



MARGARET  
BELLE

THE

PROCEDURE

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***The Procedure***  
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## ***Dedication***

***To the late Dr. Reed Kepner, biology professor, friend, and mentor. How I wish I could have finished this book before you left the world – and that before you did, you had made arrangements to be cloned!***

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Notes

Acknowledgments

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# Prologue

3000 BC

## *High in the Italian Alps*

The hunter cut into the deer, separating flesh from bone, careful not to pierce the bladder and contaminate the meat. Because wild boar or other predators could challenge him for the carcass at any moment, he kept his bow and quiver of stone-tipped arrows close.

A subtle change in the air broke his concentration and he put down the knife. Moving into the clearing, he sniffed the air and searched the horizon as the sky darkened. Adrenalin pumped through him as he recognized the enemy materializing in the distance; an adversary that could not be stopped with an arrow or outrun.

Storm clouds sped toward the hunter, devouring snow-capped peaks and blackening the sky as they came. Thunder ruptured the air and shook the ground under his feet. He clutched at his gray cloak as the ferocious wind fought to rip it from his shoulders. The primitive garment was tightly woven and waterproof, fashioned to protect the furs and skins he wore underneath; but now it flapped wildly, like the wings of a frantic bird, admitting streams of water that quickly soaked him through.

Temperatures plummeted as snow and sleet exploded from the sky. Icy shards stung his face and glazed his frizzled beard, but he stubbornly stood his ground and squinted into the fury, searching for some small rip in the dark – a tiny speck of light that would tell him that this storm might pass as quickly as it had started. But there was only the darkness and the howling wind calling to him, searching him out. The deer now forgotten, he stumbled, cold and wet, back to the meager shelter of the cave where his young son waited.

The hunter removed the hot coal he'd carried with him from its wrapping of damp leaves, then pulled twigs from his pouch and started a small fire near the cave's entrance to keep out wild animals that would soon come to feast on the deer. From the same pouch, he pulled a sinewy rope and tied one end of it around his middle, then fastened the other end around his son's waist to keep the two of them from becoming separated if they were forced to leave the cave and travel down the mountain in the blizzard. The two sat huddled together against a rocky wall to wait out the storm. The hunter closed his eyes, but the boy could not close his. Shivering, he stared at the fire, terrified that the howling wind would reach in and snuff it out.

The boy woke, freezing cold, in the dark. The fire, now a pile of cold ashes, provided no heat or protection as the storm continued to rage. But the wind brought something new with it. A voice? It shook his father, but couldn't wake him.

Again, the boy heard the voice. He moved toward the entrance to the cave but the length of the rope ran out and yanked him back. With shaking hands he took the small axe out of the cord at his waist and clumsily crashed it down on the tether, cutting it in two.

He stumbled toward the voice and his heart raced with hope. Could it be? He squinted in the swirling snow and saw his mother, bent, staggering, battered by the weather; she had come to find them!

His joy quickly turned to horror, as behind her, a low, shadowy figure approached. The boy

watched as she was driven to her knees and he cried out as the roar of the wind was splintered with his mother's screams and the resolute snarls of a wild boar who had stumbled upon a meal in the storm.

He pulled an arrow from his quiver and brought his bow around, but his hands shook too violently to take aim and he had no strength to pull back the string. Clutching the arrow, the boy dragged himself toward his mother, and in a feeble attempt to save her, heaved it at the boar.



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# Chapter 1

*December 22, 1997*

*Syracuse, NY*

The obviously flustered nurse tossed my chart on the counter and slammed the door behind her as she hurried from the examining room. The chart slid off the counter and clattered to the floor.

This whole appointment had seemed “off” from the beginning. My OBGYN, Dr. Reed Neumann who was usually full of friendly chatter, doing what he could to keep my mind off the procedure which he worked quickly and efficiently, was quiet and seemed distracted. A mobile, featuring geese on the wing, hung motionless from the ceiling directly over my head and I stared at it and wondered what the hell was taking so long.

“Okay, Melanie,” he finally said, “we’re done.”

Dr. Neumann rose from behind the white sheet tented over my knees and I unclenched my fists, relieved that the exam was over. When he peeled off his latex gloves and tossed them into his trash container, they landed with a small clunk. What was that?

He extended a damp hand to help me sit up. While he made notes in the chart he’d retrieved from the floor, I glanced around the pale blue room, a color that had no doubt been chosen to calm his patients. Glass-fronted cabinets held syringes and diagnostic instruments I couldn’t identify. A variety of medieval-looking tools and devices with sterilized steel points and claw-like ends reflected the glare of the overhead fluorescent fixtures. The blue walls weren’t doing a damn thing for me.

Dr. Neumann wrote in the file that was as old as I was – twenty-eight, to be exact. He appeared to be deep in concentration, writing quickly until he snapped off the point of the pencil. Was he stalling? Trying to figure out how to tell me something I didn’t want to hear? Heat spread across the back of my neck.

I fidgeted with my paper gown, feeling like I was new here, which was as far from fact as it could be. My twin sister and I had been born at this clinic and Dr. Neumann had provided our health care since then. Our mother had been one of Dr. Neumann’s first patients and had undergone what was then the highly speculative process of mixing eggs and sperm in a dish; the procedure that had resulted in the births of my sister Maddy and me nine years before Louise Brown made news as the “world’s first test-tube baby.” While my mother did not live long enough to tell me why she’d chosen the Upstate Family Clinic, I’d trusted her judgment and followed in her footsteps when I decided to have a baby of my own. With no prospective husband on the horizon with his own supply of sperm, I entered Dr. Neumann’s in-vitro program, resigned to using that of an anonymous donor.

Once in the program, I’d learned I was actually sterile, just like my mother had been. Not because I didn’t ovulate, but because some medical circumstance had left my eggs impenetrable to sperm. So, as it turned out, the only way I would ever have been able to get pregnant was through the in-vitro process, where sperm would be forced to mingle with my standoffish eggs.

Finally, Dr. Neumann turned to me. “Your blood pressure is on the low side,” he said, “and you’re a little pale. But what concerns me more is a fibroid you’ve developed, which is usually just a harmless mass. I’ll want to see you again for a follow-up just to be sure it’s not getting any larger.”

I glommed onto to the word “harmless.” I could deal with harmless. But if my blood pressure was low, if I was pale, shouldn’t I have noticed that in the mirror this morning? Mentally, I performed a quick assessment of my innards and tried to pinpoint a twitch or a pain between my bellybutton and my crotch. Nothing.

Dr. Neumann pulled a bottle from a cabinet drawer. “Take one of these every day,” he said, looking more like the one whose blood pressure might be low.

I turned the bottle around in my hand until I could read the label. Vitamins. That was it. Vitamins?

“You haven’t prescribed vitamins for me since I was pregnant with Eric.”

“They might be just what you need to get your color back, young lady,” and he leaned over a date planner that was open on the counter. “Can you come back on the seventh?” he asked. “Same time?”

“Sure,” I mumbled.

What if the next exam turned up a real problem? I imagined my organs rotting away and fought to banish the image I’d already conjured up of my little boy Eric sobbing at my grave.

“You seem stressed,” I said. “Am I in trouble here?”

“No, no,” he said, “don’t worry. You’ll come back and we’ll check you again. Don’t mind me. I’m just tired. Most people have the good sense to retire before they get to be my age.”

Reassured that I wasn’t on my way to the morgue, I relaxed. “Time does fly,” I said, and pointed toward the curtained dressing area. “In fact, if you hand me my purse I’ll show you Eric’s third birthday picture.”

Dr. Neumann adjusted his glasses and stared intently at the photo. “Already three,” he said, somewhat wistfully it seemed to me.

I nodded, and he allowed himself a small smile as he handed back the picture. “I’ll never forget the day you told me you wanted to have a baby. I was so glad you’d come to me.”

I had loved being pregnant. It had filled an emotional emptiness that I’d carried around since the night my parents had died. “We’ll be back in the morning,” my mother had promised. But they died on that icy night when their car smashed through a guard-rail and plunged into a ravine. The promise made and not kept had left me singularly needy until I’d conceived my son.

“I would never have trusted anyone else.”

He averted his eyes. Why did he do that? He snapped my folder closed and headed for the door. “See you on the seventh then.”

As I started to get down from the table, he stopped and tapped my folder on the edge of the counter. “Listen,” he said, “my receptionist has been called away on a family emergency and I need someone to fill in for her after the new year. There’ll be a skeleton crew holding down the fort and I only have one couple in residence. Do you know anyone who could do scheduling, answer the phone, that kind of thing? It really should only be for a few days – a week at the most.”

“What about Helen? Won’t she come out of retirement long enough to help you?” Helen Fello had been the clinic’s receptionist and Dr. Neumann’s right hand since the day he’d opened its doors.

He pushed his glasses to the top of his head. “I wish I could ask her because I’m really in a bind, but no, she can’t do it.”

“I’ll give it some thought,” I said.

I traded the thin gown for my sweater and jeans and thought about how tired Dr. Neumann had looked. As I pulled a brush through my hair, I realized that I could probably give him a hand. And why not, he’d given me my son; it was the least I could do.

On my way out, instead of continuing to the reception area, I detoured around a corner and walked the long hallway to Dr. Neumann’s office. I took a deep breath and knocked on his door.

“Yes,” he murmured, as he looked up from his paperwork. He took off his glasses and set them

on the desk. "What is it Melanie?"

~~"I'd like to fill in for your receptionist," I said, sure that he would welcome my offer.~~

"You?"

"I can handle the work you described. What do you think?"

"I suppose..." he rolled his pen slowly between his palms as though it would help him decide "but it's quite a commute to Syracuse from Watertown. It would be a lot of driving in what can be pretty bad weather this time of year."

"I could stay here, in one of the cabins."

"Yes, I guess you could," he said almost reluctantly. "Well, all right. I'll have a cabin ready for you. Can you start right after the new year?"

"It shouldn't be a problem," I said. "I'll call you tomorrow."

I closed the office door and started toward the lobby, then stopped to lean against the wall for a moment and took a deep breath. Okay, so he hadn't seemed all that enthusiastic, but he'd accepted my offer in the end. He needed someone to be here. Was there a reason he didn't want it to be me?

As I pushed through the door and welcomed the cold air on my face, it occurred to me that there might be a silver lining to my taking the job; maybe I would run into my old beau, Dr. Neumann's son, Philip. We'd dated on and off when we were younger, but neither of us had been ready for a serious relationship and we'd drifted apart. I'd never forgotten him and now I wondered if he thought of me over the years.

Instead of heading straight to my car, I walked around the side of the building and took in the view. The enormous wooded campus included four other log-constructed buildings and five residential cabins, creating the illusion of an affluent mountain village. The pediatric care facility, the pharmacy, the research lab, and the computer compound where Philip worked, were perfectly situated among stands of majestic pines. Intricately-patterned bricks, now coated with snow, formed walkways that led away from each building to a main sidewalk, which in turn meandered north to the main building and south to the very back of the property where an enormous steel structure stretched out behind a row of evergreens.

A long, commercial-looking building, its roof served as a helipad for Dr. Neumann's private helicopter, which presently perched menacingly on top like a hungry bird of prey. Even from the distance, I could hear the loose ends of its cover drag, then snap, in the wind. I had trouble tearing my eyes away from the hulking bundle. Something about it made me feel small and vulnerable. Drag-snap. Drag-snap.

It wasn't until I'd returned to my car and was pulling out of the driveway that I realized I'd forgotten to look into the trash can to see what had made that clunk. Shit. Too late now.

---

## Chapter 2

Dr. Reed Neumann sat at his desk and watched through his wall of windows as the dusk-sensitive lamps along the clinic walkways blinked to life.

Melanie had caught him off guard and now she would be working at the front desk for maybe a week. He made a mental note to have Sharon lock the filing cabinets and put computer restrictions in place before she left. He rolled his pen slowly between his palms and tried to think it through. Maybe he was getting upset for no reason. After all, she was just trying to help. But what if she happened upon something – or overheard something?

No, he reasoned. The place was all but deserted. Ross and Sasha Distler were the only patients in his residence and they wouldn't be around Melanie any longer than it took for them to walk through the lobby for their meeting with him. It should be okay, he thought, but beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

And really, he thought in an attempt to calm himself, what was there for Melanie to overhear? He could guarantee that she wouldn't run into that damn nurse from today. New to the clinic, she had come highly recommended by a close colleague, as all of the clinic nurses had been. But this one obviously had no stomach for the work and he could not afford to have her in his employ a minute longer.

He picked up his phone and pushed a button. "Tony," he demanded, "come to my office right now. Bring Jimmy with you." He eyed his decanter of whiskey, but decided to wait until after he had met with the men.

He slammed his fist on his desk. Damn it! If he hadn't been so exhausted, he could've come up with an excuse to turn Melanie down. Hell, he wouldn't have asked her for a recommendation in the first place. But he'd worked in the lab almost non-stop for the last three weeks and it had taken a toll on him. He eyed the decanter again and wished the men would hurry the hell up.

---

# Chapter 3

## *Watertown, NY*

Our kitchen was warm and the air was sweet with the aroma of Maddy's pecan breakfast cake. Sipping coffee, I watched Eric as he focused on sinking the last Cheerio in a blue plastic bowl with the back of his spoon.

Maddy, who was clearly nervous at the thought of being left alone with Eric, was avoiding me by pretending to be engrossed in scraping out the remains of the eggs I'd burned in one of her favorite skillet.

"Just let it soak," I said. "Come sit down." She gave me one of her sideways looks and wiped her hands on the dishtowel that she had slung over one shoulder.

"I know you feel like you owe it to Dr. Neumann for making it possible for you to have your own know-who," she said, nodding her head toward Eric, "but don't you think moving into the clinic is a bit much?"

She filled her cup with the last of the coffee and dropped into a chair across the table from me. "I don't know how it's going to work, my being your stand-in," she said.

"It's only for a few days," I told her. "Besides, the change of pace will do you good."

Maddy looked unconvinced. Unlike me, she was hesitant to venture out of her comfort zone and as I watched her, I could see she was struggling to come to terms with the responsibility she was about to shoulder. She and Eric got along very well, but she'd never had full charge of him, had never disciplined him, or dealt with one of his rare temper tantrums. I could feel her apprehension as if they were my own because our insecurities were as identical as we were, right down to our birthmarks.

"Eric," I said, loud enough to wrestle his attention away from drowning the last Cheerio. "Remember when I told you I had to take a little trip? Well, today's the day," I said. "I'm leaving in a couple of hours, but I'll be back before you know it."

He cocked his head to one side. "What about me?"

"I already told you. You'll stay here with Aunt Maddy."

He said nothing else, but peeked at me from under his long lashes as though he was trying to read my face. I knew he wasn't sure I'd really go. After all, I'd never left him before.

"All right," Maddy said, "I told you I'd watch the little stinkweed, and I will. But you'd better not be gone long."

"You'll still be scrubbing that pot when I get back," I said, as she returned to the sink.

I pulled Eric into my lap. His brown hair was sticking up in all directions and the feet of his superhero pajamas, which never stayed in place, were hanging loose.

"Don't go," he whispered, and Maddy turned her head slightly in our direction. I knew that the apprehension in Eric's voice would get to her and she'd realize that he would be out of his comfort zone too.

"I told you, Honey, I'll only be gone a few days. Now run upstairs and play for a while. I'll be up soon."

I called my boss, Tim Mahoney, a veterinarian I work for part-time. Tim's office was affiliated with our local S.P.C.A. and my job was to transport abandoned and abused animals between his office and the shelter. He'd had no problem with my taking the time off, but I wanted to be sure he'd found someone to fill in for me, which he had.

I was finally packed and ready to go, but I was nervous and stalling. If anything happened to Eric I would be a good hour and a half away, even if the roads were clear. I would never forgive myself if I couldn't get to him if he needed me. With nothing left to do, I went upstairs to say goodbye to my son.

I found Eric in his room lining up his superheroes on a shelf. The high ceilings, oversized windows, and wide-planked floors of our century-old home made him appear even smaller and more vulnerable than he really was and I thought my heart would break at the thought of leaving him. He was wearing a red cape over his pajamas to coordinate himself with some of his superhero friends. Children find strength wherever they can.

"Eric," I said quietly, "it's time for Mommy to go. Can I have a hug?"

"Don't go," he said without turning around, and then I caught him as he threw himself into my arms. I carried him to his bed and sat with him on my lap. "I don't want you to go," he wailed, burying his face in my neck.

"Oh, Eric, please." Tears spilled down my own face. "I'll be back before you know it."

I heard clanking and turned to see Maddy standing in the doorway with Eric's double-runner inline skates swinging from her hand. "Those tears will freeze at the rink, Stinkweed," she said, "so wipe your eyes and get dressed. And be sure to wear your Long Johns. I saw how many times you landed on your keister at last week's lesson."

She winked at me and I knew I could count on her. She would do her best to get my little guy through this. I held onto Eric and whispered, "I'll be back soon."

A shiver ran through me as I remembered my mother making a similar promise to me.

---

# Chapter 4

## *Syracuse, NY*

After fighting with my pillow and watching the clock all night, I was exhausted from lack of sleep. I poured myself a second cup of coffee, but then realized it was time to get dressed and dumped it down the drain. I headed toward the bedroom, already doubting the wisdom of being here and suffering from separation anxiety. I tried to picture Eric, to conjure up the scent of him and the sound of his voice, but I couldn't do it.

Changing into a blue sweater and a pair of slacks, I fashioned a ponytail with a quick few pulls and a brush through my fiery red hair. What the hell, I thought, adding a touch of lipstick in case I ran into Philip. I stared at myself in the mirror for a few seconds and then ditched the ponytail. He used to like my hair long.

I put on my parka and boots and began the short walk from my cabin to the main building, pausing to wave at Robert, who was throwing salt on the icy sidewalks.

Robert was the only child of Helen Fellow, the clinic's retired receptionist who had refused to help Dr. Neumann out of his bind. A big lump of a guy who tended the grounds, Robert struck me as someone you might find waiting for you with a knife and fork at the top of a beanstalk.

Despite the cold, my body temperature climbed as I approached the main building. I passed through the front door, aware that my every move was being captured by security cameras that recorded from three different angles. I looked directly into the next lens and smiled, wondering how many other monitoring devices were at work in this place.

The large reception hall, with its rough beams, large windows, vaulted ceilings, and plush green carpets, combined luxury with rustic comfort to put the most stressed-out patients at ease. An oversized leather sofa and four chairs provided comfortable seating. Familiar as it all was, I felt out of place, walking in for the first time as a staffer, instead of as a patient.

Robert already had a fire going and the room smelled of apple wood. I put on a pot of coffee and began sorting through the papers that were stacked in the center of my desk.

There was mail to sort, forms to send out, and a package from the clinic's security firm. What the hell was I supposed to do with that? Propped against the phone was an envelope with my name scrawled on the back.

The door flew open as Robert pushed his way in with an armload of wood, which he unloaded into an enormous rattan basket. I slipped the envelope into a drawer and waited for him to finish arranging the logs on the hearth. When he finally heaved himself back outside, I went to the file drawer marked A-D and looked through the A tabs for my last name. I wanted to see exactly what Dr. Neumann had written during my last visit when he'd seemed so stressed.

My file wasn't there. Neither were Maddy's or Eric's. That was odd. Maybe mine was in a pile somewhere waiting to be filed. But my appointment had been back on December 22<sup>nd</sup> – it should have been put back by now, unless there really was a problem and he'd kept it in his office. Still, where were Maddy's and Eric's?

I went back to my desk and turned on the computer, thinking I might find copies of the records there. A quick search turned up nothing about us, but a file called "Fruition," caught my eye. It wasn't any of my business – and surely it would be illegal for me to even look at it. Still, it was interesting and there was no one around to catch me. It turned out to be a record of clinic births, so I scrolled through the alphabetized list of names, but we weren't there either. I searched the desk for a floppy disc and found a whole pile of them, and with no thought as to why I wanted the list, or to the possible ramifications of having it, I hit the Copy button.

I had to be careful. If Robert walked in it would be one thing – I didn't think he could tell by looking at me that I'd been acting in a less than trustworthy way, but other employees would be working with full decks and I had no idea how many there were on this skeleton crew that Dr. Neumann had mentioned, or how often they came through this area. I rubbed my arms because, despite the roaring fire, I was cold.

I retrieved the envelope from the desk drawer. In it, Dr. Neumann had provided me with a list of several tasks I was required to perform and the location of books and forms I would need. He mentioned that Ross and Sasha Distler, the couple in residence, had an appointment with him that afternoon, and that Tony and Jimmy would be around if anything needed tending to that Robert wasn't equipped to handle.

Over the years I'd become aware of Tony and Jimmy, who served as a combination of security guards and maintenance men. They looked like thugs and I hoped I wouldn't run into either one of them.

The last item in the note said that Robert was the only one allowed into the building at the back of the property, which he identified as Building 10. The word "only" was underlined.

Still holding the note, I wandered over to the window and looked past Robert, who was busy filling a bird feeder, to the forbidden building. The sight of the covered helicopter on its roof unnerved me, and I stared at it, almost expecting it to shrug off its enormous tarp and lift off. Suddenly, the door behind me opened and when I spun around, God help me, I was looking at Philip Neumann.

"Mel!" he exclaimed, clearly surprised and pleased to see me. "What are you doing here?"

I returned to the desk and sat down, hoping that the feeling in my arms and legs would return by some point. "You scared the hell out of me!"

"Sorry about that. So, what are you doing here?" he repeated.

"I'm filling in for your father's receptionist." He didn't appear to notice how flustered I was and I hoped I hadn't stuttered without realizing it.

"How the hell did you get roped into that?" he asked, taking off his parka and tossing it on one of the chairs by the fireplace.

"I offered," I told him, slipping Dr. Neumann's note back into the drawer.

Philip sat on the corner of my desk. "You offered."

I couldn't stop staring at his long dark hair, and I could feel my cheeks getting warm as I remembered how it used to feel against my neck. Even though men wore their hair shorter these days, Philip seemed to know his shiny mane gave him a sexy, romance novel look that the ladies liked, and I was glad he hadn't cut it to conform. Today he wore it tied back, but it used to frame his rugged face like Tarzan-like. *Me Jane.*

"Your dad needed someone to do a little paperwork and some scheduling," I said with a dry throat. "He's done a lot for me, so I was happy to volunteer."

"Are you staying on the grounds?"

"Cabin five."

He grinned and I squeezed the arms of my chair. "Well, as long as you're here, what do you say we have dinner tonight? Do a little catching up?"



“Dinner,” I said. “Why not?”

~~Looking pleased with himself, he slid off the desk and grabbed his parka. “I’ll pick you up  
six.”~~

“Six,” I repeated.

When he reached the door he looked back at me and winked, then he was gone. I sat back in my chair and nibbled my bottom lip. God, I was plenty warm now.

I swung around in my chair and caught my breath. Robert was at the window, staring in at me and slowly shaking his head no.

---

## Chapter 5

Since I'd thought I was alone in the building, I was surprised when a faint voice sounded from somewhere far from my location. Obviously, there was more than one entrance. Abandoning my paperwork, I started down the hall, following the voice past the closed door of the conference room and the open doors of the examination rooms.

As I neared Dr. Neumann's area, the voice grew louder, and I recognized it as his. I couldn't make out exactly what he was saying, but he did not sound happy. Was there someone in the office with him?

I knocked on the door but the commotion continued. I peeked in to find him alone, watching television. The program, that seemed to be more of a documentary, was about the discovery of an ice mummy by a German couple who'd been hiking in the Alps in 1991. The narrator explained that the mummy's grass cloak and stone-tipped arrows suggested he had been a hunter who'd lived more than 5,000 years ago, making him one of the oldest human discoveries to date. The story drew me in and I was shocked at the sight of the corpse, still partially trapped in layers of ice. What an awful way to die. I tried to picture him in life. What had he looked like? And how had he come to such a tragic, lonely end?

The narrator went on to explain that the rescue team had damaged the relic when they'd hurried their work to beat a rapidly developing ice storm. Dr. Neumann groaned, most likely at the thought of the reckless handling of the pre-historic prize.

He slammed his fist on the desk. "Idiots!" he shouted. "*Idiots!*"

I didn't know what to do, so I started to leave, but it was too late. He'd already turned in my direction, and strangely enough, he didn't seem surprised to see me.

A sudden click and subsequent whirring, told me he'd been watching a tape.

"It was a catastrophe!" he gasped, grabbing the corner of the desk to keep his balance. The smell of whiskey was in the air, and I wondered how much he'd had to drink. "How could they have been so stupid?" he wheezed.

Doctor Neumann shouldn't have been so upset – he knew all about the dangers of sudden storms in that part of the world. He'd been on his own expedition in the same location more than thirty years ago and been hit by an ice storm just like the one described on the documentary. People repeated accounts of his harrowing experience around here so often it was practically folklore. I was young when I'd first heard about the expedition in which he and his two companions had become separated in the storm, how he had searched for his two friends, but had ultimately been forced to return without them.

An extravagantly framed black and white photo of the three men hung on the wall behind Dr. Neumann's desk. They were standing in front of his helicopter, all of them smiling, unaware that only one would make it back alive. Just the sight of the helicopter in the photo gave me pause. What was it about that aircraft that bothered me?

"If only I had seen him first," he muttered, "I would have known. I would have understood who he was." He went to the window and stared out at the falling snow, his shoulders slumped. "How

could they not have known?" His distress was palpable; it filled the air.

~~I couldn't shake the image of the skeleton trapped in the ice. To make matters worse, the room~~ seemed to be losing its light, and as it grew darker, a sense of claustrophobia set in. A puff of cold air lifted the ends of my hair, and with it, the mummy, or at least a version of it, materialized in front of me, fully fleshed, and so real I was sure I could reach out and touch his tangled hair and wiry beard. The grasses in his cape looked faded, but pliable, and the skins he wore underneath it smelled of long-dead game. He carried a rickety bow and a pack of some kind was slung over one shoulder. His eyes drilled into mine as if he could see me – like he knew me and was as surprised to see me as I was to see him! I thought he was going to speak when he simply disappeared. I grabbed for a chair as the room brightened again and the warmth returned. *What the Hell was that?*

Dr. Neumann's attention had not strayed from the window. I must have imagined the whole thing – well of course I had – but the hunter had seemed so *real*. I rubbed the gooseflesh on my arms. Had it happened or not? Perhaps I was the one who was losing it. But the idea that I could have somehow made contact with the hunter just by watching the documentary scared the hell out of me. But that was ridiculous, I told myself. Nothing had happened.

"Dr. Neumann," I started, but he didn't even turn around, and I didn't finish the sentence because there was nothing I could say that would make the slightest difference to either one of us.

I closed the door behind me and stayed there in the hallway, listening, until I heard the tape start all over again. I didn't know what to make of it. Surely, the documentary couldn't be the only thing that had him in such a tailspin. And what the hell was with the drinking? Things were getting weird around here and I thought about going home. But my family's records were missing – it was as if we didn't exist – and I wanted to know why.

As I headed back to my desk, I thought about the intensity of Dr. Neumann's anger over a stupid video and I tried not to think about what he would do if he ever discovered I'd been snooping around. But worse by far was the hallucination I'd just experienced, or thought I had.

Then something occurred to me. What if it had happened, and what if I hadn't been the one who'd made the contact? What if it had been the other way around?

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## Chapter 6

When I reached the reception area, Ross and Sasha Distler were waiting on the sofa. I'd forgotten about their appointment; they were here to find out if Sasha was pregnant.

"I'll be right with you," I said. I grabbed my Rolodex and went into an adjoining room, where I looked up Philip's number and punched it into the phone pad.

"Philip Neumann," he reported at the other end of the line. His voice went right through me. It might as well have licked my ear.

"It's Mel," I whispered, cupping my hand over the receiver, "I've got a problem. Your dad is supposed to meet with people who are sitting here right now but he's been drinking. What do I do?"

"Are you saying he can't meet with them at all? Even in an hour or so?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"I don't know, have them re-schedule, I guess."

"It's not that easy," I whispered. "They aren't here for an introductory meeting; they're here to find out if they're pregnant."

I was annoyed at his insensitivity, but then, I had been in the position of waiting to hear this life-altering news, and Philip had not. I couldn't blame him for not understanding the situation the same way I did.

"Then you'll have to tell them there was an emergency and he had to leave. I'm sure he'll be able to see them tomorrow."

That was it? No reaction to his father being too intoxicated to see a patient? I'd thought it would have come as a shock to Philip. I could only conclude that this wasn't the first time it had happened, which was horrifying to me.

"I really don't want to do this, Philip."

"I don't know what else to tell you."

"Fine." Big help you are, I thought. I rubbed the sore spot that was developing in my left temple.

"Listen," Philip said, "I'm going to have to meet you at the restaurant tonight, okay?"

Pooh. I'd been looking forward to sitting next to Philip in a car again. Could this day get any suckier? It could, I suppose, if Ross Distler turned out to be a violent man.

"Sure," I said. "See you there."

There was a reason I didn't want to tell Sasha that she couldn't see her doctor today. I knew why she had suffered to reach this point: daily injections, mood swings, endless blood work, vaginograms, ultrasounds, the egg harvest, the implant, the stress, and the waiting. Yesterday I had actually become nauseous when I took inventory of the clinic's supply of drugs and remembered what it had been like to be treated like a human Petrie dish.

And now I was worried about Dr. Neumann treating Sasha at all. Had he been a closet drinker all these years? Surely, his reputation and the clinic could not survive if that became public knowledge. Philip had never mentioned it back when we were dating, but maybe he hadn't known then; or hadn't wanted to confide something so personal to me.

After all Dr. Neumann had done for me, I wanted to help him, but I didn't know if a man of such stature could accept help when he'd always been the one to give it. At the moment I could diffuse the

situation, but my gut was telling me to urge Ross and Sasha to find another clinic, to look for a  
OBGYN they could depend on to be sober when the time came to give birth. In fact, I'd give them  
their file if I could, and I was pretty sure I knew where I could find it.

I walked to the conference room and opened the door. Sure enough; her file was on the table  
right where mine had been. My eyes locked onto it as though I could see through the cover. Did I  
dare to look inside? My stomach rolled and my heart began to flutter in my throat. The folder seemed  
to warn me away, and dared me to come closer at the same time.

I peeked back out into the hallway, and seeing no one, closed the door behind me and picked up  
the file.

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## Chapter 7

What was I doing? I didn't owe the Distlers anything.

I put the file back on the table exactly where I'd found it, then walked back down the hall where Sasha and Ross sat holding hands, hoping they wouldn't notice I'd broken into a sweat.

"I'm afraid that Dr. Neumann has been called away on an emergency," I told them. "He won't be able to meet with you today."

"You're kidding," said Ross. He put his arm around Sasha, who had gone ashen.

"Sometimes things come up that he has no control over," I said, "and this is simply one of those times."

Ross jumped to his feet. "Do you know how much stress we're under?"

"I absolutely do, and I'm really sorry. Dr. Neumann will meet with you first thing in the morning."

Sasha stood and turned to her husband, disappointment etched into her face. She shrugged her shoulders. "What else can we do?"

I moved right on. "Call the kitchen and have anything you want for dinner sent to your cabin. Anything."

Ross didn't bite. "I've lost my appetite." Sasha nodded in agreement.

Well, this was going just super.

Ignoring me, Ross helped Sasha on with her coat, and then put on his own. "He'd better be here in the morning," he said as they went out, and I decided not to ask again if the day could get any suckier.

It was after three o'clock when I decided to check back in on Dr. Neumann. Maybe I'd find that he had transformed back into his old self. I mustered what courage I had left and went to his office and peeked in, realizing I was actually praying like hell that he'd left for the day. Thank you God, his office was dark. I checked the hallway in both directions like a kid waiting to cross a street, and then ventured in.

Dr. Neumann had entered the building earlier without my knowing, and he could do it again, but I snapped on a light anyway and quickly looked through the papers on his desk, thinking that our missing birth records might be in one of the piles, but I didn't see them. I tugged on the top drawer of his file cabinet, but it was locked. A credenza with a wide pair of center doors and three deep drawers looked interesting. I pulled on a brass fixture and popped open one of the doors, only to find a conglomeration of papers, videotapes, and photos inside; nothing that looked official or even promising. Closing the credenza doors I looked around the room for other places that could store what I was looking for, but my nerves started to get the better of me. Every creak made me breathe harder and I cried out when the wall clock chimed on the half hour.

I looked again at the photo of the three men that occupied such an obvious place of honor on the wall behind Dr. Neumann's desk. All of them were wearing parkas with hoods and sunglasses, making it impossible to tell one from the other. Plucking it from the wall, I slid the photo out of its frame and found their names handwritten on the back.

I set the empty frame on the desk and held the photo over the lamp, as though I was reading someone else's mail through an envelope. The washed-out images of the disguised men appeared reverse. Dr. Neumann was in the center, flanked on the left by Dr. Eugene Shepp and on the right by Dr. Theodore Benning.

Somewhere out front, a door banged and I jumped, nearly sending the frame, glass and all crashing to the floor. I quickly re-assembled the parts and fumbled to put the picture back on its hook. Then I snapped off the light and ran from the room.

As I came into the reception area, a large man carrying three duffel bags was lumbering toward my desk.

My heart was still racing. "I hadn't been told to expect anyone," I said. There was something vaguely disconcerting about this man – although it was probably just my nerves.

He put down two of the bags, each with a thud that spoke of significant weight, and thrust his meaty hand toward me. "John Prior," he said, "head of the clinic's security."

I hesitated and then shook his hand, but only briefly, because it was so cold. "Some security," I said, "why aren't you asking me who I am?"

He put down the last bag and sank into a chair. "Melanie Allen," he recited in a voice that told me it had been a long day for him. "You're twenty-eight-years old and you live in Watertown with your sister and son. All three of you were born at this clinic, and all three of you receive your health care here. The doc told me you'd be temping."

"I'm impressed," I said, forcing a smile. "So why are *you* here? The clinic is all but closed."

"It's easier to maneuver. Not as many people in my way."

"Are you working in all of the buildings or just this one?" I was concerned about the Distler cabin and my own.

"All of them."

Did he have the ability to monitor the private quarters? Had he or someone else been watching me undress or take a shower? Watched me as I slept?

"Don't worry," he said, grinning, "there are no cameras in the cabins; just in the five main buildings."

Relieved, I watched as he closed his eyes and massaged his temples. His hands looked strong.

"Headache?" I asked. "You want something for it?" I rummaged through my tote for my bottle of Tylenol. "Looks like you have a bad one."

I handed over my last two tablets, thinking I should have saved one for myself. I kept the empty container, expecting by the end of the day to be licking the dust out of the inside.

"So what do you do? Look for bugs?" I asked, at once embarrassed at having used the word "bug" to a security professional. But he didn't seem to notice.

"Partially. They're tiny electronic devices, mostly, that can be hidden in small places," he said, stretching out his long legs. "More deceptive equipment comes into the market every day. We can get it and so can the bad guys. It's a race to see who can out-do the other the fastest. The doc's real into it."

"He likes spy stuff?" I asked, finding that piece of information unsettling, particularly after the day I'd had. I wondered if John had already digested the Tylenol or if I could reach down his throat and get one of them back.

"Big time. He has some real high-tech systems in place." His eyes wandered around the reception area, with its expensive leather furniture, pricey handcrafted woodwork, beautiful faux-painted walls and plush carpets. "In a place like this, you can't be too careful. There are lots of crazies out there who would like nothing more than to flatten an operation like this one. People who think infertility treatments are the work of the devil himself."

I wondered how much John actually knew about what went on in the facility. He obviously had access to almost every nook and cranny. He yawned and rubbed his face, then pulled his hand through his brown brush cut. He was powerfully built and looked uncomfortable in the chair as he groaned and shifted his legs.

“How do you do it?” I asked. “It seems like an almost impossible job.”

He yawned hard. “Everything records back to my office. We keep the originals and send the copies here.” He pointed to the package on my desk. “That box is full of tapes.”

“There must be hundreds of them,” I said, “where do they keep them all?”

“I don’t know. Probably out back.”

“Where? In that big warehouse? Building 10?”

“I don’t know where else they’d have the room.”

“Ever been out there?”

“Are you kidding?” He shifted in the chair again. “It’s the one place even I’m not allowed to go. I’ve never seen anyone but the doc and Robert go anywhere near there.”

Why would that be? What could be out there that the head of security wasn’t allowed to see? “Aren’t you curious?”

“Sure,” he said, “but I’m not about to jeopardize my job over it.”

In other words, he liked it here and intended to play by the book. Looking around the perimeter of the ceiling, I tried to find a way to shake a little information loose.

“Does every room in this building have a camera?” I asked, aware that he was under no obligation to tell me anything.

“Not the examination rooms or the bathrooms, but all of the others, sure.”

“Except for the setup at the front door, I’ve never seen anything that indicated the presence of a camera.” I said. Could he sense the panic that was building in me? I’d never been a good liar, never had a poker face.

“That would defeat the purpose, don’t you think?” he laughed. “They’re not supposed to stand out.”

“Show me one in this room.”

After a moment of apparent indecision, he said, “Why?”

“So there is one!”

“Is this an examination room or a bathroom?”

“Come on. Where should I stand if I have an itch that I wouldn’t want to be seen scratching?”

He looked at me for a moment as he considered his impending breach, then pointed to the clock on the wall behind my desk. “Just to the left of the six,” he said. “The doc put that one in by himself under my supervision. Don’t scratch anything while you’re at your desk.”

I turned to look at the clock, thankful that John could no longer see my face. To the left of the six was a tiny square. “But there are other squares by the three, the nine, and the twelve,” I persisted. I wondered how long I could avoid turning back to him. The tightness behind my eyes told me that my face would surely express the fear that was spreading rapidly through me. I fought to get myself under control.

“Just a design to keep the one hiding the camera from standing out,” he said dryly. “Gotta go.” He hefted one of the bags onto his shoulder and then picked up the others.

I watched him load the bags into the back of his van and stayed by the window until he was gone. It couldn’t be a good sign that my nerves were in such terrible shape already.

I walked back to my desk not knowing whether to look at the clock or avoid it completely. Surely, the hidden camera had recorded John showing me its location. Why would he have done that? Did he think Dr. Neumann wouldn’t mind if he let a trusted temp in on a little secret? Or did he have



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