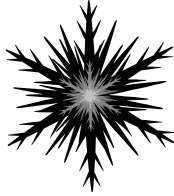




THE BREEDERS



BY MATTHEW J. BEIER



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THE BREEDERS

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PART ONE:



ENGILUTION

“A STORM IS COMING.”

– The National Organization for Marriage,
2008

CHAPTER 1 (HER)

FOR GRACE JARVIS, the threat of banishment came at Garland's Food Emporium on Monday, the twenty-ninth of October.

She was reaching down for an empty grocery basket when a stabbing sensation twisted in her abdomen. Mr. Dietrich, a wrinkled old fag who had been running the nearby sample station for as long as Grace could remember, frowned as she stopped, put a hand on her stomach, and lurched forward. The pain came again—a violent cramp, like nothing she had ever felt before.

This only happens to carriers, was the thought that crossed her mind as Mr. Dietrich took a step away from his pineapple chicken mini-skewers.

"Everything all right, Miss Jarvis?"

Grace stood up to full height, trying to cover her sudden panic with a polite smile, and approached his table. She grabbed one of the skewers and said, "Must have been something I ate at lunch." Then, with a smile, "Maybe one of your samples will help. They usually do."

"Only \$4.99, and they're already skewered. I'm telling you, they're *fabulous*."

“Well, we both know I have a weakness for good food.” Grace winked at Mr. Dietrich, slid a pineapple bite off the skewer with her teeth, then continued on to the produce section.

The pain grew worse with each step, and the first trickles of concern sank into her chest. With defiant resolve, she grabbed a head of broccoli.

Stop it. You’re being paranoid. They’re not going to send you to Antarctica just for having weird cramps.

But the concern turned to terror as she picked out a bundle of cilantro. The herbs were wet, and just as Grace was shaking them off and enjoying the mixture of pleasant aromas around her, a peculiar warmth touched the inside of her underwear. She looked down.

On the sparkling white floor was a red circle. There was no spatter around it; for a second, Grace hoped it was dried paint.

Then another drop fell from under her skirt. And another. It was thick, almost viscous looking, and the fact it was her own blood registered with a final burst of wishful disbelief.

This is impossible. Absolutely impossible. The engineers can’t have messed me up.

She swiped one of the blood drops with the tip of her shoe, trying to wipe it away, but this only transformed it into a garish smear. She glanced left, where a lesbian couple (Regina and Bear, their names were—she knew them from last year’s Union Day Fest) had stopped in front of the dairy section, ten feet away. Bear was looking at the floor; Regina was staring straight at Grace. Neither wore a threatening expression, and both—bless them—seemed to be registering her panic.

“Get out now,” Regina mouthed.

“I’m sorry,” Grace whispered, now dripping tears as well. She set her half-full basket on the floor, gave Regina and Bear a pleading glance, then made for the market’s exit as fast as she could. Her gait became a conspicuous waddle in the effort to keep her legs pressed together, and Mr. Dietrich furrowed his eyebrows. “Left my com in the car,” Grace murmured to him as she stole a glimpse backward and saw Bear hurrying to wipe up the blood.

A moment later, she was outside. The gusty October night sent her straight dark brown hair into a fitful dance, clashing with the sticky heat spreading inside her skirt and down her legs. It turned cold as she ran from the grocery store, past the Atom Clean fuel station, and into the train station lot where her car was parked. But here was a shred of luck: buried in her trunk were a backup running jacket and an unused beach towel from her last outing on Lake Minnetonka. Grace wiped herself clean, wrapped herself in the towel, then sat in the driver's seat on the waterproof jacket.

I'm as good as dead if anyone sees this, she thought. Her knuckles were white; her legs were numb. The pain in her abdomen throbbed as she forced herself to start the hydro engine and drive toward home.

It began to rain.

THE JARVIS MANSION WAS DARK when Grace turned into the driveway—a second shred of luck. She rolled past the main courtyard and stopped in front of her fathers' small brick guest house. It had been her home since moving out at age eighteen, but tonight, its small frame and aging brick walls left her feeling exposed and susceptible. By morning, it could all be a figment of her past, never to be seen again.

Grace dashed through the rain and into the house, then hurried to the bathroom. Dropping the soiled beach towel to the floor, she fumbled out of her clothes and into the shower. All that mattered—and it could be life and death, really, if the Bio Police decided to forego the legal process of banishment in favor of simple execution—was getting the bleeding to stop.

In accordance with Mandate 11, her fathers had engineered her to be sterile, just like all other females. She was not supposed to ovulate, not supposed to menstruate, and certainly not supposed to create life. Any of those three things were absolute grounds for banishment; all it would take for the Bio Police to make a decision was a simple medical test to see what was causing the bleeding. She had never heard of any

woman passing it. Genetic mistakes and legal carriers were the only types of women who bled like this, and she sure as hell was not a legal carrier.

The water swirling around her feet turned from red to pink to beige before finally stopping. Grace turned the shower off and stood there, bare, until the drops trickling down her body grew cold. But her heart was on fire, beating faster than it ever had in her life.

The New Rainbow Order had come to an innovative balance of punishment for illegal fertility, even if it was accidental—no more forced abortions, no more forced hysterectomies. Expulsion to the Antarctic Sanctuary was the real and only deal now, in the interest of both humane treatment and foolproof control of humanity. The threat of being stuck at the bottom of the world, in an artificial bubble full of excommunicated breeders, was what kept society in line.

And now I have to find a way out, Grace thought.

Here in Minneapolis, she was landlocked. All inhabited spots on Earth were now controlled by the worldwide government, and the places that had disintegrated during the Bio Wars—the coasts here on the North American continent, much of South America, much of mainland Europe, and most of Asia—were impossible to survive in. If the terrorist plagues hadn't wiped people out, the military bombs used to obstruct them had, and the ruins that remained were more treacherous than any natural jungle. They were called the Unrecoverable Territories for a reason.

The smartest thing would be to kill myself. Do it easily, somehow. Painlessly.

But no. It would be unfair to her fathers, her brother, and Linda Glass, her best friend. Grace was the luckiest heterosterile she knew of: rich parents, an education, a solid job. Ending her life would be a poor display of gratitude.

Trembling, she wrapped herself in a towel, returned to her bedroom, and stood alone in the darkness.

Tomorrow was her final meeting with the Minneapolis Neighborhood Development Council to make one last case for an overhaul of the Obesaland slum. It was the city's only true cosmetic atrocity, and there

was no way she could miss the meeting, not unless she wanted the poor fatties living there to rot in their misery. Fitness was a virtue, yes, but even those who didn't subscribe to the homosexual-male-driven ideal of perfection deserved a shred of dignity. Grace wanted nothing more than to be an advocate for them, and tomorrow was her last chance. The meeting was at nine o'clock—just twelve hours away.

But it no longer mattered. It couldn't. She could find some sort of absorbent material to block further bleeding, but if it failed during her plea for funding, the Bio Police would be on her within minutes. That was the awful truth.

Father might turn me in if I ask for help, but Dad won't. He can't. Not his little girl.

Her dad, Stuart, was a doctor. He had no love for government-imposed standards, and he would be able to identify the problem. Even so, diseases were rare, and chronic irregularities would have been identified during her engineering. Judging from what she had heard about carriers, bleeding and pain of this sort seemed too sudden to be menstruation. This left one likely scenario, however absurd it might be:

She was—or had been—pregnant.

It could only have happened during the orgy with Todd Bender and his five friends: Hannah, Peter, Elena, Fletch, and the short but muscular man whose name had remained a mystery, the one she had gone all the way with. His salt-and-pepper-colored hair had given him an air of maturity she had melted under—the first time since the Dyke Patrol had attacked her outside Pommie's Pub that she allowed herself to publicly embrace her sexual orientation. She had succumbed to the urges engineered into her—lost control, really—and now, life as she knew it was over.

Standing in front of the mirror, Grace let the towel fall. She stood naked, aware for the first time of her body's frightening power.

The potential to create life was the very reason breeders didn't stand a chance when natural conception happened by accident—which of course was the only way it could happen at all these days. The homosexuals had won the Bio Wars, plain and simple. Twenty generations later, they had perfect, worldwide control. Few questioned the sense

in controlled homosexual reproduction—the medical breakthrough of same-sex chromosome combination had marked the end of spiraling populations, children born to unfit parents, and heterosexual recklessness.

“Too many mistakes!” Secretary General Vincent Metzger had said during his last address to the world, when he had become so excited that his gaudy blonde wig had fallen off. “Too many chances for the world to fall back into its old ways!”

He had already been in office three terms past his legal limit, blaming the unprecedented extension on a recent resurgence of God’s Army terrorists. Now, in just three weeks, his homosexual government assembly would be voting on Mandate 43, a new law rumored to be his final attempt to squelch human birthing from society completely. People called him the Queen, but the only sparkly things about him were his signature blue dress and matching eye shadow. The man was ruthless—the first true dictator since the Bio Wars, though nobody had the courage to say it.

Grace stared out her bedroom window. The tree branches in her dad’s garden thrashed in the darkness, as if to remind her that life, as finished and nullified as it seemed right then, had not ended just yet. She returned to the bathroom, gathered her clothes, and dragged them down the shadowy hallway toward the living room fireplace. It would be the only sure way to dispose of her secret, at least until it happened again.

Just as she passed the kitchen, another cramp circled her abdomen. The same warm feeling followed between her legs. More blood. She ran to the shower for a second time, and it came out with sobs of shock, pain, and confusion. Hot, red, sticky, horrible.

As of that night, Grace Jarvis was, by the New Rainbow Order’s definition, a biological fugitive.

CHAPTER 2 (HIM)

EIGHT MILES PER HOUR. Nine. Ten. Eleven and a half. Intervals were Dex Wheelock's favorite running exercise, as they had been since childhood: maximum cardiovascular benefits and fat loss, minimum time spent slaving away on a treadmill. Today, the gym's roof was retracted, and the Indian summer sun beat down on him. Only another month before the roof would be up every day, keeping out the winter. From this treadmill, the skyscrapers of Minneapolis were visible. Most of them glinted in subdued but obvious rainbow colors, a century-old construction trend symbolic of society's bright future.

Bright future if you're normal, Dex thought. And that will never be me.

Heterosexuals made up exactly 8 percent of the New Rainbow Order's population, and he was among the 2 percent who were fertile and male. The reality of this—of the sheer number of homosexuals pressing him into society's corners, believing him to be inconsequential—made him feel like spit in a churning ocean. It didn't help that the

only heterosexuals working in those skyscrapers were the ones cleaning the toilets.

Dex finished his warm-up, hopped off the treadmill, and approached the weight room. Here, he always looked as good as (and sometimes better than) the homosexuals in this gym's crop, despite his short height. He had joined Flip Fitness because it allowed males and females to comingle, unlike the other gyms near his apartment that tolerated heterosexual clientele. The females at this particular location also tended to be interested in men. If it wasn't obvious due to the general but often correct stereotype that lesbians avoided gyms, it was obvious because of the eye contact they would make with him: *Yes, I'm hetero. And available.*

Diana Kring had been one of them—a sparkle of a woman who had worked at the front desk. She had not been shy in telling Dex the night they met that smaller men, graying hair, and bulging muscles turned her on, so he had escorted her right back to his apartment and done things to her his mothers would be ashamed of. Three months later, they were in love. It had taken thirty-seven years, but Dex had finally found in Diana a queller for his loneliness.

And then she had disappeared. Apartment empty, coworkers shrugging, one aging father left scratching his head. Either Diana had duped everyone she knew, or some unexpected desperation had forced her to run. It was enough to show Dex for the first time ever how a broken heart could both define and unravel him, in one swift emotional gust.

Despite being a constant reminder of what he had lost, Flip Fitness had since become his prime spot for grief evasion. In the weight room today were two shirtless fags pumping dumbbells with blank concentration, one on either end of the long weight rack. The closer of the two, a gym regular, had an erection under his tight shorts. Dex approached a bench facing the middle of the rack, maintaining a wide berth on either side of himself, hoping the fags would leave him alone. But the one with the erection nodded hello. His eyes flickered over Dex's body as he set his dumbbells back in their allotted place.

Dex had just begun a warm-up set of seated shoulder presses when

the fag approached him from behind. A second later, he felt the erection press against his upper back.

"Shorty, you don't have a husband, do you? I don't see a ring."

Typical.

"Uh, no. Not quite interested in anything today though."

"Oh, come *on*!" The fag flicked his wrist forward, and it landed on Dex's shoulder. "You know, I give *really* good head. Just saying."

"Maybe another time."

The bulging erection circled Dex until it was pointing him in the face. Dex looked up at the fag, whose eyes were still vibrating back and forth over his muscles. Come to the gym when there weren't many lesbians or heterosteriles present, and this was what any attractive failsafe got. It was normal for fags to assume every other male was homosexual and wanted to have sex, as if they had somehow forgotten about the government's mandate that some males remain hetero. It was ingrained in social etiquette, which left failsafes like Dex with the awkward challenge of having to explain themselves while also avoiding potential threats. He had to be careful, always.

"Hey, I'd rather just do my workout. Thanks, though."

"I'm Glen."

Dex sighed. "Hi, Glen."

"I've seen you around here before. Never seen you leave with anyone, though. What gives?"

To their left, the other fag dropped his hundred-pound dumbbells to the floor and looked at Glen. His muscles were rippling and dripping with sweat. "Honey, he's a *failsafe*. I've seen him make eyes at women before. Trust me, you can do better."

Glen stepped back, his face contorting as if he had bit into a lemon. It was only a matter of seconds before the tent in his shorts started to recede. "Sorry. Not really going to put my mouth on a dick that wants to breed, even if it's a hot one."

Dex felt his cheeks burning. "And I never asked you to."

"He left with that Diana chick once," the other fag said. "She worked here for a while."

"Oh, I know her!" Glen's arms flailed up at nothing. His wrist

flowed in an arc, then settled with the rest of his hand into a pointing gesture aimed at the other fag.

Dex almost dropped his dumbbells. Erection boy knew Diana.

“Mark, wasn’t she the one who was, like, bleeding all over a couple months ago? I swear, it was disgusting. I saw it coming through her pants, like she was a carrier in pre-fertilization mode or something. I mean, you hear about that happening to carriers, but who really wants to see it?”

The musclehead—Mark—took a quick, inward hiss of air as he grabbed the ninety-five-pound dumbbells and began shrugging them. “Maybe she got the Lrh1 switch. She would’ve made a pretty carrier, even if she was a hetero. Unless maybe she was a genetic mistake. I haven’t seen her around since.”

Glen giggled with a flamboyant smile. “And we all know what Queen Vincent is doing to those illegal breeders!”

Panic had drained Dex’s strength in a matter of seconds. If Diana had somehow accepted the procedure to become a carrier, the Bureau of Genetic Regulation would have registered her for a ration of tampons. She would not have bled in public.

“How long ago was this?” he asked.

Glen pursed his lips and turned back to him. “Oh, well look at you, all interested in talking now! Looks like she’s moved on, honey. Haven’t seen her in weeks. Nice girl, though, for a breeder. Too bad she’s going to lose that stomach when they insert her with an embryo, you know? Those things, like, *grow*. Of course, they’ll probably abort it anyway once Mandate 43 passes.”

Despite Glen’s having at least eight inches of height on him, Dex jumped out of his seat, threw the dumbbells back onto the rack, and stepped into his face. He was close enough to smell sweat through the fag’s cologne.

“Piss off.”

But it was Dex who abandoned his workout and stormed toward the locker room. It would be dangerous to come back to this gym anytime soon, lest he risk being cornered in the showers.

He changed clothes as fast as he could. Dread raged in his chest.

Saturday, the fifteenth of September, had been his last day of contact with Diana. He had woken up next to her in his apartment, kissed her, and risen to make coffee. After leaving momentarily to run to the corner store for cream, he had returned to an empty apartment. Her overnight bag was gone, and she had left the bed unmade. No note; no “I love you”; no hint, except for the obvious one: when Mandate 43 passed, females, even lesbians, would be needed only for the shells of their ova, because test tube gestation would replace human carrying completely. The law, proposed by Sanjay Raghuvanshi of Srinagar (but conceived of by the Queen, surely) was now up for vote in just four weeks’ time.

Diana had been nervous about the implications of Mandate 43, but mostly for Dex’s sake. If the Queen were to abolish society’s natural reproductive backup plan, heterosexuals—especially failsafes like him—would officially become disposable.

Dex squinted again at the city’s glaring skyline as he left the gym. Just when it had seemed apparent that answers would never come, here was this, a clue. Diana had suffered the worst fortune an innocent heterosterile could ask for:

She had bled like a carrier.

A MEMORY (HER)

***F**OUR YEARS OLD is very young to be reading as well as she is, and Grace is of course very proud. It doesn't matter that she is making Abraham feel bad, and she cannot help it if he is seven and still on easy readers. It's dinnertime on Friday, her favorite day, and her father swirls his wine, the way he always does. Grace is curious how it tastes, because the purple color reminds her of the flowers in her dad's garden—the same garden her father says looks overgrown, even though that's how it's supposed to look.*

All day, she has been itching for dinner so that she can make her announcement:

"I read today how babies used to be made!"

She screams it over the clanking of silverware on dishes, careful not to look at her father James. Instead, she focuses on her dad Stuart, who is always nicer about things like this.

Across the table, Abraham claws a fork through his potatoes in slow, jealous strokes. But how can Grace help it if he doesn't like school? The teachers say he never pays attention, which is why he has trouble learning.

"And where, pray tell, did you read about that, Grace?" James says. Whenever he sips his wine, he looks like a curious snake, which makes Grace think of snake bites and sucking out the poison.

"On the com," she replies.

The com: a gateway to anything and everything, even for a four-year-old. She can type in anything and learn. Oceans? It would have information. Africa, that far-off place only the military goes to? She could learn about it. Snakes? Well, that's how she knows about sucking out the poison.

"Tell us what you learned, Pix," Stuart says, setting the salad bowl at the table's center.

James rolls his eyes at his husband's nickname for Grace, as always, which never makes sense to her. She beams at her dad and tells him what she knows:

"Before the Bio Wars, failsafes and carriers used to press their bodies together, and the penis would go in the vagina, and women back then weren't heterosterile, and the penis would shoot out stuff called sperm, and it would magically combine with female eggs, but not the kind we eat, obviously, and then the egg would just start growing, and then a baby would come out! And when the babies weren't going to happen, females had to use things to plug up the blood, because it would hurt and come out of the vagina!"

Her dad smiles, but her father looks stern.

"And why do you think that was wrong, Grace?" James asks. Now, he reminds Grace of the hawk that was sitting on top of the guest house last week. First he is a serpent; then he is a hawk. She doesn't know why this makes her nervous.

"Wrong?"

"That was a horrible thing that used to happen in the world, and human beings have come far enough in their technological advancements to stop it and control it. Why do you think they wanted to do that?"

"Because of the blood?"

"Because of population. The world has only so many resources, and those failsafes and carriers, even though they were not called that back

then, were destroying the world by having too many babies. Now, only same-sex people can make babies together, and everyone is happier, even you! Those silly heterosexual breeders almost destroyed the planet!"

"It said something about genes." She pronounces the word with a hard G. Geens.

"Oh, genes," her dad corrects with a chuckle, leaning over to help Abraham with his artichoke hearts. Dad always reminds her of clouds, not scary animals.

"Genes," Grace repeats, thrilled at the pronunciation. "Genes made it so that those magic eggs couldn't work anymore. Which means carriers couldn't make babies by rubbing together with failsafes. But I watched a video of it, so I know how it used to be!"

James seethes. "Don't they have parent lock on that type of stuff? I told you she shouldn't be allowed on the desk com, Stuart. Call me old-fashioned." He lets out an exasperated sigh and swirls his wine.

Abraham's face twists into a jealous, angry scowl, which makes him look just like their father. "But you let the engineer make Grace a heterosexual!" he screams, as if he's somehow won a game she forgot they were playing. "That makes her bad!"

James raises his eyebrows at Stuart and smiles as if he's the reason Abraham won the game. Stuart's face turns red, and he slams the potatoes down in front of his husband. They don't speak for the rest of dinner.

CHAPTER 3 (HER)

HETEROSEXUALS. Babies. Rubbing together. *Dirty*.

Today, Grace realized it was a gross overstatement. The world would have gone on, even if humanity managed to destroy itself. It had almost happened during the Bio Wars, and the planet pulled through, somehow. Didn't it always?

She was in the grungy women's bathroom at her office, sitting in the stall farthest down, letting blood trickle from between her legs into the toilet water. Its flow was nowhere near as heavy as the previous evening, but it would still make a mess if she wasn't careful. Sanitary wipes had held it at bay during her meeting with the Neighborhood Development Council, where her boss, the new executive director Devon Shemple, had all but cancelled the Obesaland project she had spent the last two years planning. Today's meeting had been a last-ditch effort to rejuvenate the rotting slum, and Shemple had put the project on hold until the New Rainbow Order's General Assembly voted on Mandate 43. It had been only two months since he accepted the executive director post, but it had taken Grace only a day to realize he had no interest

in helping the less respected members of society. He was a foot soldier of the Queen through and through.

I shouldn't have believed I could make a difference, she thought, arching her spine on the toilet and wincing at the pain squeezing the small of her back. Obesaland did not matter now, of course, but Grace was not yet ready to call it quits with her old life. That she had nobody to turn to with her questions about the last twenty-four hours (*What was causing the bleeding? If it really was a pregnancy or miscarriage, how had she become fertile?*) made it easier to imagine that nothing had really changed.

It was a stupid way to think, but the more Grace thought about trying to disappear, the more impossible it seemed. If she were able to make a run for the Unrecoverable Territories to live in the wild, she would need to scan the TruthChip in her wrist at some point along the way. This would brand her a heterosterile to every vendor, government agent, or law enforcement officer she might come across. If they were to find out she was a fugitive, the escape effort would be wasted. Better options would no longer exist.

The night of the orgy, Todd Bender—the man she had been brave enough to start dating two weeks prior—had handed her a little green pill. It was just over two months ago now.

“Come on, take it.”

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“Come on, you’re hot as hell. This will make you hotter. Take it.”

“Okay, fine.”

No backbone. She had wanted so badly to recover from the trauma caused by the lesbian attack outside Pommie’s Pub that embracing her desires publicly, without fear or shame, seemed to be a logical step in the right direction.

There had been sex. Lots and lots of sex: Todd working magic with his fingers, pulling out, then letting Fletch and Peter do the same. Then Hannah and Elena had licked every part of her as Fletch and Peter fucked them, all while the mysterious Salt and Pepper man watched. “You’re so fucking hot,” they all said as they devoured her, except the silver-haired stranger, who remained quiet and contemplative, even as

he escorted her to the couch after Todd disappeared into a bedroom with Fletch and Hannah. What followed was the most intense sex of Grace's life. Salt and Pepper made her forget Todd Bender completely.

But he had been gone in the morning. Probably for the best, because she looked like hell. Felt guilty, too, for having given into drugs and thoughtless judgment like everyone else. Instead of feeling empowered, she had crept to the train station with the sunrise, afraid anyone she passed would immediately know what had occurred the night prior and punish her for it.

Now, this: the biggest of all possible accidents, all because she had acted against her instincts and insecurities to fit in with the crowd. All Grace wanted was to forget it had ever happened, but by the time she left work to meet Linda Glass for coffee, the bloody puzzle pieces were aligning themselves against her willful ignorance. The obvious had been showing itself, despite what she now recognized as her own subconscious denial: she had been sick in the mornings; it had been happening almost daily since the orgy; she had seen bits of blood on underwear in recent years, as if her body was showing signs of unnatural menstruation. Today, Grace knew she had seen the possibility all along and been stupid enough to brush it off. What she didn't know was how long life would hold together before it decided to unravel.

LINDA EYED HER CAREFULLY when they found a table at the Union Café in Wayzata, just two miles down the road from where they had grown up. She was a classic lipstick lesbian—ravishing blonde hair, a tight, feline physique, and lips so red they just begged to be kissed. It was no secret she had borne a crush on Grace since childhood. Still best friends, they joked about it often. “Want to make out?” Linda always asked, clearly half-serious. Grace always laughed in response, saying, “Not today, baby.” Had she been normal, they would have been married, no question.

Today, Linda's hair glistened against the waning afternoon sun. “What's up, honey? I thought we talked about that gloom and doom

face you keep wearing out in public. You're too pretty for that. You've got to put that dyke gang shit behind you."

Was it worth the risk to tell Linda?

No. As much as it grieved Grace to evade the truth, she did. "It's not that. I'm just feeling tired. I haven't slept much this week. Spent all my time prepping for that Obesaland pitch."

"Oh yeah, how did that go?"

Grace told her, forcing the proper amount of frustration into her voice, putting on a show worthy of the old Hollywood movies. She even wrapped in a psychological thread relating to fear of being herself among homosexuals, which solicited an expected—yet somehow sympathetic—eye roll from Linda. Not once did she mention her bleeding, suggest that she might be a genetic mistake, or hint that their friendship might soon go the way of Antarctica. Linda, none the wiser, responded with stories about her daughter Rita, her wife Celine's drinking problem, and the new bra she had found at V-Barn. Typical girl talk.

So there it was; there it went. A social encounter, a regular instance in Grace's normal heterosterile life, a sign that things had not yet changed irrevocably. But the cramps, those little nightmares, were starting again.

CHAPTER 4 (HIM)

A BIO POLICE CAR crept onto Spruce Place and parked across the street from the rundown apartment complex where Diana Kring had lived. Dex saw its approach reflected in the building's front entryway.

For the third time, he scanned his wrist on the resident panel and buzzed Diana's neighbor, Trinka. Trinka had birthed eight children for seven different male couples after being forced by the Bureau of Genetic Regulation to become a carrier. Worn ragged by age twenty-seven, she had purposefully become addicted to hard methamphetamines in order to fight the system, and the last child to come out of her had been deformed. Trinka hated the New Rainbow Order more than anyone Dex knew, and she would have no problem letting him break into Diana's apartment—for a second time—to check for new leads.

He dared a glance toward the police car while waiting for the woman's answer. The bearish officer behind the wheel was peering sideways, in Dex's direction. Here the brute was in his purple uniform, outside Diana's home, two and a half months after her disappearance.

Why now? Had Trinka finally become cause for concern, or was he here for some other reason?

Dex was due at work in just forty minutes. He buzzed Trinka again, scouring his brain for places in Diana's apartment he had forgotten to search the first time, wondering if there might have been clues about her bleeding incident all along.

His spirits had spiraled downward for two weeks after she stopped answering com calls and door knocks. The message had seemed clear: she did not love him, and this was her way of showing it. The orgy at Fletch Novotny's apartment had been a good way to blow off steam, and the drugged-up woman he had finished with had been beautiful enough to be proper revenge against Diana—an idealist-type who worked for the Obesaland slum, if he remembered correctly. Under her lush, dark hair, however, she had an innocent face and an air of sexual inexperience about her. Fucking her had made him feel as if he was crushing a fledgling under his heel, simply to snuff away his own pain.

And it had not brought Diana back.

Not long after the orgy, it became obvious *nobody* had seen her. When he had finally searched her apartment, Dex noticed her pink suitcase was missing, as were most of her favorite outfits. Diana's father Joshua was not prejudiced, so he made no mention of Dex to police. Associating his daughter's disappearance with heterosexual activity might have become dangerous for both of them. While both Civic and Bio Police were much more brutal in Chicago and certain other metropolises in the Recovered Territories, heterosexuals like Dex—and the people who cared for them—were still at risk here in Minneapolis. Avoiding the police rendered Diana's trail even colder, but it was just as well. If this bleeding incident meant she was a genetic mistake, the shadows would be her safest refuge.

The com in Dex's pocket vibrated. He grabbed it and looked at the screen.

A holomessage from Fletch Novotny. It was the perfect excuse to start walking toward the Twin Cities Com studio. If the officer decided to stop him, Dex would have a good excuse: the midday news, for which

he was a camera operator. Trinka did not appear to be home, so with a final glance into the window's reflection, he turned and started on his way. He kept his gaze locked on his com.

"Hey, Dex," said the tiny hologram of Fletcher. "Just wanted to say 'I told you so.' Remember that chick Sheila Willy I told you about? She sent me a link to this news story on WorldCom. There's a rally going on in New Zealand about the Sanctuary, so I wasn't completely out of line about my conspiracy theories last week. Some heteros down there are actually standing up to the NRO. Looks like it's getting pretty intense. You should check it out. Totally buried in the 'society' section of the WorldCom site, so I guess there's still *some* freedom of the press. Made me think of Diana. Hope you're not listening to this in public or whatever. I'm getting nervous again. Ciao."

Fletcher's face disappeared. Dex touched the WorldCom menu on the com screen, which brought up a host of stories. He scrolled through them, and there it was, a hologram link. He tapped it with his finger.

A lisping WorldCom reporter sprang to life.

"We bring you an amusing report today from Christchurch, in the territory of New Zealand, where straight rights protestors are gathered in Old Cathedral Square, demanding answers about rumors surrounding the NRO's much-famed and celebrated Antarctic Sanctuary."

The gaysian journalist wore a smirk under his perfectly sculpted black hair. Behind him was a line of grungy protestors who were shouting and holding signs.

"The protestors are adamantly opposed to Queen Vincent's efforts at human progress, voicing concerns that the new breeding laws passed in the last two years have *already* filled the Sanctuary beyond capacity, and the quality of life for illegal carriers and failsafes who have been deported with their offspring is dwindling. Some even claim the quality of life doesn't exist at all."

The hologram cut to a red-haired, bearded man who was screaming at the camera in fanatical bursts.

"There never was a Sanctuary, and they're just *killing* the carriers 'n' failsafes they bring down there! Vincent Metzger is a Satanist who

wants nothing more than to rid the world of everything natural! It's a *conspiracy*! God's Army had it right during the Bio Wars! We need to *fight the homosexuals!*"

Spit flew from the man's mouth just before the hologram cut back to the reporter.

"A conspiracy indeed, and boy, could *he* use a brow wax," came the gaysian's sum-up. "While myths concerning the Wilkes Land Sanctuary have been running amok since the Queen's term was extended after the terrorist attacks in Salzburg three years ago, this demonstration is a first for the territory of New Zealand, the gateway through which illegal breeders travel before final departure for Antarctica. For the past seventy-six years, despite the significant political polarization it has inspired, the Sanctuary has been a stimulus for the territory, whose economy previously relied solely on tourism, hetero pornography, and exports. Now, both Sanctuary staff and future residents pass through the country, providing an ample backbone for the local economy. But contrary to what these protestors are arguing, the number of reproductive criminals has been reduced significantly since Queen Vincent passed Mandate 42 two years ago. From Christchurch, this is Erik Milam with WorldCom."

The gaysian disappeared, but his report triggered an entirely new brand of alarm in Dex. After nearly a century, it seemed the Sanctuary's original purpose was starting to fizzle. What frightened him most was that it did not come as a surprise. On three occasions since Diana's disappearance, he had woken in the dead of night to the drumming of fists on doors and harsh but muffled male voices—the Bio Police, making their rounds. If they had begun arresting and disposing of innocent heterosexuals, it was still happening in the shadows.

Maybe Diana knew something I didn't, Dex thought. *Maybe she'd want me to disappear, too.*

A line of preschool children, tethered by a rainbow-colored leash and led by two smiling and flamboyant teachers, passed him as he reached the corner of West Grant Street. He took the opportunity to glance back down Spruce Place to see if the police car was rolling

behind him. But no, it was gone already, which suggested an even worse life development:

The Bio Police officer had been there because of him. For whatever reason, he was now under their scope.

CHAPTER 5 (HER)

BY SUNDAY EVENING, thinking ahead became Grace's only option. Dinner with the family was a weekly tradition, despite simmering tension over value differences regarding the Queen's looming agenda. Grace had become the unacknowledged elephant in the room over the past thirteen years, since everybody (though they never mentioned it) had realized her place in society was slipping through the cracks. It would come soon now, considering both her bleeding and Mandate 43: a reckoning, a fight to save her—or let social progress snuff her out.

Her thirty-two-year-old brother Abraham, now once divorced, once widowed, and sporting a pale, eleven-year-old son named Lars, was bringing his new boyfriend Daryl to dinner. Lars had taken a liking to Daryl, a copywriter, snobby as they came, who worked for the Bureau of Sexual Progress. Abraham claimed Lars liked Daryl more than he himself did but that it was good for the boy to have a second father figure in his life. Grace knew her brother better than that, however. Daryl filled a psychological gap for him. Abraham did not enjoy being alone.

With a creepy son like Lars, I can't blame him, Grace thought.

She walked out of the guest house, past the pool, and up the brick sidewalk toward the patio. The crabapple trees—her dad's favorite—arched over her, gliding behind with each step. Stuart Jarvis had a passion for tending gardens, and during summer, this one was a spectacle to behold. Now, it was barren of color, swallowed by the growing cold of autumn. Grace slowed to savor each step as she realized the plants might never again bloom in her presence, if banishment truly was a risk she now faced.

During dinner, the bleeding happened just after Abraham had taken a scoffing Daryl into the kitchen to slice dessert (Daryl had deemed the fruit torte too fattening, to Stuart's face). Lars, who was sitting with his usual shrewd expression across from Grace, was wearing a subtle but unmistakable grin.

"You like fruit torte, don't you Lars?" Stuart said.

"I agree with Daryl," the boy said. "Too fattening."

"You could use some meat on those bones," Stuart muttered, ignoring the warning eye from his husband.

Grace decided to inject some neutrality into the conversation. "I'm going to go wash my hands. Got some olive oil on them."

She stood up, turned, and started walking. Suddenly, Stuart whispered, "Oh, my God, *honey*."

Blood had soaked through the rear of her brand-new skirt and smeared on the plush dining room chair seat. Dark red, no mistaking it. There had been no pain to warn her, and her latest stuffing of sanitary wipes had failed.

"James, give me that extra napkin!" Whispers, all whispers, because of Daryl. On the other side of the table, Lars was staring, calculating.

"Honey, she's bleeding! Give me that napkin!" Stuart hissed at his husband. James's eyes widened in confusion, and he grabbed the extra napkin. Stuart slammed it onto the chair, then jumped up and rubbed it into the seat's fabric. He pointed a sharp finger at James, but his eyes were flicking in a concerned manner toward Lars. "Grace cut herself on the steak knife, and it got on the chair. We have to go look at it. Keep

that blood covered, and cancel dessert. Too fattening after all. *Honey, if you question me on this, I'll regret I ever took your name.*"

James nodded, but there was a nagging disapproval in his expression, just as there had been in the hospital, the night Grace had been attacked by the Dyke Patrol. She caught a glimpse of it just as Stuart ushered her out of the room, blocking the view of her skirt from Lars.

"She wasn't using a knife," Grace heard her nephew say.

THEY WERE RUSHING DOWN THE FAR HALL, toward the bathroom.

"I don't know, Dad, I don't know, I didn't want to tell anybody—"

"When? When did it start?"

"Four days ago, only a couple times, but it hurt—"

"Why didn't you tell me? I'm a doctor, for God's sake! You're sure it's been bleeding from your vagina? Like menstruation? Christ, that isn't even possible."

But they both knew it could be.

He slammed on the bathroom lights, opened the toilet, and forced her down. Grace's breaths were sharp, her tears running with fear and humiliation. "But Daryl! He's here! What if he sees? Lars already knows I didn't cut myself on the knife! I could have made up something else!"

"What, an anal fissure?" Stuart growled, not out of anger but out of absolute concern. "Actually, that could work. Say you were experimenting with regular sex and it got a bit rough. I can cover Lars. I'll tell him I made the knife excuse so you wouldn't be embarrassed."

"But will Daryl buy that? Fissures wouldn't make me bleed like that, would they?"

"He doesn't have to see the blood, and neither does Abraham. Christ, Grace, this is just the type of thing that'll give the Queen an excuse to start his genocide!"

It was the first time either of them had used that word about the Queen's agenda.

Stuart put a hand on his daughter's shoulder. For some reason,

Grace's gaze was glued on his wedding ring as it moved toward her. "Now, let me ask you, and be totally honest with me! I won't judge you, even though it would make no sense since Metzger is about to pass Mandate 43, but have you been menstruating? Did you get the gene switch procedure to become a carrier?"

Grace buried her face in her hands, too frightened to shake her head. Her dad gaped at her, wide-eyed.

"*Did you get the procedure?* Honey, it's okay if you did! Just tell me so I can know how to go about this—"

"No!" Grace choked back a sob. "No, I didn't get the gene switch! I just started bleeding!" Now, a stab of pain in her abdomen made her wince and double over.

Stuart caught her. "Jesus Christ," came his whisper.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

"Morning sickness?"

"I was throwing up for a while in the morning."

"What, Grace? Did you think it was a *disease*? Diseases don't happen anymore! What did you think it was?"

"I didn't want to think!"

She hoped her father had followed through as inconspicuously as possible and kicked Abraham, Lars, and Daryl out for the night. Even if it worked, they would still wonder what happened to her, and she would be lucky if Lars had not already piped up that smart little voice of his.

No, this definitely wasn't menstrual bleeding, Stuart told her, but—here came the shock—it might not be a miscarriage either. It very well could be, but unless this was something other than a pregnancy, it was possible the baby was still alive.

"In the olden days, you'd have been in the hospital right away. I'm no expert in bioengineering, but I know the basics. I've had pregnant carriers visit my clinic before."

"Like Bonnie Henderson."

"Yes, like Bonnie Henderson. She had bleeding when she was carrying for Bill and Don, and it actually was quite heavy. Her engineer

was the primary caregiver, but I saw her file. A number of things can cause bleeding. In her case, it was a partially detached placenta. That's the part that connects the baby—"

"To the carrier. I know."

"In any case, I'll have to examine you at the office. We'll say it's just a routine checkup for non-pathogenic abnormalities, because you've been having headaches."

It was embarrassing to hear her dad's questions. Had there been any signs other than morning sickness? On what occasion was it likely she had conceived? Could there be more than one possibility? Had she ever taken any strange drugs?

And then the answers: yes, apart from the morning sickness, there had also been fatigue on and off. ("Classic symptoms of pregnancy," her dad muttered as he checked her pulse.) It could only have happened that one night during the orgy, with Salt and Pepper. And the drugs? No, they had been standard, as far as Grace knew. Just typical party drugs that would not cause unpredictable genetic problems. Virus-based mutating solutions came in syringes; there had been no syringes, and even so, no street drug could perform the zinc finger switch that activated a female's ovarian *Lrh1* genes. That happened with vectors, Stuart explained, altered viruses that carried genes engineered to produce the zinc finger proteins. These then bound to DNA in a woman's ovaries to activate the *Lrh1* gene responsible for ovulation. The process was extremely complex, nothing a woman could instigate on her own.

Breathe, Grace. Breathe, Dad.

But this was quite the quandary.

The *Lrh1* gene switch could happen only once in a woman. It was a one-way procedure to trigger fertility in a heterosterile. Geneticists had yet to find a way to reverse fertility after gene switches, because the DNA manipulation it required always caused severe or deadly mutations. Furthermore, it would be impossible to pass her off as a carrier in any official sense, because the TruthChip identification plate in her wrist was clear. Grace Emilia Jarvis was registered as heterosterile, and only an unforeseen genetic mutation or a zinc finger switch could have

made her otherwise. If she had somehow been born a genetic mistake, the option of illegally switching her from fertile to sterile was also riddled with obstacles. As a general practitioner, Stuart Jarvis was not qualified to authorize experimental gene switches, even when they were legal. As a genetipsychologist, however, his husband James was.

"But even if your father *could* authorize an experimental procedure like that," Stuart said, "the decision would have to go through a hundred different people, both at the clinic and in the local and intercontinental branches of the NRO. They'd know you were a genetic mistake, and you'd be banished. I don't know how long we can hide this!"

Grace had seen her dad panic only once, the night of her attack. To see it again was unnerving.

"What about tampons or pads, those things carriers use?" she asked, feeling sick with worry. "Is there any way for me to get them? If I did miscarry, doesn't it mean I might start menstruating all the time, like a carrier?"

"Once a month, give or take. And tampons and pads are only sold under strict supervision by the BGR, and you, my dear, won't have the proper identification to receive those from any clinic."

"*Your* clinic, though? Do *you* have access to them? Does Father?"

"Neither of us would. It's not part of my Wellness Care Jurisdiction, and your father doesn't have clearance to prescribe them to carriers. He just . . . picks their brains to make sure they're good candidates. Besides, each pad or tampon package is tracked by the Bureau, so it'd leave a trail of red tape. Damn it, Grace!"

"I didn't try! I didn't know, Daddy!"

But he had not meant it as a scolding. A moment later, he grabbed her into a hug and whispered, "Well, you can always keep using sanitary wipes."

Grace chuckled, burying her face into his slippery silk shirt. "You're not going to turn me in?"

Stuart Jarvis squeezed his daughter extra hard. "Not on your life, Pix. But we need to find you help, and fast."

He let her go and began pacing back and forth. Grace sat back on

the toilet, then folded her hands and looked down at the limestone floor tiles. It was a creeping mixture of uncontrollable selfishness and lonely dread that brought Salt and Pepper's face to mind.

"If it really is a pregnancy, should I try to find the father?" she whispered.

Stuart stopped. He looked at her with a wary expression. "Would you really want to put a failsafe in that sort of danger?"

What frightened Grace most, right then on the toilet, was that, for this all-important question, she had no immediate answer.

A MEMORY (HIM)

***T**HE WORLD IS AN EASY PLACE for little Dexter, because all he has to worry about is what and who he'll play with on any given day. He loves the sun, and he loves it even more when his mothers take him to the community center in Nowthen. It has a bright and shallow pool with a large, mushroom-shaped umbrella where water rains down onto him and the other children.*

Today, his parents have him in the women's locker room, and they are changing into their swimsuits. His mother Karen is fixing her hair and checking messages on her com with a frown. As always, something is making her feel to Dexter like a rainy day. His mom Roberta is busy socializing with Susan and Jessica Claiborne, both of whom are naked and drawing Dexter's three-year-old eyes.

"He's getting so big!" Susan says, beaming down at Dexter, who hides behind Roberta, neither confused by the fact nor noticing that he is watching the spot between Susan's legs, where it looks different from his own and there is hair. It pleases him, somehow.

Her boy Tommy smacks Dexter on the head.

"Tag, you're it!" he screams, but Dexter doesn't understand the game, so tears form in his eyes.

"Tommy, play nice!" Susan says. "Go find your brother!"

There's something about all of this that makes Dexter want to keep hiding. Susan leans down, and her breasts tumble into his face. She is oblivious that Dexter is for some reason noticing them. "Honey, are you okay? Don't mind Tommy. He's not as well behaved as you are!"

She has made it all okay. The swat on his head is forgotten.

Tommy's other mother Jessica is just as beautiful as Susan. Red hair falls over her face in a way that sends a warm feeling through Dexter. The woman smiles, but he can tell (the way he can with his mother Karen) that it isn't the same kind of smile his mom and Susan have.

Jessica says, "I still can't believe you guys let him be a surprise. Doesn't it make you nervous?"

An ant on the floor catches Dexter's eye, and he runs from his mom's side and follows it down the length of the changing bench. He passes his mother Karen just in time to see her look up at Jessica and let out a sigh, the same one she does when she has helped him build a tower of building blocks, and he knocks it over on purpose.

His mom Roberta, however, looks at Jessica and stands a bit higher. "I'm being optimistic," she says. "Call me a dreamer, but I think the world was better off when things like who a child was going to be could be a surprise."

"Yeah, but won't that do a number on his mind, once he gets older? Finding out he's only here to be . . . a backup plan?"

The ant has disappeared. Dexter listens to the conversation, but it is made of grownup words, so he settles next to the bench, watching a group of older boys by the door who are waiting in uniform patience for their mothers. Some of them are touching each other's swimming suits and giggling. All Dexter can think of are the pool sounds and bright sparkles coming through the door, and he wants his mothers to hurry up, because it is sunny and hot outside, and the cool water awaits.

CHAPTER 6 (HIM)

“IT’S THOSE FUCKING FAGGOT *MEN*,” Fletch drunkenly spouted to Dex before taking another sip of whiskey. He had bags under his eyes and, for the first time since Dex had known him, smelled slightly of body odor. “Men have always had the upper hand of power, but since the homo ones took over the world, mothers like *yours* had to get the short end of the stick! First they engineered bisexuals and trannies right out of society, then they cut out almost all the heteros, and now they’re going after females! The whole lot of them! How the fuck do they expect humanity to survive?”

It was Wednesday, the fifteenth of November, and they were each on their fourth drink at Sterile Me Susan’s. Fletch had left a message with his fellow government dissenter friend Sheila Willy three days before to ask if Diana’s supposed bleeding episode might mean anything to her. The woman had not yet returned his calls, so he and Dex were spending this Wednesday’s whiskey session discussing the next best thing: political and sociogenetic progression. It was Dex’s mom Roberta’s birthday, so their angle on the topic was lesbians.

“Hell, I almost feel *safe* around them, compared to the fags,” Fletch

continued. "I feel like they've been suppressed enough to know what it's like for us. Except for the biker gangs, obviously. Thank God men still tend to be stronger."

Lesbians did not as a rule carry a stigma (despite there being a relatively small ratio of them in political and medical power), but as individuals, they were considered lesser citizens when it came to reproducing. Why? Because females carried two X chromosomes, which could only produce females, and males carried both X and Y chromosomes, which could produce either sex. Over the past thirteen years, the Queen had reduced the engineering quota of females to only one fourth of what it had been before his rise to power, and it was getting lower every year. As a result, most lesbian couples were being forced to engineer males, which was impossible without their borrowing Y chromosomes from male donors. Never mind that all human embryos still needed an ungeneticized ovum shell to develop, and this rendered males just as dependent on females for reproduction. It was as if the post-Bio War world had forgotten that the science behind this modern process was extreme to begin with; all combined same-sex genes inserted into an egg also had to undergo extensive manipulation in order to mimic the natural developmental process dictated by male and female genetics. But people turned a blind eye.

Now, Mandate 43 was about to change everything. Soon, genetic material and eggs would be the only necessities. Female carriers, even homosexual ones, would be cast aside in favor of test tubes.

The music in Sterile Me Susan's was still low enough for Fletch's voice to carry across it. His rant was becoming dangerous, even for a hetero bar.

"Seriously, this stuff is getting scary, Dex! There's no balance of power anymore. People, especially lesbians, have to stand up and do something about it! Do you realize Mandate 43 will single handedly put us all out of commission? They're not just making heteros unnecessary, as if they are somehow immune to making a mistake and ever needing us to breed again, but they're making *females* unnecessary. Where are the female politicians to stand up against this shit?"

"Too scared to run for office," Dex replied. "Ever since Luna Vega."

Luna Vega had been a lesbian who ran for the chair seat of the Intercontinental Social Council six years earlier. She won it, then was found dead in her apartment a day later. To this day, not even World-Com had reported any official explanation of her death.

Fletch shook his head. "They can't *possibly* go through with it. I mean, phasing out carriers? That means they'll just breed lesbian females and use them to harvest eggs! Doesn't anyone *care*? You grew up seeing that discrimination happening, right? Weren't your moms, like, some of the first dykes to be bred sterile?"

"Yeah, at least in Minnesota," Dex said, sipping his whiskey. The bar's dim, red lighting was starting to spin. He felt both weightless and heavy. Drunk, or at least getting there.

The extraction of mature female eggs had always been simple, the first part of the process either homosterile or heterosterile carriers-to-be went through to make their bodies viable for gestation. Fifty to a hundred eggs were always harvested, emptied of all their genetic material to become mere shells, and then frozen until the carrier's body, six months off the Lrh1 gene switch, was menstruating and ready for embryos. Genetic re-engineering had become a well-oiled process.

The seed for homosexual rule had been planted in the early 2000s, as far as Dex knew. While genetipolitics had always interested him as far as they concerned current events, his interest in political history had just recently blossomed. All he really knew (or needed to know) was that homosexuals had once been a repressed sector of society, a tarnish on what old-fashioned breeders had blanket termed "the family." While the hushed-up United Nations mission to thin out Earth's population by infecting humans with HIV had helped reduce the number of homosexuals, it had failed on a broader scale. Families in the developed world had still ballooned in numbers, eaten up the planet's resources, and caused an international social collapse.

It wasn't until the development of God's Army and the Bio Wars, however, that the effort to curb population actually succeeded. Again, the heterosexuals had been at fault; this time, they had perpetuated outright murder and terrorism in an effort to fight back against the homosexuals who had risen to power and begun to suppress them.

Entire regions—continents, almost—had fallen to chemical and biological plagues that, in those final months, would have spread far enough to wipe out most of humanity were it not for the obstructor bombs dropped by the military to stop them. Cities that had once been power centers of the planet—New York, Los Angeles, London, Hong Kong, and countless others—were still in ruins.

A history lesson not to be repeated.

Fletch ran a hand through his black hair, which hung to his rounded shoulders. “I want to get my TruthChip replaced so nobody knows I’m a failsafe. People are talking, man. You know that group I was telling you about before? They said the NRO is going to stage a terrorist attack and use it as an excuse to blame it on heterosexuals, so it’s okay to round us up for mass killing. And you know what? I wouldn’t be surprised. I think we all know it’s coming, if it hasn’t started happening already. The Sanctuary won’t be able to handle *everyone*, you know? It’s big, but not that big. That’s why I want to beat the NRO to the punch. Cause some motherfucking damage!”

Dex turned back to the bar to sip his drink, feeling his face flushing with self-consciousness. Not only was the possibility of genocide still a taboo subject to discuss in public, but any mention of resistance, particularly terrorism, could land the Bio Police on their backs in a matter of minutes. Dex drank, then said to Fletch in a low voice, “Shut up, Fletch. I mean it. Wrong person hears you talking like that, and we’re both fucked.”

It was as if he had spoken the words to a brick wall.

“I mean, look at what the fucking NRO is capable of, man!”

“I said *shut up*,” Dex hissed.

“They’re evil! Think about HIV, Dex! The fags used that shit to make chicks sterile, just to get back at the heteros. It was an RNA virus, and that United Nations group used it with gene therapy or whatever. This was, like, *way* before they figured out the whole zinc finger switch thing, but it just goes to show—”

“I don’t really know the technicalities of genetics,” Dex said with a hushed voice, leaning over his drink. In his peripheral vision, he noticed the bartender Clara watching Fletch like a cow in heat.

“Dex, dude, it’s *history!*” the man slurred. “You’ve got to know it, or you can’t back up your opinions about the *now*. I bet you don’t even know why mitochondrial DNA restructuring is important!”

“You’re drunk, and no, I don’t. I bet you don’t either.”

“It’s, like, that thing,” Fletch said before taking a gulp so large it barely stayed in his mouth. “I mean, so the chromosomes read right, and everything develops normally when they put same-sex genes together! Proteins, man! You gotta know this shit!”

“Yep, proteins.”

A hand, followed by an arm, floated through the air behind Fletch and tapped his shoulder. It looked like some sort of sea creature.

I’m drunk, Dex thought.

“Fletch, right?”

A woman. Nervous voice, the meek type.

He and Fletch turned at the same time.

Standing behind them was a woman in a black pants suit—perfect breasts, not too large, not too small, a trim body, and a round face that complemented the innocence in her voice. Dex recognized her right away.

It was the woman from the orgy two months ago.

CHAPTER 7 (HER)

Here Grace stood, in front of Salt and Pepper, about to destroy his life.

What kind of awful person had she become?

Their baby was perfectly alive. Her dad had confirmed the pregnancy the previous week. The bleeding, he thought, had been caused by a marginal placenta previa and subchorionic bleeding. Stuart had cared for enough carriers over his career to have a clue. His examination with the ultrascope had been hasty; he had not even given her a chance to look, because another patient had been due any minute. But he had seen the living being inside her, behind the ultrascope's electronic glass visor. The vision had brought him to tears.

Grace had found herself in the late hours of sleepless nights longing to talk with Salt and Pepper, to share the desperation and terror. Both had changed her. Anger had wrapped around fear and tricked her into justifying the desire to divide this burden. Salt and Pepper was half responsible, after all. Despite her dad's recommendation to rest as much as possible, she had begun frequenting Sterile Me Susan's. She knew Fletch Novotny was a regular patron, because the bartender had

known him by name the two times she had met him here with Todd Bender. She had hoped to find him in order to learn more about Salt and Pepper.

And yes, in the back of her mind, she had also hoped for this: to meet the beautiful, horrible stranger face to face.

But anger and fear were not tools Grace had ever used to manipulate her world. She could no sooner hope ill for this man than watch herself sour from within. What had she planned to say? How had she ever thought this would be good, right, and satisfying?

When Salt and Pepper recognized her, guilt began to run its course.

CHAPTER 8 (HIM)

EVEN IN THE DIMLY LIT BAR, the beauty that had drawn Dex to this woman two months ago was striking; only now, there was something melancholy coloring her expression. He had never learned her name. Embarrassed, he turned his face back to the bar, as if he had been in the process of waiting for another drink, despite the refill sitting in front of him.

“Oh, it’s you,” he heard Fletch say in drunken surprise.

“Yes, Grace Jarvis,” she said. “We met a couple of months ago through Todd Bender.”

Grace. It was a nice name. Simple, to the point.

“Of course,” Fletch said. “I remember. We all had some fun if I recall.”

Behind the bar, Clara glared in Grace’s direction. Fletch was probably smothering the poor woman by now, so Dex turned to follow Clara’s glower.

Grace was staring straight at him. A magnetic rush passed between them immediately: a trace of the lust that had brought them together

the night of the orgy, but also something more. Something deeper. Heat rose in Dex's face.

Grace dipped into a nervous smile, then shook her head. "Sorry," she said, "Maybe I shouldn't have—"

"No, sit!" Dex jumped off his seat to offer it, but his foot curled around its wooden leg, and he went flailing into Fletch's lap. Grace erupted in laughter as Fletch pushed Dex back toward the stool. Dex found his feet, but he knew there was no way he could hide the wobble in his legs. "What I meant to say was . . . I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye that night."

He was making a fool of himself, but Grace appeared to soften with relief. Despite her polite smile, however, there was a tightness in her face, as if her sudden jollity were masking some hidden anxiety. Grace reached for her rear left hip and itched it as she sat in his seat. A *nervous quirk*, Dex thought. *She did that the night I had sex with her.*

"So, what brings you out tonight?" Dex asked, thankful for the tipsy grin helping to mask his shyness. "Looking for another party like last time?" The words spilled out as a joke, but they sounded perfectly horrid as they hit Grace's gentle face.

"Hot, you studbucket. Really hot," Fletch said, chuckling.

Grace swallowed, then offered a restrained grin. "Actually, no. I was just meeting with a coworker here, and I saw you two and wanted to say hi."

Fletch leaned forward and placed a hand on the woman's knee. "What is it you do again, Grace Jarvis?" His eyes were flitting back and forth between her face and her breasts. Seemingly unaware of his need for a shower, he rested his free arm on the bar and tried to draw Grace's gaze with a ripple of his bicep.

Grace closed her eyes and shook her head, as if warding off tears. "Actually, it's not looking too good. I work for the Minneapolis Neighborhood Development Council as a preservation specialist in charge of Obesaland."

Fletch shook his head and scoffed with an unbecoming spray of saliva. He tried to hide it by taking one last sip from his empty glass