.

All the buildings and connecting corridors were equipped with sprinklers and evacuation fans, emergency personnel showers—stainless steel-lined alcoves with multiple showerheads, decontamination rooms with remote manipulators, color-coded red-and-blue containment and isolation suits hanging behind plastic doors, and extensive collections of emergency medical supplies.

“Pathogenics is bug motel,” Presky said. Dicken was trying to place his accent: Russian, he thought, but modified by many years in the U.S. “Bugs come in, they do not go out.”

“Dr. Presky never gets our jingles right,” Turner said.

“I have no mind for trivia,” Presky agreed. Then, proudly, “Also, not watching TV all my life.”

A group of five men and three women awaited them in the lounge. As Dicken and his two escorts entered, the group lifted bottles of Bud Light in salute and gave him a rousing, “Hip, hip, hurrah!”

Dicken stopped in the doorway and rewarded them with a slow, awkward grin. “Don’t scare me,” he admonished. “I’m a shy guy.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” said a very young man with long blond hair and thick, almost white eyebrows. He wore a well-tailored gray suit that took a stylish drape on his substantial frame, and Dicken pegged him as the dandy. The others dressed as if they wanted covering and nothing more.

The dandy whistled a short tune, held out a strong, square-fingered hand, crossed two fingers, shook the hand in the air before Dicken could grip it, then backed away, bowing obsequiously.

“The secret handshake, unfortunately,” Turner said, lips pressed together in disapproval.

“It symbolizes lies and deceit and no contact with the outside world,” the dandy explained.

“That’s not funny,” said a tall, black-haired woman with a distinct stoop and a pleasant, homely face with beautiful blue eyes. “He’s Tommy Powers, and I’m Maggie Flynn. We’re Irish, and that’s the extent of what we share. Let me introduce you to the rest.”

They passed him a bottle of beer. Dicken made his greetings all around. Nobody shook hands. This close to the center, it was apparent people avoided direct contact as much as possible. Dicken wondered how much their love lives had suffered.

Thirty minutes into the party, Turner took Dicken aside, using the pretext of swapping the half-consumed Bud for a bottle of Heineken. “Now, Dr. Dicken,” he said. “It’s official. How do you like our players?”

“They know their stuff,” Dicken said.

Presky approached, bottle of Becks lifted in salute. “Time to meet the master, gentlemen?”

Dicken felt his back stiffen. “All right,” he said.

The group fell silent as Turner opened a side door leading off the

lounge and marked by a large red square at eye level. Dicken and Presky followed him down another corridor of offices, innocuous in itself but apparently rich in symbolism.

"The rest back there don't usually get this far," Turner said. He walked slowly beside Dicken, allowing for his pace. "It's tough recruiting for the inner circle," he admitted. "Takes a certain mindset. Curiosity and brilliance, mixed with an absolute lack of scruples."

"I still have scruples," Dicken said.

"I had heard as much," Turner said, dead serious and a little critical. "Frankly, I don't know why in hell you're here." He grinned wolfishly. "But then, you have connections and a certain reputation. Maybe they balance out."

Presky tried for an ironic smile. They came to a broad steel door. Turner ceremoniously removed a plastic tag from his pocket and let it dangle from the end of a red lanyard imprinted with *Sandia* in white letters. "Never tell the townies you work here," he advised.

He lifted his arms. Dicken lowered his head, and Turner slung the lanyard around his neck, then backed off. "Looks good on you."

"Thanks," Dicken said.

"Let's make sure you're in the system before we enter."

"And if I'm not?"

"If lucky," Presky said, "you are hit by Tazer before they use bullets."

Turner showed him how to press his palm against a glass pad and stare into a retinal scanner. "It knows you," Turner said. "Better still, it likes you."

"Thank god," Dicken said.

"Security *is* god here," Turner said. "The atomic age was a firecracker compared with what's on the other side of that door." The door opened. "Welcome to ground zero. Dr. Jurie is looking forward to meeting you."

## 5

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**G**ianelli swept through the waiting room of his office, accompanied by Laura Bloch, his chief of staff. His face was red and he looked just as Mitch had once described him: on the edge of a heart attack, with a big, friendly expression topped by shrewd eyes.

Kaye stood up beside the long wrought iron-and-marble coffee table that held center position in the lobby. Even though she was alone, she felt like a card being forced from a deck.

“They’re wrangling,” Laura Bloch told Gianelli in an undertone. “The director is late.”

“Perfect,” Gianelli said. He looked at a clock on the wall. It was eleven. “Where’s my star witness?” He gave Kaye a lopsided smile, his expression combining both sympathy and doubt. She knew she did not look prepared. She did not feel prepared. Gianelli sneezed and walked into his office. A young male Secret Service agent closed the door and stood guard beside it, hands folded in front of him, eyes unreadable behind smoked glasses.

Kaye let out her breath.

The maple-and-glass door opened almost immediately and the senator poked his head out.

“Dr. Rafelson,” he called, and crooked his finger.

The office beyond was stacked with newspapers, magazines, and two antiquated desktop computers perched on three desks. The huge desk nearest the window was covered with law books and leftover boxes of Chinese food.

The agent closed the door behind Kaye. The air was close and mustily cool. Laura Bloch, in her forties, small and plump, with intense, bulging black eyes and a halo of frizzy black hair, stood and handed papers from a briefcase to Gianelli.

“Pardon our mess,” he said.

“He says that to everyone,” Bloch said. Her smile was at once friendly and alarming; her expression reminded Kaye of a pug or a Boston terrier, and she could not seem to look directly at anyone.

“This has been my home away from home the last few days. I eat, drink, and sleep here.” Gianelli offered his hand. “Thank you for coming.”

Kaye shook the hand lightly. He let her determine the strength and duration of the grip.

“This is Laura Bloch. She’s my right hand . . . *and* my left hand.”

“We’ve met,” Bloch said, and smiled. Kaye shook Laura’s hand; it was soft and dry. Laura seemed to stare at Kaye’s forehead and her nose. Suddenly, irrationally, Kaye liked and trusted her.

Gianelli she was not so sure about. He had moved up awfully fast in the last few years. Kaye had become suspicious of politicians who prospered in bad times.

“How’s Mitch?” he asked.

“We haven’t spoken for a few weeks,” Kaye said.

“I like Mitch,” Gianelli said with an undulating shrug of his shoulders, apropos of nothing. He sat behind his desk, stared over the crusted boxes, and frowned. “I hated to hear about what happened. Awful times. How’s Marge?”

Kaye could tell he did not really give a damn about Marge Cross, not at the moment. He was mentally preparing for the committee meeting.

“She sends her regards,” Kaye said.

“Good of her,” Gianelli said.

Kaye looked up at a framed portrait to the right of the big desk. “We were sorry to hear of Representative Wickham’s death,” she said.

“Shook up everything,” Gianelli murmured, appraising her. “Gave me the boost I needed, however, and here I am. I am a whelp, and many kind folks in this building are bound and determined to teach me humility.”

He leaned forward, earnest now and fully focused. “Is it true?”

Kaye knew what he meant. She nodded.

“Based on what data sets?”

“Americol pharmacy tracking reports. Drop-in data collection systems in two thousand area hospitals servicing epidemiology contracts with Americol.” Kaye swallowed nervously.

Gianelli nodded, his eyes shifting somewhat spookily over her shoulder as he thought this through. “Any government sources?” he asked.

“RSVP Plus, Air Force LEADER 21, CDC Virocol, NIH Population Health Monitor.”

“But no sources exclusive to Emergency Action.”

“No, though we suspect they listen in on some of our proprietary tracking systems.”

“How many will there be?” Gianelli asked.

“Tens of thousands,” Kaye said. “Maybe more.”

“Jesus, Homer, and Jethro Christ,” Gianelli said, and leaned back, his tall chair creaking on old steel springs. As if to calm himself, he raised his arms and folded his hands behind his head. “How’s your daughter?”

“She’s in a camp in Arizona,” Kaye said.

“Good old Charlie Chase and his wonderful state of Arizona. But how *is* she, Dr. Rafelson?”

“Healthy. She’s found friends.”

Gianelli shook his head. Kaye could not tell what he was thinking or



feeling. "It could be a rough meeting," he said. "Laura, let's give Dr. Rafelson a quick tour of the subcommittee's players."

"I was briefed in Baltimore," Kaye said.

"Nobody knows 'em better than we do, right, Laura?"

"Nobody," Laura Bloch said.

"Laura's daughter, Annie, died at Joseph Goldberger," the senator said.

"I'm sorry," Kaye said, and suddenly her eyes filled with tears.

Bloch patted Kaye's arm and set her face in grim reserve. "She was a sweet kid," she said. "A little dreamy." She drew herself up. "You are about to testify before a baboon, two cobras, a goose, a certified bull ape, and a spotted leopard."

"Senator Percy is the baboon," Gianelli said. "Jakes and Corcoran are the cobras, lying low in the grass. They hate being on this committee, however, and I doubt they'll ask you anything."

"Senator Thomasen is chairperson. She's the goose," Bloch said. "She likes to think she's keeping the other animals in order, but she has no fixed opinions herself. Senator Chase claims to be on our side—"

"He's the bull ape," Gianelli said.

"But we don't know how he'll vote, push comes to shove," Bloch finished.

Gianelli glanced at his watch. "I'm going to bring you in first. Laura tells me the director is still stuck in traffic."

"Twenty minutes away," Bloch said.

"She's working hard to get the directorship of EMAC legislated into a Cabinet-level position, giving her sole budgetary control. The director is our leopard." Gianelli scratched his upper lip with a forefinger. "We expect you to help us counter her suggestions, which are bound to be nasty beyond belief."

"All right," Kaye said.

"Mark Augustine will be there," Bloch said. "Any problem with that?" she asked Kaye.

"No," Kaye said.

"You two get along?"

"We disagreed," said Kaye, "but we worked together."

Bloch made a fleeting face of dubiety.

"We'll take our chances," Gianelli said with a snuffle.

"You should never take chances," Bloch advised, producing another handkerchief from her purse.

"I *always* take chances," Gianelli said. "That's why I'm here." He blew his nose. "Goddamned allergies," he added, and watched Kaye's reaction. "Washington is full of snotty noses."

"No problem," Kaye said. "I'm a mommy."

"Good," Bloch said. "We need a pro."

## 6

### NEW MEXICO

**D**r. Jurie's office was small and crammed with boxes, as if he had arrived only a few days before. Jurie pushed back his old Aeron chair as Dicken and Turner entered.

The shelves around the office were lightly populated with a few battered college texts, favorites for quick reference, and binders filled with what Dicken assumed were scientific papers. He counted seven metal lab stools in the small room, arranged in a cramped half-circle around the desk. The desk supported a flat top computer with two panels popped up, displaying results from two experiments.

"Acclimatizing, Dr. Dicken?" Jurie asked. "Altitude treating you well?"

"Doing fine, thank you," Dicken said. Turner and Presky assumed relaxed hunched positions on their stools.

Jurie motioned for Dicken to sit in a second old Aeron, on the other side of the desk. He had to push past a stack of boxes to fit into the chair, which bent his leg painfully. Once he sat, he wondered if he would be able to get up again.

Jurie wore brown oxfords, wool slacks, a dark blue shirt with a broad collar, and a sleeveless, cream-colored knit sweater, all clean but ruffled. At fifty-five, his features were still youthfully handsome, his body lean. He had the kind of face that would have fit well right above the collar of an Arrow shirt in a magazine ad. Had he smoked a pipe, Dicken would have thought him a cliché scientist. His body was too small, however, to complete the Oppenheimer effect. Dicken guessed his height at barely five feet three inches.

"I've invited more of our research group heads to join us. I apologize for showing you off, Dr. Dicken." Jurie reached over to send the flat top into sleep mode, then rotated in his chair, back and forth.

A woman's head poked through the door and pushed a fist in to rap on the inside wall.

"Ah," Jurie said. "Dee Dee. Dr. Blakemore. Always prompt."

"To a fault," the woman said. In her late thirties, comfortably rotund, with long mousy hair and a self-assured expression, she pushed through the door and sat with some difficulty on a stool. In the next few minutes, four others joined them in the room, but remained standing.

"Thank you all for coming," Jurie started the meeting. "We are all here to greet Dr. Dicken."

Two of the men had entered holding cans of beer, apparently cadged from the party. Dicken noted that one—Dr. Orlin Miller, formerly of Western Washington University—still favored Bud Light over Heineken.

"We're a relaxed group," Jurie said. "Somewhat informal." He never smiled, and as he spoke, he made small, unexpected hesitations between words. "What we're essentially interested in, here at Pathogenics, is how diseases use us as genetic libraries and reservoirs. Also, how we've adapted to these inroads and learned to use the diseases. It doesn't really matter whether viruses are rogue genes from inside us, or outside invaders—the result is the same, a constant battle for advantage and control. Sometimes we win, sometimes we lose, right?"

Dicken could not disagree.

"I've listened to all the media babble about virus children, and frankly I don't give a damn whether they're the products of disease or evolution. Evolution *is* a disease, for all I know. What I want to learn is how viruses can recombine and kill us.

"Not coincidentally, if we learn how that works, we have a pretty important weapon for both national defense and offense. This is the age of gene and germ, and whatever subtle little perversions we can think of, our enemies can also think of. Which is a pretty good reason to keep Sandia Pathogenics funded and running at fool steam, which we all will benefit from."

"Amen," said Turner.

*I heard "fool steam,"* Dicken thought, and looked around the room. *Did anybody else? Fool steam ahead.*

"Dr. Presky, shall we show Dr. Dicken our zoo?" Jurie asked.

## NEAR LUBBOCK, TEXAS

**M**itch had lost everything important, but once again he had dirt and bone chips and pottery. He was back in the field, carrying a small spade and a kit full of brushes. Starting from scratch was an archaeologist's definition of workaday life, and he was definitely starting from scratch, all over again.

Around him, a neat square hole in the earth had been sculpted into many terraces on which sat fragments of flint, the crushed remains of what might have once been a wicker basket, a rough oval of shards from a small pot, and the thing that had absorbed his attention all day: an engraved shell.

The sun had set several hours ago and he was working by the light of a Coleman lantern. Down in the hole, all colors had long since turned to gray and brown. Brown was the color he knew best. Beige, gray, black, brown. The brown dust in his nose made everything smell like dry earth. A brown, neutral smell.

The shell lay in three pieces and was crudely engraved with what looked like a crosshatched bird's wing. Mitch had a hunch it might be similar to the shells found at the Craig mound in Spiro, Oklahoma. If it was, that might generate enough publicity that they could persuade the contractors to pause for a few weeks.

The generator in the back of the truck had broken down the night before. Now, the lantern's gas was running out.

With a sigh, he turned the lantern off, laid his spade and kit on the side of the hole and climbed out carefully, feeling his way in the dark, putting a strain on his good arm.

As with most university-sponsored digs, the budget was minimal and equipment was precious, usually secondhand, and seldom reliable. Time was important, of course. In two more weeks bulldozers would move in and cover hundreds of acres with fill and concrete slabs for a housing tract.

The twelve students working the site had gathered under a tent and were sipping beer in the cooling twilight. Some things never changed. He accepted a freshly popped can from a twenty-year-old brunette named Kylan, then sat with a groan in a camp chair reserved for him in part because he was the most experienced and in part because he was the oldest and the kids thought he might require the bare minimum of comfort to keep functioning.

The gimpy arm drew sympathy, too. Mitch could only dig effectively with one hand, propping the handle of the shovel under his armpit.

The others squatted on the dirt or on the two rugged wooden benches pulled from the back of the single battered pickup, the same one that held the useless generator.

“Any luck?” Kylan asked. They were not very talkative this evening, perhaps because they saw the imminent dashing of their hopes and dreams. This dig had become their lives in the past few weeks. Two couples were already lovers.

Mitch held up his hand, made a grasping motion. “Flashlight,” he said.

Tom Pritchard, twenty-four, skinny, with a head of dusty and tousled blond hair, tossed him a black aluminum flashlight.

The students looked at each other, blank-faced in the way kids have of hiding what might be an inappropriate emotion: hope.

“What is it?” asked tall, stout Caitlin Bishop, far from her native New York.

Mitch lifted his head and sighed. “Probably nothing,” he said.

They crowded around, all pretense and weariness gone. They needed hope as much as they needed rehydrating fluids. “What?” “What is it?” “What did you find?”

Mitch said it was probably nothing; probably not what he thought it was. And even if it was, how did that figure into his plans? There were hundreds of shells from Spiro scattered in private and university collections. So what if he had just found one more?

What sort of prize was that to replace his family?

He waved them off with the flashlight, then aimed the beam up at the first star to appear in the sky. The air was dry and the beam was only visible because the dust they had been raising all day lingered in the still air.

“Anyone know about Spiro, Oklahoma? The Craig mound?” he asked.

“Mississippian civilization,” said Kylan, the best student in the group but hardly the best digger. “Opened during the nineteen thirties by the Pocola Mining Company. A disaster. Burials, pottery, artifacts, all gone, all sold to tourists.”

“A famous source for engraved conch shells,” Mitch added. “Decorated with birds and snakes and such, vaguely Mesoamerican designs. Probably part of an extensive bartering community spread through a number of cultures in the East and South and Midwest. Anybody know about these shells?”

They all shook their heads.

“Show us,” said Bernard Rowland and stepped forward, as tall as Mitch

and broader across the shoulders. He was a Mormon and did not drink beer; Iced Sweat, a wickedly green drink in a large plastic bottle, was his liquid of choice.

Mitch led them back through the ranks of holes in the ground. Flies were starting to zizz and hum after hiding out during the heat of the day. The cattle feed lots near Lubbock were less than ten miles away. When the wind was right, the smell was impressive. Mitch wondered why anyone would want to build homes here, so close to that smell and the flies.

They came to his hole and the students stood a foot back from the dry edges. He climbed into the hole and pointed the flashlight at the terrace that held the shell, painstakingly revealed by his brush and dental pick work of the last six hours.

“Wow,” Bernard said. “How did it get out here?”

“Good question,” Mitch said. “Anybody have a camera?”

Kylan handed him her digital, Dyno-labeled “Potshooter.” Mitch drew out the marker strings with length measurements in small squares of tape, handed them to the students, who set them at right angles and weighted them with rocks, and then snapped a series of flash pictures.

Bernard helped Mitch out of the hole. They stood solemnly for a moment.

“Our treasure,” Mitch said. Even to himself, he sounded cynical. “Our only hope.”

Fallon Dupres, a twenty-three-year-old from Canada, who looked like a fashion model and kept severely aloof from most of the men, handed him another can of Coors. “Actually, the Craig mound shells weren’t conchs,” she told Mitch in an undertone. “They were whelks.”

“Thanks,” Mitch said. Fallon tilted her head, blasé. She had made a pass at Mitch three days before. Mitch had suspected her of being the type of attractive woman that instantly gravitated to age and authority, however weak that authority might be. In the near vacuum of the little dig, he was the most authoritative male, and he was certainly the oldest. He had politely declined and told her she was very pretty, and under other circumstances he might oblige. He had hinted, in as roundabout a way as possible, that that part of his life was over. She had ignored the evasions and told him bluntly that his attitude was not natural.

In fact, Mitch had not had a woman since he and Kaye had parted last year in Phoenix, shortly after his release from prison. They had agreed to go their strategic ways. Kaye had gone to work for Americol in Maryland, and Mitch had gone on the road, looking for holes in the Earth to hide in.

“I thought Spiro was, like, a corrupt vice president,” said Larry Kelly, the dimmest and funniest of the crew. “How’s a shell going to save our dig?” Fallon, surprisingly, set herself to gently explain.

Mitch wandered off to check his cell phone. He had turned it off for the morning work hours, and forgotten to switch it on during the nap he had taken at the burning center of the day. There was one message. He vaguely recognized the number. With an awkward pass, he punched in the retrieval code.

The voice was instantly recognizable. It was Eileen Ripper, a fellow archaeologist and friend. Eileen specialized in Northwestern digs. They had not spoken in more than ten years. “Mitch, something dishy. Are you busy? Better not be. This is, as I said, *dishy*. I am stuck here with a bunch of women, can you believe it? Want to upset some more apple carts? Call me.”

Mitch looked across the darkening plateau and the black ditches to where Fallon was explaining the Spiro shells to a group of bone-weary students, about to have their dig closed and covered over by lawns and concrete slabs. He stood with the phone in his weak hand, clenching his strong hand. He could not stand the thought of having this dig closed, however trivial it was, of having another part of his life be judged useless.

He had been put away for two years for assault with a deadly weapon—a large wood chip. He had not seen Kaye for more than a year. She was working on viruses for Marge Cross, and in Mitch’s judgment, that was a kind of defeat as well.

And there was Stella, stashed away by the government in a school in Arizona.

Fallon Dupres walked up behind him. He turned just as she folded her arms, watching him carefully. “It isn’t a whelk, Mitch,” she said. “It’s a broken clamshell.”

“I could have sworn,” he said. He had seen the Mesoamerican design so plainly.

“It’s scratched up like a doodle pad,” the young woman said. “But it’s not a whelk. Sorry.” She turned away, glanced at him one more time, smiled perhaps more in regret than pity, and walked off.

Mitch stood under the blue-black sky for a few minutes, wondering how many wish-thinks he had left in him before he lost it completely. Another door closing.

He could head north. Drop off and visit Stella along the way—if they let him. You could never find out in advance.

He called Eileen’s number.

WASHINGTON, D.C.

**G**ianelli entered at the back of the chamber, carrying a stack of papers. Thomasen looked up. Augustine glanced over his shoulder. The last senator on the committee was followed by a Secret Service agent, who took a position with another agent by the door, and then by a small, intense-looking woman. Augustine recognized Laura Bloch. She was the main reason Gianelli was a senator, and she was a formidable political mind.

Augustine had also heard that Bloch was a bit of a spymaster.

“Glad you could make it, Dick,” Chase called out across the chamber. “We were worried.”

Gianelli smiled foxily. “Allergies,” he said.

Kaye Lang Rafelson entered after Bloch. Her presence surprised Augustine. He recognized a setup and suspected that the current director of EMAC would regret not arriving on time.

Kaye moved up to the witness table. A chair and microphone awaited her. She was introduced to the committee, all of whom knew her by name and reputation.

Senator Percy looked disconcerted. He, too, could smell a setup. “Dr. Rafelson is not on our list, Dick,” he said as Bloch helped Gianelli settle himself at the dais.

“She brings important news,” Gianelli said brusquely.

Kaye was sworn in. Not once did she look at Augustine, though he sat fewer than five feet away.

Senator Thomasen stifled a yawn. She seemed perfectly happy to take her cues from Gianelli. There was some procedural wrangling, more interruptions by Percy and counterarguments by Chase, and finally Percy held up his hands and let her testimony proceed. He was clearly unhappy that the director was still not present.

“You work at Americol, correct, Dr. Rafelson?” Thomasen said, reading from the witness sheet handed to her by Gianelli.

“Yes, Senator.”

“And what is your group doing?”

“We’re studying ERV knockout techniques in mice and chimpanzees, Senator,” Kaye said.



“Bravo,” Senator Percy said. “A worthy effort, to rid the world of viruses.”

“We’re working to understand the roles viruses play in our genome and in our everyday lives,” Kaye corrected. The distinction seemed lost on Percy.

“You also work with the Centers for Disease Control,” Thomasen continued. “Serving as a go-between for Marge Cross and Fern Ridpath, the director of SHEVA affairs at the CDC?”

“Occasionally, but Dr. Ridpath spends more time with our PI.”

“PI?”

“Principal Investigator.”

“And that is?”

“Dr. Robert Jackson,” Kaye said.

Thomasen looked up, as did the others, at the sound of the door at the back of the chamber opening once more. Rachel Browning marched down the aisle, wearing a black dress with a wide red belt. She glanced at Augustine, then looked over the senators on the dais with what she meant to be a puzzled smile. To Kaye, the smile appeared predatory. Two steps behind walked her counsel, a small, gray-haired woman in a beige cotton summer suit.

“You’re late, Ms. Browning,” Senator Thomasen said.

“It was my understanding Dr. Browning was to be testifying alone to the committee, in closed session,” the counsel said, her voice commanding.

“The hearing *is* closed,” Gianelli said with another sniff. “Senator Percy invited Dr. Augustine, and I invited Dr. Rafelson.”

Browning sat at the end of the table and smiled calmly as her counsel leaned over to set up a small laptop on the desk. The counsel then unfolded blinders, to prevent the computer display from being visible to either side, and took her seat on Browning’s left.

“Dr. Rafelson was interrupted,” Senator Gianelli reminded the chair.

Thomasen smirked. “I’m not sure which tune we’re supposed to be dancing to. Who’s the fiddler?”

“You are, as always, Madam Chair,” Gianelli said.

“I sincerely doubt that,” Thomasen said. “All right, go ahead, Dr. Rafelson.”

Kaye did not like going up against the director of Emergency Action in this way, but she clearly had no choice. She was being squeezed between lines of scrimmage in a game far rougher than football.

“Yesterday evening, a meeting was held in Baltimore to discuss the results of a proprietary Americol health survey. You were present,” Gianelli said. “Tell us what’s happening, Kaye.”

Browning’s look was a warning.

Kaye ignored her. “We have conclusive evidence there have been new first-stage SHEVA deliveries, Senator,” she said. “Expulsion or abortion of interim daughters.”

A hush fell over the chamber. All the senators looked up and around, as if a strange bird had flown into the room.

“I beg your pardon?” Chase said.

“There will be new SHEVA births. We are now in our third wave.”

“Is there not a security protocol?” Percy asked, regarding his fellow senators on the committee with a look of astonishment. “This committee is not known for its discretion. I ask you to consider the political and social fallout—”

“Madam Chair,” the senator from Arizona demanded, exasperated.

“Dr. Rafelson, please explain,” Gianelli said, ignoring the ruckus.

“Blood samples from more than fifty thousand males in committed relationships are again producing SHEVA retroviruses. Current CDC estimates are that more than twenty thousand women will give birth to second-stage SHEVA infants over the next eight to twelve months in the United States. In the next three years, we may have as many as a hundred thousand SHEVA births.”

“My God,” Percy called out, “Will it never end?” His voice made the sound system ring.

“The big ball rolls again,” Gianelli said.

“Is this true, Ms. Browning?” Senator Percy demanded.

Browning drew herself up. “Thank you, Senator. Emergency Action is well aware of these cases, and we have prepared a special plan to counteract their effect. True, there have been miscarriages. Subsequent pregnancies have been reported. There is no proof that these children will have the same kind of virally induced mutations. In fact, the retrovirus being shed by males is not homologous to the SHEVA viruses we are familiar with. We may be witnessing a novel resurgence of the disease, with new complications.”

Senator Percy moved in. “This is awesome and awful news. Ms. Browning, don’t you think it is high time that we free ourselves of these invaders?”

Browning arranged her papers. “I do, Senator Percy. A vaccine has been developed that confers substantial resistance to transmission of SHEVA and many other retroviruses.”

Kaye held onto the edge of the table to keep her hands from shaking. There was no new vaccine; she knew that for a fact. This was the purest scientific bullshit. But now was certainly not the time to call Browning to account. Let her spin her web.

“We expect to be able to stop this new viral phase in its tracks,” Browning continued. She slipped on granny reading glasses and read from notes on her data phone. “We are also recommending quarantine and GPS-chipping and tracking of all infected mothers, to prevent further outbreaks of Shiver. We hope to eventually get court permission to chip all SHEVA children.”

Kaye looked along the row of faces behind the dais, seeing only fear, and then turned to Browning again.

Browning held Kaye’s gaze for a long moment, eyes square and forthright over the granny glasses. “Emergency Action has the authority, under Presidential Decision Directives 298 and 341, and the authority conferred by Congress in our original charter, to announce a full quarantine of all affected mothers. We are ordering separate house arrest for males shedding the new retrovirus, removing them from households where they may infect their partners. The bottom line is we do not want any more SHEVA-affected children to be born.”

Chase had gone pale. “How do we prevent that, Ms. Browning?” he asked.

“If chipping cannot be implemented immediately, we’ll resort to older methods. Ankle bracelets will be attached to monitor the activities of affected males. Other plans are being drawn up even now. We *will* prevent this new surge of disease, Senator.”

“How long until we can cleanse our bodies of these viruses completely?” Senator Percy asked.

“That’s Ms. Lang’s area of expertise,” Browning said, and turned to her with an ingenuous expression, one professional to another. “Kaye? Any progress?”

“Our division is trying new procedures,” Kaye said. “So far, we have been unable to remove legacy retroviruses—ERVs—from mouse or chimpanzee embryos and proceed to live birth. Removing most or all of the ancient viral genes, including SHEVA genes, produces gross chromosomal

abnormalities following mitosis, failure of fertilized eggs to implant, early absorptions, and miscarriages. As well, we have not made progress at Americol with any effective vaccine. There's a lot to be learned. Viruses—"

"There it is," Browning interrupted, turning back to the senators. "Utter failure. We have to move now with practical remedies."

"One wonders, Dr. Rafelson, whether or not you are to be trusted with this work, given your sympathies?" Senator Percy said, and mopped his forehead.

"That's uncalled for, Senator Percy," Gianelli said sharply.

Browning swept on. "We hope to share all scientific data with Americol and with this committee," she said. "We sincerely believe that Ms. Lang and her fellow scientists should be as forthcoming with us, and perhaps a tad more diligent."

Kaye folded her hands on top of the table.

After the session was gaveled to a close, Augustine sipped a glass of water in the waiting room. Browning walked briskly by.

"Did you have anything to do with this, Mark?" she asked in an undertone, pouring herself a glass from the frosted pitcher. Three years ago, he had underestimated the fear and hatred of which Americans were capable. Rachel Browning had not. If the new director of Emergency Action trailed any rope, Augustine could not see it.

Many more years might pass before she hanged herself.

"No," Augustine said. "Why would I?"

"Well, the news will get out soon enough."

Browning turned away from the door to the waiting room as Kaye was ushered in by Laura Bloch, and slipped away with her counsel. Bloch quickly secured Kaye a cup of coffee. Augustine and Kaye stood less than a pace apart. Kaye lifted her cup. "Hello, Mark."

"Good evening, Kaye. You did well."

"I doubt that, but thank you," Kaye said.

"I wanted to tell you I'm sorry," Augustine said.

"For what?" Kaye asked. She did not know, of course, all that had happened on that day when Browning had called and told him about the possible acquisition of her family.

"Sorry you had to be their decoy," he said.

"I'm used to it," Kaye said. "It's the price I'm paying for being out of the loop for so long."

Augustine tried for a sympathetic grin, but his stiff face produced only a mild grimace. “I hear you,” he said.

“Finally,” Kaye said primly, and turned to join Laura Bloch.

Augustine felt the rebuff, but he knew how to be patient. He knew how to work in the background, silently and with little credit.

He had long since learned how to emulate the lowly viruses.

## 9

## NEW MEXICO

**T**o enter the Pathogenics zoo, they had to pass through a room with bare concrete walls painted black and dip their shoes in shallow trays of sweet, cloying yellow fluid—a variation on Lysol, Turner explained.

Dicken awkwardly swirled his shoes in the fluid.

“We do it on the way out, too,” Presky said. “Rubber soles last longer.”

They scraped and dried their shoes on black nylon mats and slipped on combination cotton booties and leggings, cinched around the calf. Presky gave each a snood and fine mesh filter masks to cover their mouths, and instructed them to touch as little as possible.

The zoo would have made a small town proud. It filled four warehouses covering several acres, steel and concrete walls lined with enclosures containing loose facsimiles of natural environments. “Comfortable, low stress,” Turner pointed out. “We want all our ancient viruses calm and collected.”

“Dr. Blakemore is working with vervets and howler monkeys,” Jurie said. “Old World and New World. Their ERV profiles are vastly different, as I’m sure you know. We hope soon to have chimps, but perhaps we can just piggyback on Americol’s chimp project.” He glanced at Dicken with speculative brown eyes. “Kaye Lang’s work, no?”

Dicken nodded absently.

The five large primate cages had most of the amenities: tree limbs, swings and rings, floors covered with rubber matting, multiple levels for pacing and climbing, a wide selection of plastic toys. Dicken counted six howler monkeys segregated male and female in two cages, with perforated plastic sheeting between: They could see and smell each other, but not touch.

They walked on and paused before a long, narrow aquarium containing a happily swimming platypus and several small fish. Dicken loved platypuses. He smiled like a little boy at the foot-long juvenile as it breached and dove several times through the clear green water, silvery lines of bubbles streaming from its slick fur.

“Her name is Torrie,” Presky said. “She’s pretty, no?”

“She’s wonderful,” Dicken said.

“Anything with fur, scales, or feathers, has viral genes of interest,” Jurie said. “Torrie’s rather a dud, at the moment, but we like her anyway. We’ve just finished sequencing and comparing the allogenesomes of echidnas and, of course, platypuses.”

“We’re taking a census of monotreme ERVs,” Turner explained. “ERVs are useful during viviparous development. They help us subdue our mothers’ immune systems. Otherwise, her lymphocytes would kill the embryos, because in part they type for the father’s tissue. However, like birds, monotremes lay eggs. They should not use ERVs so extensively during early development.”

“The Temin-Larsson-Villarreal hypothesis,” Dicken said.

“You’re familiar with TLV?” Turner asked, pleased. TLV stood for a theory of virus-host interactions concocted from work done over decades, at different institutions, by Howard R. Temin, Eric Larsson, and Luis P. Villarreal. TLV had gained a lot of favor since SHEVA.

Dicken nodded. “So, do they?”

“Do who, what?” Presky asked.

“Do echidnas and birds express ERV particles to protect their embryos?”

“Ah,” Presky said, and smiled mysteriously, then wagged his finger. “Job security.” He faced Turner. Wherever his head moved, his body moved as well, like a clocktower figure. “Torrie will have a mate soon. That effects many changes intriguing to us.”

“Intriguing to Torrie, as well, presumably,” Jurie added, deadpan.

They moved on to a concrete enclosure with a convincing, though small grove of conifers. “No lions or tigers, but we have bears,” Presky said. “Two young males. Sometimes they’re out sparring with each other. They are brothers, they like to play fight.”

“Bears, raccoons, badgers,” Turner added. “Peaceful enough critters, virally, at least. Apes, including us, seem to have the most active and numerous ERV.”

“Most plants and animals have their own capabilities in biological pro-

paganda and warfare. War happens only if the populations are pressed hard,” Jurie said. “Shall we hear Dr. Turner’s favorite example?”

Turner took them across to a large enclosure containing three rather mangy-looking European bison. Four large, shaggy animals, fur hanging in patches, regarded the human onlookers with ageless placidity. One shook its head, sending dust and straw flying. “Fresh in modern memory, for hamburger eaters anyway: Toxin gene transfer to *E. coli* bacteria in cattle,” Turner began. “Modern factory farming and slaughterhouse technique puts severe stress on the cattle, who send hormonal signals to their multiple tummies, their rumen. *E. coli* react to these signals by taking up phages—viruses for bacteria—that carry genes from another common gut bacteria, *Shigella*. Those genes just happen to code for Shiga toxin. The exchange does not hurt the cow, fascinating, no? But when a predator kills a cow-like critter in nature, and bites into the gut—which most do, eating half-digested grass and such, wild salad it’s called—it swallows a load of *E. coli* packed with Shiga toxin. That can make the predators—and us—very sick. Sick or dead predators reduce the stress on cows. It’s a clever relief valve. Now we sterilize our beef with radiation. *All* the beef.”

“Personally, I never eat rare meat,” Jurie said with a contemplative arch of his brows. “Too many loose genes floating around. Dr. Miller, our chief botanist, tells me I should be concerned about my greens, as well.”

Orlin Miller raised his hands in collegial defense. “Equal time for veggies.”

They entered Building Two, the combination aviary and herpetarium. Mounted on benches beside the large sliding warehouse door, glass boxes housed king snakes coiled beneath red heat lamps.

“We have evidence of a slow but constant lateral flow of genes between species,” Jurie said. “Dr. Foresmith is studying transfer of genes between exogenous and endogenous viruses in chickens and ducks, as well as in the Psittaciformes, parrots.”

Foresmith, an imposing, gray-haired fellow in his early fifties, formerly of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—Dicken knew him for his work on minimum genome bacteria—took up the topic. “Flu and other exogenous viruses can exchange genes and recombine within host or reservoir populations,” he said, his voice a bass rumble. “New strains of flu used to come rumbling out of Asia every year. Now, we know that exogenous and endogenous viruses—herpes, poxviruses, HIV, SHEVA—can recombine in us. What if these viruses make a mistake? Slip a gene into the wrong location in a cell’s DNA . . . A cell starts to ignore its duties and grows out of

control. Voilà, a malignant tumor. Or, a relatively mild virus acquires one crucial gene and flips from a persistent to an acute infection. One really *big* mistake, and *pow*,” he slapped his fist into his palm, “we suffer one hundred percent mortality.” His smile was at once admiring and nervous. “One of our paleo guys figures we can explain a lot of mass extinctions that way, in theory. If we could resurrect and reassemble the older, extremely degraded ERVs, maybe we would learn what actually happened to the dinosaurs.”

“Not so fast,” Dicken said, raising his hands in surrender. “I don’t know anything about dinosaurs or stressed cows.”

“Let’s hold off on the wilder theories for now,” Jurie admonished Fore-smith, but his eyes gleamed. “Tom, you’re next.”

Tom Wrigley was the youngest in the group, in his mid-twenties, tall, dark-haired, and homely, with a red nose and a perpetually pleasant expression. He smiled shyly and handed Dicken a coin, a quarter. “That’s roughly what a birth control pill costs. My group is studying the effect of birth control on endogenous retrovirus expression in women between the ages of twenty and fifty.”

Dicken rolled the quarter in his hand. Tom held out his palm, lifting his eyebrows, and Dicken returned the coin.

“Tell them why, Tom,” Jurie prodded.

“Twenty years ago, some researchers found that HIV infected pregnant women at a higher rate. Some human endogenous retroviruses are closely related to HIV, which goes after our immune systems with a vengeance. The fetus within the mother expresses lots of HERV from its placenta, which some think helps subdue the mom’s immune system in a beneficial way—just enough so that it won’t attack the developing fetus. TLV, as you know, Dr. Dicken.”

“Howard Temin is a god in this place,” Dee Dee Blakemore said. “We’ve set up a little shrine in C wing. Prayers every Wednesday.”

“Birth control pills produce conditions in women similar to pregnancy,” Wrigley said. “We decided that women on birth control would make an excellent study group. We have twenty volunteers, five of them our own researchers.”

Blakemore raised her hand. “I’m one,” she said. “I’m feeling testy already.” She growled at Wrigley and bared her canines. Wrigley held up his hands in mock fright.

“Eventually, SHEVA females will be getting pregnant,” Wrigley said,



“and some may even use birth control pills. We want to know how that will effect production of potential pathogens.”

“Sexual maturity and pregnancy in the new children is likely to be a time of great danger,” Jurie said. “Retroviruses released in the natural course of a second generation SHEVA pregnancy could transfer to humans. The result could be another HIV-like disease. In fact, Dr. Presky here, among others, believes something similar explains how HIV got into the human population.”

Presky weighed in. “A hunter in search of bush meat could have slaughtered a pregnant chimp.” He shrugged; the hypothesis was still speculation, as Dicken knew well. As a postdoc in the late 1980s, Dicken had spent two years in the Congo and Zaire tracking possible sources for HIV.

“And last but not least, our gardens. Dr. Miller?”

Orlin Miller pointed to flats of greenery and flower gardens spread out under skylights and artificial sun bulbs hanging in imposing phalanxes, like great glassy fruit, on the north side of the warehouse. “My group studies transfer of viral genes between plants and insects, funguses and bacteria. As Dr. Jurie hinted earlier, we’re also studying human genes that may have originated in plants,” Miller added. “I can just see the Nobel hanging from that one.”

“Not that you’ll ever go up on stage to collect,” Jurie warned.

“No, of course not,” Miller said, somewhat deflated.

“Enough. Just a taste,” Jurie said, stopping in front of a basin containing a thick growth of young corn. “Seven other division heads who could not be here tonight extend their congratulations—to me, for landing Dr. Dicken. Not necessarily do they congratulate Dr. Dicken.”

The others smiled.

“Thanks, gentlemen,” Jurie said, and waved bye-bye, as if to a group of school children. The directors said their farewells and filed out of the warehouse. Only Turner remained.

Jurie fixed Dicken with a gaze. “NIH tells me I can find a use for you at Pathogenics,” Jurie said. “NIH funds a substantial portion of my work here, through Emergency Action. Still, I’m curious. Why did you accept this appointment? Not because you love and respect me, Dr. Dicken.” Jurie loosely crossed his arms and his bony fingers engaged in a fit of searching, marching along toward the elbows, drawing the arms into a tighter hug.

“I go where the science is,” Dicken said. “I think you’re primed to dis-

cover some interesting things. And I think I can help. Besides . . .” He paused. “They gave you a list. You picked me.”

Jurie lifted one hand dismissively. “Everything we do here is political. I’d be a fool not to recognize it,” he said. “But, frankly, I think we’re winning. Our work is too important to stop, for whatever reason. And we might as well have the best people working with us, whatever their connections. You’re a fine scientist, and that’s the bottom line.” Jurie strolled before a plastic-wrapped greenhouse filled with banana trees, obscured by the translucent plastic. “If you think you’re ready, I have a theoretical problem for you.”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Dicken said.

“I’d like for you to start with something a little off the beaten path. Up for it?”

“I’m listening,” Dicken said.

“You can work with Dr. Wrigley’s volunteers. Assemble a staff from our resident postdocs under Dee Dee’s supervision, no more than two to begin with. They’re analyzing ancient promoter regions associated with sexual characteristics, physiological changes in humans possibly induced by retroviral genes.” Jurie swallowed conspicuously. “Viruses have induced changes quite evident in our SHEVA children. Now, I’d like to study more mundane instances in humans. Can you think of the fold of tissue of which I’m suspicious?” Jurie asked.

“Not really,” Dicken said.

“It’s like an alarm mounted on a gate kept closed until maturity. When the gate is breached, that announces a major accomplishment, a crucial change; announces it with a burst of pain and a whole cascade of hormonal events. The hormones generated by this experience appear to activate HERV and other mobile elements, preparing our bodies for a new phase of life. Reproduction is imminent, this breach tells the body. Time to prepare.”

“The female hymen,” Dicken guessed.

“The female hymen,” Jurie said. “Is there any other kind?” He was not being sarcastic. It was a straight question. “Are there other gates to be opened, other signals? . . . I don’t know. I’d like to know.” Jurie studied Dicken, eyes glittering with enthusiasm once again. “I’m supposing that viruses have altered our phenotype to produce the hymen. Rupturing the hymen gives them warning that sex is taking place, so they can prepare to do all that they do. By altering expression of key genes, promoting or blocking them, the viruses may change our behavior as well. Let’s find out how.” He reached into his jacket pocket, removed a small plastic case,

and handed the case to Dicken. "My notes. If you find them useful, I'll be content."

"Good," Dicken said. He knew very little about hymens; he wondered what his other resources would be.

"SHEVA females don't have hymens, you know," Jurie said. "No such membranes. Comparison should bring up fascinating divergences in hormonal pathways and viral activations. And viral activations are what concern me."

Dicken found himself nodding. He was almost hypnotized by the audacity of the hypothesis. It was perverse; it was perversely brilliant. "You think menarche in SHEVA females will switch on viral mutations?" he asked.

"Possibly," Jurie said evenly, as if discussing the weather. "Interested?"

"I am," Dicken said after a thoughtful pause.

"Good." Jurie reached up and pulled his head to one side, making the bones in his neck pop. His eyes turned elsewhere, and he nodded once and walked away, leaving Turner and Dicken alone in the warehouse between the trailers and the gardens.

The interview was over.

Turner escorted Dicken back through the zoo, the foot baths, and the corridors to the steel door. They stopped off at the maintenance office to get the key to Dicken's dorm room.

"You've survived meeting the Old Man," Turner said, then showed Dicken the way to the dorm wing for new residents. He held up a key, pinched the key's tag, turning it from blue to red, and dropped it into Dicken's palm. He stared at Dicken for a long, uncomfortable moment, then said, "Good luck."

Turner walked back down the hall, shaking his head. Over his shoulder, he called out, "Jesus! Hymens. What next?"

Dicken closed the door to the room and switched on the overhead light. He sat on the narrow, tightly made-up bed, and rubbed his temples and jaw muscles with trembling fingers, dizzy from repressed emotion.

For the first time in his life, the prey Dicken was after was not microbial.

It was a disease, but it was entirely human.

## ARIZONA

**S**tella awoke to the sound of an over-under songfest between barracks. The wake-up bell had not yet rung. She rolled between the crisp white sheets of the top bunk and stared up at the ceiling tiles. She was familiar with the routine: A few dozen boys and girls were hanging out of the windows of their barracks, singing to each other across the razor-wire fence. The *over* was loud and almost tuneless; the *under* was *subtle* and not very clear from where she lay. She had no doubt it carried a lot of early-morning gossip, however.

She closed her eyes for a moment and listened. The singers in the barracks tended to slip into harshly sweet and sky-shaking laments, pushing sounds around both sides of their ridged tongues, circulating breath through nose and throat simultaneously. The two streams of song began to play counterpoint, weaving in and out in a way designed to prevent any eavesdropping by the counselors.

Not that the counselors had yet figured out how to interpret under-speech.

Stella heard loud clanging. She closed her eyes and grinned. She could see it all so clearly: Counselors were going through the barracks, banging metal trash-can lids and shouting for the children to shut up. Slowly, the songs scattered like gusts of scented air. Stella imagined the heads withdrawing from the windows, children rushing to their bunks, climbing under their covers.

Tomorrow, other barracks would take their turns. There was a kind of lottery; they tried to predict how long it would take the counselors to get from their compound to the guilty barracks, and how long they could be fooled as to which were the offending barracks. Her barracks might join in and undergo the same trash-can-lid response. Stella would be part of the songfest. She did not look forward to the challenge. She had a high, clear overvoice, but needed work on her underspeech. She was not quite as facile as the others.

Silence returned to the morning. She sank under the covers, waiting for the alarm bell. New uniforms had been deposited at the end of each bunk. The bunks were stacked three high, and the kids began each morning with a

shower and a change of clothes, to keep the scent from building on their bodies or what they wore.

Stella knew that her natural smell was not offensive to humans. What concerned the camp counselors and captains was persuasion.

The girls below her, Celia and Mandy, were stirring. Stella preferred to be among the first in the showers. The wake-up bell at the south end of the hall went off as she ran toward the gate to the showers. Her thin white robe flapped at mid-thigh level.

Fresh towels and brushes were provided every day. She took a towel and a toothbrush but avoided using toothpaste. It had a lingering smell that she suspected was meant to confuse. Stella stood at the long basin with the polished steel mirror and ran the moist brush over her teeth, then massaged her gums with one finger, as Mitch had showed her how to do almost ten years ago.

Twenty other girls were already in the shower room, most from other barracks. Stella's building—barracks number three—tended to be slow. It contained the older girls. They were not as chipper or enthusiastic as the younger girls. They knew all too well what the day had in store—boredom, ritual, frustration. Stagnation.

The youngest girl in the camp was ten. The oldest was fifteen.

Stella Nova was fourteen.

After she finished, Stella returned to her bunk to dress. She looked down the lines of bunks. Most of the girls were still in the showers. It was her day to act as monitor for the barracks. She had to be inconspicuous—simply walking from bunk to bunk, bending over, and taking a big whiff would probably land her in detention, with Miss Kantor asking pointed questions. But it had to be done.

Stella carried a stack of school newspapers printed the day before. She walked from bunk to bunk, placing a paper on each bunk and gently sniffing the unmade sheets without bending over.

Within ten minutes, as the girls returned from the showers and began to dress, Stella had a good picture of the health and well-being of the barracks. Later, she would report to her deme mentor. The mentors changed from day to day or week to week. Underspeech or cheek-flashes would tell her who was responsible today. She would make a quick report with underspeech and scenting, before the heavily supervised, once-a-week, coed outdoor activity began.

The girls had thought this procedure up all by themselves. It seemed to

work. The bed check was not just useful in knowing how each member was faring, it was also an act of defiance.

Defiance was essential to keeping their sanity.

Perhaps they would have early warning if the humans passed along any more diseases. Perhaps it was just a way of feeling they had some control over their lives. Stella didn't care.

Catching the scent of her barracks mates was reward enough. It made her feel as if she were a part of something worthwhile, something not human.

## 11

### Americol Research Headquarters

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

**"E**lacob hobe!"

Liz Cantrera rushed past Kaye, a rack of clear plastic trays clattering in her arms beneath the flopping edge of a folder clamped between her teeth. She deposited the rack near the safety sink and pulled the black-bound folder from her mouth. "This just in from La Robert."

Kaye hung her coat on the knobs behind the lab door. "Another salvo?"

"Mm hmm. I think Jackson is jealous you were asked to testify and not he."

"Nobody should envy me that." Kaye waggled her fingers. "Give it to me."

Cantrera smirked and handed her the folder. "He'll be pushing a disease model long after the Karolinska hangs gold on you."

Kaye leafed through the fifty-page brief and response to their work of the last two years. This was the big one. Robert Jackson, PI for the larger group and in some respects her boss, was working very hard to get Kaye out of his labs, out of the building, out of the way.

The expected publication date for Jackson's paper in the *Journal of Biologics and Epigenetics* was sticky-tabbed to the last page: December. "How nice he's passed peer review," Kaye said.

Liz put her hands on her hips and stood in an attitude of defiant expectation. She pushed back a strand of curly strawberry blonde hair and loudly chewed a wad of gum. Her eyes were bright as drops of fresh blue ink. "He says we're removing necessary transcription factors sur-

rounding our ERV targets, throwing out the baby with the contaminated bathwater.”

“A lot of those factors are transactivated by ERV. You can’t have it both ways, Dr. Jackson. Well, at least we can shoot that one down.” Kaye slumped on a stool. “We’re not getting anywhere,” she muttered. “We’re taking out the viruses and not getting any baby chimps. What does it take for him to come around?” She glanced up at Liz, who was still wagging her hips and snapping her chewing gum in mock defiance of La Robert.

Liz cracked a big sappy smile. “Feel better?”

Kaye shook her head and laughed despite herself. “You look like a Broadway gamine. Who are you supposed to be, Bernadette Peters?”

Liz cocked her hips and fluffed her hair with one hand. “She’s a corker. Which play?” she demanded. “Revival of *Mame*?”

“*Sweeney Todd*,” Kaye said.

“That would be Winona Ryder,” Liz countered.

Kaye groaned. “Where do you get so much energy?”

“Bitterness. Seriously, how did it go?”

“I’m being used as a prop by one side and a patsy by the other. I feel like Dorothy in the tornado.”

“Sorry,” Liz said.

Kaye stretched and felt her back pop. Mitch used to do that for her. She riffled through Jackson’s folder again and found the page that through instinct, and a touch of luck, had caught her eye a moment before: suspect lab protocols.

As ever, Jackson was trapped in a maze of in vitro studies—test-tube and petri dish blind alleys using Tera2 tumor cell lines—proven traps for making mistakes with ERV. *Hell, he’s even using chicken embryos*, she thought. *Egglayers don’t use ERVs the same way we do.*

“Jackson’s vaccines kill monkeys,” Kaye said softly, tapping the page. “Marge doesn’t like projects that never get past animal studies.”

“Shall we play another game of Gotcha with Dr. Jackson?” Liz asked innocently.

“Sure,” Kaye said. “I am almost cheered by this.” She dropped the folder on her small, crowded desk.

“I’m off to check our arrays, and then I’m going home,” Liz called out as she pushed through the door with the tray. “I’ve been working all night. You in for the week?”

“Until they fire me,” Kaye said. She rubbed her nose reflexively. “I need to look over the fragile site studies from last week.”

“Prepped and digitized. They’re on the photobase,” Liz said. “There’s some leftover spaghetti in the fridge.”

“Heavenly,” Kaye said.

“Bye,” Liz called as the door swung closed behind her.

Kaye got up and rubbed her nose again. It felt slightly stuffy, not unpleasantly so. The lab smelled unusually sweet and fresh, not that it ever smelled dirty. Liz was a stickler for cleanliness.

The scent was hard to place, not at all like perfume or flowers.

There was a long day’s work ahead, preparing for tomorrow’s morning meeting. Kaye closed her eyes, hoping to find her calm spot; she needed to focus on the chromosome results from last week. Get the sour clamp of Washington off her gut.

She pulled the stool over to the workstation and entered her password, then called up the tables and photos of chimpanzee chromosome mutations.

Early-stage embryos modified for lab work had had all of their single-copy ERVs deleted, but all multicopy ERVs, LINEs, and “defective” ERVs left intact. They had then been allowed to develop for forty-eight hours. The chromosomes, bunched up by mitosis, were removed, photographed, and crudely sequenced. What Kaye was looking for were anomalies around fragile sites and hot spots in the chromosomes—regions of genes that responded quickly to environmental change, suggesting rapid adaptive response.

The modified chimp chromosomes were severely distorted—she could tell that just by looking at the photos. The fragile sites were all screwed up, broken and rearranged incorrectly. The embryos would never have implanted in the womb, much less gone to term. Even single-copy ERVs were important to fetal development and chromosome adaptation in mammals, perhaps especially so in primates.

She looked over the analysis and saw random and destructive methylation of genes that should be actively transcribing, necessary lengths of DNA mothballed like a fleet of old ships, curling the chromatin into an agony of alternating misplaced activity and dark, inactive lassitude.

They looked *ugly*, those chromosomes, ugly and unnatural. The early-stage embryos, growing under the tutelage of such chromosomes, would die. That was the story of everything they had done in the lab. If, by rare chance, the ERV-knockout embryos managed to implant and begin development, they were invariably resorbed within the first few weeks. And getting that far had required giving the chimp mothers massive drug regi-



mens developed for human mothers at fertilization clinics to prevent miscarriages.

The ERVs served so many functions in the developing embryos, including mediating tissue differentiation. And it was already obvious that TLV—the Temin-Larsson-Villarreal conjecture—was correct. Highly conserved endogenous retroviruses expressed by the trophectoderm of the developing embryo—the portion that would develop into the surrounding amnion and placenta—protected against attacks by the mother’s immune system. The viral envelope proteins selectively subdued the mother’s immune response to her fetus without weakening the mother’s defenses against external pathogens, an exquisite dance of selectivity.

Because of the protective function of legacy retroviruses, ERV knockout—the removal or stifling of most or all of the genome’s “original sins”—was invariably fatal.

Kaye vividly remembered the chill she had felt when Mitch’s mother had described SHEVA as “original sin.” How long ago had that been—fifteen years? Just after they had conceived Stella.

If SHEVA and other ERV constituted original sin, then it was starting to look as if all placental mammals, perhaps all multicelled life forms, were filled with original sin, required it, died without it.

*And wasn’t that what the Garden of Eden was all about? The beginning of sex and self-knowledge and life as we know it.*

*All because of viruses.*

“The hell with that,” Kaye muttered. “We need a new name for these things.”

## 12

### ARIZONA

**R**oll call was Stella’s least favorite time of day, when the girls were all gathered together and Miss Kantor walked between the rows under the big tent.

Stella sat cross-legged and drew little figures of flowers and birds in the dust with her finger. The canvas flapped with the soft morning breeze. Miss Kantor walked between the lines of seated, cross-legged adolescents and leafed through her daybook. She relied entirely on paper, simply because

losing an e-pad or laptop in the reserve was a severe offense, punishable by dismissal.

The dormitories held no phones, no satellite feeds, no radios. Television was limited to educational videos. Stella and most of the other children here had come to abhor television.

“Ellie Ann Garcia.”

“Here.”

“Stella Nova Rafelson.”

“Here,” Stella called out, her voice silvery in the cool desert air.

“How’s your cold, Stella?” Miss Kantor asked as she walked down the row.

“Done,” Stella answered.

“Eight days, wasn’t it?” Miss Kantor tapped her pen on the day-book page.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s the fifth wave of colds we’ve had this year.”

Stella nodded. The counselors kept careful and tedious track of all infections. Stella had spent several hours being examined, five days ago; so had two dozen other children with similar colds.

“Kathy Chu.”

“Here!”

Miss Kantor walked by Stella again after she had finished. “Stella, are you scenting?”

Stella looked up. “No, Miss Kantor.”

“My little sensor tells me you are.” She tapped the nosey on her belt. Stella was not scenting, and neither was anybody around her. Miss Kantor’s electronic snitch was wrong, and Stella knew why; Miss Kantor was having her period and that could confuse the nosey. But Stella would never tell her that.

Humans hated to be clued when they produced revealing odors.

“You’ll never learn to live in the outside world if you can’t control yourself,” Miss Kantor said to Stella, and knelt in front of her. “You know the rules.”

Stella got to her feet without being prompted. She did not know why she was being singled out. She had done nothing unusual.

“Wait over by the truck,” Miss Kantor said.

Stella walked to the truck, brilliant white under the morning sun. The air over the mountains was intense and blue. It was going to be hot in a few

hours, but it might rain heavily later; that would make the late-afternoon air perfect for catching up. She did not want to miss that.

Miss Kantor finished her count and the kids filed off to the morning classes in the trailers and bungalows scattered over the dusty grounds. The counselor and her assistant, a quiet, plump young woman named Joanie, walked across the gravel to the truck. Miss Kantor would not look straight at Stella.

“I know it wasn’t just you,” Miss Kantor said. “But you’re the only one I could catch. It has to stop, Stella. But I’m not going to punish you this time.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Stella knew better than to argue. When things went her way, Miss Kantor was reasonable and fairly easygoing, but any show of defiance or contradiction and she could get harsh. “Can I go to classes now?”

“Not yet,” Miss Kantor said, placing her notepad in the truck. She opened the rear door of the truck. “Your father is visiting,” she said. “We’re going back to the infirmary.”

Stella sat in the back of the truck, behind the plastic barrier, feeling confused. Miss Kantor climbed into the front seat. Joanie closed the door for her and went back to the tent. “Is he there, now?” Stella asked.

“He’ll arrive in an hour or so,” Miss Kantor said. “You two just got approval. That’s pretty good, isn’t it?”

“What do they want?” Stella asked suddenly, before she could control her tongue.

“Nothing. It’s a family visit.”

Miss Kantor switched on the truck motor. Stella could feel her disapproval. Parental visits were futile at the best of times, Miss Kantor believed. The children would never be fully integrated into human society, no matter what the school policy said. She knew the children too well. They just could not behave appropriately.

Worse still, Miss Kantor knew that Stella’s father had served time in prison for assaulting Emergency Action enforcement officers. Having him as a visitor would be something of an affront to her. She was a holdover from the times when Sable Mountain School had been a prison.

Stella had not seen Mitch in three years. She hardly remembered what he smelled like, much less what he looked like.

Miss Kantor drove over the gravel to the paved road, and then between the brush half a mile to the brick building they called the hospital. It wasn’t really a hospital. As far as Stella knew, for sure, the hospital was just the

administration and detention center for the school. It had been a hospital once, for the prison. Some kids claimed the hospital was where they injected salt into your cheeks, or resected your tongue, or Botoxed the new facial muscles that made your expressions so compelling.

It was the place they tried to turn SHEVA kids into humans. Stella had never met a kid who had undergone such torments, but that was explained, some said, by the fact that they sent those kids away to Suburbia, a town made up of nothing but SHEVA kids trying to act just like humans.

That was not true, as far as Stella knew, but the hospital was where they sent you when they wanted to draw blood. She had been there many times for that purpose.

There were lots of stories in the camps. Few of them were true, but most were scary, and the kids could get ominously bored.

As they drove through a razor-wire fence and over a moat, Stella felt something sad and cold grow in her.

Memory.

She did not want to lose her focus. She stared through the window, resenting Mitch for coming. Why now? Why not when she had her act together and could tell him she had accomplished something worthwhile? Life was still too confused. The last visit with her mother had been painful. Stella had not known what to say. Her mother had been so sad and full of needs neither could satisfy.

She hoped Mitch would not just sit and stare at her over the table in the family conference room. Or ask pointed questions. Or try to tell Stella there was hope they would get together again. Stella did not think she could stand that.

Stella dipped her head and rubbed her nose. She touched the tip of her finger to the corner of her eye and then to her tongue, out of sight of the rearview mirror. Her eyes were moist and the tears tasted of bitter salt. She would not cry openly, however. Not in front of a human.

Miss Kantor stopped the truck in the parking lot of the flat brick building, got out, and opened Stella's door. Stella followed her into the hospital. As they turned a corner, through a gap in the brick breezeway she saw a long yellow bus drawn up beside the processing office. A load of new kids had arrived. Stella hung back a few steps from Miss Kantor as they passed through the glass doors and walked to the detention center.

The door to the secretary's office was always open, and through the wide window beyond, Stella thought she would catch a glimpse of the new

kids from the shipment center. That would be something to take back to the deme; possible recruits or news from outside.

Suddenly, irrationally, she hated Mitch. She did not want him to visit. She did not want any distractions. She wanted to focus and never have to worry about humans again. She wanted to lash out at Miss Kantor, strike her down to the linoleum floor, and run away to anywhere but here.

Through Stella's brief, fierce scowl—a more intense scowl than most humans could manage—she caught a glimpse of the lineup of children beyond the secretary's window. Her scowl vanished.

She thought she recognized a face.

Stella dropped to remove her shoe and turned it upside down, shaking it. Miss Kantor looked back and stopped with hands on hips.

The nosey on her belt wheeped.

“Are you scenting again?” she asked.

“No, ma'am,” Stella said. “Rock in my shoe.” This pause gave her time enough to chase down the memory of the face in the lineup. She stood, shuffled awkwardly for a moment until Miss Kantor glanced away, then shot a second look through the window.

She *did* know the face. He was taller now and skinnier, almost a walking skeleton, his hair unruly and his eyes flat and lifeless in the bright sun. The line began to move and Stella flicked her gaze back to the corridor and Miss Kantor.

She no longer worried about Mitch.

The skinny kid outside was the boy she had met in Fred Trinket's shed in Virginia, when she had run away from Kaye's and Mitch's house.

It was Will. Strong Will.

## 13

### BALTIMORE

**K**aye shut down the displays and removed the specimens, then carefully returned them to a preservation drawer in the freezer. She knew for the first time that she was close to the end of her work at Americol. Three or four more experiments, six months at most of lab work, and she could go back to Congress and face down Rachel Browning and tell the oversight subcommittee that all apes, all monkeys, all mammals, probably

all vertebrates, even all animals—and possibly all forms of life above the bacteria—were genetic chimeras. In a real sense, we were all virus children.

*Not just Stella. Not just my daughter and her kind.*

*All babies use viruses to get born. All senators and all representatives and the president and all of their wives and children and grandchildren, all the citizens of the United States, and all the people of the world, are all guilty of original sin.*

Kaye looked up as if at a sound. She touched the bridge of her nose and peered around the lab, the ranks of white and beige and gray equipment, black-topped tables, lamp fixtures hanging from the ceiling like upside-down egg cartons. She felt a gentle pressure behind her eyes, the cool, liquid silver trickle down the back of her head, a growing awareness that she was not alone in the room, in her body.

The caller was back. Twice in the past three years, she had spent as much as three days in its presence. Always before, she had been traveling or working on deadline and had tried to ignore what she had come to regard as a pointless distraction.

“This isn’t a good time,” she said out loud and shook her head. She stood up and stretched her arms and bent to touch her toes, hoping exercise might push the caller into the background. “Go away.” It did not go away. Its signal came in with even greater conviction. Kaye started to laugh helplessly and wiped away the tears. “Please,” she whispered, leaning against a lab bench. She tipped a stack of petri dishes with her elbow. As she was rearranging them, the caller struck full force, flooding her with delicious approval. Kaye shut her eyes and leaned forward, her entire body filled with that extraordinary sensation of oneness with something very close and intimate, yet infinitely creative and powerful.

“It feels like you love me,” she said, shaking with frustration. “So why do you torment me? Why don’t you just tell me what you want me to do?” Kaye slid down the bench to a chair near a desk in the corner of the lab. She put her head between her knees. She did not feel weak or even woozy; she could have walked around and even gone about her daily work. She had before. But this time it was just too much.

Her anger swelled even over the insistent waves of validation and approval. The first time the caller had touched her, Mitch and Stella had been taken away. That had been so bad, so unfair; she did not want to remember that time now. And yet this affirmation forced her to remember.

“Go away. Please. I don’t know why you’re here. This world is cruel, even if you aren’t, and I have to keep working.”

She looked around, biting her lip, seeing the lab, the equipment, so neatly arranged, the dark beyond the window. The wall of night outside, the bright rationality within.

“Please.”

She felt the voice become smaller, but no less intense. *How polite*, she thought. Abruptly, panicked at this new loss, this possible withdrawal, she jumped to her feet.

“Are you trying to clue me in to something?” she asked, desperate. “Reward me for my work, my discoveries?”

Kaye received the distinct impression that this was not the case. She got up and made sure the door was locked. No sense having people wander in and find her talking to herself. She paced up and down the aisles. “So you’re willing to communicate, just not with words,” she said, eyes half-closed. “All right. I’ll talk. You let me know whether I’m right or wrong, okay? This could take a while.”

She had long since learned that an irreverent attitude had no effect on the caller. Even when Kaye had loathed herself for what she had done by abandoning Mitch in prison and her daughter in the schools, ruining all their lives in a desperate gamble to use all the tools of science and rationality, the caller had still radiated love and approval.

She could punish herself, but the caller would not.

Even more embarrassing, Kaye had come to think of the caller as definitely not female, and probably not neuter—but *male*. The caller was nothing like her father or Mitch or any other man she had ever met or known, but it seemed strangely masculine nonetheless. What that meant psychologically, she was most unwilling to discover. It was a little too *de rigueur*, a little too churchy, for comfort.

But the caller cared little about her qualms. He was the most consistent thing in her life—outside of her need to help Stella.

“Am I doing the right thing?” she asked, looking around the lab. Her tremors stopped. She let the extraordinary calm wash over her. “That means yes, I suppose,” she said tentatively. “Are you the Big Guy? Are you Jesus? Or just Gabriel?”

She had asked these questions before, and received no response. This time, however, she felt an almost insignificant alteration in the sensations flooding through her. She closed her eyes and whispered, “No. None of the above. Are you my guardian angel?”

Again, a few seconds later, she closed her eyes and whispered, “No. “Then what are you?”

No response at all, no change, no clues.

“God?”

Nothing.

“You’re inside me or up there or someplace where you can just pump out love and approval all day long, and then you go away and leave me in misery. I don’t understand that. I need to know whether you’re just something in my head. A crossed nerve. A burst blood vessel. I need solid reassurance. I hope you don’t mind.”

The caller expressed no objection, not even to the extent of withdrawing under the assault of such questioning, such blasphemies.

“You’re really something else, you know that?” Kaye sat before the workstation and logged on to the Americol intranet. “There’s nothing Sunday school about you.”

She glanced at her watch—6 P.M.—and looked up the roster that recorded who was in the building at this hour.

On the first floor, chief radiologist Herbert Roth was still at his post, working late. Just the man she needed. Roth was in charge of the Noninvasive Imaging Lab. She had worked with him two weeks ago taking scans of Wishtoes, their oldest female chimp.

Roth was young, quiet, dedicated to his craft.

Kaye opened the lab door and stepped out into the hall. “Do you think Mr. Roth will want to scan *me*?” she asked no one in particular.

## 14

### ARIZONA

**T**hey did not let Stella see Mitch for hours. First Stella was visited by a nurse who examined her, took a cheek swab, and drew a few cc’s of blood.

Stella looked away as the nurse lightly jabbed her with the needle. She could smell the nurse’s anxiety; she was only a few years older than Stella and did not like this.

Afterward, Miss Kantor took Stella to the visitor’s area. The first thing Stella noticed was that they had removed the plastic barrier. Tables and chairs, nothing more. Something had changed, and that concerned her for a



moment. She patted the cotton patch taped to the inside of her elbow. After an hour, Miss Kantor returned with a pile of comic books.

“*X-Men*,” she said. “You’ll like these. Your father’s still being examined. Give me the cotton.”

Stella pulled off the tape and handed it to Miss Kantor, who opened a plastic bag to store it.

“He’ll be done soon,” Miss Kantor said with a practiced smile.

Stella ignored the comics and stood in the bare room with its flowered wallpaper and the single table and two plastic chairs. There was a water cooler in the corner and a couple of lounge chairs, patched and dirty. She filled a paper cup with water. A window opened from the main office, and another window looked out over the parking lot. No hot coffee or tea, no hot plate for warming food—no utensils. Family visits were not meant to last long or to be particularly comfortable.

She curled the paper cup in her hand and thought alternately about her father and about Will. Thinking about Will pushed her father into the background, if only for a moment, and Stella did not like that. She did not want to be chaotic. She did not want to be unpredictable; she wanted to be faithful to the goal of putting together a stable deme, away from the school, away from human interference, and that would require focus and an emotional constancy.

She knew nothing about Will. She did not even know his last name. He might not remember her. Perhaps he was passing through, getting a checkup or going through some sort of quarantine on his way to another school.

But if he was staying . . .

Joanie opened the door. “Your father’s here,” she said. Joanie always tried to hide her smell behind baby powder. Her expression was friendly but empty. She did what Miss Kantor wanted and seldom expressed her own opinions.

“Okay,” Stella said, and took a seat in one plastic chair. The table would be between them, she hoped. She squirmed nervously. She had to get used to the thought of seeing Mitch again.

Joanie pointed the way through the door and Mitch came in. His left arm hung by his side. Stella looked at the arm, eyes wide, and then at Mitch’s denim jacket and jeans, worn and a little dusty. And then she looked at his face.

Mitch was forcing a nervous smile. He did not know what to do, either.

“Hello, sweetie,” he said.

“You can sit in the chair,” Joanie said. “Take your time.”

“How long do we have?” Mitch asked Joanie. Stella hated that. She remembered him as being strong and in charge, and his having to ask about such a thing was wrong.

“We don’t have many visits scheduled today. There are four rooms. So . . . take your time. A couple of hours. Let me know if you need anything. I’ll be in the office right outside.”

Joanie shut the door and Mitch looked at the chair, the table. Then, at his daughter.

“Don’t you want a hug?” he asked Stella.

Stella stood, her cheeks tawny with emotion. She kept her hands by her sides. Mitch walked across the room slowly, and she tracked him like a wild animal. Then the currents of air in the room brought his scent, and the cry came up out of her before she could stop it. Mitch took the last step and grabbed her and squeezed and Stella shook in his arms. Her eyes filled with tears that dripped on Mitch’s jacket.

“You’re so tall,” Mitch murmured, swinging her gently back and forth, brushing the tips of her shoes against the linoleum.

She planted her feet and pushed him back and tried to pack in her emotions, but they did not fit. They had exploded like popcorn.

“I’ve never given up,” Mitch said.

Stella’s long fingers clutched at his jacket. The smell of him was overwhelming, comfortable and familiar; it made her feel like a little girl again. He was basic and simple, no elaborations, predictable and memorable; he was the smell of their home in Virginia, of everything she had tried to forget, everything she had thought was lost.

“I couldn’t come to see you,” he said. “They wouldn’t let me. Part of probation.”

She nodded, bumping her chin gently against his shoulder.

“I sent your mother messages.”

“She gave them to me.”

“There was no gun, Stella. They lied,” Mitch said, and for a moment he looked no older than her, just another disappointed child.

“I know. Kaye told me.”

Mitch held his daughter at arm’s length. “You’re gorgeous,” he said, his thick brows drawing together. His face was sunburned. Stella could smell the damage to his skin, the toughening. He smelled like leather and

dust above the fundamental of just being Mitch. In his smell—and in Kaye’s—she could detect a little of her own fundamental, like a shared license number in the genes, a common passkey to the emotions.

“They want us to sit . . . here?” Mitch asked, swinging one arm at the table.

Stella wrapped her arms around herself, still jammed up inside. She did not know what to do.

Mitch smiled. “Let’s just stand for a while,” he said.

“All right,” Stella said.

“Try to get used to each other again.”

“All right.”

“Are they treating you well?” Mitch asked.

“They probably think so.”

“What do you think?”

Shrug, long fingers wrapping around her wrists, making a little cage of her hands and arms. “They’re afraid of us.”

Mitch clenched his jaw and nodded. “Nothing new.”

Stella’s eyes were hypnotic as she tried to express herself. Her pupils shifted size and gold flecks passed like fizz in champagne. “They don’t want us to be who we are.”

“How do you mean?”

“They move us from one dorm to another. They use sniffers. If we scent, we’re punished. If we cloud-scent or fever scent, they break us up and keep us in detention.”

“I’ve read about that,” Mitch said.

“They think we’ll try to persuade them. Maybe they’re afraid we’ll try to escape. They wear nose plugs, and sometimes they fill the dorms with fake strawberry or peach smell when they do a health inspection. I used to like strawberry, but now it’s awful. Worst of all is the Pine-Sol.” She shoved her palm against her nose and made a gagging sound.

“I hear the classes are boring, too.”

“They’re afraid we’ll learn something,” Stella said, and giggled. Mitch felt a tingle. That sound had changed, and the change was not subtle. She sounded wary, more mature . . . but something else was at work.

Laughter was a key gauge of psychology and culture. His daughter was very different from the little girl he had known.

“I’ve learned a lot from the others,” Stella said, straightening her face. Mitch traced the faint marks of lines under and beside her eyes, at the corners

of her lips, fascinated by the dance of clues to her emotions. Finer muscle control than she had had as a youngster . . . capable of expressions he could not begin to interpret.

“Are you doing okay?” Mitch asked, very seriously.

“I’m doing better than they want,” she said. “It isn’t so bad, because we manage.” She glanced up at the ceiling, touched her earlobe, winked. Of course, they were being monitored; she did not want to give away any secrets.

“Glad to hear it,” Mitch said.

“But of course there’s stuff they already know,” she added in a low voice. “I’ll tell you about that if you want.”

“Of course, sweetie,” Mitch said. “Anything.”

Stella kept her eyes on the top of the table as she told Mitch about the groups of twenty to thirty that called themselves demes. “It means ‘the people,’ ” she said. “We’re like sisters in the demes. But they don’t let the boys sleep in the same dorms, the same barracks. So we have to sing across the wire at night and try to recruit boys into our demes that way.”

“That’s probably for the best,” Mitch said. He lifted one eyebrow and pinched his lips together.

Stella shook her head. “But they don’t *understand*. The deme is like a big family. We help each other. We talk and solve problems and stop arguments. We’re so smart when we’re in a deme. We feel so right together. Maybe that’s why . . .”

Mitch leaned back as his daughter suddenly spoke in two bursts at once:

“We need to be together/We’re healthier together

“Everyone cares for the others/Everyone is happy with the others

“The sadness comes from not knowing/The sadness comes from being apart.”

The absolute clarity of the two streams astonished him. If he caught them immediately and analyzed, he could string them together into a serial statement, but over more than a few seconds of conversation, it was obvious he would get confused. And he had no doubt that Stella could now go on that way indefinitely.

She looked at him directly, the skin over the outside of her eye orbits drawing in with a pucker he could neither duplicate nor interpret. Freckles formed around the outside and lower orbits like little tan-and-gold stars; she was sparking in ways he had never seen before.

He shivered in both admiration and concern. “I don’t know what that means, when . . . you do that,” he said. “I mean, it’s beautiful, but . . .”

“Do what?” Stella asked, and her eyes were normal again.

Mitch swallowed. “When you’re in a deme, how many of you talk that way . . . at once?”

“We make circles,” Stella said. “We talk to each other in the circle and across the circle.”

“How many in the circle?”

“Five or ten,” Stella said. “Separately, of course. Boys have rules. Girls have rules. We can make new rules, but some rules already seem to be there. We follow the rules most of the time, unless we feel there’s an emergency—someone is feeling steepy.”

“Steepy.”

“Not part of cloud. When we cloud, we’re even more like brothers and sisters. Some of us become mama and papa, too, and we can lead cloud, but mama and papa never make us do what we don’t want to do. We decide together.”

She looked up at the ceiling, her chin dimpling. “You know about this. Kaye told you.”

“Some, and I’ve read about some of it. I remember when you were trying out some of these . . . techniques on us. I remember trying to keep up with you. I wasn’t very good. Your mother was better.”

“Her face . . .” Stella began. “I see her face when I become mama in cloud. Her face becomes my face.” Her brows formed elegant and compelling double arches, grotesque and beautiful at once. “It’s tough to explain.”

“I think I understand,” Mitch said. His skin was warming. Being around his own daughter made him feel left out, even inferior; how did it make the counselors feel, their keepers?

In this zoo, who were the animals, really?

“What happens when someone disagrees? Do you compel her? Him?”

Stella thought about this for a few seconds. “Everyone is free in cloud, but they cooperate. If they don’t agree, they hold that thought until the time is right, and then cloud listens. Sometimes, if it’s an emergency, the thought is brought up immediately, but that slows us down. It has to be good.”

“And you enjoy being in the cloud?”

“Being *in* cloud,” Stella corrected. “All clouds are part of each other,

just smeared out. We sort the differences and stuff later, when the demes catch up. But we don't get to do that often, so most of us don't know what it's really like. We just imagine. Sometimes they let it happen, though."

She did not tell Mitch that those were the times when nearly everybody got taken to the hospital to be sampled, after.

"Sounds very friendly," Mitch said.

"Sometimes there's hate," Stella said soberly. "We have to deal with it. A cloud feels pain just like an individual."

"Do you know what I'm feeling, right now?"

"No," Stella said. "Your face is kind of a blank." She smiled. "The counselors smell like cabbages when we do something unexpected./ They smelled like broccoli when we caught colds a few days ago./

"I'm over my cold now and it wasn't serious but we acted sicker to worry them."

Mitch laughed. The crossed intonations of resentment and wry superiority tickled him. "That's pretty good," he said. "But don't push it."

"We know," Stella said primly, and suddenly Mitch saw Kaye in her expression, and felt a rush of real pride, that this young woman still came of them, from them. *I hope that doesn't limit her.*

He also felt a sudden burst of longing for Kaye.

"Is prison like this?" Stella asked.

"Well, prison is a bit harder than here, even."

"Why aren't you with Kaye, now?"

Mitch wondered how he could possibly explain. "When I was in prison—she was going through rough times, making hard decisions. I couldn't be a part of those decisions. We decided we'd be more effective if we worked separately. We . . . couldn't cloud, I guess you'd say."

Stella shook her head. "That's *fit*, like drops of rain hitting each other. *Slipskin* is when the drops fall apart. Cloud is a bigger thing."

"Oh," Mitch said. "How many words for snow?"

Stella's expression became one of a simple lack of comprehension, and for a moment Mitch saw his daughter as she had been even ten years ago, and loved her fiercely. "Your mother and I talk every few weeks. She's busy now, working in Baltimore. Doing science."

"Trying to turn us back into humans?"

"You *are* human," Mitch said, his face going red.

"No," Stella said. "We aren't."

Mitch decided this wasn't the time or the place. "She's trying to learn how we make new children," he said. "It's not as simple as we thought."

“Virus children,” Stella said.

“Yes, well, if I understand it correctly, viruses play all sorts of roles. We just discovered that fact when we looked at SHEVA. Now . . . it’s pretty confused.”

Stella seemed, if anything, offended by this. “We’re not new?”

“Of course you’re new,” Mitch said. “I really don’t understand it very well. When we all get together again, your mother will know enough to explain it to us. She’s learning as fast as she can.”

“We’re not taught biology here,” Stella said.

Mitch clamped his teeth together. *Keep them down. Keep them under lock and key. Otherwise, you might prime their fuse.*

“That makes you angry?” Stella asked.

He could not answer for a moment. His fists knotted on the top of the table. “Of course,” he said.

“Make them let us go. Get us all out of here,” Stella said. “Not just me.”

“We’re trying,” Mitch said, but knew he wasn’t being entirely truthful. As a convicted felon, he had a limited range of options. And his own sense of resentment and damage reduced his effectiveness in groups. In his darkest moods, he thought that was why he and Kaye were no longer living together.

He had become a political liability. A lone wolf.

“I have lots of families here, and they’re growing,” Stella said.

“*We’re* your family,” Mitch said.

Stella watched him for a moment, puzzled.

Joanie opened the door. “Time’s up,” she said.

Mitch spun around in his chair and tapped his watch. “It’s been less than an hour,” he said.

“There’ll be more time tomorrow if you can come back,” Joanie said.

Mitch turned to Stella, crestfallen. “I can’t stay until tomorrow. There’s something . . .”

“Go,” Stella said, and stood. She came around the table as Mitch got to his feet and hugged her father again, brisk and strong. “There’s lots of work for all of us.”

“You are so adult now,” Mitch said.

“Not yet,” Stella said. “None of us knows what that will be like. They probably won’t let us find out.”

Joanie tsked, then escorted Mitch and Stella from the room. They parted in the brick corridor. Mitch gave her a small wave with his good arm.

• •

Mitch sat in the hot interior of his truck, under the low Arizona sun, sweating and near despair, lonelier than he had ever been in his life.

Through the fence and across the brush and sand, he saw more children—hundreds of them—walking between the bungalows. His hand drummed on the steering wheel.

Stella was still his daughter. He could still see Kaye in her. But the differences were startling. Mitch did not know what he had expected; he had expected differences. But she was not just growing up. The way Stella behaved was sleek and shiny, like a new penny. She was unfamiliar, not distant in the least, not unfriendly, just focused elsewhere.

The only conclusion he could come to, as he turned over the big engine in the old Ford truck, was a self-observation.

His own daughter scared him.

After the nurse filled another tube with her blood, Stella walked back to the bungalow where they would watch videos after dinner of human children playing, talking, sitting in class. It was called civics. It was intended to change the way the new children behaved when they were together. Stella hated civics. Watching people without knowing how they smelled, and watching the young human faces with their limited range of emotions, disturbed her. If they did not face the televisions, however, Miss Kantor could get really ugly.

Stella deliberately kept her mind clear, but a tear came out of her left eye and traveled down her cheek. Not her right eye. Just her left eye.

She wondered what that meant.

Mitch had changed so much. And he smelled like he had just been kicked.

## 15

### BALTIMORE

**T**he imaging lab office was separated from the Magnetic Resonance Imager—the Machine—by two empty rooms. The forces induced by the toroidal magnets of the Machine were awesome. Visitors were warned not to go down the hall without first emptying their pockets of mechanical and electronic devices, pocket PCs, wallets, cell phones, security name tags, eyeglasses, watches. Getting closer to the Machine required exchanging



day clothes for metal-free robes—no zippers, metal buttons, or belt buckles; no rings, pins, tie clasps, or cuff links.

Everything loose within a few meters of the Machine was made of wood or plastic. Workers here wore elastic belts and specially selected slippers or athletic shoes.

Five years ago, right in this facility, a scientist had forgotten the warnings and had her nipple and clitoris rings ripped out. Or so the story went. People with pacemakers, optic nerve rewiring, or any sort of neural implants could not go anywhere near the Machine.

Kaye was free of such appliances, and that was the first thing she told Herbert Roth as she stood in the door to the office.

Slight, balding, in his early forties, Roth gave her a puzzled smile as he put down his pencil and pushed a batch of papers aside. “Glad to hear it, Ms. Rafelson,” he said. “But the Machine is turned off. Besides, we spent several days imaging Wishtoes and I already know that about you.”

Roth pulled up a plastic chair for Kaye and she sat on the other side of the wooden desk. Kaye touched the smooth surface. Roth had told her that his father had crafted it from solid maple, without nails, using only glue. It was beautiful.

*He still has a father.*

She felt the cool river in her spine, the sense of utter delight and approval, and closed her eyes for a moment. Roth watched her with some concern.

“Long day?”

She shook her head, wondering how to begin.

“Is Wishtoes pregnant?”

“No,” Kaye said. She took the plunge. “Are you feeling very scientific?”

Roth looked around nervously, as if the room was not completely familiar. “Depends.” His eyes squinched down and he could not avoid giving Kaye the once-over.

“Scientific and discreet?”

Roth’s eyes widened with something like panic.

“Pardon me, Ms. Rafelson—”

“Kaye, please.”

“Kaye. I think you’re very attractive, but . . . If it’s about the Machine, I’ve already got a list of Web sites that show . . . I mean, it’s already been done.” He laughed what he hoped was a gallant laugh. “Hell, I’ve done it. Not alone, I mean.”

“Done what?” Kaye asked.

Roth flushed crimson and pushed his chair back with a hollow scrape of the plastic legs. "I have no idea what in hell you're talking about."

Kaye smiled. She meant nothing specific by the smile, but she saw Roth relax. His expression changed to puzzled concern and the excess color faded from his face. *There is something about me, about this*, she thought. *It's a charmed moment.*

"Why are you down here?" Roth asked.

"I'm offering you a unique opportunity." Kaye felt impossibly nervous, but she was not going to let that stop her. As far as she knew, there had never been an opportunity like this in the history of science—nothing confirmed, at least, or even rumored. "I'm having an epiphany."

Roth raised one eyebrow, bewildered.

"You don't know what an epiphany is?" Kaye asked.

"I'm Catholic. It's a feast celebrating Jesus' divinity. Or something like that."

"It's a manifestation," Kaye said. "God is inside me."

"Whoa," Roth said. The word hung between them for several seconds, during which time Kaye did not look away from Roth's eyes. He blinked first. "I suppose that's great," he said. "What does it have to do with me?"

"God comes to most of us. I've read William James and other books about this kind of experience. At least half of the human race goes through it at one time or another. It's like nothing else I've ever felt. It's life changing, even if it is very . . . very inconvenient. And inexplicable. I didn't ask for it, but I can't, I *won't* deny that it is real."

Roth listened to Kaye with a fixed expression, brow wrinkled, eyes wide, mouth open. He sat up in the chair and folded his arms on the desk. "No joke?"

"No joke."

He considered further. "Everyone is under pressure here."

"I don't think that has anything to do with it," Kaye said. Then, slowly, she added, "I've considered that possibility, I really have. I just don't think that's what it is."

Roth licked his lips and avoided her stare. "So what does it have to do with me?"

She reached out to touch his arm, and he quickly withdrew it. "Herbert, has anyone ever imaged a person who's being touched by God? Who's having an epiphany?"

"Lots of times," Roth said defensively. "Persinger's research. Meditation states, that sort of thing. It's in the literature."

“I’ve read them all. Persinger, Damasio, Posner, and Ramachandran.” She ticked the list off on her fingers. “You think I haven’t researched this?”

Roth smiled in embarrassment.

“Meditation states, oneness, bliss, all that can be induced with training. They are under some personal control . . . But not *this*. I’ve looked it up. It can’t be induced, no matter how hard you pray. It comes and it goes as if it has a will of its own.”

“God doesn’t just *talk* to us,” Roth said. “I mean, even if I believed in God, such a thing would be incredibly rare, and maybe it hasn’t happened for a couple of thousand years. The prophets. Jesus. That sort of thing.”

“It isn’t rare. It’s called many things, and people react differently. It does something to you. It turns your life around, gives it direction and meaning. Sometimes it breaks people.” She shook her head. “Mother Teresa wept because she didn’t have God making regular visits. She wanted continuing confirmation of the value of her work, her pain, her sacrifices. Yet no one actually knows if Mother Teresa experienced what I’m experiencing . . .” She took a deep breath. “I want to learn what is happening to me. To us. We need a baseline to understand.”

Roth tried to fit this into some catalog of social quid pro quos, and could not. “Kaye, is this really the place? Aren’t you supposed to be doing research on viruses? Or do you think God is a virus?”

Kaye stared at Roth in disbelief. “No,” she said. “This is not a virus. This is not something genetic and it’s probably not even biological. Except to the extent that it touches me.”

“How can you be so sure?”

Kaye closed her eyes again. She did not need to search. The sensation rolled on, coming in waves of amazement, of childlike glee and adult consternation, all of her emotions and reactions met not with tolerance, nor even with amusement, but with an equally childlike yet infinitely mature and wise *acceptance*.

Something was sipping from Kaye Lang’s soul, and found her delicious.

“Because it’s bigger than anything I know,” she said finally. “I have no idea how long it’s going to last, but whatever it is, it’s happened before to people, many times, and it’s shaped human history. Don’t you want to see what it looks like?”

Roth sighed as he examined the images on the large monitor.

Two and a half hours had passed; it was almost ten o’clock. Kaye had

been through seven varieties of NMR, PET, and computerized tomography scans. She had been injected, shielded, injected again, rotated like a chicken on a spit, turned upside down. For a while, she wondered if Roth was bent on taking revenge for her imposition.

Finally, Roth had wrapped her head in a white plastic helmet and put her through a final and, he claimed, rather expensive CT-motion scan, capable, he muttered vaguely, of extraordinary detail, focusing on the hippocampus, and then, in another sweep, the brain stem.

Now she sat upright, her wrist wrapped in a bandage, her head and neck bruised from clamps, feeling a vague urge to throw up. Somewhere near the end of the procedures, the caller had simply faded, like a shortwave radio signal from across the seas. Kaye felt calm and relaxed, despite her soreness.

She also felt sad, as if a good friend had just departed, and she was not sure they would ever meet again.

“Well, whatever he is,” Roth said, “he isn’t talking. None of the scans show extensive speech processing, above the level of normal internal dialog and my own datum of questions. You seem, no surprise, a little nervous—but less so than other patients. Stoic might be the word. You show a fair amount of deep brain activity, signifying a pretty strong emotional response. Do you embarrass easily?”

Kaye shook her head.

“There’s a little indication of something like arousal, but I wouldn’t call it sexual arousal, not precisely. Nothing like orgasm or garden-variety ecstasy such as, for example, you might find in someone using consciousness-altering drugs. We have recordings—movies—of people meditating, engaging in sex, on drugs, including LSD and cocaine. Your scans don’t match any of those.”

“I can’t imagine having sex in that tube.”

Roth smiled. “Mostly enthusiastic young people,” he explained. “Here we go—CT motion scans coming up.” He became deeply absorbed in the false-color images of her brain on the display: dark fields of gray overlaid with symmetric, blossoming Rorschach birds, touched here and there with little coals of metabolic activity, maps of thought and personality and deep subconscious processes. “All right,” he said to himself, pausing the scroll. “What’s this?” He touched three pulsing yellow splotches, a little bigger than a thumbnail, points on a scan taken midway through their session. He made small humming sounds, then flipped through an on-line library of im-

ages from other explorations, some of them years and even decades old, until he seemed satisfied he had what he wanted.

Roth pushed his chair back with an echoing scrape and pointed to a blue-and-green sagittal section of a head, small and oddly shaped. He filled in and rotated the image in 3-D, and Kaye made out the outlines of an infant's skull and the fog of the brain within. Radiating fields of mental activity spun within ghostly curves of bone and tissue.

An indefinite grayish mass seemed to issue from the infant's mouth.

"Not so much detail, but it's a pretty close match," Roth said. "Famous experiment in Japan, about eight years ago. They scanned a normal birthing session. Woman had had four kids previously. She was an old pro. The machines didn't bother her."

Roth studied the image. He hummed for a moment, then clicked his fingernails like castanets. "This is a scan of the infant's brain while he or she was getting acquainted with mom. Taking the teat, I'd say." He used his finger to point out the gray mass, magnified the activity centers in the infant's brain, rotated them to the proper azimuth, then superimposed the baby's scan on Kaye's.

The activity centers lined up neatly.

Roth smiled. "What do you think? A match?"

Kaye was lost for a moment, remembering the first time Stella had suckled, the wonderful sensation of the baby at her nipple, of her milk letting down.

"They look the same," she said. "Is that a mistake?"

"Don't think so," Roth said. "I could make some animal brain comparisons. There's been some work in the last few years on bonding in kittens and puppies, even some in baboons, but not very good. They don't hold still."

"What does it mean?" Kaye asked. She shook her head, still lost. "Whatever He is, He's not using speech—that much has been clear from the start. Irritating, actually."

"Mumbles from the burning bush?" Roth said. "And no stone tablets."

"No speeches, no proclamations, nothing," Kaye confirmed.

"Look, this is the closest I can come to a match," Roth said.

With her finger, Kaye traced the Rorschach birds inside the infant's brain. "I still don't understand."

Roth tilted his head. "Looks to me like you've made a big connection. You're imprinting on someone or something big-time. You've become a baby again, Ms. Rafelson."

**K**aye unlocked her apartment, entered, and used her briefcase to block the front door from closing. She punched in her six-number code to deactivate the alarm, then took off her sweater, hung it in the closet, and stood in the hallway, breathing deeply to keep from sobbing. She wasn't sure how much longer she could endure this. The voids in her life were like deserts she could not cross.

"What about *you*?" she asked the empty air. She walked into the darkened living room. "The way I see it, if you're some kind of big daddy, you *protect* those you love, you keep them from harm. What's the God . . . what's the *damned*," she finally shouted it, "the *God damned* excuse?"

The phone beeped. Kaye jumped, pulled her eyes away from the corner of the ceiling she had been addressing, stepped to the kitchen counter, and reached across to pick up the handset.

"Kaye? It's Mitch."

Kaye drew in another breath, almost of dread, certainly of guilt, before speaking. "I'm here." She sat stiffly upright in the easy chair and covered the mouthpiece as she told the lights to switch on. The living room was small and neat, except for stacks of journals and offprints arrayed at angles to each other on the coffee table. Other piles spilled across the floor beside the couch.

"Are you all right?"

"No-o-o," she said slowly. "I'm not. Are you?"

Mitch did not answer this. *Good for him*, Kaye thought.

"I'm on the road again," he said.

A pause.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Oregon. My horse broke down and I thought I'd give you a call, ask if you had some extra . . . I don't know. Horseshoes." He sounded even more exhausted than she was. Kaye intercepted something else in his tone and zeroed in with sudden hope.

"You saw Stella?"

"They let me see Stella. Lucky guy, right?"

"Is she well?"

"She gave me a big hug. She's looking pretty good. She cried, Kaye."

Kaye felt her throat catch. She held the phone aside and coughed into her fist. “She misses you. Sorry. Dry throat. I need some water.” She walked into the kitchen to take a bottle from the refrigerator.

“She misses both of us,” Mitch said.

“I can’t be there. I can’t protect her. What’s to miss?”

“I just wanted to call and tell you about her. She’s growing up. It makes me feel lost, thinking that she’s almost grown and I wasn’t around.”

“Not your fault,” she said.

“How’s the work?”

“Finished soon,” Kaye said. “I don’t know if they’ll believe it. So many are still stuck in old ruts.”

“Robert Jackson?”

“Yeah, him, too.”

“You’re lucky to be working at what you do best,” Mitch said. “Listen, I’m—”

“You don’t deserve what happened, Mitch.”

Another pause. *You didn’t deserve being dumped*, she added to herself. Kaye looked back to that empty corner of wall and ceiling and continued, “I miss you.” She tightened her lips to keep them from trembling. “What’s in Oregon?”

“Eileen’s got something going, very mysterious, so I left the dig in Texas. I mistook a clamshell for a whelk. I’m getting old, Kaye.”

“Bullshit,” Kaye said.

“You give me the word, I’ll drive straight to Maryland.” Mitch’s voice steeled. “I swear. Let’s go get Stella.”

“Stop it,” Kaye said, though with sudden gentleness. “I want to, you know that. We have to keep to our plan.”

“Right,” Mitch said, and Kaye was acutely aware he had had no part in making the plan. Perhaps until now Mitch had not really been informed there *was* a plan. And that was Kaye’s fault. She had not been able to protect her husband or her daughter, the most important people on Earth. *So who am I to accuse?*

“What are the kids up to? How has she changed?” Kaye asked.

“They’re forming groups. Demes, they call them. The schools are trying to keep them broken up and disorganized. I’d guess they’re finding ways around that. There’s a lot of scenting involved, of course, and Stella talks about new kinds of language, but we didn’t have time for details. She looks healthy, she’s bright, and she doesn’t seem too stressed out.”

Kaye fixed on this so intensely her eyes crossed. "I tried to call her last week. They wouldn't put me through."

"The bastards," Mitch said, his voice grating.

"Go help Eileen. But keep in touch. I really need to hear from you."

"That's good news."

Kaye let her chin drop to her chest, and stretched out her legs. "I'm relaxing," she said. "Listening to you relaxes me. Tell me what she looks like."

"Sometimes she moves or acts or talks like you. Sometimes she reminds me of my father."

"I noticed that years ago," Kaye said.

"But she's very much her own person, her own type," Mitch said. "I wish we could run our own school, bring lots of kids together. I think that's the only way Stella would be happy."

"We were wrong to isolate her."

"We didn't have any choice."

"Anyway, that's not an issue now. Is she happy?"

"Maybe happier, but not exactly *happy*," Mitch said. "I'm calling on a landline now, but let me give you a new phone code."

Kaye took up a pad and wrote down a string of numbers keyed to a book she still kept in her suitcase. "You think they're still listening?"

"Of course. Hello, Ms. Browning, you there?"

"Not funny," Kaye said. "I ran into Mark Augustine on Capitol Hill. That was . . ." It took her a few seconds to remember. "Yesterday. Sorry, I'm just tired."

"What about him?"

"He seemed apologetic. Does that make sense?"

"He was busted to the ranks," Mitch said. "He deserves to be apologetic."

"Yeah. But something else . . ."

"You think the atmosphere is changing?"

"Browning was there, and she treated me like a Roman general standing over a dying Gaul."

Mitch laughed.

"God, that is *so* good to hear," Kaye said, tapping her pen on the message pad and drawing loops around the numbers, across the pad.

"Give me the word, Kaye. Just one word."

"Oh, Jesus," Kaye said, and sucked in a breath against the lump in her throat. "I hate it so much, being alone."



“I know you’re on the right course,” Mitch said, and Kaye heard the reserve in his voice, filling in, *even if it means leaving me outside*.

“Maybe,” Kaye said. “But it is so hard.” She wanted to tell him about the other things, the imaging lab, chasing down her visitor, the caller, and finding nothing conclusive. But she remembered that Mitch had not reacted well to her attempts to talk about it on their last night together in the cabin.

She remembered as well the love-making, familiar and sweet and more than a little desperate. Her body warmed. “You know I want to be with you,” Kaye said.

“That’s my line.” Mitch’s voice was hopeful, fragile.

“You’ll be at Eileen’s site. It is a site, I assume?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“What do you think she’s found?”

“She’s not telling,” Mitch said.

“Where is it?”

“Can’t say. I get my final directions tomorrow.”

“She’s being more cagey than usual, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.” She heard Mitch moving, breathing into the handset. She could hear as well the wind blowing behind and around him, almost picture her man, rugged, tall, his head lit up by the dome light in the booth. If it was a booth. The phone might be next to a gas station or a restaurant.

“I can’t tell you how good this is,” Kaye said.

“Sure you can.”

“It is *so* good.”

“I should have called earlier. I just felt out of place or something.”

“I know.”

“Something’s changed, hasn’t it?”

“There’s not much more I can do at Americol. Showdown is tomorrow. Jackson actually dropped off his game plan today, he’s that cocky. They either listen to the truth or they ignore it. I want to . . . I’ll just fly out to see you. Save me a shovel.”

“You’ll get rough hands.”

“I love rough hands.”

“I believe in you, Kaye,” Mitch said. “You’ll do it. You’ll win.”

She did not know how to answer but her body quivered. Mitch murmured his love and Kaye returned his words, and then they cut off the connection.

Kaye sat for a moment in the warm yellow glow of the small living

room, surveying the empty walls, the plain rented furniture, the stacks of white paper. "I'm imprinting," she whispered. "Something says it loves me and believes in me but how can anything fill an empty shell?" She rephrased the question. "How can anyone or anything believe in an empty shell?"

Leaning her head back, she felt a tingling warmth. With some awe she realized she had not asked for help, yet help had arrived. Her needs—some of them, at least—had been answered.

At that, Kaye finally let down her emotions and began to weep. Still crying, she made up her bed, fixed herself a cup of hot chocolate, fluffed a pillow and set it against the headboard, disrobed and put on satin pajamas, then fetched a stack of reprints from the living room to read. The words blurred through her tears, and she could hardly keep her eyes open, but she needed to prepare for the next day. She needed to have all her armor on, all her facts straight.

For Stella. For Mitch.

When she could stand it no more and sleep was stealing the last of her thoughts, she ordered the light to turn off, rolled over in bed, and moved her lips, *Thank you. I hope.*

*You are hope.*

But she could not help asking one more question. *Why are you doing this? Why talk to us at all?*

She stared at the wall opposite the bed, then dropped her focus to the cover rising with her knees above the bed. Her eyes widened and her breath slowed. Through the shadowy grayness of the cover, Kaye seemed to look into an infinite and invisible fount. The fount poured forth something she could only describe as *love*, no other word was right, however inadequate it was; love never-ending and unconditional. Her heart thudded in her chest. For a moment, she was frightened—she could never deserve that love, never find its like again on this Earth.

Love without condition—without desire, direction, or any quality other than its purity.

"I don't know what that means," she said. "I'm sorry."

Kaye felt the vision, if that was what it was, withdraw and fade—not out of resentment or anger or disappointment, but just because it was time to end. It left a mellow, peaceful glow behind, like candles thick as stars behind her eyes.

The wonder of that, the awesome wonder, was too much for her.

She laid her head back and stared into the darkness until she drifted off to sleep.

Almost immediately, it seemed, she dreamed of walking over a field of snow high in the mountains. It did not matter that she was lost and alone. She was going to meet someone wonderful.

## 17

### OREGON

**T**he high desert morning was warm and it was barely seven o'clock. Mitch walked across the motel parking lot, swung his bag into the battered old truck's side seat and shielded his eyes against the sun over the low, gray eastern hills. An hour to the Spent River. Half an hour to the outlying camp. He had his instructions from Eileen, and one more warning: *Don't breathe a word to anyone. No students, no wives, no girlfriends, no dogs, no cats, no guinea pigs: Got it?*

He got it.

He pulled out of the Motel 50 parking lot, scraping his bumper on the way. The old truck was on its last few thousand miles; it smelled of singed oil and was starting to cough blue smoke on the grades. Mitch loved big old trucks and cars. He would be sad to see the truck die.

The motel's red sign grew tiny in his mirror. The road was straight and on either side lay rolling brown terrain daubed with greasewood and sage and low, stubby pines and an occasional sketchy line of fence posts, leaning and forlorn, the wire broken and coiled like old hair.

The air got cooler as the truck climbed the gentle grade into the high country. The Spent River was not on the itinerary of most tourists. Surrounded by forest, in the long shadow of Mount Hood, it consisted of a winding, flat sandy bed cutting through black lava cliffs, leaving tufty islands and curving oxbows. The river itself hadn't flowed for many thousands of years. It was not well known to archaeologists, and with good reason; the geological history of alternating floods—gravel beds filled with pebbly lava and rounded bits of granite and basalt—and periodic eruptions of lava made it hellacious to dig and disappointing to those who did. Indians had not built or stayed much in these areas over the last few thousand years.

Out of time, out of human interest, but now Eileen Ripper had found something.

Or she had looked into the sun too long.

The road mesmerized him after a while, but he was jounced to full alertness when it started to get rough from washouts. The land had taken on a five o'clock stubble of trees and grass. The asphalt switched to gravel.

A small state sign came and went: SPENT RIVER RECREATION AREA: THREE MILES. The sign looked as if it had been out in the sun for at least fifty years.

The road curved west abruptly, and as he turned, Mitch caught a gleam about a mile ahead. It looked like a car windshield.

The old truck barked out blue smoke as he took a short grade, then he spotted a white Tahoe and saw a stocky figure standing up and waving from the open driver's door. He pulled over to the side of the road and draped his arm out the window. Enough grip remained in his hand to clutch the door frame and make the gesture look casual.

Eileen had gone completely gray. Her clothes and skin and hair had weathered to the color of the land out here.

"I recognized your taste in trucks," Eileen said as she walked across the gravel shoulder. "God, Mitch, you're as obvious as a sailor with a stack of two-dollar bills."

Mitch smiled. "You're a regular Earth mother," he said. "You should at least wear a red scarf."

Eileen pulled a rag from her pocket and draped it from her belt. "Better?" "Just fine."

"How's your arm?" she asked, patting it.

"Limp," Mitch said.

"We'll put you on toothbrush detail," she said.

"Sounds good. What have you got?"

"It's *dishy*," Eileen said. "It's grand." She did a little jig on the gravel. "It's deadly dangerous. Want to come see?"

Mitch squint-eyed her for a moment. "Why not?" he said.

"It's just over there," she said and pointed north, "about ten more miles."

Mitch scowled. "I'm not sure my truck will make it."

"I'll follow and scoop up parts."

"How can you tell me when to turn?" Mitch asked.

"It's a game, old friend," Eileen said. "You'll have to sniff it out, same as I did." She smiled wickedly.

Mitch squinted harder and shook his head. "For Christ's sake, Eileen."  
 "Older than Christ by at least eighteen thousand years," she said.  
 "You should wear thicker hats," he said.

Eileen looked tired beneath the bravado. "This is the big one, Mitch. In a couple of hours, I swear to God you won't even know who you are."

## 18

### ARIZONA

**A**t eleven in the morning, Stella walked with all the girls from their barracks through a gate in the razor wire fence to the open field, attended by Miss Kantor and Joanie and five other adults.

Once a week, the counselors and teachers let the SHEVA children mingle coed on the playground and under the lunch table awnings.

The girls were uncharacteristically quiet. Stella felt the tension. A year ago, going through the fence to socialize with the boys had been no big deal. Now, every girl who imagined herself a deme maker was plotting with her partners as to which boys would be best in their group. Stella did not know what to think about this. She watched the demes form and disintegrate and reform in the girl's dorms, and her own plans changed in her head from day to day; it was all so confusing.

The sky was sprinkled with broken clouds. She shaded her eyes and looked up and saw the moon hanging in the pure summer blueness, a wan face blankly amused by their silliness. Stella wondered what the moon smelled like. It looked kindly enough. It looked a little simple, actually.

"Single file. We're going to South Section Five," Miss Kantor told them all, and waved her hand to give them direction. The girls shuffled where she pointed, cheeks blank.

Stella saw the boys come through their own fence line from the opposite rows of barracks. They were more touching heads and weaving and pointing out the girls they noticed. They smiled like goofs, cheeks brown at this distance with indistinguishable color.

"Oh, joy," Celia said listlessly. "Same old."

The sexes would be allowed to mingle with heavy supervision for an hour.

"Is he here?" Celia asked. Stella had told her last night about Will.

Stella did not know. She hadn't seen him yet. She didn't think it likely.

She indicated all this with a low whistle, a few desultory freckles, and a twitch of her shoulders. "My, you're-KUK touchy," Celia said. She bumped shoulders with Stella as they walked. Stella did not mind.

"I don't know what they expect us to do in an hour," Stella said.

Celia giggled. "We could try to-KUK kiss one of them."

Stella's brows formed an uneven pair of curves and her neck darkened. Celia ignored this. "I could kiss James Callahan. I almost let him hold my hand last year."

"We were kids last year," Stella said.

"What-KUK are we now?" Celia asked.

Stella was looking down a line of boys drawn up in the sun beside the lunch table awnings. The tallest she recognized immediately.

"There he is," she said, and pointed him out to Celia. Three other girls moved in and followed her point, all smelling of aroused curiosity—smoke and earth.

Will stood, looking at the ground with shoulders slumped and hands stuck firmly in his pockets. The other boys seemed to be ignoring him, which was to be expected; boys didn't cloud as quickly with newcomers as girls did. It would take Will a few days to form tight bonds with his barracks partners.

Or maybe not, Stella thought, watching him. Maybe he never would.

"He's not very pretty," said Felice Miller, a small, brown-haired girl with thin, strong arms and thicker legs.

"How do you know?" asked Ellie Gow. "You can't smell him from here."

"He wouldn't smell pretty, either," Felice said disdainfully. "He's too tall."

Ellie winced. She was known for her sensitivity to sounds and a preference for talking while lying under a blanket. "What's that got to do with a cat's fart?"

Felice smiled tolerantly. "Whiskers," she said.

Stella paid no attention to them.

"Someone you met when you were young can exert a profound influence," Felice continued.

"I didn't see him for very long," Stella admitted.

Celia quickly told them the story of Stella and Will, speaking in her halting double, while the counselors and teachers huddled and arranged the rules of the confab. The rules changed week to week. Today, on the outskirts of the field, three men stood watching them with binoculars.

Nine months ago, Stella had been taken aside and driven to the hospital with five other girls after such a meeting. They had all given blood and one, Nor Upjohn, had suffered other indignities she would not describe, and afterward she had smelled like a mildewed orange, a warning scent.

The girls made their formation, four long columns of fifty each. The counselors did not try to stop them from talking, and Stella saw that some of them—possibly all—had turned off their nosies.

Will looked across the brown grass and gravel at the lines of girls. His brows drew into a narrow straight line and he seemed to be sucking on something sour. His matted hair was cut jagged and his cheeks were hollow pits, as if he had lost some teeth. He looked older than the others, and tired. He looked defeated.

“He’s not pretty, he’s *ugly*,” Felice said, and with a shrug turned her attention to the other boys they had not seen before. Stella had counted the new arrivals on the bus: fifty-three. She had to agree with Felice. Whatever her memory of Strong Will, this fellow was no one’s idea of a good deme partner.

“You want to cloud with *him*?” Celia asked in disbelief.

“No,” Stella said, and looked away with a sharp pang of disappointment.

The woods were far away now for both of them.

“What’s anything got to do with toad skin?” Ellie asked nervously as the teachers started to shoo the rows and columns toward each other.

“Crow on the road,” Felice replied.

“What’s that have to do with apple feathers?” Ellie riposted by reflex.

“Oh, just-KUK *grow*,” Celia said. Her face wrinkled like a dried peach in a sudden despair of shyness. “Grow big and *hide me*.”

The lines drew up before the concrete lunch tables and the boys were pushed to go and sit, three to one side, leaving the opposite side of each table empty.

“What’ll we say?” Ellie asked, hiding her eyes as their turn approached.

“Same thing we always say,” Stella said. “Hello and how are you. And ask how their demes are growing and what they’re doing on the other side of the wire.”

“Harry, Harry, quite contrary,” Felice sang in an undertone, “how does your garden grow? Pubic hairs and wanton stares, making the hormones flow.”

Ellie told her to shush. Miss Kantor walked in front of the rows from

their barracks. "All right, girls," she said. "You may talk, you may look. You may not touch."

*But the nosies are turned off*, Stella thought. The girls fanned out from the lines. Stella looked up at the cameras mounted on the long steel poles, swinging slowly right and left.

Ellie's turn came and she ran off to join a table of boys whom, as far as Stella knew, she had never visited before. So much for shyness. Stella's turn came, and of course whatever she had thought earlier, she moved toward the table where Will sat with two smaller boys.

Will hunched over the table, looking at the old food stains. The two smaller and younger males watched her approach with some interest and freckled each other. She thought she heard some under, difficult to be sure at this distance, and Will looked up. He did not seem to recognize her.

Stella was the only girl to sit at their table. She said hello to the two boys, and then focused on Will. Will rested his cheeks in the palms of his hands. She could not see his patterns, though she saw his neck darken.

"He's in our barracks," said the boy on the right, strong but short, Jason or James; the boy to the left of Will was named Philip. Stella had sat with Philip three weeks ago. He was pleasant enough, though she had learned quickly she did not want to cloud with him. Neither Jason/James nor Philip smelled right. She freckled Philip a butterfly greeting, friendly but not open, meaning no offense, etc.

"Why did you sit here?" Philip asked with a frown. "Doesn't somebody *else* want to sit here?"

"I want to talk to him," Stella said. She was not very good at dealing with the boys, but then few of the girls were. There were unspoken, unwritten rules, rules yet to be discovered, but this way of doing things was never going to make the rules any plainer.

"He doesn't talk much," Jason/James said.

"Girls play games," Philip said resentfully.

"Nothing like *human* girls," Will murmured, and looked up at her. The glance was brief, but Stella knew he remembered their last meeting. "They cut you like knives and you never know why."

"Right," Philip said. "Will lived among the savages." Jason/James giggled at this, and made a gesture of tangled fingers Stella could not interpret.

"I passed," Will said.



“Was it the woods?” Stella asked, hope flickering like a small ember.

“What?” he asked.

“They scrubbed him before he came to our barracks,” Philip said, just being informative. “His skin was red from soap.”

“Did you stay with your parents?” Will asked. He looked up and let her see his cheeks. They were blank, dark and raw. Most of Will’s neck and face were red and rough. Stella inhaled, only what was polite under the circumstances, and could still smell the Lysol and soap on his skin and clothes.

“Only for a few days,” Stella said. “I got sick.”

“I missed out on getting scabs,” Will said, touching between his fingers. The SHEVA kids referred to the disease that had killed so many of them as “scabs” or “the ache.”

“We’re going to another table,” Jason/James and Philip said, almost in unison.

“You two should be alone,” Philip added brusquely. “We can tell.”

Stella wanted to ask them to stay, but Will shrugged, so she shrugged as well. “They’re breaking the rules,” she said after they were gone.

“They can find a table with not enough boys,” Will suggested. “They’re making up rules in the barracks. Something about demes. What are demes?”

“Demes are families,” Stella said. “New families. We’re trying to figure out what they’ll look like when we’re grown up.”

Will looked directly at her once more, and Stella looked away, then covered her own cheeks. “It doesn’t matter,” Will said. “I don’t care.”

“I came over to say hello,” Stella said. He could not know what his words had meant to her. “You must have got away.” She watched him eagerly, hoping for his story.

“We’re talking human talk. Do you know the under and the over?”

“Yes,” Stella said. “Do you speak it the same way?”

“Not the way they do in the barracks,” Will admitted with a twitch of one arm. “Out on the road . . . It’s different. Stronger, faster.”

“And in the woods?” Stella asked.

“There are no woods,” Will said, face crinkling as if she had spoken some obscenity.

“When you got away, where did you go?”

Will looked up at the sky. “I can eat lots here,” he said. “I’ll get better, stronger, learn the smell, talk the two tongues.” He balled up his hands and

bounced them lightly on the table, then against each other, thumb to thumb, as if playing a game. "Why are they letting us get together, boy-girl?"

"I don't know. Sometimes they draw blood and ask questions."

Will nodded.

"Do you know what they're doing?" Stella asked.

"Not a clue," Will said. "They teach nothing, like all the schools. Right?"

"We read some books and learn some skills. We can't cloud or scent or we're punished."

Will smiled. "Stupid blanks," he said.

Stella winced. "We try not to call them names."

Will looked away.

"How long were you free?" Stella asked.

"They caught me a week ago," Will said. "I've lived on my own and with runaways and street kids. Covered my cheeks with henna tattoos. Neck, too. Some human kids mark their faces to look like us, but everyone knows. They also claim to read thoughts and have better brains. Like they think we do. They say it's cool, but their freckles don't move."

Stella could see some brown still staining the raw patches on Will's face. "How many of us are outside?"

"Not many," Will said. "I got turned in by a human for a pack of cigarettes, even after I saved him from getting beat up." He shook his head slowly. "It's awful out there."

Stella smelled Joanie nearby, under her signature mask of baby powder. Will straightened as the stout young counselor approached.

"No one-on-one," Stella heard Joanie say. "You know the rules."

"The others left," Stella said, turning to explain, stopping only when Joanie gripped Stella's shoulder. Touched and held, she refused to meet the counselor's eyes.

Will stood. "I'll go," he said.

Then, speaking two streams at once, the over a flow of young gibberish, he said, "See you, say hi to Cory in Six" (there was no Cory and no Six) and "keep it low, keep it topped, shop with pop, nay?"

The under:

"What do you know about a place called Sandia?"

He mixed the streams so expertly that it took Stella a moment to know he had delivered the question. To Joanie, it probably sounded like a slur in the gibberish.

Then, with a toss of his hand, as Joanie led Stella away, Will said, in one stream, “Find out, hey?”

Stella watched Ellie be led away to give blood. Ellie pretended it was no big deal, but it was. Stella wondered if it was because Ellie had attracted a lot of boys today, five at the table where she and Felice had sat. The rest of the girls went to their late morning classrooms, where they were shown films about the history of the United States, guys in wigs and women in big dresses, wagon trains, maps, a little bit about Indians.

Mitch had taught Stella about Indians. The film told them nothing important.

Felice was sitting in the aisle next to her. “What’s a green bug got to do with anything?” she whispered, making up for Ellie’s absence.

Nobody answered. The game had gone sour. This time, being with the boys had hurt, and somehow Stella and the others knew it would only get worse. The time was coming when they would all need to be left alone, boys and girls together, to work things out for themselves.

Stella did not think the humans would ever let that happen. They would be kept apart like animals in a zoo, forever.

“You’re scenting,” Celia warned in a whisper behind her. “Miss Kantor turned her nose on.”

Stella did not know how to stop. She could feel the changes coming.

“You’re doing it, too,” Felice whispered to Celia.

“Damn,” Celia said, and rubbed behind her ears, eyes wide.

“Girls,” Miss Kantor called from the front of the classroom. “Be quiet and watch the film.”

## 19

### BALTIMORE

**P**romptly at eleven, Kaye entered the Americol twentieth-floor conference room, Liz close behind. Robert Jackson was already in the room. His hair had turned salt and pepper over the years but otherwise he had not matured much either in behavior or appearance. He was still handsome, skin pale to the point of blueness, with a sharply defined nose and chin and a glossy five o’clock shadow. His quartzlike eyes, dark gray, bored into Kaye whenever they met, occasions she tried to keep to a minimum.

Angled on either side of Jackson at the corner position he favored were two of his postdocs—research interns from Cornell and Harvard, in their late twenties, compact fellows with dark brown hair and the nervous aloofness of youth.

“Marge will be here in a few minutes,” Jackson told Kaye, briefly half-standing.

He had never forgiven her an awkward moment in the early days of SHEVA, sixteen years ago, when it seemed that Marge and Kaye had ganged up on him. Jackson had won that round in the long run, but grudges came naturally to him. He was as passionate about office politics and the social side of research as he was about science as an ideal and an abstraction.

With so keen a sense of the social, Kaye wondered why Jackson had been other than brilliant in genetics. To Kaye, the processes behind both were much the same; to Jackson, that idea was heresy of a disgusting magnitude.

The representatives from three other research divisions had also arrived before Kaye and Liz. Two men and one woman, all in their late forties, bowed their heads as they pored over touch tablets, getting through the perpetual network-enabled tasks of their day. They did not look up as Kaye entered, though most of them had met her and conversed with her at Americol mixers and Christmas parties.

Kaye and Liz sat with their backs to a long window that looked out over downtown Baltimore. Kaye felt a breeze go up her back from a floor vent. Jackson had taken pole position, leaving Liz and Kaye with the air conditioning.

Marge Cross entered, alone for once. She seemed subdued. Cross was in her middle sixties, portly, her short-cut, scraggly hair brilliantly hennaed, her face jowly, her neck a landscape of hanging wrinkles. She possessed a voice that could carry across a crowded conference hall, yet carried herself with the poise of a ballet dancer, dressed in carefully tailored pant suits, and somehow could charm the butterflies out of the skies. It was difficult to know when she did not like what she was hearing. Like a rhino, Cross was said to be at her most dangerous when she was still and quiet.

The CEO of Americol and Eurocol had grown stouter and more beefy-faced over the years, but still walked with graceful confidence. “Let the games begin,” she said, her voice mellow as she made her way to the window. Liz moved her chair as Cross passed.

“You didn’t bring your lance, Kaye,” Jackson said.

“Behave, Robert,” Cross warned. She sat beside Liz and folded her hands on the table. Jackson managed to look both properly chastened and amused by the jabbing familiarity.

“We’re here to judge the success so far of our attempts to restrict legacy viruses,” Cross began. “We refer to them generically as ERV—endogenous retroviruses. We’ve also been concerned with their close relations, transgenes, transposons, retrotransposons, LINE elements, and what have you—all mobile elements, all jumping genes. Let’s not confuse our ERV with someone else’s ERV—*equine rhinovirus*, for example, or *ecotropic recombinant retrovirus*, or, something we’ve all experienced in these sessions, a sudden loss of *expiratory reserve volume*.”

Polite smiles around the room. A little shuffling of feet.

Cross cleared her throat. “We certainly wouldn’t want to confuse anybody,” she said, her voice dropping an octave. Most of the time, it hovered between a quavering soprano and a mellow alto. Many had compared her to Julia Child, but the comparison was surface only, and with age and hennaed hair, Cross had gone well beyond Julia and into her own stratospheric realm of uniqueness. “I’ve looked over the team reports from our vaccine project, and of course the chimpanzee and mouse ERV knockout projects. Dr. Jackson’s report was very long. Also, I’ve looked over the research reviews and audits from the fertility and general immunology groups.” Cross’s arthritis was bothering her; Kaye could tell from the way she massaged the swollen knuckles on her hands. “The consensus is, we seem to have failed at everything we set out to do. But we’re not here for a post-mortem. We need to decide how to proceed from where we are at this moment. So. Where are we?”

Glum silence. Kaye stared straight ahead, trying to keep from biting her lip.

“Usually, we toss a coin and let the winner start. But we’re all familiar with this debate, up to a point, and I think it’s time we begin with some probing questions. I’ll choose who goes first. All right?”

“Fine,” Jackson said nonchalantly, lifting his hands from the tabletop.

“Fine,” Kaye echoed.

“Good. We all agree it sucks,” Cross said. “Dr. Nilson, please begin.”

Lars Nilson, a middle-aged man with round glasses, had won a Nobel twenty years ago for his research in cytokines. He had once been heavily involved in Americol’s attempts to resolve retroviral issues in xenotransplants—

the transplanting of animal tissues into human recipients—a prospect that had come to a drastic halt with the appearance of SHEVA and the case of Mrs. Rhine. He had since been reassigned to general immunology.

Nilson peered around the room with a wry expression, looking to Kaye like a gray and disconsolate pixie. “I presume I’m expected to speak first out of some notion of Nobel *oblige* or something more awful still, like seniority.”

A small, very slim elderly man in a gray suit and yarmulke entered the room and looked around through friendly, crinkled brown eyes, his face wreathed in a perpetual smile. “Don’t mind me,” he said, and took a chair in the far corner, crossing his legs. “Lars is no longer senior,” he added quietly.

“Thank you, Maurie,” Nilson said. “Glad you could make it.” Maurie Herskovitz was another of Cross’s Nobel laureates, and perhaps the most honored biologist working at Americol. His specialty was loosely labeled “genomic complexity”; he now functioned as a roving researcher. Kaye was startled and a little unnerved by his presence. Despite his smile—built-in, she suspected, like a dolphin’s—Herskovitz was known to be a demanding tyrant in the lab. She had never seen him in person.

Cross folded her arms and breathed loudly through her nose. “Let’s move on,” she suggested.

Nilson looked to his right. “Dr. Jackson, your SHEVA vaccines have unexpected side effects. When you work to block transmission of ERV particles between cells in tissue, you kill the experimental animals—apparently in part because of a massive overreaction of their innate immune system—whether they be mice, pigs, or monkeys. That seems counterintuitive. Can you explain?”

“We believe our efforts interfere with or mimic some essential processes involving the breakdown of pathogenic messenger RNA in somatic cells. The cells seem to interpret our vaccines as a byproduct of the appearance of viral RNA, and stop all transcription and translation. They die, apparently to protect other cells from infection.”

“I understand there may also be a problem with shutting down function of transposases in T cells,” Nilson continued. “RAG1 and RAG2 are apparently affected by nearly all the candidate vaccines.”

“As I said, we’re still tracking that connection,” Jackson said smoothly.

“Most expression of ERVs doesn’t trigger cell suicide,” Nilson said.

Jackson nodded. “It’s a complicated process,” he said. “Like many

pathogens, some retroviruses have developed a cloaking ability and can avoid cell defenses.”

“So the model that all viruses are interlopers or invaders may not apply in these cases?”

Jackson vehemently disagreed. His argument was rigidly traditional: DNA in the genome was a tightly constrained and efficient blueprint. Viruses were simply parasites and hangers-on, causing disorder and disease but, in rare instances, also creating useful novelty. He explained that putting viral promoters in front of a necessary cellular gene could cause more of that gene’s products to be manufactured at a key moment in the cell’s history. More rarely, within germ cells—egg or sperm progenitors—they might land, randomly, in such a way as to cause phenotypic or developmental variation in the offspring. “But to call any such activity orderly, part of some cellular reaction to the environment, is ridiculous. Viruses have no awareness of their actions, nor are the cells specifically activating viruses for some wonderful purpose. That has been obvious for more than a century.”

“Kaye? Do viruses know what they’re doing?” Cross asked, turning in her chair.

“No,” Kaye said. “They’re nodes in a distributed network. Greater purpose as such lies with the network, not the node; and not even the network can be described as self-aware or deliberately purposeful, in the sense that Dr. Jackson has purpose.”

Jackson smiled.

Kaye went on. “All viruses appear to be descendants, directly or indirectly, of mobile elements. They did not pop up from outside; they broke free from inside, or evolved to carry genes and other information between cells and between organisms. Retroviruses like HIV in particular seem closely related to retrotransposons and ERV in the cells of many organisms. They all use similar genetic tools.”

“So a flu virus, with eight genes, is derived from a retrotransposon or retrovirus with two or three genes?” Nilson asked with some disdain. His brows dropped into a puzzled and stormy expression at this patent absurdity.

“Ultimately, yes,” Kaye said. “Gaining or mutating genes, or losing them, is mediated by necessity. A virus entering a new and unfamiliar host might take up and incorporate useful genes found within the host cell, but it’s not easy. Most of the viruses simply fail to replicate.”

“They go in, hoping for a handout at the gene table?” Jackson asked. “That’s what Dr. Howard Urnovitz believed, isn’t it? Vaccinations led to HIV, Gulf War Syndrome, and every other illness known to modern man?”

“Dr. Urnovitz’s views seem closer to yours than to mine,” Kaye replied evenly.

“That was more than twenty years ago,” Cross said, yawning. “Ancient history. Move on.”

“We know many viruses can incorporate genes from ERVs,” Kaye said. “Herpes, for example.”

“The implications of that process are not at all clear,” Jackson said, a rather weak-kneed response, Kaye thought.

“I’m sorry, but it simply is not controversial,” she persisted. “We know that is how Shiver arose in all its variety, and that is how the virus mutated that gave our children lethal HFMD. It picked up endogenous viral genes found only in non-SHEVA individuals.”

Jackson conceded these points. “Some of our children,” he amended quietly. “But I’m willing to concede that viruses may be enemies from within. All the more reason to eradicate them.”

“Just *enemies*?” Cross asked. She propped her chin in one palm, and looked up at Jackson from beneath her bushy eyebrows.

“I did say ‘enemies,’ not handmaids or subcontractors,” Jackson said. “Jumping genes cause problems. They are rogues, not handmaids. We know that. When they’re active, they produce genetic defects. They activate oncogenes. They’re implicated in multiple sclerosis and in schizophrenia, in leukemia and all manner of cancers. They cause or exacerbate autoimmune diseases. However long they can lie dormant in our genes, they’re part of a panoply of ancient plagues. Viruses are a curse. That some are now tame enough to get by without causing their hosts major damage is just the way disease evolution works. We know that HIV retroviruses mutated and jumped from one primate species to another, to us. In chimps, the HIV precursor evolved to be neutral, a genetic burden and little more. In us, the mutation proved to be highly immunosuppressive and lethal. SHEVA is little different. The ERV we are fighting are simply not useful to the organism in any fundamental way.”

Kaye felt as if she had traveled back in time, as if thirty years of research had never happened. Jackson had refused to change despite massive strides; he simply ignored what he could not believe in. And he was not alone. The number of papers produced each year in virology alone could fill



the entire meeting room. To this day, most such papers stuck to a disease model for both viruses and mobile elements.

Jackson felt safely enclosed by thick walls of tradition, away from Kaye's mad, howling winds.

Cross turned to the sole woman on the review committee, Sharon Morgenstern. Morgenstern specialized in fertility research and developmental biology. A nervous-looking, thin woman, reputedly a spinster, with a withdrawn chin, prominent teeth, wispy blonde hair, and a soft North Carolina accent, she also chaired the Americol jury that approved papers before they were submitted to the journals—in-house peer review set up in part to quash publications that might reveal corporate secrets. "Sharon? Any questions while we're jumping up and down on Robert?"

"Your test animals, when given candidate vaccines, have also been known to suffer the loss or reduction of key sexual characteristics," Morgenstern began. "That seems exceptionally odd. How do you plan to get around those problems?"

"We have noticed reduction of certain minor sexual characters in baboons," Jackson said. "That may have no relevance to human subjects."

Nilson moved in once more, ignoring Morgenstern's irritated expression. *Let the woman finish*, Kaye thought, but said nothing.

"Dr. Jackson's vaccine could be of immense importance in our attempts to neutralize viruses in xenotransplant tissues," Nilson said. "Dr. Rafelson's endeavors also hold tremendous promise—to knock out all ERV genes in these tissues has been one of our holy grails for at least fifteen years. To say we're disappointed by these failures is an understatement." Nilson shifted in his seat and referred to his notes by leaning over sideways and looking through the edge of his glasses, like a bird examining a seed. "I'd like to ask some questions about why Dr. Jackson's vaccines fail."

"The vaccines do not fail. The organisms fail," Jackson said. "The vaccines succeed. They block intercellular transmission of all ERV particles."

Nilson smiled broadly. "All right. Why do the *organisms* fail, time after time? And, in particular, why do they become sterile if you're blocking or otherwise frustrating a viral load—all the disease-causing elements within their genomes? Shouldn't they experience a burst of energy and productivity?"

Jackson asked that the overhead projector be lowered. Liz sighed. Kaye kicked her gently under the table.

Jackson's presentation was classic. Within three minutes, he had used

nine acronyms and six made-up scientific terms with which Kaye was unfamiliar, without defining any of them; he had entangled them all in an ingenious map of pathways and byproducts and some deep evolutionary suppositions that had never been demonstrated outside a test tube. When he was on the defensive, Jackson invariably reverted to tightly controlled *in vitro* demonstrations using the tumor cell cultures favored for lab research. All the experiments he cited had been tightly designed and controlled and had, all too often, led to predicted results.

Marge Cross gave him five minutes. Jackson noticed her impatience and drew his sidebar to a close. "It's obvious that ERVs have devised ways to worm themselves into the machinery of their host's genome. We know of many instances in nature where trying to remove a parasite can kill a host. It's even likely they've created safeguards against removal—pseudogenes, multiple copies, disguised or compressed copies that can be reassembled later, methylation to prevent restriction enzyme activity, all sorts of clever tricks. But the prime proof of the malevolent nature of all retroviruses, even the so-called benevolent or benign, is what HIV and SHEVA have done to our society."

Kaye looked up from her notes.

"We have a generation of children who can't fit in," Jackson continued, "who arouse hatred and suspicion, and whose so-called adaptive characteristics—randomly invoked from a panoply of possible distortions—only cause them distress. Viruses cause us grievous harm. Given time, our group will overcome these unfortunate delays and eliminate all viruses from our lives. Genomic viruses will be nightmares from a rough and nasty past."

"Is that a conclusion?" Cross asked without letting Jackson's dramatic effect sink in.

"No," Jackson said, leaning back in his chair. "Something of an outburst. I apologize."

Cross looked at the questioners. "Satisfied?" she asked.

"No," Nilson said, once again with that special Olympian frown Kaye had only seen in older male scientists, winners of Nobel prizes. "But I have a question for Dr. Rafelson."

"Lars can always be relied upon to keep these sessions lively," Cross said.

"I'm hoping Dr. Nilson will ask equally probing questions of Kaye," Jackson said.

“Count on it,” Nilson said dryly. “We realize how difficult it is to work with early-stage embryos in mammals, mice for example, and how much more difficult it is to work with primates and simians. As far as I have been able to review, your lab techniques have been creative and skilled.”

“Thank you,” Kaye said.

Nilson waved this off with another frown. “We also know that there are many ways in which embryos and their hosts, their mothers, work together to prevent rejection of the paternal components of embryonic tissues. Isn’t it possible that by removing known ERVs in chimpanzee embryos, you have also shut down genes crucial to these other protective functions? I am thinking in particular of FasL, triggered by CRH, corticotropin releasing hormone, in the pregnant female. FasL causes cell death in maternal lymphocytes as they move in to attack the embryo. It is essential to getting born.”

“FasL is unaffected by our work,” Kaye said. “Dr. Elizabeth Cantrera, my colleague, spent a year proving that FasL and all other known protective genes remain intact and active after we knock out ERVs. In fact, we’re tracking the possibility now that a LINE element transactivated by the pregnancy hormone in fact regulates FasL.”

“I do not see that in your references,” Nilson said.

“We published three papers in *PNAS*.” Kaye gave him the citations, and Nilson patiently wrote them down. “The immunosuppressive function of particles derived from endogenous retroviruses is indisputably part of an embryo’s protective armament. We’ve proven that over and over.”

“I’m concerned in particular about evidence that a drop in corticotropin releasing hormone after pregnancy induces rapid expression of ERV responsible for triggering arthritis and multiple sclerosis,” Nilson said. “The ERV in this case are reacting to a sharp *drop* in hormones, not a rise, and they appear to cause disease.”

“Interesting,” Cross said. “Dr. Rafelson?”

“It’s a reasonable hypothesis. The triggering of autoimmune disorders by ERV is a rich area for research. Such expression could be regulated by stress-related hormones, and that would explain the role such hormones—and stress in general—play in such disorders.”

“Then which is it, Dr. Rafelson?” Nilson asked, his eyes sharp upon her. “Good virus, or bad virus?”

“Like everything else in nature, one or the other or even both, depending

on the circumstances,” Kaye said. “Pregnancy is a tough time for both the infant and the mother.”

Cross turned to Sharon Morgenstern. “Dr. Morgenstern showed me some of her questions earlier,” she said. “They are cogent. They are in fact excellent.”

Morgenstern leaned forward and looked at Kaye and Liz. “I will state up front that although I often agree with Dr. Nilson, I do not find Dr. Rafelson’s laboratory procedures free from bias or error. I suspect that Dr. Rafelson came here to prove that something could *not* be done, not that it *could* be done. And now we are supposed to believe that she has proven that embryos cannot proceed to live birth, or even grow to pubescence, without a full complement of old viruses in their genes. In short, working backwards, she is trying to prove a controversial theory of virus-based evolution that could conceivably elevate the social status of her own daughter. I am suspicious when such strong emotional motivations are involved in a scientist’s work.”

“Do you have a specific criticism?” Cross asked mildly.

“A number of them, actually,” Morgenstern said. Liz handed Kaye a note. Kaye looked over the quickly scrawled message. *Morgenstern published twenty papers with Jackson over the last five years. She’s his contact on the Americol jury.*

Kaye looked up and stuffed the note in her coat’s side pocket.

“My first doubt—,” Morgenstern continued.

This was the true beginning of the frontal assault. All that had come before was just the softening up. Kaye swallowed and tried to relax her neck muscles. She thought of Stella, far across the continent, wasting her time in a school run by bigots. And Mitch, driving to rejoin an old lover and colleague on a dig in the middle of nowhere.

For one very bad moment, Kaye felt she was about to lose everything, all at once. But she drew herself up, caught Cross’s gaze, and focused on Morgenstern’s stream of precisely phrased, mind-numbing technicalities.

**T**hey had left the dirt road twenty minutes ago and Mitch still had not seen anything compelling. The game was beginning to wear. He slammed on the brakes and the old truck creaked on its shocks, swayed for a moment, then stalled out. He opened the door and mopped his forehead with a paper towel from the roll he kept under his front seat, along with a squeegee to remove mud.

Dust billowed around them until a stray draft between narrow rills spirited it away.

“I give up,” Mitch said, walking back to stare into Eileen’s window. “What am I supposed to be looking for?”

“Let’s say there’s a river here.”

“Hasn’t been one for a few centuries, by the looks of things.”

“Three thousand years, actually. Let’s go back even further—say, more than ten thousand years.”

“How much more?”

Eileen shrugged and made an “I’m not telling” face.

Mitch groaned, remembering all the troubles that came with ancient graves.

Eileen watched his reaction with a weary sadness that he could not riddle. “Where would you set up some sort of long-term fishing camp, say, during the fall salmon run? A camp you could come back to, year after year?”

“On hard ground above the river, not too far.”

“And what do you see around here?” Eileen asked.

Mitch scanned the territory again. “Mostly mudstone and weak terraces. Some lava.”

“Ash fall?”

“Yeah. Looks solid. I wouldn’t want to dig it out.”

“Exactly,” Eileen said. “Imagine an ash fall big enough to cover everything for hundreds of miles.”

“Broken flats of ash. That would have to be above this bed, of course. The river would have worn through.”

“Now, how would an archaeologist find something interesting in all that confusion?”

He frowned at her. "Something trapped by ash?"

Eileen nodded encouragement.

"Animals? People?"

"What do you think?" Eileen peered through the dusty windshield of the Tahoe. She looked sadder and sadder, as if reliving an ancient tragedy.

"People, of course," Mitch said. "A camp. A fishing camp. Covered by ash." He shook his head, then mockingly smacked his forehead, *Such a dummy*.

"I'm practically giving it away," Eileen said.

Mitch turned east. He could see the dark gray-and-white layers of the old ash fall, buried under ten feet of sediments and now topped by a broken wall of pines. The ash layer looked at least four feet thick, mottled and striated. He imagined walking over to the cut and fingering the ash. Compacted by many seasons of rain, held in place by a cap of dirt and silt, it would be rock hard at first, but ultimately frangible, turning to powder if he hit it vigorously with a pick.

Big fall, a long time ago. Ten thousand and more years.

He looked north again, up a wash and away from the broad mud and gravel bed of the long-dead river, spotted with hardy brush and trees, a course now cut off even from snow melt and flash floods. Undisturbed by heavy erosion for a couple of thousand years.

"This used to be a pretty good oxbow, I'd say. Even in the Spent River heyday, there'd have been shallows where you could walk across and spear fish. You could have set up a weir in that hollow, under that boulder." He pointed to a big boulder mostly buried in old silt and ash.

Eileen smiled and nodded. "Keep going."

Mitch tapped his lips with his finger. He circled the Tahoe, waving his arms, making swooshing sounds, kicking the dirt, sniffing the air.

Eileen laughed and slapped her knees. "I needed that," she said.

"Well, shucks," Mitch said humbly. "If I'm tapping into mystic spirits, I got to act the part." He fixed his gaze on a gap that led to higher ground, above the ash. His head leaned to one side and he shook out his bad arm, which was starting to ache. He got the look of a hound on the scent. Eyes sweeping the rough ground, he walked up the wash and climbed around the boulder.

Eileen yelled, "Wait up!"

"No way," Mitch called back. "I'm on it."

And he was.

He spotted the camp ten minutes later. Eileen came up beside him,

breathless. On a level plateau only thinly forested, marked by patches of gray where the deep ash layer had been exposed by erosion, he saw twelve low-slung, light-weather tents covered with netting, dead branches, and bushes uprooted from around the site. A pair of old Land Rovers had been parked together and disguised as a large boulder.

Mitch had taken a seat on a rock, staring glumly at the tents and vehicles. “Why the camouflage?” he asked.

“Satellites or remoters doing searches for the BLM and Army Corps, protecting Indian rights under NAGPRA,” Eileen said. Federal interpretation of the complaints of certain Indian groups, citing NAGPRA—the Native American Graves Protection Act—had been the nemesis of American archaeologists for almost twenty years.

“Oh,” Mitch said. “Why take the chance? Do we need that now? Having the feds cover your dig with concrete?” That was how the Army Corps of Engineers had protected Mitch’s dig against further intrusion, more than a lifetime ago, it seemed now. He waved his hand at the site and made a face. “Not very smart, staying hidden like this, hoping to avoid the Big Boys.”

“Isn’t that what you did?” Eileen asked.

Mitch snorted with little humor. “It’s a fair cop,” he admitted.

“These are not rational times,” Eileen said. “You’ll understand soon enough. Don’t we all need to know what it means to be human? Now more than ever? How we got to where we are, and what’s going to come later?”

“What are a few old Indian bones going to tell us that we don’t already know?” Mitch asked, feeling his sense of discovery start to sputter and stall.

“Would I have called you out here if that was all we had at stake?” Eileen said. “You know me better than that, Mitch Rafelson. I hope you do.”

Mitch wiped his hand on his pants leg and looked over his shoulder at the long fan of the wash. They had climbed about twenty feet, but he could still see evidence of ancient bank erosion. “Big river, way back when,” he said.

“It was smaller at the time of our site,” Eileen said. “Just a broad, shallow stream filled with salmon. Bears used to come down and fish. One of my students found an old male on the other side. Killed by an early phase of the ash fall, stage one of the eruption.”

“How long ago?” Mitch asked.

“Twenty thousand years, we’re estimating. Ash gives a good potassium-argon result. We’re still refining with carbon dating.”

“Something more than just a dead grizzly?”

Eileen nodded like a little girl confirming that there were, indeed, more dolls in her room. “The bear was female. She was missing her skull. It had been cut off, the bones hacked through with stone axes.”

“Twenty thousand years ago?”

“Yeah. So my student crossed the Spent River and started looking at other reveals. Just killing time until the Land Rover came to pick her up. She found an eroded layer of high-silica ash, right down there, about fifty meters from where the camp is now.” Eileen pointed. “She almost stepped on a human toe bone mixed with some gravel. Nothing spectacular, really. But she tracked down where it had weathered out, and she found more.”

“Twenty thousand years,” Mitch said, still incredulous.

“That isn’t the half of it,” Eileen said.

Mitch took a huge leap of supposition and bent backwards, then did a little dip of disbelief. “You are not suggesting . . .”

Eileen stared at him keenly.

“You found *Neandertals*?”

Eileen shook her head, a strong no, then rewarded him with a teary-eyed smile that gave some hint of the distress she had gone through, at night, lying awake and thinking things over.

Mitch let out his breath. “What, then?”

“I don’t want to be coy,” she said primly, and took his hand. “But you’re not nearly crazy enough. Come on, Mitch. Let’s go meet the girls.”

## 21

### BALTIMORE

**M**orgenstern’s questions were spot on and difficult to answer. Kaye had done her best, but she felt she had goofed a few of her responses rather badly. She felt like a mouse in a room full of cats. Jackson appeared more and more confident.

“The fertility group concludes that Kaye Rafelson is not the proper individual to continue research in ERV knock outs,” Morgenstern concluded. “She has obvious bias. Her work is suspect.”

A moment of silence. The accusation was not rebutted; everyone was



considering their options and the map of the political minefield around them.

“All right,” Cross said, her face as serene as a baby’s. “I still don’t know where we stand. Should we continue to fund vaccines? Should we continue to look for ways to create organisms without any viral load?” Nobody answered. “Lars?” Cross inquired.

Nilson shook his head. “I am perplexed by Dr. Morgenstern’s statements. Dr. Rafelson’s work looks impressive to me.” He shrugged. “I know for a fact that human embryos implant in their mothers’ wombs with the aid of old viral genes. Dr. Morgenstern is undoubtedly familiar with this, probably more than I.”

“Very familiar,” Morgenstern said confidently. “Utilization of endogenous viral syncytin genes in simian development is interesting, but I can quote dozens of papers proving there is no rhyme or reason to this random occurrence. There are even more remarkable coincidences in the long history of evolution.”

“And the Temin model of viral contributions to the genome?”

“Brilliant, old, long since disproved.”

Nilson pushed his scattered notes and papers into a stack, squared them, and thumped them lightly on the table top. “All my life,” he said, “I have come to regard the basic principles of biology as tantamount to an act of faith. *Credo*, this I believe: that the chain of instruction arising from DNA to RNA to proteins never reverses. The Central Dogma. McClintock and Temin and Baltimore, among many others, proved the Central Dogma to be wrong, demonstrating that genes can produce products that insert copies of themselves, that retroviruses can write themselves to DNA as proviruses and stay there for many millions of years.”

Kaye saw Jackson regarding her with his sharp gray eyes. He tapped his pencil silently. They both knew Nilson was grandstanding and that this would not impress Cross.

“Forty years ago, we missed the boat,” Nilson continued. “I was one of those who opposed Temin’s ideas. It took us years to recognize the potential of retroviruses to wreak havoc, and when HIV arrived, we were unprepared. We did not have a crazy, creative bouquet of theories to choose from; we had killed them all, or ignored them, much the same. Tens of millions of our patients suffered for our own stubborn pride. Howard Temin was right; *I* was wrong.”

“I would not call it faith, I’d call it process and reason,” Jackson inter-

rupted, tapping his pencil harder. "It's kept us from making even more horrible blunders, like Lysenko."

Nilson was having none of this. "Ah, get thee behind me, Lysenko! Faith, reason, dogma, all add up to stubborn ignorance. Thirty years before that, we had missed the boat with Barbara McClintock and her jumping genes. And how many others? How many discouraged postdocs and interns and researchers? It was prideful, I see now, to hide our weaknesses and spite our fundamentalist enemies. We asserted our infallibility before school boards, politicians, corporations, investors, patients, whomever we thought might challenge us. We were arrogant. We were *men*, Ms. Cross. Biology was an incredible and archaic patriarchy with many of the aspects of an old boy network: secret signs, passwords, rituals of indoctrination. We held down, for a time at least, some of our best and brightest. No excuses. And once again we failed to see the coming juggernaut. HIV rolled over us, and then SHEVA rolled over us. It turned out we knew nothing whatsoever about sex and evolutionary variation, *nothing*. Yet some of us still act as if we know it all. We attempt to assess blame and escape our failures. Well, we *have* failed. We have failed to see the truth. These reports sum up our failure."

Cross seemed bemused. "Thank you, Lars. Heartfelt, I'm sure. But I still want to know, *where do we go from here?*" She hammered her fist on the table with each emphatic word.

Still stuck in his chair in the far corner, pushed back from the table, wearing his trademark gray jacket and yarmulke, Maurie Herskovitz raised his hand. "I think we have a clear-cut problem in epistemology," he said.

Cross squeezed her eyes shut and pressed the bridge of her nose. "Oh, please, Maurie, anything but *that*."

"Hear me out, Marge. Dr. Jackson tried to create a positive, a vaccine against SHEVA and other ERV. He failed. If, as Dr. Morgenstern accuses, Dr. Rafelson came to Americol to demonstrate that no babies would be born if we suppressed their genomic viruses, she has made her point. None have been born. Regardless of her motivations, her work is thorough. It is scientific. Dr. Jackson continues to put forth an hypothesis that the results of his labors seem to have disproved."

"Maurie, *where do we go from here?*" Cross repeated, her cheeks pinking.

Herskovitz lifted his hands. "If I could, I would put Dr. Rafelson in

charge of viral research at Americol. But that would only be to curse her with more managerial duties and less time in the laboratory. So, I would give her what she needs to conduct her research on her own terms, and let Dr. Jackson focus on what he is best suited for.” He peered happily at Jackson. “Administration. Marge, you and I can make sure he does it right.” Herskovitz then looked at everyone around the room, trying hard to appear serious.

The faces at the table were stony.

Jackson’s skin had turned a bluish shade of ivory. Kaye worried for a second that he might be on the verge of a heart attack. He ticked his pen in a brisk shave-and-a-haircut-two-bits. “I welcome, as always, Dr. Nilson’s and Dr. Herskovitz’s opinions. But I don’t think Americol wants a woman who may be losing her mind in charge of this particular area of research.”

Cross leaned back as if caught in a cold wind. Morgenstern’s watery gaze finally settled on Jackson with an attitude of dread expectancy.

“Dr. Rafelson, last night you spent some hours with our chief radiologist in the imaging lab. I noticed the billing request when I was picking up results from radiology this morning. I asked what the billing was for, and I was told that you were looking for God.”

Kaye managed to hold on to her pencil and not let it drop to the floor. Slowly, she brought her hands up to the tabletop. “I was having an unusual experience,” she said. “I wanted to find out what the cause might be.”

“You told the radiologist you felt God was inside your head. You had been having these experiences for some time, ever since the removal of your daughter by Emergency Action.”

“Yes,” Kaye said.

“Seeing God?”

“I’ve been experiencing certain psychological states,” Kaye said.

“Oh, come on, we’ve just been lectured by Dr. Nilson about truth and honesty. Will you deny your God three times, Dr. Rafelson?”

“What happened was private and has no influence on my work. I am appalled that it should be brought up at this meeting.”

“None of this is relevant? Other than the expense, some seven thousand dollars of unauthorized tests?”

Liz seemed thunderstruck.

“I’m willing to pay for that,” Kaye said.

Jackson lifted a paper-clipped set of invoices and rippled it in the air. “I see no evidence of your picking up the bill.”

Cross's calm look was replaced by indignant irritation—but at whom, Kaye could not tell. “Is this true?”

Kaye stammered, “It is a personal state of mind, of scientific interest. Almost half—”

“Where will you find God next, Kaye?” Jackson asked. “In your cunning viruses, shuffling around like holy ratchets, obeying rules only you can understand, explaining everything you can't? If God was my mentor, I'd be thrilled, it would all be so easy, but I am less fortunate. I have to rely on *reason*. Still, it is an honor to work with someone who can simply ask a higher authority where truth waits to be discovered.”

“Astonishing,” Nilson said. In the corner, Herskovitz sat up. His smile appeared cut in plaster.

“It is not like that,” Kaye said.

“That's enough, Robert,” Cross said.

Jackson had not moved since beginning his accusation. He sat half-slumped in his chair. “None of us can afford to give up our scientific principles,” he said. “Especially not now.”

Cross stood abruptly. Nilson and Morgenstern looked at Jackson, then at Cross, and got to their feet, pushing back their chairs.

“I have what I need,” Cross said.

“Dr. Rafelson, is God behind evolution?” Jackson called out. “Does he hold all the answers, does he jerk us around like puppets on a string?”

“No,” Kaye said, eyes unfocused.

“Are you really sure, now, in a way none of the rest of us can be, with your *special knowledge*?”

“Robert, that is enough!” Cross roared. Seldom had any of them heard Cross when she was angry, and her voice was painful in its crackling intensity. She let the stack of papers in her hands slip back to the table and spill onto the floor. She glared at Jackson, then shook her fists at the ceiling. “Absolutely unbelievable!”

“Astonishing,” Nilson repeated, much quieter.

“I apologize,” Jackson said, not at all chastened. His color had returned. He looked vigorous and healthy.

“This is over,” Cross declared. “Everyone go home. Now.”

Liz helped Kaye from the room. Jackson did not deign to look at them as they left.

“What in hell is going on?” Liz asked Kaye in an undertone as they walked toward the elevator.

“I'm fine,” Kaye said.

“What in hell was La Robert on about?”  
Kaye did not know where to begin.

## 22

## OREGON

**E**ileen escorted Mitch down the slope on a crude stairway made of boards hammered into the dirt. As they walked through a copse of pines and up a short embankment, gaining a closer view of the camp, Mitch saw that a large excavation of about ten thousand square feet, L-shaped and covered by two joined Quonset huts, had been hidden by brush arranged over netting. From the air, the entire site would be little more than a smudge in the landscape.

“This looks like a terrorist base, Eileen. How do you conceal the heat signature?” he asked half-seriously.

“It’s going to terrorize North American anthropology,” Eileen said. “That’s for sure.”

“Now you’re scaring me,” Mitch said. “Do I have to sign an NDA or something?”

“I trust you,” Eileen said. She rested a hand on his shoulder.

“Show me now, Eileen, or just let me go home.”

“Where *is* home?” she asked.

“My truck,” Mitch said.

“That heap?”

Mitch mockingly implored forgiveness with his broad-fingered hands.

Eileen asked, “Do you believe in providence?”

“No,” Mitch said. “I believe in what I see with my eyes.”

“That may take a while. We’re into high-tech survey for now. We haven’t actually pulled up the specimens. We have a benefactor. He’s spending lots of money to help us. I think you’ve heard of him. Here’s his point man now.”

Mitch saw a tent flap open about fifty feet away. A lean, red-headed figure poked out, stood, and brushed dust from his hands. He shaded his eyes and looked around, then spotted the pair on the bluff and lifted his chin in greeting. Eileen waved.

Oliver Merton jogged toward them across the pale, rugged ground.

Merton was the science journalist who had dogged Kaye’s career and

footsteps during the SHEVA discoveries. Mitch had never been sure whether to look on Merton as a friend or an opportunist or just a damned fine journalist. He was probably all three.

“Mitch!” Merton called. “How grand to see you again!”

Merton stuck out his hand. Mitch shook it firmly. The writer’s hand was warm and dry and confident. “My god, all Eileen told me was she was going to fetch someone with experience. How absolutely, bloody appropriate. Mr. Daney will be delighted.”

“You always seem to get there ahead of me,” Mitch said.

Merton shaded his eyes against the sun. “They’re having a kind of mid-afternoon powwow, if that’s the right word, back in the tents. Bit of a knockdown, really. Eileen, I think they’re going to decide to uncover one of the girls and take a direct look. You have perfect timing, Mitch. I’ve had to wait days to see anything but videos.”

“It’s a committee decision?” Mitch asked, turning to Eileen.

“I couldn’t stand having all of this on my shoulders,” Eileen confessed. “We have a fine team. Very argumentative. And Daney’s money works wonders. Good beer at night.”

“Is Daney here?” Mitch asked Merton.

“Not yet,” Merton said. “He’s shy and he hates discomfort.” They hunkered their shoulders against a gritty swirl blowing up the gully. Merton wiped his eyes with a handkerchief. “Not his kind of place at all.”

The wide, bush-studded net flapped in the afternoon breeze, dropping bits of dry branch and leaf on them as they stooped to enter the pit. The excavation stretched about forty feet north, then branched east to form an L. Mottled sunlight filtered through the net. They descended four meters on a metal ladder to the floor of the pit.

Aluminum beams crossed the pit at two-meter intervals. Rises in the pit, like little mesas, were topped with wire grids. Over the mesas, some of the beams supported white boxes with lenses and other apparatus jutting from the bottoms. As Mitch watched, the closest box slowly railed right a few centimeters and resumed humming.

“Side scanner?” he asked.

Eileen nodded. “We’ve scraped off most of the mud and we’re peeking through the final layer of tephra. We can see about sixty centimeters into the hard pack.” She walked ahead.

The Quonset structure—arched wooden beams covered by sheets of

stamped, ribbed steel and a few milky sheets of fiberglass—sheltered the long stroke of the L. Sunlight poured through the fiberglass sheeting. They walked over flat, hard dirt and haphazard cobbles of river rock between the high, irregular walls. Eileen let Mitch go first, ascending a dirt staircase to the left of a flat-topped rise being surveyed by two more white boxes.

“I don’t dare walk under these damned things,” Eileen said. “I have enough skin blotches as is.”

Mitch knelt beside the mesa to look at alternating layers of mud and tephra, capped by sand and silt. He saw an ash fall—tephra—followed by a lahar, a fast-moving slurry of hot mud made of ash, dirt, and glacier melt. The sand and silt had arrived over time. At the bottom of the mesa, he saw more alternating layers of ash, mud, and river deposits: A deep book going back far longer than recorded history.

“Computers do some really big math and show us a picture of what’s down there,” Eileen said. “We actually debated whether to dig any deeper or just cover it over again and submit the videos and sensor readings. But I guess the committee is going for a traditional invasion.”

Mitch moved his hand in a sweeping motion. “Ash came down for several days,” he said. “Then a lahar swept down the river basin. Up here, it slopped over but didn’t carry off the bodies.”

“Very *good*,” Merton said, genuinely impressed.

“Want to see our etchings?” Eileen asked.

Eileen unrolled a display sheet in the conference tent and tuned it to her wrist computer. “Still getting used to all this tech,” she murmured. “It’s wonderful, when it works.”

Merton watched over Mitch’s shoulder. Two women in their thirties, dressed in jeans and short-sleeved khaki shirts, stood at the rear of the long, narrow tent, debating in soft but angry voices. Eileen did not see fit to introduce them, which clued Mitch that she was not the only high-powered anthropologist working the dig.

The screen glowed faintly in the tent’s half-light. Eileen told the computer to run a slide show.

“These are from yesterday,” she said. “We’ve done around twenty-seven complete scans. Redundancy upon redundancy, just to be sure we’re not making it up. Oliver says he’s never seen a more frightened bunch of scientists.”

“I haven’t,” Merton affirmed.

The first image showed the pale ghost of a skeleton curled in fetal position, surrounded by what looked like sheets of grass matting, a few stones, and a cloud of pebbles. "Our first. We're calling her Charlene. As you can see, she's fairly modern *Homo sap.* Prominent chin, relatively high forehead. But here's the tomographic reconstruction from our multiple sweeps." A second image came up and showed a dolichocephalic, or long-headed, skull. Eileen told the computer to rotate this image.

Mitch scowled. "Looks Australian," he said.

"She probably is," Eileen said. "About twenty years of age. Trapped and asphyxiated by hot mud. There are five other skeletons, one close to Charlene, the others clustered about four meters away. All are female. No infants. And no sign of males. The grass matting has decayed, of course. Just molds remain. We have a shadow mold around Charlene, a cast of fine silt from seepage through the mud and ash showing the outlines of her body. Here's a tomographic image of what that cast would look like, if we could manage to pry it loose from the tephra and the rest of the overburden."

A distorted ghost of a head, neck, and shoulders appeared and rotated smoothly on the display sheet. Mitch felt odd, standing in a tent that would have been familiar to Roy Chapman Andrews or even to Darwin himself, while staring down at the rolled-out sheet of the computer display.

He asked Eileen to rotate the image of Charlene again.

As the image swung around and around, he began to discern facial features, a closed eye, a blob of ear, hair matted and curled, a hint of cooked and distorted flesh slumped from the back of the skull.

"Pretty awful," Merton said.

"They suffocated before the heat got to them," Eileen said. "I hope they did, anyway."

"Early-stage Tierra del Fuegan?" Mitch asked.

"That's what most of us think. From the Australian migration out of South and Central America."

Such migrations had been charted more and more often in the last fifteen years; Australian skeletons and associated artifacts found near the tip of South America had been dated to older than thirty thousand years BP, before the present.

The two other women walked around them to reach the exit, as serious and unsocial as porcupines. A plump, red-faced woman a few years younger than Eileen held the flap open for them then stepped in and stood before Mitch. "Is this the famous Mitch Rafelson?" she asked Eileen.



“Mitch, meet Connie Fitz. I told her I’d bring you here.”

“Delighted to meet you, after all these years.” Fitz wiped her hands on a dusty towel hanging from her belt before shaking hands. “Have you showed him the good stuff?”

“We’re getting there.”

“Best picture of Gertie is on sweep 21,” Fitz advised.

“I know,” Eileen said testily. “It’s my show.”

“Sorry. I’m the mother hen,” Fitz said. “The others are still arguing.”

“Spare me,” Eileen said. Another image cast their faces in a pale greenish light.

“Say hello to Gertie,” Merton said. He glanced up at Mitch, waiting to see his reaction.

Mitch poked the surface of the screen, making the light pool under his finger. He looked up, on the edge of anger. “You’re kidding me. This is a joke.”

“No joke,” Merton said.

Eileen magnified the image. Then, clearing his throat, Mitch asked, “Fraud?”

“What do you think?” Eileen asked.

“They’re in close association? Not in different layers?”

Eileen nodded. “They were buddies, probably traveling together. No infants, but as you can see, Gertie was maybe fifteen or sixteen, and she was probably gravid when the ash covered her.”

“Either that or she ate babies,” Merton said. Another twitch of the lip from Eileen.

“Oliver’s on borrowed time,” Fitz said.

“Matriarchy,” Merton accused, deadpan.

The tent suddenly seemed very stuffy. Mitch would have sat down had there been a convenient chair. “She looks early. Different from Charlene. Is she a hybrid?” he asked.

“No one’s willing to say,” Eileen replied. “You’ll like our late-night debates. A few weeks back, when I wanted you to join us, everyone shouted me down. Now, we’re all at each other’s throats, and Oliver, I’m told, convinced Daney it was time.”

“I did,” Merton said.

“Personally, I’m glad you’re here,” Eileen added.

“I’m not,” Fitz said. “If the feds find out about you, if there’s any publicity at all, we’re NAGPRA toast.”

“Tell me more, Mitch,” Eileen suggested.

Mitch massaged the back of his neck and for the ninth time watched the image of the skull grow and rotate. "Skull seems compressed. She's long-headed, more even than the Australian. There's a flint implement near her hand, and she's carrying some sort of grass bag over her shoulder, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're not."

"Filled with what looks like bush or small tree roots."

"Desperation diet," Fitz said.

"Maybe that was just her assignment, gathering roots for the stone soup."

Merton looked puzzled. Eileen explained stone soup.

"How colonial," Merton said.

"Ever the B-movie Brit, aren't you?" Fitz said.

"Please, children," Eileen warned.

"Relatively tall, taller than Charlene, maybe, and pretty robust, heavy boned," Mitch continued, trying to talk himself out of what he was seeing. "Sloping forehead, mid-sized to small brain case, but the face is fairly flat. Impressive supraorbital torus. A bit of a sagittal keel, even an occipital torus. I'd love to get a better look at the incisors."

"Shovel-shaped," Eileen said.

Mitch rubbed his limp hand to still the tingling and looked at the others as if all of them might be crazy. "Gertie is much too early. She looks like Broken Hill 1. She's *Homo erectus*."

"Obviously," Fitz said with a sniff.

"They've been extinct for more than three hundred thousand years," Mitch said.

"Apparently not," Eileen said.

Mitch laughed and stood back with a snap as if he had been leaning over a wasp that had suddenly taken flight. "Jesus."

"Is that it?" Eileen asked. "Is that the most you can say?" She was kidding, but her tone had an edge.

"You've had longer to get used to it," Mitch said.

"Who says we're used to it?" Eileen asked.

"What about the fetus?"

"Too early and too little detail," Fitz said. "It's probably a lost cause."

"I'm thinking we should drive a tube, take a thin core sample, and PCR mitochondrial DNA from the remaining integuments," Merton said.

"Dreamer," Fitz said. "They're twenty thousand years old. Besides, the lahar cooked them."

“Not to mush,” Merton countered.

“Think like a scientist, not a journalist.”

“Shh,” Eileen said in deference to Mitch, who was still staring at the rolled-out screen, mesmerized. “Here’s what we have on the central group,” she said, and paged through another set of ghostly images. “Gertie and Charlene are outliers. These four are Hildegard, Natasha, Sonya, and Penelope. Hildegard was probably the oldest, in her late thirties and already racked with arthritis.”

Hildegard, Natasha, and Sonya were clearly *Homo sapiens*. Penelope was another *Homo erectus*. They lay entwined as if they had died hugging each other, a mandala of bones, elegant in their sad way.

“Some of the hardliners are calling this a flood deposition of unassociated remains,” Fitz said.

“How would *you* answer them?” Eileen challenged Mitch, reverting to his teacher of old.

Mitch was still trying to remember to breathe. “They’re fully articulated,” he said. “They have their arms around each other. They don’t lie at odd angles, tossed together. This is in no way a flood deposit.”

Mitch was startled to watch Fitz and Eileen hug each other. “These women *knew* each other,” Eileen agreed, tears of relief dripping down her cheeks. “They worked together, traveled together. A nomadic band, caught in camp by a burp from Mount Hood. I can feel it.”

“Are you with us?” Fitz asked, her eyes bright and suspicious.

“*Homo erectus*. North America. Twenty thousand years ago,” Mitch said. Then, frowning, he asked, “Where are the males?”

“To hell with that,” Fitz fumed. “Are you with us?”

“Yeah,” Mitch said, sensing the tension and Eileen’s discomfort at his hesitation. “I’m with you.” Mitch put his good arm around Eileen’s shoulders, sharing the emotion.

Oliver Merton clasped his hands like a boy anticipating Christmas. “You realize that this could be a political bombshell,” he said.

“For the Indians?” Fitz asked.

“For us all.”

“How so?”

Merton grinned like a fiend. “Two different species, living together. It’s as if someone’s teaching us a lesson.”

## NEW MEXICO

**D**icken showed his pass at the Pathogenics main gate. The three young, burly guards there—machine pistols slung over their shoulders—waved him through. He drove the cart to the valet area and presented the pass for his car.

“Going for a drink,” he told the serious-faced middle-aged woman as she inspected his release.

“Did I ask?” She gave him a seasoned, challenging smile.

“No,” he admitted.

“Don’t tell us anything,” she advised. “We have to report every little thing. Vodka, white wine, or local beer?”

Dicken must have looked flustered.

“I’m joking,” she said. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

She returned driving his leased Malibu, adapted for handicapped drivers.

“Nice setup, all the stuff on the wheel,” she said. “Took me a bit to figure it out.”

He accepted the inspection pass, made sure it was completely filled out—there had been some trouble with such things yesterday—and slipped it into a special holder in the visor. The sun was lingering over the rocky gray-and-brown hills beyond the main Pathogenics complex. “Thanks,” he said.

“Enjoy,” the valet said.

He took the main road out of the complex and drove through rush hour traffic, following the familiar track into Albuquerque, then pulled into the parking lot of the Marriott. Crickets were starting up and the air was tolerable. The hotel rose over the parking lot in one graceless pillar, tan and white against the dark blue night sky, proudly illuminated by big floodlights set around stretches of deep green lawn. Dicken walked into a low-slung restaurant wing, visited the men’s room, then came out and turned left to enter the bar.

The bar was just starting to crowd. Two regulars sat at the bar—a woman in her late thirties, looking as if life and her partners had ridden her hard, and a sympathetic elderly man with a long nose and close-set eyes.

The worn-down woman was laughing at something the long-nosed man had just said.

Dicken sat on a tall stool by a high, tiny table beside a fake plant in an adobe pot. He ordered a Michelob when the waitress got around to him, then sat watching the people come and go, nursing his beer and feeling miserably out of place. Nobody was smoking, but the air smelled cold and stale, with a tang of beer and liquor.

Dicken reached into his pocket and withdrew his hand, then, under the table, unfolded a red serviette. He palmed the serviette over the damp napkin on the table, also red, and left it there.

At eight, after an hour and a half, his beer almost gone and the waitress starting to look predatory, he pushed off the stool, disgusted.

Someone touched his shoulder and Dicken jumped.

“How does James Bond do it?” asked a jovial fellow in a green sport jacket and beige slacks. With his balding pate, round, red Santa nose, lime green golf shirt bulging at the belly, and belt tightened severely to reclaim some girth, the middle-aged man looked like a tourist with a snootful. He smelled like one, too.

“Do what?” Dicken asked.

“Get the babes when they all know they’re just going to die.” The balding man surveyed Dicken with a jaundiced, watery eye. “I can’t figure it.”

“Do I know you?” Dicken asked gravely.

“I’ve got friends watching every porthole. We know the local spooks, and this place is not as haunted as some.”

Dicken put down his beer. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

“Is Dr. Jurie your peer?” the man asked softly, pulling up another stool.

Dicken knocked his stool over in his haste to get up. He left the bar quickly, on the lookout for anyone too clean-cut, too vigilant.

The balding man shrugged, reached across the table to grab a handful of peanuts, then crumpled Dicken’s red serviette and slipped it into his pocket.

Dicken drove away from the hotel and parked briefly on a side street beside a used car lot. He was breathing heavily. “Christ, Christ, Chee-rist,” he said softly, waiting for his heart to slow.

His cell phone rang and he jumped, then flipped it open.

“Dr. Dicken?”

“Yes.” He tried to sound coldly professional.

“This is Laura Bloch. I believe we have an appointment.”

Dicken drove up behind the blue Chevrolet and switched off his engine and lights. The desert surrounding Tramway Road was quiet and the air was warm and still; city lights illuminated low, spotty cumulus clouds to the south. A door swung open on the Chevrolet and a man in a dark suit got out and walked back to peer into his open window.

“Dr. Dicken?”

Dicken nodded.

“I’m Special Agent Bracken, Secret Service. ID, please?”

Dicken produced his Georgia driver’s license.

“Federal ID?”

Dicken held out his hand and the agent whisked a scanner over the back. He had been chipped six years ago. The agent glanced at the scanner display and nodded. “We’re good,” he said. “Laura Bloch is in the car. Please proceed forward and take a seat in the rear.”

“Who was the guy in the bar?” Dicken asked.

Special Agent Bracken shook his head. “I’m sure I haven’t the faintest idea, sir.”

“Joke?” Dicken asked.

Bracken smiled. “He was the best we could do on short notice. Good people with experience are kind of in short supply now, if you get my meaning. Slim pickings for honest folks.”

“Yeah,” Dicken said. Special Agent Bracken opened the door and Dicken walked to the Chevrolet.

Bloch’s appearance was a surprise to him. He had never seen pictures and at first he was not impressed. With her prominent eyes and fixed expression, she resembled a keen little pug. She held out her hand and they shook before Dicken slid in beside her on the rear seat, lifting his leg to clear the door frame.

“Thank you for meeting with me,” she said.

“Part of the assignment, I guess.”

“I’m curious why Jurie asked for you,” Bloch said. “Any theories?”

“Because I’m the best there is,” Dicken said.

“Of course.”

“And he wants to keep me where he can see me.”

“Does he know?”

“That NIH is keeping an eye on him? No doubt. That I’m speaking with you, now, I certainly hope not.”

Bloch shrugged. “Matters little in the long run.”

“I should get back soon. I’ve been gone a little too long for comfort, probably.”

“This will just take a few minutes. I’ve been told to brief you.”

“Who told you?”

“Mark Augustine said you should be prepped before things start happening.”

“Say hello to Mark,” Dicken said.

“Our man in Damascus,” Bloch said.

“Beg your pardon? I don’t get the reference.”

“Saw the light on the road to Damascus.” She regarded Dicken with one eye half closed. “He’s being very helpful. He tells us Emergency Action is soon going to be forced to do some questionable things. Their scientific underpinnings are coming under severe scrutiny. They have to hit pay dirt within a certain window of public fear, and that window may be closing. The public is getting tired of standing on tiptoes for the likes of Rachel Browning. Browning has put all her hopes on Sandia Pathogenics. So far, she’s keeping the Hill off her back by appealing to fear, national security, and national defense, all wrapped in tight secrecy. But it’s Mark’s belief that Pathogenics will have to violate some pretty major laws to get what they want, even should it exist.”

“What laws?”

“Let’s leave that open for now. What I’m here to tell you is that the political winds are about to shift. The White House is sending out feelers to Congress on rescinding Emergency Action’s blanket mandate. Cases are coming up in the Supreme Court.”

“They’ll support EMAC. Six to three.”

“Right,” Bloch said. “But based on our polling, we’re pretty sure that’s going to backfire. What’s the science look like so far, from the Sandia perspective?”

“Interesting. Nothing very useful to Browning. But I’m not privy to what’s going on with all the samples brought in from Arizona—”

“The Sable Mountain School,” Bloch said.

“That’s the main source.”

“Goddamn bastard is consistent.”

Dicken sat back and waited for Bloch’s face to clear an expression of

angry disgust, then concluded, "There's no evidence that social interaction or stress is causing viral recombination. Not in SHEVA kids."

"So why is Jurie persisting?"

"Momentum, mostly. And fear. Real fear. Jurie is convinced that puberty is going to do the trick. That, and pregnancy."

"Jesus," Bloch said. "What do you think?"

"I doubt it. But it's still a possibility."

"Do they suspect you're working with outside interests? Beyond NIH, I mean?"

"Of course," Dicken said. "They'd be fools not to."

"So, what is it with Jurie—a death wish?"

Dicken shook his head. "Calculated risk. He thinks I could be useful, but he'll bring me into the loop only when it's necessary and not a second before. Meanwhile, he keeps me busy doing far-out stuff."

"How do the others feel about what Pathogenics is doing?"

"Nervous."

Bloch clenched her teeth.

Dicken watched her jaw muscles work. "Sorry not to be more helpful," he said.

"I will never understand scientists," she murmured.

"I don't understand people," Dicken said. "Anybody."

"Fair enough. All right," Bloch said. "We have about a week and a half. Supreme Court is scheduled to release their decision on *Remick v. the state of Ohio*. Senator Gianelli wants to be ready when the White House is forced to cut a deal."

Dicken fixed her gaze and raised his hand. "May I have my say?"

"Of course," Bloch said.

"No half measures. Bring them down all at once. Tell the big boys Department of Health and Human Services needs to revoke EMAC's blanket national security exception to 45 CFR 46, protection of human subjects, and exceptions to 21 CFR parts 50 and . . . amended, what is it, 312? 321? Informed consent waiver for viral national emergency," Dicken said. "Are they going to do that?"

Bloch smiled, impressed. "21 CFR 50.24 actually applies. I don't know. We've got some institutional review boards coming over to our side, but it's a slow process. EMAC still funds a boatload of research. Get us whatever you can for ammunition. I don't want to sound crass, but we need outrage, Dr. Dicken. We need more than just pitiful bones in a drawer."



Dicken tugged nervously on the door handle.

“We’re on the knife edge of public opinion here. It could go either way. Understand?” Bloch added.

“I know what you need,” Dicken said. “I’m just disgusted that it’s gone this far, and we’ve become so difficult to shock.”

“We don’t claim any moral high ground, but neither the senator nor I are in this for political advancement,” Bloch said. “The senator’s approval rating is at an all-time low, thirty-five percent, twenty percent undecided, and it’s because he’s outspoken on this issue. I’m beginning to take a dislike to our constituents, Dr. Dicken. I really am.”

Bloch offered him her small, pale hand. He paused, looking into her steady black eyes, then shook it and returned to his car.

Special Agent Bracken closed his door for him and leaned down to window level. “Some friends in the New Mexico State Police tell me that citizens around here aren’t happy about what’s going on at Sandia,” he said. “They—the police, and maybe the citizens—plan to engage in some civil disobedience, if you know what I mean. Not much we can do about it, and damned few details. Just a heads up.”

“Thanks,” Dicken said.

Bracken tapped the roof of the car. “Free to go, Dr. Dicken.”

## 24

### ARIZONA

**S**tella awoke before dawn and stared at the acoustic tile ceiling over her bunk. She was instantly vigilant, aware of her surroundings. The dormitory was quiet but she smelled something funny in the air: an absence. Then she realized she couldn’t smell anything at all. A peculiar sensation of claustrophobia came over her. For a moment, she thought she saw a pattern of dark colors form a circle over her bunk. Little flashes of red and green, like distant glowing insects, illuminated the circle, became tiny faces. She blinked, and the circle, the lights, the faces faded into the shadowy void of the ceiling tiles.

Stella felt a chill, as if she had seen a ghost.

Her thighs were damp. She reached under the covers with her hand and brought up her finger, curling it to keep the sheet clean. The finger was tipped with a smudge of black in the moonlight shining through

the windows. Stella made a little sound, not of fear—she knew what it probably was, Kaye had explained it years ago to her—but of deeper recognition.

Just that afternoon, she had seen spots of blood on a toilet lid in the bathroom. Not her own; some other girl's. She had wondered if somebody had cut herself.

Now she knew.

With a sigh, she wiped the blood on her nightgown, beneath the fabric of her short sleeve, then thought for a moment, and touched the finger to the tip of her tongue. The sensation—taste was not really the right word—was not entirely pleasant. She had done something that seemed to violate her body's rules. But slowly her sense of smell returned. The sensation on her tongue lingered, sharp with an undertone of mystery.

*I'm not ready*, she thought. And then remembered what Kaye had told her: *You won't believe you're ready. The body propels us.*

She lifted the sheets with her knees and then let them drop, wafting her own scent through the small gaps around her midriff. She smelled different, not unpleasant, a little sour, like yogurt. She liked her earlier smell better. She recognized it. This new smell was not welcome. She did not need any more difficulties.

*I don't care. I'm just not ready.*

She shivered suddenly, as if a ropey loop of emotion had been pulled, rasping, through her body, then felt a sudden contraction of muscles around her abdomen, a cascade of unexpected pleasure. The tip of her tongue seemed to expand. Her entire body flushed. She did not know whether she was dreaming or what was happening.

Stella kicked back the covers, then rolled on her side, wincing at the stickiness, wanting to get up and get clean, wash away the new smell. Slowly, as the minutes passed, she relaxed, closed her eyes. *Natural stuff. Not so bad. Mother told me.*

Her nostrils flared. Currents of slow air moved around the dormitory, propelled by drafts through the doorways, cracks in the ceiling; at night, it was possible sometimes for girls to scent and communicate, reassure each other, without getting out of bed. Stella was reasonably familiar with the circulation patterns of the building at different hours and with the wind outside coming from different directions.

Around the room, she smelled the other girls on their bunks and heard them moving quietly in the bars and shadows of moonlight. Some of them

moaned. One and then another coughed and softly called out her friends' names.

Celia rolled out of the bottom bunk and stood up beside Stella. Her eyes were large in the dim light, her face a moving blob of paleness framed by wild black hair. "Did you feel that?" she whispered.

"Shh," Stella said.

Felice's face joined Celia's beside Stella's bed.

"I think it's okay," Stella said, almost too softly for them to hear.

"We're getting-KUK our first periods," Celia said.

"All *together*?" Felice asked, squeaking.

Someone in another bunk heard and giggled.

"*Shh*," Stella insisted, wrinkling her face in warning. She sat up and looked along the rows of bunks. Some of the younger girls—a year or more younger—were still asleep. Then, her back tingling, Stella looked up at the video cameras mounted in the rafters. Moonlight reflected from the linoleum floor glinted in their tiny plastic eyes.

Four girls left their bunks and padded into the bathroom, walking bowlegged.

*Useless to hide it, Stella thought. They're going to know.*

And they would be even more frightened. She could predict that easily and with assurance. Everything different frightened the humans, and this was going to be very different.

## 25

### OREGON

**E**ileen set the Coleman lantern on a metal table and laid out the cold dinner: a nearly frozen loaf of white bread, Oscar Meyer bologna in a squat, rubbery cylinder, American cheese, and a chilled, half-eaten tin of Spam. A Tupperware box, yellow with age, contained cut celery stalks. She positioned two apples, three tangerines, and two cans of Coors beside this assortment. "Want to see the wine list?" she asked.

"Beer will do. Breakfast of diggers," Mitch said. The plastic roof of the hut over the long reach of the L-shaped excavation rattled in the wind rolling down the old riverbed.

Eileen sat in the canvas seat of her camp chair and let out her breath in

a sigh that was halfway to a shriek. But for them and the still-hidden bones, the excavation was empty. It was almost midnight. "I am *dead*," she proclaimed. "I can't take this anymore. Dig 'em out, don't dig 'em out, keep your cool when the academics start to scrap about emergence violations. The whole goddamned human race is so *primitive*."

Mitch cracked his can and tossed back a long gulp. The beer, almost tasteless but for a prolonged fizz, satisfied him intensely. He put down the can and picked up a slice of cheese, then prepared to peel back the wrapping. He turned it into a grand gesture. Eileen watched as he lifted the slice, rotated it on tripod fingers, and then, using his teeth, delicately lifted and pulled off the intercalary paper. He glanced at her with narrowed eyes and raised one thick eyebrow. "Expose 'em," he said.

"Think so?" Eileen asked.

"Give me that old-time revelation. I'd rather see them personally than trust future generations to do it better. But that's just me." The beer and exhaustion both relaxed Mitch and made him philosophical. "Bring them into the light. Rebirth," he said. "The Indians are right. This is a sacred moment. There should be ceremonies. We should be appeasing their troubled spirits, and our own. Oliver is right. They're here to teach us."

Eileen sniffed. "Some Indians don't want their theories contradicted," she said. "They'd rather live with fairy tales."

"The Indians in Kumash gave us shelter when Kaye was pregnant. They still refuse to hand their SHEVA kids over to Emergency Action. I've become more understanding of anybody the U.S. government has repeatedly lied to." Mitch raised his beer in toast. "Here's to the Indians."

Eileen shook her head. "Ignorance is ignorance. We can't afford to hang on to our childhood blankies. We're big boys and girls."

*Mostly girls*, Mitch thought. "Are anthropologists any more likely to see what's under their noses?"

Eileen pursed her lips. "Well, no," she said. "We've already got two in camp who insist these can't possibly be *Homo erectus*. They're creating a tall, stocky, thick-browed variety of homo sap on their laptops even as we speak. We're having a hell of a time convincing them to keep their mouths shut. Ignorant bitches, both of them. But don't tell anybody I said so."

"Absolutely," Mitch said.

Eileen had finished assembling a Spam and American cheese sandwich, with two stalks of celery sticking out like lunatic Gummy feet from the pressed layers of perfect crust. She bit into a corner and chewed thoughtfully.

Mitch wasn't particularly hungry, not that he minded the food. He had eaten much worse on previous sites—including a meal of roasted grubs on toast.

"Was it another SHEVA episode?" Eileen mused. "A massive leap between *Homo erectus* and *Homo sapiens*?"

"I wouldn't think so," Mitch said. "A little too radical even for SHEVA."

Eileen's speculative gaze rose beyond the rattling plastic roof. "Men," she said. "Men behaving badly."

"Uh-oh," Mitch said. "Here it comes."

"Men raiding other groups, taking prisoners. Not very choosy. Gathering up all the females with the appropriately satisfying orifices. Females only, whomever and whatever they might be."

"You think our absent males were raiders and rapists?" Mitch asked.

"Would *you* date a *Homo erectus*? I mean, if you weren't at the absolute bottom of any social hierarchy?"

Mitch thought of the mother in the cave in the Alps, more than a lifetime ago, and her loyal husband. "Maybe they were more gentle."

"Psychic flower children, Mitch?" Eileen asked. "I say these gals were all captives and they were abandoned when the volcano blew. Anything else is pure William Golding bullshit." Eileen was pushing the matter deliberately, playing both proponent and devil's advocate, trying to clear her head, or possibly his.

"I suppose the *Homo erectus* members of the group might have been slaves or servants—captives," Mitch said. "But I'm not so sure social life was that sophisticated back then, or that there were such fine gradations of status. My guess is they were traveling together. For protection, maybe, like different species of herd animals on the veldt. As equals. Obviously, they liked each other enough to die in each other's arms."

"Mixed species band? Does that fit anything in your experience with the higher apes?"

Mitch had to admit it did not. Baboons and chimps played together when they were young, but adult chimps ate baby baboons and monkeys when they could catch them. "Culture matters more than skin color," he said.

"But *this* gap . . . I just don't see it being bridgeable. It's too huge."

"Maybe we're tainted by recent history. Where were you born, Eileen?"

“Savannah, Georgia. You know that.”

“Kaye and I lived in Virginia.” Mitch let the thought hang there for a moment, trying to find a delicate way to phrase it.

“Plantation propaganda from my slave-owner ancestors, my thrice-great grandpappy, has tainted the entire last three hundred years. Is that what you’re suggesting?” Eileen asked, lips curling in a duelist’s smile, savoring a swift and jabbing return. “What a goddamned Yankee thing to say.”

“We know so little about what we’re capable of,” Mitch continued. “We are creatures of culture. There are other ways to think of this ensemble. If they weren’t equals, at least they worked together, respected each other. Maybe they smelled right to each other.”

“It’s becoming personal, isn’t it, Mitch? Looking for a way to turn this into a *real* example. Merton’s political bombshell.”

Mitch agreed to that possibility with a sly wink and a nod.

Eileen shook her head. “Women have always hung together,” she said. “Men have always been a sometime thing.”

“Wait till we find the men,” Mitch said, starting to feel defensive.

“What makes you think they stuck around?”

Mitch stared grimly at the plastic roof.

“Even if there *were* men nearby,” she said, “what makes you think we’ll be lucky enough to find them?”

“Nothing,” he said, and felt hazily that this was a lie.

Eileen finished her sandwich and drank half her can of Coors to chase it down. She had never liked eating very much and did it only to keep body and soul together. She was hungry and deliberate in bed, however. Orgasms allowed her to think more clearly, she had once confessed. Mitch remembered those times well enough, though they had not slept together since he had been twenty-three years old.

Eileen had called her seduction of the young anthropology grad student her biggest mistake. But they had stayed friends and colleagues all these years, capable of a loose and honest interaction that had no pretense of sexual expectation or disappointment. A remarkable friendship.

The wind rattled the roof again. Mitch listened to the hiss of the Coleman lantern.

“What happened between you and Kaye, after you got out of prison?” Eileen asked.

“I don’t know,” Mitch said, his jaw tightening. Her asking was a weird kind of betrayal, and she could sense his sudden burn.

“Sorry,” she said.

“I’m prickly about it,” he acknowledged. He felt a waft of air behind him before he saw the woman’s shadow. Connie Fitz stepped lightly over the hard-packed dirt and stood beside Eileen, resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Our little stew pot is about to boil over,” Fitz said. “I think we can hold the lid down for another two or three days, max. The zealots want to issue a press release. The hardliners want to keep it covered up.”

Eileen looked at Mitch with a crinkled lower lip. All that was outside her control, her expression said. “Enslaved women abandoned in camp by cowardly males,” she resumed, getting back to the main topic, her eyes bright in the Coleman’s pearly light.

“Do you really believe that?” Mitch asked.

“Oh, come on, Mitch. I don’t know what to believe.”

Mitch’s stomach worked over the meal with no conviction. “You should at least tell the students that they need to expand the perimeter,” he said. “There could very well be other bodies around, maybe within a few hundred yards.”

Fitz made a provisional moue of interest. “We’ve talked about it. But everybody wants a piece of the main dig, so nobody was enthusiastic about fanning out,” she said.

“You feel something?” Eileen asked Mitch. She leaned forward, her voice going mock-sepulchral. “Can you read these bones?”

Fitz laughed.

“Just a hunch,” Mitch said, wincing. Then, more quietly, “Probably not a very good one.”

“Will Daney continue to pay if we dawdle and poke around a couple of more days?” Fitz asked.

“Merton thinks he’s patient and he’ll pay plenty,” Eileen said. “He knows Daney better than any of us.”

“This could become every bit as bad as archaeology in Israel,” said Fitz, a natural pessimist. “Every site loaded with political implications. Do you think Emergency Action will come in and shut us down, using NAGPRA as an excuse?”

Mitch pondered, slow deliberation being about all he was capable of this late, this worn down by the day. “I don’t think they’re that crazy,” he said. “But the whole world’s a tinderbox.”

“Maybe we should toss in a match,” Eileen said.

## BALTIMORE

**K**aye woke to the sound of the bedside phone dweeding, sat straight up in bed, pulled her hair away from her face, and peered through sleep-fogged eyes at the edge of daylight slicing between the shutters. The clock said 5:07 A.M. She could not think who could be calling her at this hour.

Today was not going to be a good day, she knew that already, but she picked up the phone and plumped the pillow behind her into a cushion. “Hello.”

“I need to speak with Kaye Lang.”

“That’s me,” she said sleepily.

“Kaye, this is Luella Hamilton. You got in touch with us a little while ago.”

Kaye felt her adrenaline surge. Kaye had met Luella Hamilton fifteen years ago, when she had been a volunteer subject in a SHEVA study at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda. Kaye had taken a liking to the woman, but had not heard from her since driving west with Mitch to Washington state. “Luella? I don’t remember . . .”

“Well, you did.”

Suddenly Kaye held the phone close. She had heard something about the Hamiltons being connected to Up River. It was reputed to be a very choosy organization. Some claimed it was subversive. She had forgotten all about her letter; that had been the worst time for her, and she had reached out to anyone, even the extremists who claimed they could track and rescue children.

“Luella? I didn’t—”

“Well, since I knew you, they told me to make the return call. Is that okay?”

She tried to clear her head. “It’s good to hear your voice. How are you?”

“I’m expecting, Kaye. You?”

“No,” Kaye said. Luella had to be in her middle fifties. Talk about rolling the dice.

“It’s SHEVA again, Kaye,” Luella said. “But no time to chat. So listen close. You there, Kaye?”

“I hear you.”



“I want you to get to a scrambled line and call us again. A *good* scrambled line. You still have the number?”

“Yes,” Kaye said, wondering if it was in her wallet.

“You’ll get a cute mechanical voice. Our little robot. Leave your number and we might call you back. Then, we’ll go from there. All right, honey?”

Kaye smiled despite the tension. “Yes, Luella. Thank you.”

“Sorry to ring so early. Good-bye, dear.”

The phone went dead. Kaye immediately swung her legs out of bed and walked into the kitchen to fix coffee. Thought about trying to reach Mitch and tell him.

But it was too early, and probably not a good idea to spread such news around when any phone call was risky.

She stood by the window looking out over Baltimore and thought about Stella in Arizona, wondering how she was doing, and how long it would be until she saw her again.

Something snapped and she heard herself making little growls, like a fox. For a moment, clutching the coffee cup in her trembling hand, Kaye felt a blind, helpless rage. “*Give me back my daughter, you FUCKHEADS,*” she rasped. Then she dropped back into the nearest chair, shaking so hard the coffee spilled. She set the cup on a side table and wrapped herself in her arms. With the thick terry sleeve of her robe, she wiped tears of helplessness from her eyes. “Calm down, *dear,*” she said, trying to copy Mrs. Hamilton’s strong contralto.

It was not going to be an easy day. Kaye strongly suspected she was going to be put at liberty. Fired. Ending her life as a scientist forever, but opening up her options so she could go get her daughter and reunite her family.

“Dreamer,” she said, with none of the conviction of Luella Hamilton.

## 27

### ARIZONA

**T**hey pumped a thick strawberry smell into the dorm at eight in the morning. Stella opened her eyes and pinched her nose, moaning.

“What now?” Celia asked in the bunk below.

The humans did that whenever they wanted to do something the children

might object to. Shots, mass blood samples, medical exams, dorm checks for contraband.

Next came a wave of Pine-Sol, blowing in through the vent pipes slung under the frame roof. The smell came in through Stella's mouth when she breathed, making her gag.

She sat on the edge of the bed in her nightgown, her stomach twisting and her chest heaving. Three men in isolation suits walked down the center aisle of the dormitory. One of the men, she saw, was not a man; it was Joanie, shorter and stockier than the others, her blank face peering through the plastic faceplate of the floppy helmet.

Joanie reminded Stella of Fred Trinket's mother; she had that same calm, fated expectancy of everything and anything, with no emotional freight attached.

The suited trio stopped by a bed four down from Stella's. The girl in the top bunk, Julianne Nicorelli, not a member of Stella's deme, climbed down at a few soft words from Joanie. She looked apprehensive but not scared, not yet. Sometimes the counselors and teachers ran drills in the camp, odd drills, and the kids were never told what they were up to.

Joanie turned and walked deliberately toward Stella's bunk. Stella slid down quickly, not using the ladder, and flattened her nightgown where it had ridden up above her knees. She hid her chest with her hands; the fabric was a little sheer, and she didn't like the way the men were looking at her.

"You, too, Stella," Joanie said, her voice hollow and hissy behind the helmet. "We're going on a trip."

"How many?" Celia asked.

Joanie smiled humorlessly. "Special trip. Reward for good grades and good behavior. The rest get to eat breakfast early."

This was a lie. Julianne Nicorelli got terrible grades, not that anyone cared.

BALTIMORE

**H**eads up. Marge will be here in twenty minutes.” Liz Cantrera said. “Ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Kaye said, and took a deep breath. She looked around the lab to see if there was anything that could be put away or cleaned up. Not that it mattered. It was her last day.

“You look fine,” Liz said sadly, straightening Kaye’s lapels.

Marge Cross understood the messy bedrooms of science. And Kaye doubted that she wanted to check up on their housekeeping.

Around Kaye, Cross was almost always cheerful. She seemed to like Kaye and to trust her as much as she trusted anybody. Today, however, Cross was saying little, tapping her lip with her finger and nodding. She lifted her head to peer at the pipes hanging from the ceiling. She seemed to study a series of red tags hanging from various pressurized lines.

Only three people accompanied Cross. Two handsome young men in charcoal gray suits made notes on e-tabs. A slender young woman with long, thin blonde hair and a short, upturned nose took photos with a pen-sized camera.

Liz kept to the background, conspicuously allowing Kaye the point position. She gave them all a brief tour, well aware they were taking inventory in preparation for a transfer or a shutdown.

“We’ve lost,” Cross said. “Everything this company has been charged to do by the government and by the people has turned into a can of worms,” she added quietly, and chewed her lower lip. “I hear you did a good job on the Hill this week.” Cross regarded Kaye with a faint smile.

“It went okay.” Kaye shifted her eyes to one side and shrugged. “Rachel Browning tried to pull down my shorts.”

“Did she succeed?” Cross asked.

“Got them down to my curlies,” Kaye said.

The young men looked ready to appear shocked, should Cross be. Cross laughed. “Jesus, Kaye. I never know what I’m going to hear from you. You drive my PR folks nuts.”

“That’s why I try to keep my head down and stay quiet.”

“We’re not learning how to stop SHEVA,” Cross said reflectively, still examining the ceiling pipes.

“That’s true,” Kaye said.

“You’re glad.”

Once again, Kaye felt it was not her place to answer, that she had responsibilities to others besides herself.

“La Robert is failing, too, but he won’t admit it,” Cross said. She waved her hands at the others in the lab. “Time to go, kiddies. Leave us sacred monsters alone for a while.”

The young men filed through the door. The slender blond tried to remind Cross of appointments later in the morning.

“Cancel them,” Cross instructed her.

Liz had stayed behind, solicitous of Kaye. The way she twitched, Kaye thought her assistant might try to physically intervene to protect her.

Cross smiled warmly at Liz. “Honey, can you add anything to our duet?”

“Not a thing,” Liz admitted. “Should I go?” she asked Kaye.

Kaye nodded.

Liz picked up her coat and purse and followed the blond through the door.

“Let’s take the express to the top floor,” Cross suggested pleasantly, and put her arm around Kaye’s shoulder. “It’s been far too long since we put our heads together. I want you to explain what happened. What you thought you’d find in radiology.”

The Americol boardroom on the twentieth floor was huge and extravagant, with a long table cut lengthwise from an oak trunk, handmade William Morris-style chairs that seemed to float on their slender legs, and walls covered with early twentieth-century illustrative art.

Cross told the room what to do and two of the walls folded up, revealing electronic whiteboards. Sections of the table rose up like toy soldiers, thin personal monitors.

“If I were starting over again,” Cross said, “I’d turn this into a kindergarten classroom. Little chairs and wagons with little cartons of milk. That’s how ignorant we are. But . . . We do cling to our beauty and wealth. We like to feel we are in control and always will be.”

Kaye listened attentively, but did not respond.

Cross pushed another button and the whiteboards replayed long strings

of scrawled notes. Kaye guessed these were a frozen record of several late-night and early-morning pacing sessions, Cross alone up here in the heights, wielding her little pen wand, moving along the boards like a sorcerous queen scattering spells on the walls of her castle.

Kaye could decipher very few of the scrawls. Cross's handwriting was notorious.

"Nobody's seen this," Cross murmured. "It's hard to read, isn't it?" she asked Kaye. "I used to have perfect penmanship." She held up her swollen knuckles.

Kaye wondered where Cross intended to go with this. Was it all some devious way of letting her go gracefully, with a hearty handshake?

"The secret of life," Cross said, "lies in understanding how little things talk to each other. Correct?"

"Yes," Kaye said.

"And you've maintained, from before the beginnings of SHEVA, that viruses are part of the arsenal of communications our cells and bodies use to talk."

"That's why you brought me to Americol."

Cross dismissed that with a slight frown and a lift of one shoulder. "So you turned yourself into a laboratory to prove a point, and gave birth to a SHEVA child. Gutsy, and more than a little stupid."

Kaye clenched her jaw.

Cross knew she had touched an exposed nerve. "I think the Jackson clique is right on the money. Experience biases you in favor of believing SHEVA is benign, a natural phenomenon that we'll just have to knuckle under and accept. Don't fight it. It's bigger than all of us."

"I'm fond of my daughter," Kaye said stiffly.

"I don't doubt it. Hear me out. I'm going somewhere with this, but I don't know where just yet." Cross paced along the whiteboards, arms folded, tapping one elbow with the remote. "My companies are my children. That's a cliché, but it's true, Kaye. I am as stupid and gutsy as you were. I have turned my companies into an experiment in politics and human history. We're very much alike, except I had neither the opportunity—nor, frankly, the inclination—to put my body on the line. Now, we both stand to lose what we love most."

Cross turned and flicked the whiteboards clean with the press of a button. Her face curled in disgust. "It's all shit. This room is a waste of money. You can't help but think that whoever built all this knew what they were

doing, had all the answers. It's an architectural lie. I *hate* this room. Everything I just erased was drivel. Let's go somewhere else." Cross was visibly angry.

Kaye folded her hands cautiously. She had no idea what was going to happen, not now. "All right," she said. "Where?"

"No limos. Let's lose the luxuries for a few hours. Let's get back to little chairs and cookies and cartons of milk." Cross smiled wickedly, revealing strong, even, but speckled teeth. "Let's get the hell out of this building."

A gray, drizzly light greeted them as they pushed through the glass doors to the street. Cross hailed a cab.

"Your cheeks are pinking," she told Kaye as they climbed into the backseat. "Like they want to say something."

"That still happens," Kaye admitted with some embarrassment.

Cross gave the driver an address Kaye did not recognize. The gray-haired man, a Sikh wearing a white turban, looked over his shoulder.

"I will need card in advance," he said.

Cross reached for her belt pouch.

"My treat," Kaye said, and handed the driver her credit card. The cab pushed off through traffic.

"What was it like, having those cheeks—like signboards?" Cross asked.

"It was a revelation," Kaye said. "When my daughter was young, we practiced cheek-flashing. It was like teaching her how to speak. I missed them when they faded."

Cross watched her absorbedly, then gave a little start and said, "I learned I couldn't have children when I was twenty-five. Pelvic inflammatory disease. I was a big, ungainly girl and had a hard time getting dates. I had to take my men where I found them, and one of them . . . Well. No children, and I decided not to reverse the scarring, because there was never a man I trusted enough to be a father. I got rich pretty early and the men I was attracted to were like pleasant toys, needy, eager to please, not very reliable."

"I'm sorry," Kaye said.

"Sublimation is the soul of accomplishment," Cross said. "I can't say I understand what it means to be a parent. I can only make comparisons with how I feel about my companies, and that probably isn't the same."

“Probably not,” Kaye said.

Cross clucked her tongue. “This isn’t about funding or firing you or anything so simple. We’re both explorers, Kaye. For that reason alone, we need to be open and frank.”

Kaye peered out the taxi window and shook her head, amused. “It isn’t working, Marge. You’re still rich and powerful. You’re still my boss.”

“Well, hell,” Cross said with mock disappointment, and snapped her fingers.

“But it may not matter,” Kaye said. “I’ve never been very good at concealing my true feelings. Maybe you’ve noticed.”

Cross made a sound too high-pitched to be a laugh, but it had a certain eccentric dignity, and probably wasn’t a giggle, either. “You’ve been playing me all along.”

“You knew I would,” Kaye said.

Cross patted her cheek. “Cheek-flashing.”

Kaye looked puzzled.

“How can something so wonderful be an aberration, a disease? If I could fever scent, I would be running every corporation in the country by now.”

“You wouldn’t want to,” Kaye said. “If you were one of the children.”

“Now who’s being naïve?” Cross asked. “Do you think they’ve left our monkey selves behind?”

“No. Do you know what a *deme* is?” Kaye asked.

“Social units for some of the SHEVA kids.”

“What I’m saying is a deme might be the greedy one, not an individual. And when a deme fever scents, we lesser apes don’t stand a chance.”

Cross leaned her head back and absorbed this. “I’ve heard that,” she said.

“Do you know a SHEVA child?” the driver asked, looking at them in the rearview mirror. He did not wait for an answer. “My granddaughter, a SHEVA girl, is in Peshawar, she is charmer. Real charmer. It is scary,” he added happily, proudly, with a broad grin. “Really scary.”

## ARIZONA

**S**tella sat with Julianne Nicorelli in a small beige room in the hospital. Joanie had separated them from the other girls. They had been waiting for two hours. The air was still and they sat stiff as cold butter on their chairs, watching a fly crawl along the window.

The room was still thick with strawberry scent, which Stella had once loved.

“I feel awful,” Julianne said.

“So do I.”

“What are they waiting for?”

“Something’s screwy/ Made a mistake,” Stella said.

Julianne scraped her shoes on the floor. “I’m sorry you aren’t one of my deme,” she said.

“That’s okay.”

“Let’s make our own, right here. We’ll/ Like us/ join up with anyone else/ locked away/ who comes in.”

“All right,” Stella said.

Julianne wrinkled her nose. “It stinks so bad/ Can’t smell myself think.”

Their chairs were several feet apart, a polite distance considering the nervous fear coming from the two girls, even over the miasma of strawberry. Julianne stood and held out one hand. Stella leaned her head to one side and pulled back her hair, exposing the skin behind her ear. “Go ahead.”

Julianne touched the skin there, the waxy discharge, and rubbed it under her nose. She made a face, then lowered her finger and frithed—pulling back her upper lip and sucking air over the finger and into her mouth.

“Ewww,” she said, not at all disapprovingly, and closed her eyes. “I feel better. Do you?”

Stella nodded and said, “Do you want to be deme mother?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Julianne said. “We’re not a quorum anyway.” Then she looked alarmed. “They’re probably recording us.”

“Probably.”

“I don’t care. Go ahead.”

Stella touched Julianne behind her ear. The skin was quite warm there, hot almost. Julianne was fever scenting, desperately trying to reach out and



both politely persuade and establish a bond with Stella. That was touching. It meant Julianne was more frightened and insecure than Stella, more in need.

“I’ll be deme mother,” Stella said. “Until someone better comes in.”

“All right,” Julianne said. It was just for show, anyway. No quorum, just whistling down the wind. Julianne rocked back and forth. Her scent was changing to coffee and tuna—a little disturbing. It made Stella want to hug somebody.

“I smell bad, don’t I?” Julianne said.

“No,” Stella said. “But we both smell different now.”

“What’s happening to us?”

“I’m sure they want to find out,” Stella said, and faced the strong steel door.

“My hips hurt,” Julianne said. “I am so miserable.”

Stella pulled their chairs closer. She touched Julianne’s fingers where they rested on her knee. Julianne was tall and skinny. Stella had more flesh on her frame though as yet no breasts, and her hips were narrow.

“They don’t want us to have children,” Julianne said, as if reading her mind, and her misery crossed over into sobs.

Stella just kept stroking her hand. Then she turned the girl’s hand over, spit into her palm, and rubbed their palms together. Even over the strawberry smell, she got through to Julianne, and Julianne began to settle down, focus, smooth out the useless wrinkles of her fear.

“They shouldn’t make us mad,” Julianne said. “If they want to kill us, they better do it soon.”

“Shhh,” Stella warned. “Let’s just get comfortable. We can’t stop them from doing what they’re going to do.”

“What are they going to do?” Julianne asked.

“Shh.”

The electronic lock on the door clicked. Stella saw Joanie in her hooded suit through the small window. The door opened.

“Let’s go, girls,” Joanie said. “This is going to be fun.” Her voice sounded like a recording coming out of an old doll.

A yellow bus, like a small school bus, waited for them on the drive in front of the hospital. The bus that had brought Strong Will had been a different bus, secure and shiny, new; she wondered why they were not using that bus.

Four counselors in suits moved five girls and four boys forward, toward

the door of the bus. Celia and LaShawna and Felice were in the group once again. Julianne walked ahead of Stella, her loose clogs slapping the ground.

Strong Will was among the boys, Stella saw with both apprehension and an odd excitement. She was pretty sure it wasn't a sexual thing—based on what Kaye had told her—but it was something *like* that. She had never felt such a thing before. It was new.

Not just to her.

She thought maybe it was new to the human race, or whatever the children were. A virus kind of thing, maybe.

The boys walked ten feet apart from the girls. None of them were shackled, but where would they run? Into the desert? The closest town was twenty miles away, and already it was a hundred degrees.

The counselors held little gas guns that filled the air with a citrus smell, oranges and limes, and a perennial favorite, Pine-Sol.

Will looked dragged down, frazzled. He carried a paperback book without a cover, its pages yellow and tattered. He did not look at the girls; none of the boys did. They appeared to be okay physically, but shuffled as they walked. She could not catch their scent.

The door to the bus opened and the boys were led in first, taking seats on the left-hand side. Through the windows, Stella saw plastic curtains being drawn and fastened. They looked flimsy, like shower curtains. Joanie moved the girls up to the door. They walked to the right of the curtain and sat in the five middle rows of slick blue plastic bench seats, one girl to each seat.

Stella squirmed and her pants stuck to the plastic. The seat felt funny, tacky and oily. It exuded a peculiar smell, like turpentine. They had sprayed the interior of the bus with something.

Celia sat directly in front of her and leaned forward to talk to LaShawna.

“Stay where you are,” Joanie instructed them in a monotone. “No talking.” She surveyed the children on both sides of the curtain, then walked forward and took Julianne by the arm. She removed Julianne, backing out of the bus. Julianne shot a frightened but relieved look at Stella, then stood outside, arms straight by her sides, shivering.

A security guard came aboard. He was in his middle forties, stocky and bare-armed, wearing a pair of khaki pants and a short-sleeved white shirt that clung to his shoulders. He carried a small machine pistol in a holster on his belt. He glanced back at the boys, then leaned to one side, and peered along the right side of the bus at the girls.

Everyone on the bus was silent.

Stella's stomach seemed to shrink inside her.

The door closed. Will swung his hand against the plastic curtain and made the hooks rattle on the rail bolted to the roof. The guard leaned forward and frowned.

Stella couldn't smell a thing now. Her nose was completely clogged.

"Am I allowed to read on the bus?" Will yelled.

The guard shrugged.

"Thank you," Will shouted, and the girls giggled. "Thank you very much."

The man obviously did not like this duty. He faced forward, waiting for the driver.

"What about lunch?" Will shouted. "Are we going to eat?"

The boys laughed. The girls sank back into their seats. Stella thought maybe they were being taken away to be killed and dissected. Felice was clearly thinking the same thing. Celia was shivering.

Finally, Will stopped yelling. He pulled a page from the paperback, crumpled it into a ball, and tossed it over three seats into the well next to the driver's window. Tongue between his lips and making a clownish grin, he pulled out another page, crumpled it, and lobbed it into the empty driver's seat. Then another, which fell to the floor in front of the driver's seat. Stella watched through the transparent sheeting between the rows, embarrassed and exhilarated by this show of defiance.

The driver climbed up the steps. He picked up the crumpled paper with his gloved hand, made a face, then tossed it out the door. It bounced from the chest of the second security guard as she came aboard. She was also large and in her forties. The female guard muttered something Stella could not hear. Both guards were equipped with noseys pinned to their breast pockets. The noseys were switched off, Stella noticed.

The driver took his seat.

"Let's go!" Will shouted. Behind him, one of the boys began to hoot. The female guard swiveled and glared at them, just in time to be hit by another crumpled ball of paper.

The male guard walked to the back along the boys' side of the plastic barrier.

"Go! Go!" Will shouted, and bounced in his seat.

"Sit down, damn it," the first guard said.

"Why not tie us down?" Will asked. "Why not strap us in?"

"Shut up," the guard said.

Stella felt a chill. They were being taken somewhere by a team that had had little experience with SHEVA children. She had an instinct for such things. These two, and the driver, looked even dumber than Miss Kantor. None of the humans inside or outside of the bus looked happy; they looked as if something had gone wrong.

Stella wondered what had happened to that other bus, the one they usually used.

Will was watching the guards and the driver like a hawk, eyes steady. Stella tried to keep his face in focus through the plastic, but he leaned back and got fuzzy.

The wire-reinforced plastic windows were locked shut from the outside; this was the kind of bus she had seen as a child carrying prisoners to pick up trash or cut down brush along the highways. She stared out through the window and shivered.

Her body ached. In front of her, Celia hunched forward, whispering to herself, her hands clasping the padded rail. LaShawna was yawning, pretending not to care. Felice had wrapped herself in her arms and was trying to go to sleep.

“Go, go, go!” the boys hooted, bouncing in their seats. Felice laid her head against the window. Stella wanted the boys to be quiet. She wanted everything to be quiet so she could close her eyes and pretend she was somewhere else. She felt betrayed by the school, by Miss Kantor, by Miss Kinney.

That was stupid, of course. Being at the school was a betrayal in the first place. Why would leaving be any worse? She leaned her head back to keep from feeling nauseated.

The female guard told the driver to close and lock the door. The driver started the bus and put it in gear. It lurched forward.

Celia began to throw up. The driver jerked the bus to a halt at the end of the concrete apron before the main road.

“Never mind!” the female guard shouted, her face a mask of disgust. “We’ll clean it up when we get there. Just go!”

“Go, go, go!” the boys chanted. Will glanced at Stella, straightened his lips, and began to peel another page from the paperback.

Once the bus was under way, air began to move through small vents above the windows and Stella felt better. Celia stayed quiet, and the two other girls sat stiffly in their seats. Stella was thinking over their situation and de-

cided it was all very clumsy and badly planned, probably last-minute. They were being transported like lobsters in a tank. Time was of the essence. Someone was eager to get to them while they were still fresh.

Stella tried to make some spit to moisten her mouth. The taste on her tongue was terrible.

“This will take about an hour and ten minutes,” the driver said as they pulled out of the school parking lot. “There’s water in bottles below each seat. We’ll make one bathroom stop.”

Stella reached below the blue seat and picked up a plastic bag with a bottle of water inside. She looked down at it, wondering what it held besides water; what was going to happen at the end of the ride, their treat for being such good little boys and girls? To stay calm, she thought of Kaye, and then she thought about Mitch. Last, but not least, she remembered holding their old orange cat, Shamus, and stroking him while he purred.

If she was going to die, she could at least be as dignified as old Shamus.

## 30

### OREGON

**M**itch got up before sunrise, dressed without waking Merton, and left the tent they shared to stand at the rim of the Spent River gully. He watched the early-morning sun try to spread light over the shaded landscape. He could clearly see Mount Hood, twenty miles away, its snows purple in the dawn.

He found a twig and stuck it between his lips, then bit it with his teeth.

Mitch had never thought he was prescient, sensitive, psychic, whatever name one gave to having second sight. Kaye had told him, years ago, that scientists and artists shared similar origins for creative thinking—but that scientists had to prove their fancies.

Mitch had never told Kaye what he had gotten out of that conversation, but in a way it had helped him put things in perspective—to see the artistic side of how he came to his own, often logically unsupportable conclusions. It wasn’t ESP.

He was just thinking like an artist.

Or a cop. Nature was the world’s most efficient serial killer. An anthropologist was a kind of detective, not so much interested in justice—that was

entirely too abstract in the face of time's immensity and so many deaths—but in figuring out how the victims had died and, more important, how they had lived.

He wiped his eyes with one finger and looked north along the gulley, to the deeper gorge that had long ago been cut through alternating layers of mud and lava and ash. Then he turned and peered at the L-shaped site with its array of canvas and plastic covers, concealed by camouflage netting.

“Shit,” he said, almost in wonder at the way his feet began to walk him along the rim of the gulley, away from the main dig.

*That bear. That damned, enigmatic bear that had started it all.*

The bear had come down to the river to do some fishing and had been suffocated by a fall of ash—but several days before the humans had arrived. The humans typically tracked bears, he was almost sure of it, relying on them to find good fishing. Someone had claimed the skull, but had not butchered the carcass—there were no cut marks on the bones—which meant it was probably in an unappetizing condition by the time they found it.

Salmon came back in the spring, summer, and fall to spawn and die, different groups and different species at different seasons. Nomadic bands had timed their journeys and arranged their settlements to take advantage of one or more of these returns, when the rivers ran thick with rich, red-fleshed fish.

Leaves changing color. Water running crisp and cold. Salmon wriggling over the rocky streambeds like big red pull toys. Bears waiting to march across the stream and grab them.

But most of the bears had probably left with the first ash fall, leaving behind one old male too sick to travel far, maybe chewed up in a fight, waiting to die.

*Guessing. Just guessing, goddamnit.*

Why would people walk up the river and ignore the ash fall? Not even hunger could have driven them into that landscape, or made them stay once there. Unless it had been raining, every step would have brought up a cloud of choking ash. Setting up a fishing camp would have been stupid in the extreme.

*Like the bear, they were being followed.*

He had dreamed about the bones in the night. He did not know whether artists dreamed their work—or whether detectives dreamed solutions to their cases. But the way he worked was, he often dreamed of the people he found, in their graves or where they had fallen and died.

And sometimes he was right.

Often he was right.

Hell, nine times out of ten, Mitch's dreams turned out to be right—so long as he waited for them to evolve, to ripple through their necessary variations and reach their inevitable conclusion. That was how it had been with the Alpine mummies. He had dreamed about them for months.

But now there was not enough time. He had to rely on what amounted to a hunch.

The Australians had clued him, even more than the *Homo erectus* skeletons. They were very far north. Only now was anthropology accepting the many tides and clashes of peoples in the Americas—the early arrival by storm-driven boats of a few Australians in the south, the later and frequent arrivals of the Asians moving along and over the land and ice bridges in the north.

The Australoids had been in South America—and now it was apparent North America—for tens of thousands of years before they met the Asians. The Asians conquered and killed, subdued, pushed them back south from whatever northern territories they might have explored. It must have been a monumental war, spread out over millions of square miles and many thousands of years, race-based and violent.

In the end, the Australians had all but vanished—leaving only a few mixed-race descendants on the eastern coast of South America: the Tierra del Fuegos familiar to Darwin and other explorers.

*They were being chased. They partnered with the Homo erectus individuals because they faced a common enemy.*

Mitch stepped out like an automaton, eyes sweeping the ground ahead, ignoring everything but the pound of his boots on the old rounded river rocks. It was no place to take a tumble, especially with one bum arm.

*Too far north. In dangerous territory, surrounded by Asians. They had come up here for the rich runs of fish, following the bears; men and women, an extended family group. Perhaps united under one powerful male—and maybe he did like dabbling with the Homo erectus females. No sense being naïve.*

*But his women did not care. No babies ever resulted. Mitch could almost see the Homo erectus males and females tagging along, behind the Australians, begging at first, then being set up to do work for the women, then offering themselves to the men, their own males indifferent to the exchange. Attitudes of a hungry, dying people.*

*In the end, there had been some measure of affection, perhaps more*

*than masters for their pets. Equals? Probably not. But the Homo erectus members of the group were not stupid. They had survived for more than a million years. Homo sap was just a newcomer in the equation.*

Mitch snuffed air and blew his nose into his handkerchief; the warming air was thick with grass pollen. He was not normally susceptible, but his years in prison, with musty air and lots of mold, had exaggerated his reactions.

*If the men are out here—and no guarantee of that—they couldn't save the women. They failed, and they probably died, too. Or they hightailed it out of this miserable place ahead of the wave of hot mud—leaving the women behind.*

*How am I any better?*

*I left my women behind, and they took Stella.*

*What if I do find the males, what of it? What in hell am I looking for? Salvation? An excuse?*

He glanced up at the sun, then shaded and dropped his eyes. The thickest deposit of mudstone had set in a dark brown layer all around the banks of the old river, weathered in spots to soil rich enough to support shrubs and trees, hard and stripped and barren elsewhere. Boulders the size and shape of soccer balls poked the ground, and nowhere any clue as to where an elusive collection of fossils might just poke up underfoot.

He sat on a weather-split boulder and lifted his left elbow onto his knee to get the tingle out of his slack arm. Sometimes the blood just cut off in that arm, and then the nerves, and after a while the arm jerked awake and hurt like hell.

It wasn't easy staying attentive and on point. Something insisted on getting in the way, perhaps an all-too-real sense of the complete futility of what he was trying to do. "Where would you go?" he whispered. He hunched his knees slowly around the rock, turning his eyes to sweep the rugged land, up the high ground and down into the swales filled with brush. "Where would you weather out twenty thousand years after you died? Come on, guys. Help me out."

A light breeze whistled through the brush and touched his hair like phantom fingers. He blew a fly away from his lips and brushed the hair out of his eyes. Kaye had always chided him about getting haircuts. After a while she had just let it drop, giving up, and Mitch wondered what he resented more—being treated like a little boy or being given up on by his own wife.

His teeth ground lightly, like a beast scaring away enemies. His chest ached from loneliness and guilt.



*Wandering.*

His eyes could tell a chip of bone from a pebble at a dozen paces, even now. He could set mental filters to ignore squirrel and rabbit bones, any recent subset of bleached, chewed, or sinew-darkened remnant.

His eyes narrowed to slits.

An experienced band of males might have seen or heard the lahar and become frightened, tried to make it to high ground. That's where he was now, where his feet had taken him, to the highest ground in the area, a ridge of hard rock and cupped pockets of soil and brush. He could see the camp, or at least where he knew it was, about half a mile away, obscured by tall brush and trees.

And north, the ever-present sentinel of Mount Hood, a quiet, squat dunce cap of repressed Earth energy, hissing faint plumes of steam but confessing nothing about past tantrums, past crimes.

Mitch closed his eyes completely and visualized the head male of the band. The picture cleared. Mitch went away, and in his place stood the band's lead hunter, the chief.

The chief's face was dark and intent, hair flecked with ash, skin streaky gray with ash, like a ghost. In Mitch's imagination, the chief started out purple-brown and quite naked, but pieced skins suddenly appeared on his lanky, stooped frame, not crude rags even twenty thousand years ago, because people were savvy about fashion and utility even then; leggings and tunic tied at the waist, pouch for flints and obsidian tips or whatever they might have with them.

*Their hearts beat fast seeing the pallor on their skins, they already look dead. They're afraid of each other. But the chief holds them together. He jumps and makes faces until they cower at their ashen complexions. The chief is more than smart; he cares about the anomalous little group of males, partners in this harsh land; and he is solicitous of the females, the chewers of skins and makers of the clothing he wears.*

Never underestimate your ancestors, your cousins. They lasted a long, long time. And even then they loved, they cared, they protected.

## ARIZONA

**T**he bus cut through a Flagstaff suburb, low, flat, brown brick, and, stucco houses surrounded by dusty gravel yards. Stella had lived in such a suburb as a girl. She laid her head back on the plastic seat and stared at the passing homes. Even with air-conditioning, the bus was hot inside and her water was running out fast.

The boys had stopped talking and Will seemed to be asleep next to a small pile of crumpled yellow pages from his old paperback book.

Someone tapped her shoulder. It was the male guard. He had a larger plastic bag from which he pulled another bottle of water.

“Not long now,” he said, and stuck the bottle into her hand. “Give me the empties.” The girls handed him their empties and he passed them to the female guard, who stuck them into another bag and sealed it. Then he stepped around the curtain at the front of the bus and gave the boys fresh bottles, again collecting the empties.

The male guard shook his head and glared down disapprovingly at Will’s mess before giving the boy a bottle.

“Having fun?” he asked Will.

Will stared up at him and shook his head slowly.

The bus driver was making lots of turns, taking them up and down many streets as if he were lost. Stella did not think the driver was lost. They were trying to avoid someone or something.

That made her sit up. She looked behind. The bus was being followed by a small brown car. Up front, as they turned a corner she saw another car, this one green, with two people in the front seat. The bus was following the lead car. They had escorts.

Nothing too unexpected about that. Why, then, did Stella feel that none of this had been planned out well, that something had gone awry?

Will was watching her. He pushed close to the plastic curtain and moved his lips but she could not hear what he was saying over the road noise; they were on gravel now, rumbling across a farm track through a fallow dirt field to a state road. The bus bounced up onto the asphalt and swung left. The lead car slowed for the bus to catch up.

She tracked Will’s lips more carefully now that the bouncing had

stopped: *Sandia*, he was mouthing silently. She remembered him asking earlier if she had heard of it, but she still did not know what *Sandia* was.

Will drew his finger across his throat. Stella closed her eyes and turned away. She could not watch him now. She did not need to be any more scared than she already was.

Another hour, and they rode on a straight stretch of highway between rocky desert with low red mountains on the horizon. The sun was almost directly overhead. The trip was taking a lot longer than Joanie had said it would.

The highway was almost empty, only a few cars going either way. A small red BMW with New Mexico plates swung around to the left of the short caravan and zoomed by. The boys tracked its speedy passage listlessly, then held up their hands with crooked finger signs and laughed.

Stella did not know what they meant. The laughter sounded harsh. The boys worried her. They seemed wild.

The long, sandy, rocky stretches beside the highway hypnotized her. The mountains were always far away. She wondered what *Sandia* meant once more, then stuffed the word away, hating the sound of it, more so because it was actually a pretty word.

Screech of tires.

She was jerked up out of a doze by a sudden swerve. Stella clung to the seat back in front of her as the bus veered left, then right, then tilted. Tires kept on screaming over the asphalt. Celia's head and shoulders bounced one way then another, and as Stella looked right, the outside world flew up and dropped down, mountains and desert and all. Then everything shoved sideways, and she slipped along the plastic seat and crashed down on the window, jamming her head, neck, and shoulder against the plastic. Plastic crazed and peeled away in wire-clasped ripples and her shoulder pressed into dirt and gravel.

For a moment, the bus was very quiet. It seemed to be lying on one side, the right side, her side. The light was not very good and the air was thick and still and full of the smell of burned rubber.

She tried to move and found that she still could, which caused a surge of excitement. Her body was still working, she was still alive. She pushed up slowly and heard jingling and ripping sounds. Then, a boy fell onto the curtain and jammed his knee into her side. Through the taut veil of plastic above her, she saw another boy's denim-clad butt and a vague, contorted

face. *Will*, she thought, and with a grunt, pushed up against the body, but could not move it.

“Please, get off,” she demanded, her voice muffled.

Stella was in pain. She thought for a minute she was going to panic, but she closed her eyes and made that go away. She could not bring her hand around to feel her shoulder, but she thought it might be bleeding, and her blouse seemed to be ripped. She could feel gravel or something sharp against her bare skin.

Outside, she heard some voices, men talking, one man yelling. They seemed far away. Then a door squealed open. The knee on her chest drew up and a foot came down hard on her ankle, pressing it into the frame of the seat in front. She screamed; that really hurt.

“Sorry,” a boy said, and the foot was lifted. She saw shadows moving over her, clumsy, dazed, pressing against the plastic curtain. Will’s face seemed to blur and fade, and he was gone. The curtain lay lightly around her. Something sighed, a brake cylinder maybe, or a boy. She rolled enough to finally touch her shoulder and lifted her hand against the curtain to see a bit of blood there, not a lot. Light filtered around the seat back behind her. Someone had opened the bus’s rear emergency door, and maybe a ceiling hatch as well.

“We’d better get you out of there,” a man called congenially. “Everybody hear me?”

Stella lay on her back now against the gravel and the dirt and the side of the bus. She rolled over completely and did a kind of knee-up, arm-up between the seats, which were jammed together closer than they had been before the crash. A feathery, leafy branch somehow got into her mouth and she spit it out, then finished wriggling until she was on her knees.

She had cuts all over, but none of them were bleeding a lot. Stella flailed against the plastic curtain until someone pulled it away with a jingle of hooks.

“Who’s in here? LaShawna? You in here?” A man’s voice, deep and distinct.

And someone else, “Celia? Hugh Davis? Johnny? Johnny Lee?”

“It’s me,” Stella said. “I’m here.”

Then she heard LaShawna call out. The girl began crying. “My leg is hurt,” she wailed.

“We’re going to get you, LaShawna. Be brave. Help is coming.”

Someone cursed loud and long at someone else.

“You just back off. You stay away from here. This is horrible, but you back off.”

“You drove us the fuck off the road!”

“You went into a skid.”

“Well, what the hell else could I do? There were cars all over the road. Jesus, we need an ambulance. Call an ambulance.”

Stella wondered if perhaps she should just stay where she was for the time being, in the half-dark, and nobody knowing she was there.

Suddenly, someone was pulling on her arm, tugging her out from between the seats and into the space between the top of the seats and the roof of the bus, now a kind of hallway with windows on the floor. It was Will. He crouched and peered at her like a frazzle-haired monkey, his face smeared with blood.

“We can go now,” he said.

“Where?” Stella asked.

“It’s people coming for us. Humans. They want to rescue us. But we can leave.”

“We have to help.”

“What can we do?” Will asked.

“We have to *help*.”

For a passing moment, she wanted to smear her hand on his face. Her ears felt hot.

Will shook his head and scrambled in a half-hunch to the front of the bus. He looked for a moment as if he were just going to climb out through a window, but then two pairs of arms stretched down, and he glanced back at Stella. A sour look came to his face.

“There’s a girl back there; she’s okay,” he said. “Take care of her, but leave me alone.”

Stella sat by the side of the long two-lane highway with her face in her hands. She had banged her head pretty hard in the wreck and now it throbbed. She peeked between her fingers at the adults walking around the bus. About twenty minutes had passed since the crash.

Will lay beside her, hand tossed casually over his eyes as if he were taking a nap. He had ripped his pants and a long scratch showed through. Otherwise, they both seemed to be okay.

Celia and LaShawna and the three other boys were already sitting in the backs of two cars, not the escort cars. Both of the escort cars had run off

into a culvert and were pretty banged up—crumpled grilles, steam hissing, trunk lids popped.

She thought she heard the two security guards on the other side of the bus, and possibly the bus driver as well.

Parked by the side of the road about a hundred yards behind were two law enforcement vehicles. She could not see the insignia but their emergency lights were blinking. Why weren't they helping out, getting ready to take the children back to the school?

Would there be an EMAC van coming soon, or an ambulance?

A black man in a rumpled brown suit approached Stella and Will. "The other girls and boys are pretty badly bruised, but they're going to be fine. LaShawna is fine. Her leg is okay, thank God."

Stella peered up at him doubtfully. She did not know who he was.

"I'm John Hamilton," he said. "I'm LaShawna's daddy. We've got to leave here. You have to come with us."

Will sat up, his cheeks almost mahogany from the combination of sun and defiance. "Why?" he said. "Are you taking us to another school?"

"We have to get you to a doctor for checkups. The closest safe place is about fifty miles from here." He pointed back down the road. "Not back to the school. My daughter will never go there again, not while I'm alive."

"What's Sandia?" Stella asked John, on impulse.

"It's some mountains," John said, with a startled expression, and swallowed something that must have been bitter. "Come on, let's get going. I think there's room."

A third car pulled up, and John talked to the driver, a middle-aged woman with large turquoise rings on her fingers and brilliant orange hair. They seemed to know each other.

John came back. He was irritated.

"You'll go with her," he said. "Her name is Jobeth Hayden. She's a mom, too. We thought her daughter might be here, but she isn't."

"You ran the buses off the road?" Stella asked.

"We tried to slow down the lead car and take you off the bus. We thought we could do it safely. I don't know how it happened, but one of their cars spun out and the bus plowed into it and everyone went off the road. Cars all over. We're damned lucky."

Will had retrieved his battered and torn paperback book from the dirt and clutched it in his hand. He peered at the rip in his jeans, and the scratch. Then he stared back down the road at the cars with the emergency lights. "I'll just go by myself."

“No, son,” John Hamilton said firmly, and he suddenly seemed very large. “You’ll die out here, and you won’t hitch any rides because they’ll know what you are.”

“They’ll arrest me,” Will said, pointing at the blinking lights.

“No, they won’t. They’re from New Mexico.”

Hamilton did not explain why that was significant. Will stared at Hamilton and his face wrinkled in either anger or frustration.

“We’re responsible,” Hamilton said quietly. “Please, come with us.” Even more quietly, focusing on Will, his voice deep, almost sleepy, Hamilton said again, “Please.”

Will stumbled as he took a step, and John helped him to the car with the orange-haired woman, Jobeth.

On the way, they came close to the red Buick that carried Celia, Felice, LaShawna, and two of the boys. LaShawna leaned back in the rear seat, in the shadow of the car roof, eyes closed. Felice sat upright beside her. Celia stuck her head out the window. “What-KUK a ride!” she crowed. A white bandage looped around her head. She had blood on her scalp and in her hair and she clutched a plastic bottle of 7-Up and a sandwich. “I guess no more school, huh?”

Will and Stella got in the car with Jobeth. John told Jobeth where they were going—a ranch. Stella did not catch the name, though it might have been George or Gorge.

“I know,” the woman said. “I love there.”

Stella was sure the woman did not say “live,” she said “love.”

Will leaned his head back on the seat and stared at the headliner. Stella took a bottle of water and a bottle of 7-Up from John, and the cars drove back on the road, leaving the wreck of the bus, two guards, and three drivers, all neatly tied and squatting on the shoulder.

The official vehicles turned out to be from the New Mexico State Police, and they spun off in the opposite direction, their lights no longer flashing.

“Won’t be more than an hour,” Jobeth said, following the other two cars.

“Who are you?” Stella asked.

“I have no idea,” Jobeth said lightly. “Haven’t for years.” She glanced back over the seat at Stella. “You’re a pretty one. You’re all pretty ones to me. Do you know my daughter? Her name is Bonnie. Bonnie Hayden. I guess she’s still at the school; they took her there six months ago. She has natural red hair and her sparks are really prominent. It’s her Irish blood, I’m sure.”

Will ripped a page out of his paperback and crumpled it, then waggled it under his nose. He grinned at Stella.

**T**hey've been out hunting, the men, taking along the younger males, those near or beyond puberty; heading up to the high ground to see where there might be some game left after the ash fall. But the ash has covered everything with grit for a hundred miles and the game has moved south, all but the small animals still quivering in their burrows, in their warrens, waiting . . .

*And then the men hear the lahar coming, see the pyroclastic cloud that has melted all the snow and ice rippling around the base of the mountain like a dirty gray shawl falling from the black Storm Bear whose claws are lightning . . . or the mountain goddess sitting and spreading her wrap, the edge of the soft skin rushing over the land tens of miles away with a sound like all the buffalo on Earth.*

*Beneath the wrap, the meltwater has mixed with hot gas and gathers ash and mud and trees, roaring toward where the men stand, pallid and weak with fear.*

*The chief, with the sharpest eyes, the quickest brain, the strongest arm, the most sons and daughters in this band, yet probably only thirty-five or forty years of age, at the oldest . . . The chief has never encountered anything like the approaching lahar. The ash was bad enough. The distant wall of gray smudge looks as if it might take days to reach them, rolling over and through the distant forests. How could it ever touch where he stands with his sons and hunters, no matter how furious and powerful?*

*But, just in case, he walks back to be with the women.*

Mitch pushed on his knee to get up and started walking toward the camp.

*The men lope down the hills, taking the short route from the high ground, puffs of ash rising around their feet as they run, and the chief looks up above the ash cloaking the tiny crew in a choking haze and sees that the cloud has come that much closer in just a few minutes. He trembles, knowing how ignorant he is. Death could be very near.*

Mitch strode down into the swale, across the old mudstone and around the whistling patches of brush.

*Big old splash coming. Hot breath out of hell unnamed, perhaps un-*



*thought of then. The chief runs faster as the roar grows louder, the sound bigger even than the biggest stampeding herd in the biggest hunt, the wall of cloud rampaging over the land with a swift but lumbering dignity, like a great bear.*

*For a moment, the chief pauses and points out that the gray cloud has stopped. They laugh and hoot. The gray cloud is thinning, breaking up. They cannot see the flood beneath.*

*Then comes the biggest ash fall yet, thick curtains and fat billows, blinding, stinging the eyes and catching in the nose and mouth, gritty between lips and gums, choking. They try to cover their eyes with their hands. Blind, they stumble and fall and shout hunting cries, identity cries, not yet names. The roar begins again, grows louder, rhythmic pounding, screaming of trees, ripping.*

Mitch stopped briefly on the upslope of the swale, peering at the weathered layers, the broken, crumbling remains of the ancient lahar. He rubbed his eyes, trying to push back a sliver of light in his vision.

From the top of the crest, he half-slid, half-walked down to the edge of the Spent River, a bluff overlooking the dried-up watercourse. They might have been near the river, waiting to cross, in a straight line between the high ground where Mitch (and the chief) had been a few minutes before, not far from where Mitch stood now, his dead arm at his side, ignoring the tingling there as well as the precessing, aching silver crescent.

He walked along the bluff. His eyes swept the ground a few meters ahead, looking for that weathered-out phalange or even bigger bone or chip of bone not worried over by a coyote or hauled off by a ground squirrel, falling out of its little hollow in the ash, that hard little mold of death.

*The roar is loud and growing louder, but the cloud seems to be dissipating. What they cannot see, from where they stand, is the lahar breaking up into long fingers, finding channels already carved and ripped in the land, blowing out the last of its energy, reaching, reaching, but growing weaker. What they cannot see clearly is that this new threat is trying with all of its fading might to kill them.*

*Perhaps they will live.*

They would be on his right, if they were anywhere at all, if they were still here. Their bones might have weathered out and fallen from the bluff centuries ago. He was walking so near the edge that there might be nothing left. The river would have been higher then, its bed not so worn and deep; but the bluff might have been high enough to give them pause . . .

*The chief looks northwest. The leading run of the dying lahar roars down the channel. His eyes grow wide, his nostrils flare in rage and disappointment. It is a fuming, curling, leaping torrent of mud and steaming water. It fills his eyes, his brain. It travels faster than they can run. They hunker down and it roars past, below their feet, digging out the embankment. They crawl up the bank to safety, but the lahar vaults up and the spill catches them as they raise their arms. The thick liquid scalds, and the chief hears the others screaming, but only for a moment.*

Mitch's breath hitched.

Their women must have died at the same moment, or within seconds, across the Spent River.

*The chief falls with his arms over his head. He and all his sons and the other hunters struggle for tenths of seconds against the scalding mud and then must lie still. It covers them, a blanket more than two feet thick, larded with sticks and chunks of log and rocks the size of fists, with bits of dead animals.*

As Mitch walked, he grew calmer. Things seemed to fall into place. When the search was on, his mind became a quiet lake.

*The land is hot and steaming. Nothing near the river lives that stood above ground. Bushes denuded of their leaves crouch smashed and wilted along the river course. Corpses lie baked and half-buried under gouts of steaming mud. The ground smells like mud and steamed vegetables. It smells like cooked herbs in a meaty stew.*

*The mud cools.*

*And then comes the third fall of ash, entombing the remains of the men, the women, and the ravaged land along the Spent River and for miles around.*

It was over.

Mitch kept his head down and pressed one eye with a finger, but the pain was coming anyway. Price to be paid.

*Rod Taylor pushes the lever forward on the old time machine. The mud hardens under the gray pall of falling ash. Time flies past. The bodies decay within their molds, staining the hard mud. The flesh seeps away and the bones rattle with earthquakes and the mud and stone cracks and fresh water and mud enters, filling the hollow with mud of different density, different composition, holding the bones, finally, still.*

*The men can rest.*

Mitch knew they were still here, somewhere.

He stopped walking and looked to his right, into a step cut into the bluff by hundreds of centuries of erosion. At first he could not see what had attracted his attention; it was hidden by the painful little sliver of light.

The top of the mudstone step was at least six feet above his head. A streak of dark gray capped the step beneath a superficial wig of soil and brush. But his vision tunneled into a bright ball and all he saw was the shiny brown prominence lying horizontally in the stone.

He hardly dared to breathe.

Mitch stooped, arm hanging, propping his knees against the mound of weathered-out clods and pebbles. Reached out with his right finger and brushed along the compacted gray ash and caked mudstone.

The prominence was firm in the hardened layer. It could have been a bone from a deer, a mountain goat, or a bighorn sheep.

But it was not. It was a human shin, a tibia. In this layer, it had to be at least as old as the bones in the camp. He reached down with one hand, sparks flying in his right eye, and felt for the small piece he had seen there, a dark brown talus of bone amongst the rocky talus.

He held it up, turning it until he could see it clearly. It was small, but also from a human. *Homo* at least. He replaced it. Position would be important when they surveyed.

He took a dental pick from his jacket and worked at the hardened mud and ash around the tibia until he was sure, fighting the pain in his cranium for long minutes. Then he sat back and drew up his knees.

He could no longer put it off. The migraine had arrived. He hadn't had one this bad in more than ten years. The dental pick fell from his hand as he curled up on the ground, trying not to moan.

He managed to reach up with one finger and stroke the half-buried length of bone.

"Found you," Mitch said. Then he closed his eyes and felt his own la-har wash over him.

## NEW MEXICO

**D**icken's monitor was filled with comparisons of protein expression in embryonic tissues at different stages of development, looking for the elusive retroviral or transposon trigger that might have crept into a complex of developmental genes, promoting the hymen in human females. Even using prior searches and comparisons—incredibly, he had found some in the literature—it looked as if this would take months or years.

Dr. Jurie had shunted Dicken into the safest and least interesting position at Sandia Pathogenics. Putting him in safe, cold storage until needed.

An odd little dance of utility and security. Jurie was keeping Dicken under his thumb, as it were, just to know where he was and what he was up to, and possibly to pick his brain.

But also to confess? To be caught out?

Dicken would not rule out anything where Aram Jurie was concerned.

The man had passed along a list of rambling, long e-mail messages, cryptic, elusive, and a little too evocative for Dicken's comfort. Jurie might be on to something, Dicken thought, a twisted and crazy but undeniably big insight.

Jurie held the belief—not exactly new—that viruses played a substantial but crude role in nearly every stage of embryonic development. But he had some interesting notions about how they did so:

*“Genomic viruses want to play in the big game, but as genetic players go, they're simple, constrained, fallen from grace. They can't do the big stuff, so they engage in cryptic little elaborations, and the big game tolerates and then becomes addicted to their subtle plays . . .*

*“Weak in themselves, endogenous viruses may rely on a very different form of apoptosis, programmed cell suicide. ERVs express at certain times and present antigen on the cell surface. The cell is inspected by the agents of the immune system and killed. By coordinating how and which cells present antigen, genomic viruses can participate crudely in sculpting the embryo, or even the growing body after birth. Of course, they work to increase their numbers and their position in the species, in the extended genome. They work by maintaining a feeble but persistent control in the face of a constant and powerful assault by the immune system.*

*“And in mammals, they’ve won. We have surrendered some of the most crucial aspects of our lives to the viruses, just to give our babies time to develop in the womb, rather than in the constraining egg; time to develop more sophisticated nervous systems. A calculated gamble. All our generations are held ransom because of our indebtedness to the viral genes.*

*“Like getting a loan from the Mafia . . .”*

Maggie Flynn knocked on the open door to Dicken’s office. “Got a moment?” she asked.

“Not really. Why?” Dicken asked, turning in his rolling chair. Flynn looked flushed and upset.

“Something’s come up. Jurie’s off the campus. He tells us to sit tight. I don’t think we can. We just aren’t prepared.”

“What is it?”

“We need expert advice,” Flynn said. “And you could be the expert.”

Dicken stood and stuck his hands in his pants pockets, alert and wary. “What sort of advice?”

“We have a new guest,” Flynn said. “Not a monkey.” She did not appear at all happy with the prospect.

If Maggie Flynn believed Dicken had Jurie’s confidence, who was he to correct her? Flynn’s pass could clear them both if his own pass was blocked—he had learned that much yesterday, visiting Presky’s monotreme study lab.

Flynn took him outside the building to a small cart and drove him around the five linked warehouses that contained the zoo. Out in the open, away from listening devices, she expressed herself more clearly.

“You’ve worked with SHEVA kids,” Flynn began. “I haven’t. We have a tough situation, medically speaking, ethically speaking, and I don’t know how to approach it. As the only married female in this block, Turner picked me to provide some moral support, establish a rapport . . . but frankly, I haven’t a clue.”

“What are you talking about?” Dicken asked.

Flynn stopped the cart, even more nervous. “You don’t know?” she asked, her voice rising a notch.

Dicken’s mind started to race and he saw he was on the edge of screwing up a golden opportunity. *You’ve worked with . . . As the only married female . . .*

*They’re doing it. They’ve done it.* He felt his pulse going up and hoped it did not show.

“Oh,” he said, with a fair imitation of casualness. “Virus children.”

Flynn bit her lip. “I don’t like that phrase.” She pushed the cart forward again with the little control stick. “Jurie never worked directly with them. Only with specimens. Neither has Turner, and of course Presky is an animal guy, no bedside manner whatsoever. We thought of you. Turner said that must be why you’re here, and why you’re being given shit theoretical work—so you can be pulled loose for something like this when the time comes.”

“Okay,” Dicken said, putting on a mask of professional caution. He pressed his lips together to keep from saying anything revealing or stupid.

“Something’s gone wrong at the border, I don’t know what. I’m not in that particular loop. Jurie’s in Arizona. Turner told me to bring you in before he gets back.” Her smile was fleeting and desperate. “The cat’s away.”

It was an in-house conspiracy after all, and not a very convincing one. Flynn seemed to expect him to say something reassuring and glib. The whole damned lab functioned on a morphine high of glibness, as if to hide the gnawing awareness that what they were doing might someday attract the attention of The Hague.

“God bless the beasts and children,” Dicken said. “Let’s go.”

On the north side of the array of Pathogenics warehouses, a segmented, inflatable silver enclosure perched on a black expanse of parking lot like some huge alien larva. An access tube led from the enclosure into Warehouse Number 5, which contained most of the primate study labs. Dicken noticed two outside compressors and a complicated, freshly assembled sterilization unit on the south end of the sausage.

He didn’t realize how big the enclosure was until they were almost upon it. The whole complex was as big as one of the warehouses and covered at least an acre.

They parked the cart and entered Warehouse 5 through the delivery door. Turner met them in a small clinic inside the warehouse—a hospital clinic, obviously equipped for humans and not just for primates. “Glad you could make it, Christopher,” he said. “Jurie’s dealing with some mess at the border. A bunch of protesters blocked a lab bus, refused to let it enter Arizona. They had help from the local police, apparently. Jurie had to order up another bus at the last minute and route it around the road-blocks.”

“No surprise,” Flynn said. Dicken glanced between them both. What he

saw chilled him. The glibness had completely evaporated. They knew their careers were on the line.

“The preparations have been obvious, but Jurie only told us yesterday,” Turner said. Their statements piled together.

“She’s a very unhappy girl,” Flynn said.

“I’m not sure we should even have her here,” Turner said.

“She’s pregnant,” Flynn said.

“A rape, we’re told. Her foster father,” Turner said.

“Oh, God, I didn’t know it was *rape*,” Flynn said, and pressed her knuckles to her cheek. “She’s only fourteen.”

“They brought her from a school in Arizona,” Flynn said. “Jurie calls it *our* school. That’s where we’ve been getting most of our specimens.”

“She’s pregnant?” Dicken asked, dumbfounded, and then wondered if he had blown his cover.

“That’s not generally known even in the clinic,” Turner said. “I’d appreciate some discretion.”

Dicken let his astonishment come forward. “That’s major.” His voice cracked. “But she’s 52 xx. What about polyploidy?”

“I only know what I see,” Turner said grimly. “She’s pregnant by her foster father.”

“That’s absolutely *huge*,” Dicken said.

“She arrived at the school a month ago,” Turner said. “We discovered her pregnancy when we processed a set of her blood tests. Jurie almost had a heart attack when he got the results from the lab. He seemed elated. He got her transferred to Pathogenics last week without telling the rest of us.”

“I was so mad,” Flynn said. “I could have clobbered him.”

“What else could we do? The school couldn’t take care of her, and it’s for damn sure no hospital would touch her.”

Dicken held up his hand. “Who’s working the clinic?” he asked.

“Maggie, Tommy Wrigley—you met Tommy at the party, and Thomas Powers. Some people brought in from California; we don’t know them. And, of course, Jurie, on the research side. But he’s never even visited the girl.”

“What’s her condition?”

“She’s about three months along. Not doing too well. We think she may have self-induced Shiver,” Flynn said.

“That is not confirmed,” Turner said angrily. “She’s acting as if she has the flu, and that’s all it may be. But we’re being extra cautious. And this information goes nowhere . . . don’t even tell anyone else at Pathogenics.”

“But Dr. Dicken would know if it’s Shiver, wouldn’t he?” Flynn said defensively. “Isn’t that why Jurie brought you here?”

“Let’s look at the girl,” Dicken said.

“Her name is Fremont, Helen Fremont,” Flynn said. “She’s originally from Nevada. Las Vegas, I think.”

“Reno,” Turner corrected. Then, his face collapsing in utter misery, his shoulders slumping, he added, “I don’t think I can take this much longer. I really don’t.”

## 34

### BALTIMORE-WASHINGTON

**K**aye and Marge Cross sat in the back of the taxi in silence. Kaye looked at the passive neck of the driver below his turban, caught a glimpse of his small grin in the rearview mirror. He was whistling to himself, happy. For him, having a SHEVA granddaughter was no great burden, obviously.

Kaye did not know much about conditions for SHEVA children in Pakistan. Generally, traditional cultures—Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists—had been more accepting of the new children. That was both surprising and humbling.

Cross drummed her fingers on her knee and looked out the window at the highway, passing cars. A long semi rolled past with TRANS-NATIONAL BIRMINGHAM PORK emblazoned in huge red letters on the sides of its two trailers.

“Spent lots of money on *that* one,” Cross murmured.

Kaye assumed she was referring to pig tissue transplants. “Where are we going, Marge?” she asked.

“Just driving,” Cross said. Her chin bounced up and down, and Kaye could not be sure whether she was nodding or just moving her jaw in time to the truck ruts in the roadway.

“That address is in a residential neighborhood. I know Baltimore and Maryland pretty well,” Kaye said. “I assume you aren’t kidnapping me.”

Cross gave her a weak smile. “Hell, you’re paying,” she said. “There’s some people I think you’ll want to meet.”

“All right,” Kaye said.

“Lars came down pretty hard on Robert.”

“Robert’s a sanctimonious prick.”



Cross shrugged. “Nevertheless, I’m not going to take Lars’s advice.”

“I didn’t think you would,” Kaye said. She hated to lose her labs and her researchers, even now. Doing science was her last comfort, her lab the last place she could take refuge and lose herself in work.

“I’m letting you go,” Cross said.

To her surprise, the blow did not feel so heavy after all. It was Kaye’s turn to nod in time to the cab’s rubbery suspension.

“Your work with me is over,” Cross said.

“Fine,” Kaye said tightly.

“Isn’t it?” Cross asked.

“Of course,” Kaye said, her heart thumping. *What I have been putting off doing. What I cannot do alone.*

“What more would you do at Americol?”

“Pure research on hormonal activation of retroviral elements in humans,” Kaye said, still grasping at the past. “Focus on stress-related signaling systems. Transfer of transcription factors and regulating genes by ERV to somatic cells. Study the viruses as common genetic transport and regulatory systems for the body. Prove that the all-disease model is wrong.”

“It’s a good area,” Cross said. “A little too wild for Americol, but I can make some calls and get you a position elsewhere. Frankly, I don’t think you’re going to have time.”

Kaye lifted her eyebrows and thinned her lips. “If I’m no longer employed by you, how can you know how much time I’ll have?”

Cross smiled, but the smile vanished quickly and she frowned out the window. “Robert picked the wrong hammer to hit you with,” she said. “Or at least he did it in front of the wrong woman.”

“How’s that?”

“Twenty-three years ago come August, I was beginning to drum up venture capital for my first company. I was packing my schedule with meetings and heavy-duty lunches.” Her expression turned wistful, as if she were recalling an old, wonderful romance. “God dropped in. Bad timing, to say the least. He hit me so hard I had to drive to the Hamptons and hide out in a hotel room for a week. Basically I swooned.”

She was avoiding direct eye contact, like a little girl confessing. Kaye leaned forward to see her face more clearly. Kaye had never seen Cross look so vulnerable.

“I can’t tell you how scared I was that He was a sign of madness, epilepsy, or worse.”

“You thought it was a he?”

Cross nodded. “Doesn’t make sense for a couple of strong women, does it? It bothered me a lot, then. But no matter how bothered I was, how scared I was, I never thought about visiting a radiology center. That was brilliant, Kaye. Not cheap, but brilliant.”

Kaye glanced at the driver’s face in the rearview mirror. He was obviously trying to ignore the words being spoken in the backseat, trying to give them privacy—and not succeeding.

“Love isn’t the word, but it’s all we have. Love without desire.” Cross reached up to wipe her perfectly manicured fingers beneath her eyes. “I’ve never told anybody. Someone like Robert would have used it against me.”

“But it’s the truth,” Kaye said.

“No, it isn’t,” Cross said peevishly. “It’s a personal experience. It was real to you and to me, but that doesn’t get us anywhere in this old, cruel world. That same vision might have compelled someone else to burn old women as witches or kill Englishmen, like Joan of Arc. Cranking up the old Inquisition.”

“I don’t think so,” Kaye said.

“How do you know the butchers and murderers didn’t get a message?”

Kaye had to admit that she did not.

Cross said, “I’ve spent so much of my time trying to forget, just so I could do the work I had to do to get where I wanted to be. Sometimes it was cruel work, stepping on other folks’s dreams. And whenever I remembered, it just crushed me again. Because I knew this thing, it, He, would never punish me, no matter what I did or how I misbehaved. Not just forgiveness—*no judgment*. Only love. He can’t be real,” Cross said. “What He said and what He did doesn’t make any sense.”

“He felt real to me,” Kaye said.

“Did you ever hear what happened to Thomas Aquinas?” Cross asked.

Kaye shook her head.

“The most admired theologian of all. Furiously adept thinker, logical beyond all measure—and pretty hard to read nowadays. But smart, no doubt about it, and a young fellow when he made his mark. Student of Albertus Magnus. Defender of Aristotle in the Church. He wrote big thick tracts. Admired throughout Christendom, and still revered as a thinker to this day. On the morning of December 6, 1273, he was saying Mass in Naples. He was older, about my age. Right in the middle of the sermon, he just stopped speaking, and stared at nothing. Or stared at *everything*. I

imagine he must have gawped like a fish.” Cross’s expression was quizzical, distant.

“He stopped writing, dictating, stopped contributing to the *Summa*, his life’s work. And when he was pressed to explain why he had stopped, he said, ‘I can do no more; such things have been revealed to me that all I have written seems as straw, and I now await the end of my life.’ He died a few months later.” Cross snorted. “No wonder Aquinas was brought up short, the poor bastard. I know a hierarchy when I see one. I’m little better than a wriggly worm in a pond compared to what touched me. I wouldn’t dare try to tell God how to behave.” She smiled. “Yes, dear, I can be humble.” Cross patted Kaye’s hand. “And that’s that. You’re fired. You’ve done all you need to do, for now, at my company.”

“What about Jackson?” Kaye asked.

“He’s limited, but he’s still useful, and there’s still important work for him to do. I’ll have Lars watch over him.”

“Jackson doesn’t understand,” Kaye said.

“If you mean he’s narrowly focused, that’s just what I need right now. He’ll cross all the *t*’s and dot all the *i*’s, trying to prove he’s right. Good for him.”

“But he’ll get it wrong.”

“Then he’ll do it thoroughly.” Cross was adamant. “Robert’s problem was familiar to Aquinas. He called it *ignorantia affectata*, cultivated ignorance.”

“God should touch him,” Kaye said bitterly, and then flushed in embarrassment, as if that were any kind of punishment.

Cross considered this seriously for a moment. “I’m surprised God touched *me*,” she said. “I’d be shocked if He wanted to have anything to do with Robert.”

## 35

### NEW MEXICO

Inside the silver tent were eight single wide mobile home trailers, sitting up on blocks on a wrinkled and patched gray plastic floor and surrounded, at a distance of thirty feet, by a circle of transparent plastic panels topped with razor wire. The trailers did not look in the least comfortable or friendly.

Dicken tried to orient himself in the general gloomy light that seeped

through the silver tent. They had entered on the western side. North, then, was where a small Emergency Action van was parked, the same van that had presumably brought Helen Fremont from Arizona. South of the mobile homes and the wall of plastic and razor wire, a small maze of tables and lab benches had been set up and stocked with standard medical and lab diagnostic equipment.

A few klieg lights mounted on long steel poles supplemented the dim sunlight.

Dicken saw no one else under the tent.

"We don't have a team in place yet," Flynn said. "She just came down sick this morning."

"Is there a phone connection in the trailer, an intercom, a bullhorn, anything?"

Flynn shook her head. "We're still putting it together."

"Goddamnit, she's alone in there?"

Turner nodded.

"For how long?"

"Since this morning," Flynn said. "I went in and tried to do an exam. She refused, but I took some pictures, and of course, there's the video. We're running tests on the waste line fluid and the air, but the equipment here isn't familiar to me. I didn't trust it, so I took the samples over to the primate lab. They're still being run."

"Does Jurie know she's ill?" Dicken asked.

"We called him," Turner said.

"Did he give any instructions?"

"He said to leave her alone. Let nobody in until we were sure."

"But Maggie went in."

"I had to," Flynn said. "She looked so scared."

"You were in a suit?"

"Of course."

Dicken swung about on his stiff leg and leaned his head to one side, biting his cheek to keep his opinions to himself. He was furious.

Flynn would not meet his eyes. "It's procedure. All tests done under Level 3 conditions."

"Well, we sure as hell follow the goddamned rules, don't we?" Dicken said. "Haven't you at least asked her to come out and have a doctor inspect her?"

"She won't come out," Turner said. "We have video cameras tracking her. She's in the bedroom. She's just lying there."

“Dandy,” Dicken said. “What in hell do you want me to do?”

“We have the pictures,” Flynn said, and took her data phone from her pocket.

“Show me,” Dicken said.

She brought up a succession of five pictures on the phone’s screen. Dicken saw a young SHEVA girl with dark brown hair, pale blue eyes with yellow specks, thin features but prominent cheekbones, pale skin. The girl looked like a frightened cat, her eyes searching the unseen corners, refusing even in her misery to be intimidated.

Dicken could tell the girl was exhibiting no obvious signs of Shiver—no lesions on her skinny arms, no scarlet cingulated markings on her neck. A live update chart butted in at the conclusion of the slide show and displayed a temperature of 102.

“Remote temperature sensing?”

Flynn nodded.

“You said her viral titers were high.”

“She cut herself getting into the van. They had been instructed not to draw blood, but they sequestered the stain and we took a sample under controlled conditions. That’s why the van is still here. She’s producing HERV.”

“Of course she is. She’s pregnant. She doesn’t present any of the necessary symptoms,” he said. “What makes you think it’s Shiver?”

“Dr. Jurie said it might be.”

“Jurie isn’t here, and you are.”

“But she’s *pregnant*,” Turner said, scowling, as if that explained their concern.

“Have you tested for pseudotype viruses?”

“We’re still running the samples,” Turner said.

“Anything?”

“Not yet.”

“You’ve had Shiver,” Flynn said sullenly. “You should be even more cautious.” She looked more angry than distressed now. They were wondering whose side he was on, and he was half inclined to tell them.

“I won’t even need a suit,” he said contemptuously, and tossed the phone back to Flynn. He walked toward the trailer.

“Hold it,” Turner said, his face red. “Go in there without a suit, and you’ll stay. We won’t—we *can’t* let you out.”

Dicken turned and bowed, holding out his arms in exasperated placation. There was work to do, a problem to resolve, and anger wasn’t helping.

“Then get me a goddamned suit! And a phone or an intercom. She needs to communicate with the outside. She needs to talk with someone. Where are her parents—her mother, I mean?”

“We don’t know,” Flynn said.

The narrow rooms inside the mobile home were neat and cheerless. Rental-style furniture, upholstered in beige and yellow plaid vinyl, lent them an air of cheap and soulless utility. The girl had brought no personal effects, and had touched none of the stuffed animal toys that lined the shelves in the tiny living room, still in their plastic wrappings.

Dicken wondered how long ago the stuffed animals had been purchased. How long had Jurie been planning to bring SHEVA children into Pathogenics?

A year?

Two dining chairs had been upset beside the dinette. Dicken bent to set them right. The plastic in his suit squeaked. He was already starting to sweat, despite the air conditioner pack. He had long since come to sincerely hate isolation suits.

He looked for other obstructions that might snag the plastic, then moved slowly toward the bedroom at the back of the trailer. He knocked on the frame and peered through the half-open door. The girl lay on her back on the bed, still wearing pedal pushers, blouse, and a denim jacket. The bed’s green plastic covers had been tossed aside, and she was staring at the ceiling.

“Hello?”

The girl did not look at him. He could see her skinny chest moving, and her cheeks were ruddy with fever or fear or perhaps despair.

“Helen?” He walked along the narrow space beside the bed and bent over so she could see his face. “My name is Christopher Dicken.”

She swung her head to one side. “Go away. I’ll make you sick,” she said.

“I doubt it, Helen. How do you feel?”

“I hate your suit.”

“I don’t like it much, either.”

“Leave me alone.”

Dicken straightened and folded his arms with some difficulty. The suit rustled and squeaked and he felt like one of the plastic-wrapped stuffed animals. “Tell me how you’re feeling.”

“I want to throw up.”

“Have you thrown up?”

“No,” she said.

“That’s good.”

“I keep trying.” The girl sat up on the bed. “You should be afraid of me. That’s what my mother told me to say to anyone who tries to touch me or kidnap me. She said, ‘Use what you have.’ ”

“You don’t make people sick, Helen,” Dicken said.

“I wish I could. I want *him* to be sick.”

Dicken could not imagine her pain and frustration, and did not feel comfortable probing it out. “I won’t say I understand. I don’t.”

“Stop talking and go away.”

“We won’t talk about that, okay. But we need to talk about how you’re feeling, and I’d like to examine you. I’m a doctor.”

“So was *he*,” she snapped. She rolled to one side, still not looking at Dicken. Her eyes narrowed. “My muscles hurt. Am I going to die?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I should die.”

“Please don’t talk that way. If things are going to get any better, I have to examine you. I promise I won’t hurt you or do anything that makes you feel uncomfortable.”

“I’m used to them taking blood,” the girl said. “They tie us down if we fight.” She stared fixedly at his face through the hood. “You sound like you’ve helped a lot of sick people.”

“Quite a few. Some were very, very sick, and they got better.”

“And some died.”

“Yes,” Dicken said. “Some died.”

“I don’t feel that sick, other than wanting to throw up.”

“That might be your baby.”

The girl opened her mouth wide and her cheeks went pale. “I’m *pregnant*?” she asked.

Dicken suddenly felt the bottom fall out of his stomach. “They didn’t tell you?”

“Oh, my God,” the girl said and curled up, facing away from him. “I knew it. I knew it. I could smell something. It was his baby inside of me. Oh, my God.” The girl sat up abruptly. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

Dicken must have showed his concern even through the hood.

“I’m not going to hurt myself. I have to throw up. Don’t look. Don’t watch me.”

He said, "I'll wait for you in the living room."

She swung her legs out over the side of the bed and stood, then paused, arms held out as if to keep her balance. She stared down at the fake wooden floor. "He used nose plugs and scrubbed me with soap, and then he covered me with cheap perfume. I couldn't make him stop. He said he wanted to learn whether he would ever have grandchildren. But he wasn't even my real father. A baby. Oh, my God."

The girl's face wrinkled up in an expression so complex Dicken could have studied it for hours and not understood. He knew how a chimpanzee must feel, watching humans emote.

"I'm sorry," Dicken said.

"Have you met anyone else like me who was pregnant?" the girl asked, holding, compelling his gaze through the plastic.

"No," Dicken said.

"I'm the first?"

"You're the first in my experience."

"Yeah." She got a panicky look and walked stiffly into the bathroom. Dicken could hear her trying to throw up. He went into the living room. The smell of his sorrow and loathing filled the helmet and there was no way to wipe his eyes or his nose.

When the girl came out, she stopped in the doorway, then sidled through, as if afraid to touch the frame. She held her arms out to her side like wings. Her cheeks were a steady golden brown and the yellow flint-sparks in her eyes seemed even larger and brighter. More than ever, she looked like a cat. She glared at him quizzically. She could see his puffy eyes and wet cheeks through the plastic. "What do you care?" she asked.

Dicken shook his head inside the helmet. "Hard to explain," he said. "I was there at the beginning."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure there's time," he said. "We need to find out why you're sick."

"Explain it to me, and then you can look at me," the girl said.

Dicken wondered how they would react outside if he spent a couple of hours in the trailer. If Jurie should happen to come back . . .

None of that mattered. He had to do something for the girl. She deserved so much more than this.

He pulled up the covering seal and unzipped his helmet, then removed



it. It certainly wasn't the worst risk he had ever taken. "I was one of the first to know," he began.

The girl lifted her nose and sniffed. The way her upper lip formed a V was so strangely beautiful that Dicken had to smile.

"Better?" he asked.

"You're not afraid, you're angry," the girl said. "You're angry *for* me."

He nodded.

"Nobody's ever been angry for me. It smells kind of sweet. Sit in the living room. Stay a few feet away, in case I'm dangerous."

They walked into the living room. Dicken sat on a dinette chair and she stood by the couch, arms folded, as if ready to run. "Tell me," she said.

"Can I examine you while I talk? You can keep your clothes on, and I won't stick you with anything. I just need to look and touch."

The girl nodded.

Rumors and half-truths were all she had ever heard. She remained standing for the first few minutes, while Dicken pressed his fingers gently under her jaw, into her armpits, and looked between her fingers and toes.

After a while, she sat on the vinyl couch, listening closely and watching him with those incredible flint-spark eyes.

## 36

### ARIZONA

**T**he three cars split off at a crossroads going through a small desert town. Stella looked through the rear window at the diminishing dot of the car that contained Celia and LaShawna and two of the boys. Then she turned to look at Will, who seemed to have fallen asleep.

JoBeth Hayden had talked about her daughter for the first half hour or so, about how she had been glad Bonnie was not on the bus, being taken to Sandia, yet how disappointing it was not to see her and have her be free.

After a while, Stella had felt her muscles tighten from the aftereffects of the crash, and she had tuned out Jobeth, focusing instead on the pile of crumpled pages that Will had arranged on the seat between them.

Will opened his eyes and leaned forward. "Mrs. Hayden," he said, and ran his tongue over dry lips, avoiding Stella's curious stare.

“Yes. Your name is William, isn’t it?”

“Will. I’d like to put these up by you.” He dropped some crumpled pages in the middle of the front bench seat.

“That’s trash,” Jobeth Hayden said disapprovingly.

“I can’t keep it back here,” Will said.

“I don’t see why not.”

Stella could not figure out what Will was up to. She rubbed her nose. The front bench seat was in direct sunlight. Will was fever-scenting. She could smell him now, subtle but direct, like cocoa powder and butter. She had never smelled anything exactly like it.

“Can I?” Will asked.

Jobeth Hayden shook her head slowly. Stella saw her eyes in the rearview mirror; she looked confused. “All right,” she said.

Stella picked up a crumpled page and smelled it. She drew back, rejecting the urge to frith, and stared at Will resentfully. The paperback was a reservoir. Will had been rubbing the pages behind his ears, storing up scent. She poked him with her finger and flashed a query with her cheeks. He took the paper from her hands.

“We don’t want to go to this ranch,” Will said to Mrs. Hayden.

“That’s where we’re going. There’s a doctor there. It’s a safe place, and they’re expecting you.”

“I know a better place,” Will said. “Could you drive us to California?”

“That’s silly,” Jobeth Hayden said.

“I’ve been trying to get there for more than a year now.”

“We’re going to the ranch, and that’s that.”

Will dropped another wadded-up page onto the pool of sun on the front seat. Stella could smell Will’s particular form of persuasion very clearly now, and however much she fought against it, what he said was beginning to seem reasonable.

Mrs. Hayden continued to drive. Stella wondered if too much persuasion would confuse her and make her drive off the road.

Will cradled his head in his arms. “We’re fine. I don’t need a doctor./ She’s fine, she can still drive.”

“We’re going to see a doctor in a small town in Arizona, and then we’re going straight to the ranch,” Mrs. Hayden said.

“It’s right across the state line. You have to drive through Nevada, though. Can I see the map?”

Mrs. Hayden was frowning deeply now, and she started to toss back the

pieces of crumpled paper. "I don't think that's a good idea," she said. "What are you doing?"

"I just want to see the map," Will said.

"Well, I suppose that's okay, but no more of this trash, please. I thought you children behaved better."

Stella touched Will's arm. "Stop it," she whispered, leaning forward so only he would hear.

Will ignored Stella and tossed the paper again onto the front seat, in the pool of sunshine that warmed it and made it release its scent.

"This is really intolerable," Mrs. Hayden said, but her head straightened and she did not sound angry. She reached over, opened up the glove box, and handed Will an Auto Club map of Arizona and New Mexico. "I don't use them often," she said. "They're pretty old."

Will opened the map and spread it across their knees. His finger followed highways going north and west. Stella leaned into the corner where the seat met the door and folded her arms.

"You'll have to sit up straight, sweetie," Mrs. Hayden told her. "The car has side airbags. It's not safe to slump over."

Stella sat up. Will looked at her. Her back was really hurting now. Calmly, he reached over and touched her hands, her legs, then her back.

"What are you doing back there?" Mrs. Hayden asked, dimly concerned.

Will did not answer, and she did not press the question. His fingers marched lightly up Stella's spine, and she rolled over to let him examine her back.

"You'll be okay," Will said.

"How do you know?" Stella asked.

"You'd smell different if you were bleeding inside, or if something was broken. You're just suffering from a little whiplash, and I don't think there's any nerve damage. I smelled a boy with a broken back once, and he had a sad, awful smell. You smell good."

"I don't like you telling us what to do," Stella said.

"I'll stop once she takes us to California," Will said. He did not seem very confident, and he did not smell sure of himself. This was one nervous young man.

"It's a beautiful day/ I learned a lot in North Carolina," Will doubled. "I'm glad you're here/ That was before they burned our camp."

Stella had never met anyone more adept at persuasion. She wondered whether his talent was natural, or whether he had been taught somewhere.

She also wondered whether they would be in any danger. But Stella was not willing, not yet anyway, to tell Mrs. Hayden her suspicions. She apparently had suspicions of her own. "I'd like to roll down the windows," Mrs. Hayden said. "It's getting stuffy in here."

"It's fine, really," Will said. At the same time, he undered to Stella, "I need your help. Don't you want to see what we can do?"

Stella shook her head, thinking of Mitch and Kaye, thinking irrationally of the house in Virginia, the last place she had really felt safe, though that had been an illusion.

"Didn't you ever want to run away?" Will asked in a near whisper.

"It really *is* stuffy," Mrs. Hayden said. Will was running out of pages.

"Help me," Will pleaded softly, earnestly.

"What is this place?" Stella asked.

"I think it's in the woods," Will said. "It's hidden, far from the towns. They have animals and grow their own food./ They raise marijuana and sell it to make money to buy stuff."

Marijuana was legal now in most states, but still that sounded dangerous. Stella suddenly felt very cautious. Will looked and smelled scary, with his jumbled hair and cocoa-powder richness, his face that seemed capable of so many expressions. *He's been with others and they've taught him so much. What could they teach me—and what could I add?*

"Would I be able to call my parents?"

"They're not like us/ They'd take you back," Will replied. "We need to be with our own people/ You'll grow and learn who you really are."

Stella felt her stomach knot with confusion and indecision. It was what she had been thinking about in the school. Forming demes was impossible with humans around; they always found ways to interfere. For all she knew, demes were just what children tried on for practice. Soon they would be adults, and what would they do then?

How would they ever find out if humans kept clinging to them?

"It's time to grow up," Will said.

"Why, you're so young," Mrs. Hayden said dreamily. She was driving straight and steadily, but her voice sounded wrong, and Stella knew they had to do something in concert soon or Mrs. Hayden could go one way or the other.

"I'm only fifteen," Stella said. Actually, she had not yet had her fifteenth birthday, but she always added in the time her mother had been pregnant with the first-stage embryo.

"There's supposed to be a man there in his sixties, one of us," Will said.

“That’s impossible,” Stella said.

“That’s what they say. He’s from the south, from Georgia. Or maybe Russia. They weren’t sure which.”

“Do you know where this place is?”

Will tapped his head. “They showed us a map before the camp was burned.”

“Is it real?”

Will could not answer this. “I think so./ I want it to be real.”

Stella closed her eyes. She could feel the warmth behind her eyelids, the sun passing over her face, the suspended redness, and below that the rising up of all her minds, all the parts of her body that yearned. To be alone with her own kind, making her own way, learning all she needed to learn to survive among people who hated her . . .

That would be an incredible adventure. That would be worth so much danger.

“It’s all you’ve wanted, I know it,” Will said.

“How do I know you’re not just *persuading* me?” Her cheeks added unconscious quotes to the emphasis on that word, which sounded so wrong, so lacking in nuance, so human.

“Look inside,” Will said.

“I *have*,” Stella said, a little wail that brought Mrs. Hayden’s head around.

“I’m fine,” Stella said, arms folded tightly across her chest. The tires squealed as Mrs. Hayden straightened the car out on the road.

Stella gripped the arm of her seat.

“I’m sweating like a bastard,” she told Will with a little giggle.

“So am I,” Will said, and smiled crookedly.

There was one last question. “What about sex?” she asked, so quietly Will did not hear and she had to repeat herself.

“Don’t you know?” Will said. “Humans can rape us, but we don’t rape each other. It just doesn’t work that way.”

“What if it happens anyway, and we don’t know what we’re doing, or how to stay out of trouble?”

“I don’t know the answer to that,” Will said. “Does anybody? But I know one thing. With us, it doesn’t happen until it’s right. And now it isn’t right.”

That was honest enough. She could feel her independence returning, and all the answers were the same.

She was strong. She was capable. She knew that.

She focused on fever-scenting for Mrs. Hayden.

“Whoa,” Will said, and waved his hand in the air. “You strong, lady.”

“I am *woman*./ I am *strong*,” Stella sang softly, and they giggled together. She leaned forward. “Please, would you take us to California?” she asked Mrs. Hayden.

“We’ll have to stop for gas. I only brought a little money.”

“It’ll be enough,” Will said.

“Do you need the book?” Stella asked him. It was a yellowed, dog-eared, and now thoroughly reduced paperback called *Spartacus* by Howard Fast.

“Maybe,” Will said. “I really don’t know.”

“Did you learn that in the woods, too?”

Will shook his head. “I made it up myself,” he said. “We have to be smart. They were taking us to Sandia. They wanted to kill us all. We have to think for ourselves.”

## 37

### MARYLAND

**T**he cab dropped off Kaye and Marge Cross at a single-story brick house on a pleasant, slightly weedy street in Randallstown, Maryland. The grass in the front yard stood a foot high and had long since turned straw yellow. A big old Buick Riviera from the last century, covered with rust and half-hearted patches of gray primer, sat up on blocks in the oil-stained driveway.

They walked up the overgrown path to the front porch. Kaye stood on the lower step, unsure where to look or what to expect. Cross punched the doorbell. Somewhere inside the house, electronic chimes played the four opening notes from Beethoven’s Fifth. Kaye stared at a plastic tricycle with big white wheels almost lost in the grass beside the porch.

The woman who opened the door was Laura Bloch, from Senator Gianelli’s office. She smiled at Kaye and Cross. “Delighted you could be here,” she said. “Welcome to the Maryland Advisory Group on National Biological Policy. We’re an ad hoc committee, and this is an exploratory meeting.”

Kaye looked at Cross, lips downturned in dubious surprise.

“You belong here,” Cross told her. “I’m not sure I do.”

“Of course you do, Marge,” Bloch said. “Come on in, both of you.”

They entered and stood in the small foyer opposite the living room, separated by a low wall and a row of turned wooden columns. The inside of the house—brown carpet, cream-colored walls decorated with family pictures, colonial-style maple furniture and a coffee table covered with magazines and a flattop computer—could have been anywhere in the country. Typical middle-class comfort.

In the dining room, seven people sat around a maple table. Kaye was not acquainted with most of them. She did recognize one woman, however, and her face brightened.

Luella Hamilton walked across the living room. They stood apart for a moment, Kaye in her pants suit, Mrs. Hamilton in a long orange and brown caftan. She had put on a lot of weight since she and Kaye had last seen each other, and not much of it from her pregnancy.

“Dear baby Jesus,” Mrs. Hamilton let out with a small, wild-eyed laugh. “We were just on the *phone*. You were going to stay put. Marge, what is this all about?”

“You know each other?” Cross asked.

“We sure do,” Kaye said. But she did not explain.

“Welcome to the revolution,” Luella said, smiling sweetly. “You know Laura. Come meet the others. Quite a high-toned group we have here.” She introduced Kaye to the three women and four men seated at the table. Most were in their middle years; the youngest, a woman, appeared to be in her thirties. All were dressed in suits or stylish office work clothes. All looked like Washington insiders to Kaye, who had met plenty. She saw gratefully that they were all wearing name tags.

“Most of these folks come from the offices of key senators and representatives, eyes and ears, not necessarily proxies,” Laura Bloch explained. “We won’t connect the dots until later. Ladies and gentlemen, Kaye is both a working scientist and a mommy.”

“You’re the one who discovered SHEVA,” said one of the two gray-haired men. Kaye tried to demur, but Bloch shushed her.

“Take credit where it’s due, Kaye,” Bloch said. “We’re presenting a paper to the president within the week. Marge sent us your conclusions about genomic viruses, along with a lot of other papers. We’re still digesting them. I’m sure there are lots of questions.”

“Wow, I’ll say,” chuckled a middle-aged man named Kendall Burkett. “Worse than homework.”

Kaye remembered Burkett now. They had met at a conference on SHEVA four years ago. He was a fundraiser for legal aid for SHEVA parents.

Luella returned from the kitchen carrying a pitcher of orange juice and a plate of cookies and celery stalks with peanut butter and cream cheese fillings. "I don't know why you folks come here," she told the group. "I'm not much of a cook."

Bloch put her arms around Luella's shoulders. They made quite a contrast. Kaye could tell Luella was six months or more along, although it was only slightly apparent on her ample frame.

"Come sit," said the younger woman. She pointed to an empty chair beside her and smiled. Her name, printed neatly on her tag, was Linda Gale. Kaye knew that name from somewhere.

"It's our second meeting," said Burkett. "We're still getting acquainted."

"Orange juice okay for you, honey?" Luella asked, and Kaye nodded. Luella filled her glass. Kaye felt overwhelmed. She did not know whether to resent Cross for not warning her in advance, or to just hug her, and then hug Luella. Instead, she walked around the table and settled into the seat beside Gale.

"Linda is assistant to the chief of staff," Bloch said.

"At the White House? For the president?" Kaye asked, hopeful as a child looking over a Christmas package.

"The president," Bloch confirmed.

Gale smiled up at Bloch. "Am I famous yet?"

"About time," Luella said, passing around the plate. Gale demurred, saying she had to keep in fighting trim, but the others snatched the cookies and held out glasses for juice.

"It's the legacy thing," Burkett said. "The polls are going fifty-fifty. Net and media are tired of being scaremongers. Marge tells us the scientific community will come out in support of the conclusion that the SHEVA kids won't produce disease. Do you go along with that?"

In politics, even a fragile certainty could move mountains. "I do," Kaye said.

"The president is taking advice from all sectors of the community," Gale said.

"They've had *years*," Kaye said.

"Linda is on our side, Kaye," Bloch said softly.

"Won't be long," Luella said, and nodded, her eyes both angry and knowing. "Mm hmm. Not long now."



“Dr. Rafelson, I have a question about your work,” Burkett said. “If I may . . .”

“First things first,” Bloch interrupted. “Marge knows already, but Kaye, you have to be absolutely clear on this. Everything said in this room is in the strictest confidence. Nobody will divulge anything to anybody outside this room, whether or not the president chooses to act. Understood?”

Kaye nodded, still in a daze.

“Good. We have some papers to sign, and then Kendall can ask his questions.”

Burkett shrugged patiently and chewed on a cookie.

Two phones rang at once—one in the kitchen, which Luella pushed through the swinging door to answer, and Laura Bloch’s cell phone in her purse.

Luella clutched an old-fashioned handset on a long cord. “Oh, my God,” she said. “Where?” Her eyes met Kaye’s. Something crossed between them. Kaye stood and clutched the back of her chair. Her knuckles turned white.

“LaShawna’s with them?” Luella asked. Then, once more, “Oh, my God.” Her face lit up with joy. “We caught a bus in New Mexico!” she cried. “John says they got our children! They have LaShawna, dear Jesus, John has my sweet, sweet girl.”

Laura Bloch finished her call and clacked her phone shut, furious. “The bastards finally did it,” she said.

## 38

### OREGON

“**Y**ou found them,” a voice said, and Mitch opened his eyes to a haze of faces in the shadows. The migraine was not done with him, but at least he could hear and think.

“The doctor says you’re going to be okay.”

“So glad,” Mitch said groggily. He was lying on an air mattress under a tent. The mattress squeaked beneath his shifting weight.

“One of your migraines?”

That was Eileen.

“Yeah.” He tried to sit up. Eileen gently pushed him down again on the mattress. Someone gave him a sip of water from a plastic cup.

"You should have told us where you were going," a woman he did not know said disapprovingly.

Eileen interrupted her. "You didn't know *where* you were going, did you?" she asked him. "Just what you wanted to find."

"This whole camp is on the knife edge of anarchy," the other woman said.

"Shut up, Nancy," said Eileen's colleague, what was her name again, Mitch liked her, she seemed smart: something Fitz. Then, it came to him, Connie Fitz, and as if in reward, the pain flowed out of his head like air from a balloon. His skull felt cold. "What did I find?"

"Something," Fitz said admiringly.

"We're taking scans now with the handheld," said Nancy.

"Good," Mitch said. He took a plastic bottle of water from Eileen and swallowed long and hard. He was as dry as a bone; he must have lain out on the rock and dirt for at least an hour. "I'm sorry," he said.

"De nada," Eileen said with a hint of pride.

"It's a tibia, isn't it?" Mitch asked.

"It's more than that," Eileen said. "We don't yet know how much more."

"I found the guys," he said.

The women would not commit.

"Just be happy you didn't die out there," Eileen said.

"It's not that hot," Mitch said.

"You were three feet from the bluff," Eileen said. "You could have fallen."

"They weathered out," Mitch mused, and took another swallow of water. "How many are left, I wonder?"

He peered into the blue light of the tent at the three women: Nancy, a tall, striking woman with long black hair and a stern face; Connie Fitz; Eileen.

The tent flap opened and the light assaulted him, bringing back a stab of pain.

"Sorry," Oliver Merton said. "Just heard about the incident. How's our boy wonder?"

"Explain it to me," Merton said.

Mitch sat alone with Oliver under the sun shade. He sipped a beer; Oliver was working away, or pretending to, on his small slate. He had a tracer cap on one finger and typed on empty air. All the archaeologists from

the camp, except for two younger women standing guard at the main site, were at the bluff, leaving Mitch grounded, “to recover,” as Eileen put it, but he strongly suspected it was to keep him out of their hair, out of trouble, until it was determined what he had found.

“Explain what?” Mitch asked.

“How you do it. I sense a pattern.”

Mitch covered his eyes with his hands. The sunlight was still dazzling.

“You undergo some sort of psychic revelation, enter a trance state, troop off in search of something you’ve already seen. . . . Is that it?”

“God, no,” Mitch said, grimacing. “Nothing like that. Was I showboating, Oliver?” he asked, and did not know himself whether he spoke with satisfaction, pride, or real curiosity as to what Merton thought.

Before Merton could answer, Mitch winced at a spike in his thoughts. His neck hair prickled.

*Something’s wrong.*

“Oh, most definitely,” Merton said with a nod and a sly little grin. “Sherlock Holmes, I presume?”

“Holmes was not psychic. You heard them. They still don’t know what I found.”

“You found a hominid leg bone. All of Eileen’s students, searching for two months around this site, haven’t found so much as a chip.”

“They were making us look bad,” Mitch said. “Men in general.”

“A camp full of angry women digging out a camp full of abandoned women,” Merton said. “Look bad? Right.”

“Have there ever been any men here?”

“Beg your pardon?” Merton asked petulantly.

“Working at the camp. Digging.”

“Besides me, not a one,” Merton admitted, and scowled at the screen on the slate.

“Why is that?” Mitch asked.

“Eileen’s gay, you know,” Merton said. “She and Connie Fitz . . . very close.”

Mitch thought this over for a few seconds but could not connect it right away with reality, his reality. “You’re kidding.”

Merton tried to cross his heart and hope to die, but got it wrong.

The closest Mitch could come to acknowledging this bit of information was to wonder why Eileen had not introduced her lover to him as such. He said, very slowly, “You could have fooled me.”

*That's not what's wrong.*

"Mr. Daney is amused by it all. He takes quite an anthropological view."

Mitch pulled back from somewhere, an unpleasant place coming closer. "They're not *all* gay, are they?"

"Oh, no. But it *is* a bit of a crazy coincidence. The others appear to be single, to a woman, and not one has shown any interest in me. Funny, how that slants my view of the world."

"Yeah," Mitch said.

"Nancy thinks you're trying to steal their thunder. They're sensitive about that."

"Right."

"It's just you and me, until Mr. Daney gets here," Merton said.

Mitch finished the can of Coors and propped it gently on the wooden arm of the camp chair.

"Shall I crush that for you?" Merton asked with a twinkle. "Just to keep up masculine appearances."

Mitch did not answer. The camp, the bones, his discovery, suddenly meant nothing. His mind was a blank sheet with vague writing starting to appear, as if scrawled by ghosts. He could not read the writing, but he did not like it.

He jerked, and the can fell off the arm of the chair. It struck the gravel with a hollow rattle. "Jesus," he said. He had never had a hypnagogic experience before.

"Something wrong?" Merton asked.

"Eileen was right. Maybe I'm still sick." He pushed up out of the chair. "Can I use your phone?"

"Of course," Merton said.

"Thanks." Mitch sidled awkwardly one step to the left, as if about to lose his balance, perhaps his sanity. "How secure is it?"

"Very," Oliver said, watching him with concern. "Private trunk feed for Mr. Daney."

Mitch did not know whom to trust, whom to turn to. He had never felt more spooked or more helpless in his life.

*No ESP, he thought. Please, let there be no such thing as ESP.*

## NEW MEXICO

**D**icken sat beside Helen Fremont on the couch in the trailer. She was staring at the wall opposite the couch, fever-scenting, he suspected, but he could not tell what she was hoping to accomplish, if anything. The air in the trailer smelled of old cheese and tea bags. He had finished his story ten minutes ago, patiently going back over old history and trying to justify himself as well: his existence, his work, his loathing for the isolation he had felt all these years, buried in his work as if it were another kind of plastic suit, proof against life. There had been silence for several minutes now, and he did not know what to say, much less what would happen to them next.

The girl broke the silence. "Aren't you at all afraid I'll make you sick?" she asked.

"I'm stuck," Dicken said, lifting his hands. "They won't let me out until they can make other arrangements."

"Aren't you afraid?" she repeated.

"No," Dicken said.

"If I wanted to, could I make you sick?"

Dicken shook his head. "I doubt it."

"But if they know that, why keep me here? Why keep any of us away from people?"

"Well, we just don't know what to do or what to believe. We don't understand," he added, speaking softly. "That makes us weak and stupid."

"It's cruel," the girl said. Then, as if she was just coming to believe she was pregnant, "How will they treat my baby?"

The door to the trailer opened. Aram Jurie entered first and was almost immediately flanked by two security men armed with machine pistols. All wore white isolation suits. Even through the plastic cowl, Jurie's pallid face was a peppercorn of irritation. "This is stupid," he said as the security men stepped forward. "Are you trying to sabotage everything we've done?"

Dicken stood up from the couch and glanced at the girl, but she did not seem at all surprised or disturbed. *God help us, it's what she knows.* Dicken said, "You're holding this young woman illegally."

Jurie was comically incredulous for a man whose face was normally so placid. "What in God's green Earth were you thinking?"

"You're not an authorized holding facility for children," Dicken continued, warming to his subject. "You illegally transported this girl across state lines."

"She's a threat to public health," Jurie said, suddenly recovering his calm. "And now you've joined her." He waved his hand. "Get him out of here."

The security men seemed unable to decide how to react. "Isn't he safe where he is?" one guard asked, his voice muffled inside the hood.

The girl reached up to Dicken and tightly gripped his arm. "There is no threat," Dicken told Jurie.

"You do not *know* that," Jurie said, staring hard at Dicken, but the comment was more for the benefit of the guards.

"Dr. Jurie has stepped way over the line," Dicken said. "Kidnapping is a tough rap, guys. This is a facility doing contract work under EMAC, which is under the authority of the Department of Health and Human Services. All of them have strict guidelines on human experimentation." *And nobody knows whether those guidelines still apply. But it's the best bluff we have.* "You have no jurisdiction over the girl. We're leaving Sandia. I'm taking her with me."

Jurie shook his head vigorously, making his hood waggle. "Very John Wayne. You got that out very nicely. I'm supposed to growl and play the villain?"

The situation was incredible and tense and fairly funny. "Yeah," Dicken said, abruptly breaking out in a shit-kicking, full-out hayseed grin. He had a tendency to do that when confronted by authority figures. It was one reason why he had spent so much of his life doing fieldwork.

Jurie misinterpreted Dicken's smile. "We have an incredible opportunity here. Why waste it?" Jurie said, wheedling now. "We can solve so many problems, learn so much. What we learn will benefit millions. It could save us all."

"Not this girl. Not any of them." Dicken held out his hand. The girl got to her feet and together, hand in hand, they walked cautiously toward the door.

Jurie blocked their way. "How far do you think you'll get?" he asked, livid behind the cowl.

"Let's find out," Dicken said. Jurie reached out to hold him, but

Dicken's arm snaked up and he grabbed the edge of the faceplate, as if to remind Jurie of their unequal vulnerability. Jurie dropped his hands, Dicken let go, and the man backed off, catching up against a chair and almost falling over.

The security men seemed rooted to the trailer's floor. "Good for you," Dicken murmured. "Hire some lawyers, gentlemen. Time off for good behavior. Mitigating factors in sentencing." Still murmuring legal inanities, he peered through the door of the trailer and saw a cluster of scientific and security staff, including Flynn, Powers, and now Presky, hanging back beyond the open gate in the reinforced acrylic fence. "Let's go, honey," Dicken said, and they stepped out onto the porch.

Behind, he heard a scuffle and swiveled his head to see Jurie, his face contorted, trying to grab a pistol and the security guards doing an awkward little dance keeping their weapons out of his reach.

*Scientists with guns*, Dicken thought. That really was the living end. Somehow, the absurdity cheered him. He squeezed the girl's hand and marched toward the others standing by the gate.

They did not stop him. Maggie Flynn actually held the gate open. She looked relieved.

## 40

### CALIFORNIA

**S**tella and Will had left the car after it ran out of gas near a town called Lone Pine. They were in the woods now, but she did not feel any closer to freedom, or to where she wanted to be.

They had left Mrs. Hayden asleep in the car, drained after driving all night and then cutting back and forth across the state routes and freeways and back roads all morning. Will trudged ahead of Stella, carrying two empty plastic bottles.

At noon, the air was cool and hazy. Summer was turning into fall. The pines and larches and oaks seemed to shimmer as breezes blew and clouds raced over the low mountains.

They had seen very few houses along the road, but there were some. Will talked about a place that was in the middle of nowhere, with no humans for tens, if not hundreds, of miles. Stella was too tired to feel discour-

aged. She knew now they did not belong anywhere or to anyone; they were just lost, inside and out. Her feet hurt. Her back hurt. The discomfort from her period was passing. That was a small blessing, but now she was beginning to wonder who and what Will really was.

He looked more than a little feral with his hair sweaty and sticking straight up at the back where he had leaned against the rear seat in Mrs. Hayden's car. He smelled gamy, angry, and afraid, but Stella knew she did not smell any better.

She wondered what Celia and LaShawna and Felice were up to, what had happened to the drivers trussed up and left by the side of the road.

She had only a dim idea how the map in Will's back pocket correlated with where they were. The road looked like a long black river rolling into the distance, vanishing around a tree-framed curve.

For a moment, she stopped and watched a ground squirrel. It stood on a low flat rock beside the shoulder, hunched and alert, with shiny black eyes, like the Shrooz in her room in Virginia.

She hoped they would end up on a farm and she could be with animals. She got along well with animals.

Will came back. The squirrel fled. "We should keep moving," he said. They trotted clumsily into the trees as two cars rumbled by.

"Maybe we should hitchhike," Stella suggested from behind a pine trunk. She smelled the cloying sweetness of the tree's sap and it reminded her of school. She curled her lip and pushed away from the rough bark.

"If we hitchhike, they'll catch us," Will said. "We're close. I know it."

She followed Will. She could almost imagine a big blue Chevy or a big pickup barreling down the road with Mitch behind the wheel. Mitch and Kaye, together, looking for her.

The next time they heard a car coming, Will ran into the trees but she kept walking. After the car had passed, he caught up with her and gave her a squinch-faced look.

"We're helpless out here," Stella said, squinching back at him, as if that were a reasonable explanation.

"More reason to hide."

"Maybe somebody knows where this place is. If they stop we can ask."

"I'm not very lucky," Will said, his mouth twisting into a line that was not a smile and not quite a smirk. Wry and uncertain. "Are you lucky?" he asked.

"I'm here with you, aren't I?" she asked, deadpan.



Will laughed. He laughed until he started waving his arms and snorting and had to stop to wipe his nose on his sleeve.

“Eeyeew,” Stella said.

“Sorry,” he said.

Against her better judgment, Stella liked him again.

The next car, Will stuck out his hand, thumb up, and gave his biggest smile. The car flashed by doing at least seventy miles an hour, smoked windows full of blurred faces that did not even look their way.

Will hunched his shoulders as he resumed walking.

They heard the next vehicle twenty minutes later. Stella looked over her shoulder. It was an old Ford minivan, cresting a rise in the two-lane road and laying down a thin cloud of oily white smoke. Neither she nor Will moved back from the road. Their water bottles were empty. It wouldn't be long before they had to turn around and retrace their journey.

The minivan slowed, moved into the opposite lane to avoid them, and passed with a low whoosh. An older man and woman in the front seats peered at them owlshly; the back windows were tinted blue and reflected their own faces.

The minivan pulled over and stopped about two hundred feet down the road.

Stella hiccupped in surprise and crossed her arms. Will stood sideways, like a fencer expecting a strike, and Stella saw his hands shake.

“They don't look mean,” Stella said, but she thought of the red truck and Fred Trinket and his mother who had cooked chicken, back in Spotsylvania County.

“We do need a ride,” Will admitted.

The minivan backed up slowly and stopped about twenty feet away. The woman leaned her head out of the right side window. Her hair was salt-and-pepper gray and she had a square, strong face and direct eyes. Her arm, elbowing out, was covered with freckles, and her face was heavily wrinkled and pale. Stella saw she had lots of big silver rings on the fingers of her left hand, which rested on her forearm as she looked back at them.

“Are you two virus kids?” the older woman asked.

“Yeah,” Will said, hands shaking even harder. He tried to smile. “We escaped.”

The older woman thought about that for a moment, pursing her lips. “Are you infectious?”

“I don't think so,” Will said, and stuck his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

The older woman turned back to the man in the driver's seat. They shared a glance and reached a silent agreement possible only to a couple who had lived together a very long time. "Need a ride somewhere?" the woman asked.

Will looked at Stella, but all Stella could sniff was the thick fume of oil. The man was at least ten years older than the woman. He had a thin face, bright gray eyes, and a prominent nose, and his hands, on the wheel, were also covered with rings—turquoise and coral and silver, birds and abstract designs.

"Sure," Will said.

The minivan's side door popped and slid open automatically. The interior stank of cigarette smoke and hamburgers and fries.

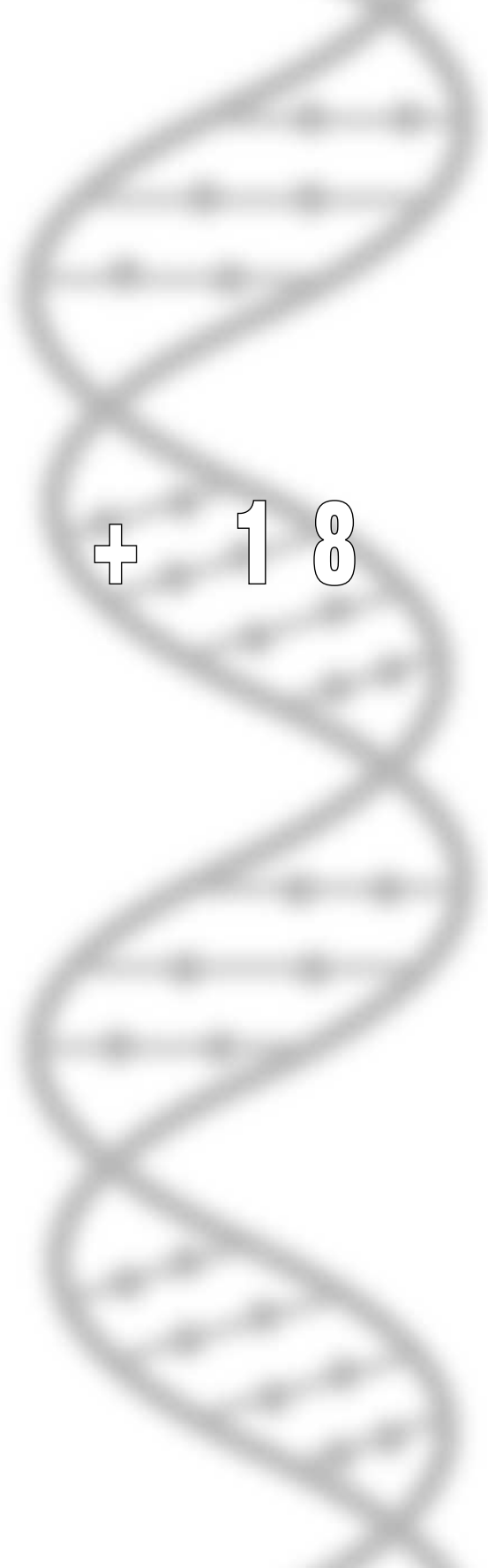
Stella's nose wrinkled, but the smell of food made her mouth water. They hadn't eaten since the morning of the day before.

"We've been reading about kids like you," the old man said as they climbed in. "Hard times, huh?"

"Yeah," Will said. "Thanks."

**PART THREE**

S H E V A + 1 8



“We’re in year eighteen of what some have called the Virus Century. The whole world is still running scared, though there are faint and tremulous hints of a political solution.

“Yet the majority of people polled today haven’t the faintest idea what a virus is. For most of us, ‘They’re small and they make us sick’ just about says it all.

“Most scientists insist that viruses are genetic pirates, hijacking and killing cells to reproduce: ‘Selfish genes with switchblades,’ ‘Terrorist DNA.’ Others say we’ve got it mostly wrong, that many viruses are genetic messengers, carrying signals between cells in the body and even between you and me: ‘Genetic FedEx.’

“The truth probably combines both views. It’s a weird old biological ballgame, and most scientists agree we’re not even in the second inning.”

—*FoxMedia producer pitching a Floodnet Real Life, Real News special; rejected*

“Who’ll buy ad time? It’s too scary. What the hell does ‘tremulous’ mean? I’m tired of all this science shit. Science ruins my day. Let me know if and when the president stays on the pot long enough to get his job done. He’s our boy. Maybe if, maybe then, but no promises.”

—*Memo from FoxMedia CEO and program executive*

## FORT DETRICK, MARYLAND

**K**aye stared into Mrs. Rhine's darkened living room. The furniture had been rearranged in bizarre ways; a couch overturned, covered with a sheet, the bumps of its legs pointing into the air and pillows arranged in a cross on the floor around it; two wooden chairs leaning face-forward against the wall in a corner as if they were being punished.

Small white cardboard boxes covered the coffee table.

Freedman tapped the intercom button. "Carla, we're here. I've brought Kaye Lang Rafelson."

Mrs. Rhine walked briskly through the door, took a chair from a corner, swung it into the center of the room, two yards from the thick window, and sat. She wore plain blue denim coveralls. Gauze covered her arms and hands and most of her face. She wore a kerchief, and it did not look as if she had any hair. The little flesh that showed was red and puffy. Her eyes were intense between the mummy folds of gauze.

"I'll turn my lights down," she said, her voice clear and almost etched over the intercom. "You turn yours up. No need to look at me."

"All right," Freedman said, and brightened the lights in the viewing room.

The lights in Mrs. Rhine's living room darkened until they could see her only in silhouette. "Welcome to my home, Dr. Rafelson," she said.

"I was pleased to get your message," Kaye said.

Freedman folded her arms and stood back.

"Christopher Dicken used to bring flowers," Mrs. Rhine said. Her movements were awkward, jerky. "I can't have flowers now. Once a week I have to go into a little closet and they send a robot in here to scrub everything.

They have to get rid of all the little house-dust things. Fungus and bacteria and such that might grow from old flakes of skin. They can kill me now, if they build up in here.”

“I appreciated the letter you sent me.”

“The Web is my life, Kaye. If I may call you Kaye.”

“Of course.”

“I seem to know you, Christopher has spoken of you so often. I don’t get too many visitors now. I’ve forgotten how to react to real people. I type on my clean little keyboard and travel all around the world, but I never go anywhere or touch or see anything, really. I thought I had gotten used to it, but then I just got angry again.”

“I can imagine,” Kaye said.

“Tell me what you imagine, Kaye,” Mrs. Rhine said, head jerking.

“I imagine you feel robbed.”

The dark shadow nodded. “My whole family. That’s why I wrote to you. When I read what happened to your husband, to your daughter, I thought, she’s not just a scientist, or a symbol of a movement, or a celebrity. She’s like me. But of course you *can* get them back, someday.”

“I am always trying to get back my daughter,” Kaye said. “We still search for her.”

“I wish I could tell you where she is.”

“So do I,” Kaye said, swallowing within the hood. The air flow in the stiff isolation suit was not the best.

“Have you read Karl Popper?” Mrs. Rhine asked.

“No, I never have,” Kaye said, and arranged a plastic wrinkle around her midriff. She noticed then that the suit was patched with something like duct tape. This distracted her for a moment; she had heard that funding had been cut, but she had not fully realized the implications.

“. . . says that a whole group of philosophers and thinkers, including him, regard the self as a social appurtenance,” Mrs. Rhine said. “If you are raised away from society, you do not develop a full self. Well, I am losing my self. I feel uncomfortable using the personal pronoun. I would go mad, but I . . . this thing I am . . .” She stopped. “Marian, I need to speak with Kaye privately. At least let me believe nobody is listening or recording us.”

“I’ll check with the technician.” Freedman spoke briefly with the safety technician. She then moved gingerly out of the viewing room, the umbilical coiling behind her. The door closed.

“Why are you here?” Mrs. Rhine asked in a low voice, barely audible.

Kaye could see the reflections in the woman's eyes from the brighter lights behind the glass.

"Because of your message. And because I thought it was time that I meet you."

"You're not here to reassure me that they'll find a cure? Because some people come through here and say that and I hate it."

"No," Kaye said.

"Why, then? Why speak with me? I send e-mail letters to lots of people. I don't think most of them get through. I'm surprised you got yours, actually."

Marian Freedman had made sure of that.

"You wrote that you felt you were getting smarter and more distant," Kaye said, "but you were losing your self." She stared at the shadowy figure in the dark room. The eczema had gotten very bad, so Kaye had been told in the briefing before joining Marian Freedman. "I'd like to hear more," Kaye said.

Suddenly, Mrs. Rhine leaned forward. "I know why you're here," she said, her voice rising.

"Why?" Kaye asked.

"We've both had the virus."

A moment's silence.

"I don't get you," Kaye said softly.

"Ascetics sit on pillars of rock to avoid human touch. They wait for God. They go mad. That is me. I'm Saint Anthony, but the devils are too smart to waste their time gibbering at me. I am already in hell. I don't need them to remind me. I have changed. My brain feels bigger but it's also like a big warehouse filled with empty boxes. I read and try to fill up the boxes. I was so stupid, I was just a breeder, the virus punished me for being stupid, I wanted to live so I took the pig tissue inside of me and that was forbidden, wasn't it? I'm not Jewish but pigs are powerful creatures, very spiritual, don't you think? I am haunted by them. I've read some ghost stories. Horror stories. Very scary, about pigs. I'm talking a mile a minute, I know. Marian listens, the others listen, but it's a chore for them. I scare them, I think. They wonder how long I'll last."

Kaye's stomach was so tense she could taste the acid in her throat. She felt so much for the woman beyond the glass, but could not think of anything to say or do to comfort her. "I'm still listening," she said.

"Good," Mrs. Rhine said. "I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to die soon. I can feel it in my blood. So will you, though maybe not so soon."

Mrs. Rhine stood and walked around the overturned and shrouded couch.

"I have these nightmares. I escape from here somehow and walk around and touch people, trying to help, and I just end up killing everybody. Then, I visit with God . . . and I make Him sick. I kill God. The devil says to Him, 'I told You so.' He's mocking God while's He's dying, and I say, *Good for you.*"

"Oh," Kaye said, swallowing. "That isn't the way it is. It isn't going to be that way."

Mrs. Rhine waved her arms at the window. "You can't possibly understand. I'm tired."

Kaye wanted to say more, but could not.

"Go now, Kaye," Carla Rhine insisted.

Kaye sipped a cup of coffee in Marian Freedman's small office. She was crying so hard her shoulders were shaking. She had held back while removing the suit and showering, while taking the elevator, but now, it could not be stopped. "That wasn't good," she managed to say between sobs. "I didn't handle that at all well."

"Nothing we do matters, not for Carla," Freedman said. "I don't know what to say to her, either."

"I hope it won't set her back."

"I doubt it," Freedman said. "She is strong in so many ways. That's part of the cruelty. The others are quiet. They have their habits. They're like hamsters. Forgive me, but it's true. Carla is different."

"She's become sacred," Kaye said, straightening in the plastic chair and taking another Kleenex from the floral box on Freedman's desk. She wiped her eyes and shook her head.

"Not sacred," Freedman insisted, irritated. "Cursed, maybe."

"She says she's dying."

Freedman looked at the far wall. "She's producing new types of retroviruses, very together, elegant little things, not the patchwork monstrosities she used to make. They don't contain any pig genes whatsoever. None of these new viruses are infectious, or even pathogenic, as far as we can tell, but they're really playing hell with her immune system. The other ladies . . . the same."

Marian Freedman focused on Kaye. Kaye studied her dark, drained eyes with a growing sense of dismay.



“Last time Christopher Dicken was through here, he worked with me on some samples,” Freedman said. “In less than a year, maybe only a few months, we think all our ladies will start showing symptoms of multiple sclerosis, possibly lupus.” Freedman worked her lips, fell silent, but kept looking at Kaye.

“And?” Kaye said.

“He thinks the symptoms have nothing to do with pig-tissue transplants. The ladies may just be accelerated a little. Mrs. Rhine could be the first to experience post-SHEVA syndrome, a side effect of SHEVA pregnancy. It could be pretty bad.”

Kaye let that information sink in, but could not find any emotion to attach to it—not after seeing Carla Rhine. “Christopher didn’t tell me.”

“Well, I can see why.”

Kaye deliberately switched her thoughts, a survival tactic at which she had become adept in the last decade. “I’m flying out to California to meet with Mitch. He’s still searching for Stella.”

“Any signs?” Freedman asked.

“Not yet,” Kaye said.

She got up and Freedman held up a special disposal basket marked “Biohazard” to receive her tear-dampened tissue. “Carla might behave very differently tomorrow. She’ll probably tell me how glad she is you dropped by. She’s just that way.”

“I understand,” Kaye said.

“No, you don’t,” Freedman said.

Kaye was in no mood. “Yes, I do,” she said firmly.

Freedman studied her for a moment, then gave in with a shrug. “Pardon my bad attitude,” she explained. “It’s become an epidemic around here.”

Kaye boarded a plane in Baltimore within two hours, heading for California, denying the sun its chance to rest. Scents of ice and coffee and orange juice wafted from a beverage cart being pushed down the aisle. As she sat watching a news report on the federal trials of former Emergency Action officials, she clamped her teeth to keep them from chattering. She was not cold; she was afraid.

Nearly all of her life, Kaye had believed that understanding biology, the way life worked, would lead to understanding herself, to enlightenment. Knowing how life worked would explain it all: origins, ends, and everything in between. But the deeper she dug and the more she understood, the

less satisfying it seemed, all clever mechanism; wonders, no doubt, enough to mesmerize her for a thousand lifetimes, but really nothing more than an infinitely devious shell.

The shell brought birth and consciousness, but the price was the push-pull of cooperation and competition, partnership and betrayal, success causing another's pain and failure causing your own pain and death, life preying upon life, dragging down victim after victim. Vast slaughters leading to adaptation and more cleverness, temporary advantage; a never-ending process.

Viruses contributed to both birth and disease: genes traveling and talking to each other, speaking the memories and planning the changes, all the marvels and all the failures, but never escaping the push-pull. *Nature is a bitch goddess.*

The sun came through the window opposite and fell brilliant on her face. She closed her eyes. *I should have told Carla what happened to me. Why didn't I tell her?*

*Because it's been three years. Fruitless, painful years. And now this.*

Carla Rhine had given up on God. Kaye wondered if she had as well.

## 2

### CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

**M**itch adjusted his tie in the old, patchy mirror in the dingy motel room. His face looked comical in the reflection, tinted yellow around his left eye, spotted black near his right cheek, a crack separating neck and chin. The mirror told him he was old and worn out and coming apart, but he smiled anyway. He would be seeing his wife for the first time in two weeks, and he was looking forward to spending time alone with her. He did not care about his appearance because he knew Kaye did not care much, either. So he wore the suit, because all his other clothes were dirty and he had not had time to take them down to the little outbuilding and plug dollar coins into the washing machine.

The rumpled queen-sized bed was scattered with half-folded maps and charts and pieces of paper with phone numbers and addresses, an imposing pile of clues that so far had gotten him nowhere. In the last three years of searching across the state, and finally zeroing in on Lone Pine, it seemed no

one had seen Stella, no one had seen any youngsters traveling, and most certainly no one had seen any virus children playing hooky from school.

Stella had vanished.

Mitch could locate with stunning insight a cluster of men who had died twenty thousand years ago, but he could not find his seventeen-year-old daughter.

He pinched the tie higher and grimaced, then turned out the bathroom light and went to the door. Just as he opened the door, a young-looking man in a sweatshirt and gray windbreaker, with long blond hair, pulled back a knocking fist.

“Sorry,” the man said. “Are you Mitch?”

“Can I help you?”

“The manager says maybe *I* can help *you*.” He tapped his nose and winked.

“What’s that mean?”

“You don’t remember me?”

“No,” Mitch said, impatient.

“I deliver hardware and electrical supplies. I can’t smell a thing, never have, and I can’t taste much, either. They call it anosmia. I don’t like the taste of food much, and that’s why I stay skinny.”

Mitch shrugged, still at a loss.

“You’re looking for a girl, right? A Shevite?”

Mitch had never heard that word before. The sound of it—a *right* sound—gave him gooseflesh. He reappraised the thin young man. There *was* something familiar about him.

“I’m the only one my boss, Ralph, will send to deliver supplies, because all the other guys come back confused.” He tapped his nose again. “Not me. They can’t make me forget to pick up the money. So they pay us, and since I treat them with respect, they pay well, with bonuses. See?”

Mitch nodded. “I’m listening.”

“I like them,” the young man said. “They’re good folks, and I don’t want anybody to go up there and make trouble. I mean, what they do is sort of legal now, and it’s a big business around here.” He peered off into the bright morning sunshine heating up the small asphalt parking lot, the grassy field, and the scattered pines beyond.

“I’m interested in any information,” Mitch said, stepping out onto the porch, careful now not to spook the man. “She’s my daughter. My wife and I have been looking for her for three years.”

“Cool,” the man said, shuffling his feet. “I have a little girl myself. I mean, she’s with her mother, and we’re not married—” He suddenly looked alarmed. “I don’t mean she’s a virus kid, no, not at all!”

“It’s okay,” Mitch said. “I’m not prejudiced.”

The man looked strangely at Mitch. “Don’t you recognize me? I mean, okay, it’s been a long time. I thought I remembered you, and now that I see you, it’s all as clear as yesterday. Strange, how people come back together, isn’t it?”

Mitch made little motions of shoulder and head to show he still wasn’t clued in.

“Well, it might not have been you . . . but I’m pretty sure it was, because I saw your wife’s picture in the paper a few months later. She’s a famous scientist, isn’t she?”

“She is,” Mitch said. “Look, I’m sorry . . .”

“You picked up some hitchhikers a long time ago. Two girls and a guy. That was me, the guy.” He pointed a skinny finger at his own chest. “One of the girls had just lost a baby. They were called Delia and Jayce.”

Mitch’s face slowly went blank, with both astonishment and memory. He was surprised, but he remembered almost everything, perhaps because it had taken place in another small motel.

“*Morgan?*” he asked, stooping as if his arms were dragged down by weights.

The man broke into the broadest grin Mitch had seen in months. “Bless you,” Morgan said. There were actually tears in his eyes. “Sorry,” he said, shuffling his feet and backing off into the sunshine. He wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands. “It’s just, after all these years . . . I’m sorry. I’m acting stupid. I am really grateful to you guys.”

Mitch reached out to save Morgan from falling off the curb. He pulled Morgan gently back into the shadow, and then, spontaneously, two men who had been through a lot over the years, they hugged. Mitch laughed despite himself. “Goddamnit, Morgan, how are you?”

Morgan accepted the hug but not the profanity. “Hey,” he said. “I’m with Jesus now.”

“Sorry,” Mitch said. “Where’s my daughter? What can you tell me? I mean, sounds like you’ve run into a group of people who don’t want to be found.” He felt the questions lining up, refusing to be slowed, much less stopped. “SHEVA people. Shevites, is that what you called them? How many? A commune? How did you find out I was looking for my daughter?”

“Like I said, the manager in the motel, he’s my girlfriend’s uncle. I deliver hardware to the garage he runs up on North Main. He told me. I wondered if it was you. You made some impression on me.”

“You want to take me out there, just in case I can’t be trusted?”

“I’m pretty sure you can be trusted, but . . . it’s hard to find. I’d like to take you there, just in case it is your daughter. I don’t know who she is, understand? But if she is out there . . . I’d like to return a favor.”

“I understand,” Mitch said. “Would you like to take my wife along, too? She’s the famous one.”

“Is she here?” Morgan asked, preparing to be stunned and shy again.

“She’ll be here in a couple of hours. I’m picking her up at the airport in Las Vegas.”

“Kaye Lang?”

“That’s her.”

“Wow!” Morgan said. “I’ve been watching the Senate hearings, the court stuff. When I’m not working. You know, I saw her on Oprah? That was a long time ago, I was still just a kid. But I really can’t promise anything.”

“We’ll go on faith,” Mitch said, happier than he had been in he did not remember how long. “Had some breakfast?”

“Hey, I earn my keep now,” Morgan said, straightening and sticking his finger tips into the pockets of his jeans. “I’ll buy *you* breakfast. What goes round, comes round.”

In the room, Mitch’s data phone rang. He half-closed the door as he loped to pick it up from the bed. Mitch pinched open the phone’s display door. The call was from Kaye. “Hello, Kaye! Guess—”

“I’m on the plane. What an awful, awful morning. I really need to hold someone,” Kaye said. Her image in the little screen looked pale. He could see a high seat back and people sitting behind her. “I need some good news, Mitch.”

He held back for a second, hand trembling, knowing how many times there had been false hopes. He did not want to add yet another disappointment.

“Mitch?”

“I’m here. I was just going out the door.”

“I just couldn’t stand not talking to you. Flight’s half full.”

“I think we’ve got something,” Mitch said, his voice rough and throat tight around the words. *You know it’s right. You know this is it.*

“Is that Dr. Lang? Say ‘hi!’ ” Morgan called brightly from the motel porch outside the door.

“What is it?” Kaye tried to make out Mitch’s expression on the little screen. “Is it a detective? Do we have that kind of money left?”

“Just get here safe. I’ve found an old friend. Or, rather, he’s found me.”

### 3

#### Lake Stannous

#### NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

**T**he air fell away from the heat of the afternoon. Through the pines Stella Nova could see thunderheads rising in silent, self-involved billows over the White Mountains. The woods were dry and full of the fragrances of lodgepole, spruce, and fir.

She had finished doing her share of the laundry in the big old concrete washhouse near the center of Oldstock. Now she sat on an empty oil drum beside the long lines hung with sun-drenched linens and underwear and some diapers and work clothes, smelling the laundry soap and bleach and steam, sipping a black cherry soda—a rare luxury here, she allowed herself only one a week—and thinking, kicking her feet back and forth, scuffing the concrete slab around the washhouse with her clogs.

From where she sat, she could see the gravel turnaround beside the old abandoned bowling alley, painted gray decades ago, the paint now peeling; three long dark redwood-stained dormitories that used to house seminary students and pilgrims and a few tourists; and up north of that, the fuel cell and solar station that ran the medical center and nursery. Beyond the station and an old fenced-in compound for storing mining equipment stretched a debris field dominated by a small mountain of tailings. The mountain marked the old mine and made that end of the camp a no-man’s-land of heavy metals and cyanide. No one walked there unless they had to; sometimes after a heavy rain she could smell the poison in the air, but it wasn’t bad enough to make them sick, unless they did something stupid.

In the middle of the last century, humans had mined copper and tin and even some gold at Oldstock, and built a little town—that was where the bowling alley and the seminary buildings had come from. South of town, just off the main road down to the shore of Lake Stannous, you could find weed-grown streets and concrete foundations where houses had once stood, built by Conditte Copper Company to house miners’ families. In the woods

Stella had come across old refrigerators and washing machines and piles of bottles and bigger junk, abandoned steam and diesel engines like big iron spaceships, squat dark hopper cars, stacks of iron rails orange with rust, and creosote-dipped cross ties glistening with black beads from years in the sun.

Oldstock was a designated Superfund site, located on the north end of Lake Stannous, where fishing was poor, and that combination kept most humans away. But Oldstock was beautiful, and as long as it did not rain too much, the tailings did not wash out into the lake and the village's water was fine. So far, they had been lucky. The weather had been dry for twenty years, ever since Mr. and Mrs. Sakartvelo had bought the place from a Lutheran church group.

Sakartvelo was not their real name. They had been immigrants from the FSU, the Former Soviet Union, the part now called the Republic of Georgia. The name they had adopted was the name of their country the way the natives said it. They had been hiding here for almost twenty years, knowing others would arrive eventually.

Five years ago, the others had started arriving, and the town had slowly come alive once more.

Mr. and Mrs. Sakartvelo were in their sixties. Physically, they were obvious Shevites. They said others like them—not many—went back over two hundred years in Georgia and Armenia and Turkey. Stella Nova saw no reason not to believe them. Mitch had talked about such things.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, turning her face like a flower to soak up more sun before it dipped behind the trees. She listened for red-winged blackbirds and jays, mockingbirds and robins. Her cheeks freckled with butterflies of contentment.

A game for the younger kids was Rawshock—freckling up in symmetrical patterns and guessing what they meant. It trained them at cheek flashing. Some came to Oldstock *freckle-dumb*, with no knowledge of how to communicate with their own kind. Slowly, they learned. Stella and others taught the young ones.

The woods had been full of ticks this summer—and deer, as well—but ticks and even mosquitoes did not bother them much. The Sakartvelos taught them how to use fever-scenting to keep biting insects away, and also how to soothe animals—black bears in particular—that they might encounter. The two hundred Shevites in Oldstock were the only inhabitants for ten miles, and the woods were wild.

And of course, the Sakartvelos had taught the children how to keep Oldstock a secret, and trained them in what to do if humans came looking for them.

They had been taught well. No one had ever been taken away, and no one had ever been hurt—by animals or humans. Life had been pretty good, and Stella had started to forget the bad times and even the times with Mitch and Kaye, the good times, though sad. She had started to believe there was a life to live, rooted and real, among her own kind.

Then, Will had gone wrong.

Some still had nightmares of the schools and of living among humans. Stella did not dream about such things. Will had not been so lucky. He had hidden many things from all of them, things he had experienced, that had happened to him.

There were no radios or televisions in Oldstock, no telephones except for a single satellite phone in the main meeting hall, kept locked in a cabinet. It had not been used since Stella and Will had arrived, and probably not for a long time before that.

A breeze made the sheets and diapers flap. Stella wiped sweat from her forehead, got up, and started taking down and folding the dry pieces. She stacked them in a plastic tub and scented the tub by touching the ball of her thumb behind her ear and rubbing the handle.

Randolph—the only Randolph in Oldstock, so she did not know his human last name—came up and sparked a greeting. Randolph was four years younger than Stella, what some called an off-born, not part of the Waves. Those born during the three big Waves were called boomers, she did not know why. They talked with just their faces for a while as they plucked and folded pillowcases and dungarees and diapers. They exchanged pleasantries and imitated the scents of others, a kind of joking gossip that passed the time.

Randolph was being brought into the Blackbird Deme, not Stella's but an offshoot of her group. They could talk openly about deme business, but not about personal affairs within the demes. That required triples, to prevent misunderstanding between the demes: three figures from each deme, engaging in full fever-scenting and sparking and facing. Triples looked like a weird dance to outsiders, but they solved a lot of problems and kept friction way down.

Oldstock had two children from the most recent Wave, foundlings aged two years and twenty-six months respectively. Stella cared for them some-



times in preparation, in training, and enjoyed their wild toddler scenting. Shevite infants raised among their own kind got enthusiastic sometimes and could emit a rank odor like dead skunks, and not from their dirty diapers.

Shevite babies knew how to swear with scent long before they could talk.

Everyone was learning. Fortunately, Mr. and Mrs. Sakartvelo were far from tyrants. They had been sterilized by the Communists in Tbilisi in the 1960s and could not have children of their own. In a strange way, that made them perfect to be everyone's Shevite godparents, their guides in small, cloistered Oldstock.

Randolph finished folding a good share of the laundry and palmed Stella's cheek in a brotherly fashion, with just a hint of the Question that the young males often asked, even of someone in her condition. Even of someone who still had a partner.

Stella responded with a little warning grumble under her throat and a polite chirrup. They smiled and parted, having spoken not a single word. Stella could go for days without speaking, and though sometimes she shouted out loud in her sleep, she could never recall why on waking.

Supper was being served in the refectory for those who had been cutting wood and planing boards starting early that morning. Males and females came out of the fresheners, stalls where they rubbed down with wet towels to take off the sweat—otherwise, most showered less than once a week. Cutting or hiding scent was considered rude. Smelling like heavy labor, however, could also hide scent.

Mr. Sakartvelo had told them, "We're all French, at heart." Stella did not know precisely what he meant. In France, Shevites were employed in perfume factories, they had heard. Maybe that was his meaning.

She felt so ignorant. She was hungry much of the time now, so she stood in line with the workers, hands on her stomach, trying to feel the shape beneath, but there was hardly even a bulge yet. Feeling her stomach made her a little sad. A cup of coffee would help. Caffeine made the day easier. Shevites reacted so strongly to caffeine that coffee and tea and even chocolate were only allowed between the hours of ten and five.

Stella's mind raced all the time even without coffee. Half the time she wanted to cry, the other half just to suck it back and get on with the hours of each day and what they could bring. So much work to do. Months and years could go by and still she could not fit herself in completely. All those years away from her kind . . . Had they handicapped her, made her more human than Shevite?

But there were sweet moments, classes with the younger boomers and especially the babies.

She took her tray from the food line and walked into the refectory, large and quiet, twelve workers off duty, none speaking, gesturing and facing and flashing, pleasant odors of cocoa and yogurt and even jasmine—somebody was being *very* pleasant—mingled together and out of context at this distance, like words pulled out of a conversation and tossed together randomly, the discourse going on at the old wooden tables and benches.

Stella sat by herself, which she did often enough to elicit comments, kindly meant but a little critical. She ate her bowl of canned kidney beans and sprinkled or dribbled in the extra spices and flavorings that Shevites enjoyed, Indian black salt, extracts of broccoli raab and sour anchovy sauce.

Luce Ramone sat down beside her with a bowl of chips. Luce was more talkative than others, and Stella greeted her with a smile that showed some need.

“What, you want a chatty person?” Luce asked. She was a year younger than Stella, from the tail end of the first boomers, small for a Shevite and pale of skin, with thick black hair that tended to bristle. She smelled wonderful, however, and attracted much attention from males hoping to be peripheral to her deme. Stella’s deme and Luce’s were currently in merger, coalescing but still keeping their bounds. Nobody knew where that might lead, or what it might mean to the domestic anglers, hopeful males and females in either deme.

“I’d love a chatty person,” Stella said.

“Hair of the human/ I’m your girl. You’re down/ looking stretched.”

“I’m thoughtful.”

Both were cheek-flashing, but speech over and under was dominant for the time being.

“Joe Siprio, you know him?”

“Will’s friend,” Stella said.

“He’s angling for me. Should I?”

“No way/ too young,” Stella said.

“You were angled at my age/ hypocrite.”

“Look what happened to me.” Not emphasized, but standing alone, no under.

“He’s a total cheer-fly,” Luce said with a musing glance. “Our bodies like each other.”

“What’s that got to do with a cat’s fart?” Stella asked, irritated. “You’re

moth. You need to rise to bee.” Moth and bee were names for two levels of menarche in the Shevites. Women passed through three stages: the first, moth, receptive to sexual overtures but not to actual intercourse; the second, bee, sexually active but infertile—and this was still a guess, even to the Sakartvelos—to allow more subtle hormonal and pheromonal samplings and communications; and the third, wasp, total fertility, leading to sexual activity with prospects of pregnancy. Shevite females could actually fall back into bee stage if a deme broke up or an angling failed.

Males started puberty at bee and from there went straight to wasp, sometimes within hours.

“Lemon and Lime are old notion about that,” Stella added. Lemon and Lime were the fundamentals of the Sakartvelos. “They think you should wait.”

“You didn’t,” Luce said.

“It was different,” Stella said, and freckled a warning that she did not like thinking about this, much less talking.

“Lemon and Lime support *you*,” Luce said testily.

“They didn’t have much choice, did they?”

A ten-year-old male named Burke walked to the end of the table and stood there shyly, hands folded in front of him, rocking on his heels.

“What?” Stella snapped, facing him with cheeks flashing full gold.

Burke backed off. “Lemon and Lime are down at the gate with some others. There’s humans down there.”

“So?”

“They say they’re your parents. Another brought them, the numb-nose delivery guy.”

Stella slapped her hands on the table, then drummed them, shaking her head, making the plates rattle. Heads turned in the cafeteria, and two stood in case intervention was the consensus.

Luce pushed back, never having seen her friend this disturbed.

“It’s not them,” Stella said, and swung her legs around on the bench, then got to her feet. “Not now.” She approached Burke, face and pupils ablaze in full accusative query, as if she wanted to punish him.

“The woman smells like you!” Burke wailed, and then others surrounded them and prodded Stella aside with gentle elbow nudges. Touching with angry hands was considered very bad. Burke ran off, crying.

“Go see,” Luce suggested, her own color flaring. Nobody was a better persuader than Luce. “If they’re not your parents, they’ll smoke them out of here and they’ll forget everything. If they are your parents, you have to go.”

She held out her spit-damp palms, as did others who had formed a circle around the table, but Stella refused them all.

"I don't want to know!" she wailed. "I don't want *them* to know!"

## 4

### Albert V. Bryan United States Courthouse

ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA

**S**enator Laura Bloch greeted Christopher Dicken in the hall outside the courtroom. Dicken was dressed in his usual excuse for business wear, brown tweed jacket and corduroy pants with a wide tie completely out of fashion. Senator Bloch was dressed in a navy blue suit and carried a small briefcase. Behind her stood a younger balding man and a lone, harried-looking middle-aged woman, both wearing suits and carrying their own briefcases.

"She's going to get off," Bloch declared curtly. "She's painting herself as the cop on the beat who protected us all."

Dicken was not much on punishment, and did not look forward to having to testify.

"I wonder what Gianelli would think," Bloch added softly, staring at the benches, the lines of lawyers and witnesses waiting to be allowed into the courtroom to sit and wait until called.

The sound of Mark Augustine's cane was unmistakable. Dicken and Bloch turned to see him making his way down the hall toward the courtroom. He nodded to his attorneys, spoke to them for a few seconds, eyes turning to Dicken, then broke away and stepped gingerly toward them.

"Dr. Augustine," Bloch said, and extended her hand.

"Senator, pleasure to see you." Augustine smiled and shook her hand, but kept his eyes on Dicken. "Sorry duty, eh, Christopher?"

Dicken nodded. "How are you, Mark?"

"Steep learning curve for us all," Augustine said.

Dicken nodded. He felt no triumph, only a hollow sensation of unfinished business.

Augustine pursed his lips and took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. "Two items of news," he said. "First, I've got Sumner's chief of staff, Stan Parton, on board for a reconciliation joint session. We're going

to have a select few children in the House chambers, at the president's invitation. The vice president will be there."

"That's great," Senator Bloch said, her eyes brightening. "Dick would have loved to hear that. When?"

"Could be months. The other news is bad."

The last thing the group wanted was bad news. Bloch sighed and rolled her prominent eyes.

"Let's have it," Dicken said.

"Mrs. Rhine slipped into a coma at six thirty this morning. She died at eleven fifteen."

Dicken felt his breath hitch.

"She had been in pain for years," Augustine said.

"A blessing, really," Bloch said.

Dicken asked where a restroom was on this floor, then excused himself. In the echoing hollowness, he closed the door to a stall. No tears came. He did not even feel numb.

"Funny world," he whispered, and looked up at the ceiling, as if Mrs. Rhine might be listening. "Funny old world. Wherever you are, Carla, I hope it's better."

Then he stepped out of the stall, washed his hands, and returned to stand with Bloch and Augustine outside the courtroom.

Rachel Browning and her attorneys had arrived and now huddled in a tight cluster about twenty feet from Augustine and Bloch. Her face had become deeply lined, pale as if cast in plaster, a death mask. She nodded to the tune of the attorneys' back-and-forth. One stopped to whisper in her ear.

"I'm sorry for her," Dicken said, vulnerable to the point of charity.

"Don't be," Augustine primly advised. "She'd hate that."

The court clerk opened the doors.

"Let's go, gentlemen," Bloch said. She placed her hands on their elbows and escorted them, three abreast, into the courtroom.

## LAKE STANNOUS, CALIFORNIA

**M**itch held Kaye's hand as a group of more than twenty youths tightened its gyre around them. Morgan had been drawn aside and now stood surrounded by three young men. He held out his hands and smiled nervously, face flushed, windbreaker pulled off one shoulder. He looked surprised.

Several other adolescents and a female in her late seventies were searching Morgan's truck, looking, Mitch guessed, for communications or tracking equipment. They were all quiet and serious.

"We're trying to find a girl named Stella Nova," Kaye repeated. The air was thick with persuasion. Mitch felt woozy and confused already, despite the nose plugs they had manufactured in the motel bathroom out of toilet paper and vanilla-scented lip balm.

An older male, also in his seventies, with ruddy cheeks and an unruly halo of reddish hair shot with gray, came through the gyre and reached to take Mitch's and Kaye's hands in his. He wore a denim jacket with brass buttons. Except for his round face and SHEVA features, he might have been an itinerant farmworker. "There was no need for you to come," he said pressing their hands to his chest.

"We're her parents," Kaye said, eyes pleading. "We've been looking for her for years."

"She isn't here." The old man's cheeks freckled in rapid patterns, unreadable, and his emerald green irises sparkled with yellow and brown. His accent was mild but Mitch could still detect a hint of eastern European. Mitch tried to think clearly, tried to resist the onslaught. Any minute now, he was certain, they would all get back in the truck and drive away, sure they had made a mistake—no matter what Morgan would tell them had happened.

For the first time, Mitch felt frightened, being among his daughter's people.

The old woman stood beside the old man and spoke a stream of over-under in another language.

"Georgian," Kaye said to Mitch. Mitch and Kaye tried to pull their hands back, but the old man was strong and would not release them and

Mitch did not want to start any kind of struggle. They stood in a tight triangle with the old man, who was no longer looking at them, but had focused on the old woman and the adolescents.

“They’re your friends!” Morgan shouted, struggling against the clasp- ing arms, his voice breaking with anger and frustration. “I wouldn’t bring no enemies here, you know that. She’s *famous*! She’s been on Oprah!”

The old man let their hands go, but still the gyre of youths, red-headed, strawberry blond, sandy brunette, all colors—Mitch had never seen so many varieties of SHEVA child—stayed close and fever scented the air.

Mitch doubted he would ever enjoy chocolate again.

Kaye stammered a few words of Georgian, then asked the old couple, in English, “When did you come here? Where are you from?”

“*Stella!*” Mitch shouted at the buildings adjoining the turnaround.

The old man touched his finger to Mitch’s lips. Mitch bent his head like a submissive dog and fell silent.

“*Please,*” Kaye pleaded. Mitch supported her as her legs gave way.

“Go home,” the old man said.

“Go home,” the children said in many voices, over and under, a rising, singing, all-too-convincing and reasonable murmur in the late afternoon warmth.

Mitch saw something from the corner of his eye. He raised his head and stood on tiptoes to look over the crowd. A face he knew, like Kaye’s, like his mother’s, moved steadily toward the gyre from the direction of the gray buildings. He tried to keep the young woman in sight through the bobbing heads and singing mouths and gold-flecked eyes. She wore a baggy pair of black pants and clogs and a white sleeveless blouse. Her shoulders were narrow, like Kaye’s, and her arms were tanned to a reddish bronze, like a statue in a park. Her cheeks formed a butterfly pattern that Mitch recognized instantly, the complicated expression revealing both surprise and uncertainty, and then unwitting greeting.

“She’s here!” Mitch said, choking.

Kaye saw Stella and stood up straight and tried to shove her way out of the circle. The youths crowded in to stop her.

Stella stopped outside the gyre, arms crossed, looking this way and that as if she had not found what she had come looking for, or did not want to see it.

Kaye beat at the young people to get free, using no words, just grunts and shrieks.

Stella suddenly dashed forward and grabbed at the members of the gyre.

The old man lifted his hands, the woman did the same, and the gyre dropped back, leaving Kaye and Mitch and Stella at the center of a loose and expanding crowd.

A breeze whispered through the trees and across the gravel turnaround and dispelled the scent. Stella hugged her mother, then reached around Kaye's shoulder and grabbed Mitch's arm and pulled him in, as well.

Other youths arrived, curious, waiting to join in and do whatever was necessary.

"See!" Morgan shouted triumphantly. "Would I shit you? Man, let them be! They're family!"

They said good-bye and thanks to Morgan, and Mitch shook his hand. Morgan was sternly told by the old Shevite man that he was not to return again, ever.

"Hey, it was worth it," Morgan said defiantly. He waved farewell as Stella led Mitch and Kaye to a small meeting room at the back of the old bowling alley.

"They're unhappy that you're here," she said, pulling out chairs around a battered wooden table. She motioned for them to sit. The window at the back of the room was dark; night had fallen. "They don't want us to be found."

"Who are *they*?" Kaye asked, too sharply, but she could not help herself. "Cult leaders? What are their names, Bo and Peep?"

"I don't know what you mean," Stella said.

"They wouldn't talk with me," Kaye said, trying to control her agitation. "Do they hate us so much?"

Stella shook her head, unable to answer for the moment. She could not easily explain how complicated an answer to that question might be.

"I sympathize with all of you," Kaye said. "We both do, Stella. They have a marvelous story, I'm sure of it, but we have been looking for *so* long, we were so afraid!" She pounded the table hard enough to make the floor vibrate and the window rattle.

Mitch placed his hands over hers. "We've both been searching." He watched Stella with alternating expressions of relief and anger.

"I'm sorry," Stella said. "Will and I came here after the bus accident. It was for the best."

"Will?" Mitch asked. "Was he the boy?" John Hamilton had told them about putting Stella and Will in the car with Jobeth Hayden. Hayden had



been arrested by state police in Nevada and turned over to the FBI, but she had never been charged with anything.

She had had no idea where the children might have gone. Piles of crumpled paperback pages had been found in her car.

“You saw him in Virginia, in the long building where you found me. Where the girl died,” Stella said.

“I don’t remember much about him,” Mitch said.

“He was my friend,” Stella said. She turned to Mitch, examining his face with shy, flicking glances, her own face turning dark and her pupils dropping down to pinpricks. Mitch had never seen his daughter looking so down, so discouraged.

“Was?”

“He’s dead.”

“How did he die?” Kaye asked.

Stella shook her head and looked away.

“Did he fit in, here?” Kaye asked cautiously.

Stella shook her head once more. “He lived with humans too long. They hurt him. They made him wild. He couldn’t fit with any deme, not even mine.”

“You’ve lived with humans,” Kaye said softly.

“Not the same.”

“Stella, are you pregnant?” Mitch asked, and Kaye jerked as if kicked.

“Yes,” Stella said.

Kaye’s jaw clenched. Mitch moved his hand to Stella’s shoulder. “Will?”

“Yes,” Stella said.

Kaye moaned, then wrapped her hands around her mouth and jaw. Stella stared at the window, unwilling to witness her mother’s anguish.

“He’s the father,” Mitch said.

“I went to wasp so quickly,” Stella said. “It seemed so right, and he was sweet and gentle, with me, when he was away from the others.”

“Did they kill him?” Mitch asked.

Stella shook her head and her cheeks went a lovely shade of sienna, which, Mitch knew, signified a very unlovely emotion: grief. Her cheeks had taken a similar color when they had found Shamus huddled dead in the kudzu, years ago. Lifetimes away. “He stopped eating. Nobody could force him. Nobody would. I don’t know why; we can do so much with some who are ill. I stayed with him. We played games. It was his decision. He said he did not fit. He was in such pain, he became so far away.”

Kaye laid her head on the table. Mitch saw glints of tears falling from her eyes, darkening the scarred wood.

“He couldn’t be with us, and he couldn’t be anything he wanted to be away from us. Something was broken inside of him. He knew he would never be right with us or anybody else. Yevgenia and Yuri—our hosts—they tried everything they knew.”

“There is so much to learn,” Kaye murmured, and turned her head toward her daughter.

“He did not want to live, at the end,” Stella said. “We buried him in the woods.” She shook her head vigorously. “No more talk about Will.”

Kaye got up and stood behind her daughter. “Can we stay for a while?” she asked Stella. “Be with you? Help around here, maybe?”

“I don’t know,” Stella said.

“Do you want us to stay?” Mitch asked.

Stella stroked Kaye’s fingers where they rested on her collarbone. “Yes,” she said.

“Are we the first . . . from the old kind of people, to come here, to visit?” Kaye asked.

“No,” Stella said. “There are four more. An old man and three old women. They lived at Oldstock when Yevgenia and Yuri bought the place, and they stayed. The man does maintenance and they all work in the cafeteria.”

“So it wouldn’t be unprecedented. Maybe they can explain some things to us,” Kaye suggested.

“I’d like you to be here when the baby comes,” Stella said. “That would be good.”

Kaye lay her cheek on the crown of Stella’s head. “I would be so proud,” she said. “Is there a doctor here?”

“Yevgenia and Yuri were doctors in Russia,” Stella said. “Mine will be the first baby born here.”

“Like mother, like daughter,” Mitch said with a hint of his old reluctance. “Pioneers.” His wife and Stella ventured smiles.

“You could sing to the baby, like you did to me,” Stella said. “You have a good voice, for babies.”

“She’s right,” Kaye said. “What if it’s a boy?”

“It is,” Stella said. “I can smell him. He smells like Will, inside me.”

## SPENT RIVER, OREGON

**S**ome said the turning point had come. Kaye was not so sure. After all the years of struggle she could hardly imagine a time of reconstruction, of engagement and change. As she sat with her husband and the three girls in the back of the long passenger van, jouncing along the rutted trails beneath the white glare of Mount Hood, what she felt inside was a kind of frozen patience.

She held her husband's arm and stared between the driver and the Secret Service agent sitting up front. Then she turned to look back at Stella and Celia and LaShawna, and John Hamilton behind them. The girls—young women now—were stiff as dolls, their eyes large. They had watched the landscape change from high arid brush to farms and pear orchards and then to thin forest; saying little, pushed close together on the bench seat. John was looking out the back window at where the long line of vans and cars had been.

*He wants to be with Luella, Kaye thought. He's tired of this fight and he wants to be with his wife. For the next fight.*

*No peace. No rest.*

Mitch leaned forward to peer through the side window, looking for the first signs of the Spent River and the camp. He had not wanted to return here. "I've given up the dead," he had told Kaye after the visit from Oliver Merton a week ago. "No more dirt and bones for me. Give me the living. They're trouble enough."

Mitch did not like the publicity aspect, nor the connection with William Daney, Eileen Ripper's benefactor at the Spent River dig; it smacked too much of a stunt. None of this junket had appealed to him, and at first Kaye had shared his opinion. Why go forth into the world to help an administration that had come to the table so late, after so much destruction—one of three clueless, terrible administrations in a row?

What good to help the monsters understand? Best to stay in Oldstock, hidden away from everyone and wait for Stella's baby.

But Oldstock was no longer hidden. Morgan had been doing a lot of talking. Reporters were arriving, pilgrims, parents searching for lost children.

It had taken a visit from Senator Bloch to finally persuade Kaye that this was a good idea. Troublesome gifts sometimes came out of left field; it was unwise to ignore them. Or impossible.

Kaye understood that better than most.

The EMAC schools were closing down or being converted to orphanages. Sandia Pathogenics was fighting for its existence and trying to redefine itself. Eileen's Spent River site was about to become an object lesson. The president of the United States wanted it as a symbol for a country trying to come together after a long and awful battle between conscience and fear.

"There are always those who fear the future," Bloch had told Kaye and Mitch. "They fear change, fear being replaced; one thing they do in their fear is kill children. They have to be left completely powerless, or the nastiness will start all over again.

"Either you join in, or you get left behind." Bloch had said. "I think you should go. Fruits of victory. People want to know what Kaye thinks." She had added, "You, too, Mitch."

In the end, it was Stella who had tipped the scales.

"Let's go," she had said in the kitchen of the Oldstock cafeteria, wiping her hands on a dish towel and resting them on her prominent stomach. "I've always wanted to see where Dad worked."

The line of cars and vans crested a rise and descended on the rough road to the dry meander of the ancient river bed. A few of the cars, with lower suspensions, were being left behind.

"There it is," Mitch said. "They've taken off the camouflage." The girls turned their heads to follow his finger. The site had expanded enormously. There were over thirty tents and shelters now on both sides of the old brush-strewn river bed.

Secret Service agents waited for them, checked with the drivers, then flagged them through, diverting the VIP vans to one area and the reporters to another.

The two long vans pulled into a makeshift parking lot marked by crumbling logs and shut off their engines. Senator Bloch waited for them under a white plastic awning. The sun poked through uncertain clouds and illuminated the covered H of the new main dig shelter. Again, linked Quonset huts provided cover. It lay at the end of a fenced pathway leading north.

"Is this where they died?" LaShawna asked.

Secret Service agents opened the van doors. Five photographers, led by a subdued Oliver Merton, surrounded the trucks and snapped pictures and made video. They concentrated on Stella.

Oliver smiled at Mitch and Kaye and stared at Stella with something like reverence. It was a quiet side of Oliver Kaye had never seen before.

“Just a year ago,” a reporter was saying into her lapel mike, staring earnestly into a tiny camera mounted on a curved pole poking from her belt, “the sight of a pregnant Shevite female would have caused panic. Now—”

Kaye turned away and refused to listen.

Mitch spotted Eileen Ripper walking along the trail from the big new shelter. He would have recognized her slow, deliberate saunter even had she worn a mask. She did not like this any more than he did, but it was indeed a triumph. A federal circuit court judge had ruled just three months before, after almost twenty years of litigation, that the Five Tribes had no standing—could claim no legitimate relationship to the remains of peoples physically and temporally so far from their own. The Department of the Interior would no longer halt these digs or return any remains found to the complaining tribes.

Thus had ended a long nightmare for North American archaeology.

Strange that Mitch did not feel any sense of victory.

The bones he had found, goaded on by Eileen’s challenge, had been just part of the story. He had not, after all, completely understood the motives of the ghosts flitting over the landscape.

Perhaps ghosts also lied to get their own way.

Eileen pushed through the photographers and past Bloch’s entourage with hardly a nod. She came straight to Mitch and Kaye, and her eyes lingered for a moment on the girls as she held out her hand to Kaye.

“Welcome,” she said with a broad, nervous smile. “And welcome back. Glad you could bring the family.”

She set about introducing the others, all moving forward with varying degrees of shyness or confidence or diffidence in front of the cameras.

Mitch was sure this was going to turn out badly.

At the airport, LaShawna and Celia had been glad to see Stella again. Breaking from John Hamilton’s protection, LaShawna had grabbed Celia and then Stella and they had all gone off together to the closest women’s restroom—a frightening place for them all, even more than the airplane, with the smells of so many humans.

LaShawna had dragged Stella into a stall and whispered fiercely at her,

“What are you doing, girl, going wasp and getting yourself puffed! Was it that boy Will?”

Celia had called through the closed door, “She’ll explain later. Let’s go! I don’t like it in here.”

But there had been little time for talk, much less clouding and conveying the full story. The ride in the truck had made them all a little quiet, even with Kaye and Mitch and John along. LaShawna had whispered in Stella’s ear, “Your mother looks good.”

Stella had pulled back and looked LaShawna full in the face.

“Momma has it,” LaShawna had said sadly, dropping her chin to her chest and pulling up her knees, propping them against the seat back. “She’s in a wheelchair.”

Stella brushed the short hair from her eyes as the wind blew in her face. She stepped down from the truck and blinked at the cameras. Celia and LaShawna seemed to fall in place behind her like ducklings. Being pregnant gave her seniority, she wondered why; it was stupid the way it had happened, stupid losing Will. She had left Oldstock to come here in part to get perspective; she wondered how much longer she would live at the compound.

Without Will, she doubted she would ever find the childish freedom that had once seemed so important. As she smelled and felt the baby inside her, she thought of responsibility and getting things done.

Meeting with a senator and with all these other folks was a start.

The landscape around the dry river bed was somewhere between bleak and pretty and it smelled much like Oldstock though cooler; the trees knew less sun than the trees around Lake Stannous. Quiet, cool pines poked up through gray brush and hard, crusty dirt with broken pieces of purple-black and gray rock overlying.

There was something going on between the woman archaeologist, Eileen, and her father. They were old friends. Something had happened between them along ago; Stella was sure of it. She watched her mother, but Kaye did not seem bothered. In fact, Kaye and Eileen seemed to walk alike and to look around with the same dignified curiosity.

That pleased Stella.

Mitch put an arm around her shoulder. Stella leaned into his embrace and cameras whirred and flashed all around.

“They’re *affectionate*,” said a male newscaster to unseen eyes. “Isn’t that wonderful?”

Mitch gently squeezed Stella. “Never mind,” he said in a low voice. “We’re going to visit the bones.” He sounded as if that would be like entering a church.

And it was. They walked down into the big shelter, following long plywood sheets, and reporters were instructed to turn off their bright lights. A large sunburned man, about thirty years old, in muddy jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt, with dirty forearms and a bandanna around his head, and dental tools and brushes slung on his belt, made the reporters pass through inspection and a shoe scrub. They all donned plastic booties. “Dirt is important here,” the man explained, his voice a rich tenor. “We don’t want to add anything that doesn’t belong.”

Eileen broke from a small group of reporters and introduced him. “This is Carlton Fierro,” she said. “Carlton the Doorman. We call him that because he can hardly fit through most doors. He’s in charge of this dig now.”

Stella smiled at Carlton.

“Glad you could make it,” he told the girls.

Connie Fitz walked around a sculpted pillar of dirt and hooked arms with Eileen. “We need big boys to protect us when there are reporters around,” she said, and winked at Mitch.

Stella did not understand any of this. She focused on Carlton, who was shaking hands with Mitch. “We’ve got the biggest grouping over here,” Carlton said, and led them all along the boards and through a connecting corridor to the second wing of the shelter. They turned right and stood before a wide excavated mesa, sheared off about ten feet below the datum—the level of the surrounding land. Scaffolds had been erected around the mesa and filtered sunlight fell on them all through milky fiberglass sheets.

“Eight at a time,” Carlton instructed, “and that includes me.” The reporters pushed around him, trying to keep the girls and Kaye in direct view.

He made a path through the crowd for the people Eileen pointed out, holding her hand over their heads and nodding.

“Coming through,” Carlton said, and they climbed the aluminum steps. He was the last.

Stella looked down on the excavation. At first, all she saw was a large jumble of dark bones on hard planed dirt, mud, and what looked like old ash. She could smell the dust. Nothing more.

Mitch and Kaye stood across from her, Celia and LaShawna beside her; John Hamilton and Senator Bloch, both very quiet, were catercorner on the

scaffold beside Carlton. Oliver Merton was staying out of the way, standing alone in one corner with arms crossed.

Eileen and Connie Fitz and Laura Bloch had also stayed below. It was now Carlton's show.

"There are eight adult females and two children, one male and one female, in this grouping," Carlton said. "A lahar of volcanic gas and mud and water came roaring down this river bed about twenty thousand years ago. They died together, covered with hot mud. One of them dropped a woven grass basket. Its mold is still in that cube of unexcavated mudstone to the right. The woman on top of the group—she's marked with a red plastic square, and her outline is made more clear by the thin strip of blue tape—is taller and more robust; she's *Homo erectus*, a late stage variety similar to *heidelbergensis* but as yet without a scientific designation. She appears to be in her forties, well past child bearing and very old for the time. A grandma type. We think she was protecting the children, and perhaps two other women. The female child and the other females are all *Homo sapiens*, virtually indistinguishable from you and me. The male child is another *Homo erectus*.

"At first, we thought—Connie and Eileen and the pioneers at this site thought, that is; I'm sort of late here—that there were only females, that the males had run off and abandoned them. Later, Mr. Rafelson found the first signs of the males, not far away and across the river. We thought they might have been out hunting and coming back to their females. Well, that may still be the case, but there was a lot more going on. We've since excavated thirteen sites around the Spent River, all within a thousand yards of here. We've found a total of fifty-three whole skeletons and perhaps seventy partials, a bit of femur or skull cap or tooth here and there.

"This was a kind of village, set up in the autumn to take advantage of salmon runs in the river. Family groups made camp along a loose network of trails, waiting for the run to begin. They were caught by the volcanic eruption and frozen in time, for us to find, and to reacquaint ourselves with . . . well, I think of them as old friends. Old teachers, actually."

Stella glanced at Mitch and saw a tear on his cheek.

Carlton paused to gather his thoughts. Celia was transfixed and maybe a little frightened by this big, rough-looking male. Her jaw hung open. LaShawna was frowning in concentration.

"And what they teach us now is pretty simple. They were traveling as equals. Personally, I don't know what they were offering each other. But we've found roughly equal numbers of both species, *erectus* and *sapiens*.



There are children of both species, and males as well. Our first site was anomalous. If I could make a guess . . .”

“He’s a lot like you, Mitch,” Eileen called from the crowd below the scaffold.

Carlton smiled shyly. “I’d say maybe the *erectus* individuals worked as hunters, using tools made by the *sapiens*. We haven’t finished analyzing one of the outermost digs yet, a hunting party, but it looks like some of the *erectus* females served as lead hunters. They carried flint knapping tools and the heavy weapons and some stones that might or might not be hunting charms. That’s right. Tall girls with great sniffers leading the brainy boys.

“We’re looking for a central butchering ground for game—usually near where the large cutting tools were manufactured. In those days hunters tended to carry big game back to the village and butcher it in a protected area. We aren’t sure why—either they hadn’t yet thought of carrying the butchering tools with them, or they were trying to avoid attracting large predators.

“The *sapiens* females cooperated in weaving grass and leather and bark and preparing the fish and gathering berries and bugs and such around the camps. We’ve found beetles and grubs and grass and blackberry seeds in some of the baskets. Everyone had their place. They worked together.”

“So should we all,” said Senator Bloch, and Stella could see that she, too, was deeply moved.

Stella did not know what to think. The bones were still a tangle, as were her thoughts.

“As we reveal the bones, remove the overburden and brush them clean, we don’t know what beliefs they held, twenty thousand years ago,” Carlton said softly. “So basically we just respect them with silence, for a while, and gratitude. We get acquainted, as it were. They were not our direct ancestors, of course—we’ll probably never find direct ancestors that old. It would be like digging up needles in a mighty sparse and distributed haystack.

“But the people down here, and all around the Spent River, they’re still *us*. Nobody owns them. But they’re family.” Carlton nodded to his own strong convictions.

“Amen,” Eileen and Connie Fitz said simultaneously below the scaffold.

Stella saw her father’s hands on the rail. His knuckles were white and he was staring directly at her. Stella leaned her head to one side. He moved his lips. She could easily tell what he was saying.

*Human.*

• •

Eileen and Laura Bloch and Mitch watched as the photographers arranged Kaye and the girls at the base of the mesa, standing in front of the scaffolding. No pictures of the bones were being allowed.

“Rumor has it Kaye met God,” Eileen said in a low voice to Mitch. “Is it true?”

“So she tells me.”

“That’s got to be awkward for a scientist,” Eileen said.

“She’s doing okay,” Mitch said. “She calls it just another kind of inspiration.”

Senator Bloch listened to this with a focused pug-dog expression.

“What about you?” Eileen asked.

“I remain blissfully ignorant.”

“Kind of a sometime thing, huh?”

Bloch weighed in. “That can’t be bad,” she mused. “Not for politics. Did she see Jesus?”

Mitch shook his head. “I don’t think so. That’s not what she says, anyway.”

Bloch pouted her lips. “If there’s no Jesus, we best keep it under our hats for now.”

“What does God tell her about all of this?” Eileen asked, sweeping her hand over the excavations, the revealed bones.

Mitch scowled. “Not much, probably. It doesn’t seem to be that kind of relationship.”

“What good is he, then?” Eileen asked petulantly.

Mitch had to look hard to tell if she was joking. She appeared to be, and she lost interest as some photographers came too near a grid square propped against a table and almost knocked it over.

After berating them and resetting the square, she came back and patted Mitch on the shoulder. “Good for Kaye,” she said. “Just proves that we’re a tough old species. We can survive anything, even God. How about you? Going to come back soon and dig with us?” Eileen asked.

“No,” Mitch said. “That’s over for me.”

“Shame. He was the best,” Eileen said to Bloch. “A real natural.”

Mitch helped Kaye back into the van. Kaye sat and massaged her calves. Her feet were numb and she had had a difficult time climbing the stairs out of the shelter.

Stella and Celia and LaShawna walked in a tight cluster to the van and

climbed in behind her, then sat quietly. John Hamilton and Mitch stood talking as they waited for Bloch to rejoin them.

Kaye could hear her husband and John, but only a scatter of words between whisks of dusty wind.

John was saying, “. . . and bad. They say it’s worse with two. Summer in Maryland is going to be tough. She wanted to come here. Just couldn’t.”

Kaye licked her dry lips and stared forward. Stella placed her hand on Kaye’s shoulder and touched her cheek.

“How are you all doing?” Kaye asked abruptly, swiveling around despite the twinges in her thighs and surveying the girls—the young women.

“We’re just fine,” LaShawna said dreamily. “I wish I knew what this was all about.”

“I think-KUK I do,” Celia said. “Human politics.”

“How are you, dear?” Kaye asked Stella.

“*We’re fine,*” Stella said, and her cheeks flushed butterfly gold with something like fear, and something like joy.

*She gets it,* Kaye thought. *What we just saw. She’s like her father that way.*

She watched Stella lean back in the seat and put on a distant, thoughtful expression, cheeks paling to beige. Celia and LaShawna sat back with her.

Together, they all folded their arms.

That evening, Stella and Celia and LaShawna sat in their own room in a motel in Portland. Kaye and Mitch and John Hamilton were in other rooms in the same motel; the girls had asked to be together, alone, “To just lie back and revert,” Stella had explained.

They had eaten with the others and watched Senator Bloch and Oliver Merton leave in a limo to fly back on a red-eye to Washington, D.C., and now they were relaxing and thinking quietly.

Seeing the bones had bothered Stella. Will was not much more than bones now. All that time, all that life; gone, leaving nothing but scattered rubble. Celia and LaShawna were also quiet at first, absorbed in their own individual thoughts.

They were saddened by the prospect of parting, but they all had things to do at home, loved ones to attend to. Celia was living with the Hamiltons and working with Shevite outreach services in Maryland and had her own life. LaShawna was getting her general education requirements at a local high school and planned on going to a junior college to study nursing. With

her father, she took care of her mother, who was not getting around on her own much now, and her baby sister.

So much had changed in a few short months.

Stella sat up from a pile of pillows and made a circling motion with her palm, dipping her head like a bird, and LaShawna seconded. Celia gave a little groan of weary protest but joined them on the bed farthest from the curtained window. They palm-touched and sat in a circle, and Stella felt her cheeks flush and her ears grow warm.

“Who we are,” LaShawna sang. “What we are/ who. What we are/ who. Get us in, get us out/ who.”

It was a chant that helped them focus; they had done it before at Sable Mountain when the teachers and counselors weren’t watching or listening, and especially after a difficult day.

The room filled with their scents. A little something like electricity passed between them and LaShawna started to hum two tunes, two sets of over and under. She was good at that, better than Stella.

The day seemed to melt away and Stella felt her neck and back loosen and they began to remember all the good they had experienced together.

“Lovely. We’re in it,” LaShawna said, and started to hum again.

“I can-KUK feel the baby,” Celia said. “He’s so small and quiet. He smells like Will, a little—if I remember, it’s been so long.”

“He smells like Will,” Stella agreed.

“It’s so good to be with both of you again,” Celia said.

“I had a dream about this, weeks ago,” LaShawna said. “I was awake, with my friends, but everything was dark, and I was looking so far down into myself it hurt. I saw something down there. A little glow hidden way at the bottom . . .”

“Like what?” Celia said, squirming in fascination.

“Let me show you,” LaShawna said, and squeezed their palms tightly.

Celia bit her lip and closed her eyes. “I’m looking deep.”

“Can you see them?” LaShawna whispered. She chanted softly, “If you take away/strip it down/ all the days and years/ all the thoughts . . . Who are we? Umm-hmm. Down there deep in a cave. Get us in, get us out/ Who?”

Stella reached down to where LaShawna was, using her palm-touch for guidance. She actually did see something at the bottom of a long, deep well, three somethings, actually, and then four, the baby within her joining. Like four luminous golden kernels of corn, hidden away at the bottom of four separate tunnels of memory and life.

“What are they?” Celia asked quietly, eyes still closed. Stella closed her own eyes now to see these peculiar things more clearly.

“They’re like us, part of us, but way below us,” LaShawna said.

“They’re so quiet-KUK, like they’re asleep. Peaceful.”

“The baby’s is not much different from ours,” Stella observed. “Why is that?”

“Maybe they’re the important ones and we’re just shadows trapped way up here. We’re ghosts to them, maybe. Ummm . . . I’m losing them . . . I can’t see them now,” LaShawna said, and opened her eyes with a sigh. “That was spooky.”

The waking dream ended and left Stella feeling a little woozy. The air in the room had turned cold and they shivered and laughed, then clasped hands tighter, listening to their own heartbeats.

“Spooky,” LaShawna said again. “I’m glad you see them, too.”

They sat that way for hours, just touching hands and scenting and being quiet together until the dawn came.

## 7

### LAKE STANNOUS

**T**he third snow of the year came in late October, fat flakes slipping down and nodding between the trees and over the dirt and gravel pathways throughout Oldstock. Kaye hurried from her classroom in the overheated school building, clutching a parka over her shoulders. Puffing, her lips and fingers numb, she met Mitch and Luce Ramone on the path to the infirmary—a name Kaye hated, with its emphasis on dysfunction. Mitch wrapped her in his arms and she marched quickly, close to his side, looking up at him with tight lips and large eyes.

“We have the partners and side mothers in the birthing room,” Luce said. Most of the children—the Shevites, Kaye corrected—did not speak in doubles, over-under, around them, more out of politeness than any obvious reserve or caution. Slowly, over the last four months, the Shevites had come to trust Kaye and Mitch, and together they had worked out procedures to calm mothers about to give birth. Kaye did not know whether it was mumbo jumbo or a new way of doing things. She was about to find out. Now there were twelve pregnancies in Oldstock and Stella was serving

a very important function. *Keep reminding yourself. Be proud. Be courageous. Oh, God.*

So much was being learned. So many questions were being answered. *But why my daughter? Why someone who, if she dies, takes me with her, soul if not body?*

The last two months had been the happiest in Kaye's life, and the most tense and awkward.

They gingerly climbed the snowy steps into the old infirmary and down the linoleum-tiled floors, along the plastered hallway lit with dim incandescent bulbs, into the delivery room.

Stella was sitting on the bent and padded bench, puffing and blowing. A rusty gurney covered with a foam mattress and clean white sheets waited for her if she wanted to sleep. She gritted her teeth into a contraction.

Kaye set about arranging the medical instruments, making sure they had been kept in the old autoclave long enough.

"Where did you get these antiques?" she asked Yuri Sakartvelos as he came in, hands held in the air, dripping from the scrub station. Yevgenia smiled at Kaye and her wrinkled cheeks grew golden-green as she slipped the gloves on Yuri's hands.

"Pray they don't have to do anything," Kaye whispered grimly to Mitch.

"Shush," Mitch warned. "They're doctors."

"From *Russia*, Mitch," Kaye responded. "How long since they've done anything but set a broken leg or dress a wound?"

As Mitch caught a catnap, in the twelfth hour of Stella's long delivery—that had not changed much, difficult births for babies with large heads—Kaye stood outside the infirmary and breathed the cold early morning air and watched the snow.

While Kaye taught in the village school, Mitch had helped the Shevites restore a small lumber mill and clear the debris from the old concrete foundations and start putting up new houses for the families.

It was not yet clear what shape those families would take; probably not just father, mother, and children, and on this score the Sakartvelos were as clueless as Kaye and Mitch. There had never been so many Shevites together before; though some said there were larger communities in the East and the South, perhaps in New Jersey or Georgia or Mississippi, lying low.

The young Shevites were designing the homes. They felt uncomfort-

able when deprived of company for more than a few hours. Large windows Kaye could certainly understand, after so many years in cramped dorms and even cells. But there was no double pane glass available, not yet, and winters in Oldstock could be cold. While the foundations provided some constraint on their imaginations, some of the drawings were looking very odd indeed: bathrooms and toilet facilities without walls—“Why privacy? We know what’s happening”—and narrow “scent shafts” connecting adjacent homes. The whole idea of privacy seemed up for grabs.

Kaye’s best moments were spent with Stella and Mitch and Stella’s deme. Most of the students in Kaye’s class were part of Stella’s deme. Her curiosity and relative ease with these intruder humans, her parents, seemed to blend over into those closest to her, and that extended family had adopted Kaye and Mitch.

The Sakartvelos, on the other hand, treated Kaye and Mitch civilly enough, but seldom socialized. They seemed a little standoffish even with the others in their community, perhaps because of early trauma and years of living alone, growing middle-aged with little company.

The concept and practice of demes was still growing, but the demes formed thus far made up the most stable of all the social structures and experiments going on in Oldstock, and the oldest. Stella’s deme consisted of seven permanent partners—three males and four females—and twelve exchange members.

Deme partners usually did not mate, though they could fall in love—Stella was very definite about that, but not very clear what it entailed. Romantic love was running wild in Oldstock, complete with exchanges of dried fruit, perfumes when available, carved wooden statues, but such infatuations seldom had anything to do with sex.

Sex, it seemed, was too important to be left to the whims of romance. Love, yes, but not this boiling torrent of fickle affection.

In late summer, the paths and woods had sometimes smelled like an explosion in a cocoa factory, mixed with shocking and eye-stinging hints of musk and civet. Couples, all combinations—and sometimes triples—could be seen wrapped in congeries of self-involved, fondling splendor, intertwined, giggling, fever-scenting, persuading—everything but having sex.

At first, Kaye and Mitch had speculated that some of the couples and triples were too young, but soon the sixteen-year-olds were proving them wrong, mating outside the romance, and almost always across demes.

Those who were still prepubescent could become juniors in romantic

groups, but such relationships were less demonstrative, more reserved and instructional. Love, and new varieties of passion, it seemed, would find many new uses in Shevite society, and the homes had to reflect these novelties.

Kaye's thoughts darted back to the one thing she did not want to think about, not now. She lifted her eyes to the dark sky. She wanted to be around for her daughter, to be useful to Mitch and to Stella for many years. But the CDC had confirmed that there was indeed a post-SHEVA syndrome. Luella Hamilton had it; so did many others.

The tips of Kaye's fingers and portions of her calves were growing numb as the months passed, her walk less quick, her strength and stamina waning.

She had told nobody at Oldstock, though Mitch knew. Kaye could seldom hide important things from Mitch. Except, of course, for what he did not want to hear.

The caller had touched her just a week ago. A short visit, pleasant but not conclusive; a social call. She had asked if she might be allowed to live to see her grandson born.

As before, no answers.

Inside the delivery room, Stella was surrounded by all the females in her deme. They alternately sang and read stories from old children's books and put their heads together, rubbing their damp palms on hers to calm her and relieve her pain.

Stella leaned back at the last and her eyes seemed to slip up into her head. She gave a long, loud shriek, operatic in its intensity, and the room smelled like saltwater and violets. Everyone moaned together, no signal, just the way it was, would be, moaning in an over-under song of sympathy and greeting.

Stella gave a vigorous wriggle and then a shove, and her son came into the larger world. The moaning softened as the child was examined, and then changed to delighted coos and chuckles.

Yevgenia and Kaye cooperated in lifting the baby onto Stella's stomach. Yevgenia smiled at Kaye. "Now you are truly grandmother," she said.

The afterbirth came. Yuri moved them urgently to one side and caught it in a steel basin lined with a plastic bag. To Kaye's surprise, Yuri insisted on cutting the cord, then wrapping and removing the placenta right away. He cleaned up all the blood with a sponge soaked in bleach, then brought basins of soapy water and insisted the helpers wash their hands.



He bathed Stella solicitously. “It might be dangerous, no touching,” Yuri insisted, and left the infirmary with the tissue.

Kaye was beyond analysis or caring. She huddled with her daughter and the females in the deme, and Mitch, and one young male, the stand-in for Will, looking confused and bewildered at this unexpected role.

The infant, wrinkled and small, squirmed slowly in Stella’s arms, seeking the breast, then looked up at them all, drawing back his eyelids until it seemed his face was all eyes, wide, mobile, focused. His cheeks flared golden and pink, melanophores shaping at first a series of flower-petal raw-shocks. All those in the room, except for Kaye and Mitch, responded to the newborn with the same colors and patterns, flower petals and butterflies, sparks and flares, and the baby saw this and smelled their pleasure and delight. He smiled with saintly ease and reassurance as he took the nipple.

That smile took Kaye’s breath away. She squeezed Mitch’s hand. Ever the anthropologist, Mitch was watching the deme, the side mothers, all the Shevites in the room, with a quizzical expression.

“Do you have a name yet?” Kaye asked Stella.

Stella shook her head dreamily. “Give us time. Something nice.”

Moments later, suckling her son, Stella relaxed and slept. Her cheeks kept showing patterns. Even asleep, the new mother could sign her love.

The infant released his mother’s nipple and looked up at Mitch. “Sing,” he said.

The deme laughed, and the young man who was standing in for Will, in a burst of emotion, hugged them and shook Mitch’s hand. Kaye touched his shoulder and smiled up at him, and Mitch knelt beside the bed and sang the alphabet song, the same he had sung for Stella. “*Ah, beh, say, duh, eh, fuh, guh, huh, kuh, ih, juh, em . . .*”

Mitch’s grandson relaxed and took Stella’s nipple. His large purple-flecked eyes became heavy-lidded, and then closed. He joined his mother in sleep before Mitch got to *wuh*.



# EPILOGUE

SHEVA2 + 1

LONE PINE, CALIFORNIA

**K**aye tried to move her lips. Such wonderful thoughts. So simple, so clear. If she could only speak to her husband.

Mitch looked at the lamp on the table, brows knit; he could hear his wife's steady breath and the hum of the medical monitor and little more. When her breath changed its rhythm, he slowly turned his head and saw her lips move. He leaned forward, wondering if she was coming back, but her eyes stared out into space and blinked only once while he watched.

Still, the lips moved. That hurt. Any expectations were painful. Kaye's periods of paralysis had been coming with greater frequency. He leaned forward, hoping with childish hope to see his wife, his woman, return to him, beginning with that small motion. He brought his ear down to her lips and felt the breath against the little hairs on the skin of his lobe. Kaye's breath puffed, worked, to shape a few words.

Mitch could not be sure what he heard, if he heard anything at all. He pulled back to look at Kaye's face and realized she was trying with super-human effort to communicate something she thought was important. The slightest coming together of her brows, stiffening of her cheeks, set of her eyelids, reminded him of earnest conversations years past, when she struggled to convey something not quite within her grasp or authority. That had been his Kaye, always reaching beyond what words could do.

He placed his ear close, almost blocking her lips. He fancied he heard, for a moment, his name, and then,

"Something's . . . going on."

He listened again.

"Something's . . . happening."

Then she lay still. Breath lifted the sheets but her eyes were still. Her face was blank.

She seemed to be listening.

• •  
*She felt the love rolling over her in waves, the yearning that was at once so powerful and frightening, the sweetness that lay behind the power. Her death would not come yet, not this minute, not this hour, this she knew, but she was no longer much of this world.*

*And so she could be embraced and told all.*

*No fear of addiction now.*

Stella brought the baby and sat with them. She wore simple clothes and held the boy in a loose knit wrap, because, she said, he was such a warm-blooded creature, he hardly ever got chilly and fussed if he was covered.

"We've chosen a talking name," Stella said. Then, looking at her mother, she asked Mitch if Kaye could hear them.

"I don't know," Mitch said. His face was so lost. Stella let him hold his grandson and adjusted her mother's covers.

"Nothing's fair, is it?" she asked Kaye softly, leaning over, her cheeks golden. "She looks peaceful. I think she can hear us."

Mitch watched Kaye breathe in and out, slowly, simply.

"What's his name?" he asked.

"We're going to call him Sam," Stella said. "I can't think of anything better. The deme thinks it's good."

Sam was Mitch's father's name. "Not Samuel?"

"Just Sam. He likes the name already. It's strong and short and doesn't interfere with saying other things."

Sam squirmed and wanted to get down. At six months, he was already walking a little, and speaking, of course; but only when he wanted to, which was seldom.

Mitch tried to find a little of Kaye in Sam's features, but there was too much eyebrow. Sam looked too much like Mitch.

"He looks like Will, I think," Stella said. She touched her mother's cheek, gripped her hand. "She has a scent. It's her, but different. I'm not sure I'd recognize her. Can you smell it?"

Mitch shook his head. "Maybe she smells ill," he said darkly.

"No." Stella bowed to sniff her mother from breast to crown. "She smells like smoke from a wood fire, and flowers. We need her to teach us. Mother, you could teach me so much."

Sam walked around the bed, gripping the covers and making sounds of discovery.

Kaye's face did not change expression, but Stella saw the tiny freckles darken under her mother's eyes. Even now, Kaye could show her love.

*The memories fall away. We are shaped, but in ways we do not understand. Know that thinking and memory are biology, and biology is what we leave behind. The caller speaks to all of our minds, and they all pray; to all of our minds, from the lowest to the highest, in nature, the caller assures us that there is more, and that is all the caller can do. It is important that each mind be created with absolute freedom of will. That freedom is precious; it enriches and quickens that which the caller loves.*

*Mind and memory make up the precious rind of the even more precious fruit.*

*We are sculpted as the embryo is made; we die and cells die that others may take a shape; the shape grows and changes, visible only to the caller; ultimately all must be chipped away, having made their contributions.*

*The memories fall away. We are shaped. There is no judgment, for in life there is no perfection, only freedom. To succeed or to fail is all the same—it is to be loved.*

*To die, to fall silent, is not to be forgotten or lost.*

*Silence is the beacon of past love and painful labor.*

*Silence is also a signal.*

Mitch sat by Kaye as the doctors and nurses came and went. He watched her grow more at ease, if that was possible, while breath still came and heart still beat with a slow, pattering softness.

He finished that night, before he napped off, by kissing her forehead and saying, "Good night, Eve."

Mitch slept in the chair. Quiet filled the room.

The world seemed empty and new.

Silence filled Kaye.

In a dream, Mitch walked over the high rocky mountains, and met a woman on the snows.

Lynnwood, Washington  
2002



## CAVEATS

**M**uch of the science in this novel is still controversial. Science usually begins with speculation, but must in time be confirmed by research, empirical evidence, and scientific consensus. However, all of the speculations found here are supported, to one degree or another, by research published in texts and in respected scientific journals. I have gone to great pains to solicit scientific criticism and make corrections where experts feel I have strayed over the line.

No doubt errors remain, but they are my responsibility, not the responsibility of the scientists or other helpful readers listed in the acknowledgments.

The theological speculations presented here are also based on empirical evidence, personal and culled from a number of key books. But that evidence is remarkably and uniquely difficult to present scientifically, since it is necessarily anecdotal. That does not make its truth any less apparent to the witnesses; it simply puts this type of life experience in the same category as other human events, such as love, abstract and creative thought, and artistic inspiration.

All of these experiences are personal and anecdotal, yet almost universal; none are easily quantified or understood by current science.

In answer to the obvious questions about evolution, do I support neo-Darwinian randomness or theistic external design? The answer must be neither. Do I support fundamentalist or Creationist views of our origins? I do not.

My view is that life on Earth is constituted of many layers of neural networks, all interacting to solve problems in order to get access to resources and continue to exist. All living things solve problems posed by their environments, and all are adapted to attempt, with reasonable success, to solve such problems. The human mind is just one variety of this natural process, and not necessarily the most subtle or sophisticated. See my novel, *Vitals*.

I also make a distinction between self-aware personality and mind. Human self-awareness is a psycho-social phenomenon resulting from feedback in modeling the behavior of one's neighbors, and, almost coincidentally, modeling one's own behavior to make sure we'll fit into social activities. One offshoot of this ability is the writing of novels.

Self is not an illusion; it's real. But it's not unitary, it's not primary, and it's not always in charge.

It seems apparent that God does not micromanage either human history or nature. Evolutionary freedom is just as important as individual human freedom. Does God interfere at all? Other than my affirming, along with many others, that the presence of something we could call God is made known—a kind of interference, undoubtedly—I do not know.

As Kaye experiences her epiphany, she is made aware that her “caller” is not talking just to her, but to other minds within and around her. Epiphany is not limited to our conscious selves, or even to human beings.

Imagine epiphany that touches our subconscious, our other internal minds—the immune system—or that reaches beyond us to touch a forest, or an ocean . . . or the vast and distributed “minds” of any ecological system.

If the only honest approach to understanding both nature and God is humility, then surely this should help by making us feel humble.



## A SHORT BIOLOGICAL PRIMER

**H**umans are metazoans, that is, we are made up of many cells. In most of our cells there is a *nucleus* that contains the “blueprint” for the entire individual. This blueprint is stored in *DNA*, deoxyribonucleic acid; DNA and its complement of helper proteins and organelles make up the molecular computer that contains the instructions necessary to construct an individual organism.

*Proteins* are molecular machines that can perform incredibly complicated functions. They are the engines of life; DNA is the template that guides the manufacture of those engines.

DNA in eukaryotic cells is arranged in two interwoven strands—the “double helix”—and packed tightly into a complex structure called chromatin, which is arranged into *chromosomes* in each cell nucleus. With a few exceptions, such as red blood cells and specialized immune cells, the DNA in each cell of the human body is complete and identical. Researchers currently estimate that the human *genome*—the complete collection of genetic instructions—consists of approximately thirty thousand *genes*. Genes are heritable traits; a gene has often been defined as a segment of DNA that contains the code for a protein or proteins. This code can be transcribed to make a strand of RNA, ribonucleic acid; ribosomes then use the RNA to translate the original DNA instructions and synthesize proteins. Some genes perform other functions, such as making the RNA constituents of ribosomes.

Many scientists believe that RNA was the original coding molecule of life, and that DNA is a later elaboration.

While most cells in the body of an individual carry identical DNA, as the person grows and develops, that DNA is expressed in different ways

within each cell. This is how identical embryonic cells become different tissues.

When DNA is transcribed to RNA, many lengths of nucleotides that do not code for proteins, called *introns*, are snipped out of the RNA segments. The segments that remain are spliced together; they code for proteins and are called *exons*. On a length of freshly transcribed RNA, these exons can be spliced together in different ways to make different proteins. Thus, a single gene can produce a number of products at different times.

*Bacteria* are tiny single-celled organisms. Their DNA is not stored in a nucleus but is spread around within the cell. Their genome contains no *introns*, only *exons*, making them very sleek and compact little critters. Bacteria can behave like social organisms; different varieties both cooperate and compete with each other to find and use resources in their environment. In the wild, bacteria frequently come together to create biofilms; you may be familiar with these bacterial “cities” from the slime on spoiled vegetables in your refrigerator. Biofilms can also exist in your intestines, your urinary tract, and on your teeth, where they sometimes cause problems, and specialized ecologies of bacteria protect your skin, your mouth, and other areas of your body. Bacteria are extremely important and though some cause disease, many others are necessary to our existence. Some biologists believe that bacteria lie at the root of all life forms, and that eukaryotic cells—our own cells, for example—derive from ancient colonies of bacteria. In this sense, we may simply be spaceships for bacteria.

Bacteria swap small circular loops of DNA called *plasmids*. Plasmids supplement the bacterial genome and allow them to respond quickly to threats such as antibiotics. Plasmids make up a universal library that bacteria of many different types can use to live more efficiently.

Bacteria and nearly all other organisms can be attacked by *viruses*. Viruses are very small, generally encapsulated bits of DNA or RNA that cannot reproduce by themselves. Instead, they hijack a cell’s reproductive machinery to make new viruses. In bacteria, the viruses are called *bacteriophages*, (“eaters of bacteria”) or just *phages*. Many phages carry genetic material between bacterial hosts, as do some viruses in animals and plants.

It is possible that viruses originally came from segments of DNA within cells that can move around, both inside and between chromosomes. Viruses are essentially roving segments of genetic material that have learned how to “put on space suits” and leave the cell.

## SHORT GLOSSARY OF SCIENTIFIC TERMS

**Antibody:** molecule that attaches to an antigen, inactivates it, and attracts other defenses to the intruder.

**Antibiotics:** a large class of substances manufactured by many different kinds of organisms that can kill bacteria. Antibiotics have no effect on viruses.

**Antigen:** intruding substance or part of an organism that provokes the creation of antibodies as part of an immune response.

**Bacteria:** prokaryotes, tiny living cells whose genetic material is not enclosed in a nucleus. Bacteria perform important work in nature and are the base of all food chains.

**Bacteriophage:** see *phage*.

**Chromosome:** arrangement of tightly packed and coiled DNA. Diploid cells such as body cells in humans have two sets of twenty-two *autosomes* as well as two *sex chromosomes*; haploid cells such as gametes—sperm or ova—have only a single set of chromosomes. The total number of chromosomes varies between apes and humans. Chromosome numbers for so-called ancestral species such as *Homo sapiens neandertalensis* and *Homo erectus* are not known; any DNA extracted from even relatively recent (~20,000 years) fossil specimens is generally limited to mitochondrial DNA. Polyploidy—having extra sets of chromosomes—results in infertile offspring or totally precludes reproduction between organisms and can often define a barrier between species. This should prevent successful mating between SHEVA individuals and older variety humans. Apparently, it does not. This puzzles scientists, and further research is in order.

**Cro-Magnon:** early variety of modern human, *Homo sapiens sapiens*,

from Cro-Magnon in France. *Homo* is the genus, *sapiens* the species, *sapiens* the subspecies.

**DNA:** Deoxyribonucleic acid, the famous double-helix molecule that codes for the proteins and other elements that help construct the *phenotype* or body structure of an organism.

**ERV or endogenous retrovirus:** virus that inserts its genetic material into the DNA of a host. The integrated *provirus* lies dormant for a time. ERVs may be quite ancient and fragmentary and no longer capable of producing infectious viruses.

**Exogenous virus:** virus that does not insert its genes into host DNA on a long-term basis. Some viruses, such as MMTV or mouse mammary tumor virus, seem to be able to choose whether to insert or not insert their genetic code into host DNA. See *ERV*.

**Exon:** region of DNA that codes for proteins or RNA.

**Frithing:** also, flehman. Sucking air over the vomeronasal organ to detect pheromones. See *vomeronasal organ*.

**Gene:** the definition of a gene is changing. A recent text defines a gene as “a segment of DNA or RNA that performs a specific function.” More particularly, a gene can be thought of as a segment of DNA that codes for some molecular product, very often one or more proteins or parts of proteins. Besides the nucleotides that code for the protein, the gene also consists of segments that determine how much and what kind of protein is expressed, and when. Genes can produce different combinations of proteins under different stimuli. In a very real sense, a gene is a tiny factory and computer within a much larger factory-computer, the genome.

**Genome:** sum total of genetic material in an individual organism. In humans, the genome appears to consist of approximately thirty thousand genes—half to one-third the number predicted at the time of the publication of *Darwin's Radio*.

**Genotype:** the genetic character of an organism or distinctive group of organisms.

**Glycome:** the total complement of sugars and related compounds in a cell. Sugars can form links with proteins and lipids to make glycoproteins and glycolipids.

**Herpes:** HSV-1 or -2. Herpes simplex virus types responsible for cold sores and genital herpes. Though herpes viruses are not retroviruses they can lie dormant in nerve cells for years, and often reactivate in response to stress. Chicken pox and its recurrent form, shingles, or herpes zoster, are also related to herpes.

**HERV:** human endogenous retrovirus. Within our genetic material are many remnants of past infections by retroviruses. Some researchers estimate that as much as one third of our genetic material may consist of old retroviruses. No instance is yet known of these ancient viral genes producing infectious particles (*virions*) that can move from host to host, in *lateral* or *horizontal transmission*. Many HERV do produce viruslike particles within the cells and body, however, and whether these particles serve a function or cause problems is not yet known. All HERV are part of our genome and are transmitted *vertically* when we reproduce, from parent to offspring. Infection of gametes by retroviruses is the best explanation so far for the presence of HERV in our genome. ERV, endogenous retroviruses, are found in many other organisms, as well.

**Homo erectus:** general classification for fossils of the genus *Homo* dated chronologically and evolutionarily prior to *Homo sapiens*. *Homo erectus* was a very successful human species, surviving for at least a million years. Calling any of these fossils “ancestral” is problematic both scientifically and philosophically, but it’s a simple and easily understood description of a complex relationship. There are many interpretations of these relationships in the literature, but growing sophistication in genetics will probably lead to a general shaking out and clarification over the next ten to twenty years.

**Immune response (immunity, immunization):** the provoking and marshaling of defensive cells within an organism to ward off and destroy pathogens, disease-causing organisms such as viruses or bacteria. Immune response may also identify nonpathogenic cells as foreign, not part of the normal body complement of tissues; transplanted organs cause an immune response and may be rejected. Autoimmune diseases such as multiple sclerosis and various forms of arthritis may occur or reoccur in response to viral activation due to stress. In humans, ERV activation has been suggested as a cause of some autoimmune diseases.

**Intron:** region of DNA that generally does not code for proteins. In most eukaryotic cells, genes consist of mingled exons and introns. Introns are clipped out of transcribed messenger RNA (mRNA) before it is processed by ribosomes; ribosomes use the code contained in lengths of mRNA to assemble specific proteins out of amino acids. Bacteria lack introns.

**Lipids:** organic compounds such as fats, oils, waxes, and sterols. Lipids

make up many of the structural components of cells, including much of the cell wall or membrane.

**Lipome:** the total complement of lipids within a cell. Lipids may also form alliances with sugars and proteins (see *glycome* and *proteome*).

**Mitochondrion, mitochondria:** organelles within cells that process sugars to produce the common fuel for cells, adenosine triphosphate, or ATP. Generally regarded as highly adapted descendants of bacteria that entered host cells billions of years ago. Mitochondria have their own loops of DNA constituting a separate genome within every cell. Mitochondrial DNA, being shorter and simpler, is often the target of choice for fossil analysis.

**Modern human:** *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Genus *Homo*, species *sapiens*, subspecies *sapiens*. *Homo sapiens sapiens* could be read as “Man who is wise, who knows.” Also, “Man who is discreet, who savors.”

**Mobile element:** movable segment of DNA. *Transposons* can move or have their DNA copied from place to place in a length of DNA using DNA polymerase. *Retrotransposons* contain their own *reverse transcriptase*, which gives them some autonomy within the genome. Mobile elements have been shown by Barbara McClintock and others to generate variety in plants; but some believe these are, more often than not, so-called selfish genes which are duplicated without being useful to the organism. More and more, geneticists have found strong evidence that mobile elements contribute to variation in all genomes and help to regulate both embryonic development and evolution.

**Mutation:** alteration in a gene or segment of DNA. May be accidental and unproductive or even dangerous; may also be useful, leading to the production of a more efficient protein. Mutations may lead to variation in phenotype, or the physical structure of an organism. Random mutations are usually either neutral or bad for the health of the organism.

**Neandertal:** *Homo sapiens Neandertalensis*. Possibly ancestral to humans. Modern anthropologists and geneticists are currently engaged in a debate about whether Neandertals are our ancestors, based on evidence of mitochondrial DNA extracted from ancient bones. More than likely, the evidence is confusing because we simply do not yet know how species and subspecies separate and develop.

**Pathogen:** disease-causing organism. There are many different varieties of pathogen: viruses, bacteria, fungi, protists (formerly known as protozoa), and metazoans such as nematodes.

- PERV:** Porcine endogenous retrovirus. Ancient retroviruses found in the genome of pigs. See *ERV*.
- Phage:** a virus that uses bacteria as hosts. Many kinds of phages kill their hosts almost immediately and can be used as antibacterial agents. Most bacteria have at least one and often many phages specific to them. Phages and bacteria are always in a contest to outrun each other, evolutionarily speaking.
- Phenotype:** the physical structure of an organism or distinctive group of organisms. *Genotype* expressed and developed within an environment determines *phenotype*.
- Pheromone:** a chemical message produced by one member of a species that influences the physiology and the behavior of another member of the same species. Whether or not this chemical message is consciously detected (smelled), pheromones have the same effect. Mammalian pheromones, in the form of “social odors,” that one member of a species is exposed to during interaction with another member of the species, cause changes in hormone levels and in behavior. See *vomeropherin*.
- Polyploidy:** see *chromosome*.
- Protein:** genes often code for proteins, which help form and regulate all organisms. Proteins are molecular machines made up of chains of twenty different types of amino acids. Proteins can themselves chain or clump together. Collagen, enzymes, many hormones, keratin, and antibodies are just a few of the different types of proteins.
- Proteome, Proteomics:** the total complement of proteins within a cell or group of cells, or in an individual organism as a whole. Different tissues will produce different proteins from a standardized set of genes; gene activation in different tissues at different times causes variation in a cell’s proteome. Knowing which genes have been activated can be traced through identifying proteins and other gene products. (See *glycome* and *lipidome*.)
- Provirus:** the genetic code of a virus while it is contained within the DNA of a host.
- Radiology:** imaging of the interior of a body using radiation, such as X-rays, PET scans (positron emission tomography), MRI (Magnetic resonance imaging), CAT scans (Computerized axial tomography), etc.
- Recombination:** exchange of genes between or within organisms or viruses. Sexual reproduction is one such exchange; bacteria and viruses can recombine genes in many different ways. Recombination can also be done artificially in a laboratory.

**Retrotransposon, retroposon, retrogene:** see movable elements.

**Retrovirus:** RNA-based virus that inserts its code into a host's DNA for later replication. Replication can often be delayed for years. AIDS and other diseases are caused by retroviruses.

**RNA:** ribonucleic Acid. Intermediate copy of DNA; messenger RNA (mRNA) is used by ribosomes as templates to construct proteins. Many viruses consist of single or doubled strands of RNA, usually transcribed to DNA within the host.

**SHEVA:** fictional human endogenous retrovirus that can form an infectious virus particle, or *virion*; an infectious HERV. No such HERV is yet known. In *Darwin's Radio* and this novel, SHEVA carries first-order instructions between individuals for a rearrangement of the genome that produces a new variety of human. In effect, SHEVA triggers preexisting genetic "set-asides" that interact in time-proven ways to create a subtly different human phenotype.

**Sequencing:** determining the sequence of molecules in a polymer such as a protein or nucleic acid; in genetics, discovering the sequence of bases in a gene or a length of DNA or RNA, or in the genome as a whole. Research into the sequence of the entire human genome has made huge strides, but our understanding of the implications of this growing knowledge is in its infancy.

**Sex chromosomes:** in humans, the X and Y chromosomes. Two X chromosomes results in a female; an X and a Y results in a male. Other species have different types of sex chromosomes.

**Shiver:** hypothetical activation of dormant endogenous retroviruses in women who have undergone SHEVA pregnancies. Recombination of exogenous and endogenous viral genes may produce new viruses with an unknown pathogenic potential.

**Transposon:** see *mobile elements*.

**Vaccine:** a substance that produces an immune response to a disease-causing organism. See *antibody*, *antigen*, *immune response*.

**Virion:** infectious virus particle.

**Virus:** nonliving but organically active particle capable of entering a cell and commandeering the cell's reproductive capacity to produce more viruses. Viruses consist of DNA or RNA, usually surrounded by a protein coat, or capsid. This capsid may in turn be surrounded by an envelope. There are hundreds of thousands of known viruses, and potentially millions not yet described. See *exogenous virus*, *ERV*.



**Vomeronasal organ (VNO, also known as Jacobson's organ):** consisting of two pitlike openings in the roof of the mouth or in the nasal septum, this organ, in non-human mammals, provides a pathway that links pheromones to a hormone response and to sex differences in behavior. "Frithing" is a term used to describe sucking in air over the pit-like entrance to this organ, which is in the roof of the mouth in some animals. Cats can sometimes be observed curling their upper lip when smelling something funky; this is also called the flehman response, usually associated with examination of urine, marking scents, etc. Snakes perform similar sampling by drawing in scents from the air on their flicking tongues. Humans have vomeronasal pits, though they are very small and somewhat difficult to find; they may play a role in mate choice and other behaviors. A 1995 journal article warned plastic surgeons to preserve the human vomeronasal organ during reconstructive surgery, lest damage lead to loss of sexual interest and subsequent litigation.

**Vomeropherin:** a marketing term for a pheromone detected by the human vomeronasal organ (the same as a mammalian pheromone detected by the mammalian VNO).

**Xenotransplant:** transplant of nonhuman tissues and organs into humans. Xenotransplants in the past have involved baboon and other ape organs. Most xenotransplant research now focuses on pig tissues and organs. Xenotransplants could be risky because of the existence of latent viruses within the donor tissues. (See *ERV*, *herpes*, *PERV*.) The case of Mrs. Carla Rhine described in this novel is unlikely in real life; Mrs. Rhine's maladies come from the unfortunate combination of a relatively rare evolutionary viral event and transplantation. Nevertheless, the possibilities of viral contamination or viral recombination within human recipients of animal tissues is very real, and demands further research.



## A BRIEF READING LIST

**A** concise, elegantly written and conservative view of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory is available in Richard Dawkins's *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, BasicBooks, 1995. Dawkins is one of our best science writers and an excellent whetstone for anyone wishing to challenge institutionalized views of biology and evolution. It is my belief that he is wrong on many points, but he defines the debate in ways few others can.

Published more recently, and going into more detail, Ernst Mayr's summing up of a life's work, *What Evolution Is* (2002, Perseus Books) makes another clear and unyielding statement of the paradigm of modern Darwinism. There will probably be no finer exponents of the old view of Darwinian evolution.

The new view is emerging even as we speak.

Stephen Jay Gould is unfortunately no longer with us. I recommend all of his learned and impassioned books and essays, but in particular the flawed, and for that reason no less fascinating and instructive, *Wonderful Life* (Norton, 1989).

A good bridge to a larger understanding of the turmoil in evolutionary theory is Niles Eldredge's *Reinventing Darwin: The Great Debate at the High Table of Evolutionary Theory*, Wiley, 1995. Eldredge and Gould are currently credited with a particular view of evolutionary leaps known as *punctuated equilibrium*, but the idea can be traced back at least to masters such as Ernst Mayr, and even back to Darwin. Wherever it comes from, punctuated equilibrium was one of the key stimuli to my writing *Darwin's Radio*. Gould and Eldredge should not be blamed for my elaborations, however.

Peter J. Bowler's *The Non-Darwinian Revolution: Reinterpreting a Historical Myth* (1988, Johns Hopkins) is scholarly and entertaining at once.

A fine introduction to genetics is *Dealing with Genes: The Language of*

*Heredity* by Paul Berg and Maxine Singer, 1992, University Science Books. Though a decade old, its information is still useful and its attitude is forward-looking. It could prepare the reader for the following books.

Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan have published an excellent critique of neo-Darwinianism in *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory on the Origins of Species*, 2002, BasicBooks. Margulis is a pioneer in thinking about cooperative and symbiotic systems, and she and her son Dorion make up the single most stimulating popular writing team in modern biology.

More radical still, but just as polite and level-headed as Margulis, is Lynn Caporale, whose *Darwin in the Genome: Molecular Strategies in Biological Evolution* (2003, McGraw-Hill) is a clear and thoughtful examination of how genomics will shape and mutate the debate on evolution.

*Lamarck's Signature: How Retrogenes are Changing Darwin's Natural Selection Paradigm*, by Edward J. Steele, Robyn A. Lindley, and Robert V. Blanden (1998, Perseus Books) focuses on one possible cause and arbiter of genomic variation.

A key text in modern biology is *Retroviruses*, edited by John M. Coffin, Stephen H. Hughes, and Harold E. Varmus, 1997, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press. Mostly for professionals, this rigorous and pioneering collection of monographs is filled with useful information.

Of particular relevance to my two novels is *Lateral DNA Transfer* by Frederic Bushman, 2002, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, is an important synopsis of what is currently known about DNA transfer through viruses, transposons, plasmids, etc. I think it is one of the most significant biology books published in the last decade.

James V. Kohl's *The Scent of Eros* (1995; reprinted in a revised edition, 2002, Continuum) is a rich source of information on pheromones, human communication through smell, and the influence of scent on sexuality.

There's a wealth of fine writing on these topics in many other popular science books, textbooks, and magazines. Searching on author names and topics in online bookstores can be a good way to leapfrog through diverse subjects. Which leads us to a very small sampling of Web sites.

Searching on key words in Web engines such as Google ("HERV," "Retrotransposon," "Barbara McClintock," "*Homo erectus*," "Mitochondria," etc.) can lead the curious reader into a combination paradise and mine field of articles peer-reviewed and otherwise, research goals and updates, opinions, and quite a few rants of varying degrees of erudition. Caveats abound—there are dozens if not hundreds of Creationist and other religiously motivated, anti-evolution sites that seem to discuss evolution

and genetics with some lucidity, for a while. Generally speaking, the science here is dubious at best.

Nevertheless, searching on Google is how I located excellent articles by Luis P. Villarreal. In particular, I was influenced by Villarreal's "The Viruses That Make Us: A Role For Endogenous Retrovirus In The Evolution Of Placental Species," available on the Web at <http://darwin.bio.uci.edu/~faculty/villarreal/new1/erv-placental.html>

(Dr. Villarreal, Eric Larsson, and Howard Temin should not, however, be blamed for all the uses their ideas are put to in this novel.)

James V. Kohl's Web site, [www.pheromones.com](http://www.pheromones.com), provides a number of links to articles and other sites that discuss the biology of smell. The Web site of the Molecular Sciences Institute, [www.molsci.org](http://www.molsci.org), is filled with interesting news and developments. The International Paleopsychology Project, [www.paleopsych.org](http://www.paleopsych.org), is a clearing house of fascinating ideas with many links to other Web sites.

Periodically, I will post bibliographical updates on [www.gregbear.com](http://www.gregbear.com), as well as comments from readers about the theoretical underpinnings of the *Darwin* novels.



## **A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S**

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