ALAN BRENNERT

CRADLE

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Death borders upon our birth, and our cradle stands in the grave.

-- Joseph Hall

How much?"

The girl was barely eighteen, long, straight red hair almost to her waist, a pretty face made hard by too much makeup and by wary, friendliness eyes. She shifted a little in her seat, too-short skirt hitching up to reveal a flash of thigh, in a naive attempt, perhaps, to somehow influence the young attorney who sat opposite her. Marguerite, watching from a comer of the office, smiled to herself. Not very bright, but then, that really didn't matter, did it?

Ziegler slid the contract across the top of the big teak desk. "Ten thousand dollars," he said, showing no signs of being overwhelmed by teen sexuality. "Plus a per diem" -- she looked blank at that -- "a daily living expense during the nine months you carry the child. Fifty dollars a day for two hundred and seventy days-- less, of course, if you deliver prematurely-- for an aggregate total of twenty-three thousand, five hundred dollars."

The girl-- what was her name again? Sondra? -- seemed to contemplate that a long moment. She glanced casually around the expansive office with its hardwood floors and Paul Klee prints, floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the brightly lit fountains of Century City at night, as though assessing Marguerite's worth by the company she kept (or employed). Then, with a frown, she shook her head. "Make it an even twenty-five," she said emphatically.

Ziegler looked to Marguerite, who kept her amusement to herself such a shrewd bargainer: a paltry fifteen hundred extra! -- then nodded, silently.

"Agreed," said the attorney. "Now, in looking over the adoption agreement, you'll see there are some standard provisions to which you must adhere: No drug, alcohol, or tobacco use during the pregnancy; regular obstetrical examinations, which we will of course provide --"

Sondra frowned as she scanned the document. "What's this?" she interrupted. "'If circumstances warrant, surrogate agrees to domicile --'"

"At Ms. LeCourt's home, yes. That is, should there be any complications in the pregnancy-- unlikely, but you never know -- Ms. LeCourt would feel more secure having you nearby, with access to proper help. At which point, of course, we'd engage the services of a full-time nurse, and Dr. Chernow" he nodded toward the portly, balding man seated next to Marguerite -"would make daily visits." For the first time Sondra seemed hesitant.

Marguerite softly cleared her throat, and all eyes in the room were, just like

that, suddenly on her. She looked at the young woman and smiled. "I don't think
you'll find it that hard to take, Sondra," she said warmly. "I've been told I have a very comfortable home."

Sondra smiled uncertainly, though she seemed more puzzled, now, than reluctant.
"Listen," she said, finally, "this is none of my business, I know, and you can tell me to go to hell if you want, but --

"Because you're infertile, it's my eggs that'll be fertilized; right? And Mr. Ziegler tells me the sperm donor is anonymous. You've never even met him, right?"

Marguerite nodded.

"So it's a kid made by two strangers. No connection to you at all. Why go to all
this trouble? Why not a normal adoption? You're got the money to get any kid you
want. What do you get out of this?"

Marguerite was impressed, she hadn't expected the thought would even occur to Sondra, much less matter to her. Still, just to be safe, Marguerite had practiced her response. Time had taken the innocence from her still-youthful face, but she knew that very youthfulness could work for her here, adding poignancy to her words. She leaned forward, voice purposely soft.

"I want," she said, "the chance to watch my child grow. From a thought, to an embryo; from embryo to fetus; from fetus to child. I want to hear its heartbeat,
faint inside you; I want to be able to put my hand on your stomach and feel my son, or daughter, move. I want to be able to feel . . . if only for a moment . .
. that it's inside me. By being there, with you, as it grows . . . maybe it will
seem more like it's really mine."

Sondra listened, touched despite herself. Then, after only a moment's hesitation, she flipped to the last page of the contract, looked at Ziegler.

"Can I have a pen?" she asked.

Marguerite smiled.

The sleek white chauffeured Mercedes ghosted down Sunset Boulevard, passengers hidden behind tinted windows like riders on a phantom carriage. Inside, Chernow
said, "She's brighter than she looks, but not quite as bright as she thinks she
is. She knew insemination doesn't require removal of the ova, but when I told her we needed to do it to rule out genetic defects, she accepted it without a further thought."

Marguerite lit a cigarette -- a poor substitute for blood, but at least she didn't have to worry about cancer. "And there's nothing about the procedure itself that will cause her to suspect how -- experimental --it really is?"

Chernow shook his head. "We've already done the hard work. Considering the ways

in which your DNA was altered, just before your death, it's remarkable it took us only two years to reproduce the genetic code. Once we remove the surrogate's ova, she'll have no inkling her DNA's being wiped from the eggs-- or that yours is being imprinted onto them. All she'll actually see are the fertilized eggs being implanted in her uterus."

Marguerite exhaled a stream of smoke. She would have to quit, of course, before the baby arrived. "And then?"

"Then, with luck, a normal pregnancy, a normal birth. Though obviously, since no one's ever tried this before, we can't know for certain."

Marguerite nodded. The car turned up Queens Road, high above Sunset, toward the doctor's pied-a-terre in the hills; Marguerite glanced to her left and caught a glimpse of the golden lattice of lights -- gridwork constellations extending to the horizon-- that Los Angeles became at night. She would have dearly loved to see it, just once, by day: and not just on videotape.

"Marguerite?"

She turned. "Yes, Stewart?"

Chernow hesitated. "I . . . have my anxieties about this procedure." "Why? It won't harm the surrogate, will it?"

"Not the process itself, no. But your DNA was altered, irrevocably, by the bite that . . .transformed you. Some of your -- characteristics --will doubtless be passed on, genetically. Almost certainly your child will be, at least partly, a vampire."

Marguerite nodded. "I know that. I accepted that long ago." She studied him. "And that frightens you?"

"I . . . don't like the idea," he said in measured tones, "that I've helped create a new way for your-- kind -- to propagate themselves."

Marguerite laughed. "Stewart, trust me, the old method of propagation is far faster and more efficient than this," she said, smiling. When he didn't join her, she put a hand on his. "Stewart . . . you've known me for twenty years. I don't hunt; not when I can buy as much blood as I want. I don't seek the company of others of my 'kind.' I have no lust for power, or conquest, at least not any more."

She took his hand in hers, and held it as gently as her great strength allowed.
"I was twenty-five when I died," she said, and this time the softness in her tone was genuine. "I never had a chance to have a child. Two hundred years later-- science offers me that chance. That's all I want." She let go of his hand. "What does anyone want?" she said quietly, looking away. "To be loved

unconditionally. To be loved, despite who I am, all that I've done . . ."

She looked back at the lights. "That's all," she said, and it was the truth.

Chernow took her hand again; she looked up at him. Centuries of reading men's faces as they gazed at her told her, clearly and sadly, what was in his. They both knew he could not love her in the way she needed; no mortal could.

"Then you won't mind," he said gently, "if I destroy my notes afterward ?"

Marguerite smiled. "If that makes you feel better," she said, "by all means."

The procedure did, in fact, proceed as planned; Sondra's "decoded" ova were imprinted, successfully, with Marguerite's exotic DNA, fertilized by the donor sperm, and implanted once again in Sondra's womb. Fourteen weeks later, ultrasound revealed a fetal skeleton, normal in all ways for that stage of development, a week later, amniocentesis confirmed the fetus was male. In the sixteenth week, the first fetal heartbeat could be heard, faint but thrilling to
Marguerite, who had no heartbeat, no pulse of her own: her child was alive. It would breathe [already the placental villi were enlarged, drawing oxygen from the maternal blood), its heart would pump blood [unlike hers, merely a conduit through which blood moved by preternatural means: almost a living fluid that animated her, instead of itself being animated). Her son would be human.

Chernow was not so sure. Alive, yes; human, not necessarily. A hybrid, perhaps,
of the living and the undead . . . with certain characteristics of both.

Marguerite knew this, intellectually, but the first time she placed her hand on
Sondra's stomach--the first time she felt the baby move inside the womb--all such thoughts became remote. Something lived inside there: for the first time in
two hundred years, something of Marguerite lived. That was all she knew.

It was in the eighteenth week the first complications appeared. Normally, a pregnant woman's blood volume increases by twenty-five per cent by the time of delivery, while her red blood cell count actually decreases, as the fetus absorbs maternal blood through the placenta. Sondra's blood volume increased by
twenty-five percent within the first trimester alone, and her red cell and hemoglobin counts plunged to nearly half their normal levels. She began experiencing acute anemia: attacks of vertigo, extreme fatigue, drowsiness, a constant ringing in her ears.

Tests showed Sondra's bone marrow producing staggering numbers of red cells in response to a vastly increased appetite for blood protein and nitrogen on the part of the fetus; it was literally sucking the blood from its mother's body at
a prodigious -- and alarming -- rate. Her body was producing all the blood it could, but it wasn't enough; Chernow began augmenting this with weekly transfusions of plasma, as well as mega-doses of calcium to fortify her bone marrow.

This worked, to a point, but in the middle of her seventh month, when Sondra collapsed suddenly outside Beverly Center, an even larger problem presented itself.

Thank God she had remained conscious, and told the paramedics to bring her to

Chernow's office rather than nearby Cedars-Sinai; Lord only knew what the obstetricians there would have made of what they found. Even Chernow didn't realize at first what had happened. It was another anemic episode, yes-- ut severely acute, and one that seemed to reverse itself within minutes of Sondra coming into the office. He ran more blood tests; it was all he could do.

That night, he reluctantly gave Marguerite the results.

"Sondra's red blood cells are perfectly normal," he explained over dinner (his,
not hers) at Marguerite's Holmsby Hills mansion. "But as soon as they cross the
placental barrier into the fetus, they suddenly begin to . . . superheat. The blood plasma literally begins to evaporate, and the fetus, starved for blood, draws even more of it from the mother's body . . . only to have that evaporate,
as well."

Marguerite, shaken, stared at her empty plate. "This attack. It occurred . . . outside ?"

Chernow nodded gravely. "A bright, sunny day. Once we got her inside, the red-cell evaporation began to slow, then reverse itself. After the tests came in, I had Sondra sit under a UV lamp for half an hour; the anemia returned in force."

Marguerite shut her eyes against the realization.

"I think the time may have come for her to . . .come live with you," Chernow said quietly. "The sunguards on your windows, the shutters, the heavy curtains .
. .they should protect the fetus, and, by extension, Sondra, as well."

Marguerite was silent a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was a whisper. "I
dreamt," she said, finally, "that my child would play in the sun."

Chernow took a shallow breath. "That's not going to happen, Marguerite." A moment, then: "I'm sorry."

And so Sondra came to live with Marguerite, never suspecting, of course, anything more than what Chernow told her: that they needed to keep close watch on her from now on; that the shades were drawn because of the spots she sometimes saw before her eyes, a result of the anemia; that all other signs were
positive, and they were confident she would have a healthy baby and a safe delivery. Which was, by and large, true.

Nurses attended her twenty-four hours a day, and the luxuries of Marguerite's home-- maids to wait on her, to draw her bath; cooks to prepare elegant meals; a
private screening room with hundreds of films available to her -- seemed to buoy
her spirits, at least temporarily.

She saw little of Marguerite, who "worked" during the day and never appeared until after sunset; and, even then, lingered just long enough to listen to her child's heartbeat, feel him move inside Sondra, make some perfunctory small talk, then disappear once more, leaving Sondra alone, feeling little more than a

womb for hire, a shell. But then (she told herself) that's all she'd wanted to be, wasn't it?

One night well into the ninth month, Marguerite awoke to find Sondra missing --
having missed dinner, and apparently given the household help the proverbial slip. Frantic, Marguerite searched the house in a panic, then raced onto the grounds. There were a good fifteen acres of land surrounding the house, a labyrinth of hedges and gardens, and it was here that Marguerite, with vast relief, discovered her-- skipping flat stones across the surface of the koi pond. Marguerite was brought up short: Sondra suddenly looked nothing like the crass nymphet selected for that very crassness land so less likely to contest the baby's custody) but like a lonely little girl.

She heard Marguerite behind her; turned. "Hi."

Marguerite took a step toward her. "You . . . had us worried. Maria said you didn't show up for dinner."

Sondra shrugged. "Wasn't hungry." She turned back, skipped the last stone across
the pond. "Had another anemia spell this afternoon. Still feeling kind of woozy."

Marguerite moved a bit closer. "I'm sorry. We never expected this to be so painful for you."

Sondra smiled lopsidedly. "Yeah, well . . . you want to hear something really weird?" She shook her head in bemusement. "As shitty as this pregnancy has been
. . . I'm actually kind of . . . glad . . .I'm pregnant. Is that certifiable, or
what?"

Marguerite felt a little chill, and it wasn't the night air. Was Sondra bonding
with the unborn child, after all? "Glad? How so?"

Sondra shrugged. "I look around at your house . . . at these grounds . . . I think about all the money you must have --"

Damn, Marguerite thought. A renegotiation ploy? Is that --

"And I think . . ." Sondra hesitated; Marguerite steeled herself. "I think about
how lucky this kid is going to be," Sondra said quietly. "How much you'll be able to do for him. And it makes me feel . . .proud, I guess . . . that I'm helping him have a better life than I've had. You know what I mean?"

Marguerite stood there, surprised by Sondra's response, and more than a little ashamed at her own.

She put a hand, gently, on Sondra's arm.

"Yes," she said, at length. "I know exactly what you mean."

Sondra's contractions began at two o'clock Wednesday afternoon, exactly two hundred and seventy days after the in vitro fertilization. The first one lasted
about forty seconds, though Sondra swore it felt more like a minute and a

half;
the second came twenty minutes later. Within the hour Chernow had arrived to whisk Sondra, behind the UV-tinted windows of the Mercedes, to the private clinic in Santa Monica, where the contractions began coming fast and thick. It was three-thirty in the afternoon.

"Where's Marguerite?" Sondra gasped, a nurse sopping her forehead, and Chernow fell back on the if-necessary, pre-arranged lie that she was in San Diego on business, but would be here just as soon as she could. He hoped that Sondra's labor would, like most first-time mothers, last at least thirteen or fourteen hours -- placing the actual birth well after sundown.

Still, to be safe, the shades were drawn, the shutters closed -- as much for the
baby as for Marguerite.

Sondra's water broke about five o'clock that afternoon, and, with Chernow's support, she began bearing down as best she could. Less than an hour later, as dusk fell, Marguerite stirred in her bed, her naked body lying, as always, atop
a thin layer of soil from her native Nantes. Her eyes snapped open. Maria -- stooped, white-haired, fiercely loyal and protective -- stood above her. "The hospital called," she said. "It's time."

If Marguerite's heart had been capable of it, it would have been pounding. She jumped up, kissed Maria on the forehead, and stood by the window. "Please leave
now," she said, and Maria, as usual, obeyed wordlessly. Marguerite shut her eyes, picturing her child, hoping-- she had no one to pray to-- that she would not arrive too late to see him born. A shudder convulsed her body as it folded in on itself, becoming smaller, lighter --

And then she was soaring over the city-- sensed more than seen, in this form --
heading west to the ocean, hearing/feeling the landscape below her, picking out
the sonarform of the clinic, then transforming-- flesh expanding, bones lengthening -- as she dropped to earth. Inside, Chernow had left a change of clothes for her; she dressed hurriedly and rushed into Sondra's room.

She went immediately to her side, took her hand; Sondra's fingernails bit into her palm, and had Marguerite been merely human, they might have drawn blood. "It's all right," Marguerite said. "Everything's going to be fine." She glanced
up at Chernow, as though to ask: Isn't it?

Understanding her look, he nodded. "Everything's progressing normally," he said.
Within two hours, the top of the baby's head could be seen. And as Sondra's eries of pain filled the room, Marguerite found herself wishing it were she who
was crying out -- less empathy than envy, because this particular pain was a kind only a mortal woman could know . . .

"Push!" Chernow coached. "Push!"

Sondra pushed -- and the top of the baby's head popped out of the vaginal canal.
But as soon as she saw it -- saw its closed eyes and wrinkled skin--Marguerite sensed something was wrong terribly wrong. She said nothing, but as the infant

quickly emerged, Chernow and Sondra sensed something as well. A newborn infant's skin was always wrinkly, but this one's flesh was crepey; almost wizened. There was something horribly familiar about it . . . and there was no movement. Neck, shoulders, arms, each in their turn appeared . . .but by the time the infant was pulled out, close to midnight, everyone knew the truth:

The child was dead. Stillborn.

Sondra was crying mourning the boy who might have had so much. Chernow was stunned. "Everything was proceeding normally . . ." was all he could say.

Marguerite held out her arms. Chernow cut the umbilical cord, then silently passed the tiny form to her; she paid no mind to the blood and waxy vernix covering its body. Gently she touched the face. Its skin was so old; so very old, before it ever was new. She stroked the baby's head, fingers caressing its ears, its neck, its tiny mouth.

She should have known. Perhaps God, if He existed, had been offended at the thought of life plucked, arrogantly, from the darkest of cradles; or perhaps that Other, with whom she had made a grim compact centuries before, was equally enraged, resentful that one of his subjects was trying to reclaim something he had honestly bargained for, and won. Perhaps it was the one thing that Heaven and Hell could both agree upon.

Gently she caressed the old-man's skin of her never-young son, having recognized it immediately; she had seen it once before, when an undead lover of hers had been struck by a carriage and fallen, no time to change shape, into the River Loire. And she knew that her child, her baby, her first born, had in fact been doomed for hours -- since five o'clock that afternoon.

"Running water," was all she said, and no one except Chernow even heard, much less understood. Marguerite held the small, still form to her chest, and hoped, at least, that his soul had flown -- that he had been graced with a soul to fly -- and that it would know the peace his mother had renounced forever. "Adieu, mon agneau sanglant," she whispered: Farewell, my bloodied lamb. And, with a kiss to his forehead, said goodbye to her son.