

Lacey Ann Carrigan
8505 Arlington Ave #A46
Riverside CA 92503
(951) 509-1822
laceycare@zoho.com

HER OWN DAUGHTER

Chapter one

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When she glanced up at him, she thought, now there's a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. Several young men just like him, dressed in crisp black, flitted about from table to table, like butterflies. A chandelier twinkled overhead. All around her, animated conversation among the other women flowed like the fine wine into the crystal goblets before them. Suella glanced around at the other wives and would wonder how many thousands of dollars went into the upkeep of the hair and manicures, the designer sundresses and the brand new shoes. Yet, if she turned around the corner, she would see the glass partition and the doorway. When she opened the doorway she would find steps, stadium style plush seats and she would hear the crowd noise drift up from below, of a bat hitting a ball or the umpire shrieking a "strike" call.

Suella looked at Julie Veragones, sitting beside her. A former model, Julie stood about six feet tall yet probably weighed less than most Rottweilers. She'd worn her glossy, dark brown hair in an upswept style, curls cascading down her back and lightly framing the sides of her face. To Suella and anyone else within earshot, she said "I dread this time of year. School's out, the kids are home saying "There's nothing to do, mom!"

Trenna Kyle, a much shorter and curvier woman giggled. "So what's it to you? Just put 'em out in the pool and tell the nanny you'll pay her an extra hundred bucks if they don't drown."

They all laughed.

"My brats are gonna be up in Maine until the All-Star break," Kaitlyn Vogel, another tall, coltish looking woman said. Kaitlyn had also modeled, referring to it as "good training" for becoming a trophy wife. "It's Jeff's yearly mother's day present to me. We send them off to be with grandma and grandpa for a month."

"That's so neat," Maribel Aviles said, speaking for the first time since she'd arrived. "I thought I'd be the only one with kids. Cincinnati is such a young team." Her husband Miguel had arrived in a trade during the winter. Maribel turned to Suella. "What about you, Sula? How old are your kids?"

All of the women except Maribel looked down at the drinks they cradled between their fingers. Suella shifted from side to side on her high-heeled sandals. "I don't have any children."

Still smiling, Maribel said "Well, you're young. There's still time."

Suella decided she was going to like the new girl.

Some shouts erupted from around the corner. They all glanced in that direction.

An Asian waiter with a dispassionate expression on his face passed by, carrying a tray of empty glasses and plates. Julie stopped him. “What’s going on?”

The waiter shrugged. “Perez is getting bombed. Someone on the Cardinals just hit one into the River.” Gilberto Perez was a young star pitcher who’d remained a bachelor so far.

“Oh, no,” Maribel said. “We’re going to have to come back.”

“They can do it,” Kaitlyn announced with confidence. “Let’s go check it out for awhile.” The four of them started for the corner and the seats in the press area, but Kaitlyn had set her drink down and started for the rear door.

“What are you doing?” Julie asked, with an incredulous tone.

“Let’s go to our field boxes for once,” Kaitlyn said. “In there, it still feels like you’re watching the game from your living room.”

Their heels click-clacked through the cavernous concourse. When they left the luxury boxes, they approached the regular gates and plazas. The smells of hot dogs, mustard and tap beer drifted around them. Two guys who wore jerseys with ripped jeans and backwards-facing baseball caps approached them. “Wow!” one of them said, looking at Julie. “Supermodels! We must be in Heaven, man!”

Julie strode confidently on, toward the field level corridor. She reached the aisles first and called back to Suella. “Wow, you’re not going to believe this, Susie. They’re bringing your hubby in.”

Suella couldn’t believe it. “What? It’s too early! It’s not even dark yet!”

Their seats were in the noisy scout and VIP area. When Suella settled herself in, she took in the entire field. Her husband, Nathan Worthy, emerged from the bullpen

door. While he walked toward the field, as casually as if he'd been on a beach somewhere, the crowd buzzed expectantly. Yet, Suella knew the trance her husband went into, whenever he took the mound.

A noisy scout wearing a golf hat lifted his arms in exasperation. "Oh great, they're bringing in Worthy." He shook his head. "When the hell are they going to get rid of that old piece of shit?"

Julie, who was sitting directly beside Suella, suddenly stiffened, and swung her neck in the man's direction. "Sir, for your information, that piece of shit's WIFE is sitting right here."

He glanced over at them with glazed eyes to complement his mottled skin. "Well then I guess I should get on my knees and apologize, right?" A few male voices laughed along with the elderly scout.

"You know, you're really rude!" Julie snapped at him.

Suella touched her on her wrist, leaning in to whisper into her ear. "It's okay, Jewel. People have been saying that since he turned thirty-five."

Julie relaxed. "Well it bothers me! It's exactly the reason I like to stay up there."

"Let's have some beers," Kaitlyn said. "I'm buying!" She excused herself for the concession stand and Maribel followed along after her. Suella watched her husband warm up. For the first couple of throws, he lobbed the ball plateward, as if he was throwing to a five-year-old. Some people laughed. Suella shook her head, wondering when they locals would get used to his quirks. He'd been with the team for two whole seasons. Gradually, Nathan whipped his arm forward with more force, causing the ball to zip and snap as it arced toward the catcher. He was throwing at full speed by the time the

umpire called for the game to resume.

The scoreboard read 4-0 and it was only the third inning. Suella remembered something Nathan had told her a couple of weeks before, as they lie awake in bed.

“They’re going to make me fight, start me off in the pen.”

Finally, the crowd quieted down and the next batter appeared at the plate, flexing his muscles as he set himself in the batter’s box to face Nathan. Her husband brought his hands high over his head while still facing the plate. He twisted, shrunk down, brought his left arm back and swung it around like a whip, slinging the ball toward the catcher. His first pitch sailed high, causing Suella to remember another one of their conversations about what he did. “My riser looks just like a fat fastball coming toward the plate. Those greedy assholes usually can’t lay off it. They pop it straight up. And to see that ball going into a pop up, well, it’s a great feeling. Almost as good as you sucking me off.”

The batter fouled off the next pitch, while Suella, Julie, and Trena waited for the other two to get back with the beer. Julie poked Suella in her arm. “You’re so quiet tonight,” she said. “You’re not still bumming over what that new girl said, are you?”

“No, no it doesn’t bother me.” Even as Suella said the words, she knew she’d said them too quickly. And she wasn’t that good of an actress. Yes, Maribel’s words bothered her because it was about the thousandth time in the past fifteen years that someone looked on her childless status with pity.

The batter hit a sharp ground ball to the shortstop, Julie’s husband. She pumped her fist triumphantly as she watched him smoothly field the ball and fire a strike over to first base. “Way to go, Tony baby!”

Maribel and Kaitlyn returned with the beers. Suella sipped and watched, coaxing

her husband on for more and more success. The second batter greedily swung at the riser pitch Nathan threw and it hit his bat with a feeble click, sending the ball straight skyward. She heard a radio announcer's voice as he described the scene unfolding before her: "There's a high, high fly ball toward shallow left. Wow, that thing is a major league pop up. Veragones goes back, Calderon calls him off and catches it like a can of corn. Two down!"

Another rough looking character strutted up to the batter's box. Nathan stared the black man down for a few moments before swirling into his windup and hurling his first pitch to him. It landed in the dirt. So did the next one. The batter hit a foul. The next pitch looped way outside, causing the catcher to scramble for the ball. She suddenly realized what he was doing and rolled her eyes. "Oh, good god."

Julie flashed her a quizzical look. "What's the matter?"

"He's putting the guy on."

They both watched Nathan's next pitch sail way outside of the batter's box. Julie said "Doesn't the catcher have to put his arm out to the side and call an intentional walk?"

"Not the way Nathan does it."

While they both watched the batter trot toward first base, the same loud man from before barked: "See that? Chickenshit. Get him out of there."

Suella could sense Julie tense up beside her and she reached out to still her.

"Don't say anything. You'd only be dignifying him."

Julie snorted in disgust, glaring at the old man with the bulbous nose. "Doesn't it make you mad when idiots say things like that?"

“No, because I know they’re not true.” She watched him go to work on the next batter, imagining that she was seeing him for the first time. Nathan was tall, standing just over six feet tall but quite reedy. He may have weighed a hundred-seventy pounds if he carried two dumbbells in his pockets. He wore his copper colored hair in a short, feathered style and with his smooth skin and delicate features, people were often shocked to discover he was thirty-eight years old. Yet people like this idiot scout still commented about his age.

The crowd around her buzzed expectantly. Nathan had walked a guy who looked ripped and antsy, the kind who liked to steal bases. He jukeed and jumped around the first base bag, taunting him. Suella watched her husband’s expressions. After a stern scowl, the batter retreated. Nathan whipped around and threw as hard as he could to home plate and the umpire yelled “Strike one!”

After the catcher threw the ball to him, things got more complicated. Nathan would grip the ball with the tips of his fingers and revolve the ball quickly through them, reminding her of a Las Vegas sharpie shuffling cards or a magician playing tricks with a rope. In the middle of this action, he suddenly picked the ball up and threw it hard toward Greg Thierry at first base. Greg caught it with a pop in his mitt and slapped the runner’s shoulder as he dived back toward the bag. A chorus of “oohs” and “aahs” drifted up from the crowd.

“Almost caught him napping,” Julie said.

Nathan went into another quick set, glanced at the runner and arced a pitch toward home plate, the pitch Suella recognized as his rainbow curve. The batter lunged at it and sprayed a foul ball into the seats behind the visiting team’s dugout. Suella and Julie

giggled at watching kids and grown men fighting over the ball as it bounced around through the crowd. The umpire fished a new ball out of the sack dangling from his leg and Nathan went back to work again. He flipped the ball back and forth and in circles between his fingers, while glancing at the plate for the signal and at first base for the runner. He brought his glove up, for the wind up.

The runner put his head down and started to race for second base. Nathan, who looked like he was going to uncork for another pitch home, instead snapped his wrist and flung the ball to Greg, who caught it and side stepped away from first base. Greg fired a strike to Mick Bell at second. Mick crouched down and grinned, waiting for the doomed runner. A cloud rose from his head-first slide. The second base umpire yelled “Yer out!” Mick casually tossed the ball toward the pitcher’s mound and jogged off toward the dugout in one fluid motion, while the crowd roared in approval.

Julie said “Wow, that was cool!” as they both watched Nathan shake Mick’s and Greg’s hand on the way into the dugout.

Suella shrugged. “I’ve seen him do it a million times.”

The ladies watched two more innings from the field level seats as Nathan held the other team from scoring any further runs. The loud, drunk scout kept quiet for the rest of the time they sat there. Suella wondered if the pickoff play had shut him up. When they all arrived at the posh luxury box the waiters had brought out a fresh round of hors d’oeuvres and drinks. Suella suffered through another round of talk about parenting and discussions about children’s grades and futures.

“Hey, your guy did quite a job out there today,” Kaitlyn said at one point, smiling, trying to get Suella involved in the conversation somehow.

“Yes, he did,” Suella replied, smiling, thanking Kaitlyn silently.

After a blur of passing trays and raised glasses, the game soon ended, loyal fans trudging up from the theater seats with disgusted and disappointed looks on their faces.

“They gotta trade for another hitter,” someone said.

The activity after a game was always the same. Suella and the other wives would take the elevator down to the clubhouse where most of them would wait in the lounge just outside of it, what someone called “The Green Room.” Most times the players would have showered and changed by the time they made it down there. Some of them greeted their wives there with hugs and sweet, smooth talk. Suella knew that Nathan took a little bit longer so she waited patiently for him.

Soon, Nathan popped out of the door and looked around for her. He smiled when their eyes met, the kind of smile that made her fall in love again. They hugged and kissed. Suella always let Nathan speak first. He made a mock annoyed face and said “Hey, didn’t I tell you never to come here?”

“But I need a ride, mister. I figured a big strong pitcher like you would be able to help me.”

Nathan nodded, holding an arm around her. “Well, you’re pretty cute. I’ll see what I can do.” He handed her a set of car keys.

Suella groaned inwardly with disappointment. “But we have such a beautiful little condo. Sometimes I don’t think you like to spend much time in it.”

Nathan winked. “It’s even more beautiful when you’re there. I won’t be long. Stay up! Surprise me.” He leaned forward and gave her a long, slow, passionate kiss.

“How are you getting back?”

Nathan shrugged, flashing her a boyish smile. “A big, strong pitcher like me should be able to figure out something.” He gave her a quick hug and disappeared back through the door and into the clubhouse.

The consolation prize was getting to drive the scrumptious, low slung teal Mercedes SL750 sport coupe. Suella found it in the same spot in the players lot located in the concrete bowels beneath the stadium.

The wedge shaped speedster with the sensuous seats of buttery leather spun around the ramp, and in just a few turns and a climb up Adam’s hill, Suella found herself in their neighborhood. Their condo at the top overlooked the whole city.

A clear, June night intensified all the twinkling light and neon from the tops of the buildings. When she looked out the picture window at the twinkling lights and the dazzling cityscape below, she thought that this might be a nice place to start the next chapter in her life. Yet she and Nathan had bought the condo because, as Nathan had said “Hotels get expensive.” Nathan had just been traded to Cincinnati a couple of summers before, and at the drop of the owner’s hat, could find himself pitching in a new city the next day.

Their real home was in Santa Monica.

They’d met seven years ago, at a party.

Chapter Two

Hollywood, 2006

Nathan was pitching for New York then. He always said he liked coming to play the Dodgers, because of all the parties.

She never forgot his opening line: “Hey, you want to meet someone?” He tilted his head endearingly.

“Who, you?”

“Yeah!”

She hadn’t seen him before and assumed he was just one of the hordes of Hollywood hopefuls. He didn’t look nerdy enough to be a screenwriter or a producer. They talked all evening and Suella wondered where all his quiet, cocky confidence came from. At least a couple of times during their conversation, he said “I know people.” She avoided asking him directly what he did, and she liked the air of mystery he gave by refusing to volunteer the information.

At the end of the night he said “I think we should get together sometime.”

“I’d like that.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “Gimme your address.”

“My email address?”

He shook his head. “No, silly, your snail mail. Just give it to me. You won’t be disappointed.”

A couple of days later a package arrived for her. When she opened it, she found a handwritten note and an expensive looking cell phone. The note read “You’ll love this phone! It can do everything except give you a massage (nudge nudge wink wink). My

number's already programmed in there. Call me!"

Whoever this guy was, she thought, he was unbelievable. She called him later.

"Hey!" he said. "Wanna come to New York?"

Nathan arranged a ticket for her on the next flight from LAX to LaGuardia. He was going to be busy that afternoon, he said, so would she mind terribly if he had someone from his organization pick her up and bring her to his workplace? Well, so far the man had dropped a lot of money to her. "Sure," she said. Suella was a freelance systems analyst who could work from anywhere as long as she had one of her MacBook Airs with her. While on the flight she tried to do some code work for a client but she kept stopping and looking up.

What was she doing? She had dropped everything to fly, cross-country to be with a man she'd only met once, at a party. She knew nothing about Nathan, other than that he was gorgeous and charming. Her heart told her it was the right thing to do. A clean-cut, well groomed gentleman sat beside her on the flight. He looked all around. Rather than do his own work or tap into the plane's electronic entertainment system, he took in all that was around him during the long flight. On the third time that Suella stopped working and glanced upward, he stirred.

"Is everything okay?" he said with a soothing baritone.

She shrugged, closing the Mac, knowing that she was too distracted to get any real work done, anyway. "Yes, fine," she said.

"You're on business, I take it?"

She slid the Mac into her sleek carry-on. "Well, not exactly."

"Going to see friends and family? On vacation?"

She sighed. “Yes, I’m going to see a friend.”

“I’m on the way home,” he went on. “It’ll be great to see my wife and daughter again.”

Suella’s shoulders dropped with relief. When she looked at his hands she saw the thick gold band on his finger. “Actually, I’m flying all across the country to meet up with a guy I met once, at a party.” For the rest of the plane trip they discussed whether she was taking a risk or not.

“You only get to go around once in life,” the man, who had introduced himself as Russell, said. “If you’d stayed back in Santa Monica, you might always wonder if you gave up on something special.”

Their conversation made the rest of the trip fly by for her. They discussed business, the internet, and movies. Before long, the captain announced over the intercom that they would be landing soon, put all tray tables in the locked and upright position. As they landed in LaGuardia, at the dinner hour Suella turned to Russell. She thanked him. Once they both exited from the collapsible corridor, Russell disappeared into the crowd while Suella scanned the sea of faces and signs populating the arrival gate. She saw a jacketed employee holding up a sign reading “Suella Langenfeld.” Happy, she strode up to the gentleman to identify herself. He was a friendly looking guy in his late fifties or early sixties, with a tuft of brown curly hair and big glasses. When she reached him she realized that he was wearing a royal blue satin baseball jacket with the NY insignia in orange on it. His nametag read “Gerald Conway, equipment manager.” They introduced themselves. As Gerald took both of her bags and started walking in the direction of the airport lot, they talked.

“So you work with Nathan?” she asked him.

He chuckled. “Yes, you could say that.”

It suddenly dawned on her. “Nathan is a baseball player?”

Gerald stopped and turned slowly, to regard her. “Yes. He’s a pitcher.”

He put her in one of the official fleet cars of the team and drove her to the ballpark, which turned out to be only a couple of miles from the airport.

When they entered the stadium parking lot, one uniformed guard after another waved Russell through until they reached a ramp that tunneled down into an underground garage. Suella had seen two baseball games in her life, both at Dodger Stadium, and both in the cheap seats, with her friends. When Russell helped her out of the car, she saw the underground beehive of activity for the stadium, with receiving trucks arriving and television vans setting up. People walked briskly back and forth in all directions, most of them squawking into cell phones or two-ways.

Russell brought Suella all the way through the clubhouse and the executive offices and into the field level corridors. “It’s not safe to go on the field now because they’re still taking batting practice,” Russell said. “He told me to take you straight to the bullpen.”

“Surprise!” Nathan said when he saw her. He had been sitting on a bench with a few of the other pitchers, watching one of them throw to a catcher. “Did you have a nice flight?” They hugged, and he rocked her back and forth.

“Yes! Nathan, how come you didn’t tell me?” she asked, pulling away from him. The uniform he wore, with the tight fitting blue nylon underneath, accentuated his lean, v-shaped physique very well. She wondered if she was blushing.

“Well shucks,” he replied. “I wanted you to know I was a regular guy. I just have kind of a strange job. I get to fling baseballs for a living.”

Nathan introduced her to his friends and took her to a quiet room in the clubhouse, where he said they did “after the game” interviews. “I’m so glad to see you!”

They were playing a weekend series against Washington. He was scheduled to pitch on Sunday afternoon, but since Saturday’s game was at night, they would have lots of time in the morning and afternoon to explore and enjoy New York together. While he kept a co-op in Manhattan, she would stay at the Hilton near the airport.

When she thought about their first date years later, she shook her head, grinning. As time wore on, she would learn over and over just how many onion peel style layers of secrecy Nathan would reveal. How late would he stay out that night? While he’d said “just awhile,” she could still be waiting for him at two in the morning. To pass the time she picked up the wand and turned the screen on.

She at first kept in split mode as she both checked her stocks and her mail along with surfing past channels. A rocket kept lifting off at the lower right quadrant of the screen, distracting her like a fly buzzing around her ear. Would it be better to close out the net or the channel grid? Four choices appeared in the upper left corner. The first three looked like the “let’s embarrass a celebrity” fare that oozed out of the digital maze like slime. A straightforward looking program to the left caught her eye. A calm looking auburn-haired man in a white lab coat held up a DNA helix. Many moons ago, when she had been in school, she had actually enjoyed science. All the other windows blinked off at her command until only the scientific guy looked out at her. She turned up the sound.

“Several advances have been made in genetics and yes, cloning over the years,” he said. A picture of Dolly the Sheep flashed onto the screen, and Suella remembered hearing about that in high school, about twenty years ago. Next, they discussed cells. Stem cells from cord blood instead of aborted fetuses had ended the arguments from the religious right, the announcer said. While still in its infancy, cloning could produce a viable duplicate of another human being. Suella wondered, with all the freak shows on television, why she’d never heard of parents coming forward with a cloned child. And even if someone had come forward with a cloned baby, would she have believed it?

A series of animated images showed the cell, the nuclei, and something called “telomeres.” In the past, cloned offspring produced short telomeres, which brought on genetic problems such as premature aging and weakened immune systems. The next segment of the show discussed scientific details of artificially stimulating the telomeres during the birthing process, which theoretically would produce more viable offspring. Her eyes glazed over. She reached for the wand but stopped when the announcer said “This is a breakthrough which will help couples unable to conceive.”

Usually, the news shows approached things from the other angle, about the government’s attempts to curtail the population. In the wrong company, “mandatory sterilization” could still bring about heated, passionate arguments. Yet, in California, with certain ethnic groups multiplying like rabbits it became the only way to balance the state budget. None of it affected her, of course. Suella was thirty-seven and still childless.

Meeting with the other wives always caused her to sigh, however. On dates before she married Nathan, many men had asked her one question. “If you were able to

have a baby, would you want to?"

"Of course," she would say. But she would have to be exactly like her, though. Cloning. There was an idea. That was how she could do it. Her mind ran through a whole series of coming attractions, such as styling the little girl's hair with pretty bows and putting her in adorable baby doll dresses. They would play together, sing together, laugh together, and love together. A daughter would love her unconditionally.

The door swished open, jarring her from her reverie. Nathan stumbled a bit as he entered the room, smirking at her. When he saw the images on the screen, he squinted. "What the hell are you watching? The "boring" channel?" Nathan tossed his jacket onto the couch and shuffled across the condo toward the refrigerator.

"I had to do something while you were gone." She flipped the screen mode back to split, cursing herself for letting him intimidate her.

Nathan picked up his own wand from the slot near the kitchen doorframe and started paging through his stocks and the headlines. He still stood, concentration locked on the flashing numbers and images, causing Suella to feel as if she were invisible.

"Hey babe, let me ask you something."

Still gazing at the screen, Nathan said "Uh huh."

"You know how you're always saying that you 'know people?'"

Still looking. "Yeah."

She shifted around on the couch below him. "Do you know anyone who does cloning?"

"Cloning?" His eyes narrowed, and he glanced down at her for a second. "What, do you want to dig up your dead cat and see if you can make a carbon copy of her or

something?”

“No, silly. But that’s what the show was about. They were talking about cloning. We could have the daughter we always wanted.”

“That *you* always wanted. You know, babe, that shit still ain’t perfected yet. You’d end up with a kid like in the old time Picasso paintings. You know, with an arm on top of its head or something.”

Suella bit her lip. Damn his jovial nature! “That’s not what they said.”

Nathan waved a hand dismissively at the screen. “You can’t believe everything you see or hear on there.”

“Besides, even if that were to happen, she would still be a child, right? Someone to love.” She kept looking into his eyes.

He put the wand down and looked at her. For a few moments they stood silently, and then Nathan walked around the couch and sat down next to her, gathering her into his arms. They held each other silently for awhile, and Suella allowed herself to meld into him the way she always did.

Nathan leaned away from her first. He gazed at her appraisingly for a moment, as if he was seeing her for the first time. “Now I want you to tell me something. Does this talk have to do with your ‘seven year’ paranoia, or is it the other wives in the clubhouse?”

Suella felt a twinge inside. She paused a moment, knowing that her next statement had to sound good. “Honey, I trust you. And just us is enough.”

Nathan nodded.

“But still, I always wanted a child. It would be us. It would be fun.”

He kept his arm around her. “But isn’t a clone a carbon copy of just you? You

wouldn't even need sperm for that. IVF on the other hand..."

"Nathan, let's not go there."

He laughed. "Okay, okay. I'll ask around. I'll see if anyone knows anything about making robots, I mean clones."

She kissed him.

The next morning she reflected on her independence. She could work anywhere, at any time. It allowed her to explore things on a whim. Even though she had a videocon at one o'clock, she stayed in her lounging pajamas after she showered and fixed her hair. For the entire morning she researched cloning on the web, and at 11:30, her friend Jillian knocked at the door.

Jillian was an artist who worked out of a studio in an older complex further down the hill. They met when Suella went alone to her one-woman show at one of the galleries. She liked Jill's use of color and emotion in her renderings of expressionistic street scenes and domestic snapshots. After she bought two of Jillian's paintings she invited her over for coffee, to discuss art. It would be nice to have a friend in the strange city, after all.

Her artist friend looked like a character out of a seventies movie, with her faded jeans, smock with huge flowers, and hippie sandals. Absolutely no makeup, hair pulled back. Suella brewed jasmine tea for them, using the delicate china she loved so much. Moments later the two women sat across the coffee table from each other, delicately sipping from the dainty porcelain cups. "Have you ever wanted to have kids, Jill?"

She sighed. Jillian was a few years younger than Suella. "I love kids, I really do. But no man could ever put up with all my quirks. And I don't have the time or patience

to do it on my own.”

“Don’t say that, hon. There’s someone for everyone. Right now there’s probably this gorgeous bearded sculptor somewhere pining for someone exactly like you to come along.”

Jillian laughed. “An artist? We’d starve!”

“But you do pretty well.” Suella had been to Jillian’s condo, which was a lovely loft with lots of gleaming, shellacked hardwood.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to end up raising both a kid and a husband.” She paused for a moment, glancing at Suella with a serious glint in her eye. “Any particular reason you’re asking?” Normally, they discussed ideas and events.

“Well, I’m not pregnant.”

Jillian nodded. “I know. You can’t.”

That surprised Suella, since she wasn’t aware that she and her friend had ever discussed anything so personal. “Well, I just saw an intriguing program last night. It was about cloning.”

Jillian bowed her head a little, to ponder this. “Cloning, cloning. “

“They said that they’ve come up with lots of new advances in it. That the success rate is a lot higher.”

Jillian got that faraway look she did whenever she thought something over deeply. Suella knew her well enough just to let her go until she snapped out of it. “Do you suppose a cloned human being has a soul?”

Suella shrugged. “I never thought about that. It would have to, wouldn’t it?”

Jillian cleared her throat. “Well, they say we all choose our parents. And, that we

make up this whole big mission before we're born. Now, could you imagine that you're your soul or your higher self on the other side. And you want to get born again, give a whirl at living a life on earth again. Would you say 'gee, I'd like to be a clone this time.'"

"I never thought about it that way," Suella said.

The tea hour ended shortly after that, and Suella thought about what Jillian had said while she made herself a sandwich and avoid going into the telecon on an empty stomach. Would a cloned human being have a soul? One cloned from her definitely would. Besides, it would still be a part of her. She wasn't sure if she agreed with the other part of Jillian's theory: that we all arrange a mission for ourselves while we are on earth. Wasn't that awfully fatalistic and limiting? She resolved that after the videocon, she would research cloning some more, possibly even make a few phone calls.

Chapter Three

After the videocon, she continued her research about cloning. So far, she was just coming up with university genetics departments and other generic information. She realized that an organization that did cloning was not going to advertise on the web or the yellow pages. They would not have a commercial that went “Have you tried and tried to have a kid, with no success? Has IVF left you disappointed and disillusioned? Well, worry no more because now there’s Clone-a-kid! Hey!”

Would her doctor know? If he did, he would ask too many questions. She tried a different tactic: there was her health insurance information line. After hitting the bookmark, she turned off her camera and hit the link, she selected “voice” on the terminal and a couple of seconds later, the phone rang.

A bored sounding young woman answered: “Columbia Health First, my name is Lauren and my badge number is 4976583. For your protection, this session may be recorded. How may I help you today?”

Suella jumped in and said “I just have a general health-related question. Do you still need my member number?”

“Possibly not, ma’am,” she said. “What type of general question did you have?”

She cleared her throat. “What can you tell me about cloning? Is it legal?”

There was a pause from the other end of the line and Suella heard her shuffle a couple of papers on her desk. “Just a minute.” For the next few moments she mumbled in a barely audible voice about court cases and rulings and an instance of cloned twins. A couple of minutes passed, and Suella was going to say something but the woman broke in. “This is really strange. I’m not getting a definitive answer. Would you mind if I put

you on hold and checked around?”

“No, I wouldn’t mind. Go right ahead.”

Generic, synthesized Mozart played. In the meantime, she continued to surf, trying terms such as “Cloning-legal aspects” and “First clones.” At the same moment she saw a picture of a healthy looking three-year-old boy, the customer service representative returned. “Ma’am, thank you for waiting. This is what I can tell you. Cloning was affected by the stem cell rule of 2012. Since cloning falls under that same umbrella, it’s in a big gray area, where it’s neither explicitly illegal or explicitly legal.”

“I see,” Suella said.

“I wish I could be of more help. Possibly you can find the answer you need in the legal division?”

Suella realized that was a good idea. “Thank you for all your help.” All she had to do was find a lawyer who could be discrete. Her own lawyer, of course, would not do since he knew her too well and would ask too many questions. There was certainly no shortage of names she could pick out of a hat because one generic check of “attorneys” brought up fifteen pages worth of listings! Suella remembered a rhyme from when she was a little girl: “Eenie, meenie, miney, mo.”

Just to further protect herself, she blocked her number before calling. When a bored sounding young man answered at the other end of the line, Suella told him about her questions regarding cloning.

“Yes, it’s true that cloning isn’t exactly legal or illegal,” he said. “The technology is new and there have been some viable babies born from cloning. “

“Well, how would I find someone who would do this for me? It’s not like they

advertise, right?"

He chuckled. "No. I guess you would have to be referred. What I do know is that cloning and medical supervision for carrying the fetus to term is quite expensive."

Suella had figured as much. It would probably cost about the same as space tourism. "Can you give me a ballpark figure?" She smiled at the irony, of being a baseball player's wife.

He snickered again. "Well, I'm sure it starts at a mill and goes upward from there."

Ugh.

For the next couple of days, while Suella ran about her other activities, she kept trying to justify the expense. More than five times her annual salary. Nathan, as what they called a "long reliever" earned five million each season. Unlike other baseball players who'd gone before him, though, he spent and invested his money carefully. "I don't know how much time I got left," he would sometimes say. He would blanch at the prospect of spending a million dollars for anything.

Soon, she'd have to continue her talk with him. The All-Star break was coming up, which should put him in a better mood. Usually they tried to squeeze in a family visit during those four days, such as going to see Nathan's parents in Kansas City or Suella's mother in Florida. Yet they had just been to both places over the holidays. Nathan's team started a west coast road trip immediately after the break. Suella thought about suggesting that they just head to their big house and spend a few days there. When she discussed the subject at dinner that night, however, she received a disappointment.

"That's not the way things are done, babe," Nathan said. "There's going to be a

meeting here right after the break and then we'll fly out west. We have a chance this year. Salty bones wants to give us a motivational speech before we start the second half." "Salty bones" was his nickname for Steve Borelli, the manager of his team. Suella had always assumed that the nickname came from the man's salt and pepper hair, yet he was mostly bald when he took off his baseball cap.

"Okay, so we'll stay out here," Suella said. She looked forward to having a few leisurely days off with her husband.

"I'm sorry, babe, but we're going to have to wait till Halloween again. I have to talk about something private with my dad. He's getting up there in years, you know."

Suella didn't even bother to hide her disappointment. "Fine," she said.

She attended the last couple of games at the stadium before the break. The team was playing St. Louis but they could have been playing the Martians for as much as she cared. For both games, she spent the entire time in the suite with the girls, even when Nathan pitched a couple of innings in the Sunday game. The Cardinals bombed him, anyway. He would want sex that night, so Suella prepared herself. He always wanted sex after a bad outing of pitching. It was as if he was trying to reassure himself that he could still perform in other areas of his life. She left the game ahead of the other wives just to buy extra time.

Once back at the condo, she drank a glass of wine, fixed her hair and put on fresh makeup. She freshened herself all over with the collection of lotions and perfumes she always kept on hand. To sweeten things even further, she changed into the red, lacy teddy that Nathan liked and she sat up in bed, waiting for him.

And waiting for him. And waiting for him.

She watched old reruns of shows she'd seen while growing up, such as "Friends" when she realized that hours had gone by. The wine had made her slightly drowsy, and just as she was going to lay the pillows down and rest, the front door creaked open. "Hey," Nathan said as he poked his head into the bedroom. Suella smelled stale cigarette smoke and hard liquor. When he saw her, his eyes lit up like a young boy on Christmas morning. "Well aren't you nice!" Allowing his blazer to slide off of him and crumple to the floor, he strode the length of the room, kicked off his shoes and crawled gracefully onto the bed.

Suella accepted him, wincing at the strong alcohol smell for a moment, kissing him deeply. She reached down to undo the top buttons of his shirt, but Nathan suddenly pulled away, lifting himself up into a seated position. He swung his knees off the bed and said that he would be back right away. It struck her as odd. Normally the sight of her on the bed with the teddy, glamorously made up would keep him coming right after her. This time, though, he wanted to take his own clothes off and freshen up in the bathroom. At least that's what she assumed he was doing when she heard the faucet run. He also brushed his teeth.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, he was naked, smiling and loosened his knuckles as if he was going to perform a piano concerto. "Now, where were we?" He lowered himself down again, in a graceful fluid motion, and Suella had to admit that this time the kiss was much nicer. She pushed the covers aside so that he could play with her easier. He touched her legs, her thighs, and the dampness of her love petals. "You are so good to me," he said. "I don't deserve you."

He'd said that before, but this time, he seemed to mean it. Though she leaned

back and allowed herself to enjoy his expert and enthusiastic lovemaking, his comment had cast a pall over everything. Later, when she stayed awake and he slept, she told herself she was just imagining things. After all, as she told herself over and over, she was really the lucky one.

Nathan played one more game on Sunday (he didn't get to pitch: one of the club's rookie phenoms threw a complete game, 3-hit shutout that day). Since he wasn't appearing in the all-star game (he'd only been voted into one in his entire career), that left five solid days of vacation. In the past, Suella had always loved the all-star break because it gave them a rare chance to be together during the summer. This year, she felt at a loss, left out even though with five days on her own she could accomplish a lot, too. Her flight to LA was Friday morning.

By Wednesday she was bored. She worried about the Santa Monica home much more than the Mount Adams home. The team travel agent assured her that she could exchange her Friday ticket for a Wednesday night red-eye. She would arrive early. With the extra couple of days she could straighten up, take care of errands that had piled up and get herself rested and relaxed for another one of Nathan's amorous moods. The long flight from Cincinnati gave her plenty of time to get caught up on work and respond to her emails. She even had time left over to watch part of the in-flight movie, read the magazine and play an odd video game called "Sand Castle City."

Most importantly, going home to Santa Monica meant that she would drive her own car again. When the plane finally landed, she walked briskly through the terminal to the ground transportation area. Once she reached her car, she stopped to admire it the way she always did. While she could definitely afford more, she loved her Mazda 3E

super sport in honey and white. It was the first true electric car Mazda made. Suella turned the key and heard the metallic whine of the capacitors spinning, something Nathan joked sounded like “hamsters on a treadmill.” Since it was 3AM when she arrived, there’d be next to no traffic to hinder her on her short jaunt home, either. She felt very pleased with herself until she reached her driveway, turned in, and saw Nathan’s car parked there. Well, he had two in LA and one in Cincinnati, maybe he’d just used the Toyota to go to the airport during the most recent time. She shrugged it off, parked her car behind his, and walked toward the breezeway. She entered that door, and the side door for the house, leading into the kitchen.

An odd feeling gripped her as soon as she shut the door behind her. She felt a horrifying sense of dread. She was not alone. She dropped her large carry-on and let her laptop bag tumble onto the couch. Gingerly, she crept through the family room and down the hallway to the other wing. She turned the doorknob slowly, letting the tumblers click and creak with barely a sound as she then cracked the door open.

Light from the hallway spilled into the room, causing an angle-shaped ray to slice along the floor and sweep over the bed. The light revealed a head of long, curly blonde hair at the end of one ruffled shape, semi-covering another ruffled shape. She flicked the light on and the owner of the long, curly blonde hair jerked bolt upright, clasp the covers to her chin. The form beside her also stirred. Nathan rose, rubbing his eyes, shielding them from the light, saying “What the...”

Suella recognized the woman with the long blonde hair but had forgotten her name. The woman said “Holy shit.” They’d been introduced at a couple of different parties. She had gone to school with Nathan and had come west in search of an acting

career. Suella wanted to say something, but a lump in her throat nearly choked her. Tears flooded her eyes. Not knowing what else to do, she slammed the door shut, ran to the family room and collapsed onto the couch, sobbing into a pillow. It all hit her as a nasty nightmare and she fell into a vortex of pain and sobbing. Her shoulders tensed and shuddered with each wracking bout of sobs, bringing waves of aching agony to her.

She didn't know how long she'd been splayed out over the couch like that. Soon she felt a light tap on her shoulder and someone calling her name softly. "Suella," he kept saying. "I know this looks bad. I know I'm in trouble. Can we please talk?"

As he wished, she lifted her head from the pillows and sat up on the couch. Nathan sat on the armrest, above her. Suella thought he was always trying to gain the upper hand no matter what. "You lied to me!" she said, her voice cracking.

"I lied," he repeated, hanging his head low. "I lied, I was unfaithful, I should be shot. Do you want to know why?"

Suella swallowed, wiping a tear away. "That'd be a good start." What on earth was he going to say? That you get tired of vanilla ice cream all the time? That sooner or later you're going to want butter pecan? She readied herself to listen to someone more closely than she'd ever listened to anyone in her whole life.

"Toni is an old friend. We've known each other since high school. She's going through a rough time. I was trying to help."

Well, she thought for an insane moment, at least he isn't saying that she "means absolutely nothing to me." Still, she knew that her husband's words demanded a response, a comeback. "Exactly what type of help are you talking about?"

"I've known her since high school, since we were both starting out, me in the

minors and she pounding the pavement out here, trying to get something to happen.”

Suella vaguely remembered that Toni had some success as an actress, landing a role in an Adam Sandler comedy at one point before the man turned-about and started doing only action flicks. Still, Suella ached to know at least one thing: “How often do you get together, like this. And I don’t want any more lies. I want the bald truth. No matter how much you think it’s going to hurt me.”

Nathan sighed, and for a moment looked like a sad, vulnerable boy. “Would it help you if I tell you that we didn’t even have sex tonight?”

“How much, Nathan?”

“And that we’re more like just friends. She’s practically a sister to me.”

“How much, Nathan? How many times?”

He balled his hands into fists and grabbed at his temples, jerking his head down for a moment. “We’ve helped each other through so much together.” When he pulled his hands away from his face, she could see that tears had started to well up in his eyes. He could not cry at will and was a horrible actor. She felt a twinge of compassion for him. Still...

“How many times, Nathan. How much?”

He groaned. “Will knowing the raw number help? Will it really help?”

“I’m your wife. I want to know. I need to know. Tell me.”

He swallowed, and glanced at the Jackson Pollack they’d bought together at an auction once. “Yes, you’re my wife! I’m your husband! You’re the love of my life. Nothing will change that, ever.”

“How many times?”

Nathan closed his eyes, his lip quivering. "Five or six."

Suella knew she was supposed to be the one who spoke next. She wondered if Nathan expected her to throw something at him. Even if she wanted to, she didn't think she could summon the energy. To assume a position of power, and also because her chest ached, she folded her arms. "What else don't I know, Nathan? What else?"

"Angel, you're my dearest friend. I love you. I don't want to lose you."

Okay, style points for using the term of endearment she loved the most. But they had both been married over thirty, when they had both accomplished much in their lives. Suella's lawyers met with her for days, drawing up a lengthy and complicated pre-nuptial agreement they could both live with. Divorce would be painful and messy, for both of them. And deep down, Suella knew something fundamentally true: most men wanted more than one woman for at least one time in their lives. But beside all the business machinations and the implications for their future, Suella wanted to keep Nathan. "I don't want to throw you away. But this changes things." For another moment she stared off into space, unable to look at him.

Suella said "I want you to do something for me."

He maneuvered himself around into her field of vision. "Yes, Angel?" He was gazing into her eyes beseechingly. Oh god, she thought, he was so easy to love.

"Hold me," Suella said.

Nathan reached up and eased himself over to Suella, gathering her into his arms. Smartly, Suella thought, he stayed silent as they held each other tightly, their breath rising and falling together. Suella could hear her heart beat. Toni broke the spell when she tiptoed across the floor past them, walking to the front door. "I really should go," she

said, when both Suella and Nathan looked up at her.

“Please stay,” Suella said, in a neutral tone, devoid of any emotion.

“But it isn’t right,” Toni protested.

“You can sleep in the guest room,” Suella offered. She looked up at Toni, and forced a half smile.

“It’s okay,” Nathan added.

Suella felt so drained of energy from the long flight and the cataclysmic shock that she fell into a deep sleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Chapter Four

The first rays of dawn sliced through the delicate, hazy curtains. Nathan lay beside her, curled up in a fetal position, still, appearing to be asleep. Suella knew better: he was just lying down with his eyes closed, his mind swimming in deep depths of thought. Let him torture himself, she thought, as she swung her knees over the side of the bed and padded off toward the kitchen. As she made coffee and waited for the other two people in the house to wander in, she reveled in the bittersweet power she now possessed.

Toni emerged from the guest room first. She looked sheepish and stepped daintily around the house, as if floors were made of balsa wood. They looked at each other for a moment. Toni took extravagant care in putting cream and sugar into the coffee Suella had poured. "I'm so sorry," she said. "We really are just friends."

Suella nodded. "I'm not angry with you, I'm angry with him."

Toni looked down. "I can totally understand. If it were me, I would be furious."

Nearly eight years earlier, however, Suella had met with her lawyers for days drawing up a lengthy pre-nuptial that would cover every conceivable thing. She needed to protect herself in case he allowed himself to be seduced by one of the baseball groupies or if he found himself a younger model and decided to trade her in. Half. In the case of divorce, she would get half of the marital assets.

Suella decided that she wanted to get to know Nathan's friend a little better. As she buttered her toast she asked "So, Nathan tells me you're going through a little bit of a hard time?"

Toni's eyes widened for a split second. She inhaled and exhaled deeply, to attempt to regain her composure. "Oh, well, you know. After you get past a certain age

in Hollywood, women become invisible. I mean, there are only so many roles for chubby best friend or sister of the bride.”

“And Nathan’s been helping you?”

Toni’s lower lip quivered. “It was my last resort! I can’t find a good server job and I’ve already sold two eggs this year.”

“You what?”

Toni cleared her throat. “I sell my eggs to a biological company. For in-vitro and surrogacy programs and stuff.”

Suella nodded. “How long have you done that for?”

“Five years. It’s the only way I’ve been able to afford my apartment when work is tight. Then my car broke down and I get this big tax bill for a mistake I made four years ago. But I might not be able to sell the eggs any more. They’re getting old just like the rest of me.”

Suella chuckled. “You’re not old.”

“I am in Hollywood.”

Nathan woke up a short while later, and ventured into the kitchen in his shortie pajamas. He looked even more sheepish than Toni had. While the three of them ate breakfast, Nathan kept hanging his head low. Toni finally said “Well, I must go. I’ve got errands to run.” She needed Nathan to take her to her car. As Nathan threw on some clothes and they left the house together, Suella reached for his arm as he passed her.

“When you get back, we have lots to discuss.”

Nathan winced deeply, his eyes turning into slits, as if he’d just been stabbed. He

returned less than a half hour later, after delivering Toni to her condo near the beach. Suella had been washing dishes when he entered the kitchen. He stood in the center of the floor and spread his legs slightly, trying to adopt a strong stance. “Angel, I don’t want a divorce.” His eyebrows formed a straight line across his forehead, the way they always did when he was serious.

Suella smiled and turned toward him. “Honey, I’m not going to ask you for one.”

Nathan’s shoulders slumped and he exhaled with relief. The corners of his eyebrows also came down, giving him the jovial expression she loved.

Before he could say anything, though, Suella revealed her grand plan that she had just concocted. “We’re going to clone a baby. Toni is going to provide the egg, and she will also carry the child to term.”

“What?”

Suella was going to counter with a cruel “You heard me,” but she knew it would only get her upset and probably not affect Nathan. “We’re going to clone a baby. Toni is going to provide the egg, and she will also carry the child to term.”

His lower lip quivered several times while his eyes darted back and forth. Suella knew this meant that he was racking his brain trying to think of something to say, to come up with a coherent objection. Finally, he said “What if she doesn’t want to?”

“Oh, she’ll want to. We’re going to pay her. We’re going to pay her well.”

Nathan scratched his head. “I suppose you’ve got this all set up, have the doctor picked out and everything.”

“No, I want you to help me with that, too.”

“Help you? With cloning?” His voice rose, carrying the “o” sound of cloning for

three syllables. “How in fuck’s sake am I going to be able to do that?”

“Aren’t you the one who’s always saying ‘I know people?’”

He nodded. “Yeah. People who can have someone killed for you. People who can rig gambling. People who break kneecaps. And worse!” With that, his hand went to his upper jaw, and the crown a dentist had placed on one of his bicuspids.

Before they married, Suella lived in Nathan’s New York co-op for awhile. Nathan used to snicker and swagger about being an outlaw. He admitted to her that he scratched the baseball with one fingernail that he kept longer than the rest. He also scuffed it with mound dirt or Vaseline. During the year that several players went to trial for steroids, he knew about that, too. Nathan had paced the apartment for days, saying “I’m going to hit those fuckers where they live. They call me a cheater, but they’re worse than me. They’re roid montsters.”

“Nathan, be careful,” she tried to tell him. It was the January of an unusually cold winter. He just laughed off her caring words.

A couple of nights later, right before the deposition, Nathan staggered home later than usual. He nearly fell over the couch in the front hall and Suella assumed that he’d been drinking. When he spoke, he slurred his words, his lip crooked and swollen. His face was deadly, ashen white, his eyes wide. “Pain medicayshun. We got any pain medicayshun?”

Shocked, Suella said “Babe, what on earth happened?”

When he smiled weakly she could see blood on his upper lip, soaking through his teeth. “Some friends of the National League slugger’s club got hold of me. They told me

what to say in tomorrow's deposishun." His eyes narrowed, and his eyebrows formed a straight line, his eyes sinking into his head. "Do you have fucking pain medicayshun?"

She searched her medicine cabinets for the Demerol they'd given her the year before, when she'd had her eyes done. As she gave him one and a glass of water, she asked "What happened?"

He gave her the whole story, with lots of lisping and whimpering. An official from one of the other teams asked him to meet him for lunch in Chinatown. He wanted to know what Nathan would say during the deposition the next day, and Nathan made the mistake of telling them "I'm going to fry the bastards." When lunch ended, and Nathan and the official left the restaurant, he felt a shove in the back as a black car pulled up on the street in front of them. A thug sitting in the shotgun seat said "Get in, Nate boy! We're going to take a little ride."

The car sliced through some side streets and back alleys and when they stopped, three beefy guys hustled Nathan out of the car and into the back entrance of a building so old they still used a mechanical elevator. The men smiled at him while the elevator rose. Once they reached the right floor, the men shoved him out into the corridor and pushed him along the floor until they reached an office. They wrestled him down onto a static office chair and two of the thugs held his arms back and held him down. The third one, riding shotgun stood menacingly above him, smiling crookedly. Nathan couldn't believe that this guy looked just like the stereotypical bad guys in movies: mottled skin, hair slicked back, perpetual smirk. "Now what are you going to say for the league boys tomorrow?"

"That's none of your fucking business asshole," Nathan shot back.

The spokesman cracked him across the face with the back of his hand, causing his neck to snap. Pain exploded through his temples. “Well what our boys do is none of your fucking business. Now, tomorrow, you’re going to tell them you don’t know a goddammed thing.”

“Fuck you.” He braced, expecting the thug to punch him again,

Instead, he leaned back, grinning. He tsked tsked, shaking his head. “That’s quite a bad attitude you have there, pal. I think we need to call in a friend of mine to help you with that.” A moment later he shouted “Ted” and a guy in a white coat carrying tools appeared. He was gray haired, wore glasses and even looked slightly frail. When he looked down at Nathan, his expression was grim. “I got a question for you, big guy. Have you ever seen the movie ‘The Marathon Man?’”

The thug forced Nathan’s mouth open with a long, prying instrument, while the small, frail looking older gentleman affixed two metal contacts to one of Nathan’s front teeth. He was so horrified he could literally see his heart jump against his ribs. He assumed that the old guy was going to shock him somehow. Instead he held pliers. They had unusually long handles. Nathan thought he was going to simply yank his tooth out, but instead, he crushed it. He knew that in the old building, no one could hear him scream.

So Nathan knew people. He would have to find one who would clone a baby for them. Suella was kind. She said it would be okay if he waited until after the break to begin searching. Ironically, the game was played the same fateful night that she flew back to California from Cincinnati and made her life-changing discovery. She kept on

searching, however. When Toni left the house and Nathan went on errands it left lots of time for her to websearch and phone canvas.

Unfortunately, she kept coming up against wall after wall. Over and over she kept on hearing “I’m sorry ma’am, we don’t do that sort of thing here.” They didn’t even do it at UCLA, one of the premier medical institutions in the country. Still, at UCLA, a whiskered and shaggy haired graduate assistant gave her a glimmer of hope. He took her aside and said “Lifewind. Look them up.”

That’s all he said. It was so cryptic she wondered exactly what he meant, but when she got out to her car, she keyed the name into her phone. Several listings came up and she had to zoom in to have any prayer of reading them. First off, she could tell the company held several locations in southern California. That was good. Some were in the desert, some were along the coast, and others were up north. The full name of the company was “Lifewind Biologicals.” From the ads the links brought up, it looked like they manufactured medical equipment. What good was that? Of course, it could be a cover. None of the listings contained a phone number. What good was that? Didn’t people cold call anymore? Emailing from the phone or even the home system was out. This could be traced too easily. By the end of the day she asked out loud: “How on earth does anyone get cloned?”

She would find the answer on the coming weekend. The Cincinnati Reds traveled out west, to play the Dodgers, and Suella could visit with the wives in the luxury box. The atmosphere was much more distracting and glamorous than the booth in Cincinnati. There were more paintings on the walls, richer carpet, and more crystal chandeliers. She could never believe that just a few feet past the glass, a baseball game was going on.

While she didn't know very many people in the Dodger's organization, Carolyn Concannon saw her right away and shouted greetings. Her husband was one of the Dodger coaches, and this made her one of the oldest (but still glamorous) wives in the booth. "What's been going on?" Carolyn asked, when Suella arrived beside her.

She looked around them, to check whether anyone was in easy earshot and felt like a character in a bad mystery movie. "I am trying to find out about cloning."

Carolyn nodded, and for the next forty-five minutes, told her about a couple she knew who were unable to conceive. Cloning became for them a way to have the baby they always wanted. "It's very clandestine, and they make you sign a pile of legal disclaimers a mile high but they're really happy they did it."

"Do you happen to remember which company it was?" Suella asked.

"Of course. Lifewind."

It was the weekend, so Suella resolved to make first contact with them on Monday. On Sunday morning, Nathan seemed down while they drank their coffee.

"Is anything wrong?" Suella asked.

Nathan just shrugged, like a bored teenager. "Nothing." She knew him well enough that his "nothing" was really a whole lot of something. She also knew all the ways to get it out of him without being too direct or prying. "I've forgiven you."

"I know."

"When this happens, it will be like a new beginning for us," she went on. "We'll be raising a child together. It'll be so much fun." She took his hand.

"I know. I'm just down. "

"Are you getting lots of innings?"

“Yeah,” he said. “You know that. You read the sporting pages as much as anyone I know.”

“Does anything hurt? Are you okay, physically?”

He chuckled. “You should know the answer to that, too. You know my ass better than anyone in this world.”

“Then what?”

He inhaled, exhaled slowly, then stared out into space for a moment. Just to think, he lifted the coffee cup to his lips and took a long sip. “This is just not the way I pictured it ending. Not the way at all.”

Suella was horrified. “But I said that I forgive you!”

He chuckled again, cracked a smile, and put an arm around her shoulders for emphasis. “Angel, you can be such a worrywart sometimes. Someone would think I walked in and found you with some young cock or something.”

Suella exhaled hard with relief, her shoulders dropping.

“It’s just that I expected it to end a lot better than this. Mop up pitcher for a fourth place club.”

During moments like this, Suella wanted to point out the millions and millions of boys and young men who dreamt of a career in the major leagues and wound up getting regular jobs instead. She was excited about the possibility of becoming a mother, though.

“You started twice already this year, right?”

“Yeah. Only because some doofus got injured. I can still do it. I know I can. From now on, I’m pitching for me. If some contender is smart, they’ll pick me up for their stretch drive.”

That very afternoon, Nathan got to pitch. It was a bright, hot day and Suella felt grateful to bask in the air-conditioned comfort of the luxury box. He only faced two batters though, striking one out and getting the other to hit a weak ground ball. The next inning, another guy she didn't recognize came out of the bullpen to start throwing. Sometimes she didn't understand baseball. She turned to Carolyn and asked "Why would they take him out of the game? He got those guys out, didn't he?"

Carolyn grinned. "Because he's a lefty, honey. Didn't you notice those two batters were left-handed? Frank brought in your hubby to throw to both of them because he had a better chance of getting them out."

Suella shook her head, wondering what Nathan was thinking as he sat in the dugout.

Carolyn noticed her and touched her wrist. "Left-handed relief specialist is one of the best jobs in baseball, dear. He could pitch another five more years."

Suella resolved to tell him this the next time he complained about not getting enough work.

Chapter Five

Monday was an off day. Nathan woke up, walked out to breakfast still in the nude. He said “Oh, by the way, I got you an appointment at a place called “Lifewind. They’re in the desert. Your appointment is Wednesday.”

She would have to go alone, since Nathan would be up in San Francisco playing with his team. Full GPS directions arrived in her email. She would have to travel way south, into wine country. How should she dress for this type of an appointment, she wondered. Something simple, yet tasteful and elegant should do it. She found the perfect white halter dress in her closet.

On Wednesday she packed a cooler with lots of drinks and set out for the forty-five mile drive to the desert. She also wore her strongest sunglasses. Even so, the strong mid-day sun glaring off all the fields of solar panels caused her to squint, bringing on a headache. The windmills she passed reminded her of Holland.

Lifewind turned out to be much different from any medical office or professional building she’d ever seen. Tall fences surrounded the complex, topped with barbed wire as if it was a maximum-security prison. When she turned in from the main road, she saw a guard tower. A big man in a Canadian mounty style hat with mirrored sunglasses approached her window. “Good afternoon, ma’am,” he said. “Do you have an appointment?”

“Yes,” she said, and showed him the confirmation she had printed out back home.

He looked at it thoroughly. “May I see some identification?”

She handed her card to him and he swiped it on a reader.

“Thank you very much.” He nodded to her. “The road curves around and then

comes to a fork. You want to follow the sign for “visitors.”

When she did as he said, she felt disoriented because she could not see a building, just something that looked like a raised bunker. From the air, she thought, it could have been mistaken for a mound of dirt. She came upon the fork in the road, turned in the direction marked “visitors” and discovered that the road sloped downward into an underground garage. As the car angled downward, she worried for a moment about temporary blindness from her eyes adjusting to the dim light. Thankfully, though, they lit it well. A stout, dark-skinned and dark haired woman awaited her at another guard post at the bottom of the grade.

“Can I see your confirmation?” she said when she approached the car. Suella handed it to her, and she glanced at it, handing it back to her along with a green slip printed with a number. “That’s your spot for today. You’ll find it one level down. Just follow the arrows.” Suella continued on and noticed several official looking hybrid SUVs and low slung sports cars parked in spaces marked “Reserved.”

It surprised her when the driveway sloped downward into the next level, but she found her space quickly and easily. She parked amid rows of average looking Toyotas and Fords. A two level parking lot was one thing, but when she saw the doors leading to the inside of the offices, she found an elevator. Her appointment would take place in an office another three floors down!

After the elevator ride, she found a glass partitioned office with tobacco brown carpeted floors. A receptionist with a smile, beautifully coiffed hair and a business suit straight out of Vogue greeted her. “Mrs. Worthy? It’s very nice to meet you. I’m Jackie. Your appointment is going to be with Dr. Allende. She’ll be here in a moment. Have a

seat, make yourself comfortable, and let me know if you need anything.”

Dr. Allende soon entered the lobby to collect Suella. She extended her hand and in a soprano voice, introduced herself. She was small, crisply dressed, and wore her hair in a blunt style just below the ears. Her dark eyes flashed.

Suella couldn't believe it. “How old are you?” she blurted out.

The doctor smiled pleasantly, as if she'd grown used to such reactions. “I'm thirty. Do you want to follow me back to the office?”

“Sure.” As they walked along past doors and offices, Suella still couldn't believe what she was seeing: a girl doctor.

They arrived in an office filled with gleaming glass desktops and bookshelves filled with scholarly volumes. Suella wondered where they kept the computer until Dr. Allende sat down and pressed a button. A small cylinder rose from the desk, along with a glass panel that looked like a teleprompter, as used in television. Of course! They were so up to date they had the new projectibles. A keyboard flashed under the doctor's fingers, and images beamed onto the small pane of glass.

Once both of the women had settled themselves, the doctor started to speak, while glancing back and forth at the text on the screen. Suella recognized the intake form she'd filled out online. “I'm going to ask some additional questions, just some standard things, and we'll go from there.”

“Sounds fine,” Suella asked, feeling herself start to tense up.

“Do you have any children right now?”

She thought she answered all that on the intake form. “None.”

“How long have you and your husband tried to conceive?”

Suella raised a hand. “I don’t understand? I thought I answered all of this. In the intake form.”

The doctor glanced at the forms on the screen and back at Suella. She smiled at her. “I realize that Mrs. Worthy, but I always like to get to know my clients on a personal level, too. I apologize if I offended you.”

“That’s all right. It’s just that, I can’t conceive. That’s what brought me here, to seek your help. I’m sure you’ve spoken to many other women in the same boat.”

“Yes, I have. Have you and your husband tried in-vitro, surrogacy programs, or adoption?”

“No,” Suella said. “Do you want to know the real reason I’m interested in doing this?”

The doctor angled herself toward her, and leaned back in her chair, opening herself directly to her. She nodded.

Suella began. “I’ve always wanted a child who would be just like me. This seems like the best chance for something like that to happen.”

She expected a flash of bewilderment to cross Dr. Allende’s face, but instead she took a moment to consider her words and smiled. After the rest of their pleasantries, Dr. Allende showed her a video telling how the whole process worked. Suella watched cartoon figures of a harvested egg, which was stripped of its nucleus. Zygotes and telomeres flashed on the screen, and the use of a cartoon needle and laser beam made the whole thing sound so simple. When the egg had been artificially gestated that way an electronic conveyor would transfer it to the uterus of a healthy female who would carry it to term. The baby could be born under regular conditions in a birthing suite or a hospital

OB unit.

“For the next meeting,” Dr. Allende said, “I’ll need both your husband and the woman who’s going to carry the child for you.”

Suella thanked her, shook her hand and looked for the elevator and the parking lot for her car and the long ride home. Before the three of them would meet with the doctor and the other support personnel, Suella decided that she wanted another meeting with Toni, alone. When she arrived home, she called her. “Let’s have dinner. I want to discuss something with you and I know you must have lots of questions for me.”

They met at a diner away from the busy intersections and the beach parking lots. Suella expected a dressed-down Toni, with a clean face or sunglasses. She’d known actresses who liked to keep an extremely low profile when they were out in public. Not Toni. She wore a silky tank top with clinging black jeans and glamorous, tall sandals. Her makeup had been applied with a deft hand. She could have been between takes while filming the latest “B” movie she appeared in. Toni kept her eyes low and her mouth a straight, thin line.

A bland waitress took their orders for drinks. Suella said “How do you feel about our offer?”

Toni shrugged. She possessed absolutely clear skin without any wrinkles. Fair skin. Not only had she broken tradition by refusing a tan, either artificial or real, but she also appeared to keep most of her meals down. “It’s very generous. I’m nervous about it, though.”

“Why? Would you be missing any work?” She and Nathan had tried to arrive at a figure comparable to what Toni would have earned on one of her projects.

“Not really,” she replied. “Besides, I could still do voice. And there’s always face work for pregnant women, believe it or not.”

“Good, I’m glad.”

“It’s just that,” Toni said, narrowing her eyes. “I’ve never done this before. I’ve never been pregnant.”

Suella reached out to pat her on the hand. For a moment she didn’t know what to say, and the two women just looked at each other and smiled. “This is the greatest thing anyone’s ever done for me,” she managed, finally. The waitress arrived and took the rest of their order. Suella decided to eat light, just soup and a salad. Toni ordered a supreme hamburger basket with fries. Yes, Toni definitely broke with tradition. “When our child is born, you can be as close to her as you like.”

“That’s nice of you,” Toni said. “I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“Well, I have. If I had a baby, I know there’s always part of me that would want to be there for her, watch her develop into an adult, see the kind of person she would become.”

Toni blinked, her nose wrinkling. “How do you know it’s going to be a ‘she?’”

“This is cloning,” she said, straining to maintain her composure. “It’s going to be a clone of me.”

Toni nodded.

Suella insisted on watching the harvest. Her million dollars covered five attempts. Eggs, with the nuclei stripped, came from Toni and a couple of other donors. Suella knew she had provided several cell cultures. Though she had been warned that it would be boring and tedious, she wanted to be there to watch the doctors try to create a

miracle for her.

They performed the operation in a sterile room, with the four doctors wearing full scrubs. With the clinical fabric and the stainless steel instruments, to Suella, it looked like a sterile cocoon under the observation glass. All of the doctors peered through binocular-style microscopes, manipulating their instruments on an area that was about the size of a saucer.

Suella felt a heart-stopping kind of stillness about her as she looked on. She was the only one in the observation theatre. While it was quiet in there, it was not completely soundproof. She could hear whispers and clicking instruments filtering up from the suite below. Since they wore head to toe scrubs the doctors acquired an eerie sameness to them, such as monks. She knew that Dr. Allende was down there and she could only tell who she was because she was smaller than the other doctors.

Suella told herself again that the actual procedure was very simple. Dr. Allende had explained it to her three times. Get an egg, remove the nucleus from it, obtain a body cell, from herself in this case. Fuse the egg and the body cell with electricity and stimulate them to divide. When it becomes an embryo, implant it into the uterus of the woman who would gestate it to term. While she looked down at the doctors, ten minutes passed before she realized that they were standing still, staring down through the microscopes. They continued whispering.

She stared at them for such a long time that her neck muscles began to hurt. Finally, one of the doctors turned the switch on his microscope, dropped the mask down from his face and started to walk out of the room. The other doctors followed, one by one switching off their microscopes. Soon, Suella was looking down at an empty

operating suite. She scrambled out of there and ran down the steps to the main floor. Dr. Allende had taken off her cap and seemed bleary-eyed when Suella found her.

“What happened?” she asked the doctor.

Dr Allende sighed, and through the concerned expression on her face, she gave her answer. Yet she spelled it out for Suella anyway. “We’re going to have to try again.”

“Today?”

“Yes, today. We all need to take a break, though. For at least an hour.”

The doctor started to walk away, in the direction of a lounge, but Suella gently put a hand on her wrist. “I just want to know. Was it even close?”

The doctor forced a smile that came out weak and sublime. “Suella, it takes time and extreme patience. It’ll all come out fine.”

She decided that it was the best she could hope for. While she tried to distract herself with a chicken oriental salad in the lounge, thoughts of failure dogged her. A million dollars, and she could not be guaranteed a successful embryo. Would it cost her a million dollars to find out she simply wasn’t meant to be a mother? The thought tore at her. By the end of her break, she tossed half of the chicken salad in the trash, unable to eat any more. She tried opening her notebook to try to catch up on some work, but knew that half-hearted energy would produce half-hearted results. After just a half hour of that, she walked back to the observation room to wait for the doctors.

When the doctors returned, they took their positions around the table again, and peered into their microscopes. Suella tried to shift herself around in her seat so that she could remain in the same position for a long time, watching them. After a heartbreaking hour and a half, her spirits sank when the first doctor dropped her face mask and switched

off the microscope. As they all methodically followed her, Suella wondered if the third time would be a charm.

An hour later, she followed the same ritual all over again, with the same results. She looked down at her phone. It was five o'clock. This time, she could not find Dr. Allende on her way to the lounge. Instead the oldest, tallest, gray-haired doctor intercepted her. "We're just going to have to try again tomorrow," he said.

"There was three attempts today. Does that mean..." Suella said.

"Yes," the doctor said, finishing the sentence for her. "We'll just have to hope for the best. We should know by noon."

To Suella, he might as well have said "You have cancer." How on earth would she ever sleep tonight? She took a deep breath. Tomorrow's attempt would be successful. It had to be. The cell would start to divide. Toni was at the ready. Suella called her while she drove through the desert on the way home. After a couple of sentences had been spoken between them, Toni said "You don't sound good."

"None of the embryos took. But they're going to try again tomorrow." She sighed.

"Then there's hope."

"Yes."

The two women stayed on the line for several moments, as Suella watched windmills pass by. "I need you here tomorrow."

"Okay."

Nathan called her almost immediately after that. His words came in short bursts, as if he'd just run around the baseball field perimeter. "Wish, wish I could be there."

“It’s okay, honey. I understand.” She heard a popping sound behind him and checked the time. “Where are you?”

“In the bullpen, watching the kid get ready. God, I wish I was there.”

She smiled. “We’ll have a good reunion when you get back.”

Over the next few miles, Suella realized that no one in her family knew. Part of the paperwork she’d signed stated that she’d have to keep quiet if all of the attempts failed. She shrugged. Maybe it was better for them not to know.

The next morning, as she drove to the center, she forced herself to think about several painful things. What if the day’s first attempt misfired? That would hang everything on the doctor’s final attempt. She wasn’t sure if she could handle all that pressure and the shattering conclusion that it had all failed. Way back in her youth she’d been baptized and confirmed Roman Catholic. She’d even attended parochial school until the eighth grade. In all the years since, she’d hardly ever gone to mass, even on the Holy Days. She and Nathan had been married before a justice of the peace. Yet she needed something that morning, anything. “God,” she said, “I know I haven’t spoken with you since I was a little kid, and I may not be one of your favorite children, but today I’m asking your help. Can you see fit to bring this child into the world? If not, I promise I will understand. Thank you.”

She arrived at the center, having dressed that morning in one of her crispest, well-tailored designer outfits, having also put on her favorite perfume. A sense of peace enveloped her as she lowered herself down into the same seat where she’d writhed in agony the day before. One by one, the doctors arrived, and took their places in the stations around the table. Dr. Allende paused to look up into the observational window

and wave to Suella, smiling broadly.

One by one all the microscopes turned on and the four doctors locked their attentions on the tiny slide below them. Suella saw lasers fire and small white patches of light ignite. When they started to work, they stayed mostly silent. Instead, their hand signals and their body language seemed more purposeful, and on-task. Suella saw a bright light white glow from them. When she looked closer, she realized that the center of the white light lie in the small dish they focused on.

She could hardly breathe. Rather than sit back demurely in her seat, she leaned forward, urging them on. Gradually she lowered herself down, peering at them, until she'd put both hands on the glass, pressing her face against it. The white lights and the lasers continued to fire. The doctors looked at one another. One of them raised a fist triumphantly. The rest looked through their scopes and Dr. Allende clapped her hands silently, while the other two doctors high-fived each other.

Suella wanted to jump up and scream. She forced herself to stay low, keeping her giddy excitement inside. Jumping up and down and whooping might destroy the cell. Dr. Allende moved away from the table and left the room, confusing her. Moments later, she heard a knock on the door. When she opened it, she saw the doctor beaming, having taken off both her cap and her face mask. She put a finger to her lips to motion for her to shush. After all that, all she said was "You need to call Toni. Now."

As she made her way to the lounge, she hit Toni's number on the phone. After she reached her and the two women giggled like excited teenagers, Dr. Allende appeared in the lounge, looking much more serious than before. "What's wrong?" Suella asked, having freshly terminated her call with Toni.

“Oh, nothing. The cells took and we’ll have a viable embryo in about two hours. You’ve contacted the birth mother, right?”

“Yes.”

The doctor exhaled. “I just want you to know that we’re only one quarter of the way there. We now have to implant the embryo. Then your birth mother will carry it to term. As I’m sure you know, there could be problems anywhere along the way.”

“Yes, I understand.”

Chapter Six

Suella stayed overnight at the center. Months before, she had arranged for a private limousine to arrive at Toni's door, seven a.m. sharp. The driver delivered her to the center by eight a.m. "Geez, you must have been doing a hundred," Suella said as she handed him a hundred dollar bill.

"We aim to please," he said, smiling, as though the whole thing had been scripted in a big budget Hollywood movie. As Suella helped her out of the car, Toni gazed at the tall fences, the barbed wire, and the spare, austere buildings. "This doesn't look like a hospital," she said. "It looks more like a military base."

"I know," Suella agreed. "Wait till you see the inside, though."

They would implant the embryo in a different suite. She felt refreshed and relieved that the offices for the implanting and birthing had been furnished and painted with much more warmth in mind, with pastels and soft edges. Toni had to wear a hospital gown. She emerged from the bathroom wearing it, and a sheepish, awkward expression on her face. Suella realized that, as an actress Toni had played a small part in a period drama and she'd also worn an elaborate contraption on her shoulder to help with special effects in a slasher movie (a mad chef with a meat cleaver literally split her head in half). However, she'd probably never worn a hospital gown in real life. When Dr. Allende and Dr. Polidore arrived, Suella felt that she would be witnessing a weird kind of a gynecological appointment.

A couple of nurses lifted a fabric tent above Toni's hips as she sat in stirrups. Suella stood behind her, placing a hand warmly atop her shoulder. When Dr. Pollidore entered the room, he carried a glass and steel instrument that looked like a giant

hypodermic needle. He moved slowly, deliberately, and the nurses swayed away from him to give him more room. She learned that the little embryo that would hopefully become her child floated around in fluid at the bottom of the glass tip. The doctor positioned himself between the “y” formed by Toni’s suspended legs.

As the doctor pressed forward with the glass and steel, Toni winced and tightened. She let out an agonized yelp as the cold steel and glass parted her cervix and probed her uterus. The doctors locked their concentration on a series of screen readouts and three dimensional screen images transmitting from the probe. A warm mechanical hum created a lulling sense of calm over all of them.

Dr. Pollidore honed concentrated on the images, then the probe and also checked Toni, switching his gaze back and forth. After a while he nodded, a slight smile coming to his thin lips. “That should do it,” he said, relaxing and straightening.

For a moment, Suella felt strangely empty. She knew she’d just witnessed the conception of her own child. With any luck at all, the embryo would take, Toni would carry to term, and her beautiful little daughter would be born. Still it all felt so strangely clinical, so robotic. “How do you feel, Toni?” she asked.

Toni shrugged. “Glad to have that cold probe out of me.”

Dr. Allende let out a short giggle, causing her to look even more youthful than normal. She also exhaled. “All we can do now is wait, and hope. The first twenty-four hours are the most critical.”

“Would it be best if Toni lies absolutely still until we’re sure the embryo is going to take?” Suella asked.

“That would probably be best,” the doctor replied.

“Could we get a double room?” Suella asked. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Toni shoot her a slightly disdainful look.

“I’ll be fine,” Toni said.

“But I want to be there,” Suella countered. “We can contact the doctors right away if anything goes wrong. Also, if you’re going to lie motionless, it would be good for someone to keep you company.”

Toni shrugged. “Okay,” she said. “Whatever creams your coffee.”

They both checked into the room, which looked more like a high-priced suite at a resort than a room in a medical institution. Cheery drapes covered the windows and both beds sported polished wood footboards and headboards. Suella felt very motherly as she adjusted the left side of Toni’s bed so that it angled upward. Rather than get into pajamas and wedge herself between the sheets, Toni simply lay atop the bedspread. “I’m going to get us some lunch,” she said, after making sure the woman carrying her child was comfortable. She knew there had to be a cafeteria somewhere.

Suella felt pleased and reassured when she discovered that the cafeteria featured many of the new synthetics. On the surface of it, she was fixing a turkey and dressing platter for Toni. Would she be able to tell the difference? The sliver of turkey that she tried on her plate tasted fine, especially with a dollop of gravy. She rounded out the dinner with sweet potatoes and cranberry sauce using the new sweetener Crystallite.

Back at the room, both women sat and ate from their platters while the mid day news played on the screen across the room. Suella tried to casually observe Toni as she pecked at the folds of turkey and the small mound of mashed potatoes with “new gravy.” Her face took on an unpleasantly quizzical expression.

“Is anything wrong?” Suella asked.

Toni lifted a piece of turkey from the plate. “Are these those new synthetics?”

“Yes they are.”

Toni smiled wryly. “It tastes like Styrofoam. Didn’t they have any real food there?”

Suella indicated her plate. “This is real food.”

Toni grinned weakly at her. “You know what I mean. Turkey that was like, raised on a farm and stuff.”

“But this is so much better for you,” Suella said, munching on a couple of bites of turkey and gravy. “I think it’s great.”

“Can’t I get real turkey?” Toni raised her plate from the platter.

“I don’t know if they have it, to be honest,” Suella said, attempting to stall.

“Besides, real turkey is filled with preservatives and antibiotics. You don’t want all of that stuff going into your system.”

Toni shrugged, wistfully stabbing at a few shreds of the turkey. “No, I guess not.”

Suella knew that as an actress, Toni had probably worked with some of the most famous people in Hollywood. She probably had so many stories about what went on when the cameras stopped rolling. It could have spiced up their time together to get her talking about her experiences in the business. Still, there was something else she wanted to know even more. It was best to approach the subject delicately, though. “So, exactly how long have you known Nathan?”

She grinned, shaking her head. “We were in grade school together. My family

lived about three streets away from his.”

“Did you always know you wanted to be an actress?” Okay, Suella thought, it was a question more about Toni’s childhood than anything else.

“Of course. We used to put on plays in the basement. My friends Mandy, Jennifer, and I.”

“Was Nathan ever in any of the plays?”

She smiled wryly, scrunching her eyebrows. “No.”

“Did he ever come see the plays?”

“No. He was always throwing baseballs against his pitch back.”

Suella realized that she knew very little about Nathan’s boyhood. “His what?”

“Pitch back. It was like a little trampoline, except it was standing on its side. There was a square in the middle. He would throw baseballs against it for hours. He used to brag he could hit the same spot fifty times in a row.”

“Okay,” Suella said, not knowing what to think. For as long as she’d known him, he’d bragged about walking the fewest batters of any pitcher.

Toni had control of the wand and she made the screen split and divide but stopped suddenly at a screen showing the movie “Saw 7.” She chuckled. “Have you ever seen one of these? I can’t believe the stuff they do in these movies.”

“No, and I don’t think I want to start now! Could we watch something else?”

Toni’s lip snarled and she tossed the wand in the air, over to Suella. “You pick something, then.”

For the rest of that day and on into the night, they both watched television.

“I’m so sleepy,” Toni said.

“Go ahead and sleep,” Suella said, patting her gently on the arm. “It’d be the best thing.” Toni started to lift the covers and dip her legs into them, but Suella held her back. “What are you doing? I want to be able to see if anything goes wrong.”

Toni gazed back at her incredulously. “What? You’re going to sit there and stare at my cooter all night? That’s not necessary. I’ll feel it if anything goes wrong, believe me.”

“Please,” Suella said. “This is all so exciting for me. I want to make sure that if anything goes wrong, we can reach someone right away.”

Toni smiled weakly, relenting. “Ok.” She sighed. “Can we at least just turn on the smaller light?” She motioned to the small lamp on the desktop. Suella did as she requested and sat up in bed while the woman carrying her child slept.

At this moment, there was a tiny embryo of her growing in Toni’s uterus. She cried tears of joy as she sat up in bed. For the next several hours, she absently watched one movie after another. Here and there she would check on Toni, or more appropriately, Toni’s vagina.

For hours she kept watch that same way, sitting still, like a sentry. For a while, she imagined that she was back in college, watching one of those crazy old art flicks. Her eyelids got heavy and her head lolled, her body trying to will her to sleep.

About the time she thought the sun should start to rise, however, she saw something.

A little trickle of blood appeared out of nowhere between Toni’s legs. At first she thought she was seeing things, as if a demon was playing a trick on her. She closed her eyes and opened them. Yes, it was still there. Still, to be absolutely sure, she reached

over and touched the trickle. When she felt the warm slickness of it, she leaped back.

“Oh my god!”

Toni stirred and lifted upward. “What? What’s wrong?” Her eyes had sprung open.

“You’re bleeding! Sit down! Stay calm!” Suella scrambled for the nearest phone. Toni looked down and saw the small red streak.

Dr. Allende had stayed at the center for the night, to keep vigil for just a situation such as this. Her hair was still perfectly combed and though she had no makeup, she still seemed as glamorous as she did during the brilliant light of mid-day. Though they didn’t need to, they turned Toni’s bed into a gurney and wheeled her gingerly to one of the examination rooms. Suella was surprised over how smoothly the bed moved, as if it rested upon blades on the ice.

The doctor immediately connected the ultrasound software and waved the paddles over Toni’s abdomen. A picture of neon colors flashed onto the screen. Dr. Allende smiled. “There,” she said, pointing to the image. “It’s still intact.”

Suella had to squint and move closer to the screen to see anything. To her, it looked like a squashed plate of spaghetti. The doctor pointed to a small speck.

Once Suella’s breathing returned to normal, the doctor spoke some more. “A slight discharge like this is normal,” she said.

Just to be sure, Dr. Allende waved sensors over Toni, to check her heartbeat, blood pressure, and temperature. All normal. Suella shrugged. “Well, as long as I’m up, I might as well get dressed, right?”

Suella drove them home. Both of them remained silent for much of the trip, while

Suella's MP3 collection played on the stereo. As they drove into the sunlight, she turned down the sound. "How do you feel about staying over?"

Toni said. "You mean for tonight? I kind of had things I wanted to do at my apartment."

"Well, actually, I was thinking of having you at our house for the entire time."

Toni's mouth dropped open. "No. No. I don't think I'd be comfortable. Why do you want to do that?"

"We would want to make sure that you're comfortable, that you get the best nutrition, that someone's around in case something happens."

Toni's upper lip curved. "I'll be fine. I can take care of myself. Besides, I'm on a lease. I'd lose money."

"You could sublet," Suella countered. "Especially if you rented at sub-market."

Toni sighed. "I'd just feel much more comfortable at my own place. You can check up on me as much as I want. I promise I won't get annoyed."

"Okay," Suella said. "But I would like to be with you on all the OB visits."

"That's fine. I think I'd want someone to drive me, anyway."

Reluctantly, Suella brought Toni back to her apartment and dropped her off. As Toni stepped away from the car, Suella rolled down her window and called her back. "Toni, could you come here?" When Toni stepped toward her in the driver's seat, Suella continued. "Would you allow me to do something? It's something you might find kind of silly."

"What?"

"I want to say good bye to my daughter." Suella opened her door and stepped out

onto the pavement. She then dropped down to her knees and placed her head near Toni's belly. "Now you have a pleasant night! I'll see you soon! And I want you to know I love you."

Toni giggled, shaking her head.

"I told you it was silly," Suella said.

Once she arrived home herself, she tried to catch up on some work she'd neglected over the past several day's excitement. While she thought she would be too distracted to get anything done, on the contrary, the life developing in Toni's uterus gave her a new impetus. She sat for hours conferring with clients, solving problems, and going the extra mile. By the time night fell, she decided that she needed a little break. While she could have listened to music or idly watched television, she decided to research pregnancy. She already knew that with an impending birth came myriad decisions. Natural childbirth or c-section? Should they use the Lamaze method? What type of vitamins should the mother take?

One website listed the size of the fetus and the baby on a week by week basis. It gave recommendations for the mother's weight and diet, as well. Suella bookmarked the site. She also watched several videos of delivery. Obviously, she would be there for the birth of her new daughter. It would probably be one of the greatest moments of her life. Something suddenly occurred to her. When Toni had agreed to carry the child for her, Suella had been so excited that she forgot about the important legal implications. What if, at this very moment, she was drinking a glass of wine and smoking a cigarette? And she didn't know Toni well at all. Did she like to ski, or scuba dive?

She decided that she was just being too much of a worrywart. Her phone rang,

startling her. When she answered it, she heard Nathan's excited, boyish voice. "How's the new mom?"

"I'm great! Where are you?"

"At the airport." As if to confirm this for him, several people sitting around him started talking and a voice sounded over an intercom. "How does it feel?"

"Damn good, actually." She described how the doctors implanted the embryo and detailed their scare from the night before, adding "It's all going to work out just fine."

"Great. Are you coming east for the next series?"

Suella suddenly remembered she had a whole other residence nearly a couple of thousand miles away, along with a husband who needed her. "Yes, I'll be there," she said, knowing even then how difficult it would be to tear herself away from her developing child. On the other hand, she could hardly wait to tell Julie, Kaitlyn, and all the other women. They would ask too many questions, however. How was she going to explain a brand new baby when she wasn't (and never would be) pregnant? And then later, when it would become glaringly apparent that the child was going to look just like her. How could she say they'd adopted?

The next day she visited her attorney, Lewis Rogansky. She'd always thought that with his solemn demeanor and kind face that he might have been better suited for a funeral director. "I've just gone ahead and done something really crazy," she said, when she shook his soft hand as he stood at the threshold of his office. She carried thick stack of papers they'd given her at Lifewind. Lewis invited her to sit. When she'd situated herself, she set the stack of paperwork in front of him.

"I see," Lewis said, with his detached, formal air. "It's nice to know there's

another one of us old school types out there. What is this?" He gently touched the first few sheets.

Suella sighed. "I've had myself cloned." She told him all about the process and how Toni was carrying the child to term. She had expected at least an eyebrow raise from Lewis, but he simply sat, nodding, as if they were discussing her estate.

He skimmed over the pile of papers. "They're covering themselves, that's for sure."

Suella shrugged. "Aren't you going to scold me for not consulting with you, first?"

Lewis stopped reading and looked up at her. "It's your life, Mrs. Worthy."

For the rest of their visit, she sat silently while he read over the stacks and stacks of briefs. "Now, I know the whole cloning thing isn't really legal," she said, "but is there any chance I could get in trouble for being a part of it?"

Lewis leaned back in his retro, gleaming leather desk chair. He sighed, steepled his fingers on the desktop in front of him and glanced at the ceiling for a moment, to think. "The short answer? No, there isn't. But did you know that there are massive hold-harmless clauses here?"

Suella glanced down at the stack of papers. "Well, of course. They want to make sure I don't sue them if there's anything wrong with my child. Dr. Allende and I discussed that for hours once."

The attorney nodded and one side of his lip curled upward. "Did you know, though, that they can sue you?"

"Why would they want to do that?"

Lewis pointed to one of the pages. “You have to bring the child to their center once a year, every year. If you don’t they have the right to sue for breach.”

Suella waved a hand at him dismissively. “They once a year visits. Yes, they want to make sure she’s growing and developing properly. How on earth could that possibly be a problem?”

Lewis’ eyes widened. “The whole second part of the document opens the door should they decide to sue you.”

Suella wondered what it could all mean. “Well, they want to make sure I don’t go around blabbing about my new clone baby, but why would I want to do that anyway?”

“It might be a little more involved than that. You might want to ask them sometime.”

Later that afternoon, when she was sessioning for her clients, she forgot all about the strange visit with her attorney. She spent the next week in a bittersweet funk. Toni, a woman she’d caught in bed with her husband a month before, was carrying her child. Life was strange.

Chapter Seven

Like they say with all pregnancies, nothing much happens for the first two months. A woman may not even show until after the third month. Suella kept her promise and drove Toni to all the OB appointments. She'd chosen a doctor who was oblivious to the way the embryo had been implanted in her. He was also oblivious to the fact that when the child was born, the doctors at the Lifewind Center would deliver her. Why had they done it this way? Toni asked "Isn't he going to find it weird when we tell him we want someone else to deliver the baby?"

Suella shrugged. "He'll probably be happy for being off the hook for the liability for delivering her." For the rest of that summer, Suella jetted back and forth between Cincinnati and Los Angeles. When she was at her home, she would go over to see Toni frequently. Thanks to Toni's naturally round, generous figure, it took her friends and co-workers five months to notice Toni was pregnant. The next time Suella went to visit her, Toni answered the door holding a drink in a wineglass. Suella almost fell off the front stoop. "What are you doing?"

"Relax," Toni said. "It's sparkling cider."

Autumn came and went without Nathan getting a chance to pitch in October. He last pitched in the World Series during the last season he played for New York. Both New York teams played in the series that year, and Nathan won one of the games. That was the year, though, that his tooth was still healing from the shenanigans around the time of the steroid deposition. "At least I get a vacation," Nathan said, as he lay in a recliner. He was watching football during his first Saturday off since the previous Valentine's Day.

The baby would be born around Easter. It was the spring, a time of rebirth. Suella attended Lamaze classes with Toni and barked at her as a breathing coach.

A man in the class noticed this and approached Suella after it was over. He smiled disingenuously and said “I take it that you wear the pants in your relationship?”

Suella didn’t know what he meant at first. It only hit her when they both walked out to the car to drive home. As they sat at an intersection waiting for the light to change, she exclaimed “That guy thought we were gay?”

Toni chuckled. “Oh, honey, you’re not my type.”

They rode the rest of the way home in silence. When the holidays arrived, they invited Toni over for their Thanksgiving dinner. Suella raised her glass of sparkling apple cider (if Toni wasn’t allowed to drink, she reasoned, then neither should she). She said “I’m thankful for the miracle we’re all experiencing together.” They all raised their glasses along with her. Later, she made sure that Toni ate only one helping of turkey with the trimmings. She shouldn’t gain too much weight!

By Christmas, Toni started waddling. One of the times Suella visited her, she was entertaining three friends. All of them drank beer or cocktails, while Toni drank seven up. Two of them were smoking cigarettes, though. “Could both of you do me a little favor? Could you both smoke your cigarettes out on the balcony?” They both did as she requested, closing the sliding glass door behind them.

Toni looked at Suella with a hint of fiery anger in her eyes. “Who do you think you are, ordering my friends around like that?”

Suella instantly realized she should have told Toni first and given her the option to take care of it. “Second hand smoke. It’s not good for you, you know that, right?”

Toni waved a hand dismissively at her. “If it was up to you I’d be in a glass case until Easter. Sometimes I’m sorry I ever even said I’d do this.”

Horrified, Suella backpedaled and tried to smooth things over for Toni. “You’re delivering such a wonderful gift!” she said. “I just want to make everything’s right. But more important than that, I care about you.”

Toni shrugged.

The Christmas season was a blur of parties and get-togethers, with people laughing giddily and eating and drinking too much. Through all of the partying and all of the fun, Suella told herself that next year and all the years after that, she’d have a daughter with whom to share the holiday. On Christmas morning she went downstairs in her silk lounge pajamas and found their tall, full tree blinking lights and flashing tinsel. She’d laid presents for Nathan down there, and he’d set down a few for her as well. Together, they also wrapped presents for Toni.

Suella sat in the recliner at the array of gifts nestled atop a snow-white, glittery blanket. She squinted, meditating, envisioning the Christmases yet to come, with her darling girl opening gifts with her small hands. Her eyes would be wide with wonder, her skin radiant on the bright winter morning as she reveled in the love of her mother through all the gifts beneath the tree.

2017 arrived. It was the year her child would be born, the year she became a mother. She made sure that Toni stayed sober on the New Year’s Eve holiday by inviting her to spend it with her and Nathan at Carolyn’s house. Toni had found a wonderfully festive knit ensemble and was the most glamorous and fashionable pregnant woman Suella had ever seen. At one point she overheard a conversation between Toni, a young

man and a young woman in a corner. “So who’s the father?”

Suella leaped across the room and dived into the conversation before Toni had time to respond. She put her arm around Toni. “This wonderful, beautiful woman is carrying Nathan’s and my child. Isn’t that fantastic?”

Their faces lit up with approval and admiration, as the girl said “That’s so kind and thoughtful of you!”

“Thanks,” Toni told Suella a little bit later. “I’m not sure what I would have said to them.”

To herself, Suella said “Yes, I know. That’s why I jumped in there and said what I did before you replied ‘I’m carrying Suella and Nathan’s kid. Suella had herself cloned.’” Outwardly she said “I’m just so proud and thankful for what is happening that I want to shout it from the rooftops.”

A few weeks later, Nathan arrived home one night with a bang. He ran through the house shouting “Honey, you won’t believe it!”

Suella, who’d been on her hands and knees cleaning, jumped up and asked “What is it?”

“I guess I’m not an old, washed-up has-been after all! San Diego just traded for me! San Diego!” His enthusiasm was infectious. He and Suella jumped up and down together in the middle of the living room. She had always liked going there, since it was more mellow and newer than LA and now, it would become a second home. When they calmed down enough, Suella poured glasses of wine as Nathan dished out all the details of the deal. “They want me to be a left-hand specialist and set up man.”

It was the role she had discussed with Carolyn that summer before. “You’re sure

you won't mind not starting?"

"Nah. I'm over that. This is better. I've got a definite role, I can help out the young kids, and here's the best thing: TEN MILLION FOR THREE YEARS!"

"Oh, honey, that's fantastic!" She cried again, over the good news.

Everything was falling into place.

The next morning, though, she suddenly remembered their condo in Cincinnati. "Aw, let's sell it," Nathan replied. "We don't need that thing anymore." A condo like theirs, atop Mt. Adams, would fetch a pretty penny. Yet, Suella suddenly thought of her artist friend, Jillian, and all the hours they'd enjoyed, in one stimulating conversation after another: art, spirituality, fashion, and on and on. She suddenly felt anxious over the prospect of giving that up.

"Would you let me handle the details?" Suella asked. "I'll fly there next week."

The next week, when the plane landed in Cincinnati and docked at the terminal, Suella called Jillian. The artist lady answered quickly, as she always did since she rarely left her studio. Suella envisioned her in a spotty smock speaking on her Lips phone or the Mr. Pizza. "Are you free?"

Jillian replied "I was working, but I can take a break, yeah."

An hour later Suella parked her car and walked down the hill to knock on Jillian's door. Jillian had tied her hair back with a handkerchief and wore a work smocked splashed with errant dabs of paint over a pair of capris. After the two women hugged, Jillian said "So how's the baby?"

"She's fine. Say, Jill, I have a fantastic offer for you." She wanted to rent the condo out and pay Jillian to be a landlady. "It'll help pay for your paint and paint

brushes.” More importantly, though, it would give Suella a reason to keep coming to Cincinnati to see her friend. Their visits together had always calmed her down so much.

“What do you think the pitcher is going to think about all of this?” Jill asked.

Suella marveled, once again at how her friend could be so down to earth.

Artists, after all, were supposed to be passionate and flighty. “He’ll be okay with it.”

When she called him later to give him the news, Nathan was less than pleased.

“Rent the condo? To any low-life that comes crawling down the street? No. Being a landlord sucks.”

“Jillian will be the landlady,” Suella said, weakly.

“That dyke artist?” Nathan tended to think of any woman who habitually dressed for comfort as a ‘dyke’ whether they showed the other behaviors or not. “She’s going to be too busy painting her little pictures to be much good as a landlady.”

“No she won’t. Jillian’s a kind, sensible person. Can’t we rent it to one of the rookies on the team?”

Nathan laughed. “A twenty-two year old with lots of money? And watch them trash the place? Ha! We should sell the place and have the money for when the baby comes.”

This had forced Suella’s hand. “Okay, the reason why I want to rent it out instead of sell it is because I like to visit Cincinnati. It’s a fun getaway from all the hustle and bustle back home. And it’s nice in October, when the leaves change. Plus it’s fun to have tea with Jill.”

“Well then, ask her if she wants to buy the condo. “

“She couldn’t afford it,” Suella said. “I think she can barely afford the place she’s

in now. That's why I wanted to make her landlady. Help her out a little."

"Then sell it and give your friend a hundred bucks a week or something. Jeez, you make things so complicated."

Suella knew Nathan was right, but her spirits sank anyway.

She'd been hoping to hold onto the condo and even use it when it was between renters. But you can't have everything. The next morning she told Jillian the bad news, while they drank tea at her studio.

Jillian smirked. "I knew he'd want to just sell it. He seems like a very black and white kind of guy."

Suella told her how she wanted to keep having their chit chat sessions over tea, that holding onto the condo would give her an excuse to do this. "I have a feeling that over the next few years, I'm going to need it."

Jillian squinted. "I'm a childless old maid. I don't even have cats. What could I possibly add to a discussion about child rearing?"

"You're a good listener."

Later that day, Suella met with a realtor about putting the condo on the market. For dinner that night, she met with Julie, her best friend from among the wives on the team. "That's so cool, I'm so happy for you," Julie said, while they both munched on their salads.

In addition to the news about Nathan's trade, Suella longed to tell her tall friend about the even bigger news. So what if the lawyer told her that she shouldn't? Would it open up a whole Pandora's box if someone else beside her, Nathan, Toni, Jillian and the employees at Lifewind knew about their child?

She wouldn't have been able to tell her secret anyway. Julie talked non-stop about her kids and their pets. All of the wives in the clubhouse were like that, Suella had realized long ago. They talked at each other, about their kid's achievements, about what civic offices they held and how they'd shopped Rodeo on their last visit to LA. What would happen if Suella did tell Julie, and then one day she brought her little daughter to meet the moms and other little girls?

She would be treated differently. Julie would make sure of it. As they polished off their cannelloni and followed up with dessert, Suella just sat back, listened, and smiled. Her friend would never know how close she came to learning something cataclysmic.

By the next day, Suella finalized the details of putting the condo on the market and paid Jillian a visit. "You were right, she said. The pitcher didn't go for it. Guess you won't get to be a landlady."

Jillian breathed a sigh of relief. "I don't think I could have done a good job for you, anyway."

Instead, Suella told herself that she would just stay with Jillian if she ever wanted to visit Cincinnati. Her place was nice, in a bohemian, austere kind of way.

Chapter Eight

When Suella returned home, she found Nathan on the back patio, reading the paper. He often said that he loved winter. There was still nearly a month before he would have to go to Arizona for spring training. That would be new for her: all the other teams he'd played for had trained in Florida. Suella had always disliked all the rude people there. Maybe Arizona would be nicer.

After he put aside the paper, Nathan said "Maybe we should look into getting a place on Mission Beach or Oceanside."

Both would be close to his new pitching home in San Diego. Suella shook her head. "Is this why you wanted to get rid of the place in Cincinnati? So you could turn around and get another by the beach?"

Nathan's lower jaw tightened, and his eyes paled. "Well you don't expect me to take the 405 home every day, do you? Besides, when the baby comes, it'll be nice to have a beach place. And we can get one a hell of a lot easier down there than around here."

In the end, when the condo in Cincinnati sold, Nathan bought a rooftop, space needle place in Mission beach. If it was smaller than the one they had in Cincinnati, at least it was completely solar and homey, if a bit sterile. On a lazy Sunday afternoon in February, Suella took a stroll to the beach, watching seagulls and pelicans soar overhead. She sat on a picnic bench under a pavilion and looked out at the gently rolling surf and the pier in the distance. She imagined bringing her daughter here on just such a lazy afternoon, letting her play in the sand with a pail and shovel.

Toni soon hit her seventh month. At this point, Suella expected her to be flopped

out on a couch channel and web surfing, fanning herself. Instead, she found Toni cleaning her apartment briskly, rubber gloves on her hands and her hair in a handkerchief. Her figure had always been round, though now, just a short way away from delivering, she hardly looked any different from what she had the previous summer, “Are you keeping up with a good weight for the baby?” Suella asked. “What did they say at the OB last time?” Toni had gone to her last appointment on her own.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Toni said, as she sprayed some oven cleaner into the oven.

Startled, Suella reached for the can of spray cleaner and scrutinized the ingredients. “My god, what are you doing?”

Toni had lowered herself down to remove the wire racks from the oven. “Suella! Don’t start.”

“I don’t want you breathing those fumes. It says on here you’re supposed to spray it on and wait before you clean it, about an hour. Why don’t you relax and let me do it for you.”

Toni sighed with exasperation. “I want to do it myself! I’m becoming a beached whale! What do you expect me to do? Sit and watch soap operas all day?”

“No, I don’t expect you to sit all day, but I don’t expect you to run marathons and be a cleaning superwoman either.”

Toni slumped down and stared out the window at her balcony. “Easter can’t come soon enough,” she murmured.

Suella decided that Toni’s black moods might be more harmful to her baby than any noxious chemicals or second-hand smoke. For the final two months, she only went with Toni to her OB appointments and the last few Lamaze classes. Conversation

sputtered between them: “How are you feeling?” Suella would ask.

“Fine,” was Toni’s unvarying reply.

Suella’s clients suffered during those last few weeks, while she made so many preparations for her child. Fortunately, she knew a whole network of friends in the business who could step in to cover her. Still, she pushed herself, attending videocons in her lounge pajamas (while at least getting herself made up). Some of the older guys had started to call her “Zaa, Zaa.” If anyone noticed that the quality of her work was slipping no one said anything. No news was good news.

In March she took a trip to Arizona to watch Nathan in spring training with his new team. While they had signed him to a good deal, nothing was ever guaranteed, as Nathan always liked to say. He had to fight for his job against a bunch of young, hard throwing kids. The press secretary, a bespectacled, gray haired guy, spoke to her. He had probably been chosen last for all the teams in gym class while he had been growing up. “Your man’s in great shape,” he said. “You’ve been taking good care of him. The way we plan to use him, he could go on another four, five years. You must be pleased.”

Suella also found Arizona to be a friendlier place than Florida. There were only older folks around and rattlesnakes, as far as she could see. For all the weeks he was in Arizona, Nathan would work out with the team early in the morning. They would all stretch together and jog around the baseball field’s warning track. In the afternoon during games, he would practice toss in the bullpen or help with the rookies. Sometimes he pitched in a game, but most times he sat. It was a racket, Suella thought, to accept millions of dollars for this. At the end of spring training, when they all headed west,

Nathan had a rock-solid job in the bullpen.

“Come on down for opening day,” Nathan said, when he finished packing the car to leave.

“I don’t know,” Suella said. “It’s getting really close.”

He shrugged. “Two weeks, isn’t it?”

“Something like that.”

He smiled at her and trailed a fingertip along her chin. “Please come.”

She gave in, knowing that it would be a long summer if she didn’t. Still, another kind of Opening Day would be happening one hundred miles north, in less than two weeks! When she woke every morning, the first thing she did was call Toni. “No, I don’t see any water splashing underneath me yet,” she would always say. “I guess we’re good.” At least she wasn’t complaining. Yet.

San Diego’s stadium was much brighter than the one in Cincinnati, and Nathan’s new team played their first game on an idyllic early April day under a robin’s egg blue sky. Suella stayed in the luxury box with the other wives, as was the custom on every other team he’d played with. She listened to the same conversations about kids, schools, real estate, and investments while waiters kept their cocktail glasses filled and chefs brought by lots of scrumptious treats.

The day before, Toni had visited the OB, but was forbidden from getting another ultrasound. Suella started to get wary of all the radiation exposure her baby might be getting. “But it won’t be easy for them to tell how close I am,” Toni had protested.

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” Suella said. She wanted to attend opening day festivities, the same way she had for the previous seven opening days. Something stirred

inside her as they drove down the 405, getting further and further away from Toni and her about to be born child. She told herself that as soon as the game was over, she would drive back and bring Toni to the center to stay until labor started.

Halfway through the game, though, her telephone rang. She winced when she saw the number, gathering her purse together before she even answered. "Hello?"

Toni said "I know this sucks, but I think it's time."

Suella almost dropped the phone. "Has your water broken?"

"No."

Suella kneaded the skin at the top of her nose to buy herself time to decide what to do next. "Get a cab to the desert, now. Use our card. Call them now. I'm on my way."

"I've got to go," she explained to the other ladies in the box as she rose and briskly walked toward the exit. Along the way to her car she checked her screen for the quickest route from the stadium to the desert. To her relief, she could catch one of the lesser-traveled freeways, which ran from downtown sideways toward Riverside. When she reached her car, she decided she would lead foot it all the way up there. For once in her life, she would speed.

It helped that this occurred in the middle of the day. She felt as if a whole army of angels had cleared the way for her, making all the traffic lights green and the freeways clear. She pushed her little Mazda as fast as it would go as she bore down on the center in the middle of the desert. When she arrived there, the guards all waved her through so she could park the car quickly. She leaped from her car and ran to the birthing suite, finding Dr. Allende already in scrubs. "Let's go," she said, catching her by the arm and

leading her toward the scrub-in room, where the workers there had already laid out everything Suella would need. She scrambled into the clothes and the washing up, anxious to get to the birthing suite and Toni. She could have already delivered while they were messing around!

Suella found Toni sitting calmly on a gurney, a couple of doctors beside her. An IV pole stood near her bedside. She leaned down and kissed her quickly, hugging her. “How do you feel?” she asked, the same as always.

“We’re going to do an epidural,” Toni said. “I’m good.”

Suella’s phone rang. When she answered it, she was surprised to hear Nathan’s voice. “So the witching hour has arrived,” he said. Suella could feel his warmth and his smile from seventy miles away.

“Yes. How did you find out?”

“All those gals in the suite? You may as well have gotten on the PA system.” He laughed. “I wish I could be there.”

Suella noticed a doctor motioning for her to cut her call short. “I know you do, hon. Listen, it’s showtime. I’ve got to go.”

“I love you,” Nathan said.

“Love you too,” Suella responded, as she snapped her phone shut and joined the birthing team for the miraculous event.

What is there to say about a woman giving birth? Toni screamed, and breathed, Suella held her hand. For the past nine months, she’d envisioned a bright room, with light so bright as to hearken the birth of her daughter. Yet the birthing suite looked like a place where they did plastic surgery, with bright artificial light, baby pink walls, and

slick, gleaming instruments.

As they'd done so much in all the Lamaze classes, Suella coached Toni through all the breathing exercises. She reared back her head and screamed, then shouted "I can't believe I actually went through with this for you, you fucking bitch!"

The doctors told her "Keep pushing! You're doing fine!"

Suella had been standing behind Toni's shoulder, but Dr. Allende said "Would you like to switch places?" since she had been on the other side, helping the birthing team. She took a deep breath and took up the position with the doctors trying to bring a new life into the world.

She worried about being squeamish. Toni's water had broken long ago, yet pink and orange ooze still kept coming out of her. This caused a vague wave of nausea in her. One of the other doctors said "I think we're going to have crowning soon." He was reaching beneath Toni's bottom, feeling around for the fetus to drop. This was a perfect clone of her, a virtual carbon copy. Suella realized that this was like watching her own birth.

Her baby's head soon appeared behind the folds of Toni's labia. The doctors still urged Toni to push, and she still reared back and screamed. Dr. Allende called out "Are you feeling anything? Are you in pain?"

Toni shook her head vigorously. A nurse aide patted her head with a cool towel. "I'm going to break in half!"

Dr. Allende patted her on her wrist. "No, you're not going to break in half."

The baby was covered in slime as Suella watched the head and face emerge. At that moment she was aware of the door to the birthing suite opening, but she kept her

eyes forward, gazing at the spectacle in front of her. “Surprise!” Nathan rejoiced loudly while he put both arms around her shoulders and hugged her tightly. She whirled around and saw his smiling face, his twinkling eyes.

Suella started to jump up and down and Nathan started to jump up and down with her. “How did you get here?”

He chuckled. “Do you think I’d want to miss this? They sprung me from the game and I lead-footed it all the way up here!”

Suella yanked him down into place so that they could watch the rest of the birth together. People had always told you that you’ll always remember the birth of your first child, whether you carried it or a surrogate did. In watching herself be born, Suella knew she would remember this forever. The doctors around her began to rejoice and cheer as more and more of her baby emerged: the shoulders, the back, her hips. Then, with a whoosh, she had catapulted out into the world. A nurse keyed in the Apgars and counted fingers and toes. The man doctor took her baby by the leg and dangled her upside down and smacked her behind. Suddenly the sound of the infant crying filled the whole room. Toni also cried, as rivers of relief washed her face. Nathan settled in behind her and hugged her tenderly, rocking her back and forth.

Moments later came the afterbirth. Someone asked Suella if she wanted to cut the cord, but she stood there staring at the baby instead. When the question had finally registered, it was too late. A doctor stepped in and cut the cord. Two nurses washed the baby down, then dried her. For a split second, the nurse looked over at Suella, as if she was confused about whether to turn the baby over to her, or to Toni, who had carried her for nine months. Suella motioned silently toward Toni.

Toni cuddled the tiny infant close to her, looking every inch the proud mother, with her hair plastered down by sweat and water from the nurse's cool towels. Suella cuddled in next to her, and Nathan hovered over the both of them, arms around their shoulders. The doctors barked out facts about the birth and the mother's vital signs. Suella somehow felt as if she, Toni, Nathan, and her newborn child were the only ones in the whole room.

Toni offered the tiny infant to Suella. She said "Do you want to hold her?"

Suella's breathing grew ragged, and shallow. Time stopped as she lowered herself down to receive her new daughter. Her lower half had been swathed in a receiving blanket. Suella steadied herself as she reached beneath her child to accept her fully into her arms, the passing seconds expanded dreamily in time like minutes, with all the sound of the outside world muffled out in a pleasant murmur like running water.

She tried to say "Hello, little one," but the words stuck in her throat as tears welled in her eyes. Her child was so small, so delicate, so pink. She lightly traced her fingertip over the baby's forehead as her cupid bow lips opened and closed and her arms and hands poked and shifted. Suella could have been frozen that way forever, her little daughter cuddled against her. Eventually she handed her baby over to the nurses. Toni had closed her eyes.

They could both only stay in the birthing suite for a moment longer. Suella remembered in the paperwork session, way back at the beginning of the cloning process, that the doctors would have to perform extensive tests. Two nurses started to wheel Toni's gurney back into her semi—private room. Suella followed, holding Toni's hand as she walked beside her. As far as Suella was aware, Nathan had stayed behind to talk

with one of the doctors. It occurred to her that she should think of something to say to Toni as they walked along. “How do you feel?”

Toni gave a weary smile. “Exhausted.”

When they reached the room and the nurses left, Suella reached across to give Toni a big hug. “Thank you so much,” she said. “Thank you so much.” Over and over.

Though she wanted to comfort Toni after she had brought her daughter into the world, Suella was anxious to see the baby, also. She walked down the hall toward the delivery room and suites. Shockingly, two doctors hovered over the baby while tubes and tape ran out of her. Someone had run sensors with contacts from her temples and heart. Suella remembered someone barking out “seven pounds, three ounces.” She was a normal infant, wasn’t she? What could they have possibly been checking?

Dr. Allende rounded a corner and seemed to have read Suella’s mind. “Your baby’s fine. The doctors always like to run certain tests. It’s all for the best, you’ll see.”

Oh well, she thought, she had spent a million dollars, didn’t she? Nathan suddenly appeared from around a corner. He had already changed out of his scrubs gear and back into his baseball uniform. It seemed crazy that the team would allow him to run from the bullpen, jump into a car and thunder his way here, but she decided against saying anything. “They’re putting her away for the night,” Suella told him.

“I know. I got a room down the hall for us. As long as everything checks out, they’re going to let us go home tomorrow around noon.”

Suella stood blankly for a moment, unsure of her reticence. It soon occurred to her. “Hon, I was hoping to stay with Toni tonight. To make sure she’s okay.”

He broke into a mischievous grin. “She’ll be fine. That woman could fall asleep

on top of a pile of bricks with a marching band going by.”

The bad timing of the disclosure of an intimate detail irked Suella. “I just don’t think she should be alone tonight. Did you know that none of her family knows that she was even pregnant?”

Nathan shrugged. “Yeah. We all agreed that was best. Remember?”

It turned out that the other full-sized bed in Toni’s room could fit Nathan and Suella. By the time they creaked the door open, they found Toni lying back on her bed, sleeping deeply. Nathan and Suella soon joined her.

Chapter Nine

Sunlight finally cracked through the window. Suella heard muffled conversation and footsteps outside the door. She hoped someone would let her see her baby. Trying not to disturb Toni or Nathan, who were still fast asleep, Suella washed herself down with wipe sponges and put on some clothes. She sneaked out into the hallway and walked down to the examination room where they had taken her baby the night before. It was dark and empty. What had they done?

She searched for someone, anyone. A nurse crept up behind her and touched her on the shoulder, making her jump. “You must be wondering where your baby went, right?” she said. “Follow me.”

Together they turned down another hallway, the nurse leading her to the end. They turned right into a large, bright room with lots of windows. It was the place where babies go just after they are born, when girls are wrapped in pink blankets and boys in blue. Rows of plexiglass lined baby bassinets lie before them, and Suella found her baby near the middle, identified with a pink blanket and a notecard which read “Baby Girl Worthy” at the top of it.

“Have you thought about a name, yet?” the nurse asked.

Yes, Suella thought, she had thought at dozens of them, yet they’d failed to agree on a single one of them. She listed the names in her head: Mercedes, Catherine, Julia, Felicia and Corrine. A startling thought suddenly occurred to her. Why not feminize her husband’s name? Natalie. It was also the name of an old-time movie star who had died suddenly and tragically. She asked the nurse “Is it okay if I step over there and cuddle her?”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she replied, shooing her in the direction of the baby’s basinet.

Suella walked over to the clear plastic container holding her baby daughter, looked down at the little angel before her and said “Hello Natalie. I’m mama.”

Later, Suella was pleased to learn that after meeting with a couple of the doctors from the center, she would be free to bring little Natalie home. They made it sound like a “Suggestions for care” session, the way all hospitals did when discharging a patient, but instead, Suella and Nathan met the doctors in their gleaming polished wood offices, where they presented her with a whole ream of forms to sign. “I don’t know about this,” Nathan said, backing away from the table. “Our lawyers should be here. Honey, why don’t you call one of them?”

“It’s too early Nathan,” Suella said.

The doctors looked at each other and then at Nathan. “You can take as long as you need to read all the text. There’s nothing on there you’ll find odious.”

Nathan pointed a finger at the two of them, something Suella knew that he only did when he was very angry. “Listen, I’ve paid you guys here a lot of money. We’re not going any further with this until my lawyer is present.”

The doctor with the pen set it down and leaned back in his chair. Nathan reached for his phone and furiously dialed the lawyer’s office. The lawyer was in court, though. He excused himself to go into another room and call around to see who he could find. At times Suella could hear him shout even though the door was closed. Soon he emerged from the other room, looking weary but satisfied. “They’re sending someone from one of the other offices to look things over,” he said.

A half-hour a tall, red-haired man named Fisk, showed up to check the documents the doctors had been foisting on Nathan and Suella. With the doctor's permission, he perused them for an hour while everyone waited outside.

Once Suella and Nathan met with Fisk in one of the gleaming doctor's offices, Nathan asked "So what's the word?"

Fisk shrugged. "Mostly, that if Natalie develops any debilitating illnesses, that you won't hold the center liable."

Nathan said "Well, they don't make you sign all this shit when you leave a regular hospital."

Fisk said "Two things. One, this is not a regular hospital, and two, Natalie is not a regular baby. Statistically speaking, cloned children are more prone to health problems and shortened life spans than natural babies. These men just want to make sure you won't hold them financially responsible."

Nathan nodded. "Don't you think it's funny that practically everyone is scared to death of you guys? What else?"

"They want to swear you to secrecy. They want you to think of Natalie in terms of a naturally born child."

Nathan and Suella looked at each other. "Well, that doesn't sound too difficult," Suella said. "Natalie is my child. Natalie is me. She's our child." She patted Nathan's hand.

Fisk paused for a moment before continuing. "There's something else. They want you to bring Natalie back to the center every year for testing."

Nathan nodded. "On their dime, I hope?"

Fisk said “Yes.”

Suella brightened at that prospect. “It’d be like getting free medical care.”

With that settled, Nathan took to signing the forms. “Geez, this is like all the little kids dangling programs over the bullpen wall.”

Suella just wanted to hold Natalie again. She didn’t care what she had to sign.

When they all drove home, they argued over who would go in what car. “I want to be with my baby,” Suella said. She intended to hold her for the whole drive back to Santa Monica.

Nathan looked at Toni, and then at Suella. “How are you going to do that unless either I or Toni drive one of the cars?”

Suella said “God, no.” Toni still sat in the wheelchair they’d provided once they scanned for discharge.

Nathan smirked, with a serious look in his eyes and continued speaking. “The way I see it, either I drive Toni and the baby home or you drive Toni and the baby home.”

“I’ll drive Toni and the baby home,” she said. That way, she’d at least get to be in the same car.

On the way home, through the desert and the freeway, Toni fell asleep while holding Natalie. Suella tried to keep an eye on both of them as she drove along. Soon enough, she reached Toni’s condo, made sure that Toni made it inside okay, and then headed for her home. The moment had finally arrived, when she would spend her first few moments alone with her new daughter, Natalie. Nathan took a while to get back, himself, which gave her extra time with her. She sat with her in the nursery. Over the

previous five months, she had been putting together a nursery in one of the empty rooms inside their house. She'd placed a soft easy chair in the nursery because she knew she would spend many hours holding her little girl, cooing to her.

Suella held Natalie close to her, letting the baby's scent drift up and soothe her. "We're going to have such a great life," she said, taking a moment to gaze at her sleeping child, rocking her back and forth gently. That first day, she fell asleep holding Natalie. Still sitting in the easy chair. Nathan gently kissed her to wake her up. He waited until she opened her eyes to speak. "Darling, don't you think you'd be more comfortable in a bed and she'd be better off in the crib?"

Suella placed Natalie in the crib, but she went back to the easy chair, setting it even lower so she could resume sleeping.

Nathan had missed two games in attending the birth and sorting through the legal paperwork. He had to go back to San Diego and would stay at the condo down there. They hired a nanny, a matronly Mexican woman named Marie. Just after they first met, Marie looked Suella up and down in an appraising way. "You sure bounced back quickly!" she said. "You must be in really good shape."

For a moment, she struggled over whether to admit to her that another woman had carried the baby. But then the nurse would ask questions. Was it an arranged adoption or IVF? Suella was already weary of answering questions, so she simply smiled and said "Thank you."

By mid-summer, when she had mastered feeding and caring for little Natalie, she decided to take her to San Diego for a baseball game. She longed to have been able to breast feed her daughter and was dismayed when she found out she could not. During the

drive down, after securing the car seat about twenty times, she thought about how lucky it had been that Nathan had been traded. There would be a whole new group of wives in the San Diego luxury box, none of whom would know her history. As far as they would be concerned, Natalie would be her baby. Natalie was her.

She could have used a variety of different high-tech gadgets to carry her baby around. Natalie was still too small and vulnerable for a stroller, however. In the end she settled for a low-tech sling to help her hold Natalie as she brought her through the stadium gates and up the ramps. Predictably, all of the wives in the luxury box cooed and fussed over Natalie. They peppered her with all the usual questions, and Suella was ready for all of them: “Is she your first?” “Did you go natural?” and “Does she sleep through the night?” Suella replied yes to the first, yes to the second, and yes to the third, and she told herself she was not lying. Yes, Natalie was her first child. Yes, she was born naturally (after all, nobody had flat out asked her if she was the one carrying her). Finally, yes, Natalie slept through the night.

For the first half of the game, Natalie was passed to one set of gushing, cooing female arms to another. Most of the women were in their twenties or early thirties. Suella was astounded over how they were acting. Most of them had had children, hadn't they? When Suella received Natalie back in her arms, she took her down to the enclosed stadium seats section, a place where she had never sat at the Cincinnati stadium. Rosalyn Fernandez, a button-cute pitcher's wife followed her down and sat beside her. Mostly, Suella wanted to get to a place where she could take a long look at her daughter. Rosalyn watched her doing this and said “She's beautiful.” Suella held her sideways so that she could look down and see her face. Natalie possessed the delicate, soft skin that

all babies have and her little head was covered with tufts of golden blond hair. Her eyes were blue, as were all babies', yet hers were so blue that the whites had been tinged blue as well. Most of all, Suella adored the little girl's tiny mouth with cupid bow lips. Did Suella look like this as an infant? Her mother would know for sure, but of course she could not bring Natalie to meet her mother. Not yet, anyway.

That day, she could sit back and enjoy a beautiful day of watching her husband work. Most of her clients knew about the new baby. Suella still did business with them, just not every day. Everyone seemed to understand. An infant child needs her mother.

At one point during the excitement of people coming and going and the wait staff slinging trays around, little Natalie coughed twice, a big, wheeping cough. How could her little lungs force out such a sound? A nagging doubt crept into her mind: cloned children faced extraordinary health issues. There was no question. She resolved to watch her daughter's health like a hawk and pounce at the first sign of any trouble. In the meantime, she tried to enjoy the rest of the day, one that saw Nathan come in to pitch, facing only two batters.

Chapter Ten

So went the next few months: Suella worked less, devoting most of her time to watching over Natalie. She was fast on the phone to the doctor if anything at all out of the ordinary occurred. Strange cough? She hit the number. Dribbling from her nose? She hit the number. Unexplained rash? She hit the number. Usually she stayed off-screen to place her calls. One day, though, she tapped her toe while the extension rang three, then four times.

The line picked up. “Drs. Allende, Moore, and Gladstone, how can we help you today?” Shelley announced in a professional, chirpy voice.

“Shelley, it’s Mrs. Worthy. Get me to Dr. Allende or one of the nurses, please.”

She heard a sigh from the other end of the line. “Two of the nurses have already gone home for the day and Dr. A and Dr. Glad are seeing patients.”

“Anybody. Somebody. Just get me somebody.”

“Okay. Can I put you on hold?”

Suella reacted quickly. If she let one of the office girls put her on hold she might languish there for fifteen minutes or more. “No! No! Shelley! Just get me somebody. I’ll be right on the line. I don’t care which nurse it is. Just somebody. Quickly.”

“Okay, okay,” Shelley said, starting to show an annoyed tone. “Geez. What’s your baby dying of today anyway?”

Suella double-taked, unsure of what, exactly, she just heard. She took in a deep breath, to buy her a couple of extra seconds to decide what to say and what to do.

“Shelley I think you better put a doctor or nurse on this line, now or your office manager is going to hear all about that rude comment you just made. Do I make myself clear?”

Shelley groaned from the other end of the line. “Mrs. Worthy I’m sorry I said that. I’m going to get you somebody right away. Now I need to put the phone down. You won’t be put on hold.”

Suella couldn’t believe that someone who worked in a pediatrician’s office could be so rude. True, she might have to deal with desperate or even irate parents all day, but was that an excuse to take it out on her, when she was being so cordial? And she gave them the courtesy of going off-screen, which usually made things more convenient. What was going wrong with the world, anyway?

She listened closely to the goings-on in the background at the doctor’s office. Mostly it was low voices and occasional rustling, like someone shuffling papers or files. Finally, a few clicks and clunks told her that someone was coming to the phone. Another voice, younger and chirpier than Shelley’s came onto the line. “Hi Mrs. Worthy, this is Tiffany. How can I help you today?”

“Tiffany, are you a nurse?”

She paused for a few seconds before responding. “I’m an MDA.”

Medical assistant. She was no more than a glorified bedpan changer and temperature taker. “I thought I made myself clear to Shelley that I wanted to speak with either a doctor or a nurse?”

Tiffany backpedaled. “Well I’m sorry, ma’am, but the doctors are seeing patients and all the nurses were occupied, too. Shelley handed the phone to me because she felt you needed to speak to someone quickly.”

Suella gritted her teeth. She couldn’t talk snappy to a girl who was so nice.

“I appreciate it, Tiffany, I really do. Now could you do something for me? Could you

have Dr. Allende call me please, when she has a moment?”

“Certainly.”

“I appreciate it very much.” Suella snapped the button, terminating the call. To get her mind off the fiasco, she dove into her work. At the same time she kept an eye on Natalie, who crawled around in the playpen, happily playing with her plush animals and plastic pull toys.

Hours passed while Suella time flew as she caught up on old business and correspondence. When the call came, someone had selected the onscreen option. She splashed some water on her face and ran a brush through her hair before answering. To get the best reception, she scooped up Natalie and took the call in the living room. Dr. Allende’s smooth face filled the screen. “Hello Suella,” she said, seemingly strained.

“Hello doctor. I appreciate your call.”

The doctor smiled, nodded cordially, closing her eyes for just a moment. “Tiffany said you had a matter with Natalie that you needed help with?”

Suella felt embarrassed as she suddenly forgot the original reason she’d picked up the phone earlier that afternoon. She scrambled to make up something. “Well, her rash came back. I was a little concerned.”

In even tones, and with a blasé expression, Dr. Allende asked. “Her rash on her bottom?”

“No. It’s on her...her arms.”

“Can you show me?”

Suella wondered if the resolution on her player would be good enough. There’d been a recent upgrade, but she hadn’t checked it yet. It was all moot, though,

since Natalie's arms were clear. Still, Suella held her up to the camera, angling her so that the doctor could see both arms.

Dr Allende narrowed her eyes, appearing to examine her screen closely. "I see clear skin, Suella. On both of her arms."

Suella bowed her head. "It was worse before, doctor."

Dr. Allende exhaled, and on the monitor, Suella could see the small woman's chest rise and fall. "Suella, we need to discuss something. Your child is fine. She's been very healthy and every time we've examined her we've found her to be a normally developing little girl. Now, since baby's immune systems continually develop and mature, they're more sensitive to things sometimes. A few dust particles in the air can trigger a nasal discharge. Changes in the temperature can cause slight flushing that might look like a rash. And children do cough."

The doctor was speaking in slow, measured tones, causing Suella to finally realize something. "You're saying I need to chill, and not grab for the phone so much."

"I'm saying your daughter's a perfectly healthy, beautiful little girl. Sometimes it might be best to let her be."

"I gotcha." Suella smoothed her hair back. "I'm sorry I snapped at one of your office girls earlier."

"That's fine." After a few more pleasantries, the doctor and the mother ended their telephone conversation.

The next month brought the holidays, and while Suella gleefully decorated the whole house with lights and tinsel. On a Saturday, one of Nathan's non-baseball friends arrived with a pickup truck to help them get the biggest and fullest tree that would fit in

their living room. She knew Natalie was still too little to properly appreciate it, but there would be pictures, lots of pictures. She could cherish them for the rest of her life.

Suella also wanted to remember Toni, who had provided her with the greatest gift she could ever receive. Curiously, though, she'd only been over to see Natalie twice. When Toni looked at Natalie, Suella could see an entire range of emotions flit on her face, from joy, to pride, to awe, but then her lower lip would start to quiver. The second time, Suella thought she'd seen Toni's eyes moisten. Words caught in Toni's throat when she excused herself, suddenly remembering that she had to meet with her agent that afternoon. When Suella would find herself alone in the house again, she tried to imagine what it would be like to give up a child to who she had given birth. She wouldn't be able to do it.

After the holidays, the next big event was Natalie's first birthday. Suella would throw a huge party, which would coincide with the opening of the baseball season. She would invite her new friends from the luxury box in San Diego, a few of the friends she had locally, especially Carolyn, and even young kids and young mothers from around the neighborhood. She'd gotten to know a few of them when she would ride her bicycle or take Natalie to the park in her stroller.

The one-year birthday also marked the first major checkup at the center, as they'd outlined in the ream of paperwork the year before. Suella scheduled the appointment for the first week in May, which would give her plenty of time to devise a list of questions. One fact had begun to gnaw at her: why was Natalie not walking or talking yet? Most babies she'd ever seen at least made gurgling, guttural sounds like "goo goo ga ga," but Natalie remained strangely silent. Also, infants approaching their first year usually stood

up in the crib or the playpen, holding onto the bars for support. If Natalie had ever done this, Suella had never seen it. Her little daughter seemed perfectly content to sit for hours in her playpen, playing with her toys.

At times, she would set Natalie in the middle of the carpet, away from the distractions of her crib or playpen, to see if Natalie would try to stand or walk. All she did was teeter from side to side or crawl, however. She would also try to get Natalie to talk, to mimic her, saying the word "Mama" over and over again to see if Natalie would repeat it. When Nathan was home, she also pointed to him and said the word "Da Da," to see if Natalie would repeat this. She would just sit, head tilted, with a look of slight confusion in her eyes, as if she was thinking "Mom, why are you talking to me like I'm an idiot?"

She knew she'd worn out her welcome at the doctor's office, and only called there for official things or if Natalie ran a fever higher than 101 (it happened once). One day in the park, with the other mothers, she casually announced "I'm a little worried that Nat has yet to walk or talk."

None of them batted an eye. A tall redhead named Summer said "My first said nothing until he was almost two years old. Now you can't get him to shut up."

Natalie's first birthday arrived, and Suella went ahead with the major party as she planned. Her whole house was filled with mirth and gaiety, with little boys and girls from around the neighborhood and their parents. For the little kids inside a clown sang and danced while Nathan recorded everything, juking and bouncing about for the best angles. The bigger kids outside got to participate in a piñata party presided over by one of the Mexican women in the neighborhood. Throughout the day, Natalie sat in her

mother or father's lap, taking everything in with wide-eyed wonder.

Not once during the whole day did anyone approach Suella and say "Gee, she's a year old. Shouldn't she be walking and talking?" Maybe it was normal, after all, maybe some kids are reserved, or maybe, just maybe, Natalie was waiting until she could get a better vocabulary together before she tried to speak.

Even Toni showed up for the event. How could she not? At first, she kept to herself, clearly uncomfortable at a kid's party, where nothing stronger than coca cola was served. Suella looked after her and tried to make her feel welcome by introducing her to the mothers from around the neighborhood. A pleasantly round honey colored woman from around the corner kept staring at Toni for some reason, though finally, she spoke. "Hey, I know where I've seen you before. You're an actress, right? Weren't you in 'Suburban Daredevil'?"

Toni sat still and grinned. Her eyes became slits as she smiled more widely.

The woman from around the corner and everyone else in the room said "Yes, that's it!"

Toni's face flushed in an endearing, self-deprecating way. "Yes, that was me."

By now the honey colored woman was shaking her head, still looking at Toni. "You're even prettier in person. And you got to kiss Den Rivers, how cool is that?"

For awhile after that, the ladies all conversed about Hollywood and the movies and it made Suella glad to see Toni so happy and animated. As all good things do, though, Suella's party came to an end. One by one the guests picked up their party favors and left through the front door, with lots of hugs and well wishes along the way. When everyone was gone, Suella held Natalie and walked her through the house. "All those

people came to see you, on your first birthday,” and when she walked into the living room, she added “And it looks like a hurricane hit our house.

At the beginning of May she drove out to the center, a route she could have followed blindfolded. Along the way Natalie lifted up her head and gazed at the scenery whizzing past them out the car windows: mountains, cacti, and sagebrush. Other cars would occasionally pass them and the occupants inside, when they would see the darling little baby girl, would smile and wave.

When they arrived at the center, the nurses who had been present the year before, at the birth, all clamored around Suella and Natalie. “Oh, she got so big,” one of them gushed. Another said “She’s so beautiful.”

Dr. Allende smiled widely when she greeted them in the lobby. When the doctor smiled, she transformed into a warm, delicate, inwardly beautiful woman. She seemed to have forgotten all about the strife Suella had put her office through. “Well, Natalie looks completely healthy and normal. She’s beautiful. Do you have any concerns?”

Suella held Natalie a little bit closer to her. “She still isn’t speaking or walking yet. That concerns me a bit, I must say.”

The doctor waved a hand dismissively, her features still pleasant. “That’s completely normal. Before long she’ll be talking your ear off.”

Maybe so. Suella reluctantly handed Natalie over to a nurse who took her back for the tests. Over and over again Suella had pleaded to be present in the room while the doctors poked and prodded her daughter, but she’d been refused every time. Instead, Suella was forced to stay in a waiting room to try to pass the time by reading magazines or surfing screens. The anxiety of what the doctors might be doing to her little girl tore at

her. What if something hurt her and she cried out? Wouldn't she want her mother there?

As the time wore on, Suella became increasingly aware of a tan skinned and dark-haired woman wearing a ponytail, sitting in the lobby across from her. She had dressed herself smartly in a violet dress with stylish high-heeled shoes but had not picked up any magazine to read and did not seem interested in any news or entertainment swaths. A few different times, Suella looked up and discovered the woman looking directly back at her. She was going to ask what the woman wanted, but suddenly she spoke. "It's your first time, right?"

"Um, no, I've been here before. Many times."

She spoke with sharp enunciation and what sounded like an island dialect. "I mean it's your first annual, right?"

"Annual?"

"The long checkup that the doctors do every year. It's your first one, isn't it?"

Suella nodded, sure of where the woman was coming from by now. "Yes, it is."

"It gets easier, believe me. By the way, my name's Claudette." She casually lifted herself from her chair and gracefully side stepped to one beside Suella.

Suella introduced herself and then added "Then you..."

Claudette chuckled for a moment, flashing a friendly smile. "Yes, my son was two years old this past month. He already looks just like his daddy."

"Then you..."

"Yes, we did." She smiled proudly, as if she was talking about straight A's.

"My daughter is going to look just like me."

Claudette smiled even wider, showing two rows of perfect, white teeth. "That's

fantastic! I'm so happy for you."

Suella leaned forward and Claudette followed, leaning in close to her. "Listen, I don't know any other way to broach this. Could we get in trouble for sitting here and talking like this?"

Claudette waved a hand dismissively. "No honey, they aren't going to give a wink about that."

"Well, in the contract it says that the parents aren't supposed to fraternize with other parents. You know."

Claudette wrinkled her nose. "Do you think I'm going to let a piece of paper keep me from speaking to whom I want to speak to?"

Suella noticed that a couple of nurses had already passed and were smiling at them pleasantly. How would they be able to keep the parents from talking to each other? It was impossible. "Can I ask you something? Does your boy walk and talk yet?"

Claudette had been leaning in to listen to her closely, but suddenly reared back and started laughing loud guffaws. "He runs like he wants to be in the Olympics and talks and talks like he wants to be the next president."

Suella decided to hold back the details of her fears about Natalie's development and her permanent health status. "I just love her so much," she said. "I want her to be happy. I want to be the best mother I possibly can."

Claudette tilted her head and cooed. "Then your daughter is so lucky."

A nurse suddenly appeared behind them. "Mrs. Worthy?"

Suella turned around in the direction of the young woman's voice. "Yes?"

One of the doctors wanted me to come get you. Could you follow me, please?"

The nurse's demeanor was calm and cordial. As they walked away, Suella looked back at Claudette, who simply shrugged. She followed the nurse down a long, marble corridor. "I hope everything's going okay," she said.

"Yes, I'm sure it is." They stopped at a door, which the sturdily built nurse pushed open. They entered what appeared to be a laboratory, with several back rooms attached. Dr. Allende appeared from around one of the doorways.

"Back here Suella," she called out to them. They walked into an examination room where Natalie lay on a soft table, looking like a small, delicate doll. "Something just happened." Dr. Allende was smiling as she indicated Natalie, laying on the table with electronic sensors attached to various points on her legs and chest.

When Natalie turned her little head and saw Suella, she murmured "Mama!" and raised her arms toward her.

Electric lines ran from sensors on her arms, too. Suella glanced at the doctor and the nurse, standing in the doorway. "It's okay," Dr. Allende said.

Suella leaned over her precious little girl. "It's okay, buttercup, I'm here."

"Mama," Natalie said again.

Suella leaned down and held her tightly, rocking her back and forth as tears of joy trickled from her eyes. She realized she should let go so. The doctor and nurse needed to continue their work. As she stood, she saw both Dr. Allende and the nurse dabbing at their eyes.

Chapter Eleven

Five years later

September, 2022

Natalie would be going into the first grade. All the predictions her doctors had made had come true. By the age of eighteen months, she started to speak in complete sentences, such as “I would like to go outside now.” Around the same time she also rose beneath her own power and started to walk briskly throughout the whole house, without grabbing onto railings or couch armrests for support.

Nathan once again pitched for San Diego. He had turned 47 before the season started and could now say that he’d pitched in big league games over four decades: the 1990’s, the 2000’s, the twenty-teens and now the twenty-twenties. Even though San Diego released him after the 2016 season, they kept their condo in Oceanside. Suella loved to disconnect herself from everything and ride the bullet train down there with Natalie. Nathan managed to sign with Detroit for a couple of years and he bought a condo there. Suella stayed away from it during the first season. Finally, Nathan persuaded her to spend a month there the next year.

Suella had envisioned an empty ghost town with crumbling buildings from the last century hosting gangs and crankheads. Instead she saw emerald glass buildings over brightly floral walking parks with magnet trams shuttling people to work at thriving auto plants. Their first night there, Nathan had stood behind her and held her while they admired the twinkling stars in the sky outside their balcony. “See, it’s not so bad,” he said.

The next winter, Detroit released him, though he sold the condo easily.

He also found work easily, with Cleveland. Just before the all-star break they traded him to San Francisco. "I'm getting too old for this shit," Nathan complained one night during the break. At the end of the year, he considered retiring.

Toni talked him out of it, though. During Christmas at the house she told him "Go for another year. You have a chance to be the oldest pitcher ever to play."

"No, I wouldn't. Jamie Moyer grabbed that honor in '12, the prick." he said. "If a contending team calls, maybe."

That contending team was San Diego.

Nathan became a father figure to many of the new young pitchers on the team and he worked several times a week, pitching to one or two batters as a "spot man." Late in the summer, the team enjoyed a comfortable lead in the standings, causing the fans to whisper "post season."

On that September morning, he padded through the kitchen yanking on cabinet handles while Suella sat in the dining room trying to catch up on some work. "Honey, have you seen the WD40?" Nathan asked.

"It should be in those cabinets you're looking through," Suella told him.

Nathan stood in the middle of the tile floor and sighed, slump-shouldered. "I forgot the damn combination."

"It's 773," Suella said.

"773? Damn, no wonder why I can't get in. When did you change it to 773? I thought it was 442."

Suella blinked "send" and closed out the program to give her husband her undivided attention. "I changed it last week. Remember? I told you. But you were on

the way out the door, I guess it didn't sink in."

Nathan dialed the combination and opened the cabinet door. "I swear, you have to be fucking Houdini to get into any of the cabinets around here."

"There's a really good reason we did it that way and she's in her bedroom napping." Suella wanted to make sure the little girl was rested for her first day.

Later, Suella herself faced difficulty trying to sleep. She lie awake beside Nathan staring at the way the moonlight made shadows in the nooks and crannies of their colonial style beveled ceiling. How would she get along with the other children in her class? Kids were impressionable. Was there any way they would be able to tell she was slightly different from them? As the thought tumbled around in her mind like socks in an old style clothes dryer, she resolved that if the New School was too much, she could always have her transferred.

When the radio came on at five a.m., she was still wide-awake. To make herself useful, she started breakfast, preparing Natalie's favorite: waffles with blueberries and cream. After the plate had been set for her, she entered Natalie's bedroom, stopped to admire all the delicate, frilly, French provincial furniture and approached her daughter. Natalie lay peacefully in the center of the bed. For a moment, she simply stood and gazed at her. She looked at the way Natalie's curly hair tumbled in waves around her shoulders, and how she always appeared so angelic an innocent when she was sleeping. She leaned down and kissed her gently on her forehead. "It's time to wake up, baby."

Suella held her daughter's hand as she brought her from her bedroom to the kitchen on the other side of the house. Natalie rubbed her eyes and squinted. When she saw the place settings on the kitchen table, her eyes opened wide. "Boo-berries!" she

said, jumping up and down on the tile floor.

Suella reached for her coffee while Natalie plopped down into her chair and grabbed for her knife and fork. “Wait a moment, young lady. We’ve discussed this before. What is the fruit on top of your waffles called?”

“Boo-berries,” Natalie exclaimed triumphantly while she stabbed at the waffles.

“Natalie, put your knife and fork down and look at me.”

She did exactly as she was told, causing her mother to smile inside. Her little feet, covered in her footed pajamas dangled inches from the floor.

“Today you’re going to school. Do you know what that means?”

Natalie grinned, her perfect, spaced baby teeth showing as she gazed up at the ceiling. “I am going to be with the other kids.”

“Yes. And what else?”

“We’re going to practice making numbers and letters.”

Suella wondered if she should simply stop and just lecture the child but let their game continue instead. “And what else?”

“Um, I’m going to learn about the world?”

Suella patted her daughter atop her head and responded “Yes!” enthusiastically. “You’re going to learn about the world. Now tell me again what the little pieces of fruit on top of your waffles are called.”

She looked down at the plate with the whipped cream started to melt and run over the waffles in watery trails. “Boo, I mean blue-berries.”

“Perfect,” Suella said.

“Can I eat now?”

“Yes.”

Suella watched her daughter rip the waffles and blueberries apart as if she'd been lost in the woods for a week. At least she chewed delicately, with her mouth closed.

Later, she helped Natalie put on her pink, textured tights and one of the beautiful casual chic ensembles from the closet. Suella stood back in awe when she finished. Natalie was wearing ruffles and lace but her eyes were downcast, looking at the floor and her new matching Mary Jane shoes. Suella touched her arm. “What’s wrong darling? Do you feel all right?”

“Mommy, why do I always have to wear a dress?”

Her innocent little question knifed through Suella, and as she sat on her haunches in front of Natalie, she had to take a deep breath to regain her composure. “Because you look so beautiful in it, honey! You’ll be the prettiest girl in your class. Your mama loves you. That’s why she bought you the most beautiful clothes, to show you how much she loves you.” She traced a fingertip along the ridge of Natalie’s nose, a movement that never ceased to make her smile. Suella had spent lots of time in some of the higher-end shops on Rodeo drive to get Natalie all the clothes. With a small voice, Natalie asked “Can I wear pants some time?”

Suella thought about the pink “Kitty Cat” overalls she had bought during one of her recent shopping expeditions. “Sure darling, like when you go on a field trip with your class or chase butterflies out on the lawn.”

The New School was a private elementary school in a residential neighborhood near the business district. Suella made sure that they left the house in plenty of time to get to the school by eight o’clock. One could never predict how bad traffic would be. A

circular drive swirled through the grounds in front of the school and a carousel of cars dropped off children by the front walk. In this way, things had changed very little in the 38 years since she'd been in first grade herself.

When Suella's car reached the front end of the carousel, she looked down at Natalie, who'd allowed her to put silver and gold tassels in her hair at the last minute. "This is it, honey, the start of your long journey through school." She pushed a lock of Natalie's hair out of her face. "I love you and want you to do well."

Natalie looked up at Suella with a small smile that melted Suella's heart. "I love you too, mommy." The little girl then opened her door and lunch box in hand, skipped toward the front door of the school, where all the other children were headed. Suella sat still, watching her until she reached the door and disappeared inside. The blaring of a car horn behind her knocked her out of her reverie. She drove away from the curb and headed home, marveling that she'd kept herself together during this. A year ago, when she brought Natalie to kindergarten, she started shaking and crying when she was supposed to pull away from the curb and go home. One of the teacher's aides rushed up to her car and invited her inside. Suella's tears soaked through three tissues as she sat in an employee's lounge, trying to get calm.

For now, Suella let Natalie wear her pants and overalls on the weekends. The magnet train had been finally completed a couple of years ago. They could travel to their beach condo in thirty minutes, much quicker than it took to drive there. Another five minutes beyond that, they could go to the stadium to watch Nathan and his team. The games were exciting since the team was in first place and would probably go to the playoffs. On one Sunday Suella and Natalie traveled down to watch them play. They

stayed up in the luxury box level with all the other wives and children of various ages. Late in the game, when Nathan came in to pitch, Suella took Natalie to the theatre seats below the box to watch closely. “Daddy throws the baseball hard!” Natalie remarked while Nathan tossed warm up throws to the catcher.

When the first player from Arizona came up to bat, he hit a high pop up to the infield. Suella smiled when she remembered what Nathan had always said about how it felt to induce the players to hit harmless pop ups.

The second batter, a white man with dark hair and retro sideburns, smashed the ball a long way, toward the fence. They watch it drop onto the dirt track between the left and center fielder. Suella knew neither of the players since it had been so many years since Nathan returned to the team.

With a runner on base, Nathan would snap his neck around to watch the player, sometimes pretending to throw to second. “Why doesn’t daddy throw the ball to the catcher?” Natalie asked.

Suella hugged the little girl sitting in her lap. “Because he doesn’t want the man to run home.” When Nathan finally did throw a pitch to home plate, the batter hit a ground ball to third. The next batter popped the ball up. Immediately after that came the seventh inning stretch. Suella wondered why she suddenly craved a cosmopolitan. “Let’s go up to the dining room, sweet pea,” she said, lifting her little girl from her lap. “Maybe we can get you an ice cream.”

“Yay!” Natalie screeched, jumping up and down as she reached for her mother’s hand. It turned out that they served dipped frozen custard cones. Though Suella still wanted a drink, she had an idea. She asked the waiter to prepare two vanilla and

chocolate-dipped cones for them.

When they returned to their seats, Suella with a drink in one hand and a cone in the other, she noticed that a new pitcher was coming into the game for the eighth inning. Natalie held her cone out away from her body, as her mother had suggested, waiting until they reached their seats and settled in before she would start eating.

“I’m going to show you how to eat a dipped cone without making a mess,” Suella said, placing napkins down onto Natalie’s lap.

Natalie looked out through the glass, toward the baseball field. “Hey, that’s not daddy! Where’s daddy?”

“He’s sitting on the bench in the dugout with the other players,” Suella said, marveling to herself once again how much money her husband made for hardly any work. She brought the ice cream cone close to her lips. “Now what you do is go to the very top of the cone and break off a little piece with your teeth. Then, you lick the ice cream to keep it from dripping.”

Suella had eaten dipped ice cream cones that way since she was little, never spilling any melted ice cream or chocolate on her. Natalie chomped down around the edges of the chocolate tip, smearing chocolate dip and vanilla ice cream on her lips and chin. She smiled peacefully as she enjoyed the sweet richness of the flavors.

“Now honey, lick the ice cream so that it doesn’t melt and drip down onto your pretty pants,” Suella said.

Natalie hungrily lapped at the ice cream and a rivulet of it flowed over her lips and dribbled down, dripping off her chin onto the pile of napkins. Suella was glad she put plenty of them down there. Though dozens of people surrounded them in the seats

and in the luxury box, and they were in a stadium filled with tens of thousands of people, Suella felt completely alone with her daughter. Together, they nibbled at the dipped ice cream, swirling it on their tongues until they reached the stiff cake cone. By that time the napkins in Natalie's lap held a puddle of melted ice cream.

"Very good!" Suella said, patting Natalie on the top of her head. "See how we kept it off your pants?" Next time, she vowed, she would take longer to show her daughter the step-by-step process of eating a dipped cone cleanly.

A few nights later, at home, she found Nathan sprawled over his easy chair in the den, with the television off. He was staring at the ceiling, his mouth showing a short frown. Suella had left her optical splitter in there earlier, when she searched his bookcase for a file. When she entered the room to put the book back, Nathan still stared upward. "Pensive tonight, aren't we?" she said.

"This is it," he announced, his voice booming as he straightened in the chair. "I can't do this anymore."

"Then don't." When he still sat, frowning, a twinge of anxiety frosted her stomach. "You meant pitching, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then retire. You know how I feel about that." She lowered down onto the edge of the easy chair, beside Nathan's thighs. After leaning forward to hug him quickly she sat up and stroked strands of his hair.

"It's not easy. What'll I do after that?"

Suella poked him playfully. "You could be a coach."

Nathan's eyes rolled. "What am I going to teach some rookie pitcher? How to

scuff the ball with a hidden tack? How to throw a spitter?”

“You could teach them how to throw....what was that you said? Sugar strikes?”

He laughed. “Sweet strikes, hon. It’s a good thought, but nothing you can really teach.”

Suella sighed. “Then be one of those guys on TV who comments on the games,”

“A color guy? That’s funny. I’d probably say ‘Look at that fucking hit!’”

and they’d have to fire me in the first week. No, I’m done with baseball. Time to move on! Maybe I can get a bit part in one of the movies Toni’s in.”

Two weeks later, he called Suella from Milwaukee: “We’re in!” A team he played on was going to the playoffs for the first time in fifteen years.

Chapter Twelve.

Two weeks after Nathan's giddy call from Milwaukee, Nathan's team was embroiled in the National League playoff series against Chicago. They had won the first two games, making Nathan drunk with glee that they could win two out of three games in San Diego and celebrate winning the pennant at home. But then they lost two of the three games in San Diego, causing all the sportscasters to say that Chicago might go to the World Series for the first time in 101 years.

Late during the second game in San Diego, a game they were losing 12-3, Nathan called Suella from the bullpen. "Get a ticket to Chicago. Bring Nat with you."

She knew she couldn't refuse, and while she and Natalie boarded a tube for Chicago, she reflected on how much airline travel had changed since she was Natalie's age. Back then, it was like riding a bus, with the seats three across and separated by an aisle, with flight attendants flitting about. After 9-11 they got so strict with security and before long only cargo flights could carry luggage. Then someone came up with the bright idea of catapulting a jet off the edge of the atmosphere and powering it with something called "anti-matter." It could get you to Chicago in an hour, when it used to be a four and a half hour flight in the old, jet fuel days.

The catch was that the passengers would have to sit in a cocoon like plexiglass enclosure called a tube. For ten minutes the flight would skirt the edges of zero gravity, causing weightlessness that reminded Suella of swimming underwater. It would be Natalie's first trip in the tube. Suella paid extra for one that could fit two people rather than try to cajole the airlines into allowing Natalie to ride on her lap. To pass the time on the flight, she read to Natalie out of a storybook.

When they landed, it was already dark in Chicago. And cold. Suella felt glad that she brought winter coats for the both of them. A shuttle took them to a nice, new hotel and along the way Nathan pointed out the new gleaming concrete and glass stadium. It looked nicer to her than the one in San Diego, at least in the dark.

They would play the next day's game at one o'clock in the afternoon. That seemed strange to Suella until Nathan pointed out Chicago's long history of day baseball. "Hon, they didn't even have lights at the old stadium until 1988. Old habits die hard."

Suella shrugged. "Well then I guess we'll have to take our little sight-seeing tour some other time." She patted the bow on top of Natalie's head.

At the game the next day, Suella met all the wives she'd sat with all summer at various games, pretending to watch the game while holding endless conversations about their families. Thankfully, a couple of girls and a boy Natalie's age would play with her in a couple of the rooms at the luxury box. Suella felt distracted by all the video screens and the announcer's voices booming through speakers in every room. "All we have to do is win one more," Claudia Rodriguez said, as she raised a glass of wine and gestured to everyone in the room to toast with her.

It was not to be.

Chicago scored four runs in the first inning. The applause outside the luxury box rumbled the ground beneath their feet. Since the announcer's voices filled all the rooms, the loud cheering from the crowd assaulted their eardrums, also. At the beginning of the seventh inning, the announcer said "Here comes Methuselah!" Suella glanced at the screen just in time to see Nathan tossing some warm up throws. His chest rose and fell a lot and the corners of his mouth turned down as he threw. Her husband was "mopping

up,” one of his least favorite roles in baseball. The score was 10-2.

Natalie, who’d been playing with some children her age, ran back into the room with Suella just in time to see a close up of Nathan throwing a ball plateward. She froze, gazing at the screen with bewilderment, her cupid bow lips parting. “Daddy looks mad. Why is he mad?”

Suella curled her arm around Natalie and brought her toward her shoulder for a quick hug. “Oh, I don’t think he’s mad, honey. He’s just serious.” Smart little whip, that girl, she thought.

In the next instant, Natalie put on her carefree smile and ran toward the other room. A few of the other wives drifted down into the lounge seating area, some of them teetering from wine and champagne. “I want to go home, guys,” Heather Donovan said, slumping in her seat, her long legs splayed out in front of her. “Why are you doing this to me?”

Suella sat in a unique position where she could look down and see through the tall glass window out into the stadium. If she glanced upward, she could see the video monitor and hear the announcer’s voice as he said “It’s official folks. Worthy is the oldest pitcher to appear in a post-season game.”

The first batter fouled a couple of pitches into the stands before Nathan caused him to hit a weak ground ball to third base. By the time the next batter strode to the on-deck circle Suella saw something eerily familiar about her husband. He bowed his head down and kicked at the dirt around the pitching rubber. It was the same, casual air he showed when he strode around the edges of the yard, checking out the landscaping. “Oh, oh, this doesn’t look good,” Suella murmured.

Claudia replied. "Of course not. They're down 8 runs and they only have one at-bat left."

"No, I don't mean that," Suella said, but before she could get all the words out, the batter drove the ball in a vicious line over the fence in left field. It reminded her of someone viciously whacking a golf ball off the tee at the driving range. She shook her head.

After the game, the wives who'd traveled to Chicago met their husbands at the locker room door. Many of them showed red, watery eyes as they hugged their husbands, consoling them. "There's only one more tomorrow," a man's voice said.

Suella knew it was fifty-fifty that Nathan would want to hit a bar with a couple of his friends and meet up with them later. Instead, he shuffled out of the locker room, dressed in his best jeans and nightclub shirt, looking like a hurt little boy. "Let's go," he said. Natalie ran over and hugged her father hard around the tops of his legs. He patted her softly atop her lush blond hair as they walked along.

"I'm scared," Nathan said later, as they lie in bed with a monitor droning on at the other side of the room. Suella lay on one of the queen beds with Natalie, while Nathan slept in the other bed himself.

"About what?" Suella asked.

"That might be the last time I ever pitch, and I stunk it up."

"No you didn't."

He sighed loudly. "That one Rentschler hit would have been out at the Grand Canyon."

"So? It happens. Isn't that what you always say?"

Nathan shook his head back and forth, slowly. “Not the way I wanted to go out. Not the way I wanted to go out.”

“Then make him put you in the game tomorrow.” She turned on her side to face Natalie, who lay peacefully, her lips slightly parted. She looked like a porcelain doll. Suella leaned forward and kissed her goodnight on her cheek.

The next morning, rays of sunlight sliced through the sliding glass door of the balcony, waking Suella before Natalie or Nathan. She wanted to go out there, to enjoy the view of the city waking up below her. As she opened the glass door, though, a chill breeze knocked her back. She noticed lacework of frost on the other window. How cold was it out here? Halloween was coming up quickly and they’d not even settled the league championships yet. At this rate, they would be playing baseball on Thanksgiving. If they could plow the field!

Nathan woke up soon after that, causing Suella to wonder if the cold breeze from the door had stirred him.

When Natalie woke up shortly after, they all dressed and rode the elevator down to the hotel restaurant. “Wow! Do they have boo-berry waffles here?”

Suella narrowed her eyes and glared down at Natalie. “Do they have what?”

Natalie’s cheekbones tinged red as she slumped down in her chair, sliding below the tablecloth. “Blue-berries,” she murmured.

“That’s better,” Suella said, patting her atop her head.

“That’s okay, sweet pea,” Nathan said, winking at Natalie. “She always makes me say things right, too.”

The waitress brought the waffles with whipped cream and blueberries that kept

Natalie occupied for the rest of their breakfast. Meanwhile, her parents nibbled at their omelets and sipped their coffee. Suella would look across the table at Nathan every so often, just to let him know she'd been thinking about him, that she was with him. "It's Chicago," he said, finally. "Let's go to the aquarium."

For the next few hours, Nathan happily showed Natalie all the seals, tropical fish, and the sharks in the aquarium. Seeing him play with her caused a twinge in her insides. There was something sexy about the way he looked after her, joked with her and bounded through the day in his carefree way.

When they walked out into the fresh Chicago air, Suella couldn't believe they would be playing a baseball game that night. They'd all had to wear their California winter jackets out into the late October chill. As Nathan dropped them off at the hotel to catch his early shuttle, someone called Suella. An area code she didn't recognize. "It's Cynthia Brae," she said. "Claudia gave me your number. Listen, we're going to sit behind the dugout today because the guys really need us. You might want to dress accordingly."

Great, she thought. At least Natalie had a cute, fuchsia down jacket with a hood. It looked really cute on her but she always seemed a little downcast when she wore it.

"We're going to sit with the people?" she asked, when her mother was finished explaining to her why she was getting so bundled up.

"Yes honey."

Natalie's eyes brightened. "Yay!"

A couple of hours later, they both arrived at the stadium to meet the other wives at the rotunda. Natalie jumped up and down when she reunited with the two other little

girls and the little boy she'd played with the day before. The noise of the crowd swelled around them. Had they arrived early? Suella clicked herself and checked the readout: game time was still an hour away. She saw a sea of winter coats and parkas with down and fleece edged collars.

Claudia said "Shall we brave the tundra?"

The first thing they did was enter the lower level at a place called "New Waveland Avenue" which was a club that overlooked a grouping of seats that led down to the visitor's bullpen. Suella knew she could find Nathan there. As soon as they reached the edge, Nathan turned around and looked up at them from the bullpen. "Hi Daddy!" Natalie said, jumping up and down with glee.

"Hi precious! Give Daddy a kiss!"

Natalie took her little hand, pressed it against her lips, and threw her father a kiss. "Aw, sweetheart, why don't you give me a real one? I need it! For good luck!"

Suella looked down at him from the edge of the aisle and the metal rail. Nathan had walked up to the spot directly beneath them. He was at least ten feet below them, but he held up his arms beckoningly to her. "Nathan, are you saying what I think you are?"

"Dangle her down, honey," Nathan said. A couple of the other pitchers gathered.

"Yes Mommy!" Natalie said; "I want to kiss Daddy!"

Claudia overheard them and stepped beside Suella. "You do one leg, and I'll do the other. It'll be a cute photo op."

"What?" Suella said. "Are you both crazy?"

By this time a few of the regular fans seating in the seats noticed them. A few of them said "Aw, come on, mom!" and chanted for them to lower Natalie down.

“Okay,” she said, finally. “I guess I’m outvoted.”

Suella and Claudia gently lifted Natalie up, then each took hold of one leg, so she could be dangled down to her father. From the bullpen floor, two of the other pitchers boosted Nathan so that he could clear the remaining space between them and father and daughter could kiss. When they kissed for a brief second, Suella imagined flashes of light pulsing around them.

Then, someone tapped Suella on the back. When she strained to turn around, she saw two gray-haired men in orange jackets and captain’s hats. “What’s going on here?” one of them asked.

“That’s my husband, Nathan Worthy, down there,” Suella explained. She and Claudia lifted Natalie upward quickly. She squealed while they hoisted her back over the railing. Suella quickly brought her to her side, holding her against her hip.

“Do you think you’re being funny?” the other guard said. “That kid could get hurt.”

One of them smiled, but the other scowled. Suella knew that guards like that had to check out anything weird that was going on in the stands, and she couldn’t tell if she was in trouble or not. “I’m sorry if I did anything wrong,” she said.

Nathan shouted up from down in the bullpen. “It’s okay officers! It was my idea.”

Both of the guardmen grinned wryly. “Okay, we’ll let it go. Do you know you could get thrown out of here for pulling a stunt like that?”

Suella suddenly remembered something from her childhood: an image of Michael Jackson dangling his child out of an upper-story window to show to the paparazzi.

They'd discussed it in her social studies class and everyone agreed that it was inappropriate behavior for a father. Oh well.

Claudia leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Let's get the hell out of here!"

Suella took Natalie's hand and they ran away from the seats near the bullpen.

They had to weave their way through throngs of excited people on the concourse, all the while looking for the aisle that led to their box seats near the dugout.

Previously, Suella had enjoyed staying up in the luxury boxes with dinner delights served under gleaming silver pans. As they made their way to the box seats behind the visitor's dugout, she saw old-fashioned vendors hawking hot dogs, beer, and peanuts. Most of them wore gloves and caps to go with their sweatshirt sleeves under the uniform.

Megan, a lady whom Suella was familiar with, said "This has to be the coldest baseball game played ever."

Arlene, one of the Hispanic player's wives said "No. I checked that. It's forty-two degrees. They played a home opener once where the temp was 32."

"As long as it's not windy," someone said.

Baseball stadiums were supposed to have a ban on screens on the lower deck. It could be distracting to the players. That night, Suella counted three of them near the section where they were sitting. The owners had turned the sound up, too, so that she could hear all the commentators.

She felt as if she'd been sitting in her living room watching the game on television. After the formalities, such as a Celtic singer doing the national anthem, which seemed strange even for Chicago, they started playing. Suella heard an announcer say "It's do or die tonight, folks."

One of her friends, Melinda, had sneaked in a bottle of Ouzo and offered shots from it. Suella took a couple of the shots in little paper cups to keep herself warm. She worried about Natalie, but her daughter happily jumped around and played with her friends.

“We’ve got Ronnie pitching,” Claudia said. “We can win!” She was talking about Ron Hellinger, the single young man who threw fastballs that looked like white streaks. Suella noticed that the pitcher from Chicago also threw fastballs that looked like aspirin tablets and hit the catcher’s mitt with a boom that she could hear even above the expectant, raucous crowd.

The innings wore on, the pitchers dominated, and Suella felt a warm glow that intensified with every drop of Ouzo that she drank. Around her the crowd rose and sat down, cheering loudly with every long fly ball or hit. Yet, when she looked at the scoreboard, she saw zeroes at the end. Natalie held her around her hips, drawing tightly against her. “I’m cold,” she said.

As the Chicago pitcher tired, he walked a batter. Someone popped out, causing Suella to think of Nathan. San Diego’s next batter, was a righty, his back to them. When the Chicago pitcher reared back to fling his next pitch, the batter swung hard and hit the ball with a loud crack. All of the women sprang upward from their seats, shouting expectantly as a long, arcing fly ball soared into the cold night. They all watched it land near the stands where Suella had dangled Natalie a couple of hours before. All of the action happened like a slide show for Suella, as she saw the two San Diego players in helmets joyously jogging on the basepaths and the giddy women around her jumping and hugging each other. “What happened, mommy?” Natalie asked having to raise her voice

above all the shouting.

“Someone hit a home run!” Suella shouted down to her.

Later, when the Chicago players all ran off the field, Melinda said “Just two more innings! Come on boys! Just hold ‘em for two more innings!”

A different pitcher, one Suella did not recognize, took the mound for the eighth inning. He walked the first batter, causing everyone to groan. All of the Chicago fans around them and the thousands of others in the bowl cheered thunderously. The next batter popped out, quieting them. Claudia said “Come on, Jose! Make ‘em hit a ground ball!” As if following her advice, the next batter did hit the ball on the ground, but it squirt through infielders who dived after it and rolled all the way to the outfield track. More thunderous cheering. Suella saw Melinda bite her fist. The runner who had walked slid into third.

The manager walked toward the mound, his hands jammed into his pockets, his rapid breathing puffing small clouds around his face and gray hair. They all looked toward the bullpen as the Chicago fans around them laughed and joked. The manager raised his left hand, causing Suella’s stomach to frost over. The bullpen door opened. Nathan ran out of the door, galloping briskly toward the mound. An announcer on one of the screens bellowed “And here he comes, Methuseleh!”

Claudia’s mouth dropped open and she narrowed her eyes. “Nathan? Oh my god!” Someone else said “That old man? He’s gonna blow it! What the hell is Chester thinking?” They all watched him take the mound and start his warm up throws. Even from their seats, without looking at a monitor, Suella could see his look of smug satisfaction. “We’re going to the series!” a man’s voice shouted, from one of the

sections near them. “That old junkballer doesn’t have a chance.”

Suella, who’d had four drinks of Ouzo by then, saw things differently. She slurred “He’s gonna get both of those guys out!”

Claudia said “What? A double play?”

“No! He’s gonna get both of those guys out.”

They all watched it unfold. Nathan finished his warm ups, then put on his scowling game face as the next batter strolled to the plate. The roar of the crowd reached a buzzing crescendo as the batter dug his heels in and rocked back and forth, causing his bat to sway, making it look like a cobra ready to strike. Quickly, Nathan shifted his feet and glanced at the runner on first, who was dancing around, juking back and forth.

Nathan gathered himself again, gazed down at the mound and peered in at the batter. When he appeared ready to lift his hands and start a windup toward the plate, he shifted his feet again and stared the runner back to the first base bag. “Come on, throw it to the plate, jago ff!” a grumpy man’s voice bellowed from one of the nearby sections.

Nathan dipped his head and squinted, reading the catcher’s signs, as Suella knew. Quickly he whipped around and slung a pitch toward the plate but it sailed away from the batter. The catcher was standing, tensing his muscles, faking a throw to first, chasing the runner back. A few boos emanated from the crowd. “Come on you stupid old piece of shit! While we’re young!” the grumpy man shouted.

On the screens in the sections surrounding them, the announcer, in an exasperated tone said “And Worthy *again* goes into the windup.” He stopped, his feet shifted, he glared the runner back to first base took a step toward third and whirled back to the runner at first. The crowd booed, louder and longer. Suella saw her husband sigh, the

front of his shirt lifting. He set, stopped and arced a pitch toward the plate. The batter swung mightily and fouled it straight back, bonking it off the glass off one of the luxury boxes. Someone behind the glass waved a white sheet of paper as if it was a flag for surrender.

Back on the field, Nathan brought his hands to his chest to start a windup. He glared straight ahead at the catcher. After that, it happened quickly: Suella was sure her husband was going to throw a pitch to the plate, he snap-shifted his feet, like a rap dancer and fired toward the first baseman. The runner, who'd been cocky and dancing just a moment before, dived back toward the bag with a horrified look on his face. The umpire behind them all thrust his right fist high into the cold air, his thumb extended. Nathan had run toward them. The first baseman shuffled him the ball as if he'd been playing j'ai alai. Nathan caught the ball in his left hand, spun, and fired it toward home plate. The runner on third had taken off, trying to steal a run. Nathan's throw, and the runner arrived at home plate at the same time.

The runner and the catcher collided, tumbling backward in a plume of dust. All of the wives inhaled, clasping their hands together. The umpire at home, who'd backed away from the colliding baseball players, lowered down and thrust his fist into the air, thumb extended. Suella didn't see the players jump together at first base and at home. She was too busy jumping up and down herself, hugging Natalie, then Claudia, then Megan. From the speakers around them, the announcer bellowed. "I don't believe this! Worthy gunned down two runners on the same play!"

Chapter Twelve

Nathan kept his promise: his double-play pickoff move was the last time he played in a major league baseball game. For a whole year afterward, he received a blitzkrieg of calls from sports networks and sports magazine. Before he would go off to yet another interview, he would always tell Suella the same thing: “We didn’t even win the series. Nobody’s going to remember this next year.”

The next inning after Nathan’s great play, Chester the manager brought in Terry Hartwig, one of the other relievers, to close out the game. Terry struck out a batter, walked one, got another to pop out, and the next batter blooped one over the shortstop. That brought Chicago’s best hitter to home plate with a chance to win the series. That player drove one of Terry’s pitches onto the restaurant area above the bullpen, where Natalie had been dangled.

They called it “The Shot Heard Around the World, Part 2.”

Two years later, Suella still got the chills whenever she thought about that baseball game. Natalie turned seven years old. Someone had once told Suella that seven was the age of reason. In Natalie’s case, it was the age of inquisitiveness. When Natalie came home from school one day, and Suella was making tortellini in the kitchen, Natalie asked “Mom, why do people have different colored skin?”

Without missing a beat, Suella replied “Because that’s the way God made them. Just like he made you with light skin and blond hair. He made some little girls with dark skin and dark hair and some with light skin and freckles and red hair.”

Natalie giggled. “Like Cindy?”

“Yes, like Cindy.”

Natalie watched her mother cut up red peppers and onions for the sauce. What she asked next was the defining moment in a parent and child's life. "Mom, where did I come from?"

Suella was prepared, though. She took a deep breath and put down her knives. "Sweetheart, your father and I love each other very much. We love each other so much, that God decided we should have a child we could love, too. So he fixed that a baby grew inside me. That baby was you." She let her sentences hang in the air for a moment while Natalie glanced at the ceiling at her mother, and down at the floor.

"Oh."

A lie, Suella knew. There would come a time when Natalie would find out the truth. Dr. Allende and Dr. Pollidore thought it would be best to wait until she was around fifteen or so, when her developing mind could handle the information.

A week later, they took their yearly trip to the desert for Natalie's medical appointment at the center. As they drove through the desert and looked at all the familiar scenery, Natalie started asking questions. "Why do we have to go so far away for my doctor's appointment? Becca gets to go to a really nice doctor in a building right near the school. She gets a toy every time she goes. Why can't we go to that doctor?"

Suella was prepared for this, too. She had lain awake many nights thinking of her daughter and how she would develop, what kinds of questions she would ask. "Because Dr. Allende is the best. She's so good that she has to have an office way out in the desert or else crowds of people would come to her and that would be bad."

Natalie nodded, causing her mother to pray that this meant she accepted this. As they drove up to the center, Natalie remarked "The doctors are like rabbits."

“Rabbits?” Suella asked. “What do you mean?”

“They have their office in a hole in the ground, like a rabbit lives in a hole in the ground.”

“Oh.” Suella laughed.

As always, Suella waited in the lobby for two hours while the doctors saw Natalie. She clicked on her viewer so she could keep up with her business while she waited. Since the implantables became more and more popular, less and less people bothered her when she was online. They recognized the straight-ahead stare, married with a look of concentration. It reminded her of when she was in college, and they came out with Bluetooth for cell phones. People appeared to be walking around talking to themselves at first.

Right in the middle of a system sweep, Natalie jumped to her side, holding something. Annoyed, she aborted and clicked off. When she turned toward Natalie, she saw Dr. Allende with her, holding her hand. Natalie carried a small, beautiful little porcelain doll in the other hand.

“All finished,” Dr. Allende said, letting go of Natalie.

“Look what Dr. A gave me, mommy,” Natalie said, holding up the gingham-clothed doll.

“That’s wonderful, sweetie,” Suella said. “She’s so pretty.”

Suella was glad her daughter seemed cheerful and knew this would help them enjoy the long ride home. Once they made it to the car and entered the freeway, Natalie slumped in her seat and stared straight ahead, at the dashboard. Had they done something different this time? Suella wondered. Another part of her still did not want to know what

went on in the examination room. “We can stop off and get a chiliburger,” Suella said. This was Natalie’s favorite treat.

“Okay.”

It wasn’t quite the response Suella expected so she began to rack her brains for a way to get through. Natalie’s little doll sat on the console between them and gave her an idea. “That was awfully nice of Dr. Allende to give you such a pretty little doll. Do you have a name for her yet?”

“I don’t know.” She still stared at the dashboard, causing Suella even more anxiety.

“I think Jessica is a nice name. How about we call her Jessica?”

Instead, Natalie turned toward her, nudging the doll with her wrist. “Mom, is there something wrong with me?”

Suella lost her grip on the steering wheel for a moment and the car veered across the double yellow line. Thank goodness nothing was coming from the other way. When she had collected herself, she said. “Why, no Natalie. What would give you that idea?”

“Because a boy in my class has to go to a special doctor, too. He has diabattys.”

“Oh, diabetes. The poor little boy. He has to see the doctor very often, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, and he gets shots just like they give me.”

That worried Suella. None of the doctors had ever said anything about injections. She would have to have a talk with Dr. Allende about that. “Well, we like Dr. Allende. And you only have to see her once a year.” That seemed to satisfy Natalie. As they entered the Valley and the more populated areas, Suella saw the chiliburger place. She

turned there and together they ate a nice lunch and Natalie smiled and giggled a lot as she ate her meal. The moment they returned home, Suella called Dr. Allende's office, content this time to simply leave a message.

The doctor called her later. After their pleasantries, Suella jumped in with the reason for her call: "Natalie said she got a couple of injections?"

"Uh, yeah. The usual: influenza, TB, and immune booster."

Suella knew that Natalie had to receive her shots, as all children did, even though there were factions of people who were against it, forever saying that it was a sign of a government "control" conspiracy. But, immune boosters? "Why an immune booster?"

"To add quality to and prolong Natalie's life," the doctor said.

"Is there something wrong with Natalie's immune system?"

Dr. Allende sighed slightly from the other end of the line. "No, Suella. There's nothing wrong with Natalie. We like to include the injection as a precaution. You can think of it the same way you would as taking vitamin or food supplements."

"Well, Nat was quite concerned about it." She told the doctor about their conversation in the car.

"Some kids are going to be inquisitive," Dr. Allende said. "It's just one of the ways she's learning about her place in the world."

The conversation satisfied Suella. A couple of days later, though, she received another shock, this time at the hands of Nathan. She had been out grocery shopping and had been pleased to see Nathan's car in the driveway. When she parked and brought in the first bag of groceries, she expected that Nathan and even Natalie would come outside and help her with the rest. Yet the house was empty and quiet. Could they be in the back

yard? She checked the window in the den and saw Nathan wearing a baseball glove. He had just thrown a baseball to someone, lobbing it softly.

She walked through the breezeway to the door outside and there found Nathan. He was tossing the baseball to Natalie, who'd dressed in one of her blue jean overalls with a pink blouse underneath. Nathan had bought her a navy blue baseball cap with LA at the front. Natalie caught Nathan's lobbed throw. She took the ball out of her small mitt and cocked her arm back to throw, grimacing as she unleashed her arm forward to toss the ball back. Her erratic movement launched the ball nearly straight up into the air, so that it fell with a thud on the grass. Nathan laughed. "Hey, that's pretty good for a first try!"

Suella glared at him. She had folded her arms across her chest. "What's going on out here?"

Nathan gazed back at her blankly, as if she had just asked him for the shape of a full moon. "I got her some baseball stuff this morning. We're just tossing a few."

"But she's a girl, Nathan!"

He blinked. "Yeah, so?"

"She should be doing 'girl' things. This is completely inappropriate."

Nathan rolled his eyes upward. "You mean there's some kind of a law that girls can't play catch with their daddies? I missed that memo."

"Besides," Suella went on, "you might hurt her, if she misses one of your throws."

Nathan nodded, closing his eyes for a moment. "I promise I'll be gentle. Honey, are you having a good time?"

"Sure, daddy," Natalie said as he bent over to retrieve the ball from the grass.

From closer range, she picked up the ball to throw it to her father, and this time it shot from her hand in a straight line, landing in the center of Nathan's glove.

"Hey, hey," he said, laughing. "We've got a budding superstar here."

Suella had to turn away and go back inside before she got any more upset.

Playing baseball! That just wouldn't do. She would not have her daughter turning into a tough-talking tomboy. She would have to get her involved in something that would develop her grace and femininity. Ballet lessons! She'd always wanted to take them herself when she was little but had never been able to. That settled it. She would buy her pretty little girl the most beautiful leotards and tutus she could find and enroll her in ballet classes.

She approached it the same way she approached the schools: first she checked online for a good ballet school and the next day she was in the dance accessories store buying glittery pink, red, and teal leotards for Natalie. The day after that, when Natalie arrived home from school, Suella made sure she would find all the glittery and spangly spandex garments draped over her bed. She hoped she would squeal with glee but instead Natalie shuffled out of her bedroom and found her mother in the living room. "Thank you for the bathing suits mom," she said. "Are we going to the beach?"

"No, sweetie. I've got great news for you! You're going to be a ballerina!"

Suella showed her the glossy dance brochure, which featured a fair skinned and dark haired young dancer girl en pointe.

Natalie looked at the picture and squinted. "But I can't do that!"

Her mother patted her on the head, smoothing a lock of hair back away from her face. "Well, not now, of course, silly. But you can learn! And after awhile you'll be

dancing as gracefully as the girl in the picture. It'll be so much fun!" She told Natalie about the dance classes she would attend right after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

For the first ballet class, Suella helped Natalie change into the leotard. "You step into it, just like it's a bathing suit or underwear. And you bring the straps up over your shoulders." She smoothed them into place, stepping back to marvel at how adorable her little girl looked in the teal, rhinestone-spangled garment. Instead of a tutu, she wrapped a matching skirt around Natalie's waist and gave her the flat little black shoes she would need for class. When they drove to the ballet school, Suella let her wear the Gravas with ground effects that she liked so much.

Suella found that dance studios looked the same as they always did, with the shellacked wooden floors, the mirrors covering the wall, barre bars, and lots of little girls in gaily colored leotards and tutus. The teacher, Nina Espinosa, met Suella in the lobby. She wore a plum colored leotard and wrap skirt that flattered her olive skin very nicely. Her hair had been pinned up in the classic ballerina style. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Worthy," Nina said. "We'll be finished in about an hour and you can come back then." She started to lead Natalie out toward the dance floor and the other little girls.

"But I was going to stay behind and watch," Suella said.

Nina turned to her as she released Natalie. "I'm afraid that won't do. We don't let parents into the studio right away. It tends to inhibit the children."

Suella did notice that no other parents were around, and not wanting to be a pain in the butt, she window shopped at the plaza near the school. She made herself a mental note that for the next class, she would pin up Natalie's hair the same as Nina's and some of the other little girls. By the time Suella returned to the dance studio, she came upon a

small crowd of the other parents who arrived for their children. They all watched as Nina led the girls in a skipping and hopping routine around the edges of the floor. Natalie jumped higher and landed harder than the other girls, thudding along with them.

Oh well, Suella resolved, Nina would get her to coast along more lightly and delicately.

Two months later, Suella was dismayed to see Natalie still leaping and thudding. “How are you liking the ballet lessons?” Suella asked her in the car on the way home.

“Okay. Miss Espinosa tells funny stories and makes us laugh.”

Suella left it at that. Her daughter looked so much like the dancer in her collection of shimmery dance attire and her pinned up hair and she seemed to like both the teacher and the other little kids. So what if she never became a prima ballerina for the LA Ballet company? You can’t have everything.

Summer arrived, leaving Suella to revisit the mixed feelings she had about Nathan’s retirement. Playing baseball had given his life structure, a purpose. Every March was like a mini-rebirth for him as he headed off to another spring training session. He always participated in all the weight training sessions and the running the young rookies did. Throughout the summer he also regularly exercised rather than sit in the bullpen idly like most of the other relief pitchers.

She worried that life outside of baseball would slow him down, turn him into a couch jockey, give him love handles and jowls. Instead, Nathan passed the time on household projects like repairing a table or hanging drapes, and he took up gardening and landscaping. Three times a week he met up with his friends, both from baseball and the business world and they played golf or tennis.

At home, sometimes Natalie and Nathan would watch baseball games in the den

together, and Nathan would tell her stories about how he used to throw against a pitch-back for hours when he was a child. Mostly, aside from his little errands throughout the day and his trips to the golf course or tennis court, Nathan was around, around, around. On the days he felt lazy, he would lie around and web surf or yell at the sports channels, especially after he'd had a couple of beers or more. Or he would moan about how much the country was becoming a police state since the Republican congress took back the borders. "A few illegals never hurt anybody," he would often say. "We still need ditches dug and houses cleaned."

Nathan also pestered her for sex more. If she tried to beg off, using the classic excuses such as a headache, he would whine in a higher-pitched and very unattractive voice, again, especially if he'd drunk a few. For the sake of their marriage and to guarantee that two parents would raise her little girl, she just gave in. At least he was still quick, no fuss, no muss. Mostly Suella would lie there. Sometimes she would surprise him as he got out of the shower, getting down on her knees to give him a humming suck job that would always make his knees buckle as he moaned. She found that when she did that, he pestered her for straight sex less.

She understood where he'd been. As a major league baseball player, he'd enjoyed adulation from all sides. He admitted that it still gave him a thrill when people recognized him at the grocery store. Getting sex was his way of assuring himself that he still had it, he was still desirable. Suella felt that she was giving him a valuable gift of acquiescence and accommodation. In her late forties now, Suella was married to a gorgeous man who took care of himself and was good to her and she had a wonderful daughter whom she loved. Life was good!

Still, she needed a vacation from Nathan. As the old song went “Everybody needs a little time away, from the one they love.” A great idea quickly occurred to her: years had passed since they’d sold the condo in Cincinnati and she still had yet to return. She missed the quiet meaningful chats she would have with Jillian over steaming cups of tea. At the beginning of August, she and Natalie boarded a Stratojet at Ontario field. “It’s so hot here,” Natalie commented when they arrived at the terminal in Cincinnati and crossed the street in search of their rental car.

Jillian had practically begged her to stay at her condo while they revisited town but Suella chose an executive suite in Lytle Place by the river, instead. The stimulus programs of 2010 had reopened an ancient incline that connected the riverfront to the top of Mt. Adams, where she had lived so many years before. Each morning during their week of vacation, they would board the incline car and watch the city view recede below them as the car chugged upward. An older man who sat beside them grinned at Natalie and said “Isn’t it neat the way this incline car goes sideways up the mountain?”

Natalie shrugged. “We have much bigger mountains in California.”

Jillian’s humble little condo and her bohemian life fascinated Natalie. She stared at the exotic, abstract prints on the walls and the figurines occupying shelves. While Natalie had dabbled in art at school with tempera paints and clay for coffee mugs or coasters, she thought it was “fierce” that someone could actually earn a living that way. Suella’s heart felt warmed when Jillian brought out the porcelain teapot and cups.

As she poured tea for them, Suella noticed that Jillian held long gazes on Natalie. She remembered something Jillian said around the time she told her about the cloning. “Do you suppose that cloned people have souls?” The realization chilled her.

When the three of them were sitting, Jillian gave her attention to Natalie. At first she asked her about safe subjects, such as “How do you like school? What is your favorite subject? What do you like to do after school and on the weekends?” This caused Natalie and her mother to go off tangent and tell funny stories about what happened during the school year. From there, Jillian’s queries became more pointed and personal. “Do you dream at night, Natalie?”

In a low, small voice, Natalie said “Sometimes.”

Jillian nodded. “When you see art, like some of the paintings on my walls, what does it make you think of?”

Natalie glanced at one of the pictures. “It looks like piles of seaweed that we see at the beach sometimes.” That made Suella wince. Jillian nodded knowingly and watched Natalie with an appraising eye, causing Suella to wonder what she’d say the next time they were alone.

But Jillian continued her little interview with Natalie. Suella wondered if she was reading too much into things. Maybe Jillian was genuinely interested in Natalie. Though she sometimes gave talks and exhibitions at elementary schools, Suella knew that ordinarily, Jillian wasn’t in much contact with children Natalie’s age. Jillian said “Do you believe in God?”

Without missing a beat, Natalie replied “Yes, He’s the one who made the world and all the people in it.”

“How did you learn about him?”

Natalie glanced at over at her mother. “Mommy told me.” The Worthy’s had not set foot inside a church the whole time they were married. As a child, Suella was Roman

Catholic. When she married Nathan it was a justice of the peace ceremony at her best friend Sandra's house. It was all over in less than five minutes.

Later, Natalie played with Jillian's calico cat Josie while both Suella and Jillian stole out onto the soft chairs in the balcony. While the balcony at Suella's old condo had offered a spectacular view of the city, Jillian's place faced the opposite direction. They were treated to a view of the Columbia Parkway, with the Ohio River in the distance. As they both settled into their chairs, Suella leaned forward slightly. "Were you getting at what I think you were getting at back there?" she asked.

Jillian shrugged. "I was mostly asking her all the questions to keep her still so that I could look into her eyes and see if I could perceive her aura."

"What does looking in her eyes do?"

Jillian glanced at her quizzically. Her face was very expressive. Long ago she'd told Suella that after high school she'd wanted to become a nurse or an artist. "Better go to art school," her mother had said. "Your face is too expressive to be a nurse. You'd walk into the room of someone all broken up in an accident and your expression would say 'Good God, what on earth happened to you?'" At that moment, she asked Suella, "Haven't you ever heard of the saying 'The eyes are the windows of the soul?'"

"Of course. But what about the aura thing? How did it go with that?"

"I don't know," Jillian said. "It's too bright in here. It's easiest if you're looking at someone against a dark background or if you're looking at them at night."

"Well then, you need to come to our executive suite tonight."

After the visit to Jillian's, Suella and Natalie rode the incline car back down the hill to the gray and glass residential hall. For their evening entertainment, they visited a

nice French restaurant in the downtown area. They also walked through the skyways. Suella had been dismayed to learn that the baseball team was on the road that week. If she'd had more time to plan the trip, she could have chosen a week they were in town so she could take Natalie to the luxury box and she would meet Julie (whose husband still played for the club) and some of the newer wives. That was a trip for another time. As things were, the getaway was nice for mother-daughter bonding.

The executive suite contained two bedrooms, with glossy wooden furnishings and scrumptious sheets with an absurdly high thread count. When they returned for the night, Natalie said she was tired and put her pajamas on. After she lay down on the bed in her room, Suella surfed quietly in the living room. After a half hour had gone by she cracked the door open and whispered her daughter's name. Natalie lay back against the pillow, her blond curls falling away from her face and creating an angelic halo. Certainly Jillian would be able to see something. She called her friend and told her to come down the incline to the suite.

After Jillian arrived, Suella turned off all the screens and the lights in the suite. She nudged the door open so that both women could sneak inside to view Natalie. Suella watched anxiously as her friend squinted, then widened her eyes, her lips parted in concentration. This was all she could make out in the dark, however. Faint street sounds carried up from the city outside the windows, creating a background rhythm for Jillian and Suella's rite. Suella felt quite spooked by the whole thing, and when Jillian tapped her arm and motioned for them to back out of the room, she felt relieved.

They ventured out onto the balcony of the executive suite, this time closing a sliding glass door behind them. "Well, what did you see?" Suella asked while they stood.

Jillian smiled with a serenity that matched the matrons in paintings from old masters. “She has a beautiful, cobalt and pink aura.”

Suella felt so overjoyed that tears misted in hers eyes.

Chapter Thirteen

For the rest of their stay in Cincinnati, Suella met up with her friend Julie with her son Daniel and daughter Rayna and they all went to an old style amusement park called King's Island. Suella had heard of the place during all the years she'd lived in Cincinnati yet somehow had never found the time to drive twenty miles to see it. The last time she'd taken Natalie to an amusement park had been Disneyland, when Natalie was five. Mostly Natalie had gazed in wide-eyed wonder at all the animatronic characters in the "Pirates of the Caribbean" ride. At King's Island, the scene was rowdier, with more classic roller coasters and thrill rides.

Two thunderstorms that day drove them into food courts or indoor arcades, but when everything dried off, Julie's kids dragged them toward the exciting roller coasters. Suella noted that Natalie, being average sized, barely met the height requirements for the intense, racing coaster. "We don't have to go on this coaster if you don't want to," Suella said. "There's lots of other fun rides like the safari and the carousel..."

"I want to go on the coaster!" Natalie said, beaming. Julie had bought headbands for both Natalie and Rayna, with metal martian-like antennas extending from them and a puffy star at the end. These bounced around on Natalie's head delightfully as she spoke.

They moved to the front of the line quickly. Julie said it was because people had been scared away that day by all the dark clouds cruising overhead. When they all searched for coaster cars to sit in, Suella felt rumbling in the pit of her stomach. "Let's go up front!" Rayna said, jumping up and down and running for the first car in the train. Both she and Natalie hopped into the very first car. Daniel sat in the seat behind them. Another little boy quickly jumped in next to him. Julie and Suella sat in the second car.

They were in the rear seat but still close enough to keep an eye on the children. The bars came down, while calliope music filled the air. As the train rolled out of the station, a panicky thought suddenly occurred to Suella. Could Natalie's equilibrium take the sudden drops and turns of a roller coaster? She tried to remember anything in the literature that forbade riding on thrill rides or roller coasters, but couldn't. No one had ever warned her against it, either.

The roller coaster train turned a corner and started chugging up by chain-pull on a long, high hill. When they'd passed the outside of the roller coaster, Suella had already seen a steep drop the coaster trains thundered down. "Oh please forgive me for scaring her half to death," Suella said to herself in a silent prayer. "Please let her little heart be able to handle the excitement. Children young and teenagers shouted and cried with anticipation as both trains neared the summit of the hill. Suella double-taked when she realized that the train traveling parallel to them, on the other track, was going backwards!

"Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!" Suella kept saying as the cars reached the top. Julie laughed at her. In the next moment, they all plummeted down the steep drop, with all four children in the front car squealing with rowdy delight. The coaster reached the bottom and immediately thundered over another hill. Julie waved to all the people riding in the backwards train. They all thundered around a turn and then shot up onto another incline. After the cars banked around another turn, they all screeched down another drop as steep as the first. Suella screamed and laughed, happy that her daughter was having such a good time.

"Can we go on it again? Can we go on it again?" Natalie asked, jumping up and down as they all lifted themselves from the stopped coaster train and walked for the exit.

For the rest of the day, Natalie squealed and whooped along with the other children as they rode coasters with even more intense vertical drops and wicked turns. She also piloted an eagle car that swung on long cables amid other cars. Suella rode beside her on that one and was impressed by her daughter's ability to work the handle and twist the wing to make them thrust outward higher.

When they ate a dinner later of ridiculously fatty yet delicious carnival burgers and fries food, Suella said "I never knew you were quite the little daredevil."

Daniel and Rayna chose this moment to query their little visitor from the exotic land known as California. "Do you have lots of earthquakes in California?" Rayna asked. She wore braids that day and when she tilted her head to address Natalie, the end of one of her braids dipped into the ketchup.

"Aw, they're nothing. Everything just shakes a little and goes 'boom,' 'boom.'"

"Do you ever see any movie stars?" Daniel asked.

Natalie looked at her mother. "Aunt Toni. She's a movie star, isn't she?"

"Yes, you could say that, hon." Suella replied. After she became a mother, Toni found a surprising amount of mother or neighbor roles in films made for television or subscription access. Her generous curves and facial dimples worked to her benefit now, when they'd once limited her.

"Wow," Rayna and Daniel said, together, their mouths forming small "o's."

"Your aunt is a movie star!"

"Your daddy plays baseball," Natalie pointed out.

"Aw," Daniel said, waving a hand dismissively, "That ain't nothing."

Julie feigned disgust, shaking her head, looking at Suella. "Its amazing," she said.

“All this money we spend on private schools for them and they still want to talk like this. Daniel, you know better than that.”

“Oh,” Daniel said, putting his shoulders back, lifting his chin and narrowing his eyes. “I mean ‘That isn’t anything.’”

That night, as they were leaving the park, Suella’s phone rang. When she answered it, she heard a higher-pitched male’s voice at the other end that she could not place at first. “What are you doing?” he said.

It caused her to stop in her tracks, wondering if a perv had gotten hold of her number somehow.

Before she could ask who was calling, he continued. “I miss you. And I miss Nat.” He spoke slowly and sing-songy, a tip-off that he’d been drinking.

“Hey you. I’ve got a question for you. In all the years we lived in Cincinnati, how come you never took me to King’s Island?”

“King’s Island? And have all those kids hound me for autographs all day?”

Suella giggled. “Well that’s what dark glasses, mustaches and hats are for, silly.”

Nathan laughed along with her. When he spoke, Suella had to strain to hear him over the noise of the passing people and the cars as they entered the parking lot. “Really, when are you coming home? I’m so lonely.”

She believed him. And she knew that in a weak moment he wouldn’t be foolish enough to seek solace with Toni, either. Toni had found herself a guy in his twenties, who performed stunts for one of the larger studios. He was what they used to call a “boy toy.” And trolling for anonymous sex with faceless girls awed by his celebrity status wouldn’t have appealed to Nathan. “Besides, there’s too much disease shit out there.”

At heart, her husband was a simple man. “So when are you coming home?”

She’d gone over all of this with him on her way out the door nearly a week before. It was Thursday. Their flight was Sunday. Suella said “Tomorrow. We’ll be coming home tomorrow.”

In order to do it without forking over a small fortune for special tickets, Suella had to accept a torturous series of flights that hopscotched across the country with stops in Houston and Phoenix before finally landing at Bob Hope airport. They would then need to find a cab or shuttle to get them to the LAX parking lot where she’d left the car.

“This is boring,” Natalie said, as she sipped on a milk shake in a food court at the Phoenix airport. “How come we’re going home early?”

“Because daddy misses us.”

“So?” Natalie flicked at the tip of her straw, sending droplets of milk shake into the air. “When daddy was pitching, he was gone a long time. We missed him, but he never came home early for us.”

“That was different,” Suella said. “Daddy’s team needed him.”

Her little girl’s words melted her heart. She wasn’t sure if Natalie remembered or not. Then she remembered something she said when she was five and Nathan was in the last year of his contract with San Diego. “I wish daddy was a plumber,” she’d said back then.

Suella had been dressing her for kindergarten and stopped, while zipping up the back of her jumper. “Why would you want that, honey?”

Little Natalie turned to her. “Kelly’s father is a plumber. He’s always home. If daddy was a plumber, he’d always be home, too.”

“Daddy’s a pitcher though. He makes lots of people happy. People watch him. Besides, while you’re still a little girl, daddy’s going to get to be home all the time.”

She squinted. “He is? Why?”

“Because pitching is something you can only do when you’re young. And your father is not so young anymore.”

Of course, what Natalie was saying years later, in the Phoenix airport, was absolutely right. But women always gave too much, didn’t they? With Nathan’s help, though, she became a mother, and she would never forget that. “Let’s go to the gate, sweetie,” we don’t want to miss the flight and end up staying here all night.”

Though they’d left Cincinnati at 5pm, all the stops, delays, and the shuttle ride from Bob Hope got them to Suella’s car at two in the morning. Natalie had fallen asleep on the shuttle ride. Suella carried her from the shuttle to her car in the parking lot. As she pulled into her driveway, she saw shining banners hanging from the roof saying “Welcome home!” Twinkling mylar balloons danced on the breeze in the grass.

The living room light was on and when Suella glanced through the window she could see Nathan sleeping on the antique couch. She keyed open the front door, and let the groggy little Natalie enter first. “Hi daddy!” she said, rushing over to the couch to plop herself down on top of him as he lay there.

“Oh sweet pea, I missed you so much!” He pulled her down and hugged her hard. Suella followed her, lowering herself to her knees and kissing the top of Nathan’s head.

“We came home early for you!” Natalie exclaimed, causing Suella to buckle over inside.

Nathan lifted Natalie away from him so he could look at her as they talked.

“Really? You did?” Natalie nodded. Nathan looked over at her.

Suella sighed. “You got to me. What can I say?”

He beckoned her down so that the three of them could partake in a long group hug. Once they broke apart and shuffled off to bed, all three of them fell asleep as soon as their heads hit pillows.

Suella woke up first the next morning, under the bright, golden sunrise. She sunk down to kiss and touch Nathan as he slept peacefully, his breath trilling. Since she knew he would love it, she chose to gradually waken him by pleasuring him orally, taking her time, savoring him. Rather than let her finish him that way, he gently lifted her head so they could lie face to face and he could enter her. He showed the same tender languidness that she’d shown him.

Later, when Natalie went out to play, they discussed Suella’s little vacation over cups of coffee. “So why didn’t you tell Nat?”

“That we were going home early because you were lonely and I wanted to help you? I didn’t think she’d understand.”

Nathan smirked. “You’d be surprised at what that little girl understands.” To stress his point, he raised his eyebrows.

“What are you saying? Do you think she knows?”

He shrugged. “Wouldn’t surprise me.” After lowering down, he gaze at her with concern in his eyes as he continued. “Have you had ‘the talk’ with her yet?”

The idea seemed completely preposterous to Suella. Nothing like that had even entered her mind, and she knew, by attending a few parent-teacher conferences that they weren’t talking about that in school yet. “No. Of course not. She’s only eight years old.

She doesn't need to know that, yet. I didn't know until I was almost thirteen."

"Need I remind you," he said, affecting his officious professor persona, "that things are different now."

"True. But that doesn't mean that I can't raise my daughter the way that I want."

"If you don't tell her, she can find out with a couple of clicks. Or she can find out the old-fashioned way, from kids on the playground."

"But they're children!" Suella protested.

She was going to say more, but Nathan raised a finger, stopping her. "Different world. Now, I can tell her, or you can tell her. I think it should be you, don't you?"

A few weeks later, the school year began, along with the crazy ritual of buying new clothes, supplies and getting Natalie ready for the fall session of ballet. When Suella helped her step into a dainty, delicate hot pink leotard and tutu, she thought about what her husband had said. Raising children could get complicated! "Why are you so quiet, mom?" Natalie asked, as Suella pinned the girl's long, soft curls atop her head.

"I was just thinking about how quickly you're growing up," Suella replied.

"Before long you'll be in high school, and then college, and then you'll grow up to be a doctor or lawyer and ay, yi, yi!"

"Well, right now I'm just a kid."

Suella wished Nathan would see things that way. As she looked at her daughter's smooth skin and dimples, radiating innocence, she resolved to spare her of 'the talk' for now. Hopefully Nathan wouldn't force the issue by constantly nagging her about whether she'd done the deed or not.

Later, Suella and Nathan attended their daughter's first ballet recital, which was

held in a small auditorium a short distance from the school. Suella tingled with awe. She searched the faces of the little girls who fluttered out onto the stage for her Natalie, but couldn't find her. They'd printed a handbill program, which she picked up and read. The group of girls in bright white leotards and tutus had been goslings, who would become beautiful swans. Natalie's name was nowhere to be found, until Suella searched down the list, for "trees" and found her name there. A group of trees, branches, bark, and all swayed in the background as the goslings danced. A headpiece of sticks, branches and leaves thrust upward from Natalie's ears as she swayed, smiling.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Nathan said, gazing at his little girl.

"Oh yes," Suella replied, wondering why Natalie had missed the cut for "gosling."

As she had promised herself, the next time she picked up Natalie from regular ballet class, she pulled Nina Espinosa aside. "I was just curious," she said, "why Natalie was put in the back during your recital."

"She was a tree. It was a very good part," Nina said.

Suella forced herself to smile. "I know it was a good part and important for the play and all, but I just had my heart set on seeing my little Natalie flutter across the stage like all those other little girls."

Nina's face took on a blank look. Suella could tell she was racking her brain, trying to come up with a tactful answer. "Mrs. Worthy, Natalie is a much better 'swayer' and 'hopper' than she is a 'flutterer.' I think if you asked her, she'd probably tell you the same thing. She was perfectly content with her role."

"Okay. What more could one ask for, right?" Suella said.

The following Saturday she found her in the back yard with Nathan. They kicked a soccer ball back and forth between them. Suella sighed. Her daughter giggled as she tried to push the ball along with her foot, the way a basketball player dribbles the basketball. Her father would stick a foot in every now and then, trying to flick the ball away from her, but Natalie was always too quick, side-stepping, stopping, and starting.

How could this be, she thought. Growing up, she'd hated soccer, ever since the time someone managed to kick the ball straight up, directly into her face. She'd practically been knocked out, but when a couple of her classmates helped her up, she was able to walk off the field and stand on the sidelines to recover. But when she looked out into the yard and saw her little girl, her little clone, she saw a girl completely lost in the moment, enjoying life by kicking an odd round ball all over the place.

That particular fall, Natalie started third grade. Suella remembered that as a time that schoolwork started getting serious. She made a note to carefully watch Natalie's grades. In late October she came home with her mid-term report and Suella couldn't believe it. An "A" in math, an "A" in reading, a "B" in social studies, an "A" in science, and a "C" in art. She put the paper down and gazed ahead. Could this really be someone who was cloned from her?

When Nathan came home later that afternoon and saw the report, he nearly hit the ceiling jumping for joy. "All right Nat! This is fantastic! Three 'A's'! Guess what we're going to do tonight? We're going to eat at Hollywood Savannah!" It was Natalie's favorite restaurant in the world. Just after they arrived and sat down, their waiter gushed, wide-eyed when he recognized Nathan. "Oh my god, you were one of my favorites!" he

said. "Proof that you don't have to be a 'roid taking knuckle-dragger to excel in sports."

The kid, who couldn't have been older than twenty, realized his bald statement. His eyes widened with horror, as he put a hand over his mouth and blushed, apologizing.

Nathan said "That's okay, kid. I appreciate it."

Suella remembered that people said these kinds of things to Nathan all the time. She turned her attention to Natalie. "Darling, I'm ecstatic about your good report card, but I'm curious about one thing. Why was your grade in art lower?"

Natalie had been smiling, since she'd been in her favorite restaurant, where the wait staff wore pith helmets and khaki and all of the tables looked like thatched huts. A small frown registered on her face for a moment. "I don't like it."

"What's not to like? You get to paint pictures, and draw things, and play with clay. When I was your age I made cows and pigs out of clay and built a doll house out of popsicle sticks."

"It's messy," Natalie said.

Nathan reached across and hugged his daughter across the shoulders. "She's taking after her old pop on that one," he said. "I didn't get art, either. But I lived for gym class!"

Through the grapevine, Suella heard that the junior college would be putting on a production of "The Nutcracker Suite" and that they would use children from Nina's ballet classes for the child roles in the ballet. Suella hoped and prayed that her Natalie would be chosen for one of the roles, but it was not to be. "Mom, I don't even like ballet," Natalie said. "I like soccer. Why can't I play soccer?"

Well, at least Suella could sell all of Natalie's ballet clothes on Ebay.

On the last day before Christmas vacation, Natalie brought home a report card. She'd been able to raise her grade in art to a "B" though all of her other grades remained the same as they had for the mid-term. "The teacher liked a picture I drew of daddy." She retrieved the piece of artwork from her bedroom. Suella gasped when she saw it. All of the proportions were perfect and correct: it was a view of him on the pitching mound in his old San Diego uniform, throwing a pitch to the plate. Natalie had copied the picture from something she saw in a magazine or possibly something she printed from the web. Still, all the lines were correct and the colors she used in tempera jumped out from the page. "This needs to go on the refrigerator, if I can find a magnet. Honey, I'm so proud of you!"

Suella and Nathan were so proud of Natalie for her grades that on Christmas Eve they announced that she could get one more extra special Christmas present. Anything she wanted. "I want to go skiing. Can we go skiing this year?"

Who was this child? Suella wondered. She hated the cold and thought skiing was too dangerous. She could see herself taking a nasty fall at a high speed and splintering bones through her skin. To Natalie's wish, Nathan said "That's a great idea! I haven't been skiing in years."

"We'll just have to wait and see," Suella said. Riding a roller coaster with stressful g-forces was one thing. An active, high-speed sport such as skiing was another. After the holidays, when she called Dr. Allende, the doctor told her that Natalie could enjoy any sport or activity that a naturally born little girl could do. Suella was almost disappointed that she could not come up with a medical reason to avoid cold and snow.

Chapter Fourteen

On a weekend in February, they all took a drive to Big Bear Lake. Suella missed dressing her daughter in the ballet outfits, but supposed she might have almost as much fun with ski wear. She helped her pick out an adorable fuchsia ski suit that complemented her fair skin and curly blond hair. “You should get one too,” Nathan had said. “Do you think we’re just going to let you drink hot chocolate in the ski lodge?”

Suella couldn’t believe how busy the ski area was. Hundreds of people teemed along the slopes, swishing through the snow like ants on toothpicks. Nathan, Suella and Natalie all rode together on a lift chair as it pulled them up the mountain. The sky was overcast, but with little wind. At least it wasn’t too cold on the day they decided to do this. “Isn’t this great?” Natalie said, waving her gloved hand toward the rustic, snow covered mountain scenery and all the excitement below them.

When they dropped off the lift chair, Suella started skidding too much and jabbed frantically at the snow with her ski poles to try to stop. Natalie, who instinctively knew to angle her skis in and swish them out, laughed at her mother. Their first stop was a bunny slope with a smaller lift and a cheery girl ski instructor on hand to give them all pointers. Nathan curled and sped through the snow as if he’d been born on skis. Still, he patiently stood by while the girl ski pro taught Natalie and Suella how to turn, snow plow and shift their weight to control their direction.

After about an hour, Suella could cut through the bunny slope, making long graceful turns without flailing about or falling. “I think you’re ready for the green run!” the instructor said. Nathan was so happy about this he whooped with delight.

They all skied toward the lift to take them there, laughing and grinning.

On the way up, Suella said “If I fall off the side of a mountain, make sure they donate my organs.”

Nathan laughed. “You’re not going to fall. I won’t let you.” When they all dropped off the lift at the start of the green run, Suella started to breathe fast. There was an immediate drop off that looked like a cliff! “It’s no problem,” Nathan said. “Just cut through it like the girl showed you. Follow me!”

Nathan skied along a ridge above the drop and curved off into the slope for the main run. Natalie, in her dark goggles, followed gracefully along behind him while Suella coasted and prayed. The green run opened up into a bowl area where dozens of other people swished through the snow as they glided downhill. For a moment the sun poked through clouds, causing Suella to squint. She wished she’d chosen tinted ones like Natalie’s. While her heart pounded every time she skied near another person, she felt glad as the run flattened out and led toward the lodge at the bottom. “See! You can do this!” Nathan said.

“I can do it too, daddy!” Natalie sang, raising her fists triumphantly. “Let’s go up again!”

Suella groaned inside. She’d wanted to ski down to the lodge and rest for a minute, but decided it would be more fun to share her daughter’s joy on a second run. “Let’s go even faster this time,” Natalie said, as the lift chair glided over the slopes. “This is the best day ever!”

When they hopped off the lift chair, Suella resolved that, no matter what, she would ski on toward the lodge when they reached the bottom. Natalie leaped off the ski

lift chair the moment they arrived at the green diamond slope. She swished and curved her way around the initial drop as if she'd been skiing for her whole life. Suella and Nathan chased after her. She realized that with all the activity she'd lost touch with the cold bite in the air. Natalie skied further and faster out ahead of them, nearing a congested area. Nathan jabbed his poles. He was trying to give himself forward thrust in order to catch up with his daughter.

Suella lagged anxiously behind. She made sure of rounding the steep drop with long, graceful curves, even if it slowed her down. By the time she reached the long, wide-open area, which before had looked like a bowling alley on a Friday night, she noticed that many skiers had clustered over to the far side, near a clump of trees. They were all standing still. Suella searched the crowd for the distinctive rose ski pants and jacket Natalie was wearing but she could not find them. Something told her that she should angle over toward the crowd of people stopped by the trees.

When she arrived there, she discovered that they were tending to someone who had fallen on the ground. As details became clearer when she approached, she realized that the person on the ground was wearing rose ski pants. Natalie. She heard her daughter whimpering and sobbing. Terrified, she closed the gap between them by leaning down and coasting hard. When she reached the crowd, she jabbed her ski poles into the snow to stop herself, then kicked off the latches on the ski boots, to free herself from the skis. "Mommy!" Natalie cried.

Nathan had knelt down in the snow, on the other side of her, holding her, comforting her. "I'm here, precious," Suella said, dropping to her knees and gathering her daughter in her arms. Natalie shook against her with wracking sobs.

Nathan said “She bumped into another little girl on the way down. Took a tumble. and ended up over here. I don’t think anything’s broken.”

“Where does it hurt, Natalie?”

Her eyes darted all around and her breath came out in raspy sobs. “All over.”

Nathan said “We called rescue just to be on the safe side. They’re going to take her to the first aid station in the lodge.”

Just a few moments later, a young guy and a girl about the same age swished to a stop on their skis right beside them. The guy towed a plastic sled behind him. Both of them wore black and red ski suits that were printed with “staff” on the back. The girl spoke first. She rushed beside Natalie. “We’re here darling,” she said. “Jay and I are going to bring you down to the lodge so that the nurse can make sure you’re okay.” She and Jay lifted Natalie tenderly, as if she were as fragile as a porcelain doll, holding her head while they lifted her toward the rescue sled.

“That’s it, sweetie,” Jay said. “Just a little joy ride and we’ll get you inside where it’s warm. All the hot chocolate you can drink. How does that sound?”

Natalie murmured “Okay.” She turned to Suella and added “Mommy, come with us! Don’t go away!”

“Don’t worry baby I’ll be right behind you!” She followed behind Jay and the girl, who towed the sled and Nathan fell in behind her. Together they made a skiing caravan that coasted the rest of the way down the hill toward the lodge. Other skiers cleared out of the way for them. They reached the bottom very quickly. Jay, the girl, and the sled rounded a corner for the rear door of the lodge, where several people emerged to receive them.

Suella had to disengage herself from her skis again, along with Nathan. They leaned their skis against grooves beside another door of the lodge. She anxiously stepped in the direction where they'd brought Natalie. Moments later she watched Jay and a couple of other guys with big arms and necks lift the entire sled onto an examination table.

The nurse, a plain woman wearing glasses and in early middle age, brushed back Natalie's hair with her palm as she cooed reassurances to her. The men gently lifted Natalie from the sled and placed her down on the table. Natalie had started to cry and sob, but quieted down when she saw Suella enter the room.

"Where does it hurt?" the nurse asked. "Move your toes for me." Jay gingerly removed Natalie's ski boots so the nurse could better assess the extent of her injuries. She quickly and efficiently checked Natalie's legs, feet, toes, and her hip, arms, and hands. Suella slumped with relief at watching her daughter lift her limbs with ease, without crying out in pain. "You're a very brave, very lucky girl," the nurse said. She lifted a penlight to check Natalie's eyes and ears as she spoke.

After a few minutes more of an examination, she instructed Jay and the girl from the slopes to stay behind and keep Natalie company. Meanwhile, the nurse brought Suella and Nathan out into the hallway. She said "She just had a scary fall, is all. Nothing's broken, she doesn't have any cuts or lacerations either. I'd like to keep her here for awhile longer, just to check for any changes in behavior or condition."

Nathan nodded. "That's completely fine with me, ma'am."

Suella shook the woman's hand. "I'm so grateful." When they all walked back into the nurse's room, Natalie was sitting up, looking distressed and sheepish.

“I want to change my pants,” Natalie said. “I wet myself.”

The nurse said “We have plenty of towels she can use to clean herself up. I can give you a plastic bag for her underwear. We even have paper panties that would probably fit her.”

Suella was amazed at how prepared they were. Jay and Nathan gracefully left the room so that the nurse and Suella could look after Natalie. In order to get her pants off, they had to unzip the bib and pull the suspenders down first. The nurse had taken Natalie’s jacket off at the beginning of the examination. As the ski bib slid off Natalie, Suella gasped in horror when she saw her little girl’s panties. They were tinged crimson red. “Oh my god,” she said, while the nurse calmly tugged Natalie’s blood-soaked panties over her feet. “What happened?” Suella asked.

The nurse gently examined Natalie’s vulva, kneading a sample of the blood between her thumb and first finger. “What’s wrong with me?” Natalie asked, her small face a contorted mask of confusion and fear.

“What is it?” Suella anxiously asked the nurse.

“Natalie, does anything hurt, say around your tummy or lower?” the nurse asked.

Too upset to speak, Natalie just shook her head vigorously. The nurse nodded, widening her eyes behind her glasses frames. “I can’t be sure of this yet, Mrs. Worthy, but I think your daughter may have just had her first period.”

Suella closed her eyes and shook her head. “What?”

“Her first period,” the nurse repeated. “Her first menses. The consistency of the blood, the absence of any injury. It’s all that’s left.”

“But that’s impossible! She isn’t even nine years old yet!” Suella wailed.

“Mommy, am I sick?” Natalie asked. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Have you discussed this with her?” the nurse asked Suella.

“No. I didn’t think I needed to yet! She’s not even nine years old.”

The nurse sighed. “Well, we’re going to have to tell her now.”

She reached over to pat Natalie tenderly on her head. “No, Natalie. You’re not sick.

And you’re not hurt, either. “ She paused for a moment, her eyes darting about the room, as she was probably thinking of the best way to broach this delicate subject. “As you grow up and get bigger, as you become a bigger girl, certain things change, certain things happen. Your body changes so that when you get older, you’ll be able to have a baby.”

As the nurse went on, discussing the phenomenon of menses in simple language, Suella held Natalie’s hand, looked down at her and nodded a lot.

When the two women finished speaking, Natalie said “So I’m going to be okay? I’m not sick?”

“You’ll be fine,” the nurse said. “Your mother will be there to help you each month. Everything will be fine.” She turned toward Suella and as an aside asked “How old were you when it happened?”

“When what happened?”

“Your period.”

“Oh,” Suella replied, feeling her temples and cheekbones heat up. “I was fif...I mean sixteen.”

The nurse nodded. “Well, Natalie is going to have lots of questions. Be there for her.”

Suella wondered who was going to answer *her* questions. There was nothing Dr.

Allende could probably tell her as they sat in a ski lounge, yet Natalie's annual appointment would occur in less than two months. This time Suella would bowl them over with questions. Natalie quietly drank her hot chocolate. Suella thought she must be trying to wrap her head around what the nurse had said. "I'm so glad you weren't hurt," Suella kept saying, over and over. It was the only thing she could think of to distract Natalie. When Nathan sat with their daughter for awhile, Suella retreated to another part of the lounge to call Dr. Allende.

Each time she called the office, though, she reached only the office girls. "I've already left her a message to call you back, Mrs. Worthy."

Suella decided that Dr. Allende must have been on a skiing trip, also. After the nurse at the lodge was satisfied that Natalie was not hurt internally and that she'd calmed down, she gave them the green light to go. "I think we've all had a tough day," Nathan said. "Let's go home. We'll beat all of the sundown crowd."

They'd used Suella's Mazda that day. Nathan ground the ignition twice before the switches plunged and the magnets swirled. "Maybe you ought to have them check that out, hun," he said as he backed out of the parking lot. "Those things cost a fortune to replace."

As they began the long descent down to the valley, Natalie, who'd changed back into her jeans and winter jacket, curled up on the back seat and quickly went to sleep. As Suella tried to make light small talk about the cute chalet style houses they passed and whether any famous people frequented Big Bear, she realized that Natalie wasn't responding to her. "The kid's had a tough day," Nathan said, trying to keep his voice down. "Let her sleep."

Suella glanced into the back seat, awestruck again by how beautiful and innocent her sleeping daughter looked. Speaking just above a whisper, she spoke to Nathan about her attempts to reach Dr. Allende.

He chuckled, watching the winding road ahead very closely. “What the hell do you think she’s going to tell you. ‘Congratulations! Maybe she’ll go into menopause earlier?’”

“That’s not funny, Nathan.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that this would have been a whole lot easier for her had you done what I said and had ‘The Talk’ with her already.”

“What’s done is done, babe.” She tried to think of a way to deftly change the subject, but knew that being so obvious about it would make him mad. Instead she just watched fir trees rush past on the roadside.

“You know, Toni said that this might happen.”

The mention of her name surprised Suella. They only saw her about once a month now, the last time being Christmas. “What did Toni say would happen?”

Nathan’s voice was a monotonous drone, like a boring science teacher. “She did some reading and talked to some science people. They said that the reason cloning isn’t more widespread is that they haven’t figured out a way to keep the clones from aging too quickly.”

His words hit her like a slap across the face. “That’s not what’s happening to Natalie.” Just to reassure herself she turned and took a long look at her daughter. Her skin was fair and smooth, her hair lustrous. Since she was so active, she was thin and lean. She looked like a healthy, beautiful nine-year-old girl.

“I didn’t say that’s what’s happening to Natalie, hon. Those tests they run on her once a year, that’s probably what they’re about.”

“But Natalie’s so healthy. She hardly ever gets colds, or the flu.”

Less than two months later, the time arrived for Natalie’s yearly visit to the center. She would have to miss a couple of day’s worth of soccer practice, which annoyed her. “Mom, can’t we get another doctor closer to here?” she asked. “When my friends go to the doctor, it only takes an hour. I always have to go for a whole day. And none of my friends gets that many shots or gets all those wires taped on. That’s so weird. Why do they do that?”

Suella knew this time would come. Countless nights she’d lain awake in bed many nights thinking of answers to all the questions she might ask. “It’s because we love you, dear. We want to make sure you grow up strong and healthy.”

That response quieted Natalie for a bit as she helped her mother clean the countertops and dishes. “I still wish I didn’t have to go.”

Chapter Fifteen

A week later, when they arrived at the center, Dr. Allende surprised Suella by receiving them in the lobby. She'd allowed her hair to grow longer, in an updated flip style, which made her appear even more glamorous than she had before. When she saw Natalie, her eyes brightened and she opened her arms to receive a hug from her. "There's my little daredevil!" Dr. Allende said as she gave Natalie a quick embrace. "I heard you had quite a little skiing trip awhile back."

"I fell, but I'm okay now."

Dr. Allende gazed down at Natalie, studying her. "My word," she said. "You're getting to look so much like your mother. It's uncanny."

Was she serious? Suella wondered. Of course she was going to look like her. The girl was cloned from one of her cells, for god's sake. She took the doctor aside. "Dr. Allende, I'd like a word with you after you take Natalie back for her tests."

When they met quickly in one of the shellacked, gleaming offices, the doctor invited her to sit down. "Before you say anything," the doctor said, when they'd both made themselves comfortable, "I know about the other news, also."

"But I never got a chance to tell you!"

Calmly, the doctor continued. "We spoke with the nurse at the ski lodge. She was able to tell me, since you signed a treatment waiver."

"Did you tell her about Natalie's....status?"

"No," she said, emphatically. "To do so would be to violate a doctor/parent confidence."

Suella had compiled and rehearsed all of her questions for Dr. Allende.

At that moment, though, only one of them occurred to her. “Does Natalie’s early period mean she’s aging quickly?”

For a split second, the doctor’s eyes widened before she continued. “No,” she said, straightening herself in her chair. “It just means that onset of menses has occurred earlier than usual for Natalie.”

Suella wondered if other things would occur “much earlier” for Natalie as well. She couldn’t hold back any longer. “For Natalie’s whole life she’s been having these extensive tests, and I accept that and all, but...”

The doctor regarded her patiently while Suella struggled to organize her thoughts. “...well I just hope I’ll never regret bringing the poor girl into the world the way she was brought in.”

Calmly, Dr. Allende said “Natalie is a beautiful, healthy girl. A success story.”

The doctor was, by extension calling Suella beautiful also, since Natalie was the very image of her. Her husband’s stern words suddenly came to her. “Doctor, I have to tell you something that’s been preying on my mind. I’ve been told that the reason cloning isn’t more widespread is because it hasn’t really been perfected. The cells of the clone turn over too fast, causing it to age faster.”

Dr. Allende patted Suella on the wrist and said “Natalie’s telomeres are normal.”

“Her what? Her telomeres?”

“A telomere is a part of the genetic code. In the past when animals were cloned, the telomeres broke down as the cells turned over and replaced themselves. They became shorter and shorter. That’s what caused the animals to age prematurely.”

“And you’re telling me that Natalie’s tele-whats-its have all stayed the same?”

“Yes.” As the doctor continued, she explained that it was the reason for the annual exhaustive tests. Several samples of telomeres had to be harvested and compared against each other. Natalie was also tested for nerve and electrolyte function.

Throughout all nine years of her life, everything had come back normal.

Suella sighed with relief. “Well, what more could one ask for?”

The doctor excused herself to participate in Natalie’s testing while Suella retreated to the deserted lobby to pass the next hour and a half. She suddenly felt it odd that for the past five years she’d always been alone on the days for Natalie’s testing. She never saw Claudette, the other mother again. Did the executives of the center just not want parents to talk to each other? It appeared so.

As with all the other times, Natalie eventually returned to the lobby with her same elated expression, happy to be done with another year’s testing. Time for chiliburgers.

At home that night Nathan grilled salmon steaks on their patio. Since Natalie had gone out to play with some of the other neighborhood kids, her parents could talk freely as the steaks sputtered and smoked. Suella told Nathan all about Natalie’s normal telomeres. “She’s just doing damage control,” Nathan said, matter-of-factly, while sprinkling lemon on the fish. “It’s probably freaking all those doctors out about Nat getting her period already.”

“I checked the web and discretely asked around, too,” Suella said. “Menses under age 10 is not all that uncommon, especially now. Some people blame in on pesticides and fertilizers.”

“Just make sure she doesn’t get raped,” Nathan said. “She could get knocked up and we’d have us the youngest mother in history.”

Suella punched him in the ribs, the way she always did whenever he told a bad joke.

A few weeks later, something happened. Suella surfed through all of her accounts online, the way she always did in the mid-afternoon. Natalie returned home from school. Rather than bring her backpack to her room, she let it fall in the front foyer with a thud. She strode heavily toward the den. Suella felt her daughter's presence in the room before she turned around to greet her. At first she was afraid to turn around, afraid of what expression she might find on her daughter's face. When she finally steeled herself to look, she saw Natalie's pained and drawn features.

"Mom," she started, in a soft, non-threatening voice. "Why didn't you tell me I was a clone?"

Suella shocked and stunned, immobile and mute. Was it really possible for a human mind to think as quickly as hers was doing? She could deny it, of course, and ask Natalie where she got her information. There was the possibility of a half-truth, that the egg had been fused and implanted but that she had carried her to term. She could even say that she adopted her as an infant and had no idea of the origin. But she loved Natalie. After a few more seconds of rapid fire soul searching, she decided that the direct, honest approach was best.

"I should have told you years ago," Suella said, starting to cry.

She expected Natalie to start crying, too, but she simply stood in the doorway, expressionless.

Suella knew she had to act. She rushed over to Natalie, cradling her in her arms, guiding her over to the daybed, setting her down softly atop her lap.

“My darling, sweet Natalie. I love you so much. You’re so special to me.” She held her daughter tightly, rocking her back and forth. While she rested Natalie’s small head atop her shoulder, with the rays of late afternoon sun bathing them, she felt warm and peaceful, glad that everything was finally out in the open. So what if Natalie found out a little early? How did she find out?

As Suella rocked her, she could feel the little girl’s chest hiccup and lift, shuddering against her. Natalie was now crying. Suella lifted her head off her shoulder and gently turned Natalie’s face toward her. Tears had started to trickle down both of Natalie’s soft cheeks. “What’s the matter, sweetheart?”

Natalie’s breath was coming in small wisps. Suella stroked her back, soothing her. After a few moments, Natalie said “Mom, am I going to die?”

Suella held her more tightly for a moment. “No, my sweet. Of course not. That’s why we take you to see Dr. Allende. She helps make sure that you stay healthy.”

For the next moments, Suella held Natalie, who stayed still, like a statue. They sat there motionlessly. Suella fantasized that, in holding Natalie this way, she could bath her in her essence and shield her from the world. Natalie was a beautiful, healthy little girl, as anyone could see. Why should it make a difference that she was cloned? Apparently it made a difference to someone, the nasty, mean someone who’d blabbed to her that she’d been a clone. How did she find out? Who could have told her? She couldn’t just ask her, point blank, because then Natalie would clam up.

She thought of a way to broach the subject from the back end. “Did you discuss clones in school today, honey?”

Natalie shook her head, dampening the shoulder fabric of Suella’s blouse.

“Did someone else talk to you about clones? Someone not from the center?” She congratulated herself on her good sense. Putting the question that way would leave it in Natalie’s corner to tell her how and where she learned.

“Someone called me,” Natalie said.

It was the last answer Suella expected to hear. Natalie had only been connected to the grid for about a year. Nathan had stopped Suella from turning on the two-way earlier than that because “You’ll be calling her ass ten times a day.” But to receive a call that told her of her origin was strange, and scary. “Who was it?” Suella asked.

“I don’t know.” She lifted her face away from Suella’s shoulder so that she could sit upright, on her lap. Her tears had dried, leaving glistening tracks along her cheekbones.

Suella knew that she could check Natalie’s phone records and find out exactly who, along with the date and time. Still, she had one more question for Natalie: “Was it a man or a woman?”

Natalie shrugged. “A man.” She started to shift around on her mother’s lap. “Can I go play now?”

Suella nodded, helping Natalie lift herself up and over the chair. She waited until her daughter walked down the hall before she executed her next move. When she was sure that Natalie was safely out of earshot and happily occupied with her screens, Suella jumped on the line for Dr. Allende’s office. A sweet-sounding receptionist answered. Suella said “Could you just please tell Dr. Allende I have an emergency? This is Mrs. Worthy.”

She knew it might be an hour or two before the doctor had time to reach her.

In the meantime, she called Nathan's private line. He'd said something earlier that day about riding out for deep sea fishing with his friends and when he answered, Suella heard a seagull caw and waves crest. "So she knows now," he said when she told him. "I'm surprised she didn't find out any earlier."

"Who do you think would have told her?"

Nathan squawked from the other end of the line and Suella could imagine him holding the archaic handheld to his ear like a seashell. "How the fuck am I supposed to know? It was probably some disgruntled employee from that center. They're all so weird over there."

"She said it was a man."

"Oh yeah," Nathan said, chuckling. "Just trace it. Find the sorry ass. Kick him to the curb for it."

Before Suella even accessed the program, she knew that whoever did it probably put themselves in "Universal" before placing the call. When she tried to trace it by calling up Natalie's records, she saw a bunch of zeroes on the screen. She sighed. Maybe Dr. Allende would know something.

She punched in the number on voice and a sweet sounding young woman soon answered at the other end. "This is Mrs. Worthy. Get me Dr. Allende."

The office girl paused and made a few barely audible gasping sounds. "Well, I'm sorry ma'am, she's in with a patient right now..."

Suella brusquely interrupted with "Have her call me back. She knows the number." She disconnected. For the next few minutes she tried to busy herself with housecleaning, knowing that it could be an hour or two before the doctor called back.

She placed herself on two-channel availability and guided the robovacs around the den and the living room. Only minutes later the line blinked and she had to turn them both off in order to hear Dr. Allende. Normally Suella would have sat down to put herself through this type of a call, but this time she remained standing. Dr. Allende appeared on her beam screen, her hair tied back and her face scrubbed clean. Suella marveled over how the woman still managed to look good. They exchanged pleasant greetings.

“What can I help you with today?” the doctor asked.

Suella took a deep breath. “We have a problem.”

The doctor’s eyes narrowed and she tilted her head slightly to one side.

“Someone has called my daughter and told her that she’s a clone.”

Dr. Allende nodded. “And she doesn’t already know?”

“Of course not.”

Her eyes widened and she let out a small sigh. Behind her, in the background, were jars filled with cotton swabs and a small chrome box. “Okay.” She bowed her head for a moment, apparently in thought. “She needed to know soon.”

“I was going to tell her maybe next year, but that’s not the point. Do you realize what kind of damage this guy has done? My daughter is crying her eyes out right now and she thinks I’ve betrayed her!”

Dr. Allende blinked. “She may be upset, but I’m sure she knows how much you love her.”

“I think you have someone at the center causing trouble.”

Without missing a beat, the doctor started shaking her head, frowning.

“Not likely. We have strict agreements, everyone’s under contract. We’re tight knit.”

“Has anyone been let go recently?”

Dr. Allende’s eyes darted to the right for a split second. “No.” Her voice rose a few decibels before she took a deep breath. “The best thing you can do right now is be there for Natalie. She’s going to have lots of questions.”

“Tell me about it.” Suella disconnected without officially closing the conversation, with Dr. Allende’s bewildered face dissolving into the ether. Slump-shouldered, Suella shuffled down the hallway to check on Natalie. The door had been left open, and Suella sneaked up to the jamb and stood behind it, looking in on her little girl. Natalie sat in her off-white, French Provincial desk, facing the far wall. There was no vanity there; if Natalie wanted to look at herself, she used a hand mirror. She blithely stretched screens open and spread them out before her eyes, unaware of her mother standing in the doorway. Though Suella’s vision had declined as she reached her latter forties, she could still read the headlines and some of the text on the screens. A picture of a sheep passed by. It was Dolly, the first successfully cloned animal.

God help me, Suella thought, as she backed away from the jamb and walked down the hall toward the kitchen.

Chapter Sixteen

For the next several weeks, Suella often caught Natalie staring at her during various times. Most often, they would all be sitting at dinner together, with Nathan enjoying whatever pasta dish or poultry casserole Suella had put together and Natalie would eat slowly. She would gaze at her mother for long periods of time. Suella knew that it wouldn't work to ask "What are you staring at?" Natalie must have been imagining what she'd look like in another thirty-eight years.

Instead, she would try to divert Natalie into another train of thought. "So what did you do in school today?"

Natalie would shrug, her twin blond ponytails bouncing against her shoulders. "Nothing."

Suella forced a laugh. "You were there seven hours. How could you have done nothing?"

Natalie shrugged again, twirling pasta strands onto her fork. "We just do."

That night after she'd cleaned up and put away all the dishes, Suella sat down to relax and review screens. She also reflected that it had been weeks since Natalie had found out The Truth and the sky hadn't fallen. Still, she couldn't relax. Natalie came out of her room and walked into the den. She wore a slightly pained expression on her face. "Mom, can I ask you something?"

Suella turned to give her daughter her full attention.

"Do you have any old pictures? Like from when you were my age?"

The question caused Suella to wince. "Why no, honey, I don't. Why do you ask? Are you doing a project for school?"

“No. I just want to see.”

Suella swallowed. “I don’t have any pictures, sweetheart. I’m sorry. Do you want to know what I looked like when I was your age? I looked just like you do now.”

“You have no pictures on the computer?”

“No. I don’t. Back when I was your age they really hadn’t invented computers yet. At least not to where you could take pictures with them.”

Natalie pressed on. She stood straight in front of Suella, solidly as a miniature prosecuting attorney. “Do you have scrapbooks?”

“Scrapbooks,” Natalie repeated, narrowing her eyes at her mother, looking at her incredulously. “Monica’s mother has lots of scrapbooks with old pictures in them, from the 1990’s and even pictures of her grandmother when she was little. Don’t you have any scrapbooks?”

“Well no, honey, I don’t. I used to have things like that, but they must have been misplaced. Your father and I moved a lot when we were younger.”

Natalie sighed and looked down for a moment. She looked back up again. “What about grandma? She would have pictures, wouldn’t she?”

“I suppose so.”

“Could you call her? Maybe she could send us some.”

Suella reached forward to pat Natalie on the top of her head, and draw her in for a quick hug. “I’ll ask her sweetie.” When she released Natalie, she hoped that she would soon forget about getting a picture of her as a grade schooler.

The young age at which Natalie received her first period and the way she’d found out about her origin led Suella to endless explaining, after Natalie’s endless questions.

One day she asked the one Suella feared the most. “So, you carried me, right?” There was no need to lie and make things worse. If Natalie looked in all the right places, she’d find the answers herself anyway.

Suella took a deep breath. “No, honey, I didn’t.” Right there she could have volunteered all of the information but she chose to let her daughter draw it out of her instead.

“Well, who did, then?”

“Aunt Toni.” Suella winced, waiting for Natalie to either scream or shout with indignation. Instead, her daughter paused thoughtfully, her mouth forming a small “o.”

“How come we never see her then?”

To Suella’s relief, Natalie seemed bewildered by the reveal more than anything else. “Because, honey, she’s a busy woman. She’s in movies and netshows more today than she has ever been.”

“Can we at least have her over for Thanksgiving dinner?”

“Sure honey.” Suella let out a deep breath, glad to move on to another subject and another activity.

That fall, Natalie played lots of soccer. She could run fast and control the ball with her feet as if it had been glued there. Her coach had her play the entire game most times. On a cool afternoon around Halloween, Nathan finally came along to one of the games. As they put on their jackets for the drive over, they checked themselves in the vanity mirror in their bedroom. “Should I wear dark glasses and a hat?”

Suella looked back at him through the reflection. “Why? It’s cloudy outside.”

“Well, someone might recognize me.”

“So?”

Nathan laughed. “Well it’s my daughter’s game. It should be about her, not about me.”

“Nobody’s gonna care. Trust me.”

They arrived at the game and searched the bleachers for a good seat. Suddenly someone yelled out “Well looky what we have here! It’s Methuselah!”

Suella whirled around and saw a barrel-chested man wearing a Hawaiian shirt with a windbreaker over the top of it. For a moment, Nathan glanced at Suella and rolled his eyes around, as if to say “See, I told you so!” He then turned his attention to the big man, who had caused everyone in his bleacher section to turn and look toward Nathan.

“Hi everybody,” he said, nonchalantly. “That’s my daughter out there, on center.”

“That was some play you did! Throwing out two baserunners!” the Hawaiian barrel man said. A few other people voiced their approval along with him.

“Thank you,” Nathan responded, bowing gracefully. As he tugged Suella’s shoulder and started to sit down, he added “But don’t you remember the next inning? We lost!”

The barrel man waved a hand dismissively. “You’re still a winner in my book, my friend.”

A woman standing beside her had been looking toward Suella. “And this is your wife? She’s very pretty!”

“Yes, that’s what they tell me,” Nathan replied. Suella gave him a playful poke in his ribs. Together they settled in to watch their daughter’s team play soccer.

As always, Suella winced when she watched Natalie run up and down the field, bumping into other girls, running at them full speed. She wondered, all over again where the great love of sports came from. She'd swum on the parks and recreation pool team during the summer and during the winter went roller-skating, but that was it.

After about a half hour of watching the game, a boy and his mother approached Suella and Nathan. The boy held a magazine in his hands, while his mother did the talking. "Excuse me Mr. Worthy," she said. "Would you be so kind as to sign my son's program? It's from that playoff game you *should have* won." Her son held out a pen for him.

"Well that's very nice!" Nathan exclaimed as he poised his pen to one of the scorecard pages.

The woman, who was a pleasantly plump matron in her early 40's turned to Suella. "Were you there, ma'am?"

Suella smiled at her thoughtfulness. "I sure was! I still haven't warmed up from it. Do you know how cold it was that day?"

Everyone sitting around them laughed.

Nathan directed his attention to the boy and said "What's your name, young man?"

"Travis!" he said, gazing at Nathan out of wide-opened eyes.

Suella watched him sign the page, with a caption "To my buddy, Travis!" with his trademark "NW" with a couple of scribbles underneath. After the boy and his mother receded away from him and moved further down the bleachers, Nathan turned to Suella and whispered. "Hopefully that'll be the end of it."

As if following his command, the people sitting around him turned their attention to the game, which to Suella seemed more fast and furious than usual. Suella marveled over how the girls seemed to get bigger and bigger each time she came to see them play. She focused on her little girl, Natalie, running around in the thick of the action, chasing after the ball, kicking it, bouncing it against her knees or head, helping her teammates. After a few moments of this, the other players and the referees faded into the background and Natalie took on a warm glow of amber on the golden autumn day.

The action took the girls on the two teams close to the bleachers for a moment. Suella gazed into her daughter's blue eyes, which were concentrating on the ground, the bouncing ball and the tangles of legs and feet. Suddenly, however, she felt a wave of nausea overtake her and her vision clouded over. Instinctively she reached her arms out to steady herself. One on side, her fingers brushed against Nathan's jacket, and on the other side her fingers felt bristly wool. For a scary moment she couldn't see. The next thing she knew, she was running, wearing shorts, watching a black and white soccer ball. Feeling the wind in her hair. She could see sharp details of the grass, the other players, and the referee who bounded up alongside her. When she realized what had happened, she jumped up and let out a loud yelp.

The wave of nausea swept over her again, though, causing her knees to feel like jello as she tumbled downward. For a split second she could not see and started to panic, but then two strong arms caught her around the ribs and held her. Her breath came out in short, raspy wisps. When she could see again she found herself back in the bleachers, being helped back down by her husband. She turned to look at him, seeing concern in his face and his eyes. "Are you all right?" he shouted. "You're all white, like a ghost!"

She reached up, to brush strands of hair away from her forehead and found hot sweat there. “You won’t believe what just happened,” she said.

“Try me,” he replied. He sat her down on the bench and angled himself toward her, taking both of her hands in his. The people around them kept their attention on the game, every now and then jumping and shouting.

Suella told Nathan what had happened when Natalie rumbled past them just a few minutes before. She tried to keep her voice down so that no one sitting near them would be tempted to eavesdrop. While she spoke, she monitored Nathan’s expressions. Whenever he heard something that seemed outrageous to him, he would always cock an eyebrow upward. Yet, as Suella told him of her nausea and of becoming one with her daughter for a few seconds, he kept his gaze locked on hers.

When she had told him everything she could, he leaned back and opened his eyes wide for a moment, slapping his hands on his knees. “That’s quite incredible,” he said. “Has it ever happened before?”

“No.”

Nathan shrugged. “Well, it kind of makes sense to me. She was made from you, after all.”

When he put it that way, it all sounded so simple, so pat. The game ended not long after that. Nathan drove the Tesla when they left the soccer field for the ride home. Natalie always wanted to sit in the front seat so that she could splay her legs out in front of her, with her cleats resting against the firewall. Suella was quiet for most of the drive, gazing at Natalie, trying to recreate the experience she’d had out on the soccer field. As hard as she concentrated, though, her whole consciousness stayed in the back seat.

Later, when they arrived home, Suella quickly settled into the kitchen, to make them something to eat. Natalie always worked up a big appetite during her soccer games. While Suella chopped up vegetables for a pasta salad, Natalie walked through the kitchen a couple of times. She still wore her cleats, which made clacking sounds on the ceramic tile. Suella gazed at her again, wondering whether concentrating on her was the key toward making their melded consciousness begin.

Natalie stopped as she reached for a glass of water. She looked up at her mother and said “What?”

Suella shook her head and tried to smile. “Just looking at you, honey,” she said. “Can’t I admire my own daughter’s beauty every now and then?”

Natalie squinted as she placed the empty glass in the sink. “I guess so,” She started to walk away, toward the hall leading to her bedroom.

Suella called out to her. “When you were out there running on the soccer field, do you remember feeling dizzy at all?”

Natalie returned her gaze for a longer amount of time than Suella thought was appropriate for a nine-year-old girl. The fact that she was looking at her rather than staring out into space in thought told her she was thinking about the question instead of the answer. “No, I never got dizzy.”

“Okay,” Suella said, returning to her vegetable chopping.

Natalie had started to head out of the room and back down the hall, but stopped suddenly. “Why do you want to know?”

Suella decided that she couldn’t yet tell her about the phenomenon that had occurred on the soccer field just yet. “You looked a bit pale out there, playing.

I got a little bit concerned.”

“Oh,” Natalie said, over her shoulder as she resumed on toward her bedroom.

Suella had enjoyed the feeling so much she couldn't wait to have it again. When would be the next time? At dinner? It wouldn't be too much fun to have an out-of-her-body experience to discover how Natalie chewed her food. She had a feeling that it was something she had to let happen rather than something she could force to happen. Still, while the three of them ate dinner, Suella couldn't help but to gaze at Natalie some more. The both of them were quiet. Thankfully, Nathan picked up the slack by talking endlessly about the soccer game, which had ended in a score of 8-7. “You girls gotta play some better ‘D’,” he said.

After dinner she helped clients for a few hours with a few security issues. She was glad it was all mindless work since she still obsessed back to what had happened on the soccer field. Natalie went to bed around the time Suella finished. What would happen if she opened the bedroom door and meditated on her daughter while she slept? Would she somehow shoehorn herself into the girl's dreams? She decided to try it and see what would happen.

It never took Natalie long to slip into a deep sleep. She would breathe loudly every ten minutes, as if she'd been a dolphin swimming deeply and had surfaced for air. Suella could hear this even through the closed door. She twisted the knob one quarter of an inch at a time, listening to the lock tumblers click and clunk, until the latch opened. Suella opened the door wide enough for her face to peer through and she tried to block most of the opening with her body to keep light from coming in. And she gazed at her sleeping daughter.

Natalie had taken her ponytail holders out to go to bed and her long, lush hair flowed in swooshing curls around her face and forehead. Suella could see the innocent vulnerability on her daughter as she lay there with one hand lifted toward the bedpost, an extended finger grazing it. She slowed down her breathing and tried to focus all of her energies, all of her concentration on Natalie, yet still keep an open mind at the same time.

Suella thought she must have been standing there for fifteen minutes. She told herself all over again that this was not the type of thing she could force to happen. Just when she resolved to close the door and move on to something else, her husband bounded down the hall, freshly returned from a quick trip to the store. “Hey, hon! What’s going on?” he said, in a voice that boomed through the whole house. He turned around the corner in time to see Suella standing in Natalie’s doorway and added “What are you doing?”

Natalie woke up also, rubbing her eyes, squinting against the rays of light spilling in through the opened door. “Mom? What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Suella said, quickly closing the door and scurrying into the den before anyone could ask anything else.

Chapter Seventeen

Fall, 2024

Along with soccer, Natalie also played volleyball and basketball, causing Suella no end of grief. She'd never been that interested in sports in her youth. Why should Natalie, her cloned daughter, be so much into them? One day she tried to bring up the subject to Nathan, telling him that she was so concerned that her daughter would get hurt, or that her normal development would be affected, since she played so many sports.

“That’s a load of fuckin’ bullshit,” Nathan offered, in return. “Of course she likes sports. She’s my daughter, too, right?”

“You mean the nature versus nurture thing?” Suella said. “I just don’t understand why she likes sports so much. I never liked sports that much when I was growing up.”

“Oh. So you want Natalie to be exactly like you? Is that it?” He was standing near his trophies on the mantel, causing Suella to think that to an outsider this must look like the re-enactment of a bad movie scene. “Natalie may have come through you, but she is not you.”

“I’d just feel much better if she was interested in, you know, ‘girl’ things.”

Nathan paused to reflect on that one for a moment. “You mean like playing with dolls? Or plopped down in front of a sim screen, eating candy and blowing up like the Michelin man? Is that what you want?”

Despite herself, Suella started to laugh. “No, of course not. I would never want her to be fat. I just worry about her.”

Nathan slowly stepped toward her and took her into his arms for a quick, heartfelt hug. When he stepped back from her, he said “Nat is a great kid. We are lucky.

Other parents would give their left nut for a kid like her.”

“Excuse me?”

“Or their left tit,” Nathan blurted out. “You know what I mean.” He kissed her and continued out into the yard to trim a few hedges.

Months before, Suella had desperately wanted to discuss her out of body experience with someone. She thought about telling Dr. Allende when they traveled to the desert for Natalie’s 10-year physical. Yet, Dr. Allende was so cold, clinical and detached, she knew the woman would dismiss the events as a product of wishful thinking. There was also no one Suella knew from her days as a baseball wife who she could trust with speaking about such an unusually private subject.

Then she remembered Jillian. It had been years since she’d seen or heard from her amiably bohemian former neighbor. Was she still in the same condo? During a mid-afternoon, around the time they used to have daily tea together, Suella called her. If her luck held, Jillian would have the same telephone number. The phone line rang once, twice, three times. Her old friend then picked up the line, without any of the clunking and clattering that Suella remembered from times past.

After Suella greeted her, the two women giggled with delight about re-connecting with each other after all these years. Yes, Jillian still lived in the same condo. Yes, she still painted and played folk music, in fact her following was growing. And, yes, she still had the same land-line based telephone number, except “I can go to cam now!” she rejoiced. “I’ve joined the 2020’s.”

“That’s great!” Suella replied. “Now let me tell you about the reason I’m calling.” She went into vivid detail about the incident from the soccer field.

Nearly a year had gone by since it had happened, yet she still remembered all the details as if it had taken place yesterday. When she had finished telling her friend everything, she patiently waited for Jillian's words. From past experience she knew that Jillian liked to consider everything, think about everything before making assessments or passing judgments. To Suella it was always worth the wait, though.

"You've got an extraordinary bond with Natalie," Jillian finally said. "Much deeper than the bond a woman usually has with her daughter. Mothers can tell when their children are hurt, or ill, even when they're hundreds of miles away. You got to experience the world through your daughter's eyes for a brief moment. That's a wonderful thing you can hold onto, forever."

"Yes, yes," Suella rejoiced. "But how can I experience it again?"

"The time has to be right. I don't think you get to have a say in that."

To Suella, that meant that it had to be okay with heaven and the angels before she was allowed within her daughter's aura again. Maybe someday soon it would happen again. In the meantime, she should never try to force it. "You know what I miss, Jill? I miss our long talks together, over tea."

Jillian laughed. "We could do it again, sort of."

"We could?" Suella responded, thinking that the airfare could get expensive, even though both she and Nathan made lots of money.

"What did I say before? I'm on cam now. We could have tea together in the afternoon and it would almost be like we were in the same room."

"That'd be fantastic!"

That night, Suella ventured out to find a delicately beautiful, retro tea set.

The very next day she kept her word and around two in the afternoon Jillian's image beamed onto the projectable in Suella's den. She felt instantly gratified at the fact that some things do not change. Jillian still wore her hair long and flowing, although more streaks of gray shimmered through it. She still favored smocks over long dresses and paint smears still dotted her hands. When she smiled, she also revealed new crow's feet. "It's so great to see you," Jillian said. "You look beautiful, as always."

In the old days, Jillian and Suella could sit for two hours discussing themselves, ideas, life and history. Nowadays, Suella had new responsibilities and had to keep their tea talks down to an hour. "At three sharp I have to go to the school and get Nat," she explained.

Suella and Natalie would ride home together, which would ordinarily have given them a chance to bond, but for Suella it was often frustrating. "How was your day?" she would ask Natalie, hoping for an enthusiastic response for a change.

"It was fine."

Scratching and clawing for conversation, Suella would ask "What went on in school today?"

"Oh, the usual stuff," was one variation that Natalie would give her.

One day Natalie called her at around noon, when Suella was heavily in the middle of a system re-track for a client. "You don't have to come get me," Natalie said. "A friend is giving me a ride home."

"You mean a friend's mother?"

"Yes," Natalie giggled. "Something like that."

"Could you have her call me?"

“Aw, ma. It’s okay. She’s nice.”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure she is. But give me some credit, okay? That’s precious cargo she’s carrying. I wouldn’t want to entrust it to anyone.”

“Okay mom. I’ll have her call you.”

Suella hoped it didn’t show that she was secretly glad that her daughter had a new chauffeur. It meant that she could spend two hours with Jillian in the middle of the afternoon instead of just one. Natalie always arrived home at three-thirty. Though the woman never called her, Suella felt confident that it must be a good mother of one of her friends.

One afternoon, Jillian herself had to cut their tea time down to an hour. She had an appointment with an art curator that afternoon and wanted to take some extra time to freshen up and prepare herself. Suella had some clients of her own she could have been helping, with the extra time that afternoon. Instead she took the time to go outside and enjoy the fresh air while cleaning up from some palm fronds that had littered the front lawn during some recent windy days. She also edged the walkway and the bricks forming a border for her flower garden. Around three-thirty she kept herself alert for Natalie, glad that she might get a chance to meet her little girl’s chauffeur.

A few minutes later a sleek, red Tesla roadster purred up the street up and stopped in her driveway. Suella saw a familiar fluff of lush blond hair and huge sunglasses set against a familiar face and mouth. She walked around to the driver’s side of the red roadster and the driver obliged by opening the electric window, which rolled up into the roof assembly rather than down, into the door.

The woman waved delicately to Suella, showing a flash of a glamorous manicure.

“Hi Suella. Nice to see you again.”

Suella nodded, steeling herself against the shock. “Hi, Toni. How have you been?”

“Fantastic,” Toni replied.

Inside the car, Natalie gave her driver a quick hug before gathering her backpack together and stepping out onto the driveway. A moment later, Toni’s elegant sports car had slunk away out of view. At least Natalie hugged her mother, too, now that they both stood together on the driveway. “Come on inside,” Suella said, trying to smile, leading Natalie up the walkway.

When the front door shut behind them, Suella whirled around to face Natalie. “So this is the ‘friend’ you’ve been getting rides from?”

“Yes!” Natalie replied joyously. “Aunt Toni. She’s so luke.”

There was that word again, that Suella could never get used to hearing. Today’s generation of kids took the age-old youth expression of approval—cool—and swung it around backwards to form the new word “luke.” It didn’t make the reality of what had just happened settle any better with Suella, though. “How did you get in contact with Toni?”

Natalie’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open for a second, as if she was saying “Duh, I called her.” Instead, she politely replied “I texted her. She’s on Googlebee. Can you believe it? A famous actress like her.”

“And she offered to drop you home every day like this?”

“Yeah. She’s got a really sick job now. She gets off right before I get out of school.”

The use of the word “sick” to describe something positive in the youth world, had been going on since the middle oughts and Suella could never get used to that, either. To her, *sick* was, well “sick.”

At least, Suella decided, she knew who was driving her daughter home. And she approved of Toni, after all. The woman had carried Natalie. She had a good heart. But then Natalie started constantly talking about her. It started one day over dinner. “Hey, dad, you knew Aunt Toni has started driving me home from school, right?”

Nathan, who was in the middle of a texturized protein, rib-shaped entrée called a “Fib” said “Yes, I heard about that.”

“You should see the other girls vom when Aunt Toni pulls up in her red Astra.”

Nathan rolled his eyes and glanced at Suella for a moment. “Yes, I heard about that, too. Hope she doesn’t still use that lead foot of hers.”

“Her ‘lead foot?’” Natalie asked, with a confused look on her face.

Suella patted her hand. “He’s wondering if she drives too fast. That’s what they used to call it when cars had a pedal on the floor and gasoline engines. You had to press the pedal harder to get the car to go fast.”

“Oh,” Natalie replied.

“Well, does Aunt Toni drive fast?” Suella envisioned the sexy red car rocketing along the freeway.

“No. If she did, she’d bump somebody. There’s lots of cars on the driveway after school.” Natalie turned back toward her father. “Hey dad, is it true that you two knew each other since before you were my age?”

Nathan always worked up a good appetite at the gym or the golf course.

To respond to his daughter, he had to chew a large bite of salad and get it down. “Yes. It was in the 1980’s in Kansas City.”

“Wow! What was Toni like back then?”

Nathan shrugged. “Pretty much the way she is now. Blond hair. Pretty. Very bold. Acted in plays a lot. I knew her all the way through grade school, junior high, and high school.”

“Really? Did you go to dances together?”

“One or two, yes.”

Nathan had told Suella that he, Toni, and two other couples all went to the homecoming dance as a big unit. She was about to offer that as a way of clarifying things, but Natalie kept talking: “How come you didn’t marry her?”

Suella forced a laugh and then glanced incredulously at her husband, as if to say “*Can you believe this kid?*” Out loud, she said “Oh, honey, I’m sure your father doesn’t want to talk about that.”

“We were too busy for each other,” Nathan replied, glancing sympathetically at Suella. “I had my baseball. She had her acting and modeling.”

“But if you did marry her, I wouldn’t be a clone,” Natalie said, quietly.

Suella sprang up from her chair. “That’s it! That’s it!” she shouted, snatching dirtied plates from the tabletop, carrying them toward the sink. “I’m the bad guy because I wanted to have a child in any way that I could! I’m the uncool disciplinarian! Well sue me for wanting to have the best for my daughter! Sue me for not being able to carry a baby to term! Sue me for not being a glamorous movie star!” She flung the dishes into the sink, where they clattered and crashed and ran to her den. She slammed the door.

Barely able to see through her cascading tears, she slumped down into her easy chair and sobbed so heavily her lungs hurt. For what seemed like an hour, she was alone with her pain. Finally, when she began to calm herself down, she heard a knock. "What is it?" she asked, embarrassed at how sharp and bitter her voice sounded.

"Honey, it's me," Nathan said. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," Suella said, knowing that no matter what the case, it would have been stupid to barricade herself away for the whole evening.

When he walked inside, Suella was immediately touched at how solemn and contrite he appeared. He looked like the ten-year-old boy who might have carried young Toni's books home for her while Duran Duran played on her Walkman. "I'm so sorry you're hurt," he said. "Nat didn't mean anything by what she said." He reached forward and touched her shoulder, looking deeply into her eyes, the way he did years ago when he proposed to her. "She's glad that she was born. And she's glad that you're her mom."

Suella wanted to say *"Well then how can a little girl who was cloned from one of my cells, who is the very embodiment of me, even more than an identical twin...how can she be so utterly different from me?"* She knew that was a question that may never be answered. Another part of her knew that in her own way, different though it may be from she preferred, that Natalie loved her. In the end, all she could think of to say was "I made such a fool of myself back there."

"No you didn't," Nathan said, tenderly stroking the hair framing her face.

"You're a normal, healthy, sensitive and beautiful woman. And you hurt. Natalie loves you. She feels awful right now. Can she come see you?"

Suella wiped away a tear and patted her husband's hand. "Of course she can."

Nathan left the room, immediately causing Suella to feel nervous. How would she handle it when Natalie came in? Did her daughter really resent being a clone that much? Would they ever be a normal mother and daughter, even in spirit? She checked herself quickly in a hand mirror, smoothing away smears of smudged makeup and rearranging tattered strands of her hair. There was a small knock on the door. Trying to make herself sound as pleasant as she could, she said “Yes?”

It took Natalie two tries to work the doorknob with her small hand. The door soon slowly opened to reveal her downcast face and eyes, which had been red and glistening from crying she’d done. She clasped her hands tightly in front of her stomach as she shuffled slowly into the room. Stopping in front of Suella’s easy chair, she said “Mommy I’m sorry for making you mad. I’m sorry for what I said.”

Suella had tried to steel herself to receive her daughter, but felt a hard lump growing in her throat instead. She tenderly reached out for the little girl’s hand and when she held it, whirled her toward herself and enveloped her into her arms. Natalie had floated somehow onto the chair with her and she held her tightly, rocking her back and forth.

Chapter Eighteen

The worst thing of all was that “the dinner incident” as she would later think of it, had happened on a Friday night. She would have to wait until Monday afternoon to discuss the whole matter with Jillian. When another long weekend of soccer ended, she gleefully counted down the hours until two p.m. on Monday and then jumped on the button to connect with her dear friend.

Jillian patiently listened as Suella related every detail of the story to her, including the hours they lay together in her den, holding each other, sobbing together. “That’s terrible,” Jillian said, when she’d heard everything. “But you know she didn’t mean anything by it, right?”

“Yes, I know.”

Jillian took a long sip of tea, gazing out into the space before her, deeply in thought. Suella braced herself for what might be ahead. “Natalie’s getting to the age where children try to separate from their parents, where they desperately try to make friends with other children.”

“Yes. I know. And?”

Jillian cleared her throat. “And...they desperately want to fit in, to feel just like other kids do. You remember how complicated it was, right?”

“Of course.”

From the other screen, Jillian leaned forward, making her face very large in the image. She looked as if she wanted to squeeze herself through the wires and electrons and somehow teleport herself from fifteen hundred miles away. “To Natalie, the thing that makes her different is that she’s a clone. She knows that she’s not like other kids.

That she'll never be exactly like other kids. It might make her just a little bit frustrated.”

“I know,” Suella interrupted. “But if she just knew how much I loved her...”

“Well she does know how much you care. She was so upset that she might have hurt you...”

Interrupting again, Suella continued: “If there was just some way I could relive what happened out on that soccer field. We'd be one again.”

The remark caused Jillian to squint uncharacteristically, then widen her eyes.

Suella patiently waited for her friend to share whatever thought had just occurred to her.

“Suella, do you...” Jillian started to speak, but winced, stopping herself

“Do I what? Do I what?”

She took in a deep breath, creating quite a big buildup for whatever she was going to say. “Do you want to *be* Natalie?”

Suella felt her temples tinge with flashes of heat and she became light-headed, nauseous. She breathed rapidly, unable to speak for a moment. When she regained her composure, she said “Of course not. She's her own person. She came through me, but is not of me, just like Nathan said.” Thankfully her friend changed the subject after that, and they spent the rest of the two hours discussing how Jillian's meeting with the art curator had gone. Her artwork was slowly bringing her more acclaim, and fame, and riches. “I'm so happy for you,” Suella said.

Later that night, Suella decided that more than anything else, she wanted her consciousness to meld with Natalie's once again. She wanted to be one with her again, to hell with the implications. Surely someone else who'd been raising a cloned child had experienced something similar to what had happened between Natalie and her.

After dinner that night, she invented an excuse of having to “knuckle down” and work hard on an important project for a client. She would need time alone, undisturbed. It enabled her to retreat to her den, shut the door behind her and start researching the subject voraciously.

For hours she read dry clinical copy about the physical makeup of dendrites and neurons in the brain as well as new-agey fluff from websites dedicated to all night radio shows that discussed remote viewing and out-of-body experiences. Trying to make sense of it all, she concluded that a release of endorphins takes the body where it does not normally go. Natalie had been running hard out on the soccer field that day, exerting herself, releasing endorphins that made her brain more susceptible, more open to her.

A quick review of some information on cloning websites confirmed that many cloned parents report being able to “step inside” their cloned sons and daughters bodies for brief flashes, and see the world through their eyes. No one seemed to know how the phenomenon worked. There was no information on how to induce it, either. Yet, Suella knew that if she was able to meld with her daughter the way she’d been able to out on that soccer field, that maybe it would deepen their relationship. Maybe it would help Natalie become just a little more like her, even if they were only able to meld together for short patches of time.

The key was the endorphins. It was not realistic to try to keep Natalie on a permanent runner’s high that would bring on the endorphins. With better living through chemistry, though, the new anti-depressants focused on raising endorphin levels, as a way of helping people feel better about themselves. Suella would have to find a way to get Natalie to take the medications, that would perhaps open her up to the glorious melding.

But how? Getting a conventional doctor to prescribe and administer them, especially since the 2010 health care overhaul, resulted in piles of red tape and headaches. It required something a little bit more creative and clandestine.

Mexico.

She could invent some type of an excuse to take a daytrip, maybe even just say she was going to their Oceanside condo and then simply trudge onward for a few miles more. The medicine could be delivered through a laser tap, which Suella could touch her with as she slept.

The center. During the exhaustive physicals for Natalie they would find traces of the medication in her system. How could she get around that? Simple. Just discontinue the medication for a full month before her appointment. Surely it would have dissipated from her system by then, wouldn't it?

The whole scheme tested her broken Spanish. A few days later she set out in the Mazda for south of the laughingly porous border for a village conveniently tucked away in the desert. For the swarthy aides at the clinic down there and the short, round nurses she recited a rehearsed story about her elderly mother who'd dwindled far into depression over her worsening diabetes. Cruel American doctors hampered by mountains of regulations had been unable to help, so she'd decided to take matters into her own hands.

Suella drove back home carrying a shiny plastic bag filled with laser taps and tiny doses of antidepressant shaped like bullets. As she turned onto the ancient 405 for the last leg of her trip, she thought about how she would get the meds into her daughter. Natalie would have to be sound asleep, of course, so Suella would have to wait until two hours after she'd gone to bed. She'd have to distract Nathan somehow.

Most nights he surfed sporting events and laughed at young pitchers trying to come up through the Latin American leagues. He must never catch her tapping the med, called Apolbaumentine, into Natalie. No one would ever know. They'd just all comment about how much sweeter and ladylike Natalie had become.

Many medications still had bad side effects, even after all of the controversies of the last decade, when they'd pulled Viagra from the market after discovering that it caused Alzheimer's disease and Lipitor, which exacerbated cholesterol rather than helping it. Suella scoured reams of copy about clinical studies of Apolbaumentine, translating anatomic and chemical terms with her online toolbox. The worst item she could find was proof that the medication caused more frequent urination. Big deal!

To her dismay, she also found out that one dosage of it would last for eight hours. If Suella tapped Natalie with the medication just after she'd gone to bed, then she would sleep through all of its effects. She would have to tap her at the beginning of the day instead. From that day on, she would start a tradition of giving Natalie a hug to start every morning. While she was in her mother's embrace, it would be easy for her to tap the medication onto her arm or back.

"Good morning, my sweet Natalie," Suella said bright and early that first morning, after opening Natalie's door. "I've got nice fresh orange juice and a hug for you this morning." Still groggy from sleep, Natalie sat up in her bed, accepted the orange juice and her mother's hug, and Suella tapped the laser onto the skin just below the back of her neck. "Something tells me its going to be a wonderful day."

Suella also had to hide the laser taps and the dosages. The desk drawer, even the one in her den, would not do. Nathan sometimes looked for programs or files in there.

She kept them in an old hat box on her side of the bedroom closet instead. While she dutifully dosed her daughter every morning, she studied her for any results, no matter how subtle. Out on the soccer field and the volleyball court, she was just as tough, just as active as she'd been before. Toni no longer picked her up from school as Suella reclaimed all the transportation responsibilities to maximize the possibility for melding experiences with Natalie.

The holidays came and went. It would be easier for Suella to determine whether the meds were working. Natalie became very giddy during Thanksgiving and Christmas, which seemed to be her favorite times of the year. As of January, there were only three more months for Suella to devote to her little experiment. One night at dinner early in 2025 Nathan noticed something. He gazed curiously at Natalie. "Look at me," he said. As she turned to look at him he frowned, bobbing his chin up and down and squinting as he checked over her eyes and face. "I thought your eyes were getting darker. It's just your pupils, though. They're as big as saucers! What have you been doing, girl?"

Nathan was smiling while he talked to her, clearly joking around about something slightly unusual he'd noticed. Suella allowed herself to breathe. For the next couple of days after that, she monitored the condition of Natalie's eyes. Though they looked slightly glassy to her, the pupils remained small, or at least average sized. She was already much more mellow and polite than she'd been before. When were things going to get to the next level? When would she and Natalie meld again?

One morning she found out. As she entered her daughter's room, which always received the first slicing rays of sunlight, she felt slightly tipsy and light headed. She cheerfully offered her daughter a hug and tapped down, as always.

While in her daughter's embrace, she felt as if she'd been cosmically flipped over. She found herself covered from the hip down in blankets, receiving a warm hug with a cuddling rockabye sway. "Thanks, mom," came the whisper from her lips.

Suella felt like yelping for joy.

This helped her to feel much better about stopping Natalie's medications at the beginning of March. For the whole beginning of that new year, 2025, she remembered a movie she'd seen as a fourteen-year-old, entitled *Back to the Future, Part 2*. That movie, made more than thirty-five years ago, had attempted to depict what the year 2015 would look like. People traveled in cars that flew, children played on contraptions called "hoverboards," and people watched televisions with twelve squares. The only thing the producers got right was the part about the televisions. Yet, no one Suella knew actually watched all twelve available screens on a television. She watched the movie whenever she wanted to give herself a good laugh.

During that week of Natalie's 11-year appointment, she watched the movie twice. Yes, enough time had gone by for all the traces of the medication to filter out of her system, she kept telling herself. She was still uncertain how the tests would turn out, because even though the medications would have gone out of her system, test results might show lingering effects of them somehow. Without the medications, Natalie's regular personality returned. She regained her energy. Nathan and Natalie would often play catch in the back yard, either with baseball gloves and baseballs, a football, or a Frisbee. More than once, Suella called out: "Natalie, honey, I need your help in the kitchen!" and she had her wash dishes by hand in the sink.

For awhile, Natalie dutifully scraped the plates from that day's lunch.

She scrubbed them in the soapy water, rinsed them, and placed them in a dusty dish drainer Suella had fished out from beneath the sink. By the fifth dish or so, Natalie started to stretch her lips to one side of her mouth, a sign Suella recognized that she didn't like something. Still, she resisted the urge to ask her if something was wrong, knowing that she might not like the answer.

Natalie saved her the trouble. "Are you punishing me?"

Suella forced a smile. "No, darling. Why in the world would you think that?"

"Since when do we wash dishes by hand? And I'm making them dirty again by putting them in that nasty plastic thing. We have a perfectly good dishwasher."

Suella felt a flush of embarrassment. She sighed. "You're right, honey. I plead guilty." She raised her right hand into the air as if she was getting sworn in during a court proceeding. "I just wanted to spend a little bit of time with you. Is that so terrible?" She tenderly brushed a lock of blond hair away from her daughter's face, to punctuate the point.

Natalie continued to wash the remaining dishes and glasses in the sink. "But you see me all the time, mom. You see me in the morning. You see me after school. You see me all weekend if I don't have a soccer game."

Suella forced a short, mirthless laugh. "Well then sue me for loving you. I'm your mother." Natalie's appointment at the center for her 11-year checkup could not arrive quickly enough.

The morning of the appointment, Suella was so nervous she wondered whether she should shoot herself with an Apolbaumentine. She had no idea of how the medication would affect her, however, and she had to drive her daughter.

Natalie sat low in the passenger seat for the ride. She had let her long hair fall forward, covering most of her face and her eyes from Suella's view. Suella could only see Natalie's mouth, which she had set into a straight line. "Dr. Allende has an office over near our neighborhood, you know," she murmured, in a matter-of-fact, expressionless voice. "Why can't I just see her there? Why do we have to go all the way out to the dirty desert?"

Suella kept her eyes on the road as she responded. "Because, dear, we've been over this before. There are many other doctors at the center besides Dr. Allende. They're all very interested in how you're doing."

"They make me feel like a guinea pig, or a rat in a lab."

Suella sighed. She knew it was true. During the appointments, they put Natalie in a hospital gown almost from the moment she walked in through the door. They would connect various electrodes to her, run her through various scans, and draw blood at least twice. Though all of the doctors and nurses were nice, and professional, it still must have felt cold, clinical, and disconcerting. The best she could offer was "It'll all be over before you know it."

"Yeah," Natalie said. "I can't wait until I'm eighteen."

They still would not let Suella into any of the examination rooms with Natalie. She sat in the same lobby she'd used for the past eleven years. They'd redone the chairs so that now they were chrome-railed, with slick black leather upholstery, but the building and interior had remained the same. To help pass the time, she helped a few clients with projects. Before long she lost herself in the virtual worlds she helped run so smoothly.

When she finished, she checked her clock: Natalie's appointment had gone on for

a half-hour longer than normal. What were they finding?

A few minutes later, Dr. Allende appeared from around the corner, wearing a crisp white lab coat, the flipped ends of her hair bouncing delicately against her shoulders when she walked. Silently, she motioned for Suella to follow her, which suddenly made her feel as if she'd been thrust into a slow-motion, creepy movie. Her stomach frosted over, and her legs felt as if they'd been encased in lead stockings while she followed the doctor through the cubby-holed offices and suites.

When they reached Dr. Allende's office, she cordially invited her to sit down. Suella sat on the edge of an office chair, tightly gripping her purse while the doctor shuffled a stack of paperwork in front of her.

Suella could not resist: "Is something wrong?"

Dr. Allende gave a short smile. "No, everything's fine. We have some lab work results here that concern me a little, though."

"Go ahead," she said.

"Nothing to be too alarmed about. Some of her electrolyte readings are a little bit off."

Suella nodded. She had a vague idea that "electrolytes" were: something having to do with salt and metal chemicals that needed to be in balance in the body. "So I should give her more oranges to eat or something?"

"That would take care of the potassium," the doctor said. She leaned back in her desk chair. Calmly appraising Suella, she steepled her fingers in the air in front of her.

"Tell me, has Natalie's diet changed?"

Suella gave the matter some honest thought. She bought only organic food.

Food savings accounts had been developed during the scare of 2009-10, and when all the dust settled, she kept her account. They used the ingredients she liked, without too many additives. “She eats well,” Suella replied. “I try to keep her away from junk, just like you all said in your guidelines.”

Dr. Allende tapped the stack of papers to indicate she was through with her little talk. “Just make sure she’s eating all her fruits and vegetables and drinking enough water. She’ll be fine.”

“Everything else was okay?”

The doctor nodded. Suella let out a long sigh of relief.

Chapter Nineteen

Suella drove down to Mexico twice a year to get the medications. No one ever asked for any medical documentation; they just took her money, wished her well, and said “Hasta luego!” During Natalie’s second year on the medications, Suella decided she needed to get a little more creative about the ways she doled them out. Sometimes her little girl pushed her away groggily rather than accept an early morning hug. On those days and others, Suella would have to slip her a dose by tapping her as she served breakfast. Many times she would hug Natalie as she walked out through the front door, and tap her then.

Disappointingly, Suella was still waiting for the next time that their consciousnesses would meld. It never happened during the hugs they gave each other in the morning or at other times. When Natalie ran on the soccer field or jumped on the volleyball court Suella hoped something would happen, but she only got to watch her daughter excel in sports for one more year. The month of March before Natalie’s twelfth birthday, she cut off the medications again. It could have been because Natalie was getting so close to her teenage years, but she returned full-force sassy during her medication free March.

“Grapefruit and oranges!” Natalie shouted one morning. “Grapefruit and oranges! That’s all we ever have around here! Can’t we ever have eggs and bacon or other stuff that normal people have for breakfast?” Even though she complained, Natalie ate the fruit and the extra vegetables Suella sneaked into her diet. When Natalie’s twelfth birthday rolled around and they made their annual trip to the desert, Suella held her breath while she waited out in the lobby.

That year, not only did Natalie's appointment end at the regular time, it ended without a little chat from Dr. Allende. Her only comment was "She's growing up to be a fine, beautiful young lady. She's nearly as tall as you, now."

On their drive back home, Suella felt in good spirits. They passed the hot dog stand that had been so familiar to them for all these years. "What do you say we stop for chili dogs?" Suella said.

Natalie shrugged. "You can if you want. They said in school that roadkill ends up in hot dogs. I want to eat something else."

Suella couldn't wait until the next morning, when she could start her daughter on the medications again.

Nathan had tried to stay in the background since he'd retired from baseball years before. Journalists called their house fairly often, however, wanting to speak with him about his long pitching career or the double pickoff play that ended it. Nathan would always graciously accept those interviews or chances to speak at public events or corporations, which paid him very well for the short amount of work involved. "I can't believe how much money they pay me to stand up there and cuss," he told Suella.

Early in the winter of 2026, a man with a wide smile and thin hair came to the house a few times a week. "This is Justin Cintron," Nathan said, while the man stood up and bowed to Suella, tenderly shaking her hand. "He's going to help me write a book about my life: before, during, and after baseball." They would sit in the living room where Justin would ask Nathan dozens of interview questions while a chip recorded Nathan's answers. Justin usually arrived in the early evening. Natalie would show him inside and sit on one of her beanbag chairs while her father spoke about his life.

“I threw baseballs against my pitch-back every day,” he said. “Sometimes for three whole hours.”

“Didn’t you ever get bored?” Natalie asked.

“No. I’d be dreaming I was pitching in the World Series, for the Royals. The funny thing is, I feel like I pitched for every team *but* Kansas City.”

Suella had always wondered if Nathan was going to try to write a baseball book since he’d been retired and had all the extra time on his hands. From talking to women in the clubhouses and from following the literary world, Suella knew that a baseball book could be a big hit or it could be a big bust. Many books had been written during all the steroid abuse scandals that had caused hard feelings between men who’d formerly been close friends. Justin spent weeks in their living room talking to Nathan about everything, which made Suella nervous.

She spoke to him as they lie in bed awake that night. “Are you going to tell Justin about getting your tooth crushed?”

Nathan laughed. “Yeah, I told him that story last week.”

“Did you tell him why they crushed it?”

“Yes. Everybody already knows who was taking what juice and when. There have been so many books written about them since then.”

“Well then, how is your book going to be any different?”

Nathan shrugged. “Personal glimpses. Stuff like that.”

“How much are you going to tell him about Natalie?”

“You mean, am I going to tell him she’s a clone? I can’t, remember? It’s in that contract.”

“Good.” Suella felt like she could finally get some sleep. For weeks she’d been worried that Nathan’s book would somehow morph into a tell-all about what it was like to be the father of a clone.

Justin Cintron stopped coming to the house right before Natalie’s medication free month started. Nathan said he was going to spend the rest of that spring and summer writing and editing it and that it would be ready for release later in the fall.

Suella made sure to have plenty of bananas around and also kept liquid meal replacements in the refrigerator, to help with Natalie’s electrolytes. During her last trip to Mexico, the pharmacist there told her that she could receive the medication in pill form. It would allow her to blend it with Natalie’s food. One time that Suella had tapped Natalie, the wand for the laser fell partially out of Suella’s hand and knocked Natalie on the arm. Suella fumbled the wand and nearly dropped it. “What are you hitting me with a pen for?”

Horrified, Suella scrambled to make up a quick story about the laser wand. “I was going to write a check to the electric company.”

Nathan heard that and laughed. “What the hell for? We have solar. They should be writing *us* checks.”

“They have an option where you can donate to Save the Animals and things like that. So that’s how I pay. I send them a check.”

Nathan and Natalie both said “Oh.”

Suella skipped away down the hall to the bathroom, closed the door behind her and collapsed with relief. She vowed to find some other way to deliver the medications to Natalie.

When the pharmacist told her they came in pill form, she was overjoyed. Before she left the clinic, she peaked inside the bottle to look at them. Dismayed, she saw pills the size of nickels in there. “She can’t swallow well,” Suella said. “Is it okay to crush the pills, so that they’re more like powder?”

“Of course. We even have a mortar and pestle,” the swarthy pharmacist said. Later that night, when Nathan and Natalie were asleep, Suella took all of the pills out of all of the bottles and crushed them into a fine powder. That next morning, Natalie received her daily dose in her hot chocolate.

Natalie’s thirteenth visit to the Center came and went without incident, also. Suella learned that many popular single-serve beverages contained electrolytes, so she kept plenty of these around the house for Natalie to drink. For the second year in a row, she received a perfectly clean bill of health. The morning following the center visit, Suella eagerly put her daughter back on her medications.

Still, there was no repeat of the melding experience she’d enjoyed so tremendously. Yet, thirteen was a big birthday in the Worthy house. The celebration for Natalie went on for a whole month. Suella allowed her to have a slumber party with eight of her friends from school. Midnight arrived and the girls still giggled and played loud hip-hop music on one of their Wave cubes. Nathan lay atop the bed, exhausted but unable to sleep. Suella was reading a book. “It’s a slumber party,” he said. “Why isn’t anyone slumbering?”

Suella snickered. “Because bad things happen to the first girl who falls asleep at a slumber party. Haven’t you ever heard that before?”

“What? Like they dip her hand in warm water or something, so she pees herself?”

“Yes. Among other things.”

Nathan groaned. “Quick. Get me some ear plugs.”

By the summer Natalie was thirteen, she’d grown another couple of inches, so that at five foot seven, she was just a couple of inches shorter than her mother. She seemed extremely thin though, despite having a good appetite and playing lots of sports. But then Natalie remembered being rail-thin until she was in her mid-twenties. It occurred to Suella that if the two of them were alone together outside of the house it might be just enough for a repeat of the consciousness melding phenomenon. They still owned the beach condo in Oceanside.

“Hey Natalie,” Suella said, after dinner one night. “How about we celebrate by spending a few days at the beach?”

Nathan said “Yeah! Good idea, mom. It’d give me a chance to have all my girlfriends come around here for a change.” Suella poked him hard in the ribs, while Nathan cringed and crumpled, pretending that he’d been shot.

“Can I bring one or two of my friends?” Natalie asked.

Suella felt a twinge inside her head. “Well I was hoping it could be just us girls. We could get to know each other, bond, have girl talk, and stay up late watching chick flicks, stuff like that.”

“But you won’t go in the water,” Natalie countered. “When we go to the beach, all you do is put up the umbrella, squirt sunscreen all over yourself, and sit on a lawn chair reading. That’s boring! My friends go in the water.”

Suella did that because she tried to limit sun exposure as much as possible. Not only could she avoid skin cancer that way, but she could also keep her skin young

and supple, something that mattered more and more to her with each passing year.

“Well, I could go in the water, too.”

Natalie compromised. That weekend they would go to Oceanside. They would stay for just a Saturday and a Sunday. It would give Suella two solid days to spend in her daughter’s company, learn about her, marvel at how she was growing and developing into a young woman, and, hopefully, meld with her. To make it even easier for them to interact with each other and bond, Suella decided that they would take the train. All either one of them would need was an overnight bag, which made it easy.

The best thing about sitting on the train was that they could choose a table on the top deck where the seats faced each other with a table in between them. The school year had just come to an end and Suella felt glad that she finally had a chance to spend time with Natalie. Sitting together watching television or being in the same house together while Natalie played on her computer and she worked in her den was not the same thing. Suella studied her daughter’s face because she was still growing and changing and she needed to take a mental snapshot of it in time. But she gazed at Natalie for a longer amount of time than Natalie was comfortable with.

“What are you looking at?” Natalie asked.

Suella reached across the table to hold both of her daughter’s hands in hers. “I’m looking at you, honey. You’re growing up so fast I can barely keep up with you.”

“That’s what you always say. Did you ever call Grandma to see if she’s got any scrapbook pictures of you when you were my age?”

Suella glanced down at the tabletop for a moment. “No, I haven’t.”

Natalie went on. “Why do you live so far away from Grandma? She lives on the

other side of the country.”

“I had to come to California to get a good job. Grandma understands.” She did not like the way the conversation was going. Natalie had started to watch the scenery go by out the window. They were rumbling past the groves of Orange County and the freeways, where for a moment they could see the buildings of Disneyland. “Isn’t this fun?”

Natalie kept looking out the window at the scenery, nodding while watching trees swish past. Back when Natalie was a baby, Suella had thought about having *the talk* with her when she was around thirteen years old. Now that she was thirteen, it seemed moot. When she’d received her period at only eight years of age, Suella had been forced to have *the talk* with her one year later. Still, she realized again and again how little she knew about her own daughter’s day-to-day life, her likes and dislikes, and her dreams. Natalie had proved long ago that she was very different from her mother, after all.

“Natalie, can I ask you a question?” Suella began.

Natalie turned her eyes from the train window and looked at her instead.

“Have you met, or gotten to know any boys yet?”

For a moment, Natalie’s eyes twinkled and she flashed a knowing grin. “Yes.”

Suella laughed along with her. “It sounds like there’s someone special.”

Natalie’s cheekbones were tinged rose in a delightful way. “Just someone I study with in the library. He’s not good at math and I am.”

That surprised Suella, since she was terrible at math in school when she was Natalie’s age. “What’s his name?”

“Matthew.”

She let the name sink in. “Now there’s a classic, old-fashioned boy’s name that you don’t hear very often. What does he look like?”

Natalie smiled when she described him. “He has red-brown hair, he’s white, and he’s shorter than I am.”

“Shorter?” Suella asked. “Ah, well. Give him another couple of years or so. He’ll have his growth spurt and he’ll be ahead of you by then.” For the next few miles, Suella joined Natalie in looking out the window.

Speaking very softly, Natalie asked “Did you like boys when you were my age?”

“Of course.”

At that moment the train took a sharp right turn to follow the contours of the Pacific Ocean shoreline. Suella loved to sit back and enjoy the vistas of the blue ocean water swelling to whitecaps, which crashed on the pebbly beach sand that swirled out for miles ahead of them. Only two more stops and they would disembark from the train and catch a cab to their beachfront condo.

Suella had a local cleaning lady come in twice a week to straighten up and dust their beach house. To keep the value of it intact, they kept it off the general rental market, even though the extra money was tempting. A steady stream of renters represented people from all different classes, some of them rowdy and reckless. Suella decided long ago that she would forgo the extra money to be assured that their beach condo would stay in top shape. They allowed friends to use it on occasion, but it hadn’t been lived in consistently since Nathan played for San Diego.

The condo was small, with hardwood floors since carpet was so impractical. Still, Suella checked all the furniture and the countertops for dust. She made sure

everything was still in place and that the refrigerator had been turned on. Meanwhile, Natalie ran into one of the bedrooms and quickly shed her blouse and her shorts and stepped into her floral teal two-piece bathing suit. The next thing her mother knew, she jumped out from behind the door. “Are you ready? Let’s go to the beach!”

Suella would have preferred that they relax at the house first after the train trip, but she followed her daughter’s lead and put on her retro one piece halter swimsuit, the cobalt blue one with the rhinestone accent that Nathan liked so much on her. Once she had done that, she put on her white sarong cover-up with a wide-brimmed velvet sash hat and her huge sunglasses. She found the beach umbrella and the two lawn chairs inside one of the closets.

Moments later, they’d set everything up on the sand and Suella was going to turn on her Nook and start to relax in the lawn chair. “Last one in the water is a buffalo fart!” Natalie announced as she tossed her beach towel on the other lawn chair and streaked toward the blue water.

Suella recognized a golden opportunity when she saw one. She ran after Natalie, wincing as the cold ocean water washed over her toes, her feet, and her calves. Natalie had cut into the water yards ahead of her and had belly-flopped down into the surf, submerging herself. Behind her, Suella felt the familiar wave of nausea overtake her. After her vision clouded over she felt an explosion of cold water wash over her. She had melded with Natalie and resurfaced in the frothy surf. Natalie had turned, and Suella, experiencing the world through her eyes, looked at herself, a few yards away, folding her arms tightly across her chest, shivering,

“Oh, my God, it’s so cold,” she said, the words booming loudly in her ear as her

vision clouded over again, and her consciousness leaped back into her own body. She was the one too afraid to submerge herself into the cold surf just yet. Being able re-experience the phenomenon of being one with her daughter had already elevated her mood as she rejoiced in the peacefulness of a carefree day, the warm sun, and the invigorating ocean.

Together they frolicked in the surf, and at first Suella took care to keep her head above the water. She jumped on tiptoe as the waves swelled past them. They had ventured further out and the water reached both of their chests. A large wave crested a good deal ahead of them and Suella realized the inevitable: it was going to break on top of them. She winced, bracing herself for the onslaught of cold water as it submerged her.

Suella had stayed out of ocean water for as long as she could remember, possibly for as long as she'd been married to Nathan. It bothered her that somewhere along the shoreline that raw sewage poured into the same water they were swimming in, that the same ocean contained huge varieties of creatures who lived, breathed, and shat in it. There was also the familiar briny brackishness and slimy seaweed. Yet she was only thinking of the fun she had bouncing in the surf with her beautiful daughter that late Saturday morning. Suella had loved playing in the ocean when she was little, up till when she reached Natalie's age. It made perfect sense that Natalie enjoyed it so much, also. They stayed in the ocean for a couple of hours.

Eventually, Suella emerged from the water, brushed out her hair, put on her sunglasses and cover-up and sat in the chair beneath the beach umbrella to read. "Aw, you're no fun," said Natalie, who'd also come out of the water. She laid out her towel. For the next couple of hours she lay on the towel beside the beach umbrella while her

mother read.

Suella wished there was some way she could freeze this moment in time, place it in storage and then retrieve it again so she could relive it, in the future when she needed a pick-me-up. Later in the afternoon they packed up the beach umbrella and the chair and headed back to the house. There'd been no time to head to the supermarket to get groceries for dinner. Instead, Suella ordered Chinese food delivery. When it arrived, she set the table and the both of them poured rice and saucy, spicy food out of paper containers. As they ate their dinner, Natalie eased into a more thoughtful, reflexive mood.

"Mom, why did you clone yourself?"

Suella had just bitten into a large tofu cube and had to chew it and swallow it down before responding. "Lots of reasons," she said. "I wanted to become a mother, but I couldn't. That was the big reason."

"Why couldn't you be a mother?"

"I just can't," she said. "Most women can have babies. Some cannot. I was one of the ones who cannot."

"That's too bad. I used to want to have a baby sister or brother, but now I know you couldn't have one even if you wanted to."

"Especially now. I'm over fifty."

"Yeah, I know." Natalie had put down her fork and looked downward, solemnly.

Suella touched the side of her daughter's face. "But we've got each other and that's really important, right? And we're having so much fun."

After their supper they both sat on the couch and watched a movie. Natalie soon

fell asleep. Suella's eyelids also became heavy. She remembered all over again just how draining playing in ocean water could be. Gently, she woke Natalie up and led her toward the bedroom where she would be sleeping. Suella would be sleeping in the master bedroom. Once she had changed into sleepwear and lowered her head down onto the soft pillow, she drifted off immediately to sleep.

Both of them had been exhausted. They slept well into the morning of the next day, Sunday. Bright summer sunshine illuminated the beach cottage, warming them as Suella brewed coffee. Natalie wore a long, frilly white nightie, which helped Suella to forget how much of a rough-and-tumble tomboy she actually was. "You look like a beautiful little angel in that nightie," she said.

"Thank you," Natalie murmured.

Suella realized that she'd left the Apolbaumentine pills and laser taps back home. Oh well, she thought. That weekend they would not need them.

Chapter Twenty

Unfortunately for Suella, Natalie insisted on leaving early the next day. “The coach called a practice,” she said. She wanted them to take the noon train so they would be back in plenty of time for her four o’clock practice. Suella and Natalie sat in the same type of seats as they did on the way there, facing each other. They both passed the time by watching the ocean surf and mountain scenery pass by out the window.

Natalie suddenly said “You’re mad, aren’t you?”

Oh well, Suella thought. At least the girl had heart. It was how she was raised. “No, honey, I’m not mad, I’m just disappointed.”

“Why?”

Suella shifted around as she sat. “I guess I love you so much I want to have you all to myself.”

Natalie looked down at the tabletop, and fidgeted with her fingers. “I’m sorry. I like sports, what can I say! Thank you for going into the water this time, though. Wasn’t it fun?”

“Yes.”

By the end of that summer of 2027, Justin Cintron finished the book. He sent galley proof files for Nathan to read and check for accuracy. When he tried to open the files and look at them, he kept on closing out the system instead. “Honey, could you come in here?” he called out to Suella. “I need to be rescued by your computer geek expertise.”

She ran into the den to save him. He had been hitting the wrong button. Suella checked the size of the files and the word count. “Dang! This thing is huge. Did

this guy write *War and Peace* or something?”

Nathan shrugged. “Well you saw how long he was here. I talked my ass off to that man.” It took him over two weeks to read over the galley files, and even then he confessed to “skimming.” At night, after everyone else had gone to sleep, Suella brought the files up onto her own screens and slowly read all of the words. The chapter where Nathan became a father started off with: “My daughter Natalie was born in April, 2014, right in the middle of opening day.” Through Justin’s fine literary talent, he described how he ran out of the bullpen without bothering to change out of his uniform and thundered out of the parking garage and up into the desert hospital where she was born.

It reminded Suella of the old school way that husbands used to participate in the births of their children. They would strictly drive their wives to the hospital and then nervously stand in the waiting room. When the baby was born, they would pass out cigars to all of the other expectant fathers. Nathan made no mention that he jumped out of his uniform at the hospital, scrubbed in, and arrived just in time to watch the afterbirth and hear Natalie’s first cries. He also left out the fact that another woman besides his wife carried and delivered his child. Finally, he made no mention of the high tech way Natalie was conceived, or of the unique status she claimed in the world.

“My daughter is beautiful,” read one line that jumped out of the page at Suella. She felt so touched by what he’d said that she purred “Aw...” in the quiet room.

From everything else she’d read, there were no surprises. He had told her the stories over and over for the past twenty years. Toni was mentioned, but only in that they’d been friends since their childhood in Kansas City and had stayed that way. They watched each other’s careers germinate and then flourish. “To this day she

sometimes joins in with our family celebrations on holidays and birthdays, if she's not too busy making a movie."

The whole section where he offers to testify during the steroid scandals took three chapters. No names were mentioned, but the sequence where he is kidnapped by the thugs who crushed his tooth read like something out of a mafia movie. Nathan's last pitching performance took three chapters, also. Suella giggled when she read over the part where she dangles Natalie down into the bullpen so her father can kiss her. When she had finished all the parts she wanted to read, she closed out the system and out loud she said "It's gonna be a bestseller."

Just after Halloween, a representative from the publishing company called Nathan. "They want me to tour," he said.

"Tour? Like you're a hip-hop star?" Natalie asked.

"No. Fly around the country: New York, Boston, Chicago, Seattle. I'll sign copies of the book. It's a PR thing."

"Sounds fine to me," Suella said. "How are you going to sign the readers? Put an etching on the outside of the case or something?"

"No, smartass," Nathan said. "These are going to be real books, with bindings and pages, just like we had in school, back in the dark ages."

Anxious, Suella asked "You're not going to be gone over Thanksgiving, are you?"

Nathan patted her on the shoulder to put her mind at ease. "No, hon. It will start the first week of December."

After Nathan left to begin his nationwide tour, he would call often. "I've got a

surprise for you Friday. I'm not saying anything about it now, though." On the cam screen he gave one of his trademark smirks, which made Suella feel as if he'd been in the room with them.

The Friday of that week, Natalie uncharacteristically ran through the front door and shouted "Mom! Dad was on TV! Dad was on TV!"

That morning he'd appeared on The Today Show and had coyly avoided telling Suella about it. "That little stinker," she said. "Well we can probably access video on it." She sat at her desktop and opened the screens. With just a couple of clicks and passes, her husband's face was smugly staring back at someone on a television screen. "Oh my god, look what they did to his hair!" Nathan liked to comb his hair forward, to help hide the receding areas in the front, but the stylist at the television studio combed it back and fluffed it out. He wore his gray suit with the fuchsia threading and rhinestone tie clip. "He looks like a televangelist."

Natalie squinted. "What is a telvangist?"

"These religious guys who get on TV and try to guilt people into saying donations, saying it's what Jesus wants them to do."

"Oh." Natalie looked closely at her father's image as he responded to the hostesses questions about his new book. "He looks *happy* to me."

"Nat, that's not very nice." *Happy*, in the modern youth culture, was a synonym for "gay." "You know, your father just happens to have delicate features and a small chin. He's been fighting rumors like that since he was in high school."

"Oh, okay." Natalie said.

Nathan arrived home to a house adorned with welcoming banners and mylar

balloons dangling from the ceiling. When they all settled down for that night's dinner and drank their coffees afterward, he made an announcement. "How would you both like to go to Arizona in March?"

Suella replied "What's going on? Are you going to try a comeback?"

"No, idiot," he replied, smiling wryly. "But I *am* going to be playing again. They've invited me to a baseball fantasy camp, as part of the book promotion."

"What is a fantasy camp?" Suella asked. To her it implied visions of people running around in medieval costumes and trying to talk with archaic accents, using a lot of "thee's" and "thou's."

"Regular people get to play baseball with a bunch of ex-major leaguers like me. People eat it up. The best thing is that I want my two favorite ladies in the world to come with me."

"When? In March? Natalie will be in school. Can't we do something during her spring break?"

"It's a done deal, darling," Nathan said. "She's going to be a ball girl."

"A ball girl?" Suella echoed.

"Wow! That'd be awesome!"

Suella thought of the pimply-faced adolescent boys in baggy versions of the team's uniforms delivering baseballs to the umpire or handing the hitters their bats.

"Don't boys usually do that?" she asked.

"Mostly. But girls do, too. I showed them a picture. They fell in love with her, said that she'd be great."

Suella turned to Natalie. "Do you really want to be a ball girl?"

Natalie nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, yes! It’d be so much fun!”

Nathan said “Aw, come on, mom!”

Suella shrugged. “Okay. I guess I’m outvoted.” Over the next two weeks, Nathan received many joyous phone calls from both Justin and the publishing company executives. His book was a huge hit and flying off the bookstore shelves. They were thinking of making a movie from it, with at least one scene scarier than the one from *The Marathon Man*.

On Christmas morning, Nathan told her to stay in bed while he brought her coffee and fresh pancakes. When she finished, he asked her to go outside and see if the paper came. “Paper? We never get a paper?” she said, while Nathan literally pushed her out the door while she still wore her nightgown. Out on the driveway she found a gleaming, brand new, ocean blue Mazda with a giant bow on the top of it. Nathan casually sauntered outside while Suella gawked at the car.

She hugged him. “It’s beautiful! But you didn’t have to! My old one was fine! Can you afford it?”

Nathan smiled smugly. “Didn’t I show you the deposit I got from the book company? This publishing racket pays some really good coin.”

Natalie had already been awake and patiently unwrapped a monstrous pile of gifts from under the Christmas tree. She received a whole new wardrobe of designer clothes and a brand-new, top-of-the-line Hydroped. “I hope you gave her a helmet, too,” Suella said.

“This is the best Christmas ever!” Natalie exclaimed, hugging both her parents.

Suella was still tapping her everyday or dropping meds into her food or drinks.

The new year 2028 arrived and what seemed like only days later, they were packing their bags for a week-long trip to the Arizona desert. It was the first week of March, the week that Suella would discontinue Natalie's medications. At least she wouldn't have to worry about tapping her while they were gone.

They rode six hours into Arizona in Suella's brand new car. She sat in the back seat while Nathan and Natalie chattered endlessly as they passed desolate stretches of barren mountains and parched grasslands. Suella had envisioned a whole week of having to watch middle-aged men make fools of themselves trying to hit, catch, and run the bases with old major leaguers like her husband

During the week, they would stay at a hotel near the complex, and when Nathan parked there to unload their luggage, she heard a familiar woman's voice shout out her name. "Suella! Suella!"

She turned in the direction of the shouts and saw an old friend, Kaitlyn Vogel, running toward her, with a fresh updo, swinging bling and a white, sparkling smile. When they reached each other, in front of the opened tailgate of Suella's car, they swamped each other in a heavy embrace, jumping up and down, giggling like they were teenagers being reunited at summer camp. Soon they let each other slip apart yet they still held hands as Suella looked into Kaitlyn's beaming eyes. She still looked every inch the runway model, not one pound heavier than the last time Suella had seen her years ago. "How the hell have you been?" Kaitlyn asked. "You look fantastic!"

Suella laughed. "Thank you! It's so great to see you! Is Jeff in this little shindig, too?"

Kaitlyn smiled wryly at Suella's "duh" question. "Of course. I'm stuck here for

the week too, with these middle-aged crazies.”

Suella looked around. “Where are all your kids?” She mentally calculated their ages and figured that they must be in high school by now.

“Oh, they’re at home.” She leaned in closer to her for a moment, as if she were sharing a confidence. “At the age they are, they’re all too cool for something like this.”

Kaitlyn had opened her mouth, and was going to ask another question, but Natalie’s voice calling out “Hey mom,” interrupted them.

She bounded up from around the other side of the car and reached the two women, panting from her quick run from the other side of the hotel. “Dad found the room,” she said. “Can I start bringing my bags over?”

Kaitlyn, clearly awestruck, took a step toward Natalie. “Oh, my god! Is this your little baby girl?”

“Yes,” Suella said, patting Natalie in the small of her back.

Kaitlyn gently touched a lock of Natalie’s hair and shook her hand tenderly. “I don’t believe my eyes. You are absolutely gorgeous! What’s your name again, darling?”

Suella and Natalie both answered at the same time, as if they’d been coached, in choral unison. “Natalie,” they said.

Kaitlyn looked at them both and laughed. “Not only do you look alike, you think alike, too.”

Suella patted her daughter’s back.

Natalie was going to reach into the car to retrieve her luggage from in there, but Kaitlyn continued to speak, stopping her. “Suella, I just can’t believe this! She’s the mirror image of you! This is uncanny!”

Suella reached out for Natalie's hand, to gently tug her towards herself, so that they could stand close together and Kaitlyn could look at them.

"This is unreal!" Kaitlyn went on. "I mean, I've seen other mothers and daughters who looked alike, but this is eerie!"

Natalie smiled sweetly, showing her dimples and glanced at her mother. "Yeah, we get that a lot," she said. Soon the old friends had to part to tend to their various businesses. Suella, Nathan, and Natalie checked into the suite where they'd be staying for the week. Two gigantic king beds lay against the wall in the spacious, bright room. Suella thought that two people could lay on opposite sides of the bed and not see each other.

Natalie had the other bed to herself, and when she propped herself against the pillows and called up the hotel system, Nathan walked in from the bathroom. "Don't be getting too comfortable there, young lady," he said. "We've got dinner downstairs and a big 'meet and greet' thing going on."

Natalie said "Okay. Just let me know when we need to go down there."

Suella moved over to the side of the bed to stand over her. Natalie looked like a little doll sitting in the middle of the huge bed. "I was thinking you could wear that pretty floral dress we brought along."

Natalie scrunched her nose, squinting. "You were serious about that?"

"Of course," Suella said. "Why else would we have packed them?"

"I'm going to be playing baseball all week."

"Exactly." Suella nodded. "This might be the only chance we have to wear anything nice." She crossed the room and found the garment bag containing the dress.

After delicately tugging it free of the bag she held it, offering it to Natalie.

“Whatever!” Natalie said, grabbing the dress from Suella’s hand. “I’m probably going to be the only kid down there in a stupid dress.”

Suella glanced over at Nathan, who winced. By the time they finished, Natalie had tied back her hair with a delicate lace bow and looked lovely in the tea length floral dress that sculpted her waist. Suella wore one of her teal and citron business outfits, giving it warmth by adding jewelry and softening her hair. “I’m the luckiest guy in the world,” Nathan said as he looked them both over.

When they arrived in the dining hall, Suella breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that other women and girls and dresses and men in suits. Kaitlyn Vogel always looked as though she’d just stepped out into the world from a magazine picture. It was a giant banquet for all the attendees of the fantasy baseball camp, and the banner above the banquet table read “Welcome players!” At the front of the hall, a tall man with gray hair and a tan stood at a podium on a dais. He wore a clip-on mike and when he spoke, his voice boomed out from the recessed speakers in the corners of the room. “It seems like just about everyone has arrived. The hotel has put out a fantastic spread, and I’m sure you’re all licking your chops to dive in, but I’d like to make some introductions first.”

Nathan leaned over to Suella and spoke into her ear. “That’s Greg Matarocci. He played for the Tigers when I was there. He’s the one who put this whole thing together. I’ve got to get up there.”

Nathan walked up the open floor beside the dais and ten other middle-aged and older men walked up to join him. Suella looked over the diversity of faces and marveled at how they’d added African American former stars, along with Hispanic, to go with Jeff

Vogel and Nathan, the only other white players. Greg Matarocci introduced all of them with zing and rhythm in his voice, as if he was calling out the starting lineup at a basketball game. When each of the men were introduced, they would take two steps forward and wave to the dinner crowd, who applauded. Greg had to go through five of them before he reached Nathan.

“And now, we have a real treat for you here at the camp. He pitched in a colossal career that began way back in the last century and spanned four decades. He went straight from a suburban Kansas City town to the big leagues at the tender age of eighteen. For the better part of three decades he baffled hitters with an assortment of nasty breaking stuff and pinpoint control. And he saved his finest hour for last, in the legendary playoff game against the Cubs. For those of you who were living under a rock back then, this guy through out two runners on the same play! Give it up for Methuselah himself Nathan Worthy!”

Nathan smiled widely and raised his hand to the crowd as they applauded with gusto.

Greg went on: “Say there, Worthy, you’ve got a book out now, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Nathan shouted, from his place on the line. “Painting the Black.”

“What was, it? ‘Paint it black?’” Nathan was not miked, and if Suella hadn’t already known the book title, she wouldn’t have understood what he said, either.

Nathan stepped up to the dais to stand closer to Greg and repeat the title.

“Oh yes,” Greg said. “Painting the black. Nathan did a lot of that in his career.”

Suella learned about “painting the black” not long after she met Nathan. He showed her a publicity picture for ESPN, taken when he was twenty-five years old and still starting

games instead of finishing them. They had rigged up a stand near home plate, holding a couple of long, wooden rectangles, representing the right and left strike zones. Young Nathan, wearing his New York uniform, held a small paint can and a paint brush. He was painting one of the frames forming the strike zones. "Painting the black" meant pitching the ball so that it hit the outside edges of the strike zone, where batters would have a tougher time trying to hit it.

When all of the players had been introduced, he waved his arm with a flourish and said "Enough of the formalities! Get up and grab some grub, people!" When Nathan, Suella and Natalie joined the line, a stocky man approached them.

Later, while they sat down to dinner at their table, a matronly woman in her fifties approached them. She greeted Nathan and Suella and turned her attention to their daughter. "And you must be Natalie. Oh, so precious. Listen, first thing tomorrow we need to get you fitted for your ball girl uniform."

Natalie, who had already started pecking away at her salad, looked up, and out of the corner of her mouth said "Okay."

After dinner, Kaitlyn and Jeff Vogel came up to Suella and Nathan. Each of the men gave a warm embrace to the other man's wife. "Congratulations on taking such good care of Jeff," Nathan said. "Lord knows, it can't be easy!" Jeff playfully punched at Nathan and for a moment the two men looked like rowdy teenagers.

Kaitlyn took Suella aside. "They don't believe in wasting any time, do they? For tomorrow they have a full slate of practice scheduled." She looked around at the men filing out of the dining hall, the ones who would play baseball along with the old time players. "Can you believe the condition of some of these guys?" Together they looked

around at the paunchy waistlines, fatty necks and stubby legs. I hope they made them all sign waivers a foot high.”

“Oh, you know they did,” Suella said, laughing. “It’ll be fun to watch.”

“You’ve got that right! See you tomorrow!”

Chapter Twenty-one

The next morning, after the first few rays of bright, desert sun sliced into the room, Natalie was up, rummaging through her luggage places by the closet. “Is it morning already?” Suella groaned. “I’m on vacation. Can’t I at least sleep in a little?”

When she turned the other way, toward Nathan, she saw him grinning impishly, holding up his head with his elbow. “Breakfast is at eight. We start right after that.”

After a meal of powdered scrambled eggs with Belgian waffles, one of the white-shirted camp workers directed Suella and Natalie toward a ballroom that served as a uniform shop. When they entered the room, Suella gasped. They’d filled every inch of the space with racks and racks of baseball uniforms: shirts, pants, caps, socks and stirrups. Men they’d seen since they’d arrived wandered among the stacks, choosing caps and baseball gloves. Gayle welcomed them. “Good morning! Now Natalie, I know that you’re anxious to get suited up and run out to the field to get started, but I just have to go over a couple of things. You probably know what you’ll need: a shirt and pants, a cap, socks and we can also get you some soccer style cleats.”

“Thank you, but I’ve got my own,” Natalie blurted out, as she started to wander among the uniform racks.

“We have every uniform in the majors, both the National and American leagues. Whatever you want to wear is fine.”

Suella wondered how much all the official-looking baseball uniforms must have cost. Nathan had told her the night before that the middle-aged-crazies spent over six thousand dollars for the privilege of playing baseball with a bunch of old timers. So they could probably afford it, and they probably reused all of the uniforms many times

over. Natalie glanced over at Suella “What should I wear, mom?”

Suella chuckled. The child was definitely asking the wrong person. “Whatever you want, sweetie.”

Natalie gazed out into space to ponder for a moment. “San Diego,” she said. “That’s the team daddy played with the most.”

“Good choice,” Gayle said. “They have nice uniforms.”

Even though there was a nice ladies room beside the ballroom uniform shop, Natalie wanted to get changed in the room. Suella didn’t mind, as it gave her extra time to smooth sunscreen onto her face. She would wear a sundress that day. According to the net forecast, the temperature would go over ninety degrees.

When Natalie finished dressing in her uniform, Suella looked her over from head to toe, touched at what an adorable little ball girl her daughter became. Natalie had tied off her hair into double ponytails, with colorful scrunchies. She was already starting to show a womanly hourglass figure, accented by the belt she’d worn, pulled all the way to the end eyelet. “You’re the prettiest tomboy I ever saw,” Suella said, as they stepped up to the elevator.

She rolled her eyes around in exasperation. “Mom!”

Suella had expected a claptrap ballpark, overgrown with weeds and sagebrush, and a worn-out, hard-packed diamond. Surprisingly, the tram stopped before a beige concrete structure with a roof. “This is where they’re playing?” she said to Kaitlyn, who sat beside her. “It looks like a real baseball park.”

Kaitlyn nodded. “Oh yeah. Seattle used to have spring training here. Jeff says he used to play games during the Cactus league out here.” When the tram

stopped, they entered the field through the clubhouse. Suella saw a professionally manicured, emerald green lawn. “The groundskeeper should get a medal,” she said. “It’s gotta be hard for them to keep anything green out here.”

Though the ladies could have sat up near the roof, and in the shade, they chose seats by the dugout instead. Seats under the roof would take them too far away from the action on the field, and Suella wanted to be close to Natalie. Though she was off her medication for now, this was exactly the type of setting that would lend itself well to melding with her.

When the both of them had settled into their seats, they scanned the field for their husbands. Suella found Nathan, who waved delicately back to her. He stood beside Greg, who held a clipboard and addressed the thirty men in their baseball uniforms standing near the on-deck circle. Greg was explaining what they hoped to accomplish that day: take some hitting practice and some fielding practice, and find out each player’s strengths and weaknesses. By the end of the day, he said, they hoped to find positions for all of the men.

That left Natalie out by the warning track in the outfield, playing with the bat boys and the other ball girl. They tossed a baseball amongst each other, smiling and talking to each other. Kaitlyn was still gazing at Natalie, this time from a distance. “I just can’t get over that,” she said. “How much you guys look alike. Do you happen to have any old pictures on you, of what you looked like when you were her age?”

“No,” she said. “I promised myself, and I promised Nathan and Natalie. No Zon this week, and no Netcenter. Just come out and enjoy the sun and the fun.”

Kaitlyn looked at the small pockets on Suella’s sundress and at her purse. “You

didn't even bring a projectile?" she said. "Hey, somebody take a picture! This has got to be a first. You don't even have any wallet shots?"

"No. I know what I looked like when I was thirteen. I looked like Natalie."

By lunchtime all the men on the field had shown their batting and fielding prowess and Natalie got some good practice chasing after foul balls that dribbled along the edges of the field. The mid-day sun had started to scorch the both of them, as they sipped on iced teas to cool themselves. "I'm ready for the pool," Kaitlyn said. "They have one of those here, don't they?"

Hotel employees served hot dogs and cold cut hero sandwiches at the concession stand. They also provided avocado salads and veggie pitas for people like Kaitlyn. Once they settled back into watching the men play and the girls field foul balls, Kaitlyn again watched Natalie. "I just can't get over that," she repeated. "It's got to be a first. You could be identical twins, thirty-whatever-it-is years apart. They should do a photo shoot of you two. Maybe later, when Nat hits seventeen or eighteen."

Suella shrugged. "I'm not anorexic enough. No offense." She wanted to steer the subject away from Natalie, as it was making her uncomfortable. At the same time, it occurred to her that Kaitlyn already knew, and that she was baiting Suella with all of the comments about how much the mother and daughter resembled each other. She was leading her on to eventually come out with it herself. Yet, the only one of the baseball wives who might possibly know was Carolyn Concannon. She was the one who'd told her about the Lifewind center. Had Carolyn blurted out the news about Natalie? Probably not. Word traveled fast, and if Carolyn had told somebody, anybody, word would have gotten out to the paparazzi, and Natalie would have appeared on the Today

show. For the rest of that afternoon, she tried to chase the thought from her mind.

Kaitlyn helped by telling her all about her sons and daughter while they watched the men practice grounders and fly balls.

Around dinner time the camp officials called it a day and all of the men, the wives and the support staff crowded onto the trams for the ride back to the hotel. “My skin feels hot,” Suella told Kaitlyn while they rode along. “I used enough sunscreen, didn’t I? My back is not red, is it?”

Dinner that night was more casual, so Suella stayed in her sundress and she allowed Natalie to change into a casual jumper. Nathan put on a polo shirt version of his uniform and slacks and joined them in the dining room. When everyone had been through the buffet line and they sat at their tables relaxing with dessert or coffee, Greg Matarocci took to the podium on the dais. “We have something fun and unusual planned for this evening. I hope you enjoy it!”

The hotel used an old-fashioned fabric-and-glass screen for their video presentations. It unrolled slowly at the front of the room. For the next hour-and-a-half, the event management team showed images of all of the stars during highlights from their careers. Suella watched huge videos of the younger versions of these men as they belted homeruns out of ballparks, turned balletic double plays, ran down fly balls in the outfield, and struck out hopelessly overmatched hitters. The relaxed crowd clapped and cheered at some of the more spectacular athletic feats.

A young Nathan Worthy’s face filled the screen. He held a paint brush. It was the famous “painting the black” photo shoot picture from the early days in his career. The next series of images showed him in a progression of different uniforms in

different cities, dropping a looped curve ball on the outside for a called strike, tossing a throw to first base to pick off a runner, and getting a batter to pop up to close out the world series game he appeared it. The last image showed him in Chicago, steam coming out in his breath as he stared the catcher down. Rather than throw the ball to the plate, he shifted his feet and threw hard to first base, running toward the base after he threw the ball. The first baseman tagged out the runner, used his glove like a j'ai alai mitt and tossed him back the ball. Nathan caught the ball in his bare left hand and threw hard to home plate, where the catcher tagged out the runner trying to steal home. Nathan's teammates jumped for joy and mobbed him at the mound as they all ran to their dugout.

Suella felt cold all over again just from watching the images. Everyone in the roomed clapped and cheered, some of them standing. Greg took the podium. "I don't know about you," he said, "but that was the best play I ever saw." Some more of the men and the wives stood up, and everyone looked in Nathan's direction. A few of the men walked up behind Nathan and patted him on the back. People started to chant "Na-than! Na-than!" Eventually he stood up, his cheeks tinged red, as he wore a wide, bright smile, beaming at all the kind people in the dining hall. When they quieted down for him, he spoke: "Shucks, folks. I'm speechless." He even looked down and shifted his weight like the cowardly lion in *The Wizard of Oz*.

There were just a few more videos to show, and when they all ended, people gradually filed out of the dining room to continue the rest of the evening. "I want to get to bed early," Nathan said. "Tomorrow they're going to start to play for real. And I'm pitching."

The next morning, while she put on sunscreen and another sleeveless dress, Suella

resolved that she would make herself receptive to a melding experience with Natalie. Efforts in the past to force the experiences had gotten her nowhere. Whenever it had happened, she realized, she was enjoying the day casually, the way she had at the soccer game, the brilliant morning when she hugged her daughter, and then again while they went to the beach.

So it would be during that sunny, warm March morning in Arizona. She wore her wide brimmed hat and large sunglasses, causing Kaitlyn to remark “You look like an O.C. trophy wife.” The both of them had expected a casual game, possibly one where there would be lots of laughing, yelling and cussing, like during the beer league softball games she’d seen during her youth. There was a public address announcer, just like at a real major league baseball park. His voice was full of vigor and enthusiasm and he reminded Suella of the unseen game show announcers she’d seen on television when she was a kid. All of the players received a full introduction, as they ran out to the field one by one and took their place on the base line. The announcer would say “And now, from Keokuk, Iowa, number 22, second baseman and tax accountant, Michael Collins!”

They even played the national anthem, sung by a young woman who was introduced as a music major at one of the nearby colleges. It reminded Suella of the All-Star game, with all the players wearing different uniforms from the various cities. Unlike yesterday, the players on the team Nathan would pitch for wore white baseball caps embroidered with an “A” and the other team wore black baseball caps embroidered with a “B.” After they’d all been introduced, the players ran off the field and into the dugout. A full umpiring crew took their stations at home plate, the foul lines, and second base. “Wow, they really went all out for this,” Kaitlyn said.

“Getting them their money’s worth,” Suella observed.

The home plate umpire yelled “Play ball!” and the players from the home team sprinted out onto the field, taking their positions. The game progressed at a snappy, orderly pace, governed by an umpire who shouted “ball” and “strike” calls the way Suella had heard it so many times during Nathan’s playing years. Nathan pitched, for one of the teams. Some of the other old time pro players took the positions they’d played during their careers. Jeff Vogel played catcher for the other team, which caused Kaitlyn’s mouth to drop open, a bewildered look crossing her face. “He never caught before. What are they doing?” she said.

“None of those fantasy campers can catch, most likely,” Suella said.

“His knees aren’t that good,” Kaitlyn went on. “I hope he can still walk at the end of the day.”

Natalie stayed at her perch for ball girl throughout the game. That morning, Suella had coated her with extra sunscreen on her arms and around her neck.

“The sun is a thief,” she’d said. “It takes away your youth, and your beauty.”

Between innings, Suella would stroll over to the part of the fence where Natalie perched on her stool, trying to remain alert while the men batted. “One of those foul balls came over her pretty quick,” Suella said. She’d watched her daughter dance over it while the ball caromed against the fence and ricocheted out onto the field. The shortstop picked it up and tossed it back to the umpire.

“Yeah,” Natalie said. “I want to try to catch the next one like that.”

Suella tried to smile. “Well if one of them comes over too hard, just get out of the way. Don’t be a hero. There’s no major league scouts here, ready to sign the first girl

baseball player. There's no one to impress."

"Okay, mom."

Suella also watched her husband. He had worked out for a month beforehand. His workouts included runs around the neighborhood and lifting weights in his home gym in the spare bedroom. He said that he even pitched a simulated game with Tom, one of his golfing buddies who'd been a catcher. That day, while Nathan pitched, he seemed to be taking it easy, pacing himself. Some of his pitches snapped and rolled, though, almost the same way they did during his playing days. He wasn't just going to lob the ball up there for all the middle-aged crazies to smash all over the baseball stadium. They would have to work to get whatever hits came their way.

Throughout the next few innings, Suella tried to keep an eye on Natalie, who worked from the third base line. Another man came out to pitch for the fifth inning, which made her feel glad that Nathan would get a rest. Awhile later, one of the men on Nathan's team, a powerful looking black guy with big arms, hit a line drive foul ball straight toward Natalie. Suella and Kaitlyn both gasped, but Natalie simply reached up and snared the rocketing ball out of the air, causing a loud smack into her glove.

"What happened?" Kaitlyn said. "I couldn't even look."

"She caught it," Suella told her. "Quite an athlete, that little girl."

When the game ended after nine innings, with a 5-3 score, they all took a break for lunch. The same as the day before, all the players, the wives and the fantasy camp staff received sandwich lunches at the concession stand. Suella and Kaitlyn took salads. Promptly after the break ended, the next game began, with the announcer calling out the names and positions of the players just as he'd done at the beginning. "What, again?"

Kaitlyn said.

Suella noticed that it was a completely different set of players from the ones who'd started the first game. "I guess if they failed to give these guys the red carpet treatment, they'd feel left out."

Kaitlyn shook her head. "Men. Such egos."

During the second game, Nathan didn't pitch, but he pinch-hit for one of the other players and later took a position in the outfield. "They better not hit one out there," Suella said. "He has never played outfield in his whole life."

A batter did send a ball through the infield on a line toward Nathan. He ran over to field it and threw the ball hard to second base, looking every bit the position player. Another batter stroked a ground ball past the third base line. Natalie ran up to it, bent over, let it dribble into her glove and she tossed it back to the umpire. "She's good in sports, beautiful, and you say she does well in school," Kaitlyn observed. "Is there anything that kid *can't* do?"

"Ballet," Suella said, laughing.

At the end of that game, Kaitlyn and Suella met their husbands and Natalie. Both Nathan and Jeff groaned during the tram ride back to the hotel. "Man, it's been a long time since I've done that," Jeff said. "I hope I can still walk tomorrow."

Both Nathan and Natalie showered to help freshen themselves up for that night's dinner. The entertainment after the dinner was a couple of first run movies the camp staff had acquired, both macho action flicks that bored Suella. "We're going back upstairs." She got up and motioned to Natalie, who stayed put, sitting beside her father.

Natalie pleaded "Do I have to, mom? Derek Way is in this movie. He's full."

Suella said “He’s what?” and then caught herself. “Okay. You can watch the movie. I’ll see you upstairs later.” She’d forgotten the younger generation’s new synonym for “hot” or “gorgeous,” the word “full.”

When she reached the room, she flopped her body down on the bed and vacantly watched programs on the hotel network. She wondered if she would get to meld with Natalie the next day, or at all during this trip.

Chapter Twenty-two

Nathan sprang out of bed the next morning as if he was nineteen years old and living on a farm. “I feel great,” he said. “No pain anywhere. I was so worried about that.”

Suella groaned when the bright sun’s rays bathed her face in their glow. “Can’t I sleep in just a little bit, today?”

Nathan patted her on the rear. “If you do, you’ll miss breakfast. These people don’t play around.”

Natalie also pushed herself out from between the covers, joyously receiving another day. She had jumped into her uniform before Suella swung her thighs over the edge of the bed and put both feet on the floor. “Gosh, what’s wrong with me today?” Suella asked out loud, not expecting an answer. Nathan had laser-razed himself and put on his uniform shirt and pants while Suella still shuffled around the hotel room in her nightgown. “Maybe I’ll feel better if I have a little break fast.”

Later that morning, she ate just the Belgian waffle and a few slices of orange instead of the powdered eggs or the sausage. While the sausage was meatless, she felt that they used too many chemicals in making that type of product and she never touched it. Kaitlyn and Jeff met them at their table. To Suella’s dismay, Kaitlyn seemed as bright and chipper as Nathan and Natalie.

“I feel like crap,” she confided to Kaitlyn at one point.

“But you look good,” Kaitlyn said. “What more could one ask for, right? Is it your time?”

“No. That’s a whole other kind of feeling like crap. This is something different.”

Kaitlyn patted her on the wrist. “Maybe you’ll feel better when we get out there in the sun and the fresh air.”

Like the day before, the fantasy camp staff made a grand production of starting the game, complete with the gameshow style announcer, the men standing along the baselines, and the girl’s rendition of the Star Spangled banner. Kaitlyn bounced over to her post along the third base foul line. The umpire called “Play ball,” and another day of middle-aged crazies swinging for the fences and huff-puffing around the bases started.

“How are you holding out?” Kaitlyn asked, a few innings into the game.

Suella sighed. “Well, I’m no longer nauseous, like I was back at the room. I just have this, kind of tingling somehow.” She put both of her wrists before her and examined them. Neither one of them could see anything wrong.

“I’ll get you a glass of iced tea, with lots of lemon,” Kaitlyn said, getting up. She got a tall glass for the both of them, and as Suella sipped the cold, refreshing fluid, she did begin to feel better.

“Guess I was all worried about nothing,” she said, straightening up in her seat, paying new attention to the game. When his team would take the field, Nathan played shortstop, another position Suella was sure he’d never played before. He had to have more skill with it than some of the paunchy fantasy campers out there, she supposed. A small, thin guy Suella didn’t recognize pitched for the team that day. He looked as if he worked in a library in his everyday life.

One of the bigger black players from the other team had come up to bat. With his big shoulders and powerful demeanor he looked more suited to football than baseball. What happened next seemed to take place in a slow, alternate universe. The batter swung

mightily at one of the little guy's looping pitches. He connected and sent a vicious grounder wide of the third base bag, directly to Natalie. Suella jumped up and started to say "No!" all the while watching her daughter and the speeding baseball headed toward her. Natalie bent over, concentrating on it, getting ready to scoop it up. At the last instant, the baseball hit a fold on the outer track, and took a wild hop askew. Natalie had crouched down with her glove poised, but the diverted ball smacked her hard on her other, unprotected wrist, with a cracking sound like the breaking of a tree branch.

"Oh my god," Kaitlyn said.

Everyone stood. The players on that side of the field, the umpire, and Suella all ran toward Natalie, who had crumpled to the ground on her knees, flung her baseball glove aside and held onto her wrist. One of the staff members, a stocky, balding guy reached her first. "Where does it hurt, honey?" he asked. Nathan had gone around to her back and held her, while Suella jumped over the rail and landed on the field's outer track, scrambling to reach Natalie. She wasn't crying, she realized. Maybe that was a good sign. When Suella reached her though, she discovered cold sweat on Natalie's brow, dripping down over her white, pasty skin. Her eyes had opened wide and she breathed rapidly. She cried out "No! No! Don't" every time the medical staff guy touched or examined her wrist.

The man gazed solemnly at Suella. "Ma'am, we've got to get her to a hospital. I'm pretty sure her wrist is broken in two places."

Suella's heart sank. She felt worse than ever, wondering if they were going to need an ambulance for her, too. The next moment, a hydrogen-powered cart arrived. It looked the same as the carts saw at regular baseball games, to take injured players

away. Suella sat on the cart beside Natalie and Nathan sat on the bench seat, beside the driver as he sped them away, toward the outfield bullpen. Someone opened a door. The cart rolled through the fence and into the bowels of the stadium before it emerged from the other side, where a car waited on the street. “This can’t be happening,” Suella kept on telling herself. “This can’t be happening.”

But it was.

The second car raced them to the largest hospital in the area, where they pushed through the emergency room doors. It was the middle of the week, during early March and Suella almost fainted with relief when she saw only a small handful of people in the waiting room. She eerily realized that for the second time in her life, her father arrived with her at the hospital while wearing his San Diego baseball uniform. He stood in front of the clerk, to give them Natalie’s number and the insurance information. Since the clerk worked out of a glass-encased enclosure in the middle of the waiting room, all of the people sitting could see Nathan. A man sitting against the far wall exclaimed “Did I travel back in time? It’s Methusehlah!”

Nathan turned to the man and gave him a small salute. He, Natalie and Suella found seats around the edge across from the man who spoke earlier. “Hey, it looks like they’re going to take you right away,” he said. “Celebrities have clout, let me tell you.” Two nurses in shimmering teal uniforms took Natalie through the doors into the examination suite, with Nathan and Suella following along.

Natalie whimpered as the nurses helped her onto an examination gurney. “It hurts so much.”

Suella saw a tall blond in scrubs and said “Get my daughter pain meds, now!”

The blonde nodded and left the room with one of her co-workers. Nathan turned to look at Suella with watery, fearful eyes. “We ought to call the center, or Dr. Allende’s office or something.”

“Go ahead.”

They both had the doctor’s office number programmed and Suella felt better about her husband calling, after all of the ways she’d worn out her welcome there over the years. At the same time, the two nurses reappeared. One of them spoke in the proper English that matched her smooth, tea colored skin and glossy black hair. “Mrs. Worthy, the physician requests that we do a blood draw so that we can get your daughter medication for her pain.”

The news hit Suella like a jolt to her abdomen. “Are you sure? She’s in so much pain. Isn’t there something safe you can give her right away?” She indicated Natalie, whose cheekbones glistened with dried tear tracks.

The nurse sighed. “We have to make sure there won’t be a reaction. It won’t take long.”

Nathan patted Suella on her shoulder and spoke to her tenderly. “There’s nothing to worry about, hon. Nowadays, they can tap someone with a wand and get blood. It’s not like it was when we were kids.”

Suella still felt an impending sense of dread as she leaned her head against Nathan’s shoulder. How could she tell him that she wasn’t worried at all about the physical pain Natalie would endure? She was worried about what they would find.

As Nathan said, the blood draw itself was quick and painless. It looked like they were just taking Natalie’s temperature. Yet, when the nurse pulled the

wand back, Suella could see a vial of blood. When the nurses took the vial of blood away, Nathan resumed calling the doctor's office. Suella could only sit beside the examination table and hold Natalie's hand comforting her, when she was the one who needed comforting, during her sense of gray doom.

"How does your wrist feel, baby?" Suella asked.

"Better," she said. "As long as I don't move it."

While they waited, Nathan reached Dr. Allende's office and at first he seemed to be speaking with the receptionist, giving Natalie's name. After answering a few more questions about what had happened and giving them more information, he moved his mouth away from the phone to speak with Suella. "They're getting Dr. Allende."

That surprised Suella. She'd never gotten service that quickly. Then again, she'd never called the office with a bonafide emergency before. A moment later, Nathan started speaking again, more rapidly now that Dr. Allende had come to the phone. He repeated the same information he'd just given the nurse and told her their location. Her husband then sat silently for several minutes, now and again murmuring "Okay," or "I see." Soon after that, their call ended.

"Dr. Allende said something about getting a linkup with this hospital," Nathan announced, sitting tall and confident, apparently feeling better after having taken some control of the situation.

"She's going to have to tell them, isn't she," Suella said, meaning Natalie's status as a clone.

"Yeah." He let out a long, bewildered sigh,

The nurse reappeared, alone this time. "Mr. Worthy, Mrs. Worthy, we have to go

over something with you,” she said, a tone of foreboding in her voice.”

Suella’s stomach frosted over again, and her limbs felt leaden.

She continued. “You said that Natalie was not on medications, but we found significant traces of an anti-depressant in her system.”

Suella felt like crying. She turned to her daughter, who was gazing up at the nurse, dumbfounded. Nathan asked “Anti-depressants? How can that be?”

When she tried to speak, to explain herself, her voice croaked at first because her throat was so dry. “I gave them to her myself,” Suella said, her eyes welling up with tears. “I thought they might help her focus more, in school. It won’t be a problem, will it?”

The nurse’s eyes widened, as she took in a deep breath. “As far as Natalie receiving the pain medication, no.”

Suella reached out to touch the nurse’s hand. “Can I make one small request, please? Can we keep the information private?”

The nurse’s hand felt cool and detached, just like her demeanor. “Natalie’s doctor’s office has already called,” she said. “They’re on the phone to Dr. Rastovar now.”

Suella let go of the nurse, and thought she could not feel any worse, but she was wrong. Nathan turned to her and hissed “Anti-depressants? You gave her anti-depressants? What the hell for?”

She knew he wouldn’t accept any sheepish explanation. Over and over to him and Natalie, she said “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Shortly after that, Dr. Rastovar appeared. He was darker than the nurse, with a

full head of jet black, glossy hair like hers, although cut in a conservative man's hairstyle.

"Thank you for waiting," he said in short, clipped tones while he rushed up to tend to Natalie. His voice softened considerably when he addressed her. "How is our star baseball playing lady doing?"

"I think I broke my arm," Natalie said, weakly.

The doctor frowned as he gently examined the contours of Natalie's wrist, touching it lightly. Natalie gasped and winced while she tried to hold her wrist still. From his coat pocket, the doctor retrieved a small object that looked like a pocket calculator with a lens attached. Suella leaned over to watch as he placed the lens over Natalie's injured arm. Through the device, which also shone a bright, focused light onto her skin, she could see the blue nerves and veins along with the red arteries and the white bone. The white, jumbled, jagged bone. Dr. Rastovar lifted the viewer off of Natalie's arm, flipped it closed with a flick of his wrist and placed it back in his pocket. "We are going to have to operate," he said, calmly. He reached down to pat a lock of Natalie's blond hair. "You'll be fine, miss. We'll take good care of you. We're going to put you to sleep, and when you wake up, your arm will be as good as new."

Nathan took things over from that point. "Now doctor, you have spoken with Natalie's other physicians, right?"

"Yes."

"And they told you about her..." Nathan's face contorted while he searched for the right words for what he was going to say next, "...her *status*, right?"

"Oh yes."

"And it won't pose any unusual problems?"

Dr. Rastovar looked down at Natalie and smiled. “She’s a healthy, beautiful girl. She’ll be fine.”

Young men orderlies soon arrived to transfer Natalie onto a gurney and take her to the surgery suite, a place where neither Suella nor Nathan could follow her. They had to return to the waiting room. Suella felt cold while she sat next to Nathan. All he said was “I can’t believe you gave her anti-depressants. I just can’t believe it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, again. They sat in painful silence for the next several hours.

Chapter Twenty-three

Natalie made it though the surgery fine, the way Dr. Rastovar said she would, and the way Suella knew she would. She was glad for the chance to reunite with her daughter in the recovery room. Natalie sat up on a gurney bed, covered by sheets and a blanket, gazing at her parents with glassy eyes and black pupils. Suella rushed up to her and held her hand. “Hi sweetie,” she said, looking down at the bandages and cast swathing Natalie’s other arm. “The doctor and nurses said you did very well and you’ll be able to leave tomorrow morning.”

Natalie smiled.

“How do you feel, hon?” Nathan asked.

“Sleepy,” Natalie said, closing her eyes, as if the mere act of answering her father’s question took all of her energy.

“We’ve got to go back to the hotel and let these brilliant nurses and doctors take care of you tonight,” Nathan said. “But we’ll be back to get you first thing tomorrow morning.”

Her eyes still closed, Natalie smiled. When they both returned to the waiting room, they had to wait only a few minutes before one of the cars from the fantasy camp arrived for them. Nathan still had barely spoken to Suella, but her phone rang. She winced with pain when she saw the number flashing, recognizing Dr. Allende’s private line. She could not let the phone go to valet, so as her heart pounded she answered it.

The doctor came on the line. “Hello. I guess you’ve had quite a day over there. Dr. Rastovar told me the details of Natalie’s surgery.”

Suella felt as if she was walking up the steps to a gallows. “Yes, he told us the

same thing.”

“Suella, there’s no delicate way to put this,” the doctor said. “When you return to town we’re going to have to have a meeting.”

“I understand,” Suella said.

“Okay. We’ll see you soon. Drive carefully, now.”

Nathan was staring straight ahead over the front seat as he spoke. “So what did she say?” he asked, without expression.

“That we’re going to have to have a meeting.”

Nathan nodded. “You realize we’re in big trouble, right?”

“Yes.” It somehow made her feel better that her husband would say “we” and not pin everything on her.

For the next several minutes, as the driver maneuvered through the streets to get them back to the hotel, Suella thought about what the next several days might bring. The event was supposed to last a couple of more days, ending on a Saturday. She wondered if they would allow her and Natalie to watch from the stadium seats while Nathan played a couple of more day’s worth of baseball with the men. A crowd met them as the car cruised through the circular drive at the front of the hotel.

Kaitlyn and Jeff rushed to the car when it came to a stop and they opened the doors. When Suella had stepped out onto the pavement, Kaitlyn hugged her. “It’s so terrible,” she said. “I’m so sorry.” Jeff also hugged her. It was nearly eleven o’clock, and the dining hall had closed long ago. It didn’t matter to Suella. She wasn’t hungry anyway. There would be a long night where her disappointed husband would merely occupy the space in the bed beside her, silently.

She was wrong about that, however. As soon as they reached their room and he closed the door behind them, Nathan sat down across from Suella and looked at her.

“Now why the *fuck* were you drugging our daughter?”

Suella shrugged, fidgeting with her hands as a way to buy time. “I thought it would help her with school,” she said, appalled with the weak way it sounded.

Nathan shook his head. “Bullshit. Now, why did you do it?”

“Nathan, it’s difficult.” She looked away from him.

“I want to know.”

She told him the whole story, starting with the soccer game where she first melded with Natalie. As she spoke, she expected him to get angrier and angrier as she poured the words out to him, he looked back at her with compassion, even taking her hand at one point.

When she finished, he stopped to ponder the whole situation, shaking his head.

“You do realize they could take her away from us now, don’t you?”

Suella shook her head from side to side, to make sure she heard him correctly.

“What? What are you saying?”

Nathan sighed. “Hon, have you ever looked at all those reams of paperwork we signed when Natalie was born?”

“Yes, but we had the lawyers look at it, too. They can’t take Natalie away! She’s our child.”

“In cases of child abuse, they have the state backing them up and they can take her away.”

Tears sprung from Suella’s eyes. “Abuse? What abuse? I love her!”

“We’re under contract not to medicate her. Not even aspirin. It all has to go through the center. It all has to go through her doctors.”

Suella whimpered. “But I just wanted to bond with her!”

Nathan gathered her into his arms and held her while she cried and cried. At a few points she also felt him shuddering. When all the emotion had been wrung from her, she fell asleep in his arms. She woke up hours later, the room still dark. Nathan must have gently eased her onto a pillow and then onto the bed, covering her with a blanket. She still wore her clothes. Maybe, she told herself, the last twenty-four hours had just been one long nightmare, and when Nathan woke up, they would just go to the ballpark to play another game with the middle-aged crazies.

But it was not to be. Nathan woke up, saw her and smiled, and gave her a quick kiss. He showered, dried himself and started to dress in his slacks and silk polo shirt.

“What are you doing?” Suella asked, still slightly groggy. “Aren’t you going to play today?”

He had been walking across the floor to retrieve his earpiece, but stopped. He looked at Suella as if she’d just told him she was going to enter a convent. “We have a daughter in the hospital,” he said. “I think that takes precedence, don’t you?”

Before leaving, they ate breakfast in a quiet dining hall. Some of the other old time baseball players and their wives came by their table to offer their well wishes. Greg Matarocci, looking disconcertingly like a minister on the morning of a funeral, patted Suella’s shoulder. “It’s a shameful tragedy that this happened,” he said. “Hopefully your daughter will be fine.

Then Suella received a shock. Kaitlyn pulled up a chair beside her while she ate

her Belgian waffle and fruit. She whispered “She’s going to be okay, isn’t she?”

Suella nodded. “The doctors say she came through the surgery just fine.”

“It wasn’t more complicated?”

The pained, concerned look on her friend’s face and her earnest tone caused Suella to put down her fork. “No it wasn’t complicated. Why would it be?” Yet, Suella knew, before she finished speaking the words.

Kaitlyn shifted uncomfortably in her seat, backing away from Suella. “Well, you know…”

A wave of light-headedness and nausea overtook Suella. She had to rest her head on her palm and drink cold water to try to cope.

“Are you okay?”

No, Suella thought. She was anything but okay. Her stomach started churning like a washing machine spindle. “Carolyn Concannon told you, didn’t she?”

Kaitlyn nodded.

Suella winced, feeling as if a layer of skin had been torn off. “How many others?”

Kaitlyn touched Suella’s shoulder, to comfort and steady her. “That’s not important. We’re all sworn to secrecy.”

Suella could not eat another bite of the waffle or the fruit. Nathan drummed his hands on the table and said “Are you ready? I told them to bring the car around right about now.”

Nathan had to help Suella out of her chair, while Kaitlyn lagged behind, helping to prop her up as the two of them helped her out of the dining room and into another

bright, warm Arizona morning. A parking lot attendant circled Suella's own car around the front drive for them. She claimed the passenger seat, allowing Kaitlyn to open the door and help her inside. Unexpectedly, a bellman hovered by with their luggage.

Another hotel employee walked over from the front desk and helped him retrieve the pieces from the floating skid and put them in the trunk. Greg Matarocci also showed up by the curb, shaking Nathan's hand, giving him a quick embrace. "What's going on?" Suella asked, wishing she could summon the energy to open the car door and stand up.

"We're going home," Nathan said, as he lowered down and swung himself into the driver's seat.

At least she would get to see Natalie again, she thought. Last night, she'd been coming out from under anesthesia, and she'd barely been lucid when they tucked her in for the night. Had they told her anything? She left it up to Nathan to validate the discharge files, jumping out of her skin while she anxiously awaited the reunion with her daughter. When they finally walked down the hall to the room where they could find her, Suella's limbs felt heavier and more leaden with each passing step. What would they find when they walked through the doorway?

She almost fainted with relief when she saw Natalie talking with a nurse while she hungrily stabbed at a plateful of scrambled eggs and sausage. She sat up in the bed, propped up by pillows, awake and alert, wearing her ball girl uniform. When she saw them, she smiled and said "Hi mom! Hi dad!" Her eyes looked bright and her hair had been brushed. She looked strangely out of place on the clinical hospital bed, until Suella saw her cast and a spidery grouping of wires poking out from under it. Suella rushed up and hugged her daughter, knocking the bed tray aside and spilling food.

Nathan sat in a chair beside Natalie's bed, and with his forehead wrinkled by concern, said "We're going to be going home, sweetie."

Natalie sat still for a moment, expressionless, allowing her father's words to sink in. "Oh," she said. "Well, did you bring my clothes? We're going to have to give these back."

Once Natalie was dressed, they stopped by the hotel so that she could return her uniform, the cap, and the stirrup socks. Gayle at first looked dumbfounded until she saw Natalie's cast. "Oh you poor thing," she said, patting the top of her head in a matronly way.

The short exchange between the two of them gave Suella and Nathan a few moments to plan their drive home. "Let's make it a happy drive," Suella pleaded. "There's no reason for her to know, is there?"

Nathan averted his eyes from her, frowning for a moment. "No," he said. "There's no reason. We want to help her heal."

"Can we both sit in the back?"

Nathan's mouth formed an "o" and his eyes widened, as if he wanted to ask her why, but he stopped himself. "Sure."

For the long ride home, mother and daughter sat together in the back seat. Suella said "I'm so glad you're okay," and hugged Natalie yet again, taking care to avoid her healing arm. Nathan acted like a chauffeur for the first segment of their trip. Natalie happily reminisced about all the people she'd met during the fantasy camp, and how much fun she'd had helping with the games. She laughed while talking about how the players looked and acted. Before long, Nathan laughed along with her, loosened up, and

offered a few of his own impressions about the people they'd met.

The pleasant atmosphere inside the car helped Suella to relax and breathe. She watched the desert mesas and buttes pass by, embraced by the warmth of another day. Still, the nagging thought always returned to her. Could they really take her daughter away? Next month would be her fourteenth birthday. Four more years and the courts, and Lifewind would have no say regarding Natalie's well-being. She did manage to read at least that part of the contract before signing it. Maybe she could hide her. Maybe Jillian could take them both in! What would Nathan do, though? There was no way all three of them could go into hiding, she decided.

When they arrived home, though, she and Jillian could resume their tea time. Her friend would know what to do. The newfound sense of hope and the knowledge that she would get to reconnect with her good friend carried her spirit during the rest of the drive home. They only stopped once, to eat dinner at a steakhouse that had been duded up to look like the old west, with waitresses in cowgirl uniforms and rustic swinging shutters between the front lobby and the main dining room. Nathan spent the meal in an animated conversation about the next stops of his book tour. "I never signed so many autographs, not even when I was playing," he said.

At seven o'clock, with the golden dusk encroaching, her car finally reached the circular front drive in front of their house. Time to get on with their lives. Nathan and Natalie unpacked. Suella closed herself into her den and selected Jillian's number from the cam menu. Moments later she appeared on the screen, appearing slightly surprised and apprehensive. While they'd been gone she'd gotten a haircut and style and it still gleamed with shine and bristled gracefully against her cheekbones and chin while she

spoke. “How was the fantasy baseball camp?” she asked.

“It was fine,” Suella, replied. “Listen, I’m sorry to bother you this late.”

Jillian shook her head and blinked. “That’s not a problem. It’s only ten. Is everything okay?”

Suella knew that it must show in her face, and her eyes. The last time she checked, they were still red-brimmed and puffy from all her crying. There was no use in lying or even sugarcoating things, either. “Well, no,” she began. “Natalie was injured during one of the games.” She explained to her how a foul line drive had split Natalie’s wrist.

“That’s terrible,” Jillian said. “So that’s why you’re home early.” She took a moment to look down and process the information. When she looked back up, one eyebrow cocked higher than the other, the way it always did when she was expressing serious concern. “Is she going to be okay? She must heal differently, right?”

“Yes, the doctors say that she did fine. There’s something else, though...”

While her voice trailed off, Jillian moved closer to the camera at her end, which caused her face to take up the entire screen. “What is it?”

Suella took in a deep breath. “What I’ve got to say is horrific. It might change the way you think of me forever.”

Jillian’s eyes widened, and Suella could tell by the screen edges that she had lifted one hand above the cam. She was probably touching the top of her ancient LCD display, the way she did sometimes, as if she thought she could fax herself through the airwaves and deliver healing comfort. “I won’t judge you,” she assured. “No matter what. Please. Tell me.”

“Okay, here goes,” Suella began, and she reminded Jillian about the extraordinary melding experiences she and Natalie had shared. “I was so desperate for more of them. I would do anything.”

“Oh god,” Jillian interrupted. “What did you do?”

“I medicated her.” Suella explained how she’d learned that a certain type of antidepressant made its users more receptive to out-of-body experiences. She told her the name of the medication and how she’d acquired it by traveling to Mexico. By the time she had finished telling her the whole story, including the details about stopping the medication just before Natalie’s annual, appointment, Jillian’s full face in the screen shook her head, as she frowned.

“How could you do that?” Jillian asked. All that time, all those conversations we had, you always said you would never medicate your kid and that kids today are over-medicated.“

Suella had to shake her head to make sure she was hearing her friend correctly. “Jillian, I expected more support from you!” she whined.

“You sneak down to Mexico, get some medication that they *say* is Apolbaumentine, and then you shoot your daughter up with it every day? And you expect me to be supportive? You were injuring your daughter! When you dope up your daughter like that, she’s not your daughter any more. Isn’t that what I always heard from you about drugs? And now you drug your kid!”

Jillian had shouted out her last few sentences and Suella had turned up the sound rather high. Nathan knocked on her door. “Is everything okay in there?”

Suella was crying again by then. “But I’m sorry!” she wailed.

Jillian looked closely at her through the cam and her eyes softened, her mouth taking on a sad, downward curve. “I know you are. What’s done is done.

The main thing is that she’s off the medication now, right?”

Suella wiped a tear on her sleeve. “Yes. Of course.” After a few moments of thought, she added “They’re going to take my little girl away.”

Jillian’s mouth dropped open. “They’re going to do what?”

“I voided the contract by medicating her. When that happens the center can take her from me or they can sue me for wrongful birth!”

“Wrongful birth?” Jillian repeated. “How can they say it was wrongful? They’re the ones with the technology that cloned you.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know,” Suella murmured.

On the big screen, Jillian shook her head, gazing downward, running her hand through her hair. “Oh, god. Oh, god.”

Suella gazed into the cam, directly at Jillian. “Help me! Don’t let them take my little girl!”

Jillian’s lip quivered, as she gazed back from her screen. She nodded. “I’ll help you.”

Chapter Twenty-four

That night Suella again cried herself to sleep. She also stayed in bed too late the next morning. Natalie spent the day playing on her screens and her accounts. She spent some time in-world on a game she liked to play. When she finally raised herself from bed, Suella still wore her bathrobe, shuffling from one place in the house to the other, wondering when the ax was going to fall. By the latter part of the afternoon, when the sun cast long shadows through the windows, she decided that she'd been neglecting her clients for far too long. Keeping herself off cam, she signed in and helped people with their security issues, quashing viruses and malware.

Nathan left the house early in the morning and returned around the time Suella went back to work. "I spent the whole day with Fisk," he explained. "He says we're in a whole lot of trouble, but only if Lifewind decides to press the matter. Has anyone from there called today?"

"No," Suella said, vaguely reassured that her husband seemed to be exploring all their legal options.

No one called throughout the weekend either, though to Suella, that was not surprising. On Monday morning, Natalie returned to school, and Suella returned to her regular schedule of helping clients. For a couple of days she fooled herself into thinking that things had gone back to normal, that she was just another woman with a marriage and a child to raise. Lifewind still had not called by Wednesday. "They may wait all the way until Natalie's annual physical," Nathan said that night at dinner.

"That's still three weeks away," Suella said. In three weeks time, she told herself, maybe they would forget the matter. Maybe heaven had granted her a reprieve.

On Thursday night when she returned home from school, however, Natalie dragged herself through the front door listlessly, allowing her backpack to drop off her shoulder onto the couch. “Did you have a bad day at school? I’ve got cookies. That’ll help cheer you up. Oatmeal and raisin. Your favorite.” Suella held up a platter for her.

“I’m not hungry,” Natalie said, slumping down into a chair at the kitchen table. After a moment to pause for reflection, she looked up at her mother. “What’s wrong with me?”

Suella set the platter of cookies down, for fear of dropping them. “Well, nothing, sweetheart, the doctors say you’ll be fine. The cast will come off before you know it.” She noticed that a few of Natalie’s friends had signed the cast, using neon ink and expressive pen strokes.

“Well, how come we had to come home so early from the baseball camp?”

Suella shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant, desperately searching her mind for another topic she could divert the conversation towards. “We want to make sure that you get well, that you heal completely. That’s why we came home early, so you’d be near your friends, your doctors. Dr. Allende is also very concerned about you.”

“Well, why have you and dad been whispering to each other so much?”

She shrugged again, turning away from Natalie so she could search her mind for what to say next. “And that first night we got back, you were crying so much.”

Just the mention of it was enough to make Suella want to cry again. She turned around slowly to Natalie, lowered down, and reached for a chair so that she could sit beside her. She positioned herself so that their bodies angled toward each other. Before speaking, she reached out to take both of her daughter’s small, smooth hands in

her own. “Now, honey, you know how much I love you, don’t you?”

Natalie nodded, silently.

“You’re me, my own flesh and blood. Sometimes I feel like we both become one and the same. It happened the first time at one of your soccer games.”

With a confused expression on her face, Natalie repeated “My soccer games?”

Suella nodded. The room around them was soothingly quiet. Even the refrigerator and range matrix had stopped its clicking reset cycles while they sat there. “You were running on the field, kicking the ball the way you do, when you came running toward us, where we were standing. As you drew near, I started to black out, and get dizzy. I thought I was going blind, having a stroke or a heart attack or something. I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, I was *you*, I was inside your body. I felt how you feel when you run around the field and kick the ball the way you do. And it was wonderful, glorious. We were one for a few moments.”

She had expected Natalie to be gazing back at her with wide-eyed wonder, smiling, wanting to know what happened next. Instead, she’d recoiled slightly, narrowing her eyes as she watched her closely. She blinked, rapidly. “Mom, are you okay?”

“Of course I am, sweetheart! Don’t you see? That feeling was so wonderful to me I wanted to feel it all the time. It happened again one morning when I hugged you, first thing in the morning. When we went to the beach and you got me to go into the water, that was another time.”

“Mom, you’re scaring me. That’s so weird.” She tugged her hands away. “Stop it! How could you come inside me like that? We’re two different people! You

can't do that, it's impossible."

"But it's true," Suella said, softly.

Natalie pushed herself away from the table and sprang up from her chair.

"Mommy, what's wrong with you? Why are you acting this way? Are you and dad getting a divorce?"

"No, honey. We love each other."

Natalie put her hands on her hips and glared down at Suella. "Well, what is it, then? Why are you acting so weird?"

Suella's lip trembled, and for a moment, she could not speak. She could feel the tears return, welling in her eyes, distorting her vision. "If I tell you, you'll hate me forever."

"No I won't. Tell me."

"Natalie, please."

"TELL ME. Someone is going to tell me, sooner or later. I'd rather have it be you. So what is it?"

Suella told her all about the medication, the laser tap, the pills dissolved in hot chocolate, and her trips to Mexico to get them refilled. When she finished speaking, Natalie's face took on a dazed, expressionless look, and she slumped down, plopping into the chair once again. They sat together silently for several minutes. Natalie finally said "Now I know why I always feel so tired."

Through the rest of the month of March, no one from Lifewind called the house or Suella's phone. She heard nothing from them over the web, either. She was wary. Like an IRS matter, the trouble, the problem always lurked under the surface. Suella

decided that it was best to continue on with job and keep herself busy with the house, her tea times with Jillian and making sure Nathan was happy. A week after they returned from the fantasy camp, Nathan's twinkling smile returned and they'd been able to enjoy sex the way they did when they were newlyweds.

She also supported Natalie by driving her and her friends to soccer games and practices, enjoying the sight of her daughter playing with abandon. At first she balked at the idea, thinking it would be better for Natalie to devote the time to healing. After much wailing, pleading, and showing her a screen of protective sleeves for wrist casts, Suella gave in. She also felt better about things when she witnessed the coach sternly warning Natalie to protect her arm.

Without the medication, Natalie was more bright eyed and alert than she'd been recently. Her coach even noticed this, saying "That trip to the desert must have done you good!" When Natalie scored the winning goal in a game against a tough opponent, one of the all-girl's parochial schools, her friends jumped on her, lifting her to their shoulders and carrying her off the field. Suella realized that she was happier seeing that than getting to meld with her daughter once every other blue moon.

Still, Natalie's birthday loomed. Lifewind was clearly waiting for Natalie's yearly appointment to take any action. While she and Nathan lie in bed basking in each other's afterglow, she asked him. "Can you come with me to the center this time?"

He shrugged. "I'm kind of busy. The publishers might have something planned."

"Please," she said softly, rolling over, kissing his chest, his neck and working her way down. "I really need you." She perched herself atop him and delicately touched his straining essence before kissing it. "You're her father." She basted him with a warm,

smooth lick.

He groaned. “Hey now, you know that’s not fair.”

“I need you there, Nathan. You know why.” She looked up at him.

Her soft words must have vibrated deliciously against him because he gazed down at her with emotion, with awe. “Okay,” he said.

She continued, finishing what she started.

The week before Natalie’s appointment finally arrived. Suella wondered whether she should pack extra clothes in case the center decided to keep her. She decided that doing so would tempt fate. Would it help to prepare her daughter? That weekend before they would take the trip to Lifewind, Suella and Natalie rode the train to Oceanside. Natalie had jumped up and down for joy when her mother suggested it over dinner one night, but Suella added one condition: “Please don’t make me go into the water this time.”

“Why not?” Natalie asked. “Why waste a trip to the beach if you’re not even going to go into the water?”

“Because it’s COLD, silly. Remember? We just got through winter?”

Natalie agreed to her mother’s condition. “But I’m still going in,” she added.

They rode the train on an early Saturday morning, and by that afternoon, Suella sat in a beach chair under her umbrella, reading a new novel on the tablet display. Natalie, wore a teal floral bikini over her developed body (which made her look much older than fourteen). She made it out to the breakers, the ocean foam kissing the edges of her bikini bottom, before she hugged herself and shouted “Holy tish, it’s freezing!”

“Mama knows best,” Suella called out from under the umbrella.

The only people hardy enough to take to the water that day were young surfer boys and girls. Every one of them wore a wetsuit, probably with piping that added extra warmth, like an old-style electric blanket. For awhile, Natalie built a sandcastle. Suella had taught her how years before, showing her how to cup ocean water in her hands to wet the sand and mold it into walls and moats. She smiled when she saw her drip wet sand through her parted fingertips, creating towers out of sand droplets. A short distance away, some kids her age got together for an impromptu game of sand volleyball. Suella took a moment from her reading to watch and to plan how and when she would tell Natalie.

She decided she would discuss it with her the next day, a Sunday. While they ate dinner at a casual seaside diner, she chewed her food in silent dread. “You’re quiet,” Natalie said. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, just fine,” she said, reaching for her glass of wine, forcing a smile. “Just thinking about work. You know. It’s always something!”

“Maybe you should have brought your gear along,” Natalie said glumly.

Suella was unceasingly amazed at her daughter’s depth of heart. “No,” she said. “I left it home for a reason. This is our time. I needed a break from all that anyway.”

Natalie shrugged and resumed eating. “You could access at the house anyway, right? Unless you took out the point.”

“No, it’s still there.”

Natalie paused, looking up for a moment. “Aren’t you worried about renters?”

Suella shook her head. “No, silly. Who are you talking to? They’d have to go in under a different port. To get to mine they’d need to figure out a page of codes.”

Natalie laughed. “You’re such a geek.” They dropped the subject and finished their dinner.

That night Suella tried to get comfortable and fall into blissful sleep, to no avail. She kept thinking of the scene from the old Meryl Streep movie *Sophie’s Choice* when Sophie stands in a processing line at the death camp with her little boy and her little girl. A gestapo guard points a gun at her and tells her that she can only take one child with her. “I want to take both,” she says.

The guard brusquely retorts. “One. Or neither. You choose.”

When two nearby guards point their weapons at both of her children, Sophie screams “Take my little girl!” She watches in horror while one of the soldiers grabs her daughter, hoists her over his shoulder and carries her off, kicking and screaming.

“They’re not going to do that,” she kept repeating to herself, over and over. “They’re not going to do that.” Gradually, her mantra worked and she soon slipped into a deep, restful sleep.

The next morning, she made omelets. With her hair tousled, and wearing her favorite anime nightshirt, Natalie sliced mushrooms and onions for her. “You’re quiet again. What’s wrong?”

Suella tried to force a smile, wave her hand in dismissal and put on a brave front. “Later,” she said. “After we’ve had breakfast.”

“No mom,” Natalie said, standing firm. “Now.”

She turned off the range beneath the sizzling and crackling eggs. “I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

Suella tried to say the words but she started to tremble and quake. “That... when

we go to the center...” and she couldn’t bring herself to finish.

“That they won’t let me go home?”

Suella could only nod.

“Mom, they won’t do that.”

“They won’t?”

“No.”

Suella’s mind swirled with a tempest of thoughts and images that caused her to feel queasy and light-headed. Before she fell, she decided to sit. “But I’m in trouble. I voided the contract. I put you in danger.”

Reminded of this, Natalie gazed down at the floor, deep in thought, the corners of her lips turning down. A moment later she raised herself, clenching her fists. “Well they’re not going to just keep me.” She paused for a moment, allowing herself to relax, and for her fists to loosen. Turning away from her mother, she added “They’re probably going to say I should go to Waldheim, or Brooksville.”

To Suella, they sounded like institutional names. “What’s that?”

“They’re schools. Especially for kids like me.”

She knew the answer to this before she even asked, since she knew that Natalie was bright and a good web researcher. But she asked anyway. “How did you find out about them?”

“They told me about them, during my last two checkups. They said it’s a good thing for kids like me.”

Suella felt suddenly relieved. If Natalie was sent away to a form of boarding school, then both she and Nathan would be able to visit her. They might even allow her

to come home for weekends and holidays. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I knew you’d be against it. I know you’d want to keep me at home and have me continue regular school.” Natalie smiled.

The outpouring of love that Suella felt for this child was almost frightening. She stood up slowly, and Natalie moved toward her. They hugged each other tightly. “I guess I won’t have that luxury now, will I?”

Chapter Twenty-six

The morning of Natalie's annual appointment at the center, she felt like she was going to a funeral. She wore her nicest fuchsia suit with cobalt piping and accents. When Nathan saw her he said "Dang!" and promptly changed into a navy blue pinstriped suit he'd worn for various occasions since the late 2000's.

At first Natalie said "Why do we have to get dressed up?"

Her mother lifted her daughter's chin with her fingertips, looked deeply into her eyes for a moment and said "Because we want to keep you, that's why."

Natalie went back to her room and changed into her nicest lace dress, the one that showed off her hair and her tan. They silently rode through the desert, with the miles and miles of solar panels and windmills. Suella had only told her husband about the special boarding schools a couple of days before. At the time he had shrugged, then nodded, saying that a boarding school experience might be good for her. He said it was what all the other "rich snobs" did with their kids.

To break the silence, Nathan started to ask questions to Natalie, who sat in the back seat. Suella, who drove, chuckled to herself when she saw that they were looking at each other by the visor vanity mirror. "So how would you feel about going away to school?"

"It'd be all right. They don't have a soccer team, though."

She was talking about Waldheim, which Suella found out was in Riverside, about sixty miles away. The other school, Brooksville, was also in California, but in Los Gatos, at the other side of the state.

"There's probably some type of girl's intramural league you could join," he said.

“Or something,” Natalie murmured.

Suella’s heart beat faster and faster and her arms tingled the closer and closer they got to Lifewind. To distract herself, she put in her two cents worth about the current conversation. “Sweetheart, you know, soon you’ll need to think about keeping your grades up. So you can get into the best college. Maybe you should be thinking about that instead.”

“Mom, I’m only fourteen,” she said.

It was easy for Suella to forget that her daughter was still a child. She’d grown recently and now saw almost eye to eye with her. Though she was still very thin, she had developed some womanly curves, also. Just by looking at her, Suella could relive painful memories of her own adolescence, when she was also stick thin and painfully shy. Years of working as a hospital secretary had cured her of that, though.

As they approached the center, Nathan squinted when he saw the fences, a tower and guards near the front gate. “You know what?” he said, “It always slightly creeped me out that so much of this place is underground. I mean, what are they hiding?”

“Nice car, Mrs. Worthy,” a mirror-glasses wearing guard said to her when he checked them in at the gate.

When Suella had parked the car, she gripped the car and closed her eyes for a moment. “What’s wrong?” Nathan asked.

“I’m nervous,” she told him, leaning her head toward his shoulder. He brought his arms up to her for a quick embrace. Together they got out of the car and started the long walk to the lobby.

When they arrived a nurse greeting them said “Well don’t you all look nice!”

She motioned for Natalie to follow her to the examination rooms. Suella sat down.

Nathan still stood, strolling through the waiting room, which had grown more sterile and clinical over the years. Soon a formal and professional Dr. Allende met them in the lobby. She wore a touch more makeup than normal, and she had also taken care to wear a sharply appointed lavender dress underneath her lab coat. Nathan offered Suella a hand, to help her out of her chair.

Dr. Allende offered a slight, cordial smile. "It's very nice to see you today, Mr. Worthy. And you too, Mrs. Worthy. Please follow me."

Suella noticed that the doctor carried a projectible wand, most likely the one carrying Natalie's medical information. Nathan took Suella's hand, to escort her down the hall toward the wooden office door. When Dr. Allende opened the door, Suella saw a long table with a group of white-coated medical professionals sitting around it. Some, she recognized immediately, such as Dr. Polidore, yet most, she did not. A recording secretary sat in the corner, working screens. There was a blue-uniformed security guard standing against the far wall.

Dr. Polidore spoke first, his voice gravelly than it was when Natalie was born. He greeted Nathan and Suella and offered them seats at an empty part of the table, across from the row of appraising eyes. When everyone had settled in, Dr. Polidore spoke again. "Well, without further adieu, let's please get started."

Suella put her hands on the armrests, ready to push herself up. "Should our attorney be here?" she asked.

Dr. Allende quickly spoke up. "Mrs. Worthy, we're not here to scar you or judge you. We're here to discuss what's best for Natalie."

Suella allowed herself to ease back down into her chair. “Okay.”

Dr. Pollidore said “This is not to downplay the recent incident and your actions over the past couple of years. In fact we’re reserving judgment until after Natalie’s examination.”

Suella let out a breath. In some ways, she realized, the whole thing had indeed blown over.

Dr. Pollidore continued. “We feel that given the recent circumstances and Natalie’s progression into her adolescence that it may be best for her to attend one of our academies.” Nathan, who’d been staring Dr. Pollidore down like a hawk, nodded.

Suella spoke for the both of them. “We were just recently discussing that very thing. In fact Natalie’s leaning toward Waldheim.”

Dr. Allende nodded. “That’s a good choice.”

“Yes,” Natalie agreed. “For one thing, it’s close. I’m assuming we will get to see her there, won’t we?”

“Oh, yes,” Dr. Pollidore said, glancing around the table at his colleagues, who also nodded and agreed. “You’ll have chaperoned visitation rights.”

“Chaperoned?” Suella asked.

“Yes,” Dr. Allende said, her face showing a grim, wrinkle-browed look Suella had never seen before.

Nathan’s eyes narrowed as he looked at the doctors sitting across from them. “Will she be in the same room with us, or will we have to talk to her through one of those wire deals?”

Suella poked him in the thigh and flashed him a look of disapproval. Patiently,

Dr. Allende answered the question. “Yes, you’ll be in the same room. You’ll be able to tour the grounds with her, as well, as long as the chaperone is present.”

“I don’t know if I like the sound of this. Is this how all the other kids at Waldheim are treated?”

“We have to think of what’s best for Natalie,” Dr. Pollidore said, with an air of intensity. “What transpired under your care severely endangered her.”

Suella decided to ask the question she feared the most. “She would still be able to come home in the summer, wouldn’t she?”

Dr. Allende and Dr. Pollidore glanced at one another, before Dr. Allende slowly said “I’m afraid not.”

Suella felt as if she’d been stabbed with an icicle. When she looked over at Nathan, she saw his face darken. “This is our daughter,” Nathan said. “Not some teen punk. You can’t just keep her locked up all summer. She likes sports. She’d never agree to something like that. It’d destroy her spirit.”

Suella nodded, holding Nathan’s hand tightly.

Dr. Pollidore regarded Nathan and raised his eyebrow before speaking. One of the other doctors sitting nearby took off his glasses to regard Nathan out of squinting eyes. “We feel this is best. For Natalie. For you.”

“Is there any alternative?” Suella asked, weakly.

Dr. Allende and Dr. Pollidore glanced at each other, again. “You wouldn’t like it, I can guarantee. We could press charges for child endangerment. Sue for wrongful life. None of it pleasant.”

“Wrongful life?” Nathan shouted. “You would sue *us* when it’s your organization

that cloned Suella?”

“Read the contract, Mr. Worthy.”

Nathan let out an exasperated snort.

Dr. Allende faced Suella and Nathan, and when she spoke her voice was softly tinged with compassion. “We feel this is best,” she said. “You’ll have Natalie for the rest of the spring and summer. In the fall she’ll be starting her first year of secondary school. You’ll still be able to see her as much as you want. It’s a good deal.”

“What happens when she turns eighteen?” Suella asked.

“She’ll be a legal adult,” Dr. Pollidore said. “By then she will have graduated and she’ll be free to go wherever she pleases.”

On one hand Suella hoped that Natalie would go directly into a prestigious university, but when the time came she felt she might want to make up for four lost years instead. She nodded.

For the rest of the meeting with the doctors, they spoke about living arrangements at Waldheim and Natalie’s medical care. By the time Dr. Pollidore wrapped up the meeting, Suella felt tired and leaden. When they all stood up to walk out into the hallway, Suella saw a nurse out there standing beside Natalie. Nathan stepped out into the hallway first. Natalie ran to him, desperately wrapping both arms around his chest “Daddy!” she said, sobbing into his shoulder.

On the way home, they sat motionless in the car at first, drained from the day’s pain. Suella tried to force a smile. As Dr. Pollidore kept on saying, it could have been so much worse. She turned toward the back seat for a moment. “Who wants to get chili dogs?” she asked her family.

Starting with them all getting chili dogs together, they silently agreed it was best to enjoy every moment between now and the end of August. Suella had fully expected that she and Nathan would be driving back together without Natalie. When she sat in the back seat of her car, she felt like a death row inmate who has received a pardon from the governor. At first, things went on as they usually did. She worked during the day, helping defend people's systems and databases. Natalie went to school.

Natalie insisted on attending every little soccer practice and game. Suella understood, volunteering to drive on many occasions. She knew her daughter feared that come the fall, it might be awhile before she played soccer again. For two weeks, she was alone in the house with Natalie because Nathan crossed the country again on tour for his book. He called her from Chicago, where he told her that they were thinking of making a movie from it, also.

A couple of months later, when Nathan finished his book touring, and Natalie finished the eighth grade, they all drove to Oceanside. All of the projectibles and receivers stayed home. None of them were even allowed to bring telephones. For a solid week their job was to frolick in the surf together, lie together on the sand, cook their meals together and stay up late laughing together over all their funny stories. By the time they had to drive back north, Suella felt more relaxed than she had in years.

With Natalie off of school for the summer and Nathan free of his book touring obligations for the moment, it meant that father and daughter could spend days together, playing golf or tennis, or doing yard work. Many times Suella felt like she was a child who was forced to stay inside and practice piano on a warm summer day. At the same time it warmed her heart to see Natalie so happy.

July of that summer, the powers that be inducted Nathan Worthy into the Baseball Hall of Fame. They flew together to New York and would catch a bullet to the little town called Cooperstown. In the meantime Nathan and Suella showed Natalie all of the sights of the Big Apple. She tried to forget that she lived there while she and Nathan were dating and during their early marriage. All these years later she resolved that she would pretend that she was a tourist seeing the city for the first time. In a way she *was* seeing it for the first time since she never got around to doing all the touristy things when they lived there. They started with a tour of the Victory Towers at the 911 Memorial Museum. With all the glass, the beautiful indoor gardens with the sunlight of a summer day shining through, she could almost forget something so awful happened here when she was still a young hospital secretary.

From there, they rode an old elevator to the top of the Empire State Building. With all its gleaming concrete, glass, and marble on the floors inside, it was hard to believe that the building was 100 years old. At first Natalie stayed close to the core, near the hallway door for the elevator. She had a worried expression on her face. Nathan had raced to the railings and iron overhangs, where he gazed out at the panorama below them. Looking back to Natalie, he said “You’re not afraid of heights, are you?”

Suella patted Natalie on the back. “If I can do it, so can you. Come on out. You’ll see.” She held her hand out for Natalie, who took a tiny, shuffling step forward but then stood fast.

“No. You can look out there,” she said. “I’ll stay back here.”

“But it’s a beautiful day,” Suella protested. “You can see everything.”

Natalie’s face still kept a frightened look but she looked around at the railings.

As she did, her expression calmed. Suella looked out there, too and saw children with their parents, some Natalie's age but many were younger. They held the iron bars and looked out over the sea of activity in Manhattan, with smiles on their faces. Squeezing her mother's hand, little by little Natalie stepped along toward the railing. When they reached the edge and they both reached out for the railing together, Natalie said "Whoa!" She saw the emerald trees of Central Park in one direction, the bridges and the distant Atlantic ocean in another, the cacophony of buildings leading to the horizon and the swarms of moving vehicles.

"Hey, Natalie, you guys are looking in the direction of the co-op we used to live in when we were first married," Nathan said. "See if you can point it out to her."

When Suella searched the avenues for the building where they lived, it struck her that so many trolleys floated along the streets. She'd heard that public works programs had brought them back after the 2010 Depression, but she and Nathan were already living in California by then. An educational program segment she'd once seen showed that they used the same SuperMagnet technology used in the newest cars. They'd revamped all the subways the same way, and Suella couldn't believe how clean, safe, and smooth they were.

More importantly, she realized that now she was melding with Natalie in the most important way. Her daughter cheerfully looked down at the antlike pedestrians, the sunlight glistening off water and building glass, and the glowing, moving video images creating mirrors of the humanity they reflected. Spontaneously she hugged Natalie, who reached up and patted her face with her soft hand. "I love you," Suella said.

"I love you too, mom," Natalie told her.

When they rode the elevator back down, Nathan said that they should get an authentic Chinese lunch in Chinatown. It was just a short, safe, smooth subway ride away. They found a restaurant with dim lighting, warm candles and lots of lush velvet. After the waiter took their order (and gave a bow that seemed stereotypical to Suella), Nathan made an announcement. “We’re going to have to get up early tomorrow.”

Suella and Natalie looked at each other, both of them bewildered. “Why?” Suella asked. “You said you don’t have to be in Cooperstown until tomorrow night.”

“Yes, I know. But that was before NBC contacted me. They want me on the Today Show.”

“Ooh, that’s my favorite!” Natalie said, clapping her hands together with joy. “Could I meet Clark Hastings?” Clark was one of the young anchors for the show, who had become a girl’s teen heartthrob.

Suella said “Honey, I don’t think they’d allow us into the airing. The green room maybe.”

Nathan waved a hand dismissively. “Naw. It could get kind of boring in there. But old Clark does sometimes go out into the street to meet all the people by the curb.”

“He does?” Natalie started bouncing up and down in her seat. “Let’s be one of the people out by the curb, mom. Let’s be one of the people by the curb!”

“Okay,” Suella said, patting Natalie’s hand. “But afterwards, we *have* to see the Metropolitan. There’s no way we can be in this city and not see it while we’re here.”

After dinner that evening they found a pharmacy supermarket near the hotel and Suella bought posterboard and glitter markers. She drew up a poster while Nathan and Natalie surfed screens together. When she was finished, she showed them the poster.

Nathan grinned at it while Natalie crinkled her nose in mild disgust.

“Mom, that’s really *q*,” Natalie said, which Suella had only recently learned was a put-down among the younger generation.

“Well, you want your lover boy to notice you tomorrow, right?” Suella said.

“He’ll see our sign and come over and talk to us.”

Natalie snickered and snorted. “He’ll see our sign and laugh.”

“We’ll see who’s right tomorrow, young lady!”

Early was right. Nathan got them up at four o’clock in the morning. Natalie groaned when he nudged her gently. “Come on, darling,” he said, “Clark Hastings is waiting.”

Gradually, she lifted herself up from the bed, groggily saying “I know. I know.” After they all showered, she chose her prettiest lace edged jumper to wear and lifted her thick hair away from her face with delicate barrettes. Suella also wore a sleeveless top. They’d baked the day before in their longer sleeves, as she re-learned that northeastern heat was much different from California heat. Nathan wore another one of his suits for the interview, a much more summery taupe one with a pastel striped shirt and double tie. After a quick, room service breakfast they ventured out the front door into the straining dawn and boarded the subway for Rockefeller Plaza.

When they arrived at the concourse near the plaza, where one group of fans always stood, it was ten minutes after five. Bright lights from the nearby buildings still shone and Suella could also see the first rays of morning light slice through the pathways between the buildings. They found a spot behind the floating gate about a hundred yards from the studio. “Mom, don’t you think we should get a little closer?” Natalie said.

“I think in another hour or so we’re going to be glad that we got *this* spot.” A red-haired middle-aged lady who’d been standing in a group beside them turned, her eyebrows raised and she nodded.

After standing for only a half hour, Natalie started shifting her weight and frowning. “This is unbearable,” she said. “When’s it going to start?”

A boy who appeared to be in high school overheard her this time. “They turn the video screens on after seven,” he said. “It gets much more fun after that.”

Many other young people had shown up that morning, with their parents. As they all waited, they fought boredom and anxiety by texting or screen surfing. After awhile, so many different types of music played on so many different audio systems that it all sounded like symphonic mush to Suella.

Suella felt glad when they finally did turn the video screens on and that day’s show began. The crowd cheered as the main anchors for the show, Travis Redding and a former Miss Universe, honey-colored Shamiya Braxton, started to name off the guests who would appear that day. “Ah, they’re all boring,” Natalie said, as she watched and listened.

The camera focused on Travis, a sandy-haired guy with pale blue eyes. He said “And we have a special treat for all you baseball fans. Methuselah himself is in our studio today, Mr. Nathan Worthy. He’s going into the hall of fame in a couple of days.” Surprisingly, a few people in the crowd around them started to cheer. It never ceased to amaze Suella how popular her husband still was.

Over the next hour, a chef appeared to showcase one of his latest seafood creations. An actress Suella didn’t recognize talked about her new movie.

The crowd gasped when the cameras cut to a view outside, in the street. “Oh my god, get ready,” someone said. Suella looked up and saw a glamorous tanned blond girl in a floral sundress mingling with the crowd on the video screen, the weather girl.

“Aw, that’s around the corner,” a disgusted male voice said.

The weather girl cut up with a few of the people along the curb flashing signs and banners, then paused for a moment to announce that day’s weather forecast. When she finished, she said “That’s how things are here at 30 Rock, now let’s look at the weather where you are!”

For the next few segments a woman told how she rescued a little boy from an alligator in Florida, the movie critic spoke about that weekend’s new releases, and Travis gave a dry news report about congressional hearings that week. Suella looked down at her clock and saw that it was quarter after nine. Would any of the news personalities come mingle out here? After a round of mind-numbing commercials, Natalie suddenly tugged her mother’s blouse strap. “There’s dad!” she exclaimed.

White Travis narrated the screen showed images of Nathan as a New York player striking someone out, the still shot of him painting the strike zone black, and then the famous one of him picking off two players on the same play. When the images dissolved, she saw a twelve-foot high rendition of her husband’s face, smiling. They hadn’t turned the sound up very high, and Suella had to strain to hear him say such things as “...glad I made it on the second ballot.”

It was over as quickly as it began.

A few more commercials beamed up onto the video screens, causing Suella to look down at her clock. It was past nine-thirty. The show only taped until 10:00.

Would they get their chance? No matter what had happened, she decided that they had much more fun getting up to join the crowd than sleeping in and watching Nathan's appearance on the hotel screen. She sighed while the show went into its next segment, one that showcased a chubby guy with glasses talking about the hot new gadgets for spring. Shamiya Braxton then interviewed a woman author about a book detailing the latest dieting method. Natalie still stood close to her, and Suella gave her a quick hug.

The crowd a few yards up the street started jumping up and down and cheering. Natalie braced herself against Suella's shoulder and stretched on her tiptoes to see over the heads in the crowd. "Oh my god, it's him!"

Suella saw the bright light surrounding the cameraman first. Then she saw Clark, who was so impeccably groomed and coiffed, wearing a smart tan suit, that he didn't seem real. She stared at him, transfixed by the smooth confidence, the easy smile and the girl-killing good looks. Natalie reached down and grabbed the poster from her. "Hold the poster up, mom! What are you doing?" She held onto one side of the posterboard and Natalie took the other side. Clark, who had just stepped away from someone, started walking toward them. He smiled and quickened his pace, heading right for them, holding a microphone. "And who do we have here?" He read the poster "My husband and her dad is going into the baseball hall of fame." Clark stepped up directly in front of Natalie. Suella could suddenly feel the posterboard shake and quiver. "Hi, young lady! What's your name, darling, and where are you from?"

"Natalie," she replied, blushing, shifting from foot to foot and looking down. "From Santa Monica, California."

Clark quickly turned to Suella. "And you can't be the mother, can you?"

Suella laughed and said “Yes, I’m Suella Worthy. Her mother, and Nathan Worthy’s wife.” She could hear Travis say something from the studio on the monitors outside.

Clark overly feigned bewilderment in a theatrical gesture. “Methuselah himself! I used to watch him when I was in grade school. Oops! Glad he’s going into the hall. Yes, Trav, not only is he going into the hall but he’s got a beautiful wife and daughter, too. Some guys have all the luck. Well, the forecast for today is for snow...just kidding! It’s going to be another gorgeous summer day here in the northeast with temps in the low ‘80’s, so come on out here to the concert in the park and enjoy it!”

He disappeared into the crowd and moved toward the studio with his cameraman. Natalie still held onto the poster, looking at her mother with stars still in her eyes. “I can’t believe it,” she said.

Neither could Suella. Their trip to New York was like a dream. She wanted to bottle the memories up and hold them inside forever.

By the end of the summer, she would have to give Natalie away.

Chapter Twenty-seven

April, 2030

Suella didn't know if she'd ever get used to the security. She still insisted on accompanying Natalie to her annual physical around her birthday. To do it, she had to drive to Riverside and park her car on the Waldheim grounds. A driver from the school would take them to the Lifewind center, another hour-long drive through the desert. The year before, she'd resented them sending two chaperones, putting one in the front seat and one in the back. It cheated her out of the private conversation she could be having with her daughter.

She'd hated the chaperone who'd sat in the back seat with them. He was a brown-haired, middle-aged man with thin, severe lips named Gerald. Along with speaking to her in short, three-word sentences, he also wore glasses with frames that barely covered the whites and irises of his eyes. In another life, Suella imagined, Gerald might have forced Jewish people onto cattlecars in 1940s' Poland or served on a witch hunt jury in 1600's Salem.

Maybe this year would be different, she told herself as she neared the center complex. It was Natalie's sixteenth birthday, after all and maybe the school was teaming up to do something special for her. When she arrived in the lobby, she saw Gerald's face again and all the air rushed out of her balloon. Oh well, she thought. At least this year he's dressed sort of normally and smiling, a little. "Mrs. Worthy! So nice to see you again. Do you remember me? I'm Gerald Knockwood."

"Yes, I remember," Suella said, weakly shaking his hand. "Wait a minute. What did you say your last name was?"

Gerald grinned wryly. “It’s Knockwood. You know, like knock, knock, knock on wood. I never heard the end of that when I was a kid.”

“I would guess not,” Suella said. Suddenly she heard Natalie’s voice, which had become the most beautiful music to her ears.

“Mom!” Natalie had run down the stairs from the girl’s tower and continued running until she crashed into her mother, nearly toppling her. They stood and hugged for a long time, Suella rocking Natalie softly, cooing to her the way she did when she was a baby. They’d been apart since Christmas, and Suella hadn’t even taken a good look at Natalie yet. Hugging her, though, she could tell that her daughter was eating well and had been bathed in a delightful lavender essence, possibly from some of the sprays and potions Suella had sent in her many packages to the school.

After a few more moments of the warm embrace she stepped back, still holding Natalie’s hands, so that she could look at her. She seemed the same as she had four months earlier--perhaps a few more colorless hairs framing her face--but that was it. Natalie was allowed online, since it was so vital for her education, yet they forbade a cam inside her room or in her linkup. This frustrated Suella greatly, and she even called Fisk at one point to see if there was anything he could do. “I’m sorry,” he’d said, “my hands are tied.”

“Mom, you look great,” Natalie said, smiling. “Still hitting the tramp every other day, right?” Suella had purchased an indoor trampoline years ago and had worked out an elaborate series of hour-long routines on it.”

“Well, I have to keep up with you, child,” she told her.

Gerald loomed up between them and forced a smile, clearing his throat.

“They’ve got the shuttle ready outside,” he said. “What do you say we get a move on?”

Suella dutifully climbed into the rear seat of the Magna-van, with Gerald sitting on the other side of Natalie once again. She sighed. There was no way they would stop for chili dogs on the way back. Still, as the van angled away from the curb and connected for the trip to the desert, she tried to have the most private conversation with Natalie that she could. “How are things?” she started.

“Mostly luke,” Natalie said. “I’m playing soccer again.”

This delighted Suella, since during Christmas Natalie had told her that her right knee was creaking worse than it had and it had started to hurt, as well. “That’s great!” she replied. “Did they get a team together at your school?”

Natalie shook her head. “Intramurals. They let me play at Polytechnic high.”

“That’s fantastic,” Suella said. She was going to ask something, but stopped herself and tried to think of an appropriate segue for the next subject.

Natalie wasn’t fooled. “What?”

Suella waved a hand dismissively, shaking her head, still desperate to think of something else to talk about. “Oh, nothing.”

“What, mom? I know you! What were you going to say?”

Suella sighed. “Okay. Do you promise not to do your rolling-eyes thing and get upset?”

Natalie held up a hand, as if to pledge. “I promise.”

“I was going to ask if there are other white girls in your league, besides you.”

Natalie’s mouth dropped open. “I knew it! I knew it! Yes, mom, there’s other white girls. And everybody speaks English. This is 2030, you know! Not 2010.”

“And you don’t have to go through metal checkers or body cavity open MRI’s either, right?”

“No. Mom, that’s so q! You’re living in the past.”

“I worry,” Suella said, laughing. “That’s a mother’s job!” They sat together for the next few miles, watching the desert landscape and panel fields go by. “How have they been feeding you? What have you been eating?”

Natalie said “Soylent Green!”

Suella double-taked. How did Natalie know about that? “What?” she asked.

Natalie laughed. “That’s what David calls the shamrock pudding they serve in the cafeteria. He says it comes from some old movie he saw once, that was made before even *you* were born. About how aced up the future is supposed to be. Those kind of movies are funny.”

“Oh. Well, who’s David?”

Her daughter smiled warmly, as if she was reliving a fond memory. “He’s this guy I know.”

“Oh.” Suella nodded. “Did you meet him at Polytechnic, or does he go to your school?”

Gerald startled her by interrupting in his deep voice. “David’s at the center, yes.”

That son of a bitch, Suella thought. It was a cruel reminder that he was following their conversation, like a splash of cold water on her face. She leaned over and tried to glare a dagger at him. “Thank you very much, Mr. Knockwood.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, greeting her look with a twisted smile.

“By the way, I call the shamrock pudding ‘soylent green,’ too.”

Suella fought off an urge to say “Shut your piehole, weirdo,” and turned her attention back to Natalie. “So have I ever met or seen David?” There would have only been one opportunity.

“Yeah, I think so. He was there for Christmas. He has fair skin but really dark hair, and he’s tall and thin.”

Suella tried to think back to Christmas, when all of the parents of the kids attending the school got together with their parents in a huge gymnasium and celebrated Christmas together, with full security protocols operating, of course. She’d spent so much of that day focusing on Natalie and crying that all of the other kids could have been African midgets for all she knew. A few of the parent’s faces came to mind. She and Nathan had sat with them all in the lobby while the Waldheim staff organized things for the holiday morning. “What do his parents look like?”

Natalie shrugged. “Well, his dad’s tall just like him. But he’s wider and his hair has gray in it. His mother is Filipino, really pretty.”

It all came back. “Oh my god, is her name Claudette?”

Natalie stopped to think for a moment and her eyes brightened when she said “Yes, I think so.”

She glanced at Gerald before responding, feeling safe that he was checking a miniscreen, probably lost in it. “Yes, I met her in the lobby last Christmas.” And, at the center, about fifteen years ago, she silently added, remembering their conversation from back then. For the rest of the way to the center, Suella felt inhibited from exploring any further conversations with Natalie.

On the one hand, she wanted to tell Knockwood to go fuck himself, that she only

got to see Natalie three times a year if she was lucky, and this time they were going to talk their heads off to each other. The other hand won out, though, because if she and Natalie explored a conversation of any depth, both of them would break down in uncontrollable tears, clinging to each other for life. She held Natalie's slender hand, enjoying the warmth of her touch, which was the best solution of all.

The magnavan arrived at the front gate for Lifewind moments later. As soon as the doors opened, Gerald led Natalie briskly toward the lobby area. The driver took the other position, beside Suella and marched her toward the entrance, also. Once security waved them through, a nurse received Natalie and guided her toward the examination rooms. Natalie looked back at her mother apologetically, an expression that caused a hard lump in Suella's throat. Her daughter said "See you in awhile, mom."

Suella had no choice other than to sit in the same dreary lobby she'd sat in for the past sixteen years. She wondered why she even bothered to come along. Maybe all was not lost. She kept alert for passing nurses she recognized, and moments later a woman with ash blond braided hair and smooth skin walked past. Suella called out "Excuse me, miss," and waited for her to stop. "Is Dr. Allende here today?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Of course."

"Well, I figured she was but I was surprised she didn't come out to greet us this time. Could you make sure she knows I was hoping to see her? I'm Suella Worthy."

The nurse nodded. "Yes, I know. I'll tell her."

Suella tried to kill time by searching files and video, trying to prepare for her next client session. She even managed to negotiate with a client using text. Still, she sat. Was it taking longer this time than usual? And was it her imagination, or was the center

a much less friendly place than it used to be? Of course it was always a cold and clinical place, even during the excitement when Natalie was born. While she pondered all of this, she heard Dr. Allende's distinctive soprano melody as she called out "Hello Mrs. Worthy."

Suella stood up to follow the ever-dapper doctor around a hallway maze to her office. She studied her for changes, but all she could see was a slightly thickening middle and a few flecks of gray in her hair. Once both of the women sat down the doctor dispassionately called up a few screens and manipulated them so that they could both see the figures whizzing past. "Natalie's doing very well, I know that these numbers may not mean much to you but her labs and telomeres were great."

"That's nice to know. Did she tell you her knee is hurting?"

The doctor's eyes widened for a moment. "Yes, she did."

"And what did you find?"

Dr. Allende took a deep breath. "There's some arthritis there. It started developing a couple of years ago, as you know. We've treated it and it has stabilized."

It was the answer Suella expected. "Now I've got a very important question for you." For emphasis, she leaned forward and looked directly into the doctor's eyes. "Can I see my daughter in private? I'd like to see my daughter in private."

"Mrs. Worthy, I don't know..."

"Doctor Allende, put yourself in my place," Suella interrupted. "Your daughter's locked away. Can't videocam with her. Can't speak with her on a phone. Can't even message her. You see her three times a year if you're lucky in some kind of controlled setup with guards arranged like Gestapo when all you want is time with your daughter.

Is that too much to ask?” Suella realized that her emotion got the better of her and that by the end of her little speech her voice was coming out more high and warbly than she wanted. Yet, Dr. Allende’s lips had parted, her eyes wide open.

“I can send for her, and you can talk to her in here,” the doctor said, softly.

“Would you be in the office, too?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

“Is that the best you can do?”

“You know it is.”

Suella resolved that it was better for Dr. Allende to eavesdrop on a conversation instead of Gerald Knockwood. “Can you send for her, please?”

Dr. Allende left the room for a couple of minutes, and when she returned, Natalie entered the room along with her. “Hi mom,” she said. “All finished.”

Suella hugged her daughter, and all three women sat down. “So tell me more about David.”

Natalie shrugged, tapping one foot on the carpet. “He’s a friend of mine at school, and he’s a nice guy. I really like him.”

“Does he like the school as much as you do?”

“Yes, about the same. He said he was glad to get away.”

It surprised Suella that Natalie would voluntarily disclose something like that and she checked Dr. Allende’s reaction. The doctor had lowered her eyebrows, listening along with interest. “He was glad to get away, why?”

“Well, David wasn’t like me,” she said. “He was cloned from a son of his parents who died. And his parents always expected him to be exactly like the first David.”

“That’s so sad. In what ways was he different?”

The question stumped Natalie at first, as she paused to reflect and remember.

“Oh, well the first David liked spaghetti and meatballs a lot. He could have it every meal if he wanted it. But the David I know, well he didn’t like it as much. His mother kept on cooking it for him, though. One day, David said ‘Why are we always having worms and golfballs?’ and his mother screamed and slapped him.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yeah.”

Suella gathered her wits about her before she asked the next question, and took a deep breath. “Does David get to go home when he wants?”

“Mrs. Worthy, that’s none of your business.”

Suella raised her hands and said “Just having a conversation with my daughter, ma’am.”

Natalie glanced at Dr. Allende and quickly replied. “He can. But he likes to stay at school.”

Dr. Allende nodded, then tapped her desktop. “I think I’ll check to see if the gentlemen are ready for the ride back.”

Moments later, Suella and Natalie were back in the Magnavan, holding hands and talking quietly for the trip back to Waldheim. Suella decided that it was worth the trouble just to hug her daughter. In two more years, Natalie would turn eighteen and the center would no longer legally be able to hold her at Waldheim.

Suella wished she could put herself in a deep freeze until then.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Christmas, 2031

The night before, Christmas Eve, Suella drank wine and celebrated. Next Christmas Natalie would be back home, where she would hopefully stay for a long time until she tried to make her way in the world. Part of their holiday celebration for the past three Christmases had been loading down her Mazda with Natalie's gifts. Lifewind would release bodyscan results, which Suella could cross-upload to several boutiques. It was always easiest to buy her daughter clothes as gifts, especially new leggings and jackets for soccer. They would also bring fresh flowers and poinsettias.

At the break of dawn she and Nathan woke up, and he gave her a gift: an access card for the spa she loved, along with a small basket filled with fine Belgian chocolate. Suella made sure that Nathan's golf and tennis memberships were extended. They did the same thing every year and would entertain each other by pretending to be surprised. "Oh, honey! Just what I wanted!"

Nathan hugged her and said "Happy Winter Solstice Ultra Consumerism Festival!" He always complained that the holiday had lost all of its meaning and magic since he'd been a kid. They both dressed, and Suella took extra care with her airbrush that morning, since she always liked to look nice for the Waldheim Christmas party. She stared at all the clothes swirling by on her closet rail before hitting "stop" and settling on a fest plaid jumper and suit.

After coffee and a quick breakfast, they set out for Riverside. "It gets colder and colder every year," Suella remarked, when the garage opened and let in the brisk air, "I'm going to have to go back in and get my coat."

It had rained more than normal that December, bringing lush emerald grass to the hills and mountains they passed. The higher mountains in the distance showed vivid white snowcaps. “The skiers must be having a good time,” Nathan, who wore his “secret agent” style trench coat, said.

“Can you imagine what it’s going to be like tomorrow?” Suella replied.

Nathan chuckled. “No thanks. My knees couldn’t take it.”

“I was talking about the traffic, silly.”

They merged in with a steady stream of slot-line traffic of other cars filled with families traveling to visit other families on the holiday. “Hey, is that ugly robot guy going to be there again this year?”

Suella thought of all the guards and the drivers. “Which ugly robot guy?”

“The one wearing those teeny-tiny glasses. Like he’s trying to be John Lennon or somebody.”

“Gerald? Yeah. He’s going to be there. You know, I think he might really be a robot. I’ve never heard him talk about a family.” Gerald sat in the magnavan with her for all the trips to the Lifewind center for Natalie’s annual checkups.

“Gerald?” Nathan laughed. “Well, what’s his last name?”

“Are you ready for this? It’s Knockwood.”

Nathan let the name sink in before he laughed so hard the steering wheel slipped in his hands. Suella reached over to grab it and steady the car on the road. Nathan continued to laugh even after he regained most of his composure. Suella looked at him. He’d allowed the gray to stay his hair, threading through his temples and above his ears. Years of playing golf and tennis in the sun had left creases on his forehead and around his

eyes, also, but when he laughed, Suella still saw the boyish young man she fell in love with more than twenty-five years ago.

Nathan noticed her looking at him. “What?”

Suella shrugged. “You’re pretty cute for an old guy.”

Soon they arrived at the Waldheim front gate, which scanned their car and their plates before swishing open. As they parked and walked to the lobby entrance, Nathan said “This year I’m going to talk to that kid’s parents more. You know, that black-headed kid that seems to have a stiff for Natalie.”

“God, I wish you wouldn’t put it that way,” Suella said. “And his name is David.”

It was always the same. A group of twenty parents stood in the small lobby or. Some of them sat on the firm, uncomfortable couches there. Suella searched the crowd for Claudette. She found her in a corner, with her tall husband Alan, talking with another couple. Claudette’s slightly slanted eyes brightened when she saw Suella. She wore a winter white knit suit while Alan wore a shimmering, charcoal gray suit. “Well hello there my dear,” Claudette said. “So nice to see you again. You look wonderful!”

“Thank you,” Suella said. “So do you.”

“This is a special Christmas, yes?”

Claudette’s remark caught Suella off guard. It could have meant so many different things. She shrugged it off and indicated Nathan by squeezing his arm. “You remember my husband, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Alan said, reaching over to heartily shake Nathan’s hand. “How could I forget the greatest setup man of all time?”

After that, the four of them stood around, awkwardly. No one was ever sure how long they would wait in the purgatory of the lobby before the Waldheim staff let them into the larger, more festive multi-purpose room. For Suella, it was all about seeing Natalie again. She'd spent a morning with her back in August, the way they always did, as a way of kicking off the school year. Though it had only been four months before, she always wondered what changes the passing months would bring.

When the hallway doors opened, they found Gerald Knockwood on the other side. Like a tourguide, he said "Right this way, folks," and guided them around the corner to another hallway. Soon they entered the cavernous multi-purpose room, which the Waldheim staff decorated with trees, banners, wreaths, and blinking lights. They'd also brought several ornate rugs out onto the sterile floor and placed comfortable couches and lamps around, too, to lend a more at-home atmosphere to the otherwise sterile, clinical setting. All of the various parents would stake out an area on the floor where they would visit with their child and exchange gifts. Only then could someone go back out to their car and retrieve the gifts, bringing them inside.

"Man, we got her a lot of shit this year," Nathan said as he carried a pile of boxes over to the couch where Suella sat, awaiting the arrival of Natalie with the other students. "We're spoiling her rotten, you know."

"We're supposed to," she said. "She's our only kid, remember?"

"Home for the holidays" played over the school's audio system and Suella straightened up with anticipation. They always turned on the music before they arrived. They all walked in casually, from around a corner, all of the grown children wearing beatific smiles on their faces, wearing nice clothes, their hair styled fresh. Natalie was

one of the tallest girls, and also stood out because of her highlighted blonde hair. She'd set lovely curls into it that morning. When she saw her mother and father, her eyes lit up and she ran to them. She jumped into Nathan's arms and he lifted her from the floor as she squealed in delight.

After Nathan finished with her, Suella stepped over to her and held her for a long time, rocking her back and forth gently. Natalie felt very light in her arms. When they stepped away from each other and held hands, looking into each others eyes, Suella thought she saw a few gray hairs sprouting from Natalie's temples and slight smile wrinkles around her eyes. "Merry Christmas, my love," Suella said.

"Merry Christmas," Natalie said, beaming, looking back and forth from her mother to her father. "Do you realize that next Christmas I'll be home?"

Nathan smiled down proudly at her. "Yes, honey, we know."

They had to walk a short distance to the couch where Nathan had placed all the presents and Suella thought she saw Natalie limp slightly. It occurred to her to ask her about it, but she didn't want to ruin a beautiful, festive day. Instead, they all sat on the couch and Natalie began to open one present after another. She cooed and squealed with glee when she saw all the colorful, high-quality, custom made clothes they'd gotten for her, but Suella could barely hear her, since she sat in a chair across from them. She could never get used to the huge, communal Christmasses that took place at Waldheim. All of the other families sat in various places around the huge multipurpose room, and there were many shouts of joy blending together.

The staff at Waldheim had hired caterers, too. Servers walked by, pushing rolling metal carts containing holiday pastries, eggnog, juice, and coffee. To Suella, that added

to the hustle-bustle of the whole experience. Some of the staff also walked around or stood at various places on the floor. Most of them weren't even smiling and it was clear that they were watching the parents and listening in on the conversations. Suella had always had private celebrations of Christmas, with either her family or with close friends. One year, in the days before she married Nathan, she had celebrated with an old boyfriend at a restaurant, where they opened gifts together. That was the only other thing in her life that she could compare to these past four Christmas celebrations at Waldheim.

When Natalie finished, a pile of clothes and gadgets lie on the couch between her and Nathan. He saw Suella gazing at the size of the pile and grinned at her, before turning to Natalie. "So, is there going to be enough room in your closets for all of this stuff?"

"Sure there is," she replied. "I'll make room."

All the anticipation and the activity had sapped energy from Suella, who tried to bolster herself by drinking a holiday coffee. On into the afternoon, they spoke about Natalie's soccer games, her grades, the antics of some of the crazy teachers at Waldheim, and about a field trip they'd taken earlier that fall. While her daughter spoke, Suella marveled at seeing herself in Natalie as she rambled on with abandon about her friends and the good times she'd had. Of course, she added, she was looking forward to graduation and to coming home.

"We've left your room exactly the way you had it," Nathan said. "I haven't even been in there since you left. Your mother goes in there to dust every now and then."

"Thank you, mom," Natalie said.

A few of the other fathers and the children came up to the couches where they sat

to talk with Nathan. Most of them started the conversation by saying “Hey, congratulations on getting into the Hall.” One child brought a baseball to Nathan and asked him to sign it. This was a sign that the afternoon was winding down. It was always an awkward time. Though no one ever spelled it out, Suella and Nathan learned early that the staff at Waldheim wanted everyone out before sunset.

Nathan clapped his hands together and rubbed them, something he always did when he wanted to get up to leave. Suella saw Claudette and Alan approach their couch just then, however. Their boy lagged off to the side, slightly behind Claudette. “Hi everyone,” Claudette said.

Natalie brightened when she saw their arrival. She suddenly stood and walked behind Claudette, to their boy. Suella was startled to see how much he’d grown and matured. He smiled with more confidence than she remembered, and he beamed when Natalie placed her arm around him. “Mom, dad, you remember my friend David and his parents, right?”

Nathan said “Of course,” as he shook Alan’s hand first then David’s.

David said “It’s so nice to see you again,” with a resonant, though melodic voice. “Natalie talks about you all the time. I feel like I know you.”

As they all spoke, Suella watched David. Sometimes the boy would look at Nathan, for example when he told him about seeing him pitch as a grade-schooler. When David spoke directly to her, such as the time he complimented her on her holiday plaid outfit, he of course looked at her. Yet, his gaze always returned to Natalie. He looked at her with a forlorn, wistful expression that she found sweet. They looked cute together as a couple, with David towering over Natalie by several inches, with his dark

hair contrasting her blond hair. Suella suddenly remembered her conversation with Claudette years ago at the center, where she was wondering when Natalie was going to start talking. She was doing a lot of talking that day! He had to have been about the same age as Natalie. What would become of their relationship in five short months, when she graduated? She decided to find out.

“So David,” she started. “What do you like to do for fun here at Waldheim. Natalie plays a lot of sports, as you know. What do you do?”

He shrugged. “I go inworld to play games a lot. By the way, Natalie says you do that for a living! That must be so luke.”

“Well, not exactly,” she replied. “I work with those companies to help them make sure their servers are secure. Boring stuff. Do you like sports, too?”

“I like basketball, sort of. During the summer I play some baseball, too, but I’m not very good at it.”

Natalie, who had moved beside him again, poked him in the ribs. “Tell them about your guitar!”

“Oh, yeah. I like playing guitar, too.”

“That’s great!” Suella said, appraising him, realizing that what he’d just said made sense. He carried the soulful quality of an artist.

“And he’s really good, mom. He’s being way too modest, as always. He even got up and played with the band a little, at one of our dances.”

His father piped in with “Yeah, he likes that old heavy metal stuff. When he practices at home I have to get earplugs, or I’d be deaf by now.”

Suella nodded, deciding to see if the boy had any ambition. “What are your plans

for the future?” she asked.

David lowered his eyes and shifted from foot to foot. “I’ll be going to college next fall.”

Proudly, Claudette interrupted. “He’s got a scholarship to Cal Poly. Thinks he wants to go into virtual technology.”

“That’s wonderful,” Suella said. Most of the boys she knew when she was Natalie’s age seemed interested only in surfing, smoking dope, and drinking. As strict as Waldheim was, Suella knew that they couldn’t party in there if they wanted to. The dances Natalie referred to probably featured five staff members along with Knockwood making sure everyone behaved.

Soon, it was time to say goodbye. Some of the parents had already left. Others put on their coats and hugged their children. For Suella, this had always been a sad time, when she’d always felt like crying. This year it was different, though. It was the twilight of Suella’s school years. She was a woman now, with some very womanly feelings, judging by the way she’d acted around David. Suella and Nathan hugged her and she thanked them again for all the presents, Nathan took the last word before they walked out through the front entrance: “See you in May, young lady!”

Out in the parking lot, Nathan took the wheel for the trip back. While they waited for the magnets and conductors to fire, he spoke calmly. “That David is a nice boy.”

Suella replied “Yes, he is.”

“Did you see the way they were looking at each other?”

She laughed. “Uh huh. What, do you think I’m blind or something?”

“Do you think they’ve fucked yet?”

“Nathan! Do you have to put it like that?”

The blue light went out, and Nathan switched gears, backing the Mazda out of the parking space. “Well, that’s what it is!”

“Yeah, but you make it sound so graphic.”

“Sorry.” He dropped the stick and drove the car out of the lot and into the street.

“You know that’s the way I talk. It doesn’t seem to bother you when we’re in bed.”

“True. But that’s different.”

He nodded, while searching all the signs and traffic lights. “So do you think they’re doing it, or not?”

She sighed. “Probably.”

Chapter Twenty-nine

The Homecoming

June, 2032

Suella and Nathan had to rent a Magnavan to move Natalie's things out of Waldheim. Over the four years their daughter had lived there, they'd given her so many clothes and gadgets that she'd had to store some of it in a pod on campus. The weather belied the excitement Suella felt, with the heavy fog from the "June Gloom" blanketing down on them. While neither one spoke much, they held hands the entire way. Sometimes they would glance at each other and smile.

Suella felt as if her daughter had been taken from her during the past five years. She remembered all the hoopla from twenty years ago, when various daughters re-united with their mothers after years, sometimes decades away. First there was Jaycee Lee Dugard, then Heather Langston, and most recently Bridget McAnally. Suella knew how all the mothers felt, on receiving their daughters again. There was no way to describe it

"Let's have a huge party for her right when she comes home," Nathan had said. He described banners hanging from their roof and balloons floating throughout their front yard. Everyone they knew would be invited, and they'd all give Natalie a huge group hug when she walked through the front door.

"No way," Suella had told him, chasing the notion out of his mind. Yes, she thought they should have a party for Natalie, but only after she'd been home awhile. It would give her a chance to get reacquainted with everything and everybody. Instead, Suella planned a party for the second weekend after Natalie arrived home. She invited many of the player's wives she'd known over the years, including Kaitlyn Vogel and

Carolyn Concannon. Toni would come, enthusiastically accepting, looking forward to seeing the grown up version of the child she'd carried. Best of all, however, was that Jillian was going to make a rare, west coast appearance. Suella had offered to send for her by paying the airfare, but no, Jillian would have none of that. She also offered to let her longtime friend stay at her house for free, but no, Jillian would not even think of imposing like that, especially when there were so many perfectly good hotels and motels around. Her artwork must be selling well.

For now, they proceeded with the joyous task of retrieving Natalie. Slot traffic cooperated that morning and in no time at all, they arrived at the front gates of Waldheim, Suella delirious with the knowledge that it would be their last time. Today they would meet Natalie in the lobby again, where the Waldheim staff would have moved all of her things. For some reason Suella couldn't fathom, the staff did not want her to see the room where Natalie had lived for the past four years.

After Nathan parked the magnavan, Suella flung the door open, jumped out and ran across the parking lot to the front entrance. A couple of passing staff stopped to see her run ecstatically to the front door. When the sensors activated and the doors slid open, she saw Natalie standing there with a couple of her suitcases, meekly waving to her. Suella called out "Natalie! The day has finally arrived!" She rushed into her daughter's arms for a long, emotional hug. When they separated, Suella was surprised to see Natalie in a slightly downcast mood. Piles of boxes lie all around her.

"Yes, I'm so glad," Natalie said, softly.

Having parked the car, Nathan followed her in, and Suella felt better when she saw Natalie hug her father enthusiastically, letting out a girlish squeal. "Are you ready to

start the rest of your life?” Nathan said.

Gerald Knockwood joined two other staffers in helping see Natalie off. Together they helped Nathan and Suella load boxes and items into the cargo area of the Magnavan. With four people helping it didn't take long although the volume of stuff Natalie owned amazed Suella. She wished someone had thought to take a “before” and “after” picture.

When the van was loaded and everyone stood awkwardly on the curb, it was time for Natalie to say goodbye to the staffers who'd shown up and the place where she'd lived for the past four years. “Goodbye Natalie,” Gerald said, a look of tranquil warmth washing over his normally harsh features. He leaned in toward her and quickly hugged her. She reciprocated by holding him around his shoulders tightly for a moment.

“Thank you, Mr. Knockwood,” she said. “For being so nice to me.”

When they separated, Nathan said “Well, what do you say we get this show on the road, then? We're burning daylight.”

The Magnavan had old style bucket seats in the front and a bench seat in the back. Suella placed a few boxes on the passenger bucket seat and put herself on the rear bench seat, with Natalie, for the drive home. “What am I, a chauffeur?” Nathan asked.

Suella wasn't prepared for what happened next. She watched Natalie wave to the staffers and Gerald Knockwood as Nathan switched on the conductors, starting the van. As they coasted away from the curb, Natalie kept looking back at the buildings of the Waldheim campus, continuing to turn and position herself to watch them as the van exited the front gate. She kept looking back, looking back as the van turned onto Central Avenue. Soon they reached the slot interchange and Natalie crumpled down, hiding her face for a moment. Her shoulders shivered and shuddered and by then Suella realized

that her daughter was sobbing.

Suella reached over and held onto Natalie, resting her head upon her chest. Nathan looked back at the both of them, using his rear view mirror. Both of them knew better than to speak, although Nathan turned on the satellite system and kept the volume ultra low. What could Suella have said to Natalie? Cheer up, you'll find some new friends when you get settled back home. This seemed to nestle far deeper. In some ways it was like a young bride sobbing on her way down the aisle on her wedding day. Not necessarily a bad thing! That was the way Suella chose to think of it while the van sped them home.

Natalie had calmed herself by the time they came within sight of the Los Angeles skyline. She straightened up and took a deep breath, enjoying the sun's rays on her face through the window glass. By the time they traveled a few miles further, and reached their neighborhood, she smiled and laughed along with them. When the van pulled into their driveway, Suella saw a clear, well-manicured lawn and a tranquil, inviting house. She congratulated herself for keeping Nathan from festooning the neighborhood with banners and balloons.

They put all of the boxes and loose items into the guest bedroom, next to Natalie's. This way she could take her time and move things from there into her bedroom as she saw fit. "I'm going to be getting lunch ready in just a bit," Suella said.

"That's okay," Natalie replied. "I'm not that hungry right now. I'll just eat later." Nathan and Suella ate vegetarian chili while Natalie took a nap on her bed, for the first time in five years.

Over the next couple of days, Natalie received visits from friends who knew her

from grade school. She also spoke on the phone often, especially late at night. Suella had picked up her line once when it rang, hearing silence at the other end. She wondered if a hardy solicitor had somehow gotten through on Natalie's line. "Hello? Hello?" she asked, wondering if a robot had dialed the number.

Finally, a young man's voice spoke in a sheepish tone. "Hi, is this Mrs. Worthy?"

"Yes, it is. Who's calling, please?"

"This is David, ma'am. Could you switch me to her, please?"

"Uh, sure."

For the next couple of hours, Natalie sat in her room talking, sometimes quietly and sometimes loudly, punctuated with squeals and laughs. Nathan, who was in the yard working, came into and out of the house and noticed how long the conversation had gone on. "They're still at it?" he said. He stopped at Natalie's door to hear his daughter's lilting, gushing voice as she spoke with David. Suddenly, he nodded, saying "Yep,"

Suella knew what he was talking about but wanted to hear him say it. "Yep what?"

He grinned mischievously. "Yep, they've done it."

After the weekend, Suella kept herself busy with work and with planning the homecoming party for the upcoming Saturday. Jillian would arrive on Wednesday, causing Suella to feel as giddy as a teenager anticipating summer vacation.

She almost failed to notice how strangely glum her daughter seemed, for reaching such a milestone in her life.

Natalie stayed in bed late in the morning, also. When she'd been in grade school, she'd always been one to pop out of the bed at the crack of dawn, but since she'd come

home, she liked to shuffle around in her pajamas until lunchtime. Tuesday over lunch they discussed Natalie's future. "I scored in the top 5% for all the tests," she mentioned casually, as if she were talking about the rolling wheels of her closet door. "They said I could go to Cal State on a full scholarship, but I think I want to wait a while."

"Honey, that's great!" Suella said, reaching over to give her a quick hug. "What do you think you want to do in the meantime?"

Natalie shrugged. "I don't know. It might be fun to be a barrista like at the cafes near school. All the people and everything."

It occurred to Suella to tell her daughter that her test scores and background clearly laid a path for something more ambitious but she kept her mouth shut. Lord knew she'd spent lots of time knocking around before getting serious with school and careers. Later that afternoon the doorbell rang. Suella checked the monitor and saw David standing out on the front stoop. He looked pleasant but fidgeted with his hair and shifted his weight back and forth as he stood.

Suella opened the door for him. "Well hello there!" she greeted. "It's another graduate. Congratulations."

David's eyes widened and he smiled nervously while continuing to shuffle back and forth. "Thank you Mrs. Worthy. Is Natalie home?"

"Of course." She stepped aside and motioned him through. David tiptoed past.

David and Natalie were allowed to visit in Natalie's room, as long as she kept the door open. From the lightheartedness of Natalie's tone, she knew that they must be talking about happy-go-lucky, youthful stuff. Why was David so jumpy around her? Well, it was the first time he would see Natalie in her home habitat. For a boy David's

age, that could be daunting.

Eventually, David and Natalie came out to the den, where the larger interfaces enabled them to call up new movies and funny clips they both liked. Suella brought out cool glasses of fresh lemonade for them. While she had been doing work and doing her best to keep an eye on them, she realized that the last time they saw each other, she'd quizzed David on what he planned for his future. It was another daunting thing for a boy of eighteen to think about. She wanted to soften her image for him. "You're coming to the party, aren't you?" she asked him, on one of her passes through the den. "It's this Saturday. She's told you, right?"

"Oh yes, I'll be here," he said. He smiled weakly for her. He was gone by dinner. Suella and Natalie watched him get into his Hydropod and coast out of the driveway.

"I hope I didn't scare him off," Suella said.

Natalie shrugged. "He's just shy." That evening, Suella did some more work, checked again on Natalie, hugged her again just because, and set off to bed. Tomorrow was a big day, when she would pick up Jillian from the airport.

Her flight arrived the next day at eleven o'clock. Suella's bones tingled with anticipation as she got dressed and gave herself plenty of time to struggle against airport traffic that was still horrendous. She parked at one of the new garages, near the tubes. The new construction out there had finished a couple of years ago, leaving a glass wonderworld of conveyors and escalators. With the newer rules and aircraft, Suella could walk all the way up to the arrival gate after she'd ridden all the conveyors through the glass tubes.

Suella watched suited businessmen emerge from the arrival tunnel along with women who dressed down and wore sunglasses, mothers with children, and old men on holiday. The Los Angeles airport had long been a hotbed of paparazzi and other sleazy characters hoping to get a glimpse of famous people, yet ironclad security made the terminal seem like a sterile space needle from an old science fiction movie.

For days she tried to remember exactly how long she'd been in the same room with Jillian, rather than talk to her through a screen. This thought was circling through her mind when Jillian emerged from the corridor with a wide smile. She wore a faded denim and lace bohemian dress with a delicate hat garnished with a velvet ribbon. Suella shook her head. "Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god," was all she could say as the two women rushed to each other and reunited with a long, silent embrace.

Jillian had sent her luggage to the hotel via air cargo and it was due to arrive a few hours later. "Just take me to your house," she said.

While they drove there, they first made small talk about how much air travel had changed. "I haven't been on a plane in twenty years, back when they strip searched you the minute you walked into the airport," Jillian said, laughing. "Nowadays they lock you in a plexiglass coffin and bounce you against the stratosphere. At least it got here quickly."

Suella laughed.

"So how's everything going?" Jillian went on, patting Suella on the arm. "You must be so excited, every day constant bliss."

Suella glanced at the roof of the car. She sighed.

"What? What's wrong?"

“Oh god,” Suella said. “It’s wonderful, but so nerve wracking. Natalie doesn’t seem to know how to act.” She described the way her daughter sobbed on the way home from Waldheim and how she’d spent most of the first two days home in bed.

“Well it’s an intense experience for her, too,” Jillian said. “It’s a huge change from what she’s used to.”

“When you see her, and you’re around her for awhile, tell me what you think.”

“Okay,” Jillian said quietly.

The rest of the way home, Suella grinned, knowing how shocked Jillian would be when she saw Natalie. Later, as they got out of the car and walked toward the front entrance, Natalie emerged from the door and said “Finally! What took so long? Everybody’s been texting about what time the party starts!”

Jillian had to get out on the passenger side and walk around to see Natalie. Suella studied her reaction as she stooped slightly and crept toward her daughter, her mouth dropped open. “Natalie?” she asked, incredulously. “You’re gorgeous! The last time I saw you, you were a seven-year-old kid! And now you’re a grown woman!”

“Thank you,” Natalie replied. “It’s so good to see you, Jillian.” She walked gracefully down the path and hugged her mother’s friend, smiling. When Natalie turned around to walk back inside the house, Suella turned back to Jillian, who shot her a wide-eyed look of disbelief. Suella remembered how they’d studied Natalie as she slept. Back then, Jillian wanted to check her aura to see whether she could determine if Natalie had a soul or not.

The day before, Suella had shopped at the co-op for hydroponic organic vegetables, which she put into a huge salad garnished with goat cheese. Since it was lunchtime when

they arrived, Suella served salad on her nicest crystalware. “You knew I was coming,” Jillian said when she saw the colorful salad, which looked like it could grow if you planted it. They sat in the covered porch to eat, on all of the ergonomic recliners Suella had placed out there. Jillian sat close to Natalie and as she ate and talked, she kept on looking sideways at her.

“I’m sorry,” Jillian said, at one point, placing her fork and knife down. “I promise not to stare at you for the rest of the afternoon. It’s just amazing to see what a beautiful young woman you’ve become.”

“Thanks, for the hundredth time,” Natalie said, laughing.

“My pleasure,” Jillian said, patting Natalie’s hand. “There’s just this, I don’t know, this *glow* to you or something.”

The word “glow” caused Suella to whirl around. It seemed an odd choice of words to her, for a reason she couldn’t quite put her finger on. When they had all finished eating, Suella brought out her delicate china and sterling silver tea set so that after all this time, she and Jillian could have an afternoon tea face to face. While they sipped tea, Jillian uncharacteristically checked a timepiece she wore. “I’m meeting someone tonight,” she explained. “But I should have plenty of time to get settled in over at the hotel and then meet them.”

“Romantic?” Suella asked hopefully, curious that Jillian had stayed alone so long. Just her and her cats.

“Business,” she said. “A dealer out here. Says he has good connections. I checked. He does.” Suella was almost anxious to finish up with the tea time and run Jillian over to her hotel. It would give them a chance to talk privately about Natalie.

When they enclosed themselves in Suella's Mazda, she started the conversation about it before they had backed out of the driveway. "So how does she seem to you, overall," Suella asked.

Jillian shrugged. "Other than stunning, like she should have her own reality cast? She seemed a bit subdued. But she was always a quiet kid, wasn't she?"

Suella laughed, thinking about the old saying "Out of the mouths of babes." She replied "Not always."

"I think it's nice that she's giving herself some "me" time before she starts college or a serious career. Everyone should do that."

The route they took to get to the hotel where Jillian was staying required lots of turns. When she finished another slide of the wheel she winced and said "To me she just seems down. I hope she's not putting off doing things because she's depressed."

Jillian shook her head. "No. She's not depressed. I know depressed. It runs in my family. That girl is definitely not depressed. What makes you think she is?"

"Well, she's listless. The first three days she stayed in bed til ten o'clock. To me that's listless."

"Hmmm," Jillian said.

"What?" Suella gripped the steering wheel anxiously.

"Do you think she could be pregnant?"

Chapter Thirty

Suella loved the tea times she shared with Jillian, face-to-face, during the brief days she was able to visit. Each morning her friend walked from her hotel to the house and when she arrived her eyes blinked rapidly and the back of her hand constantly brushed against the tip of her nose. She seemed continually ready to sneeze. “You okay?” Suella asked, on what would be the last day of the visit.

“Sure,” Jillian said, regaining her equilibrium as soon as she walked into the house. “I’ve just spent so many years in wet climates it’s tough to get used to things out here. Every morning my throat feels parched and I have to gulp down three glasses of water before I can do anything else.”

Shortly after they walked through the door, Natalie descended the stairs from her bedroom like a marionette with the strings cut. It was ten a.m. “Hi,” she said, weakly waving a hand at both her mother and Jillian.

While her mother and Jillian helped themselves to a mid morning tea, Natalie vacantly ate from a cereal bowl filled with soy-milk soaked wheat squares. A short while later, she returned to her bedroom to dress herself for the day. “She’s awfully lethargic,” Jillian commented.

Suella started to rise: “Maybe I should go up there and see what’s the matter.”

Jillian reached out with her wrist, stopping her. “No, you two will have lots of time to talk after I’m gone,” she said.

The next morning Jillian had to leave early so she and Suella said all their good-byes the night before. “We should do this more often,” Suella said, wistfully.

After Jillian’s visit and all the hoopla from Natalie’s homecoming had died down,

Suella thought long and hard about the matters at hand. Joyfully, she had the rest of her life to spend with her daughter, to make up for her horrendous lapses of judgment from years earlier. Another part of her knew that in one way or another, she might not have Natalie with her for much longer.

If she could wave a magic wand and make a wish, it would be to make the rest of their years together happy ones.

Still, Natalie's morning malaise bothered her. Closer to the weekend, she said "Is everything okay?"

The innocent question seemed to catch Natalie off guard. Her eyes widened, and she stammered, saying "Oh yeah, sure mom. I guess I'm still recovering from all the finals, the move, the partying and everything."

Suella smiled. "I guess it was kind of overwhelming, huh?"

Natalie smiled wryly. "Yes."

Her mother snapped her fingers as if she had a grand revelation. "I've got an idea! Let's go to the beach!"

She allowed her daughter the luxury of veching out for the next few days. By the time they were getting ready for their weekend, her spirits had lifted. Natalie smiled as she bounded back and forth between the car and her bedroom, bringing a whole wardrobe of clothes for just a few days at the beach house. By the time she finished, the whole back seat of Suella's car had become filled with suitcases and bags. Like any girl her age, Suella reflected, Natalie often changed her clothes several times in the same day.

Since the last time she'd taken any kind of a long auto trip, they'd completed the solar strip between San Diego and San Francisco. She'd made sure that her latest car

contained the undercarriage connects. Giddily, she realized that she could latch onto strip at the interchange and after the menu setup, they could ride free together most of the way to the beach house. They could even sit on the back seat if they wanted to.

It was a foggy, late spring morning and she knew that the temperature would barely rise above sweater weather. No matter, she decided, since they weren't going there to bask on the beach anyway. She had five years of quality mother and daughter time to make up for.

Nathan had once said that the whole concept of operating a car electronically from a solar powered strip reminded him of toy racecar sets from his youth. "We would always race 'em too fast and they would fly off the track," he said.

Suella flipped the switch and let the circuitry take over as her car eased itself onto the ramp and swerved a couple of lanes to merge them in with the traffic. Her heart raced when she felt they loomed too close to other cars. She must have flashed one of her classic "scared" looks, she realized because Natalie laughed at her. "It's okay, mom," she said. "It's a hundred times safer to ride a solar lane than drive yourself."

"It still feels weird," her mother replied. Gradually, she allowed herself to ease back into the comfortable seat, enjoy the scenery passing by and have a leisurely, relaxed conversation with Natalie.

"You know, I think I should tell you something before much longer," she began. "David and I want to get our own place soon."

The prospect caused a knot in Suella's gut and for a few moments her thoughts swam, clouding her mind, so that for a moment she could not think of a response. Finally, she said "Why?"

Natalie shrugged, though her jaw seemed set and tense. “Well, I love him. We want to be together.”

Suella nodded. She knew that the rental market was horrendously expensive, as it had always been, and she hoped her daughter would stay in the area. Many people’s children she knew had had to move to less expensive cities and places to start their lives, like the Dakotas, Michigan, or northern Alabama. “Well, where will you go?” she asked, hoping to feel out whether Natalie and her beau had plans to relocate.

“Around here,” she replied. “He and I already have a few places picked out, sort of.”

Suella sighed, and allowed herself to close her eyes for a moment.

Natalie laughed. “What? Did you think we were going to move to Okey-homa or someplace like that?”

Suella patted Natalie’s hand. “Well of course. You know how mothers worry.”

“Nah. That’d be more trouble than it’s worth. Besides, I hate the cold and snow.”

Her mother nodded then paused for a moment to reflect. So far Natalie had not admitted to any grandiose career plans other than possibly becoming a barrista. But those folks still barely made a living wage. David seemed to be in the same boat, unless he’d majored in engineering while at school. “Okay, now I hate to be a killjoy here, but how are you going to pay for all that?”

“Easy,” she said. “Especially with both of us.”

“Easy? Well, you don’t even have a job yet. And David...”

“Mom,” Natalie interrupted, turning to face her full on. “It’s going to be okay. We’re still going to be near you, and we can more than afford to live on our own.”

God, she was so willful, Suella reflected. Where had that come from? She wanted their little trip to the beach to be peaceful and carefree, she decided. “Okay,” she said. “I’ll make you a deal. We’ll talk about it when we get back. But I want a sit down with both you and David. Is that clear?”

Natalie smiled wistfully, sighing and shaking her head. “Yes mom.”

When they reached San Diego, Suella had to disengage to enter the freeway for the beach. As they arrived, they stopped at a supermarket to get groceries they would need for their short stay. Even though the self-serve lines were quicker, Suella always stood on the line with a cashier and a bagger at the end. She liked the personal attention and opportunities for chit-chat.

This time, a tall young man with auburn hair styled retro in a short, feathered shag, happily scanned their purchases and bagged their items for them. As he worked, he kept on looking back and forth between Suella and Natalie, with his brow furrowing slightly. Suella could guess what he was going to say next. “I don’t mean to embarrass you,” he said, the features on his pock-marked face softening, “but I’ve got to ask, you’re mother and daughter, right?”

Suella and Natalie looked at each other. She was a little taller, since Suella noticed she’d lost a couple of centimeters in height from her youth. “Yes, we are.”

The cashier shook his head. “This is just uncanny,” he went on. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a mother and daughter who looked so alike! I mean, it’s like you could be twins except you’re maybe twenty years older than her.”

Natalie giggled.

Suella said “You’re very kind. And yes, we get that all the time.”

When they arrived at the beach house, Suella once again marveled at how well the cleaning and maintenance staff kept the place looking fresh and well manicured. It constantly looked like a model home. The hard wood floors always felt welcoming to her yet the living room and kitchen smelled of disinfectant and cleaning fluids. She and Natalie opened a few windows to get cross-ventilation and fresh air flowing through the little bungalow.

Once they had put away all the groceries and their weekend bags, Suella said “Put on a sweater, sweetie. Let’s go for a walk.”

For the walk, Natalie chose a slick, black jacket with fuchsia piping over what appeared to be one of her bikini tops. While Suella favored capris for activities like walking on the beach, Natalie liked to show off her legs with shorts that ended in a cute cuff high on her thighs.

Suella wondered what that meant. If she had been pregnant, she supposed, she would have worn a baggy hoody or a long shirt, billowing out to disguise her contours. As they exited the front door, she decided against giving the matter another minute of thought. They emerged into an unseasonably cool San Diego afternoon, where the low, gloomy clouds still hung over them. Suella hoped it wasn’t a foreboding premonition.

Natalie seemed to like it, however, spring in her step lifting her with buoyant spirits as they crossed the asphalt and stepped onto the concrete path leading to the beach. They both wore beach sneakers with uppers that clung to their insteps and kept sand out yet at the same time could get wet and worked like a neoprene wetsuit in keeping their feet warm.

Few others had braved the beach that day, since the weather was so cloudy,

gloomy, and cool. This made Suella feel grateful because it seemed as if they had all the miles of sand and dunes and gently crashing surf to themselves. A light breeze ruffled wisps of Suella's hair into her eyes and caused Natalie's long hair to stream back away from her head in a festive way.

“Did you make it to the beach much, in all the years you were at school?” Suella asked.

Natalie shrugged, kicking lightly at a shell in her path. “Here and there,” she replied. “They would never let us surf or stay out in the sun too long, so it was never any fun.”

“So that Knockwurst guy chaperoned you to the beach, too?”

“Him and others. I would have rather practiced soccer. That was about the only place we could run around and be ourselves. On the soccer field.”

Suella nodded. “I always knew there had to be a good reason you enjoyed it so much.” She glanced at her daughter and felt an ache in her heart over Natalie's beauty. It was tragic that so much of her youth had been spent in a kind of lockdown, all the more so because she felt she had put her there. No wonder the girl wanted a place of her own.

As they drew near to the cool ocean, the breezes invigorated her, and as she looked back at the sand, the kitschy looking houses on the shoreline, and the billowy clouds in the sky, she felt that she had escaped all her problems. Right now there was just her and her very special, beautiful daughter.

Whenever she'd been to the beach in the past, she'd always had difficulty hearing whoever she was talking to because of the rushing, pounding surf. To compensate for this she shouted to Natalie “Let's go walk in the water,” and they angled toward the surf

swelling up onto the sand, lapping up onto the sand. After this she no longer tried to communicate by the spoken word. If they were going to do that, she reasoned, they may as well go back to the house. Instead, she reached out for her daughter's hand.

Natalie froze for a moment, when she felt her mother's fingertips brush her own. She looked up at her, quizzically for a moment, but then she smiled and her whole face warmed, causing a feeling greater in Suella than any she'd ever been able to achieve through melding with her. When they held hands they both looked forward, along the beach, at the roller coaster and other carnival type rides in the distance, at the pier, at people atop blankets on the sand who'd braved the cool weather to enjoy the ocean.

While they walked along, the sun in the mid-day sky peeked out through crevices in the clouds, showering warm rays and a telepathic sense that Natalie was able to sense what she was thinking.

Time stood still. The only way she was able to tell that any time had passed at all was by checking the location of the approaching roller coaster. Just a few hundred yards more and they'd be able to ride on it if they wanted. She wanted to turn back, so she stopped and hoped Natalie would take the lead. Silently again they looked at one another, and for Suella it was always like going back in time and looking at herself in the mirror. Natalie said "Do you want to go back?"

Her mother just nodded.

In what seemed like less time that it had taken for them to get out there, Suella and Natalie walked back the way they came and soon arrived at the house. As they walked in the front door, Natalie said "That was nice." While Suella slipped out of her sweater, curiously Natalie kept her jacket on. She decided to let it pass as she shuffled

her feet along the hard wood, wondering what to do next.

Natalie looked at the two rocking chairs in the front room, as if she wanted to sit down on the comfortably cushioned wood and while away the rest of the afternoon talking. Suella suddenly had another idea. She stepped closer to Natalie, and reached down to take both of her hands in hers. “I realized something recently,” she said, speaking slowly, measuring her words carefully. “I never have asked for your forgiveness.”

Her daughter laughed a little, and shifted from one foot to the other. “Mom! I had forgiven you for that years ago. Why don’t we forgive and forget, and move on? I know I want to.”

She swung their hands from side to side, playfully, the way she did when Natalie was little. The next thing she knew, they might be playing “patty-cake.” “You’re right,” she said. “We’ve got the whole rest of our lives. Let’s have some fun!” She let go of her daughter’s hands so that they could go on to the next thing. For a moment though, the two of them stood there, silently regarding each other, as faint traffic noise and the sounds of people talking out in the street filtered in through the opened windows.

“I know!” She pointed a finger heavenward as if she’d just reached some glorious revelation. “I can play guitar!”

“You can? I didn’t see you bring one into the car.”

Natalie walked out of the room toward the bedroom toward her luggage on the bed. “It’s virtual,” she said, over her shoulder. “Everything is nowadays.”

When she returned, she indicated one of the cushy rocking chairs for her mother to sit in. Natalie tugged the other rocking chair from the corner so it would face the one

where her mother sat. Suella watched her maneuver a small, glossy, purple box with hinges that contained a few small gadgets in it. “Is your guitar in there?” she asked. “It must be a pretty small one. Like how we would play the smallest violin in the world, whenever someone complained too much.” To illustrate her point, Suella rubbed her fingertip and thumb together.

“Yes, it is.” She glanced around at the chair and the floor and placed a small purple plastic plaque on the floor, positioning her chair to face it. One of the metal gadgets, which looked like a small reading light that Suella used to use in the days when she still read old-fashioned books with pages, got affixed to the armrest of the rocking chair. When Natalie was satisfied that she’d positioned herself properly, she smiled at her mother and lifted her arms as if she were playing an imaginary guitar.

“Air guitar?” Suella asked. “Are you going to play an air guitar? Is that it?”

“Yes and no,” Natalie replied, grinning mischievously. She tapped something on the reading light-looking gadget and to Suella’s amazement, a hologram of a slick, turquoise electric guitar materialized on Natalie’s lap, fitting perfectly into her cradling arms. It contained a neck that Natalie grasped, frets, and shining strings.

“Does that really work? Can you really strum on those strings?”

In the next moment, Natalie demonstrated for her, touching the plaque on the floor with her foot and strumming the strings with one quick, loud “zount” type of sound.

“Does that answer your question?”

Taken aback, Suella’s chair rocked when her weight shifted backward. “Wow! That’s way cooler than Guitar Hero.”

“I know,” she replied. “There’s this really cool song I just learned. I want to play

it for you.” Natalie tensed and relaxed herself and also cleared her throat, the way Suella had seen countless musicians do before.

For a moment everything was silent and the noise from cars and talking people filtered in through the curtains again. Suella considered getting up to close some of the windows, but decided it would ruin the mood. At first she heard violins, or a keyboard instrument play, as if a whole band or orchestra accompanied Natalie on her guitar playing.

After the intro, Natalie started strumming the vacuous, ethereal looking guitar, using a wraparound pick on her ring finger to pluck the diaphanous strings. Her other hand worked the frets at the top of the neck. Together all the sounds produced a vaguely familiar, mellow guitar riff. Once she started smiling and swinging the guitar back and forth (it amazingly moved with her), Suella recognized the song. “I know this one,” she said, snapping her finger, to try to flick the title of it into her mind. “It’s on the tip of my tongue.”

“It’s *And You and I* by a group called Yes.”

“That’s it!” Suella said, while her daughter still strummed out what sounded like an intro. “Gosh, that’s an old song, probably older than me.”

“But it’s really cool, though. The singing part is coming up.”

Here, Natalie plays the guitar and sings the old Yes song “And You and I.”

Suella gets overwhelmed with how beautiful her daughter’s voice sounds. She had never heard her sing before. And the words to the old Yes song sum up perfectly what their outing to the beach means, and how they have the rest of their lives to work out their differences with each other. I will write out the lyrics as Natalie sings them, and note her

mother's heartfelt reaction as she leans forward, sitting on the edge of the rocking chair seat, until it slides out from under her and she hits the floor, butt-first, just as Natalie has finished singing the song.

They both laughed, but Natalie rushed forward. She pushed the gadget button, extinguishing the guitar as she leaped up and lent a hand to help her mother pick herself up off the floor. When they both stood they still laughed slightly, but Suella reached out for her daughter once again, bringing her in for a warm, heartfelt embrace. "That was so beautiful," she said, a tear splashing her cheek. "I'm so proud of you."

Later they sat together in the den watching television after a nice dinner of stir-fry. Neither one of them watched the movie very closely, which was a tired old heist caper story with too many twists and turns. "So I hope I'm not opening Pandora's Box here," Suella said, "But just how are you and David going to pay for this apartment you're planning on getting?"

"I've got plenty of money," Natalie murmured, still looking at the television screen.

"Doing what? Do you take that thing around and do concerts with it?"

Natalie smiled and looked at her. "In a way, kind of. I've played it on a few casts before."

"Casts? What's that?"

"Little videos on the net," she replied. "If you want to see one, I could probably find it..."

"That's okay. Maybe another time." She gazed at her intelligent daughter as if seeing her for the first time, on a net-cast. "So you're on those social sites, that pay, I

take it? I thought that was one big scam.”

Natalie shrugged as she stared straight ahead at the screen. “Maybe when I was a little kid it was. They’ve got all the bugs worked out now, though.”

“Oh, do they?”

Her daughter was much more interested in the movie they were watching than she was. When Suella checked the image on the screen, she saw a teenage girl with a boy and arrow shoot it at another teenager on what appeared to be a sandy beach.

When they stayed at the beach house, they always went to bed early. The events of that day had exhausted Suella more than a whole day of helping solve client’s security problems. As a result, she fell into a deep sleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow. Quickly, she drifted off into her dreams, one of which featured her as a soccer player on an impossibly green checker-boarded field, deftly pushing the ball along with her foot, weaving in and around other young girls.

She had only played soccer as a ten year old, having lost interest in it by the time she reached junior high.

Hours later she woke up, still remembering the dream. Had she and Natalie shared a dream? Someone who learned that Natalie was a clone asked her if they shared dreams at night, or if someone hit Natalie whether she felt it too.

Suella had drunk a couple of glasses of wine with dinner. Wine always made her have to pee, so she lifted herself from bed and lumbered off toward the bathroom. There was only one bathroom in the small house, and she passed the opened door of Natalie’s room on the way there. She stopped for a moment to gaze at her daughter’s peacefully sleeping face, enhanced by the glow of unusually bright moonlight. So precious, she

reflected.

She went back to sleep and woke up hours later. Should she tell Natalie about the dream? Only if it came up through the course of normal conversation, she resolved, as she promptly went to work making omelets with low cholesterol eggs.

With tousled hair but bright eyes, Natalie walked into the kitchen a short time later, giving her mother a quick hug.

If she'd been pregnant, Suella supposed, it would have been much harder for her to lift herself out of bed, especially at the beginning of the pregnancy. Together they finished cooking the omelets and potatoes and getting the morning coffee ready. Natalie squeezed a few juice oranges in a strange electric juicer the size of a soda can.

Moments after they sat down to eat, Natalie said "I had the strangest dream last night. I was playing soccer against a bunch of other girls, but the field was... like a checkerboard."

The tiny hairs on Suella's arms tingled. She smiled and took Natalie's hand. "I had the same dream."

Natalie nodded, continuing to cut bits of omelet and feed them to herself as if nothing was wrong. "Then I guess they're right. Clones share dreams with their parents."

"Yes, I guess they're right."

Suella decided it was best for them to focus on enjoying the scrumptious food and fresh juice. She'd noticed over the years that children in Natalie's generation and just a bit older took supernatural things in stride. It seemed as if she'd heard of such children described as "Crystal" and "Indigo" before.

Suddenly her daughter tilted her head slightly and jerked her neck a little. Then she started talking to an unseen third party. “Good morning Sunny-smile! No, we’re just eating breakfast.”

“Who is that?” Suella asked. “You have an implantable now, too?”

She nodded in reply while listening to whoever had called her. “I don’t know, let me ask her. Hey mom, are we going home later today, or tomorrow?”

“First thing tomorrow.” She dreaded the workload that had piled up for the last couple of days. “Who is that?”

“David.”

“Did you tell him that I want to have a talk with the both of you when we get back?”

“You want to talk to him? You could tell him yourself.”

Suella backed away. “How the hell am I supposed to do that? He’s in your head.”

“I can flash him over to your phone.”

“It’s in my purse, in the bedroom. Can you flash him on the screen?”

Natalie sighed hard and glanced up at the ceiling for a moment. “Mom, not everyone likes to talk on the phone that way.”

She waved a hand at her dismissively. “Just tell him we’ll all talk when we get back. For now he gets a reprieve.”

Suella and Natalie spent the rest of that morning and early afternoon at the beach, where the sun had come out and the temperature had climbed fifteen degrees from the day before. That night they decided to treat themselves to a dinner out with fancy

sundresses and makeup at a nice Mexican restaurant where the margaritas poured freely. The waiter, who was a tall, clean-cut Asian man with a warm smile and impeccable grooming, greeted them by saying “And how are you beautiful young ladies doing today?”

Suella ordered a Margarita and when it arrived before their food, asked Natalie whether she wanted any. “No, I’m not much of a drinker,” was her reply.

On the other hand, her mother did occasionally enjoy a drink and since they had walked to the restaurant, she decided she wanted another. And another. When they had finished their enchilada suiza dinners, they sat and giggled like elementary school girls. Suella took her daughter’s hand at one point and slurred the words “I just want you to know that I’m so terribly sorry. I’ve hurt you so bad.”

Natalie hugged her by putting both of her slender arms around her neck, the way she did when she was five. “I love you mom.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Suella had to lean against her daughter for support when they both walked home later. They watched a silly superhero movie on the big screen but the alcohol and the day's exertions lulled her into a deep sleep. In the small hours she woke up to find herself still sleeping on the couch, her body angled toward the television, and draped in a blanket Natalie had probably placed over her. She washed down a couple of aspirin and gulped down a glass of water to get rid of the pasty dryness in her mouth.

Afterward, she changed into her pajamas and climbed into bed.

Bright and early the next morning, Natalie greeted her with a wry smile. "So how are you feeling today?"

Suella was making smoothies in a blender and replied "Not bad. Thanks for looking after me."

Right after breakfast, they tidied up the house, packed their things and slid down into Suella's Mazda for a ride back to the real world. Nathan called just after they reached the interchange for the solar slot. She fed him through on the car's speakers. "I miss you two," he said. "Hows about coming home today, to keep an old man company?"

Natalie laughed. "We're in the car now, daddy! Can't you tell?"

Suella had always marveled that the trip back from a weekend was always so much quicker than the trip getting there. The next thing she knew, they'd arrived home to Nathan, who ran out of the house and down the front walk with his arms extended, hugging both of them as they emerged from the car. "You were watching from the window," Suella said. "That's so cute!"

Yes, it was Sunday, but Suella's clients ran 24-7 and she found daunting reams of work in her virtual inboxes when she flashed in. Nathan was playing so much golf nowadays, she thought, as he kissed her on the forehead before leaving to play eighteen with his regular group. "Make sure you eat a good lunch," he said. "Because you'll need the energy later, when I show you how much I missed you."

There hadn't been much sex in the Worthy household of late, so while Suella worked, she smiled at the sensuous delights she could look forward to later.

During a break in the late afternoon, Natalie showed her a couple of webcasts from her sites. They just seemed like video diaries to her, where she just pointed the camera at herself and told how she was thinking and feeling. "Today's a good day," she said on one of them. "Nothing hurts!"

Suella remembered hearing her grandmother say that one time, back when she was a little girl and only saw her grandmother a couple of times a year.

True to his word, Nathan arrived home later that afternoon with the taste of a few cocktails from the Nineteenth Hole fresh on his breath. Suella had just been finishing an anti-Malware screen for a client when he reached down behind her, scooped her up from her task chair, and carried her into the bedroom.

They still fit together like a glove and when she opened herself to receive him, felt surprised to be so moist and inviting for him that he laughed with delight as he slid in. For hours they pleased each other like teenagers until they wore themselves out and he fell asleep with his head on her chest. In the other room, her daughter was quietly working on her postings and networking.

Life is good, she reflected.

The next morning at the breakfast table, Suella found Natalie talking to David “through her head.” She hoped and prayed that the manufacturers of all those implantables had done serious testing on the long-term health effects. True, there hadn’t been any brain cancer device scares for decades, but as a mother, she always worried. On the way to the refrigerator, she tapped Natalie on her shoulder. “Tell him to come here later,” she said.

That afternoon, David came to the house. Suella greeted him at the door, touched by the boy’s polite shyness. He was tall and slightly stooped over, possibly because he was struggling to get used to his full-grown adult body. Her younger brother had gone through the same thing as a late teen. “Let’s relax on the patio, shall we?” Suella said, guiding them both out there.

They enjoyed fresh-squeezed juice in the warm sunshine of a late spring California day while Suella studied her daughter’s beau. The flawless, tawny skin came from his mother, she supposed, along with the glossy, lush dark hair that had been styled in the retro floppy bangs style that was in vogue now. Once they had all relaxed and settled into talking, he amazed her with his conversational abilities.

“When your body is supposed to age fast, you grow up fast,” he said, explaining how he was able to hold his own in a conversation about all the popular current authors. Not many other teens bothered to read anymore; Suella always wondered what some of them might do if someone plopped an old-fashioned, traditional book into their lap.

“Now about this living-together thing,” Suella began, trying to steer the conversation toward a more serious topic, “do you really know what you’re getting yourself into?”

David reached for Natalie's hand and held it tenderly while he replied. "Yes I have, Mrs. Worthy. I love her. And I think she loves me. We want to make a life together."

Natalie glowed, smiling brightly as she gazed at him with love in her eyes and leaned forward to kiss him lightly on his cheek. Suella thought of Nathan. She also thought of David's mother, whom she'd seen several times in the waiting room during the yearly physicals. How difficult it must have been to live up to the memory of his parent's other son. It was no wonder Natalie and David bonded together.

When Suella asked David about his plans for the future, she sat back and enjoyed his smile and enthusiasm as he explained how he'd always liked to build things and wanted to become an engineer. His hands fluttered in the air in front of him, as if he was trying to conjure up models of all the things he spoke about.

"But most of all," he said, with joy in his eyes as he reached for Natalie's hand "I want to have a family with Natalie."

Suella could have said that as clones they would have been rendered sterile. She could also have said that no adopting agency would consider them suitable parents when both had shortened life spans due to their very natures. To do so would have been to dump a bucket of cold water over their youthful optimism. Besides, who knew what could happen?

As they all spoke, Suella studied David closely for signs of any infirmities rising from his shortened telomeres. With Natalie, there was her slightly perceptible limp and her morning sluggishness. While she had yet to see David walk for any distance to check whether he shared the same condition, she saw only one other possible malady. An area

below his right eye would twitch slightly, once every couple of minutes or so. The effect was so subtle she almost missed it but after repeatedly gazing at him it became apparent, the way a wrinkle in a billboard reveals itself when one has looked at it long enough.

A couple of days later, when Suella had been working long and hard and her head ached, Natalie burst noisily through the front door. Her light footsteps padded through the house until she found her mother hunched over multiple screens, squinting, trying to rub the pain out of her temples. “We found the perfect place!” she announced. “Want to come see it?”

Suella decided that she needed a break and lowered herself down into the car with her daughter to view her possible apartment. They were slogging through an early season heat wave, which meant she had to crank the air and they both had to go sleeveless.

Thankfully, they didn’t have to go too far. It was a neighborhood Suella had driven through many times before, the artsy section where little Natalie had taken ballet lessons years before. The beach was only a mile away. Would she be able to afford it? Property around here went for a pretty penny.

“It’s right there,” Natalie said, pointing to a building that at first glance, looked like a warehouse, one that had been cleaned up extensively on the outside and re-bricked.

“There’s a lot in the back with a couple of guest places in it, for you to park.”

As she maneuvered the car into the space, Suella said “This looks like it used to be a factory.”

“It probably was, mom, but that was then and this is now. You’ve got to see the inside!”

Once they emerged from the car into the bright, hot sun, Natalie hustled her

toward the glass double door, set against a carved concrete archway. The management had given Natalie a key card, which she swiped against a glass sensor. “You mean they let you go in and out on your own?” Suella asked. “I assumed we were going to meet with some kind of an apartment manager.”

“The card only works between eight a.m. and six p.m.,” Natalie replied. “And I can only use it for one more day.”

The building lobby felt refreshingly cool and the air smelled clean and floral, causing Suella to notice all the potted plants populating the reception areas. When she looked around some more she saw that the building had been divided into two floors, accessible by spiral staircases at the end of the lobby. Natalie led them up the stairs to the second floor.

By the time they stopped at the door for the apartment Natalie was considering, she looked like a proud new parent, beaming at her mother while she swiped the key card against another sensor near the doorframe. “This is it,” she said, pushing the door open. “If and when I move in, I won’t even need the door anymore. David and I can just press our thumbs up to it.”

They walked into the whitest living space Suella had ever seen. White walls, white countertops, white cabinets and cream pile carpet glared at them while Natalie flitted about, showing her mother all the apartment’s features. Even the range top and oven, with its Hobbit-like hood were all white. Suella remembered that when she was a little girl and would watch a science fiction movie about the future, everything was white, even the clothes people wore.

The apartment had been arranged in four quadrants and partitioned with short

walls into a sleeping area, a utility area, and a living/kitchen area. It would have been the perfect bachelorette apartment for a young neatnik girl, but then she remembered David. “This is really nice,” she said. “But do you think you and David might feel a little crowded in here? This is only a little bigger than a studio apartment I had when I was in college.”

“No, it’s cozy,” Natalie said, resting proudly against the kitchen countertop. And if you tiptoe when you look out that window over there, you can see the beach!”

Windows for the sleeping area and the living area brought a bright, cheery quality to the little apartment. Suella could already see her daughter and David curled up on a couch together, watching a movie. “Well, it is close to the house, it’s in a good neighborhood, and you really seem to like it. Can you afford it?”

“Yes, mom.”

“Then I think you should go for it.”

A few days later all the parents got together to help the young couple move into their first apartment. Suella and Nathan would meet up with them later. For now, she and her husband looked over the piles of boxes and corrugated wardrobe containers and shook their heads. “How in the world did you ever accumulate so much shit?” Nathan asked. “And didn’t we just do this last week, when we picked you up from school?”

Natalie laughed. “Dad, you always say that!”

Unless they wanted to make ten trips, they were going to need to rent a larger magnavan, so Suella arranged for one. The vehicle contained dollies and a little ramp, which made hauling Natalie’s things much easier. She was going to take all her white chests of drawers and her end table, but her bed was staying behind.

Her twin bed with the ornate four posters, the one she'd been sleeping on since she was a little girl was too small, she said.

One load, one trip, Suella thought, as she looked at the boxes stacked into the cargo area of the magnavan. She closed the doors. She and Natalie would ride over in the van while Nathan followed them in his car. When they arrived at the apartment building and Nathan met them in the parking lot, he surveyed the building, squinting against the early afternoon sun, making a grimace.

“What kind of a place are you going to be living in, doll?” he asked. “This looks like some kind of rubber factory.”

Suella laughed, remembering that with her husband, the subject was never too far from sex. “Wait until you see what it looks like inside.”

They all attacked the van full of boxes, loading them onto the dolly, wheeling them back and forth between the van and the front door of the building. Passers-by noticed them and either waved or said hello.

“Nice!” Nathan said, when they pushed the dolly through the door and he saw the atrium with all the glass and potted plants. It also pleased him that they could wheel the dolly directly onto an elevator.

Natalie ran ahead of them down the hall and opened the door to her new apartment just by using her thumbprint.

“I hope no one ever steals your thumb,” Nathan said as he wheeled the dolly past her. When he set the boxes down in the living area, as Natalie wanted he put his hands on his hips and paused for a moment to look everything over.

“It looks a little sterile, doesn't it?” Suella offered, wondering what Nathan

thought as he looked over the white cabinets and countertops and the hob-goblin looking range top.

“White, white, white,” Nathan murmured. “It looks like a place where a robot would live.”

After they’d gone back and forth with the dolly a couple of times and the little apartment gradually filled with boxes, David showed up, alone. Suella watched closely how Nathan interacted with David and she was pleased to see him shake his hand heartily and call him “Buddy.”

Suella was looking forward to seeing David’s parents again. “Honey, are your folks coming a little later?”

David, who had hugged Natalie when he saw her and kept an arm around her, shifted back and forth on his feet, scratched his head and looked down at the carpet after being asked the question. He lifted his head and announced “They don’t want to help. They said I’m on my own with this.”

Suddenly David seemed really sad, as the corners of his eyes dropped and his lip quivered. Suella reached forward to pat him on the arm reassuringly.

Nathan shook his head. “Maybe I shouldn’t say this, but that kind of sucks about your parents.”

Suella tried to send him a hot dagger of a look. “No, you shouldn’t *have* said that.”

Natalie just shrugged. “So they can’t come. We’ve got lots of work to do.”

Nathan clapped his hands together. “That’s absolutely right pumpkin. Hows about we try to make this place look like a *real* apartment.” For a couple of hours, they

forged ahead, unloading boxes and cheerily, noisily setting up shelves and tables and arranging things. With five people working at it, before long all of the furniture had been set up and the knick-knacks placed on shelves. Natalie and David's bed had been delivered the day before, and the two men set it up in the sleeping area.

Suella tested out the bed by laying herself down on it and she sighed at the way the mattress responded to her and cradled her. "Wow, I wish I'd had something *this* nice for my first apartment."

With everything set up and arranged, there was not much need for Suella and Nathan to stay there much longer. They all sat in four chairs surrounding their tiny little dinette set while Natalie made tea. Nathan forced conversation with David about his engineering school plans, to be met with short or stilted answers blipping from David's lips. Suella tried to flash him a sympathetic look.

"I wasn't smart enough to be an engineer," Nathan said, gazing off into the distance for a moment. "For one thing, I bit the big one in math. And I was never any good at building stuff. When I was three or four my mom and dad got me one of those big round tubes filled with Lincoln Logs. They had this big piece of paper showing exactly where to put the logs and shit. And I still couldn't do it right. By the time I was finished, my log cabin looked like a pile of giant matchsticks someone threw there."

"We had Legos," David said quietly.

When she'd finished her cup of tea, Suella thumped her palm down onto the table, causing it to shake. She said "Say Nathan, didn't you say something about wanting to go to the store before they close?"

Her husband gave her a blank look and started to open his mouth as if to say "I

don't know what you're talking about", but Suella made sure that neither her daughter nor David could see her as she gnashed her teeth at him.

Instead, Nathan said "Oh yeah. That."

Moments later they stood up and said their goodbyes. Suella hugged Natalie a little longer and harder than usual as they parted, because they were entering a whole new era in her life. As they left the apartment and walked down the stairs to the atrium, she felt a hard lump rise in her throat as her eyes misted up.

Nathan mumbled through a long patter while they walked out of the building and sought the van in the parking lot. "I guess they want to break in that brand new bed. It's a good thing she's sterile."

Chapter Thirty-two

Suella had already been through it once. When she'd had to bring Natalie to school (her euphemism for having had her daughter taken away) she spent the following week throwing herself into her work. There was always something to be done and even when there was nothing to be done she could be organizing her networks and files. One day, simply because she had nothing else to do, she inventoried everything in the house and garage.

Most days, she found herself alone in the house. Nathan had taken up golf again, now that it was summer, and he also frequented Dodger games to see his old friends and attempt to make new ones.

Since she was not seeing anyone during the day and she rarely went on cam except for meetings and testimonials, she sometimes stayed in lounge pajamas all day long and barely bothered to brush her hair, let alone put on makeup. Jill had even begged off the daily teas they used to share because her art business was getting steadier.

She realized that she may as well be an old spinster hag, for the kind of life she was leading. Nathan still occasionally made love to her and did other things that reminded her of the young zestful lust they used to share.

Another weekend went by, and when her big activity included going to the supermarket for stir-fry and margarita mix, she knew something had to give. She used strong, high-end tequila for the margaritas and drank more of them than she'd planned on. As she idly watched one stream after another of mindless forms of television, the screen started to flip flop.

Nathan burst through the front door of the house noisily and bounded straight for

the darkened den. “Hey! I did a seven under par this afternoon!” He gave the smile that made him look like a randy seventeen year old as he leaned in and kissed her. So devoid of energy was she that she barely lifted her head to receive his kiss.

He’d braced himself against the armrest of the easy chair to lower himself down to kiss her, but after he tasted her and saw her demeanor he stopped, hovering over her. “You’re wasted, aren’t you?”

His words swam in her mind “I’m what?”

After lifting himself from the chair he waved a hand dismissively at her while he strode off toward the kitchen. Over his shoulder he said “Not a good look for you, doll.”

His arrival and his words had shocked her enough so that the screen stopped flip-flopping. She could hear him in the kitchen, opening the refrigerator door and twisting the caps off jars, sticking knives inside. Moments later he reappeared in the den with a plate containing a heavily overstuffed sandwich. He sat down on the couch and vacantly watched the television screen along with her.

She waited for him to fill her in on the details of his golfing success that afternoon, such as how he was able to go directly from the sand trap to the hole or how he did a two on a par five. When she glanced at him still decked out in his golf clothes, she again thanked his good sense for not wearing the traditional “loud” golfing outfits. Instead, he wore khakis and polo shirts, looking like a GQ model.

For several minutes he chewed his sandwich slowly and gazed at the screen, apparently enraptured by what was going on there. Suella knew from experience that he was not. The shock of his coming home and his silent treatment evaporated her intoxicated haze. Not talking was the worst punishment he could give, and he knew it.

Finally, Suella could not take it anymore. “How do you suppose Natalie is getting along?”

He kept his gaze on the screen but his shoulders lifted up and down about a half inch in a non-committal shrug. “She and David are probably testing out that new bed.”

Did it bother him? Did he miss his little girl? There were so many things she wanted to ask him but she knew that if she did, she might not like the answers he gave in the mood he seemed to be in. He called out a command to change the channel to one of the 24 hour all sports networks.

Flip-flopping screens and warm fuzziness brought on by tequila gave way to a raging headache. “I’m going to call it a night, hon,” she said after a few minutes, getting up to kiss Nathan on top of his head. “See you in awhile.”

Her doctor kept her supplied with an analgesic inhaler that she knew would take care of the headache. She called it her “happy snort.” Moments after breathing in the mixture, the pain and tightness in her temple evaporated. Suddenly she felt warm and nostalgic for her husband. His moods could turn on a dime and there had not been much sex in the Worthy household recently.

She brushed and teased her hair to make it look playfully tousled and sexy, sprayed her best perfume in the air, walked into it, and put on a layer of lip gloss. To top it off, she changed out of the plain, sensible lounging pajamas and slipped into one of her coquettish, satiny, strappy nylon shorty ensembles. She called out for the radio to tune in her favorite all-night talk show, then pulled back the bedspread and sheets and splayed herself coyly atop them.

And she waited, and waited.

She sighed, slumping down against the stacked pillows. He would have to see her, she realized. She lifted herself off the bed and ventured out into the kitchen. From where Nathan sat, he had his back fully to her. Had he even heard her walk into the kitchen? Was he asleep? No, his head tilted slightly as he watched the images of men in suits discussing this or that baseball teams' decline due to stingy ownership.

How could she get his attention? Clearing her throat would be too obvious, she decided. Instead, she opened one of the cabinets, reached for a plastic tumbler and flicked it off the shelf, watching it crash to the floor, with a series "clook-clook" sounds.

Nathan turned around and glared at her for a moment. When he saw how she was dressed he smiled slightly, but it was a smile of warm recognition rather than excited lust. "I don't think we have any more booze right now, hon," he said. "If you want any more you're going to have to put some clothes on and go out for it."

She picked up the dropped tumbler, closed the cabinet and took a few steps toward him, concentrating on doing the most seductive walk possible, drawing heavily on her modeling training from several decades ago. Speaking in the lowest, most smoldering tone possible, she said "Do I look like I want to get drunk?"

Nathan giggled like a high schooler. The familiar glint glistened in his eyes but just for a moment. "No."

"All right then." She knew she could have gone to the couch, jumped on his lap and started kissing him madly, rubbing him the way he liked through the crotch in his khaki golf pants. He would give in, let her tantalizingly strip him and they would make love right there on the couch, with her on top.

But that was not what she needed.

She returned to the bedroom, re-positioned herself on the bed and called on the radio program again, keeping the volume low. In the meantime she tried to send out “come hither” vibes to her husband, creating a sexually charged atmosphere for him. When several more minutes passed, her headache returned. Another snort on the inhaler wouldn’t hurt, she reasoned.

But she forgot that two snorts made her drowsy.

When she returned to the bed, she listened to a woman on the radio talk about how warrior angels caused an Iranian nuclear missile to misfire in 2013. Soon she fell into a deep sleep.

Several hours later she woke up, still alone on the bed. Disgusted, she marched off to the den and found Nathan asleep on the couch, snoring lightly. His hand dangled off the side of the seat cushion, and for a moment she wondered if there was any truth to the age-old sleepover trick about putting a hand in warm water.

When she returned to bed, she could not sleep. She tossed and turned between the sheets while listening to the radio program host talk about the “new age of enlightenment” that was dawning on the world, the same crap they had been talking about for the past twenty years.

Was it asking too much for her husband to desire her sexually, even after all these years? Was all the working out, watching what she ate, keeping her hair done and her skin taut all for nothing? Eventually she dozed off and the next time she woke up, bright sunlight streamed through the windows.

And Nathan was still asleep on the couch.

She checked in the mirror for new wrinkles, age spots or gray hair. There was

nothing, although her eyes had puffed up from the drinks and snorts on the inhaler the night before. She wet a towel with cold water and pressed it onto her face for several minutes. That always did the trick and she instantly felt better.

Upon returning to the kitchen, she knew that getting breakfast started would wake up Nathan immediately. She started a frying pan full of texturized protein sausage and eggs, which sizzled and sent an aroma to him. While she was busy working the spatula she heard him groan and yawn then take a couple of steps toward the kitchen. She kept busy making breakfast and suddenly he put his arms around her from behind and drew her in close as he nuzzled her neck and ear. "Sorry I was so tired last night, babe. I guess that's what playing two rounds will do to you."

She turned around and kissed him on the lips and gave him a full-on hug. Even while she did it, though, she knew that there was more than one way to be tired. He slipped away to go to the bedroom and change his clothes and a few moments after that she heard the shower running.

It was Sunday. Traditionally it was a day to relax for her and her husband. On warm early summer days like this one they liked to eat breakfast out on the patio. Most times Nathan would check his sports blurbs on tablet feeds. Should she suggest they go see David and Natalie today? She knew that they would be relaxing too, possibly spending the morning in bed, since they were young and in love. While they ate their breakfast quietly together, she resolved that she would go see Natalie the following morning. That left a day to spend with Nathan and icy tension in the air.

Cautiously, she decided to start a conversation with him. "So what do you want to do today?"

He finished chewing a bite of the sausage and, with a mischievous glint in his eye, said “Let’s go be a couple of kids.”

Suella put on casual capris and her most comfortable hemp shoes to go with her sleeveless top and sweater, while Nathan had already dressed in his jeans shorts with all the buckles and pockets, and a baseball t-shirt straight from his playing days. Together, they lowered down into his sports car. While he switched on the engine and revved the supercharged semiconductors, she asked “So where are we going?”

He grinned. “It’s a surprise. And you’re not allowed to ask that question for the whole rest of the day.”

She giggled. “Okay.”

Nathan punched the accelerator and rocketed them down the driveway and out onto the street.

They went to the pier first, where Nathan locked the car as they ventured out into the morning salt air with seagulls screeching overhead and waves crashing in the distance. He held out his hand for her and she took it; while they walked along she followed his lead swinging their arms back and forth as they approached the pier and something that looked like a go-cart ramp.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” she asked as they entered a line with parents and their kids and awaited their turn on the hover-carts. This go-cart track was eons different from any she’d ever seen from when she was a girl or any time since. During days gone by, a go-cart track was a strip of asphalt that wound around turns and dipped up and down to give the riders a little thrill as they spun around in circles.

This track had been constructed of a bright, sky blue foamy material and seemed

wider than any track she'd ever seen. On either side of the track, high "curbs" walled it in and reminded her of bobsled runs from the Olympics, without the ice. As they waited, they watched parents and kids gleefully buzz through the twists and turns on hover carts.

They were go-carts without wheels, each of them in neon hues from every color in the rainbow: vivid violets, ravishing reds, knockout blues, and pretty pinks. All of the carts featured wide, soft-appearing bumpers all around them, which allowed the riders to speed forward and nudge past each other.

Suella assumed that the line would lead to some kind of a dock, where an attendant would guide them to the cars, show them how the safety belt worked, and send them on their way. Instead, the line ahead led to a glass walled building, behind which she could make out groups of people looking up at a video screen.

When the cars stopped around the bend, the whirring and hissing noises they made ceased, and the cars gradually eased down until they were flush with the track surface. Almost immediately afterward, the line moved quickly ahead and they nearly reached the door of the glass building. Nathan squinted and stood on tiptoe as he tried to see what was going on in there.

"It's like at the Disney parks and Universal," Suella said, "where they have a little video telling you what you can expect on the ride. This one seems a little bit longer."

When the group watching the instructional videos beyond the glass was finished, they would be the next ones to jump into the neon hover-karts. After that it was their turn. Nathan started bouncing up and down as he spoke, with his boyish grin showing what he may have looked like as a high-schooler. "I can't wait!"

The door opened for them several minutes later and they intently watched the

video that told them how to drive the carts. Jets of air streamed upward from tiny holes all along the track and also blasted downward from the carts. The steering wheel of the cart acted as a giant joystick that would thrust the cart forward, shift it from side to side and turn it around the bends.

The last part of the video showed a schoolmarmish looking lady with tied back hair who exhorted them to “practice good etiquette” on the ride, which meant steering clear of other riders rather than ramming into them. She also showed that if the carts jammed together on one of the turns, it was best to pull back on the wheel, which put the engines in neutral and allowed them to weed themselves through.

The doors on the other side opened and beyond that point Suella could see people with smiles on their faces emerge from the carts. Nathan skipped ahead to the dock, where an African American wide-bodied young woman kept them behind a rail till all the riders emerged from the vehicles. He lowered himself into a cobalt blue hover cart and called out “Get yourself one of the pink ones.”

She did as she was told and dropped down into one that was more of a fuchsia color. At first she had to put on the shoulder straps and belt the seat buckle just as the video showed. It reminded her of putting on a scuba tank. The hover cart reminded her of an egg shaped, fiberglass cocoon. Someone spoke to her on a speaker: “Are we all buckled in and ready? Ladies and Gentlemen, start your engines!”

A loud hiss caused the hover cart to rise several inches upward, causing an eerie, unstable feeling in the pit of Suella’s stomach. She was really floating! Loud, heavy metal music began to play over the speaker system and she realized that the music could only be heard on the inside of the vehicles. This was why the hover kart complex seemed

so quiet and peaceful while she and Nathan had been standing on line. The announcer shouted “Let’s go!” and cars ahead of her thrust forward. She pulled up on the steering wheel just as was shown in the video and her cart thrust forward along with them.

Riding the hover cart along the troughs and valleys of the track system was the closest she’d ever come to flying under her own power. The joystick steering control was surprisingly light and responsive. She laughed as her slightest movement shifted the car left or right or turned it on the curves. A boy who could barely see above the dashboard and windshield edge nudged her with his neon green car and they both laughed as they careened down a straightaway together.

Someone else in a familiar blue car streaked past and she realized it was Nathan, with his need for speed, rocketing ahead of everyone. Along with being a tactile rush and feeling of weightlessness, the ride also brought visual thrills as holographic animated creatures bounced along in computer-generated wonderlands populating the scenery surrounding the tracks.

The scenery and the track swooping pattern repeated: all the go-cart riders sped through the trail twice. On the second go-round Suella felt more confident in her ability to steer and juke right and left and she laughed merrily, like a witch on a supersonic broom.

The ride ended too soon as the power cut down on her steering wheel thruster mechanism and her cocoon-like vehicle merged in with the others as they slowly coasted toward the central dock. In the next moment, she came to a complete stop and the onboard music and public address system cut out. She unhooked the straps from her shoulders and disconnected the seatbelt and when she looked up she saw Nathan reaching

down to offer her a hand.

He smiled down at her the same way he did so many years earlier, when she came upon him in a baseball bullpen and he welcomed her to New York. Whatever leftover annoyance she'd had with him over the past couple of days quickly evaporated. "That was fun!" she exclaimed as he helped lift her out of the hover cart and onto the dock platform.

"It was just as cool as I thought it would be!" he said, as giddily as a teenager. "I've been wanting to do that for a long time!"

Once they walked away from the hover kart complex, it left the whole rest of the day for them to spend whatever way presented itself. "Let's walk on the beach," Suella said, taking her husband's hand.

At several points along the thin plank-way running alongside the beach, Suella had always seen cubby-hole structures that reminded her of school lockers. She'd always wondered what they were for. That special day she and Nathan used them to store their shoes while they walked toward the surf barefoot.

The weather was perfect that day, not a cloud in the sky, just a light breeze billowing the briny ocean scent and rendering the air just a touch cool. Other people sunned themselves or walked along the beach as pairs or parts of small crowds. Yet, it was still early in the summer season and Suella noted that the beach that day was comfortably populated in a nice way. When she looked up and down the coast and saw the mountains and cliffs in the distance, she realized that people fell in love with California on such days. Even with all the crime, the government corruption, the ridiculous politics and the outrageous taxes, it was still beautiful.

Suella and Nathan walked along for a couple of miles and she felt as if she had not a care in the world, as if all of her demanding clients and the myriad details of managing day to day life existed in some other universe somewhere.

She saw a boy and a girl flying a kite. It surprised her to see the cheerfully colored clear plastic kite flying so high and effortlessly above them as they watched it dip and float on the winds. The breeze they felt at shore level barely tousled her blond bangs. Yet it looked like the children were having so much fun. “Let’s do that!” she said, grasping Nathan’s arm and jumping up and down. “It looks like fun!”

Nathan grinned. “Okay, little girl.”

They found a souvenir stand a few yards away and she realized that it might have been the same one where the children found their kite, and had their parents buy it for them. That day, she and Nathan were their own children, giving themselves the kind of happy childhood they always wanted. She immediately found a beautiful clear plastic kite festooned with unicorns and pink streamers and together they bought it.

Moments later they watched the kite soar and glide gracefully through the breeze above them, laughing gleefully with abandon. Suella realized that she could happily run around holding the string to the kite and watch it dip and glide through the air all day. Nathan seemed to be content watching her, enjoying the cool ocean breeze and the sunny warmth of the early summer day.

At the same time, she felt sad and bittersweet. True, this was a fun getaway, but the high-pressure world of her career as a cyber security specialist always lurked beneath the surface. She also worried about Natalie. Still it was fun to the world she remembered as a seven year old, when she and her friends would ride their bikes for miles, not caring

where they went or how fast they got there.

Unlike her earlier life, when she was running around on the sand holding the string for the kite, she didn't care what she looked like at all. She imagined that her hair must be billowing out all around her head and that her top must be adhering unattractively to her chest and her armpits, but it did not matter. She just laughingly chased after the kite.

Sometimes Nathan would take the string himself and control the kite for short periods of time, or he would give her suggestions about how to keep it up in the air better. Mostly, he seemed just content to watch her. After a short while, though, her arms and legs began to drag and she felt tired. She also realized that her mouth and throat felt dry and parched, probably from running around on a warm day and breathing through them.

She started to reel the string for the kite inward, knowing that with the light breeze, she could keep the kite airborne and bring it all the way to her, the way a peregrine falcon always returns to the leather-covered wrist of its master.

Nathan saw her reeling the kite in and said "Had enough?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm getting kind of worn out."

He hadn't worn his watch that day, which was unusual because he was so organized and time oriented, trying to pack the most into every day that he could. "Well then it might be good for us to take a break and get something to eat."

Back at the car they put the kite away in the trunk and then struck out on Beach Drive to find someplace good to go. Nathan stopped beside an eclectic looking little eatery carved out among a few weathered row house buildings along the street. The bright, yellow and forest green sign above it read "Sconey's Old Fashioned Hot Dog

Emporium.” Suella shrugged. “It seems just as good a place as any.”

As they walked in, she reflected that sweeping government regulations on nutrition had really changed hot dogs over the years. Once upon a time, they contained massive amounts of sodium nitrate and practically anything could be put into them: offal, floor droppings, and God knew what else. Since new technologies in food manufacturing and distribution had taken place, new hot dog ingredients included high-tech texturized protein and anti-oxidants.

Hot dogs had gone from being a form of junk food to a good piece of a viable, healthy diet. Still, the inside of Sconey’s looked just like the kind of burger-and-fries restaurants she remembered from when she was growing up.

“Ooh, Chicago dog,” Nathan murmured while he looked at the LED menu floating above the counter. “Got to have that.”

“Get me one too, then.”

Service was quick, since only a handful of other customers sat on the tall stools at the tiny circular tables. Besides, how much cooking and prep time went into making a hot dog, anyway? When she stood on tiptoe she could see how the tall, gangly adolescent boy prepared their lunch. He connected the two hot dogs to both poles of what looked like a miniature version of a life generator in Dr. Frankenstein’s lab and he electrocuted the hot dogs. After that came the mounds of sauerkraut and relish.

“It’s a Chicago dog,” Nathan said, when he paid for their meal and drinks, “but they really ought to call it a Dagwood dog.”

He brought them outside to the little circular tables in front, facing the street, with shorter chairs than the high stools inside the hot dog stand. For drinks they had taken

plain water. Suella couldn't remember the last time she'd drunk any kind of a carbonated beverage. Nathan had brought them lots of napkins and she placed several on her lap and the tabletop. She was sure she was going to need them.

She took her first bite into the hot dog and was pleasantly surprised that the slightly tough skin around the outside of it popped beneath the pressure of her teeth. An explosion of smoky beef flavor, sauerkraut, mustard, relish and ketchup assaulted her taste buds.

Nathan was looking at her, and he shook his head and grinned.

"What?" Suella asked.

He paused for a moment to think before giving his answer. "You. When I saw you out there flying that kite and getting all giggly I was thinking to myself I've never seen you more beautiful."

Her heart melted.

After their lunch together, they walked on the beach some more, until he said "What do you say we go home?" And they made love for the rest of that afternoon and on into the evening.

Yet, Suella felt as if she'd been made love to all through the morning as well.

Chapter Thirty-three

Suella lie there in bed and remembered how she used to dread Monday mornings. Decades ago, the alarm clock would have awakened her by quarter til six and many days she would make a mad rush to fix her hair and makeup, get dressed and somehow still make it to breakfast before rushing out the door to get to work by eight.

Where she would get blasted by hung over bosses barking directives at her, pissed off that their sports teams lost over the weekend, depending on what time of the year it was. Female bosses were even worse. They had to deal with bosses over them plus husbands and children. Her headaches and stress got so bad she went to a doctor to deal with the pain and the doctor prescribed Midrin. She called them her “happy pills” and she would drop one whenever things got to be too much.

Nowadays she could sleep in if she wanted to. Most of the business managers and clients she worked with would schedule meetings for later in the afternoon or on different days of the week altogether. Perhaps they’d learned to loathe Mondays early in their careers also. Nathan was still sleeping soundly beside her. He’d never had to deal with the whole “Monday morning” concept in his whole life.

As she got the coffee and juice ready, she planned out her day to see Natalie. David was in school year round, she’d said during their conversations on the day they’d moved in. So anxious was he to start his career. Natalie would be home, most likely enjoying a leisurely Monday morning herself.

Nathan grumbled, still sleepy-eyed, as he wandered into the kitchen, bare-chested, wearing only an old pajama bottom. He was so ready for his coffee that he pulled the decanter aside and let the brewed fluid pour into his cup and then put the decanter back.

“So what’s on your agenda for today?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “Corny wants to talk to me about showing up for the I league.”

John Cornelius was a coach and one of Nathan’s longtime baseball friends and it took a moment for Sueella to remember that “I” stood for “Instructional,” a league where 18-20 year old boy hopefuls learned how to pitch, bat, and field like major leaguers. “For the Dodgers?”

He shook his head. “Arizona. But he says they have a training camp out in the low desert somewhere. That’s where he wants me to go.”

“Are you going to do it?”

He laughed. “Maybe. I’m getting tired of golf. But what are you so interested in my extracurricular activities for? What’s on your plate?”

“I’m going over to see Natalie.”

His eyebrows rose. “Better call first, and give them some time to get their clothes on.”

She bumped against him playfully.

After a light breakfast, she put on sporty casual clothes. Since they lived only a couple of miles away, she decided that it was a beautiful enough morning for her to walk over there. On the way out the door she stopped off in Nathan’s study, where he’d sat down to put his reading glasses on and go over his investment reports. “Thank you for a beautiful weekend,” she said, lowering down onto his lap for a moment to hug and kiss him.

“No,” he said. “Thank *you*.”

As Sueella walked on the sidewalks in her neighborhood, she passed a couple of

gardeners trimming lawns with buzzing weed-whackers as, on the street a few hybrids eerily floated past. In her youth she hated walking, especially alone because of the exhaust and the smog and cars filled with rowdy guys of various ages and stripes calling things out to her. On a Monday morning, it was too early for certain types of guys to be out tooling around. Even if they did see her, they'd probably think she was too old.

It was one reason she wore the visor and the dark glasses, even though the cloudy skies blotted out lots of suns' rays that morning. As she walked along, she breathed in the fresh air, peppered with the scent of freshly cut grass and musky earth. A couple of blocks away she entered the commercial district where her daughter lived. The crisp scent of freshly baked bread emanated from a bakery on a street corner.

While she waited for the light to change, she heard an odd cawing sound. She knew that the walk signal often combined a loud chirp to alert pedestrians to the light change but this sound was more faint and lifelike. The sound seemed to be coming from above so she looked up just in time to see a couple of seagulls roosting on a streetlamp.

There were only a few more blocks including one where she remembered homeless people congregating during the depression. Nowadays the sidewalks looked too clean and fresh for them. Cameras and sensors everywhere would have alerted the police to their whereabouts anyway. California was still broken but she, along with several other friends she spoke with still said that in lots of ways it returned to the place they remembered from their youth. Would she have even dared to walk these few blocks during the late 90s or the depression? Of course not.

As she approached the building where Natalie lived, she chuckled. It did look like an old time factory, whether they'd made rubbers there or not. The atrium inside was

always nice though. Suella strode to the guest screen and touched her daughter's number.

A moment later a girl's weak voice came over the speaker: "Hello?"

"Hi hon. It's mom. Want some company?"

Natalie took a few moments to respond. "Sure. I'll buzz you up. Wait a second."

Her signal un-clicked the glass sliding doors to the lobby so that Suella could enter the staircase for the second floor. She smiled in anticipation of seeing her daughter again, even if it had been only a few days since she'd last seen her.

The door swung open and revealed Natalie, still in summer pajamas, green-faced, with stringy hair and a miserable expression on her face.

Suella reached forward to take her into her arms and soothe her. "Oh my god, darling. What's wrong?"

Natalie gently eased herself away to face her mother with downcast, sheepish eyes. "You may as well know. I'm pregnant."

Ever since Jill had planted the notion in her mind weeks earlier, Suella had thought about how she would deal with the reality of it. Natalie, little more than a child herself was going to be a mother, making her a grandmother. Such a state of affairs should have made her mad (couldn't she have waited, couldn't she have used protection, and all of the other "couldn'ts"), but all she wanted to do right then was act.

"Oh, you poor thing," she murmured, taking her daughter into her arms to comfort and soothe her. They stood there for just a moment, long enough for Suella to realize that Natalie was burning up, as if a cauldron burned inside of her. She quickly guided her over to a lacy, wrought iron daybed they were using as a sofa and eased her down toward a pile of pillows on it. Natalie slumped down against the pillows like a rag doll.

Suella sprinted off to the kitchen to reach for the white cabinets and start looking through them. The cabinet doors stuck when she tried to open them and wouldn't close securely when she tried to push the door shut. All she could find were boxes and bags filled with cereal or rice, along with a few thin, smaller boxes. "Don't you have any tea?"

"No, I don't drink tea," Natalie said.

"Well then, do you have any ginger ale?"

"No."

Suella looked at the refrigerator before opening it, her back to Natalie. "Well then what are you doing for the nausea?" She had to come around the corner to look her daughter in the eye.

Natalie was wincing, but it appeared to be more emotional than painful, since her color had improved even as Suella had been attending to her. "Promise you won't get mad and yell at me?"

"Why? What?"

"Seven up. I know you call it 'liquid candy' and that it was a New World Order plot to make American kids fat and stupid, but it's the only thing that works."

Suella returned to refrigerator and when she opened it found the inside shelves lined with green bio-smash bottles. She reached for one and inspected the label contents before going any further. "Well at least you bought some with low Stevia," she said, twisting off the cap. "Do you take it straight from the bottle or do you want a glass?"

"Better get me a tumbler," she said. "As mikey as I've been, I'll probably drop the bottle and make a huge mess."

“Mikey? You mean clumsy?”

“Yeah, mikey.”

Suella shook her head. Over the years she'd learned a whole new vocabulary from her daughter, and she knew if she used half of the words, her friends wouldn't understand her. She found a bright pink tumbler in one of the other cabinets and poured the soda into it, wondering who was president the last time she'd done that. When she'd only poured the liquid halfway into the cup, the fizzy foam formed a head that filled up the rest of the cup. Gradually it dissolved, allowing her to pour the rest of the bottle into the tumbler.

She lowered the tumbler down Natalie, who suddenly looked like a four-year-old again, grasping the tumbler with both hands and tilting it at a deep angle to let the fluid pour into her throat.

“Slow down honey, you're going to give yourself the hiccups.”

Natalie ignored her, finishing the tumbler filled with soda with one long, famished gulp. “Thanks, mom. I needed that.”

Suella patted her hand and allowed nurturing silence to wash over them for the next few moments. She realized that she still held the empty bottle in her other hand.

“Do you have a pestle?”

Natalie pointed to the kitchen countertop. “It's underneath the sink.”

Suella discovered an old-fashioned one that worked like an old-time pharmacist's mortar and pestle. It featured a container and a crusher that looked like a hammer with a flat business end. She dropped the bottle in there, whacked it with a hammer until the remains crystallized with the layer of fine green sand at the bottom.

Once that was done, she returned to the living area to sit beside Natalie and comfort her further. “You don’t have a garden or a lawn. What do you do with the grind?”

“Sell it,” she said. She managed a weak smile for her.

They laughed together. She took her slender, smooth hand and took it between both of hers, as much to convey tenderness as to check whether the raging fever continued. “So how long have you known?”

She shrugged. “Ever since it happened, really.”

“Well, when was that?”

“About a week before you and dad came to pick me up from school.”

The notion puzzled Suella, who’d always thought of the school as an intense security facility, probably staffed with security guards and cameras around the clock. There would have been someone to stop them, wouldn’t there? Then she remembered how strong young love could be. There were closets, spaces beneath beds, bushy areas between buildings on campus, and the list went on and on. “So you think you could feel yourself conceive? Was it like an electric shock or something?” Suella, who had never been pregnant and never would be, was simply curious.

“No,” she said. “It was just a knowing. Like I knew it.”

“Well then, did you *confirm* it? I know you haven’t been to see Dr. Allende since earlier in the spring.”

“Uh...yeah. They have those home tests. Remember?”

“Oh yes. Do they still have it where you have to pee on a stick?”

Natalie rolled her eyes. “Mom, you are so oughts. That was back in the dark

ages!”

“Oughts? What the hell is that?”

Natalie laughed, shaking her head. “Oughts! You know, someone stuck behind the times, like they’re still in twenty *ought* one or twenty *ought* two. You know! When computer and television screens were big, huge boxes.”

“So, sue me, I’m a walking antagonism. So you took the test and it was confirmed, right?”

“Yeah. The chicken clucked.”

“What?”

Natalie laughed. “They have this holo of a chicken clucking and dropping an egg. I mean, if it’s positive. If you are.”

Suella raised her eyebrows. “Well at least they don’t have a rabbit getting shot or something?”

For a moment, Natalie looked at her as though she had three heads. “What?”

Suella waved a hand in dismissal. “Whatever. Anyway, we have to call Dr. Allende. I can beam her up there, can’t I?” She pointed to a screen on the wall near the door. To get the whole process in motion, she pulled her Idial out of her purse.

“Mom, can’t we go audio instead? I look like shit!”

Suella turned to her. “Two things. One, you don’t look as bad as you think you do, and two, audio sucks.” To her it sucked so much that she couldn’t remember the last time she had a regular conversation with someone on a regular phone.

“Can I at least do something with my hair before you beam her on there?”

“Yeah.”

Natalie disappeared into the bathroom for a moment while Suella ran a quick search and found Dr. Allende. It was still fairly early on a Monday morning. She hoped the doctor wouldn't be in a procedure just yet. By the time the office environment spilled onto the screen Natalie had returned to the room with her hair loosely braided on one side and wearing a nice, buttoned-down blouse.

A bland, non-descript receptionist with pulled-back brown hair and wearing a white coat looked back at them. "This is Lifewind," she said. "How can I help you Mrs. Worthy?"

Suella stood while Natalie sat down on the daybed again. While she spoke she gestured to her daughter, feeling as if she was a college teacher drawing attention to slide images on a screen. "We're in Natalie's new apartment," she said. "And we have some urgent news for Dr. Allende."

She didn't spill the beans right away, since she wanted there to be some back and forth before she dropped the salvo that would pry Dr. Allende away from whatever she was doing, to come talk to them.

"What is the news?" the receptionist asked.

Natalie spoke for the both of them: "I'm pregnant."

For a moment, the receptionist simply went silent. Then she seemed to realize the gravity of what had just been said and her mouth formed a small "o." "Well, she's in a conference, but I'll tell her immediately."

The receptionist walked away, leaving them to stare at the screen images of cabinets and potted plants in the distance. It reminded Suella of an old joke: there was really no way for businesses to place callers on video hold, which was why so many

offices were reluctant to use it. Back in the day, 800 number lines would use cheesy, recorded music to enliven the phone line when a caller was on hold. Couldn't modern day businesses pipe in a few minutes of a video, someone telling jokes, maybe?

Dr. Allende stumbled onto the screen a short while later. Her mouth was opened slightly, her skin was pale and her eyes wide. It appeared that she'd literally run from whatever she was doing to get to the phone line. On her end she must have leaned into the lens because her image took up most of the screen. "Mrs. Worthy? Natalie? Is this true?"

In unison, Natalie and her mother said "Yes."

Dr. Allende swallowed and took a deep breath immediately. "Are you sure? It's impossible."

They looked at each other. Natalie responded. "Well, the chicken clucked."

The doctor's mouth formed a straight line and her expression went blank. Suella imagined that she must give the same face whenever someone with advanced cirrhosis of the liver says they only drink two glasses of wine a day. "Hon, those things are not one hundred percent reliable. And if it is true, then we're going to need to run some other tests. I know your annual isn't for a few moments, but..."

"We'll be there as soon as possible," Suella said, interrupting her. "Just let us know when and where."

Dr. Allende looked up, toward the upper left quadrant of whatever screen she was working on. The first two fingers of her left hand traced in the air, which Suella knew meant she was checking something in another window on her end. "Can you make it to the Center tomorrow?"

“Of course.” Though tomorrow would be busy, she was almost sure that a slot line connected her neighborhood with the low desert, enabling her to catch up on a few things as the car sped them toward the center. If not, she could get Nathan to drive.

Natalie, knowing that she might have trouble keeping down certain kinds of foods, had bought several broth mixes and dehydrated dinners. With some hot water and stirring, they sat down to a lunch of turkey broth with vegetables and rice. Their video call to Dr. Allende made Suella think of something. It had been forever since she’d shared a nice tea with Jillian. That afternoon seemed as good a time as any.

Hours later, Jillian, who had taken to wearing flowing, glistening afghans for afternoon loungewear said “I can’t believe it. I was right.”

Suella took a sip of tea before continuing. “The doctor doesn’t seem to think it’s possible.”

Jillian leaned forward and her eyes took on that compassionate quality which always meant she was about to say something serious. “Suella, we know Natalie has a soul. She started menstruating before her tenth birthday. I think it’s possible.”

Chapter Thirty-four

Nathan said he was still debating with himself about whether or not he wanted to take the job in the instructional league. “I’ll drive,” he told them. “It’ll give me something to do so I quit driving myself crazy thinking about it.”

Suella could always work well in the back seat of a car, or in a train, or on an airplane. Because of the nature of her job, she had to.

This was the first time in five years that they would be taking Natalie to one of her yearly appointments. Yes, it was unscheduled and sort of an emergency, but to Suella it felt good that she and Nathan were so involved in their daughter’s life once again. It was already scorchingly hot in the low desert and she felt glad that they’d bought a stainless steel pitcher of cold, clean water along.

When they arrived, they drove through the usual strict security. The guard with a helmet, an armored jacket and reflective sunglasses scanned the names of everyone in the car and keyed a few things into a pad. Once they were cleared and Nathan drove the car downhill into the underground parking garage, he said “Why is it that every time I go through that thing I’m tempted to click my heels together and shout *Heil Hitler?*”

After they parked and took the elevator upstairs to the lobby, they received a shock. Both of David’s parents stood in the center of the lobby, in front of the reception desk, and had been apparently expecting them. David’s mother, who appeared washed out and stressed, took Natalie into her arms for a quick hug. “Good morning, sweetheart,” she said. “We had to come when we received the news.”

Graciously, Natalie said “That’s so very kind of you.”

Suella felt an upwelling of warm pride in her daughter. In the next moment,

David's mother turned to her and said "I hope you can forgive us. We should have been there to help David."

Suella glanced at both of David's parents, and they both appeared sincere and contrite, holding their heads down. "It's okay," she replied, reaching forward to pat David's mother on her wrist, because she was closer. "We understand."

David's father then spoke. Suella couldn't remember if she'd ever heard him speak before. "This is extraordinary," he said. "We're a part of something special."

Suella looked at Nathan, who sighed and opened his eyes wider. "Oh brother, are you ever in the right."

A nurse arrived almost immediately afterward, to collect Natalie and bring her back into the examination rooms for her appointment. Suella marveled that the whole operation, with all the gleaming glass and metal, and the swiftly efficient nurse and clerical staff, had remained virtually unchanged for almost twenty years now.

Once Natalie had disappeared into the rooms, David's father invited them all to sit down on the connected waiting room chairs that more-or-less faced each other. He started off the conversation: "We have to protect their privacy, that's priority number one."

Nathan nodded. "We all signed a stack of papers almost a foot high and I know Nat's got a sensor in her where they can keep track. I think that protects them right there."

David's mother and father looked at each other and then spoke to Suella and Nathan with grave expressions on their faces. "Well, we have another concern," his mother said, still with the traces of Caribbean island accent in her voice. "It's for

Natalie's pod-casting activities. Does she speak very much about her...background?"

Suella jumped in. "No," she replied. "I watched an archive of them all, right after she told me she was doing that. The casts went back three years and it took me a couple of days to get through them. She presents herself as a normal, everyday girl."

"Which she is," Nathan added, hastily.

David's father cracked a smile for them using just the lower half of his face, yet his eye expression continued to remain grave. "If word gets out about her situation and the reality of it all, there could be...hysteria."

Suella laughed. "The Center would never allow a thing like that to happen. The minute something got out, they'd send a fleet of magnavans out to cart her away to someplace where *we* won't even be able to reach her. Natalie knows that, too. That's why she's so careful."

David's mother and father nodded, apparently satisfied with her answers. Suella leaned back and relaxed, reflecting again how lucky she was that Natalie still spoke to her, let alone wanted to include her in her life.

For the next few minutes, Nathan and David's father spoke about baseball, and Nathan's pitching career. Suella sat close to him and held his hand while he did. It felt good to have the subject switch to something much more light hearted.

In what seemed like too short a time, Dr. Allende appeared in the lobby, with Natalie. Once again, Suella marveled at how the beautiful young Arabian woman was holding up over the years, through working in such a stressful field. She wore her hair longer now, and had streaked it blond in places, but she still sported the slim, girlish figure she'd always had, and if any lines had crept onto her face, Suella couldn't see

them. “I’d like us all to sit down to discuss a few matters,” she said.

They all filed into one of the many conference rooms in the building, but what Dr. Allende had to say was brief, and Natalie was allowed to stay in the room with them. Once they had all settled into chairs around the gleaming, polished table, Dr. Allende said “First of all, I’d like to say that what I can disclose about Natalie’s status is somewhat limited now. She’s a legal adult and now protected under privacy statutes.”

Suella watched everyone around the table nod knowingly.

The doctor continued. “What I *can* say is this. We’ve confirmed Natalie’s pregnancy. She is doing well but obviously we’ll have to monitor her progress very closely. To make it easier on you, we will refer you to an obstetrician in west Los Angeles. Her name’s Dr. McConnell. I’ll have our receptionist make the arrangements.”

Suella breathed a sigh of relief, first that Natalie was pronounced healthy (would they say the same thing if they’d seen her the morning before) and second that the upcoming visits would take place in west L.A. That was a lot easier to get to than the low desert.

Soon afterward, the meeting ended and Suella and Nathan said their goodbyes to David’s parents. To Suella, her husband was acting strangely cordial. She was so used to seeing him be the center of the action. He moved slowly, like a robot while they walked out of the lobby and into the building proper, where they would ride the elevator to the parking floor.

When they stood in the elevator, Suella turned to him and said “Is something wrong?”

Soundlessly, he shook his head and instead moved toward Natalie. “Come here,

darling,” he said, gathering his daughter into his arms for a long, heartfelt hug. “This is a miracle. We’re going to do everything for you we possibly can.”

It occurred to her to join in on the hug, to make it a family event, but she stood back, letter father and daughter bind together during this extraordinary moment. Her eyes started to mist as she watched them. The elevator door opened with a whir and an electronic beep. She tried to tell them, but the words stuck in her throat. Luckily, Nathan noticed that the door had opened and he broke apart from Natalie and took her hand while they walked toward their car.

Suella had spent the drive to the Center wrapped up in her workaday world but on the way back she would do no such thing. She still sat in the back, but pushed herself forward on the edge of the seat while she propped her shoulders on both of the front seats, her head teetering back and forth between Nathan and Natalie. “You know what this means, don’t you? No soccer.”

She sighed heavily while she watched the desert tinder scenery whiz past. “Yes mom, I know.”

“You haven’t been playing in some kind of secret league have you? You know, on the sly?”

“No, of course not.”

Nathan reached over to playfully pat Natalie’s knee. “But I know you, girl. You’re not one to let grass grow on her feet. You’ve got to do *something*. I just can’t see you veging out in that little apartment all day.”

“She can walk,” Suella said. “The neighborhood’s a lot safer than it used to be.”

“Yeah,” Nathan said, with a laugh. “That’s what three months of martial law will

do for you.”

Suella breathed a sigh of relief that her husband’s jovial nature had returned, but in the next moment a façade of seriousness washed over him.

“I just can’t believe it’s happening,” he went on, murmuring softly.

She poked him playfully on the arm, to try to get the playful gentleman she knew and loved to return. “What? That you’re going to be a grandpa?”

“No,” he replied, taking a moment to glance at Natalie. “I mean it’s not supposed to happen. From everything I’ve heard, not only is she not supposed to get pregnant, she isn’t even supposed to menstruate.”

Natalie blushed a little at her father’s frank words. Suella could see the tips of her ears flushing pink as she lowered her head down, twirling the buckle at the edge of her romper outfit. At times like these, her mother reflected, she still looked like a little girl. “But I’ve defied the odds my whole life,” Natalie said, jarring Suella back to the reality that her daughter was so mature, so wise beyond her years.

“So what does David think about all this?” Nathan asked.

Natalie’s smile lit up her whole face, causing Suella to smile, too. “Oh, he’s ecstatic!”

“You mean *ecstatic*?” Nathan said, laughing.

“No, ecstatic!”

Suella shook her head. “Hon, these kids have a language all their own nowadays. Sometimes I wish I had a secret Indigo/Crystal decoder.”

“I’m going to have to have a long talk with that boy,” Nathan said.

For nostalgia’s sake, they stopped for chilidogs on the way home. They sat inside

the restaurant, eating the pleasure food out of little, edible cardboard boats. Other families and people sat around the tables there, as they were experiencing their lunch rush. To them, Suella supposed, they must have looked like a normal family. If they only knew the earth-shattering secret they harbored, however.

They brought Natalie to her apartment, and as they arrived to their home, she saw the page light flashing atop the living room screen. Anxiously, Suella wondered if Dr. Allende had found something else during the examination and was trying to reach them. That didn't make sense, however, since the doctor and all the officials at the Center had her and Nathan's personal numbers.

Suella tapped the screen and Jillian's information flashed by in a readout while the system paged her. Seconds later her beaming, radiant face filled the screen. "What a surprise," Suella said. "Is everything okay?"

Jillian smiled even wider, appearing more fresh and beautiful than Suella had ever remembered. "Everything's wonderful," she said. "I'm getting married! I want you to be in the wedding with me!"

"That's fantastic! Who's the lucky guy?"

"His name's Steve," she said. "He owns a gallery on the Hill." The image of her pushed off to the side while she dialed up a still of her betrothed on the screen for Suella to view. He was a man about Jillian's same age, somewhere between fifty and sixty, with a slicked-back hairstyle that Suella recognized was probably a pony tail in the back. With his wide smile and flashing eyes behind stylish glasses frames he looked like the sort of man Suella would have conjured up for her.

"He's gorgeous!" Suella exclaimed. "I'm so happy for you! Do you need me to

help pick out your dress, send out invitations, or anything like that?”

Jillian waved her hands in front of her face as if she was trying to call a time out.

“No honey, it’s not going to be that fancy.”

“But it’s your first time...”

“I know. But it’s just going to be me and him in our nice clothes, with the J.P. and a few close friends. Like you. So, can you come?”

Suella realized she was tearing up in joy for her friend. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

The same day that Nathan decided to take the Instructional League job, Suella booked her flight to Cincinnati, because Jillian was wasting no time in tying the knot. It made her wonder if either one of them was speeding up the nuptials before the other one changed their mind.

For the few days leading up to her trip, she worked more fiendishly than usual and walked over to see Natalie. At least her color in the early morning was improving. “I’m fine, mom, really I am. Maybe I was so sick that one day because of something I ate.”

“That’s just it,” Suella had said. “You’re *not* eating.” She was as slender as ever and still was not showing in the least. When she pointed that out to her daughter, Natalie said that the baby was only the size of a thimble at this point so of course she was not going to show yet.

A couple of different nights, Suella checked into Natalie’s huge archive of podcasts. She kept expecting at least one to say “I don’t understand my mother. She kept me doped up for a couple of years straight just so I would be more subservient and docile...” Mostly, she just gave her views about life and the world (which were

surprisingly vanilla). A great many of the sessions showed her playing her virtual guitar and singing rock standards from the last century with a beautiful, melodic voice. The long lists of comments contained one warm and fuzzy after another, from people all over the world.

Where had she gotten *that* talent from? It was certainly not from her: like the old saying went, she couldn't carry a tune in a wheelbarrow. Toni was creative and artistic and could sing. Maybe some of it had rubbed off during the nine months she had carried Natalie.

When Suella looked at the archives, she felt a surging sense of pride over a face she recognized from her late teens through early twenties years and how she could have mothered such a wonderful human being. Jillian was exactly right: Natalie had a soul, a very beautiful one.

By the time the day arrived for Suella's trip, she felt as if she had tied up enough loose ends with her clients that she could afford to leave them for a few days. The jet she would take was an old-time six miler, but it didn't matter. She wasn't in any great hurry to get across the country.

The problem was that most six milers seemed like flying cattle cars because it was the only form of air travel people in the lower classes could afford. She found herself in a window seat with a barrel-shaped, swarthy man with a mustache sitting beside her and a woman in a sari taking the aisle seat. It would be best, she decided, if she avoided any kind of beverages until the plane landed.

To distract herself from the sardine-like surroundings, Suella spent the flight reminiscing about Jillian. At one point, perhaps twenty years ago, she had seemed like

the stereotypical starving artist, with her shabby clothes and her tiny studio apartment. Suella never saw her out of bohemian attire or wearing any makeup back in those days. From around the time Natalie was born, however, she gradually watched Jillian blossom. While at one point she felt compelled to help her friend out by giving her a job as landlady for her condo, Jillian made it her own way.

Little by little, the woman kept painting and doing what she loved and spent her spare time networking just enough to get herself featured in some fine galleries. Art enthusiasts from around the country paid top dollar for her originals and even prints of her expressionistic landscapes fetched a pretty penny. Before long Jillian had changed her style to artsy-chic and amazed Suella with her array of hair styles featuring artistic braids and whorls. While she still kept her makeup to a minimum, her growing confidence enhanced her inner beauty.

It was only a matter of time before a man noticed her and fell in love, she'd thought for many years.

The three-and-a-half hour flight passed in a blur and Suella could hardly believe it when the pilot alerted them to fasten their seatbelts for the final approach. When they landed, she was dismayed to discover that the old fashioned plane connected with the older part of the terminal that featured annoying full-body security scans. Among the sea of faces at the gate, however, she saw her longtime friend's glowing smile.

Though Jillian had come out for Natalie's homecoming just recently, the two women behaved like close friends who hadn't seen each other in decades, cooing to each other and holding each other in a long, rocking hug. "I am so, so, so happy for you!"

Out in the airport parking lot, Jillian led them to a gleaming maroon Tesla

roadster. “Oh my god,” Suella said as they stowed her suitcases in the hatch and lowered down into the sleek vehicle “I can’t believe you.”

“Before you get too excited, it’s a rental. I decided to go all-out.”

The engine whirred to life with a satisfying purr when Jillian called out the series of commands. “Does this mean you also got a five-figure wedding gown with one of those trains a half mile long?”

Jillian laughed. “Hon, you know me better than that.”

When they crossed the river and cruised toward the city’s artistic district known as “The Hill,” she realized she would be seeing Jillian’s swank condo for the first time in three dimensions. Both she and her friend had never been chipped, and as they reached the front door, Jillian had to swipe a plastic card against the sensor to enter.

The inside of the condo looked like a cross between an art gallery and a stately museum. As they spoke their voices reverberated through the spacious condo with high ceilings and varnished, hardwood floors. “Let me give you the five cents tour,” she said, walking her through the kitchen that looked like something out of *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine. An L-shaped island with latticed and beveled cabinets had been capped by a granite countertop, and a copper hood housed the range top and sinks.

In the corner sat a flat black, conical-shaped metal fireplace with a few implements stacked beside it. She’d placed an ornate Asian rug in front of the fireplace and Suella envisioned many romantic encounters taking place there between Jillian and her soon-to-be husband. The master bedroom adjoined the den with the fireplace, where Suella saw a carved mahogany canopy bed with lush veils draped over it. The sheer opulence of it caused her mouth to drop. This was the type of bed found in high-end

stores at a price many people paid for cars.

Jillian seemed to be reading her friend's mind. "It's an antique," she said, as she guided her past it to present her with the master bathroom and sit-down, peach marble tub and fixtures. All along, she smiled smugly and shrugged her shoulders, as if all the finery were something to be expected and found in anyone's home.

They walked out of the bedroom and back into the den area again and Jillian suddenly turned to Suella and took both of her friend's hands in her own. She looked earnestly into her eyes. "There's just something that I'm dying for us to do," she said.

For an insane moment, Suella remembered the early days of their friendship and she never heard Jillian mention a boyfriend. She was alone, spent all of her time creating her art that in some occasions celebrated the female form. What was she supposed to think? Maybe she wanted them to romp on the beautiful bed together. Her heart started to pound.

Instead, Jillian surprised her. "Let's go back into the living room," she said. "I was to have a *real* tea together."

She kept an ecru, velour upholstered sectional in the living room and Suella sat on one end of it, admiring all of the hanging art on the walls and the sculptures in open-glass curio cabinets surrounding her. Soft, smooth jazz then emanated into the air through an invisible speaker system somewhere. It was just loud enough to enhance the mood. "Do you need some help in there?"

"No, I'm almost finished," Jillian called out from the kitchen. "Stay where you are and relax. You've just had a long flight."

Suella eased back and enjoyed the sexy trumpet music with the accompanying

young woman vocalist singing “The Look of Love.”

Moments later, Jillian reappeared holding a silver tray carrying a fine oriental porcelain tea set, the kind with the blue etchings that Suella used to look at longingly in antique shops when she was younger. The hostess gently set the tray atop a glass coffee table in front of the sectional where Suella sat. “This will be our version of a bachelorette party,” Jillian said as she lowered herself into the Hepplewhite chair across from her.

Suella suddenly recognized the setup: Jillian must have trained the camera from a point from just beyond where she sat, so that it would fit Jillian sitting in her favorite chair. “I like that,” she replied with a nervous lap as she reached forward to accept the delicate teacup.

For the next several minutes, the two of them silently enjoyed their tea while Suella continued to look around at the sumptuous habitat Jillian had designed for herself.

Jillian was watching her closely and had assumed a catlike pose in her chair while sipping her tea. “Something wrong?” she asked.

Suella considered sharing what had occurred to her while they stood outside of Jillian’s bedroom, but thought better of opening that kind of a Pandora’s box. “It’s nothing,” she said. “I guess I’m a little worn out from the trip, is all.”

“Suze,” she said, placing her teacup down. “You can tell me anything. We’ve known each other for a long time.”

They were like sisters, she realized, since they had known each other for such a long time and had been through so much. “It’s about a little vibe I got when we both stood outside your bedroom.”

Jillian paused for a moment, to let her friend’s remark sink in. When the

realization hit her, she began to laugh. “Oh my gosh, did you think I was trying to seduce you?”

Suella laughed along with her as she let out a breath and started to take another sip of her tea. “Well, yes!” she said. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

Jillian waved a hand playfully. “I haven’t had those kind of yearnings since I was in college, experimenting. I’m getting married in a couple of days... to a man, remember?”

Her cheekbones felt tinged with heat, which she recognized as a sign she was blushing. “It’s just that we’re such good friends and we’ve been through so much together and now there’s this supremely happy occasion and...”

She barely noticed that Jillian had set her cup down and had moved slowly closer to her. In the next moment, she leaned forward and kissed her. More than twenty years of pent-up feelings flooded to the surface.

That’s all it took.

Chapter Thirty-Five

She did get to sleep on the lavish canopy bed. After what had taken place between her and Jillian, she didn't know if she'd be able to sleep or not, but sleep like a baby, she did. At one point when she woke up, she lay there and spoke with her friend, who was also awake.

Jillian just said "Hello," in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Hi," Suella replied. While they lay there looking at each other for a few minutes, she felt compelled to add something. "I never thought we'd end up like this."

Jillian laughed playfully and sensuously. It was the kind of laugh that a satisfied female emits while basking in a sexual afterglow. "Never?" she challenged.

"No."

"Well, how do you feel?"

She let out a thick, snorting kind of laugh. "Good. Too good."

Jillian reached over to touch Suella's blond hair, pushing a few strands of it out of her face. "One can never feel too good. Hadn't you ever been with a girl before?"

Suella briefly thought about Amy, who nicknamed herself "Belle," who, while pretty, looked more like a point guard for the WNBA than the sweet, drawling little lass her name implied. She and Belle had had a bit of fun back in college. "Years ago, when I was like, nineteen or twenty. But lots of girls experimented back then. We would practice kissing with each other so that we'd know how to be good for our boyfriends."

"So did I," Jillian admitted.

They lay there silently for awhile and the reality of what they'd done occurred to her. A look of concerned must have flashed across Suella's face in the moonlight.

“Is everything okay?”

Suella shrugged, and tried to force a smile. “Well I can’t help but feel...you know...kind of guilty.”

That brought another laugh from Jillian’s lips. “Why? Because I’m getting married in a couple of days? Because we sullied the marriage bed?”

“You’re both going to live...here?” Suella pointed downward, at the bed they were sharing.

“Yes. Steve sold his condo a couple of weeks ago. He’s been staying with one of his buddies.

Suella let out a short, nervous laugh. “Now I really feel weird.”

“Honey, right now he’s probably still at his bachelor party. I made him schedule it for tonight so he’d be less likely to be hung over on Saturday. There could be some bimbo lowering herself down onto his face as we speak.”

“Wow.” She remembered back to her wedding, how everyone was so busy, with so many people flying in from all over the country, that Nathan probably hadn’t had the time for a traditional bachelor party. Of course, he and Toni may have stolen away to have some fun the way they continued after she and Nathan had taken their vows.

She wanted to say more but suddenly she felt very tired. Her eyelids felt heavy and she pulled up the sheets and comforter and nestled herself into the glorious supple bed that cradled her.

The next thing she knew, rays of sunlight sliced through the wispy curtains on the other side of the room. She was alone. Jillian had made her side of the bed, stacking decorative pillows that formed a fluffy wall when Suella turned toward it. Yet she could

hear stirring in the kitchen. How would she find her dressed when she walked in there? Suella was still naked. She dressed quickly in a nightgown and a wrap and ventured out the bedroom door toward the kitchen.

“Well hey, sleepyhead!” Jillian said with a bright smile. She wore satin shorty pajamas with matching lavender furry slippers. A couple of pots bubbled and boiled on her range top. “We’re having a traditional British breakfast,” she announced.

Suella saw oatmeal cooking and tea brewing and knew that Jillian was baking a few scones in her oven. “I hear they have beans for breakfast over there,” she said.

“Not this girl,” Jillian replied as she put on an oven mitt and retrieved an oven pan with golden scones on it, filling the kitchen with the scent of fresh breaded goodness.

Soon she was sitting at the breakfast nook sipping on her tea while biting into the soft warmth of a scone. “So you’re going to honor that wedding tradition, right? Is it that the bride’s not supposed to see the groom the day of the wedding, or the day before?”

“It’s the day *of*, silly,” she said. “But Steve has to work and take care of some last minute things today, so he’s leaving it up to us to have a girls’ day together. Especially since he had his bachelor party last night.”

Jillian had rented the roadster for a whole week. Once they finished breakfast and washed the dishes together, they dressed in their best cute casual clothes and thundered out of the condo’s parking garage in the sleek, fast car. They’d had a cool, rainy spring in the place she’d called home at one time. She was able to slide the moon roof open a short way, just enough to let the scent of fresh bloom from the hillsides in without making it too windy.

The lush greenery on the roadsides and hillsides made her remember that after

decades on the west coast, she still missed the colors of changing seasons and the healthy forest greens of the Midwestern countryside in early summer. When they tooled along an ancient, one hundred year old highway bordering the Ohio river, she laughed when she remembered the pathetic dribbles that qualified as “rivers” out west.

Throughout the morning and early afternoon, they bounced from shop to shop, store to store, and neighborhood to neighborhood. At a wine store near College Park they met Jillian’s younger sister Marjorie, who had the same, straight, no-fuss, no muss hairstyle and minimalist makeup sense as her older sister. Yet there was something endearing and charming about the way she wore her store apron and answered store patron’s questions about wine vintages. “Marjorie’s going to stand with me at the wedding tomorrow,” Jillian said, standing behind her and holding her by the shoulders as if she was displaying an expensive blouse from Sak’s.

“Jill’s told me so much about you,” Marjorie said, when she had a break from customers. “I’m so glad you could make it.”

After they left the wine store, Jillian continued to play tour guide with Suella for the rest of that afternoon. She showed her where old neighborhoods had been rehabbed and repackaged for successful young suburbanites, how old shopping malls had been imploded in favor of “town square” style shopping centers. And when they parked downtown, they also rode the people movers that had been installed on the Skywalk, to get them from one impossibly ritzy and chic shopping destination to the next. They never bought anything, instead choosing to laugh at blouses scanned at over three hundred units and costume jewelry that masqueraded as if it had been made of gold.

If her life had been a movie, Suella reflected, their whirlwind shopping tour on the

day before Jillian's wedding would have made for a fifteen minute montage scene with happy, frenetic music playing. Finally they slowed down as they rode an escalator at one of the grand old refurbished downtown department stores. "I'm hungry," Suella said.

"Me too," Jillian replied. "And we're right near one of the best Indian style eateries I know."

When they walked through the door of the place, Suella saw tapestries and a hostess wearing a flowing, floral sari, with sitar music playing and she expected that they would be led to a place to sit on the floor. However, once they passed a divider, she saw that the restaurant had traditional tables and chairs, though they had been fashioned out of bamboo fronds, the seat areas upholstered with satin fabric.

Suella had never dined in an Indian restaurant before, but no matter. Jillian translated the various menu items for her and made her recommendations. As they ate and made small talk together it occurred to her that Jillian had packed the morning and afternoon with lots of activity on purpose. It distracted her from thinking too much about what had happened the night before.

Friday afternoons were not rush time for an Indian restaurant apparently, as there was only one other table with people sitting at it: a couple in late middle-age. Though the coziness of the restaurant and their slowed-down pace favored it, Suella decided against starting a conversation about their intimacies the night before.

There was time for that later, anyway. From the word "go," Jillian had talked her out of reserving a hotel room and she had assumed she would be staying on some sort of a guest bed on her condo. After what had happened the night before, however, she would not be staying on a guest bed *that* evening. The prospect made her nervous, she realized,

even as she engaged in light-hearted social dinner conversation with Jillian. Maybe Jillian felt it, too, and that was the reason she'd purchased an expensive bottle of wine.

During the latter part of the afternoon, they still had to go to the seamstress shop for a final fitting on her wedding dress. Once again she surprised her. Suella had expected that the dress would be a white, somewhat traditional gown, though maybe not floor length. In her early, more bohemian period, she might have gladly married someone wearing a tie-dyed frock with a headpiece wreath but since she was so more successful now, she might want to celebrate it with some finery.

At the seamstress shop, the plain, Asian owner wearing pulled-back hair and a shapeless tunic, brought out a shimmering, satiny sculpted dress with padded shoulders that looked like it belonged on a screen siren from a 1940's era film noir movie. The basic color was creamy mauve but the lapels had been accented with shining silvery taupe striped edges. Jillian accepted the hanger from the shop owner and held the dress up proudly. "Isn't it great? What do you think?"

"It's beautiful," Suella replied. "But what's Steve going to wear? A bugle boy outfit?"

"No, he's going to be in just a traditional pin-striped suit," she said. "But Marjorie's going to be in a dress like this, too. We found hers at a consignment shop. She looks like a doll in it. And we're going all the way, too. Tomorrow we're getting our hair done in one of those cool styles like they had back then, you know with all the braiding and the drama."

"I'll take pictures," Suella replied.

Indian food, she learned, can be quite filling, with the rice and sauces and the

curry. As they returned to Jillian's condo with her wedding dress in tow plus several different odds and ends both of them had picked up, it was time for the evening meal. They settled on a simple salad, with organic lettuce, vegetables and herbs along with a light vinaigrette dressing.

While they sat across from each other at the same table where they had taken tea the day before, an urban drama played on Jillian's holodeck. She had the newer version, where a character could be isolated and blown-up life-sized. "Yeah the actors have to work out more and get more cosmetic surgery than ever before," Jillian reflected, as they watched a tall, granite-jawed actor raise his weapon and flit about her living room, dissolving into walls and furniture.

The day had been long, and Suella's eyelids grew heavy. "I'm tired," she announced.

Jillian had moved beside her, onto the sectional by then, close but not touching. She shrugged. "Well there's no law that says you have to watch the rest of the movie. If you want to turn in, go ahead. Make yourself at home."

Suella undressed and put on the gown and wrap, wondering if they would come off later that night. Jillian said she needed to stay up for awhile and get things set up for the next day. When she eased herself between the sheets and turned out the light, she could hear her best friend pattering about in the living room and den.

She had been tired and expected to fall asleep quickly but she couldn't. Instead, she lay on her side in the stillness so quiet she could hear gentle traffic noise on the highway far down the hill. Eventually, Jillian would join her. What then?

So wide-awake was she that it felt unnatural to close her eyes, when less than an

hour before, she was sure she was ready to lay down and start sawing some serious wood. The noises from the living room and kitchen became less and less. Suella's heart pounded as she realized she could hear Jillian walk toward the bedroom.

The door opened and she felt it was best to roll over and keep her eyes opened. In the dark she smiled at Jillian as she cracked open the door and moved gingerly across the room to the master bath. Suella could hear the sounds of slacks whooshing off and a blouse coming up over her head. She hoped against hope that Jillian wouldn't put her on the spot by coming out naked.

When the master bathroom door opened, it splashed light inside the bedroom and silhouetted Jillian, who was wearing a long t-shirt meant for slumbering. Suella lay there and watched her, with her eyes wide open. Jillian took languid strides toward the bed, gazing down at her. She crawled on top and leaned over to kiss her on the lips, quickly but somehow sensually. "Good night, Susie Q," she said. "See you in the morning."

Jillian eased down next to her and rolled over onto her side, to sleep. Suella let every muscle in her body relax. She realized that she'd been wound up more tightly than a swiss watch spring. Her best friend was close enough that she could feel the warmth of her body emanating from between the sheets, though, and this had the effect of calming her down. Within a few minutes the sounds of their breathing synchronized and acted as a lullaby for her. She drifted off smoothly to sleep.

The next thing she knew, morning came, with the familiar rays of sun slicing through the windows. Suella felt surprised that Jillian still lay in the bed beside her, with her eyes closed. While she had assumed that her best friend was sleeping, Jillian's eyes opened after Suella had been watching her for a few moments. "Well hey there," she

said, her voice still thick with sleep. “Are you ready?”

Suella smirked inside. “The question of the day is, are *you* ready?”

She had assumed that they would have another nice, English style breakfast as they’d had the day before, but Jillian had other ideas. “Wear your cute frilly blouse and those skinny jeans,” she said. “We’re going to have some fun.” They started at an Italian restaurant on the hill, with waiters wearing white shirts and ties and white linen on the tables. The cappuccino Suella ordered arrived with cinnamon peppered onto the saucer and her stuffed French toast was sinfully decadent. Jillian ate a light fruit plate and a scone with her tea; she had a wedding dress to fit into later.

“So where are we going now?” Suella said as they both lowered down into the Tesla roadster.

“It’s a secret,” Jillian said, her nose crinkling. “My little gift to you for helping me with my wedding.”

They drove along the same ancient highway with the lush greenery dangling over it, until she turned left and drove over an old-style concrete bridge with ornate archways. Suella remembered the neighborhood they were entering, with its rehabbed row house buildings, a jazz club, another art gallery and a mellow vibe: O’Byronville. She parked the car around the back of a building, in a lot adjoining a beauty salon.

When they entered through the back, the noise of women laughing assaulted them as stylists washed peoples hair in the wash bins or spun them around on chairs to cut and style their hair. Saturday mornings at beauty salons were always crazy, Suella remembered, which was why she always set her hair appointments for Wednesdays or Thursdays or other slow times.

Jillian checked in at the desk up front, where a pleasantly matronly woman with salt and pepper hair gushed and sighed and opened her arms for a hug from her.

“Congratulations! Your day is here at last! We’re going to make you look so good!”

“Sylvia this is my friend I told you about, Suella,” Jillian said, turning aside to introduce her.

Suella extended her hand for a handshake, but Sylvia opened her arms and rose up to hug her the same way she had hugged Jillian. “Welcome!” she sang. “Jillie has told us so much about you.”

Jillian groaned and let her eyes roll. “Oh gawd, I hate that nickname!”

Sylvia ignored her and got down to the business at hand. “So Beth’s going to be ready for you, and we’re going to have to new girl, Toni, do Suella. How does that sound?”

Suella was confused. She’d assumed she would sit and watch their screen or read through a few e-zines while Jillian was primped and pampered. Before she could say anything, Jillian patted her on the wrist. “It’s my treat. They’re going to do hair, makeup and a manicure for you, too.”

“How nice,” Suella replied, and in the next moment a small, pixiesh girl with spiky hair tinged with lavender die met her at the counter.

She was a talkative little thing, going on and on about how she had cousins in San Diego while she shampooed Suella’s hair and massaged her scalp. Suella told her about the beach house. “Oh I hate you,” Toni said, while she applied conditioner and massaged it in. “I love the beach. Cincinnati would be a great place to live if there was a beach nearby and it didn’t get so unking cold in January and February.”

Toni couldn't have been much older than Natalie, Suella reasoned, and it was only a matter of time before she uttered a word that made no sense. Maybe *unking* was a new synonym for "freaking."

Once she sat in the stylist chair, amid rows of other chairs with other women in various stages of beauty treatments, Toni turned her toward the mirror and lowered herself down. She must have wanted to be on her same level when she said "So, what do we want to do today?"

In her mind, Suella ran through the cornucopia of images of hairstyles she'd worn over the years. She knew she wanted to avoid a forties hairstyle like Jillian was getting. There were so many stylists, so many chairs, and so much commotion that Jillian and her stylist conversed at the other side of the large room and Suella could barely see her. "I usually get a layered cut, and she flips the ends up nicely. You're the stylist, you could probably guess that, right?"

"Wow, such a deliberate thinker!" Toni's fingers alighted on random strands of Suella's wet hair like butterflies while she examined it. "What do you do for work?"

"I'm a system security consultant," she replied.

Toni giggled. "I would have said lawyer. There's one lady I work on who is a lawyer. When I ask her a question I can see those little itty bitty wheels turn in there. Just like you!" She reached for her gleaming shears.

"Listen, I know it's on Jillian's dime, but I'm not looking for a major makeover today. Please don't cut too much. Just a little trim on the ends, clean it up, you know."

Toni froze and gazed at her, with her lips parting to form an amused smile. "On Jillian's dime...on Jillian's dime...my grandmother says that!"

Lovely, Suella thought. Just to be sure, she kept her eyes locked on Toni as she swept locks of her hair between her fingers and snipped at them. She was ready to pounce if the girl grabbed more than an inch to slice at. After awhile she relaxed and even laughed a little as she heard two women in nearby chairs talk about the fiasco of a prom night for one of their daughters. Wistfully, she realized that Natalie had been denied the simple pleasures of youth like that, and sporting events, and house parties.

“All done!” Toni announced as she stepped away for a moment.

Suella looked around at the plastic robe and the floor and saw one-inch bits of her blond hair lying there. She nodded in approval.

Toni reached for the blow dryer and the large bore brushes as she began to roll Suella’s hair and dry it at the same time. She had to steady herself in the chair and hold onto the armrests to keep her head from lifting; wow, the girl was strong, she thought. Halfway through she spritzed some thick spray and followed it up with a powdery substance. “It’s good stuff,” she said. “It gives really good volume.”

By the end, Suella looked into the mirror and saw a nice feathering to her hair along the sides, a poof bump to her crown and nice flips at the smoothed edges. Toni had done as good a job as stylists she’d visited in L.A. who’d worked on her for years. “That’s great,” she said. “Now are you going to do the makeup, too?” Hair was one thing, but she wanted to avoid a heavily dramatic, “gothic” look.

“Oh no,” Toni said, waving a hand dismissively. “Kaitlyn does all that. I can’t draw a straight line.”

Suella went in for makeup first, since Jillian’s hairstyle was much more delicate and complex and her stylist Beth was still braiding side sections of her hair. The makeup

stylist Kaitlyn wore her hair back and looked more like a bohemian artist like Jillian than a professional in the beauty business. In her little cubicle, she wielded a sturdy silver box with interlocking palettes springing up out of it. “It’s nice to meet you Mrs. Worthy,” she said. “You definitely have beautiful skin. Do you have any concerns I need to be aware of?”

Suella suddenly felt as if she were speaking with a doctor instead of a makeup artist. “No, I’ve been lucky that way. I just dislike heavy foundations. They make me feel as if my face is dirty.”

“Not a problem. Now I understand you’re going to a wedding? Do you have a makeup style that you like?”

Suella had always gotten by well on muted pastel shadows and crisp liner to go with her carefully arched eyebrows, and she told Kaitlyn.

“That’s fine,” the woman said, reassuringly. “I know exactly what to do.”

Oddly, Kaitlyn’s little corner of the salon featured walls with calendars and art on them instead of a big mirror. She kept several hand mirrors, though. For several minutes she daubed and dabbed on Suella’s face and presented a lip gloss shade that seemed several tones removed from what she ordinarily liked, but she gave in. When she was done, Kaitlyn smiled and passed Suella one of the hand mirrors. Staring back at her was a reflection of herself that, along with the fresh hairstyle, made her look several years younger and somehow *icier*. Maybe it was the frosted lip gloss.

“I like it,” she said.

By the time Jillian finished and they both looked at themselves in the mirror, Suella said “Wow Jill, you’re beautiful! Steve’s going to be thrilled.”

“So are you,” Jillian replied.

When she put on the wedding dress, Suella realized, her friend was going to look like an ultra glamorous 1940’s era torch singer.

They immediately whisked back to her condo for the dress and from there they could almost walk to the gallery where the wedding would take place. Jillian’s mother and father arrived at the condo just after they did, and Suella met them for the first time. Her mother was small and delicate, with hands that moved a lot and garishly dyed hair that did not. Her father had been a machinist who’d been forced to retire after the Fiscal Cliff. He wore a suit that he struggled with but the both of them stood awestruck when they saw their daughter in their wedding dress. Her mother clapped her hands together and rejoiced “I’ve been dreaming about this day since you were a little girl!”

“Who’s hot rod is that, parked in the garage?” her father wanted to know. He turned to Suella and asked “Is it yours?”

Suella laughed. “No, it’s not.”

Jillian intervened. “I rented the car for a week, daddy.”

Her father said “Vroom, vroom. It’s going to look funny with shoes tied to it and covered with confetti.”

Everyone laughed. They all knew it was not going to be *that* kind of a wedding.

It was the most unusual wedding Suella had ever seen, but then it fit right in with Jillian, who was content to march to the beat of her own drummer. She helped her slip into the wedding dress, since it fit snugly and closed at the neckline with a couple of hook and eye closures. Suella simply wore her floral, fitted bodice dress, with the pleated skirt that had gotten her many compliments through the years.

When the time came for them to go up the hill for the ceremony, the condo rang with several clashing, arguing voices. "It's so close, just right at the other side of the hill and it's such a nice day," Jillian had said. "Why don't we all just walk there?"

Her father cut in with "Oh no, no, no. The weatherman said there might be showers later. Do you want that slick looking dress to get rained on and your hair mussed up?"

Jillian's mother followed with "He's right, dear. For a bride to walk to the church or wherever the wedding ceremony's being performed, well that's just not right."

"Okay then," Jillian said. "You all can follow us in the roadster."

Suella had been to the gallery many times, back when she'd lived in the neighborhood. The art in there was fine; she'd spent many a day getting absorbed in some of the landscapes and the impressionistic city scenes. Yet she'd always found the stark white walls and bright light inside made for a sterile air in the building. It still made a good choice for a place where Jillian would get married, since she was in her element around various types of art.

Jillian carried a bouquet and her father opened the door for her. Suella noticed a small crowd gathered near one of the exhibits. She recognized Steve from pictures Jillian had shown her. In person he looked like a smiling, teddy bear kind of guy who would have looked at home in a country and western bar. "Darling," he said when he saw Jillian, his eyes lighting up as he leaned forward to hug her delicately.

A small, thin man with hair pressed into place, wearing wire rim glasses and smiling with a weak, receding chin stood among them. He wore a white tie, which seemed strange to Suella until she realized that he must be the Justice of the Peace.

For about a half hour the wedding reminded Suella of a cocktail hour as everyone went around introducing themselves. She met a man who looked just like Steve except beefier and he wore the same type of pin-striped suit. It was his brother Scott. He smiled warmly for Suella, who politely conversed with him, taking care to flash her wedding ring and drop Nathan's name into the conversation at certain points.

Jillian was right: it was a small wedding, with not more than thirty people gathered in the center of the art gallery. There was no wedding march or even music in the gallery. When she'd asked about that years ago, the gallery owner said that music would detract from the experience of the art on display.

"Okay, everyone," Steve said, standing on tiptoe to make sure his voice carried and everyone could hear him. "Mr. J.P. says it's time to start."

The family members and friends all formed a circle around the justice of the peace and the four people in the wedding party: Steve, Jillian, Scott, and Marjorie. When the Justice started to read the preliminaries from a book, Suella noticed that people still milled about in the gallery, eying them with curiosity.

It was over in a flash, as all Justice of the Peace weddings usually were. At the other end of the scale, Suella remembered attending catholic weddings for various baseball players and their wives. Those seemed to go on forever, with the sitting, standing, and kneeling, and the communion procession.

Newlywed Steve and Jillian simply stood, in an impromptu receiving line, while all of the parents and the smattering of friends attending all passed through a line to give them their congratulations. When that part of the proceedings ended, Suella realized that she didn't even know where the reception was being held. "Oh, we're just having dinner

at the Westin downtown,” Jillian said. She and Steve were going to stay there tonight, and leave the next morning for their honeymoon.

After the nice dinner, and more socializing, Jillian’s parents offered to bring Suella back to Jillian’s condo. The next morning Jillian and Steve would ride the roadster to the airport, where she would turn it in. That left Suella alone in the large condo with the high ceilings, to reflect on what had happened over the past few days. It was an eye-opener, to be sure.

Her flight would leave early the next afternoon, but Suella went to bed early, sleeping on the sectional, and the next morning she used a cab and the train to arrive at the airport a couple of hours early.

She was anxious to get back to see Natalie.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Three Months Later

Usually around Labor Day, Suella was completely tired of the hot weather and wanted to take a cruise to Alaska. She'd never made it, though, because she couldn't during Nathan's playing days and after he retired, something else always came up. This year, Natalie was just entering her second trimester.

In her walk of life, she rarely got to follow someone else's pregnancy. When she used to pal around with the other baseball wives in the seats or in the clubhouses, she would get to see other women carrying babies. Months and weeks would go by and the changes would always gradually materialize. They would usually talk about their sore backs or their early morning barf sessions and the endless cravings.

The last time she closely followed someone else's pregnancy was when Toni had carried Natalie nearly nineteen years ago. At least she didn't need to worry about whether Natalie was drinking or hanging around people who smoked. What she *did* have to worry about were the devastating effects of pregnancy on Natalie's frail, rapidly-aging body.

Once Suella had returned from Jillian's wedding, among the first things she did was to ride with Natalie to one of her OB appointments. Suella always sat with her in the examination rooms. Sometimes nurses would raise an eyebrow or she would catch them out of the corner of her eye flashing her a disapproving look, but she did not care.

The doctor would come in, take vitals and check images of the baby, who in the early weeks, looked like snail swimming around on the screen. "Everything's moving along fine," she would always say.

Sometimes the numbers frightened Suella. She knew that one hundred fifty over ninety was a high blood pressure reading, especially for someone as young as Natalie. “There might be some *white coat syndrome* going on,” the doctor said, on one visit. “Let’s wait a few minutes and take another reading.” Later, the reading would come out one hundred thirty over eighty-five, which was still borderline, but much better. “True to form, the doctor would always say “Natalie is doing just fine.”

Suella called Dr. Allende onscreen not long after that. “Did you tell that woman about Natalie’s medical status?” she asked her.

Dr. Allende, who was uncharacteristically scrubbed down that day, with her hair tied back efficiently, replied “Of course.”

“Well, she doesn’t act like it! They focus on the baby, not Natalie.” She told the doctor about Natalie’s high blood pressure readings and what seemed to her like a low body temperature.

“A high reading here or there is not cause for concern,” Dr. Allende said. “but if it starts a trend, then that’s when we usually do something.”

“If we only see the OB every couple of weeks, how are we going to know if it’s a trend?”

The doctor shrugged. For a moment she looked like an indifferent teenager instead of a medical professional in her late forties. “The one way to be sure is to get a vitals kit,” she said.

They were not cheap, Suella knew, but the next chance she got, she purchased one and it arrived via express delivery a couple of days later. The ultra deluxe one she’d chosen contained probes not just for blood pressure, heart rate and body temperature, it

also came with a blood sugar monitor and hemocult scan. When she flashed open the directions chip a whole glossary and index confronted her, causing her to say “Whoa!” Yet she still read most of it. She wanted to do what was best for her little girl.

She’d set out the items on the living room coffee table in order to learn about how to use them. Nathan passed by on his way to the kitchen to make himself a sandwich. He gazed at the odd looking gadgets quizzically. “What’s all that shit?”

“It’s a vitals kit. I’m going to use it whenever I go see Natalie. So we can keep track of how she’s doing.”

“Oh.” He nodded, then cocked his forehead to the side as if something had suddenly occurred to him. “Oh yeah. She said she’s getting tired of you just dropping on over there.”

The news hit Suella like a slap across the face. Instinctively, she started to raise up from her seat on the couch. “What?”

“Calm down, calm down. It’s not that she doesn’t want you to come over. It’s just that she wishes you would call first. In case she’s—you know—in the middle of something else.”

The next day, Suella called Natalie before she planned to come over. “I was re-knocking everything but I’m just about done.”

“Re-*knocking* everything?”

“Yeah. You know, vacuuming up crumbs, putting stuff away...”

“Oh.”

When she arrived at the apartment, she found Natalie in a casual top that barely covered her middle, along with lounging pants. “What, are you advertising now? Are

you going to mark a giant “P” down there?”

“Well it’s just for around the house,” Natalie said.

A thought occurred to Suella: since the truth was nearly “out there” already, she’d only need to lift the curtain a little bit more to see the performance. “Let’s see if you’re showing yet,” she said, gently reaching down to lift the hem of her shirt.

“Mom!”

“Hold still so I can see!”

Natalie sighed and stood there, shifting from foot to foot while Suella examined her exposed abdomen. “Are you sucking your stomach in?”

“No! Why would I do that?”

“To placate me.” As she ran her eyes over her daughter’s belly she saw just a general roundness, the same type of thing she might see if Natalie had gone to an all-you-can-eat buffet. “You’re hardly showing at all.”

“I’ve gained five pounds, mostly water, and the baby’s the size of a mouse now.”

She guided her over to the daybed couch so they could sit. “But how do you feel?”

She shrugged, letting out another sigh. “Fine, mostly I guess. I just wish there was some kind of pill I could take to make all of this go quicker.”

Suella paused, gazed at her daughter and raised her finger to make a point. “If there was, I don’t think you’d want to take it,” she said, reaching into her purse for the vitals kit.

“Oh gawd, you didn’t. Tell me you didn’t,” Natalie said, looking at the gadget filled box with dread.

“Honey, it’s for the best,” Suella tried to say soothingly, patting her daughter’s arm. “Now if you quit fussing and just relax it’ll be like nothing at all.” Swiftly, she swiped the temperature patch over Natalie’s forehead as she groaned and rolled her eyes. Next came the pressure probe, which looked like an old-fashioned clothespin, and the blood sugar monitor, which looked like a thimble. All of the objects synched up to a data pad, so Suella didn’t even have to write anything down.

“Now you’re probably gonna want to do this every day,” Natalie said.

“Well, it’s because I love you, honey,” she said, watching the data materialize. “I want to make sure everything goes okay.”

“I know,” Natalie murmured.

Suella announced the readings: “That’s 99.1 on the temp, 127 over 72 on the BP, and 189 on the sugar. Very good.”

Natalie brightened visibly when she received the good news. “Dr. Allende would be so proud of me,” she said.

Suella nodded agreement as she tidily packed away the little gadgets into their little box and sequestered it into her purse. Once everything was all tucked away, she leaned over and held out her arms for Natalie, who leaned forward and gave herself to her, closing her eyes and smiling contentedly. Despite herself, Suella began to gently rock Natalie back and forth, cooing to her in whispers, the way she did when she was an infant. For a while she thought her daughter would pull away and say “Mom, don’t be so stupid,” but she melded with her instead.

For the time she had lost with Natalie, and the closeness this provided that caused time to stand still, she could have stayed that way for hours. Eventually, though, she

lifted her head above Suella's shoulder, looked at her, and smiled. "Mom, I just want to know one thing," she said.

Suella was waiting for her to tell her what the "one thing" was, but she sat there silently, with a look of anticipation in her eyes. It dawned on her that she was waiting for a response before she went on, so Suella gave her one. "What is it?"

"Are you mad at me, because of what happened?" She squinted momentarily, as if waiting for the answer could bring about intense physical pain.

From where Suella sat, though, it could do anything but that. "No honey," she said, gathering her into her arms for another quick embrace. "What happened was beautiful. It's so extraordinary we have to keep it to ourselves. And your baby is so lucky. She's going to have a mother and father and grandparents who love her."

Natalie squinted. "What makes you so sure it's going to be a 'she?'"

"I just know," Suella replied.

The depth of her daughter's heart astounded her. From what she had put her through all of her life, Natalie had every reason in the world to hate her. Yet here she still was, welcoming her mother's affection, and showing concern about the possibility of disappointing her. Having a daughter was the greatest thing she had ever accomplished in life, she was sure of this.

For the rest of that morning, she watched Natalie record a few sessions for her network fans. Once again she brought out the mysterious and wonderful virtual guitar. "This time I want to make sure I've got the record and light levels right," she said. "It sounded weird and I looked washed out last time." They'd moved into a corner of the apartment set aside for showtime purposes.

A lamp with a silver photographer's shade bathed the area in warm light. While a tripod on a long metal stalk suspended it above Natalie's chair, Suella couldn't see any extension cord. "It's a Tesla bulb," she explained, handing her mother a round disc that looked like an old-fashioned contact lens case. "You turn that wheel to get the light to go brighter or dimmer." Suella tried it and watched the light intensify, then diminish as she worked the wheel.

With Suella here today, Natalie explained, she could use her to work the camera, instead of placing it on a tripod and selecting autoplay. When all the lighting levels and sound levels were to Natalie's liking, she positioned her arms and accepted the virtual guitar into them and began to sing another old song Suella recognized. As she watched her through the viewfinder, her heart melted. Where had Natalie gotten this talent? No one in her immediate family sang, danced, played a musical instrument or did anything even remotely creative.

As she sang, Natalie often faced the camera to address whoever would be viewing the screen. She smiled at them a lot, as if they had been an invited guest and she liked them very much and wanted to please them. Then Suella remembered that since she was working the camera, Natalie was playing directly to her. This song she was singing was a direct form of a love letter, to her.

Other instruments accompanied Natalie: Suella could hear drums, a keyboard and a type of horn she could not at first place. Just three little pieces of plastic could summon up Natalie's light guitar and an entire band.

As soon as she finished, Natalie wanted to watch what she called the "Rough mix." Her screen, which was a projectible, beamed her image against the living room

wall just moments later. Her voice, her guitar playing, and all of the instruments filled the apartment at a louder volume than what she'd played minutes before. Out of the corner of her eye, Suella could see her daughter blush. "Are you embarrassed?" she asked. "You're beautiful, honey!"

"I know," Natalie replied, the pinkish tinge of her cheekbones deepening. "It's always a little of a shock to my system to see myself onscreen at first." She worked a control and sped through much of the recording, nodding as her singing and smiling finished. "That's a keeper," she murmured.

Suella was amazed. "You must practice a lot," she said, "in order to be able to play a song in just one shot like that and look really good doing it."

She nodded. "David and I practice a lot. He helps me, and I help him with his studying sometimes, quiz him on some things from the sections." As she put away the small objects that comprised her entire "band" she looked all around the apartment with wide eyes, as if she were seeing it for the first time and sizing it up.

"What's wrong?" Suella asked.

Natalie grinned, looking at her out of mischievous eyes. "Hey mom, how would you like to be in one with me?"

"What? Point the camera at us, hit play and just smile and wave at everybody?"

Natalie nodded excitedly, resting her hand on Suella's wrist, to reassure her.

"Yes! People would love it!"

"I don't know. My hair isn't behaving right today."

"It looks fine, mom. And we can always pixel brush or stipple before we send it out there."

Her daughter was so excited for the idea that Suella didn't want to burst her bubble. "Okay," she said. "Why not."

Quickly, Natalie set up the lens and the Tesla lamp to point them at a spot on the daybed couch where they would sit. "Let me fix my face a little and touch up my hair before you turn that thing on," Suella said.

When she entered her daughter's bathroom, she felt an upwelling of pride over how clean and fastidious she was. All of the countertop surfaces and the floor sparkled, and the medicine cabinet with mirror looked as though it had just been unpacked, the cellophane peeled off the glass. Apparently her daughter was a disciplined and sensible creature but getting her there may have had a dark side. The school where she lived must have kept cameras and gave their wards feedback about their housekeeping skills from time to time.

Suella rearranged a few locks of her hair and pushed back her eyebrows with the nail of her pinkie finger. Once she was satisfied with the way her sun-kissed blond hair and makeup look, she gazed at her reflection and mouthed the words "You look good."

By the time she returned to the living room, Natalie was waiting for her. "Are you ready? Sit down." She patted the spot on the daybed beside her.

Suella positioned herself close to Natalie and adjusted her shoulders and hips until she felt the most comfortable. "Go ahead," she said. "Do whatever you have to do."

"It's all going to be head-top," Natalie said. "A little red light will flash on the lens to let you know."

"Head-top? What the eff is that?"

Natalie sighed and smiled wryly. "It means without a script or a plan."

“Oh! You mean *ad lib*.”

“Yeah. Whatever.” Natalie pressed a button on a small clicker that reminded Suella of the tiny remote teachers used to press to switch slides during an audio-visual presentation when she was in school. “We’re going to go on three. One, two three!”

The tiny red pinpoint near the lens flashed on.

“Hi everyone,” Natalie said with a breezy, cheerful delivery like a television weathergirl. “I have someone special to help me out with my posts today. This is my mother, Suella Worthy. Say ‘Hi’ to everyone, mom!”

Suella waved for the camera and pointed her thumb at Natalie. “She made me do it. I wanted to do the dishes and straighten up.”

“Now remember,” Natalie went on. “There’s a really big reason why we look *so* much alike. But isn’t she beautiful?” Unexpectedly, Natalie reached up and grasped Suella’s chin between her index finger and thumb. “Just look at this perfect face, hardly any lines or wrinkles. This is what I get to look like in thirty-eight years.”

Suella let out a short, nervous laugh and felt her temples heat up. She wondered how much of her blush would show for the cameras. “Aw, she’s so kind.”

After a minute or so of patter between the two of them, she turned off the lens and put it away, along with the Tesla bulb. It was getting close to lunch, so the two of them inspected Natalie’s cabinets and refrigerator, to see what they could make. “And David’s coming home for lunch, too,” she said. “We have to make enough for him.”

Looking through Natalie’s refrigerator and cabinet was like perusing the aisles at a natural food store. Suella found wheatgrass paste and a whole garden harvest of colorful vegetables to go with several different variations of texturized protein products.

“Do you eat any meat at all?” she asked, reaching for soft matzos and hummus spread.

Natalie shook her head and her nose crinkled, as if she found the very idea repugnant. “No.”

“Nothing? Not even chicken or fish?”

“Sort of.” She smiled smugly.

“What do you mean *sort of*? You either do, or you don’t.”

She reached onto a refrigerator rack and pulled out a small, square container.

“Look inside here and tell me if that doesn’t look like chicken.”

Suella did as she was told and saw a few white, stringy planks. “Ok, it looks exactly like chicken. But what is it, really?”

“Texturized protein made from seaweed.”

“I’ll be darned.”

They worked together to make a spread for lunch while they discussed Natalie’s decision to excise all animal products from her diet. “Didn’t you notice that I just had a coke when we stopped off to get chilidogs on the way back?”

“I just thought you weren’t in the mood for one. Is this a *save the animals* kind of thing? They used to treat the cows and pigs terribly, but I don’t know about now...”

Natalie put the faux chicken container away. “No, it’s just that I can’t even remember the last time I was able to digest meat.” She paused for a moment to gaze ahead and reflect. “Oh yes, I do know. It was a holiday meal at school a couple of years ago. They were serving steak and I got so violently ill that I thought I was going to start harfing up internal organs.”

Suella nearly dropped the mustard knife she was holding. “Natalie! Why didn’t

you tell me?”

Her eyes widened for a moment, surprised by her mother’s reaction, but she quickly toned herself down back to casual. “Well I wasn’t eating much meat anyway. It was probably a shock to my system and my body revolted on me for it. I decided it was nothing to worry you about.”

Suella couldn’t believe that her daughter was so casual about the whole thing, setting out plates and napkins as if they were discussing the weather. “But that’s a major change,” she said. “Shouldn’t we have told Dr. Allende about that?”

Natalie froze and her shoulders stiffened. She exhaled with enough force to ruffle the ends of her hair. “Mom, that’s your answer for everything! Those people already know too much about me. I don’t even think I can fart without someone taking note of it somewhere.” She turned away and started walking toward the other room.

“But we want you to be healthy as possible and live as long as possible. Don’t you see?”

She was about to respond when suddenly a series of tones twinkled in the air. A moment later the apartment front door swished open and David appeared. Natalie’s features instantly softened and her shoulders relaxed. She cooed a greeting to him and floated across the floor to hug and kiss him.

Suella watched them from behind. David looked down at her sheepishly, as if she’d walked in on them naked and in the middle of an act. “Hello Mrs. Worthy,” he said. “It’s so nice to see you.”

They had set out plates on the countertop to put matzo wraps together but it suddenly dawned on Suella that they had nowhere to sit and eat, unless they all wanted to

stand while eating lunch. David extracted what at first looked like a board from the main closet. Quickly, she realized that it was one of those telescoping-leg tables she'd heard about. He unfolded it once and the legs sprouted downward, then he placed the table in front of the daybed couch. Suella and Natalie would sit there while David rolled a task chair in from the bedroom.

At first they discussed the goings-on at David's school. He spoke about a professor for one of his courses, who'd come from the Middle East and lectured with a staccato accent that made him struggle to understand him. Between bursts of his conversation, he chomped down on the matzo wraps lustfully and greedily, though at least he had the good manners to keep his mouth closed while he chewed.

Suella studied David while the three of them conversed. It was the old familiar saw: Natalie had come from her, hadn't she? And wouldn't that mean that she would have the same tastes, the same personal style? Would she have fallen in love with David? He spoke with a smooth, confident style, fluttering his hands gracefully to help drive home his points. His dark, soulful eyes and clear tanned skin caused a twinge in her that she recognized as a hormonal physical attraction.

So yes, she could imagine herself falling in love with David.

Natalie made tea in one of those kettles that heated the water chemically through some type of reaction hidden within the double walled vessel. Moments after the whistle she brought steaming cups of aloe-mint blend tea for them to enjoy at the end of their meal. Now, when they were all comfortable and full would be the best time to bring up one of her current concerns. She said "Say, have you kids thought about getting married?"

David and Natalie stopped drinking, looked at each other and put down their cups. She said “Mom, we want to stay together because we love each other, and not just because some piece of paper from the state of California says we should.”

Suella laughed nervously in response. “Well, there’s more to it than that, honey. It’s a neat way for you to proclaim your love for each other to the world. Besides, like it or not, the institution of marriage carries with it some good tax benefits. Especially if you’ve got a little one coming.”

David looked down, suddenly looking ashamed. “My mom and dad say that I should wait until my training finishes.”

Which, Suella knew, was at least two years down the road. She leaned forward to them and measured her words carefully before continuing. “Your baby deserves to know that her mother and father have made the ultimate commitment to each other.”

For a moment, both David and Natalie looked back at her with pained concern coming from their eyes. In the next instant, Natalie picked up her teacup and changed the subject to baby gear shopping.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Christmas 2034

During the holiday season, Suella loved to watch as many different versions of *A Christmas Carol* as she could find. There were some with singing, some with puppets, ancient ones with scratchy black-and-white images, and even one that took place in America during the Great Depression of the 1930's.

She liked to fantasize about what images she would see if the ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future appeared to *her* one evening, whether it was Christmas Eve or not. What she remembered the most from her very first Christmasses was the snow. It always made for a good atmosphere, and when Christmas Carolers would show up at their family's front door wearing hats, mittens, and scarves, singing *Joy to the World* with steam emitting from their breath, it didn't get any better than that.

There was the tree. Her father always wanted to get the biggest, fluffiest tree he could find in their neighborhood. One year he wanted to go to the country and cut down his own Christmas tree but all Suella could remember was how her mother whined and complained about the trip, coming and going.

There were the gifts. When she was about five years old, she wanted a Cabbage Patch doll more than anything, even though they were ugly. Under the tree that year, she found Rania Peggy, who was unwrapped and waiting for her atop her pile of presents. From Rania, she graduated on to Barbies and every Christmas the living room would fill with Barbie houses, Winnebagoes, horse ranches, and swank swimming pools for her and her older sister to play with. Her two brothers would always get new sports gear like hockey sticks, skates, skateboards and snowboards.

One year that it was a green Christmas, her two brothers staged a snowball fight anyway, with wadded up pieces of wrapping paper. Though Suella and her sister wanted no part of the battle, their brothers included them in it anyway, pelting them with random throws of “gift wrap” balls. When she tried to run from the room, one of the wrap balls sliced upward and smacked her full on in her eye.

A searing pain like a hot poker caused her to scream out, while warm fluid flowed from her eye. She was bleeding! Her mother hysterically grabbed her around the waist and carried her out to the family station wagon. Her father stayed behind and screamed at her two brothers, and as the door shut behind them, Suella could hear the slapping sound of the back of her father’s hand against her brother’s face.

Suella felt embarrassed because she still wore her pink footie pajamas as her mother rocked her back and forth, holding a bloody towel against her eye.

Somehow her father found the gift wrap ball that had hit Suella in the face. It contained a nut that had fallen onto the floor, off a bicycle that had been put together the night before. The nut had nicked Suella’s cornea, but by the time they had all arrived at the emergency room (which she remembered was surprisingly empty of patients but surprisingly full of nurses) her bleeding had stopped.

Suella’s eye healed completely by the spring and as far as she knew, the incident had spared her sight.

A few Christmasses later, she suffered through a bunch of gloat sessions from her older sister. Not only had her period started, but at sixteen she was allowed to wear makeup and had even gone out on a chaperoned date. “You better go back to getting dolls for Christmas,” she said, “because that’s the only baby you’re ever going to hold.”

Eventually, Suella received her period but to this day she could still hear her older sister's taunts.

Later, she went away to college for four years and during the first two years, she'd stayed in the dorms. Dorm life brought its own unique spin on the holidays, as the girls in the high-rise building where she lived tried to out-do each other with window and door decorations. At the cafeteria, they'd even produced a holiday dinner with steak and egg nog and Christmas paper tablecloths over the long tables. All the lights had been turned down and candle centerpieces filled the ordinarily institutional hall with warm light.

An old boyfriend took her to Aspen one Christmas, but since she was afraid of heights back then, she could only ski on the bunny slope.

Of course, there were the early Christmasses with just her and Nathan, when they were first married. She remembered long, leisurely dinners and long, romantic nights by the fire with wine. Many of her old friends had married men who worked traditional jobs in the business world but during the holidays, Nathan was on vacation and could take her on fun shopping trips and jaunts to Santa Claus villages.

From there she remembered the first few Christmasses with Natalie the most. The joy on her face when she unwrapped a present she'd hoped for could take her through the whole rest of the year. There was a noisy family reunion where poor little Natalie must have felt crowded out by her much older, bigger (and louder) cousins.

For Christmas present, she and Nathan were spending quiet days and evenings at home while bots delivered presents nearly every day, either the ones they'd ordered or the gifts family had sent from other parts of the country. Christmas shopping had become way less hectic since they'd abolished Black Friday sales ten years earlier, but she was

still grateful that it had been years since she'd set foot in a big box or any other kind of brick and mortar store.

And Natalie was over six months along, and definitely showing. Nathan said she looked like a tall, thin girl who had swallowed a basketball. "She's going through a hard time," Suella warned him. "If I hear you say 'How's the basketball doing?'" when she comes over, I'm going to smack you one!"

Of course, Natalie rarely had any energy for short trips outside her apartment. Suella's business usually declined over the holidays since she did so little work with retail any more. She was glad for the opportunity to go to Natalie's apartment nearly every day and check on her health, her color, and keep her company.

Every day she brought the vitals kit and used it. That particular morning was good: "BP one-thirty over seventy-three, temp 99.5, and BS 179."

Natalie, who'd taken to gnawing on ginger root said "I wish I felt better."

Suella looked down and couldn't help but notice that Natalie seemed too thin for someone six month's pregnant, hence her husband's "basketball" comment. "Christmas present" for her would definitely show Natalie on the couch, resting because she felt so tired from the ravages of the pregnancy on her body. There was also the gaudy, mismatched light show that Nathan insisted on putting up on the rooftop, year after year.

For Christmas Eve, she would throw a little party at the house for her, Nathan, Natalie, and David. She would invite David's parents, but she wasn't entirely sure whether they observed Christmas or not. The past ten years had brought an explosion in delivery bots, so no movie showing "Christmas Present" could be without them, as they were sometimes decorated in wreaths and garlands.

While she thought about that she looked out the window and saw little children from Natalie's neighborhood bouncing a rubber ball against a delivery bot as it motored past. She shook her head. "Kids are way too adventurous with those things," she said. "One of these days one of them is going to have a system failure and run over one of the little daredevils." She was referring to the way older kids played chicken by laying down in the path of an oncoming bot, trusting that the machine would come to a dead stop when it recognized body heat and a beating heart.

But what of "Christmas yet to come?" Every molecule of her body wanted to relish images of her and Nathan graying and slowed down enjoying a living room with a radiant Natalie and one, possibly two children enjoying the toys and presents that Santa had brought for them.

Yet the images seemed muddied or watered down. Was it because the big one had finally hit and made the whole state of California slide into the Pacific? If that happened, they might have to find someplace to live in western Arizona or move even further east, possibly becoming neighbors with Jillian again.

Something disconcerting made the whole future seem cloudy, and the concern must have shown on her face. Natalie failed to notice it, though because she was vacantly watching some type of a reality program on one of the Net channels. Most such shows had descended into insipid drama shout-fests because of the shark that killed a contestant on the survival-oriented show and the way a person died of poisoning on a "Fear Factor" type show.

Suella soon realized what it was: try as she might, she could not conjure up a clear picture of Natalie as healthy and older. At that moment, she felt her throat knot up and

her eyes water. Letting out an agonized moan, she lowered down and dove onto the daybed couch to hold her daughter and smother with hugs and kisses, stifling sobs.

“Mom, what are you doing?” Natalie said, with a nervous laugh as she wrapped her arms around her mother’s back, returning her affections.

“Um, okay,” she responded.

Suella always left early in the afternoon, because by four o’clock the sun hung low in the sky and it already seemed like it was getting dark. She went to bed much earlier in the winter, also, especially on the colder nights. Many times, rather than wasting solar stores by heating the house, Nathan would bring in a few logs and warm things up with an old fashioned fire.

On nights like those, Suella slept on the sectional in the den, curled up under the covers while Nathan watched a football game on television. “Honey, I’m worried about Natalie,” she said, while he watched a player on the screen run into the end zone and dance a silly dance.

He sighed, lifting his eyebrows. “Did you check her out with that little play doctor kit you have?”

“Yes, her vitals are all good.”

“Then she’s fine, right?”

Suella paused to consider how much of her uncertain visions of Christmas-yet-to-come that she should reveal. “She’s just so thin, and listless.”

“It’s all that rabbit food she eats,” he said, still gazing at the images on screen. “If she’d beef up her diet with some good old fashioned animal flesh now and then she might get healthier looking.”

“She says she can no longer digest meat.”

That caused Nathan to look at her and narrow his eyes. “Bullshit. Humans are hard wired to eat meat. Why else would we have dominion over the animals? Why did a fucking horse evolve into a creature perfectly designed to carry a human being? It’s like someone drew it up on a drafting table or something.”

“Maybe it has something to do with her shortening telomeres.”

He paused to let the sentence sink it then waved his hands around, as if he wanted to resolve the conversation once and for all. “Look, from what I’ve seen, Nat’s as healthy as ever and she’s a tough kid. She’ll be fine. If you’re that worried about her, maybe you ought to call Dr. Areola or whatever.”

“Dr. *Allende*.” She exaggerated the pronunciation of the doctor’s name. One annoying trait that her husband shared with her father was his tendency to twist people’s names around, to make them sound stupid. She knew that he knew that “Areola” was the name for the round flesh structure around a nipple.

“Whoever. Just call her.”

The following morning, though, she did not call Dr. Allende. But she considered her husband’s remarks. Would getting her to eat meat help? Years ago she’d learned that plant based proteins lacked certain amino acids or minerals, that they were considered “incomplete” protein. Maybe there was a way to get her to eat meat other than thrusting a steak dinner in front of her.

Back during one of her last office jobs, around the time George W. Bush was sending young men off to die in the Middle East, she sat on the other side of a cubicle from a glamorous older woman named Jaycee Rayner. Jaycee often claimed that she

could have been a big star if she'd put out a bit more for big producers during the 1970s. She would often drink a concoction that looked fresh cut grass particles mixed with water. Suella had once asked "What is that? A spinach slurpee?"

"No, darling," Jaycee had said. "It's spirulina and liver powder mixed with water and tomato juice. It gives instant energy."

Liver powder was the best way to get Natalie the complete protein of meat without subjecting her to eating it. She could blend some into a smoothie that they could both drink together.

Suella passed by a health food store on the way to Natalie's every day. On the way home from her next visit, she stopped in to buy a container of the liver powder. Whether her smoothie contained spirulina or not, like Jaycee's had, was not important to her. Once she arrived home, she opened the container and recoiled at the foul smell that wafted up from it. It smelled like a combination of blood and body odor. She instantly remembered that she'd never liked liver while growing up. Now she re-visited the reason why. At the store she also purchased a couple of soft tofu bricks.

Her aim was to make a vanilla smoothie and swirl the liver powder in with it so that it could not be detected. The directions on the container said that a daily dosage was two tablespoons. It might take lots of vanilla flavoring and sugar to mask the taste of the powder. She used a decades-old blender to mix it all together.

After plunging down on the button to swish all the ingredients together she poured it into a juice glass, to test it. The pleasant frothy cream colored liquid foamed into her mouth when she drank it, the way she remembered it did just after it was freshly blended. A metallic bite crept into the taste, however, causing her lips to pucker. "It's

gonna need more soy milk and sugar,” she said, out loud.

Later, Nathan came in from his round of golf and Suella poured some of the mixture into a small glass for him. “Tell me what you think,” she asked.

Nathan, who was still wearing his polo shirt and golf cap that made him look like a senior citizen, raised the glass gingerly to his lips. He took a couple of sips and squinted, his mouth curling into a downward frown. “What the hell is in this? It tastes like someone jerked off into it!”

Suella chose to ignore her husband’s gross remark. “Okay, if I tell you, do you promise not to leak a word of it to Natalie?”

He shrugged, and nodded.

“It’s liver powder. I’m trying to get some better nutrition into her system.”

“Liver powder?” His features contorted into a disgusted grimace. “Wouldn’t it be a lot simpler just to give her a cheeseburger?”

“Hon, she won’t eat that, you know that.”

“So you’re going to trick her?” He looked down at the counter and noticed the container of the liver powder.

“It’s for her own good.”

“Really?” Nathan tilted his head for a moment, the way he did when he was feeling cocky about driving home an important point in an argument. “Is that what you said when you kept her doped up for all those years?”

She bit her lip and counted to five. “Nate, that’s below the belt.” She knew he hated that nickname, but he’d deliberately hurt her by reopening an old wound. “Besides, this is different. Getting her a more complete protein would help her feel better.”

“Leave her be. It’s her body, and her life. She knows what’s best for her.”

Suella kept her mouth shut, to let him believe he’d won the argument. When he disappeared into the bedroom to change, she added more sugar and soy milk to the mixture and blended it again, before storing it in a plastic pitcher.

The next day she arrived at Natalie’s apartment, carrying the innocuous looking pitcher filled with nutritious fluid. After their lunch of salad with alfalfa and wheat grass, she broke out the pitcher and two small glasses. “I have a surprise for you! It’s a vanilla smoothie. You like those, right?”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks mom.” She blithely took the glass and raised it to her lips for a small taste. Suella held her breath. Natalie smacked her lips a little, but her face remained expressionless. To encourage her, she took a big gulp of her own smoothie drink. Still, Natalie took small, “baby” sips of her drink.

Suella could stand it no longer. “So how do you like it?”

Natalie shrugged, and took yet another small sip. “It’s good. It has a really unique flavor though. I can’t quite grok what it is.”

“Grok” was yet another word from the younger generation that had originally befuddled Suella, just like all of the others. Then she remembered a book she’d read in her high school English class: *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein. The main character in that novel, an alien would say that he would “grok” something whenever he would understand it. “Well, it’s a vitamin smoothie, sweetie,” she said, patting her on the thigh. “You’re probably tasting the vitamin powder.”

She shook her head. “No, I’ve had vitamin smoothies before. This tastes different.” She lowered her head to take another sip, smacked her lips, paused, then

added “Is it malt? Is there malt in this?”

“Yes! Yes! I believe that vitamin powder package said there was a little malt in it. They probably wanted to mask the taste of the vitamins.”

Natalie raised the glass for a longer sip this time, letting more of the creamy liquid foam down into her throat. “Yeah, it’s pretty good. I’ve always liked malt flavor.”

Suella breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. I’ll try to remember to bring some next time, too.”

Now if she could only do something about her daughter’s pallor.

“Well, she needs to get up off that couch and move around,” Nathan said when she told him about it later that afternoon. “Can’t we all go see the light displays or something? Anything to get her out of that dinky apartment.”

Suella reflected on the last visit to Natalie’s OB. She’d said that Natalie’s vitals numbers concerned her and that she wanted her to take it easy, just light housekeeping and shopping, nothing to get her over-exerted. A short walk around the pier’s light display should be fine.

On the night they ventured out to the pier, a few days later, David and Nathan rode in the back seat of Suella’s car and Natalie rode shotgun, with the seat eased back to give her more room. The temperature was slightly brisk that night, and she wore a cute crocheted hat with a pompom and a scotch plaid wrap over her sweater. The wrap covered her almost like a tunic. When Suella parked the car and they all got out in the crowded parking lot, she tried to look at her daughter through the eyes of all the passing strangers on the asphalt. The way the wrap disguised her, probably not one of the passers-by would guess that she was more than six month’s pregnant.

Suella watched Natalie carefully as they walked along the boardwalk and the pier that teemed with people, and merchants, the night sky lit up with the festive red, green, yellow and white lights that blinked out from everywhere. Natalie glowed, too, smiling happily at the sea of activity and all the sights and sounds. David held her as they walked along, cradling her gently as if she'd been made of delicate porcelain.

They arrived at the manger scene, one of Suella's favorite sights of the pier display. Atheists had successfully lobbied to remove the scene from the display for years, claiming that it violated their civil rights and that since the city sponsored the pier display, it also went against church and state policies. A new regime overruled the atheists, however, and the full sized statues of Jesus, Mary and Joseph returned to the pier, along with the Wise Men and the animals. Though she'd never been religious, the manger always delighted Suella.

When they'd all gotten their fill of looking at the manger, David chimed in. "Hey, let's go down toward the end. I heard they put in some new stuff this year."

The same restaurant had operated at the end of the pier for as long as Suella could remember and stores had been added, which made it one of the busier points along the boards. As they walked, she felt calm and peaceful from the gentle ocean tides, the honk here and there of a random seagull, and the crisp, salty air. She was glad Nathan suggested this, and to show him, she leaned over and kissed him. It was a good night.

But the peace and tranquility shattered in the next moment.

Natalie stopped suddenly, and bent at the waist. She began to breathe more heavily. "Oh my god," she said. "Something's wrong!"

Suella took her aside and showered her with questions: "Where does it hurt? Are

you wet down there?”

She said she felt as if she'd just been stabbed by a butcher knife. And she was wet down there. With a sickening dread, Suella saw a red wet spot spreading. She spun around and yelled “Help! We need help!”

Nathan grabbed a passing bicycle rickshaw driver, who was transporting an elderly couple in his basket. He threw bills at both the driver and the couple. “My daughter’s having an emergency!” he shouted. “We need to get to the parking lot, stat!”

The curly haired young man’s eyes widened like saucers when he saw Natalie. He jumped down on the pedals to thrust the bicycle into action as soon as David lowered Natalie into the basket. Suella tried to run after the rickshaw, the way Nathan and David were doing, but her husband was a former pro athlete and her soon-to-be son in law was a young kid. She watched them all pull away from her as Nathan waved people out of the way frantically, his barking voice becoming a makeshift siren.

She caught up to them at her car in the parking lot, where they’d lowered Natalie in and covered her with extra jackets, turning the heat on full blast. Suella called both the OB and Dr. Allende and they both told her they would meet Natalie at the nearest hospital: St. Vincent’s. “You drive!” she ordered Nathan. The wheels chirped on the asphalt as he sped for the exit.

“I don’t want to lose her, I don’t want to lose her,” Natalie murmured, weakly. Suella held her from behind and David also leaned over from his seat, to comfort her.

It was a weeknight, but it was also cold and flu season. She thanked her lucky stars that she had been mostly healthy in her life and had only been to the emergency room three times, including the fiasco with her eye when she was little. As Nathan

roughly wound the steering wheel and snaked the car around turns at a high speed, she prayed for a slow night at the ER. The best thing that could happen was that when they arrived at the circular drive for the sliding doors of the ER, both Dr. Allende and the OB would be waiting, to hustle off Natalie into intensive treatment.

But it was not to be.

They screeched into the parking lot for St. Vincent's a glassy, new hospital built after the Recovery about twenty years ago. The halls seemed empty and the parking lot full, but not overcrowded. Nathan stopped at the curb in front of the double doors. Both Suella and David helped Natalie out of the car and stood on each side of her, walking her toward the doors.

When the doors swished open they saw a waiting room filled with various people and injuries. Some people sat, looking rheumy and miserable, while others sported clear hard-luck injuries held in place with makeshift splints. Suella was so anxious she hardly saw individual faces. They rushed with Natalie to the counter, where a bored looking, heavysset clerk with reading glasses gazed up at them. "May I help you?"

"This is my daughter, Natalie Worthy," Suella said, firmly and crisply. "Dr. Allende and the OB are waiting for us. She's six months along and bleeding."

The clerk wore a name tag that read "Racine" and she turned her attention to Natalie, who was starting to crumple under her own weight as Suella and David held onto her. Her daughter's appearance must have looked acute because Racine's eyes widened and her shoulder's tensed as she sprang into action. "Yes, they notified us," she said.

"Do you have her medical card?"

Suella turned to Natalie and said "Sweetheart?" but Natalie had lifted the card for

her, holding it between her first and second fingers. Her lucidity and presence of mind amazed Suella. Quickly, Racine the Clerk swiped her card and watched the readout whiz by on the holoscreen. “Okay, folks,” she said, when she was satisfied with what she had seen. “Have a seat and we’ll be calling you back in a few minutes.”

“But this is an emergency,” Suella started to say, but at that moment, Nathan thundered through the double doors and ran to the counter to meet them.

He huffed and puffed, managing to say “What are you all still doing here? Shouldn’t she be on a gurney?”

With the commotion, a couple of other clerks, nondescript with clear faces and pulled back hair, appeared behind Racine. All of them wore light blue scrubs outfits that blended in with the tile and clinical, sterile colors of the building. Racine said “Sir, we’ll be able to take her back in a few moments. They need to get a room ready and...”

Nathan shook his head and squinted, a sign that Suella knew that he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Wait a minute! I’m Nathan Worthy and this is my daughter. She’s pregnant, bleeding, and in pain! Isn’t that what you people call a “stat?”

“We’re doing the best we can,” Racine said, rising up slowly from her seat, as a tall, thin dark-skinned man who looked like an orderly suddenly appeared beside Nathan.

“She needs to be taken in *now*,” Nathan bellowed, puffing his chest out, looking down at them out of steely eyes. “Get a gurney out here *now*! Her doctors should be waiting for her.”

Racine was talking faster now. “That’s what I’ve been trying to say, Mr. Worthy. They haven’t yet arrived. Now your daughter needs to sit and relax but it probably won’t be for long. That’s the best you can do for her right now.”

Nathan turned to the swarthy man standing beside him. “Can’t you get someone and get my daughter on a gurney?”

“We’ll take good care of her, sir,” he said, in clipped, precise tones. “Now we need you all to sit down.”

Nathan’s jaw muscles actively flexed and bulged and Suella envisioned him grinding his molars. He reached for Natalie and helped turn her for the lobby chairs. As he helped lead her there, he turned back and said over his shoulder “Your board is going to hear all about this.”

Natalie breathed an audible sigh of relief and closed her eyes as both Nathan and David helped lower her down into the chair. “Maybe I’m not supposed to have this baby,” she murmured.

Suella held her hand, patting it. “Don’t you worry, honey. The doctors are going to take care of you and everything is going to be fine.”

True to their word, before the seats beneath them even got warm, Racine called them forward to go back into a room in the ER, and the orderly reappeared with a wheelchair for Natalie. He gently helped her into it, and when the three of them tried to accompany her through the vestibule for the treatment rooms, Racine stopped them. She looked at David. “I’m sorry, we can only allow immediate family to go back, sir.”

David calmly replied “I’m her fiancé,” and Racine relented, allowing all three of them to help her to the treatment room.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Late February, 2035

As Dr. Allende and the OB had feared, Natalie's body strained under the rigors of her pregnancy. Working feverishly, they got the bleeding to stop that night in the ER and saved Natalie's baby, but it came with a stern warning and a new set of circumstances for Natalie. She was not to leave her apartment for the balance of the pregnancy and was ordered on full bed rest.

Suella continued to give Natalie the "vitamin shake" every day, knowing that it was among the only ways that her daughter was getting complete protein. She still made the shake using liver powder, but discovered that chocolate and malt flavor worked better in disguising it. She would alternate between the chocolate and vanilla flavors. Most days Natalie was too tired and listless to register much emotion about the flavors of her food, anyway.

David spent more time at the apartment. While he could not skip on his required classes without his grades or skills suffering, he could come home early from campus and study in the apartment instead of the library or the student center on campus. Many afternoons Suella and Natalie would watch videos or holos while David would sequester himself in the opposite side of the apartment, studying feverishly.

Natalie's condition and the doctor's orders meant that she couldn't keep up with her webcasts and podcasts. Her viewership declined, and so did her income. Suella, spending more time at the apartment watching Natalie, had soon began to neglect a few of her clients, also, missing out on new opportunities. Something had to give. She soon started running her business out of Natalie's apartment and, along with some kick-in from

Nathan, started to help them financially as well.

The day she found out that her mother and father were paying almost half of the rent, she started crying. "I feel so useless," she said, trying to sit higher on the bed pillows, as if it was an attempt to assert herself.

Suella was so moved she rushed forward to ease onto the bed and hold her daughter in her arms and let her cry into her chest, rocking her back and forth as though she were a baby. What words could she think of to help comfort Natalie? In the end, she could not think of anything. Some things were better left unsaid.

The afternoon Natalie had done all of the crying, her color improved and by the end of the day she was laughing along at a recording of the 60th anniversary show of Saturday Night Live.

A nurse from the OB office visited once a week to check on Natalie, who had not bled or felt any sharp pain since the pier incident. Suella also checked her daughter's vitals whenever she thought of it. Everything seemed normal, but many days her blood pressure floated in the low range, with readings in the low hundreds over seventy. When she told the pretty, pleasantly round nurse, she just shrugged and said. "That's fine, but I would keep an eye on it."

Nathan had packed his bags for Arizona at the end of January and had been working at the instructional league. He called her every other day, either on her handset or over the screen when she returned to an empty house in the evening. She realized that it was the first Valentine's Day they'd been apart in their entire marriage but decided against pointing that out to him.

But their time apart seemed to get to him. One night his eyes looked bloodshot,

with bagginess underneath them. At first she wondered if he'd been drinking, but he was speaking too clearly for that. "I miss you, babe," he said.

Suella felt warm inside for him. "I miss you too, hon. This big house gets lonely without you." If there'd been any more space in Natalie's apartment, she would have stayed there, possibly sleeping on an inflatable or portable bed.

"So come out here for a few days," Nathan said, a boyish smile brightening his features.

"Darling, I can't do that,"

His entire look completely changed in the next few seconds, as his whole expression metamorphosed into a frown. "Why not? I need you."

"So does Natalie."

"Aw, she's fine. She's a tough kid, and she's got David there with her, and what...that nurse comes in now and then, doesn't she?"

She felt her heart strings being tugged. "It's more than just that..." she started to say, wanting to add that she wanted to be there for Natalie, after all the ways she'd wronged her during her young life.

"We can have the nurse come to her apartment every day while you're gone," he said. "If anything changes for the worse, she can just call you right away. She isn't anywhere near her delivery date, is she?"

"No, it's supposed to be about halfway through March."

"So what do you say?" Nathan leaned toward the camera at the hotel where he was staying. He gazed at her expectantly, his head looming larger than the rest of his body because of the camera angle.

“Okay, I’ll come,” Suella told him.

The next morning, she arranged for the extra nursing visits and told Natalie. Rather than showing a defeated, crestfallen expression, her features brightened. She had to stay in the center of the bed nowadays because her stomach had grown so large it could pull her sideways and send her tumbling. “That sounds like a lot of fun for you,” she said. “And it would make Daddy so happy to see you.”

She double-taked at her daughter’s choice of words. The last time Natalie had said the word “daddy” she’d been wearing boyish rompers, her hair in pigtails.

Suella was all set to drive there, latching onto a slot for the six-hour trip, so she could get some work done. “No way doll,” Nathan said. “Go to Burbank. The team jet is going to pick you up.”

She wondered if the baseball team had access to special air space or received special consideration for the holding pattern because the whole flight took only forty minutes, from landing to touch down. As always, Phoenix looked bright and hot. Suella smiled when she thought about their first date, decades before, when he’d sent the equipment manager to pick her up and take her to the stadium.

This time, he showed up himself, wearing a huge grin when they saw each other at the gate. He took her in his arms and hugged her as though they’d been apart for months. Speaking directly into her ear as they walked arm-in-arm to the luggage carousel, he said “I’m so glad you could do this.”

