

ALEX POPPE

Family Matter

I'M PRETTY SURE I could kill someone if I had to. Fico says I'd pussy out, but he complains about ball-sag and he's only fifteen, so what does he know? I'll check his palms the next time I see him, which will be in about two minutes. He likes to raid our kitchen after school.

Three—two—one. That's Fico knocking on the kitchen patio door before he slides it open. He thinks the knock shows he has manners. He beelines for the cabinets and fishes out something his mom won't buy him. Today it's a can of Pringles. When he rips off the foil seal and smiles so that his vampire tooth shows, I know exactly what he looked like when he was four. Your child-self shows when you're doing something purely joyful. Fico's child-self shows when he's performing or about to eat something he shouldn't.

I've known him since he was nine and I was ten, and his mom started talking to my dad about preadolescent junk food consumption in the checkout line at Jewel. Her version of flirting. Fico was petting a box of Twinkies in our shopping cart and I was scratching my mosquito bites until they bled. Fico and I got to talking because we were both there. Turned out he lived three streets away. Not a lot has changed since then, except now he's at the performing arts school and I'm at the regular high school, which means I get out earlier than he does and have way more free time.

Fico's first name is Frank, but no one calls him that. My name is Nastasia, but I want everyone to call me Nastia like the girls on my dance squad do. My mom had a big girl-crush on Nastassja Kinski, so that's where the name comes from. That's all I know about my mom. That, and she left. No stories. No pictures. I used to joke with Dad that he invented her, but he'd get so quiet I stopped. No one likes father-sulking. Dad's heart is a cabinet of a thousand little drawers, each one stuffed shut and locked.

I wait for Fico to lick all the potato chip crumbs off his fingers before I take his hand, palm-up, in mine. He's close enough for me to smell his sour cream and onion breath.

“What are you doing?”

“Reading your palm.”

Fico focuses on my right eye. “What are you really doing?”

He swears the one eye changes from gray to brown when I lie. “Checking for calluses. I don’t want you to have ball cancer.” The truth is I can’t afford to lose Fico. He’s the second most important person in my life.

“What do calluses have to do with it?”

“Maybe your balls are saggy because maybe you jerk off too much. Calluses are a giveaway.”

“That’s an urban myth.”

“Maybe they don’t sag at all. Maybe you have high standards combined with low self-esteem. Maybe you should let me check.” When Fico and I were kids, we used to practice kissing until a bee stung him on his bottom lip, turning it red and puffy.

“That’s okay.” Fico’s right hand checks how poochy his belly is before he heads back to the cabinets.

“Don’t be such a pussy. C’mon. I’m being a generous friend here.”

He pulls out a package of Oreos and starts unscrewing cookie tops.

“You can check my breast. Tit for sac.”

“Got milk?”

“Right here.” I Scarlett-Johanssonize my voice as I lower my gaze and thrust my chest forward. Fico spits crumbs as he laughs. Neither of us take my flat-as-a-board chest seriously. If Mom had big ones, at least I’d have hope. But it’s not like I can ask. “Hey, Pops, was Mom a meal or a mouthful?”

Fico stacks three Oreo tops and shoves them into his mouth. After he swallows, each tooth is outlined in black, which makes his vampire fang stand out. “Wanna watch music videos?” He “Single Ladies” it into the living room before I’ve put the milk away.

“Hands on your knees and make ’em say please. In five, six, seven, and eight.” We both drop into a low squat, stick our butts out, and thrust our hips back and forth, twerking up a frenzy. We don’t realize Dad’s come home until he silences the TV. “Well, hello, Father.” I greet him using my best English accent. “Would you care to join our soirée?” I like pretending to be other people. “I think you could,” pause for dramatic effect, “drop it like it’s hot.” I bounce down into a deep plié and pop my hips back, a physical exclamation point.

They come into this world who they are, and we have very little to do with it. That is one of Dad’s favorite sayings. He’s a research scientist who sometimes looks at me like he doesn’t know what to make of me. That’s usually a good time to ask for something. Not something big like Beyoncé

concert tickets, but something small like a privilege. I'm saving the Beyoncé discussion for later. So much in this world is timing.

I pirouette over to him and bow. His shoes are freshly shined. "Can Fico stay for dinner?"

"I'm sorry, Nastasia. Fico has to go home. His mom already called me." I one-legged-lunge into a dying *Black Swan* routine.

"She called you because she thinks you're cute, Dr. Tyler." Fico has no shame. He smiles like a kid who's made a fantastic mess and knows it.

"She called because she wants you home for dinner, Fico."

Parents always stick together. "I can't believe you 'Nastasia' me, but you 'Fico' Fico."

Fico and I traipse back into the kitchen for a last-minute Oreo raid. I stuff cookies into his jacket pockets as he sucker-punches me. This is how we say goodbye.

"I'm going to wash up."

I must have the only father who says "wash up" when he heads to the toilet. I want to hand him a magazine.

"Would you mind getting dinner started?" He flips through the mail as he heads upstairs. He almost never single-tasks.

I pick up the phone. "Pizza or Thai?"

Crossing to the kitchen and dumping the mail on the counter, Dad takes the phone from my hand and replaces it on the receiver. He is close enough for me to see an angry whitehead threatening the groove of skin above his left nostril. Then he puts both his hands on my shoulders as if he's going to hug me, but doesn't. Dad's a mental-hugger. Even when I was a kid and he'd read me bedtime stories, he always sat across from me near my feet, watching me between eyefuls of words. I never sat under his arm. "Why don't you fire up a salad?" He ruffles my hair with one hand as he picks up the mail with the other.

"Da-ad. Hair."

By the time he comes back down, I've got the table set, salad made, and have swapped Lorde's *Pure Heroine* for TED Talks. It's an old one with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie about if literature and pop culture and the news depict a group of people as only one thing over and over again, then that is what they become. But do *they* think they are that single story, that stereotype, or is it only the outsiders who think that? I'll have to ask Dad. He always says perception is reality.

I put the salad on the table. "This pizza looks really good."

Dad ignores my comment. I'm the kind of grouser who needs an

audience. He rummages through the refrigerator and adds his standard hummus, goat cheese, and olives to the spread. I'm lucky. I bet Fico's mom made something disgusting like meat loaf.

I wonder what my mom would have made. Would she have prepared home-cooked American suppers of chicken, potato, and vegetable, or would she have covered some frozen fish sticks in Cheez Whiz and called it a meal? I don't even know how Mom and Dad met. Was their first date over Mediterranean tapas in some cozy wine bar drenched in whiskey-colored light? Maybe that's why he's devoted to chickpeas at every meal. Who kissed whom first? If I'm anything like her, I bet it was Mom.

Dad pours juice for me and vino for him. When his back is turned, I switch the glasses to see if he'll notice. His wine tastes like a Jolly Rancher candy.

"There's something I want to talk to you about." He places some organic olive oil on the table and switches the glasses back without missing a beat. "Sometimes the way you play with your friends changes as you get older. . . . Marie Fico wouldn't approve of that dance you two were doing today. . . . Both cultural factors and biology influence arousal."

Dad seldom gets tangled in tigtropes of sentences. I give him my big eyes and wait.

He goes into lecture mode to recover himself. "Biological factors involved in sexual arousal and response are crucial to understanding the intricacies and positive aspects of sexual experience."

From entertaining to mind-numbing in a nanosecond. I have to interrupt. "Is this your birds and the bees talk? It's okay. I know all about the positive aspects of sex. I've been enjoying them for years."

He takes a long moment. "That's not funny."

"It's a little funny."

He says nothing. He looks as though I've just shot his dog.

"Dad, I hear you smiling."

"I would appreciate your practicing abstinence, but I'm a realistic man. I do, however, expect you to be smart and safe in your choices. You know you can come to me with any questions or fears."

If he were someone else's father, I would ask him for hand job tips just to mess with him.

"Was it a confluence of culture and biology with you and Mom?"

"Nastasia, what is important is your well-being and happiness."

"What would serve my well-being and happiness is some answers. How am I supposed to know who I am if I don't know whom I came

from?” The extraordinary privacy of Dad’s conjugal affair with my mother frustrates me. Even if he told me something, I wouldn’t gain any insight. There’s no one and nothing to counter or corroborate. I want to open the freezer and yell into it.

“You came to me as you are. During your life, you’ll discover yourself.”

“I love how you champion self-discovery until I want to find something out.” I get up to see what’s left of the Pringles. “While I’m at it,” the cabinet slams shut, “I also love your system of selective response.” I can’t remember ever being this exasperated with him.

“Too many aren’t good for you.” His voice is a murmur.

“I know. It’s a public service. I’m saving Fico from himself.” I crunch a stack of eight Pringles as I part-and-parcel Dad’s face: wide-set green eyes, sharp planes in an otherwise broad countenance, a pronounced curvature to his upper lip. Twirling a dark curl of hair around my finger, I slip a single chip onto my tongue, letting the salt dissolve before I smash it against the roof of my mouth, Pringle shards inflicting a million tiny scratches. Dad’s sandy hair is straight and smooth. I shovel in another heap. My chewing is rhythmic and mechanical. Words from the non-limbic part of my brain form a coherent sentence that the limbic part of my brain instinctively knows: there is no physical trace of Dad in me.

Fico calls later that night. I take my phone into the closet to make sure Dad can’t hear me, which is stupid because he can’t hear anything when he’s working in his home office.

“Have you ever noticed that I look nothing like my father?”

“Yes. Did you just realize?”

“Don’t you think that’s weird?”

“I think it’s weird you just realized.”

“I’ve been preoccupied with your issues of ball-sag and such. He also never hugs me.”

“Lots of fathers avoid physical contact with their daughters when they start developing, although your breasties have yet to blossom.” Whatever contraband he is eating clacks against his teeth as he laughs.

“If you were here, I’d punch you.” I scratch the arch of my left foot with the toenails on my right. “Do you think I’m adopted?”

“Could be.”

“I was kidding. You don’t really think I’m adopted, do you?”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“I’m asking you. Do you think I’m adopted?”

“I wasn’t present at the yoo-hoo sex that spawned you, so I wouldn’t

know. Go to the source.” Fico crunches something in his mouth.

“He never tells me anything personal. I asked him one question about Mom and him at dinner, and he shut the funk up. Are you munching Life Savers?”

“A Blow Pop. If he won’t tell you anything, find out for yourself.”

“What, like hire a detective?”

“Like snoop through his desk. Where does he keep important papers? You might find your birth certificate. My mom’s emergency money is in a plastic baggie at the bottom of a bag of flour. Her good jewelry is stashed under her date panties, our social security—”

“Ugh. Okay, I get it.” Marie Fico could lose at least thirty pounds. “So you’re saying you’d go through my dad’s office?”

“Me? No . . . no. Your dad intimidates me. But you should.”

“You wanna come over tomorrow and stand guard?”

“Can’t. Rehearsal. Let me know how it goes.”

“How do you know I’m going to do it? I haven’t decided.”

“You’ll do it. You’re like a dog with a bone. Good luck.”

I’ve never gone through Dad’s stuff before.

He knocks on the door as I emerge from the closet. “How’s Fico?”

“Did you have a chip implanted in my head? How do you know I was talking to Fico?” I settle on my bed and open my Kindle.

“I have something that might interest you.” His face is a blank egg.

He pulls a chair up to my bed and hands me a slim manila file folder. Between official-looking forms and a birth certificate written in Cyrillic are mug-shot-type photos of a young woman with dark curly hair like mine. I give the folder a huge smile. From her profile shots, I see we share the same strong nose, the same high forehead. The portrait shot is cropped at her clavicle. Figures.

“This is Danica Babić, your mother. Of Russian-Serbian descent. Orphaned during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finished her secondary education in Kiev and received a full scholarship to the University of Iowa, where I met her.” Dad’s voice is clinical, not the voice of a jilted lover. I don’t expect tears, but I don’t expect the Tin Man either. Maybe I’m the result of a drunken spray and pray.

My armpits start swamp-sweating. “Those Russian-Serbian genes trumped your American ones.”

Dad says nothing.

I can’t not pick a scab. “I don’t look like you *at all*.”

“You do, here and there.” He vaguely gestures toward his chin.

“It’s like we’re not even related.”

Dad looks constipated.

The thought hangs in the air like a silent fart. “Am I adopted?”

Dad’s features shuffle about his face and settle down askew. “Yes.”

I stop breathing for a long moment. The walls go wavy. This conversation needs immediate euthanasia. Everything I thought I knew implodes in one syllable. “I can’t believe you told me like that. Where are my emotional coddling and mental preparation?”

“You’re ready.”

“I don’t feel ready.” I feel small. I hope he can’t hear the tears inside my voice. “I can’t believe I had to ask you. You should have told me first. Did you even know her?” No wonder he never shared any of their stories. They don’t exist.

“Yes. I knew her throughout her pregnancy and your birth.”

“How did you meet her?”

“I told you. At the university.”

“But how? Was it some meet-cute or was she part of some kind of paid research?”

“She participated in a study.”

“Sex and checks make the world go round.” Outside, the Harrisons’ dog barks and barks. Dad and I listen together, isolated by our separate thoughts. “Do you know who my father is?”

“I am your father.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I am your father.” The force with which he says this sentence surprises us both. Dad coughs. “I know this is a lot to comprehend at once. Let’s take a break for tonight.” My eyes stay glued to the folder as he tucks it back under his arm. It seems like Dad should stay to comfort me, so maybe he does. Except he doesn’t. He pats my knee before he and the folder exit the bedroom.

My whole body feels shucked. Did that just really happen? I grab the phone and head into the closet.

Fico is watching *Glee*. “What’s up?”

“I am adopted.”

“What? No way.” He silences his TV.

“Way.” In my head, I’m standing at the edge of a precipice.

“What’d he say?”

“He brought in pictures of this Russian-Serbian woman who is my mother. He said they had met at the university. He said”

“What? I can’t hear you.”

“You hear me. You’re not listening. He said You know, he left out a lot when he told me the truth.”

“That sucks. Now you have to snoop. You have a right to find out what he’s not telling you.”

“The thing is, if he left it out, it’s probably bad. I don’t know if I wanna hear it.”

“No offense, but it can’t get much worse.”

“Yes it can. What if my real dad is one of America’s Most Wanted?”

“The statistical probability of that happening to two kids from the same junior high is null.”

“I want to find my mom. Damn. He took the folder with her info with him.”

“You have to snoop.”

“What if she has another daughter?”

“So? You’d get a sister.”

“Why didn’t she keep me, if she kept the other one?”

“She might not have wanted to have you. Or maybe she wasn’t ready. Maybe she was in a bad place.”

“Ouch. So much for my desire to live like the *Gilmore Girls*.”

“I’m just saying. You need to be prepared. You also need to snoop to find out.”

“What if she’s dead? I’ll never find out anything.”

“You’ll never find out, if you don’t snoop. Snoop!”

“Okay. Okay. Tomorrow. I wish you didn’t have rehearsal. Call me when you get out.”

“Okay. Happy snooping.”

I am gutted. I climb into bed without brushing my teeth. Usually, I knock on Dad’s office door and wait for him to open it before I say good night. Everything is different now the tether’s been cut. I curl up next to the Zoe Muppet doll my so-called father gave me for my sixth birthday and cough silent, dry tears onto the top of her head. Her green plastic eyes are worn almost free of their color. Her heart-shaped tongue dominates her gaping red mouth. I settle her into the crook of my neck with my heart in my mouth too.

Morning comes just as I fall asleep. Outside a car alarm urges me from my bed. The day is five seconds old and already full of lead. Both Dad and breakfast are at the table by the time I get downstairs. Chickpeas atop hominy keep his coffee company. The spoon beside his grits gleams.

“Good morning, Nastasia. Do you have everything you need for school?” Dad is a disembodied voice behind his *Wall Street Journal*.

If that’s the way he’s going to play it, fine. “Good morning, Father. Yes, I have packed my carryall quite well, thank you.” I sound like a casting reject from *Harry Potter*. When I pull out my chair, he lowers his paper. There are maroon aprons under his eyes. “Your eyes are puffy.”

“Yours too,” he counters.

A rare moment of reality.

“Nothing has changed. You are my daughter and I love you.” His paper pops back into place.

I knock at his newspaper. “Hey, Mr. Gorbachev. Tear down this wall.” He closes the paper and folds it. “I want to find my mother.” I interrupt his inhalation. “I want to find her.” We stare at each other, eyes level, jaws set. Carbon copies in stance.

Ha! He blinks first.

“I’ll see what I can do.” He smiles. People can smile and still be villains. “Let’s go. We don’t want to be late.” Dad stands up from the table: first his head, then his shoulders, next his chest and stomach, and finally his legs. He leaves in a series of pieces.

SKIPPING DANCE SQUAD rehearsal, I race home after school, only to skid to a stop outside Dad’s office door. The grandfather clock ticks the minutes away. Fico’s “snoop”-song worm burrows in my head. I watch my hand turn the doorknob as though observing it in a rearview mirror. My cheeks lift into the type of smile people have when they’re doing something unexpected.

It is just a room I have entered. It is just a desk drawer I have opened. It is just the key to the filing cabinet I have found at the bottom of a box of paperclips. To get peace of mind, I tell myself small lies about something big.

Goodbye desk, hello filing cabinet. Open, rummage, shut. Open, rum—holy shit! One, no two entire drawers are dedicated to me. The files are organized by year, starting with my birth certificate (father: unknown) and ending with a record of how many Pringles I ate last night and my father’s handwritten diagnosis of my mental state. *Subject’s rebellious behavior concerning knowledge of her mother demonstrates an uncompromising desire to know more about her lineage. Her ability to control her anger and frustration bears witness to her maturity. Therefore, she was accorded certain facts concerning her biological origins. Her exhibition of anxiety and aggression concerning the*

subject of her paternity prevented her from being told the scope of the experiment and her participation in it. I read his notes again. A kernel of understanding takes a lap around my mind and slaps me with this realization: I am the experiment. But an experiment in what?

In my head, I've fallen off that huge precipice and am clinging to an outstretched hand.

Reading the files is like reading a quantitative textbook of my life. Weight and height measurements, records of first word, first tooth, first step, first period, first kiss (how'd he know?), eating habits, hobbies, participation in clubs, analyses of social interaction, talent assessments, vocabulary acquisition, reading levels, development of analytical and problem-solving skills, academic and physical achievements, charted character development—it's all in the second and third drawers. Memories cartwheel out of my head and stack neatly into their respective files. They don't belong to me anymore. They were created to service a fiction. I feel as though I put cotton candy in my mouth but swallowed razor blades.

Dad opens the front door.

I'm sitting behind his desk with a small metal garbage bin filled with the most important-looking papers from the me-files at my feet. Cupped in my left hand is a book of matches. His office door is wide open.

Dad finds me in thirty-seven seconds. "What are you doing in my office?"

"Nothing." Sometimes I play dumb when it would be better to be dumb.

"Nastasia, I insist you apologize for violating my trust and leave my office. I don't want to start locking doors."

"I violated *your* trust? 'Her exhibition of anxiety and aggression concerning the subject of her paternity prevented her from being told the scope of the experiment and her participation in it.' What about my trust? What is the experiment?"

"Where did you find that? I keep that cabinet locked."

"And this key opens it." A thin key ring hula-hoops around my right index finger. "What is the experiment?"

"You had no right to go through my research."

"This is true. But you had no right to make me your research. What is the experiment?"

For someone who regularly interrogates the world, Dad is uncharacteristically silent.

I place the metal bin on top of his desk. "If you don't tell me, I will

strike this match and burn these papers from my files. I'm not kidding." Dad topples forward like a lightning-struck tree, but I don't care. Even my hard-to-reach places hurt. My arms cocoon the bin.

"Your mother was a surrogate participant in a research study combining gestational surgery and gene manipulation. An egg from Danica Babić was combined with a donor sperm that had been genetically manipulated by me to enhance physical grace, coordination, and skill; to maximize verbal capacity and facility with language; and to stimulate creativity. Six—"

"Wait. You messed with my DNA like some genetically modified guinea pig?"

"Genes were enhanced for the study. Six embryos were created."

"Do I have brothers and sisters?"

Dad swallows hard. "No." He moves slightly forward.

I hug the bin tighter and move slightly back. "Don't underestimate me." My voice is low and controlled, concealing my Viking anger. I need to get less human to finish this conversation. I shape-shift into an ice queen.

He takes a step back. "At that point, the government pressured the research center to destroy the embryos. I couldn't do that. The embryos were the culmination of a decade of work. Danica agreed to continue the surrogacy in exchange for monetary compensation. Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis determined which four embryos were destroyed to satisfy the investigators and which two were transferred. When both were successfully implanted into the uterus, selective termination was employed to reduce the number of viable pregnancies to one."

"So I had a brother or sister and you killed them. How did you decide which of us to keep?"

"One embryo was sacrificed to minimize complications for the other. Genetic profiling determined the fitter of the two."

"Kind of like *The Hunger Games* for fetuses?"

"For practical purposes, Danica moved into this house so I could monitor both of you, and we maintained the semblance of a couple. Our contract concluded with your birth."

My blood feels carbonated. The man across from me watches and waits. He is no doubt taking mental notes for his precious files. "I'm Frankenstein's test-tube baby."

"You are my daughter."

"Really? I don't know who you are."

“I know it’s a shock, but—”

“Dr. Tyler, *don’t*.” There is no way I can call this man before me “Dad.” I lean my cheek against the garbage bin and exhale a long stale breath. There’s a small fire in the back of my throat. In my head, that outstretched hand I’ve been clinging to lets go, and I free fall. The movie of my life trundles up from somewhere: my so-called father teaching me how to ride a bike, holding my hand snorkeling in the Pacific Ocean, taking me to the Goodman Theatre in Chicago. There were birthday parties and Christmas trees and ballet recitals. “Was any of it real?” I empty the papers onto his desk and put the bin back on the floor. “Or was it all just for this?”

“It was real. As soon as I saw you, I loved you, Daughter.”

He has never called me that. Bold. “You loved your research and wanted to finish it to become famous.”

“I wanted to love and nurture another human being.”

“Right. You’re hollow where your heart should be. You never even hug me. You did it for ego.” The look on Dad’s—Dr. Tyler’s—face makes me wish I had swallowed those words instead of spitting them out.

“That’s fair. It started out as ego but changed. You were a perfect miniature of your mother. I couldn’t have engineered that.” When he mentions Mom, his eyes are two bright lights.

“Did you love her?”

“As much as someone hollow of heart can. In my own way.”

“Did you ask her to stay?”

“Danica always had a plan of her own.”

“Why didn’t she want me?”

“She never met you. She wouldn’t look at you or touch you after delivery. I think giving you up was harder than she expected.”

“You don’t have to make me feel better. I don’t even believe you. Maybe all she saw when I crowned was your genetic mutation inside a meat costume.” This sucks. I hate him and I don’t.

“Nastasia, I always intended to tell you. I didn’t know how. I’m sorry.”

“‘I’m sorry’ should have been your first words. So now what? I assume you’ll write up some more notes on my ‘anxiety and aggression’ concerning this series of revelations. But then? Were you planning on publishing this study?” The thought of everyone at school finding out makes my heart pinball inside my chest.

“I won’t publish it until the political landscape changes.”

“You won’t publish it ever.”

“Politics will eventually catch up to science.”

“You’re not listening. You can’t do that to me.”

“This study will change the future of gene therapy. It will be published with the strictest confidentiality.”

“Get real. People will know the subject is me.”

“It will appear in scientific publications only.”

“You can’t guarantee that. Not in the Internet age.”

“Think of how many generations this study could help.”

“I don’t care. I want a normal life.”

“Nastasia, one day you’ll thank me. Look how talented I made you. I’ve given you an extraordinary life.”

I want to slap that obsequious smile from his face. “That remains to be seen.” I stand and clear my throat, adopting an adjudicatory tone. “I want to find my mother. I expect your full cooperation and financial support.” I don’t tell him I have already squirreled away anything important concerning Danica Babić. Like everything else, he probably already knows. “Good night, Dr. Tyler.” I leave him surrounded by the paper fruits of his labor.

There are twelve missed phone calls and three text messages from Fico by the time I ensconce myself inside my bedroom closet. Anxiety rides up my spine. Fico’s hello is a steady hand on my back.

“What happened?”

“I was created in a petri dish.”

“What?”

“I’m almost human. Or enhanced human. Dr. Tyler played God with my DNA and paid my mother for her chromosomal contribution. Then he rented her womb for nine months and kept copious notes about the undertaking, intended for publication.”

The silence that follows is larger than the closet. Oxygen molecules strobe by, but none enter my lungs. “Are you still there?”

“Of course.” Fico’s voice is the last true thing inside my world.

“P.S., I have no idea who donated the original spermatozoon.”

“Let me get this straight. The Russian-Serbian lady is your mom. Your sperm donor dad is unknown. Your dad dad—”

“Ex-dad. I hate him.”

“You hate him now, but you won’t hate him forever. Maybe he predicted a day such as this and enhanced your ability to forgive.” He laughs alone.

“Too soon.”

“Sorry. Your . . . what are you calling your ex-dad now?”

“Dr. Tyler.”

“Okay. Dr. Tyler enhanced your DNA. What does that mean?”

“He jacked it. I don’t know. He souped up the sperm side of things. He made me better in language and physical stuff and creativity.”

“You are so gonna kill the SAT next year.”

“That’s not the point. I’m just research to him. He’s using me. He doesn’t really care about me. He doesn’t. . .” My breathing gets shallow and my eyes sting.

“It’s okay.”

“Doesn’t love me.”

Fico hums a song that’s sounds like a pink sunset reflected on water. “It’s okay.”

“Thanks.” I’m glad Fico can’t see me wipe my snot on my shirtsleeve. “And he wants to publish his findings, and then everyone will think I’m a freak. My life is over.”

“No it’s not. You got extra of all the good stuff. In a way, you’re really lucky.”

“That’s what Dr. Franken-Tyler said.”

“Well, it’s true. Now I can stop resenting how great you are at everything. You were made that way.”

Fico’s smile is a multicolored whorl over the 4G network. I wonder if the NSA hears it too. “You can’t tell anyone. Swear.”

“Swear. What are you going to do?”

“Find my mother. And then I don’t know.”

“I’m here if you need me.”

“I know.” My words are choked. My eyelids are droopy. Fico and I hang up in silence.

The house is still when I exit the closet. Even with the bedroom door locked, an uneasiness wraps its bony fingers around my throat and tightens. I retrieve Danica’s folder from underneath my shirt. Sweat from the small of my back has dampened it. The photographs inside roll at their edges. When these pictures were taken, she was four years older than I am now. She looks like she knows who she is. Most of the time I feel like I am watching myself from the corner of the ceiling, shaking my head at all the stupid stuff I say. She isn’t the prettiest woman in the room, but she’s the one you’d think about long after the party’s over. Her eyes are an enigma. No wonder Dr. Tyler was drawn to her. He could have spent the rest of his life puzzling them out if she had let him. I alternate staring at her photographs with Googling films about genetic mutation and learn-

ing the Cyrillic alphabet. By the time I snuggle next to Zoe, I can write both our names in Russian on the blackboard under my eyelids.

A nagging thought hooks my nightshirt and yanks me from sleep. Needing a resurrection potion, I stumble into the kitchen in search of a grande mochaccino. Hating Dr. Tyler has drained my energy.

He enters just as the milk is frothed. I bet he has hidden cameras in every room of the house. Dr. Tyler is wearing his clothes from yesterday. I've never seen his boring handsomeness so disheveled. I give him my best mean-girl glare.

"Good morning."

Zero points for originality, but then I am the one with the extra dose of creativity. "Morning." He crosses left toward the counter, so I cross left to the table. The ballast of a fixed distance between us keeps the kitchen from toppling over.

"What would you have done if your genetically improvised recipe had produced a vegetable?" As soon as I blurt out the question, my shoulders sink down from my ears. The coffee cup in Dr. Tyler's hand hangs suspended between the cabinet and the counter.

"Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis safeguarded against that." He clacks the cup onto the counter.

"What if PIG diagnosis had missed something and you didn't realize I was dumb, clumsy, and untalented until I was three. Would an unfortunate accident have befallen me?"

If Franken-Tyler were capable of remorse, I would think those were tears in his eyes.

"Nastasia, do you think I am a monster?"

"A monster-maker."

"You are not a monster."

"According to a bad batch of Hollywood blockbusters, I am. Gene-mutant is my single story."

"You will play many roles in your life: mother, wife, daughter. You're my daughter. A sperm donation doesn't determine that."

"Technically it does. Anyway, would you have thrown out the baby with the bathwater, if I weren't one half of the wunderkinder?"

"Of course not."

"Ever wish you had kept the other one?"

"No."

"Lucky coin toss."

"No."

“Good for us there’s no way to know.”

He approaches the table. I counter toward the refrigerator. “What if I were just an early bloomer? If I had turned out ordinary, would you have declared the experiment a failure and farmed me out to some old lady in the woods?”

“Nastasia, of course not. I created you. I watched you grow inside Danica’s womb with anticipation. I named you. You belong here, with me.”

“Another lie. She named me. After Nastassja Kinski.”

“I named you. She signed the adoption papers and left.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“I’m telling you the truth.”

“Prove it. Help me find my mother.”

“Why?”

“I want to hear her side of things.”

“She’s not going to tell you anything different.”

“Then you have no reason not to help me.” He can’t be the only one who gets what he wants. I open the refrigerator, take out the container of hummus he’ll want for breakfast, and dump it into the sink. “My word, how some things spoil.” My drawl is as thick as a drunk preacher’s. The *Wall Street Journal* thwacks against the front door as I head to the shower.

Dr. Tyler and I become less three-dimensional so we can keep on living together. I drop dance squad because it doesn’t seem fair to exploit my genetically manipulated competitive advantage. Plus, it messes up some of Franken-T’s research. I know better than to ask him to stop, but that doesn’t mean I have to be cooperative. While Fico rehearses, I learn Russian and trawl social media looking for my mother. In the evenings, Dr. Tyler scurries to his office, no doubt recording his privileged observations. The house radiates the conviviality of an autopsy room.

Of the eleven Facebook entries for Danica Babić, eight lead nowhere. The other three have privacy settings set so high, they defeat the purpose of social media. I eliminate one of them through a cross-reference on LinkedIn. The other LinkedIn profiles ax themselves with their photos. None of those Danica Babićs resemble the Lady of the Manila Folder.

A Pinterest posting makes me cry out even though there is no one to hear me. The cover photo of one Danica Babić in Serbia shows a tightly framed nose parting two curtains of dark, wavy hair. The bastardized Oscar Wilde tag line is prophetic: “Be yourself, everyone else is already taken.” I feel like I’ve vanished from my neck down.

It’s probably a re-pinned stock photo, not an actual photo of her.

Her pin board shows we're into the same bands and the same food. If I weren't so freaked out, I might copy down some of her recipes. There's a Lebanese chickpea and sweet potato dish Da—Dr. Tyler would really like. I hold my breath for seventeen seconds. Either Mom has the mentality of a teenage girl, or Mom has a namesake offspring. The bottoms of my feet start to itch.

I need a dose of Fico.

I'm standing at the kitchen patio door, red velvet cupcakes in hand, when he arrives.

"I got your text." His eyes are fixed to my cakes.

"I should make these into a bra."

Fico's nose wrinkles like he smells feet. "It'd be a look." His index finger is nail deep in frosting before he has cleared the threshold. "How's life as an *X-Man*?"

"Lonely."

Fico breaks into "All By Myself" until I yank his air microphone away.

"So, I've been looking for my mom and I found something-ish." My laptop is open to Danica Babić's Pinterest board.

"So?"

"So maybe this is my mother or my sister."

"Could be. Didn't your Dad—"

"Uh-uh. My Franken-creator."

Fico rolls his eyes. "Didn't your Franken-creator say your mom had her own plans? If she'd worked hard to get a scholarship here, I don't think she'd have thrown it all away to go to Serbia."

"I don't believe anything he says. When I find my mom, I'm going to ask if I can stay with her for a while. I have these rotating fantasies of meeting her. In one, she wants to know what my favorite dessert is so she can make it. She starts a food fight and we're covered in flour, laughing. We end up making it together. In another, she takes me to some smoky art deco café. We're both wearing blond wigs, classy, and white gloves. Over champagne cocktails, she tells me what Dr. Tyler was like when he had a heart. In another version, we go somewhere quiet and cultured where she teaches me dirty limericks so I laugh out loud at inappropriate times. We always stay up until the sun rises, and then she sings one of her grandmother's Serbian lullabies as I fall asleep in her bed."

"Take a huge bite of cupcake, please."

"I don't want any."

"Just do it."

“Why?”

“Do it. More. More. And some more please. Don’t swallow.”

Almost the whole cupcake is in my mouth and I need to cough.

“I don’t want you to yell at me when I say this next bit. You can’t decide that your mom was right and Dr. Tyler was wrong, because people are different things at the same time. You can swallow now.”

My teeth hurt from the icing. “It sounds like you’re taking his side.”

“I’m on your side. But you’re acting like a Lifetime Movie Network special. You’re building this mother-story up in your head, inventing bonding moments. You’ve probably already cast her. But your mom is a stranger to you. She left. Dr. Tyler took care of you. Maybe he did it for research and maybe he didn’t. It could have been a bit of both. Does it matter?”

“Yes. He pretended to love me and all that time, he was probably laughing behind my back at how stupid I was to believe it.”

“Why do you think he was pretending? He could have done a lot less if you were just his mad science project.”

I get up to get us both some milk. “It doesn’t make it right.”

“And where do you get him laughing from? He’s always proud of you.”

“Proud of his creation.”

“Same thing.”

Fico has a point. We clink glasses and both take a long swallow of milk. “So Marie watches Lifetime?”

“Sometimes.”

“Milla Jovovich, as long as we’re sharing.”

“As your mother? She can’t act.”

“But, little-known fact, she can sing. Plus, her boobs are a tasteful size.”

“She has great style. I’ll give her that.” Fico drains his milk and studies the bottom of his glass. “You’re setting yourself up for disappointment.”

“I know.” I laugh in spite of myself. Fico’s milk mustache more than hints at the Joker.

“What?”

“Nice ’stash.”

“You too.”

We whip out our cell phones to selfie the moment as Dr. Tyler enters the kitchen.

“Hello, Fico. It’s been a while.”

“Hello, Dr. Tyler. Yeah, I’m in rehearsals for *Rent*.”

No one says anything for several seconds, until Fico’s elbow connects

to my ribs. "Hello, Dr. Tyler." I mimic Fico.

"Hello, Nastasia. How was school?"

"Fine."

Another thundering silence. It seems as if the three of us have been transported inside Homer Simpson's head. I imagine tumbleweeds blowing across swaths of arid land.

"So," Fico stands. "I should probably go."

"Why don't you stay for dinner?" I stand too.

"Because this is really uncomfortable." He looks from Dr. Tyler to me.

"Sorry."

"No doubt Nastasia has told you of her recent findings."

"He knows about my triple X chromosomes."

"Fico, if it isn't too much trouble, I am curious to hear your opinion."

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't have one."

Sir? Who is Fico kidding? "Daresay, young chap, I agree with Dr. Tyler. I, too, would find your viewpoint quite piquant." I channel my inner Katharine Hepburn.

Dr. Tyler and I move a little closer to Fico. He has no escape.

"I think your superpowers are cool, and I wish I had them too. But I wouldn't want to be the subject of a research experiment. Also, I would have wanted to know the truth sooner. And I very much want to leave now." Fico practically runs from the house.

"Well done. I hope you're satisfied." I carry our glasses to the sink.

"I am. He wishes he had your advantages."

"He also thinks you lied to me and used me."

"He didn't say that."

"I don't care. *I* wish you hadn't lied to me and used me. And I'm the one who counts."

"Nastasia, I am sorry I didn't tell you and you had to find out the way you did. I hope one day you will forgive me." He touches my shoulder with an envelope.

"Brave envelope."

"Open it."

"It better contain backstage passes to the next Beyoncé concert. Clemency costs."

"You'll like this too."

Inside is the contact information for one Danica Babić, of Kreuzberg, Berlin. I'm speechless. I never thought he'd help. There are also two plane tickets. It's a shameless bribe, but I fall for it.

“What do you think?” He truly asks. Instead of looking proud of himself, his smile is wrinkled.

“Better than Beyoncé.”

“I’d like to accompany you, but if not, I’ll arrange for someone to take you.”

“You can come.” Small mercies. I know he wants to see her too. “Do you think we should contact her first or ambush her?” I can’t believe this is really happening.

“I’ll leave that up to you.” He heads upstairs.

“Dr.—Tyler, D—Dad,” that word feels foreign in my mouth. “How did—”

“Your old man still has a few tricks up his sleeve.” He calls from the upstairs landing. “How about Thai for dinner?”

I can’t tell who’s playing whom.

THERE ARE FACES on the façades. Mostly lions, but some girl faces too, chiseled into the majestic stone. Tons of graffiti—cartoon men in shirt ties and chained handcuffs, little naked monster men swarming a giant naked monster man, a two-story-high portrait of a man’s face chiseled into a plaster-covered brick wall—adorn the buildings, turning the city into an open-air gallery. Alack, alas, so many men, so little time. I have a mother to find.

Bright chips of sunlight rearrange themselves on the grass as we cut through an arty trailer park near the River Spree. The eau de marijuana wafting through the trees probably has nothing to do with tall, skinny dudes in Rasta garb patrolling the park’s entrance. We ignore the catcalls. Their eyes follow us as my vanilla escort takes my hand and leads me down a narrow stone path. Dad’s palm is sweaty. The path burps us out into a gentrifying neighborhood. Almost every other storefront is a café or eatery.

We stand outside Balkanika, a gourmet delicatessen slash wine bar. A ginormous deli case containing dips, spreads, borek, and grape leaves cajoles us through a glass window. Dad must be in anticipatory hummus heaven.

“This is it.” Dad smiles the type of smile people have when they wonder if their hair is out of place. “Ready?”

“Ready.” I am anything but. Pop rockets are going off in my stomach. A tinkering bell announces our entrance. No one is behind the counter.

“Nastasia, look.” Dad points to what’s on display inside a wooden crate.

“I can’t believe it. Let me take a picture. We have to get him some.”

Dad's spied jars of jam, made of fig and cocoa, with the brand name Ficoco. This makes Fico an ASS, an actor/singer/sandwich spread.

Dad takes a jar and turns toward the window to read its label. "It's made in Croatia." His back is toward me when a slender woman with dark curly hair enters from some back storeroom wearing a black, silky slip dress. Her wide smile balances her high forehead and strong nose. Her dress clings to her amazing, gorgeous breasts. They are perfect. There is nothing more to say.