

MILLENNIUM BABIES

by KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

First published in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, January 2000.

Two weeks into the second semester, she got the message. It had been sent to her house system, and was coded to her real name, Brooke Delacroix, not Brooke Cross, the name she had used since she was eighteen. At first she didn't want to open it, thinking it might be another legal conundrum from her mother, so she let the house monitor in the kitchen blink while she prepared dinner.

She made a hearty dinner, and poured herself a glass of rosé before settling down in front of the living room fireplace. The fireplace was the reason she'd bought this house. She had fallen in love with the idea that she could sit on cold winter nights under a pile of blankets, a real fire burning nearby, and read the ancient paperbacks she found in Madison's antique stores. She read a lot of current work on her e-book, especially research for the classes she taught at the university, but she loved to read novels in their paper form, careful not to tear the brittle pages, feeling the weight of bound paper in her hands.

She had added bookshelves to the house's dining room for her paper novels, and she had made a few other improvements as well. But she tried to keep the house's character. It was a hundred and fifty years old, built when this part of Wisconsin had been nothing but family farms. The farmland was gone now, divided into five acre plots, but the privacy remained. She loved being out here, in the country, more than anything else. Even though the university provided her job, the house was her world.

The novel she held was a thin volume, and a favorite -- *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald -- but on this night, the book didn't hold her interest. Finally she gave up. If she didn't hear the damn message, she would be haunted by her mother all night.

Brooke left the glass of wine and the book on the end table, her blankets curled at the edge of the couch, and made her way back to the kitchen. She could have had House play an audio-only version of the message in the living room, but she wanted to see her mother's face, to know how serious it was this time.

The monitor was on the west wall beside the microwave. The previous owners -- a charming elderly couple -- had kept a small television in that spot. On nights like this, Brooke thought the monitor was no improvement.

She stood in front of it, arms crossed, sighed, and said, "House, play message."

The blinking icon disappeared from the screen. A digital voice she did not recognize said, "This message is keyed for Brooke Delacroix only. It will not be played without certification that no one else is in the room."

She stood. If this was from her mother, her tactics had changed. This sounded official. Brooke made sure she was visible to the built-in camera.

"I'm Brooke," she said, "and I'm alone."

"You're willing to certify this?" the strange voice asked her.

"Yes," she said.

"Stand by for message."

The screen turned black. She rubbed her hands together. Goosebumps were crawling across her skin. Who would send her an official message?

"This is coded for Brooke Delacroix," a new digital voice said. "Personal identification number..."

As the voice rattled off the number, she clenched her fist. Maybe something had happened to her mother. Brooke was, after all, the only next of kin.

"This is Brooke Delacroix," she said. "How many more security protocols do we have here?"

"Five," House said.

She felt her shoulders relax as she heard the familiar voice.

"Go around them. I don't have the time."

"All right," House said. "Stand by."

She was standing by. Now she wished she had brought her glass of wine into the kitchen. For the first time, she felt as if she needed it.

"Ms. Delacroix?" A male voice spoke, and as it did, the monitor filled with an image. A middle-aged man with dark hair and dark eyes stared at a point just beyond her. He had the look of an intellectual, an aesthetic, someone who spent too much time in artificial light. He also looked vaguely familiar. "Forgive my rudeness. I know you go by Cross now, but I wanted to make certain that you are the woman I'm searching for. I'm looking for Brook Delacroix, born 12:05 a.m., January first in the year 2000 in Detroit, Michigan."

Another safety protocol. What was this?

"That's me," Brooke said.

The screen blinked slightly, apparently as her answer was fed into some sort of program. He must have recorded various messages for various answers. She knew she wasn't speaking to him live.

"We are actually colleagues, Ms. Cross. I'm Eldon Franke..."

Of course. That was why he looked familiar. The Human Potential Guru who had gotten all the press. He was a legitimate scientist whose most recent tome became a pop culture bestseller. Franke rehashed the nature versus

nurture arguments in personality development, mixed in some sociology and some well documented advice for improving the lot nature/nurture gave people, and somehow the book hit.

She had read it, and had been impressed with the interdisciplinary methods he had used -- and the credit he had given to his colleagues.

"...have a new grant, quite a large one actually, which startled even me. With that and the proceeds from the last book, I'm able to undertake the kind of study I've always wanted to do."

She kept her hands folded and watched him. His eyes were bright, intense. She remembered seeing him at faculty parties, but she had never spoken to him. She didn't speak to many people voluntarily, especially during social occasions. She had learned, from her earliest days, the value of keeping to herself.

"I will be bringing in subjects from around the country," he was saying. "I had hoped to go around the world, but that makes this study too large even for me. As it is, I'll be working with over three hundred subjects from all over the United States. I didn't expect to find one in my own backyard."

A subject. She felt her breath catch in her throat. She had thought he was approaching her as an equal.

"I know from published reports that you dislike talking about your status as a Millennium Baby, but--"

"Off," she said to House. Franke's image froze on the screen.

"I'm sorry," House said. "This message is designed to be played in its entirety."

"So go around it," she said, "and shut the damn thing off."

"The message program is too sophisticated for my systems," House said.

Brooke cursed. The son of a bitch knew she'd try to shut him down. "How long is it?"

"You have heard a third of the message."

Brooke sighed. "All right. Continue."

The image became mobile again. "--I hope you hear me out. My work, as you may or may not know, is with human potential. I plan to build on my earlier research, but I lacked the right kind of study group. Many scientists of all stripes have studied generations, and assumed that because people were born in the same year, they had the same hopes, aspirations, and dreams. I do not believe that is so. The human creature is too diverse--"

"Get to the point," Brooke said, sitting on a wooden kitchen chair.

--so in my quest for the right group, I stumbled on thirty-year-old articles about Millennium Babies, and I realized that the subset of your generation, born on January 1 of the year 2000, actually have similar beginnings."

"No, we don't," Brooke said.

"Thus you give me a chance to focus this study. I will use the raw data to continue my overall work, but this study will focus on what it is that makes human beings succeed or fail--"

"Screw you," Brooke said and walked out of the kitchen. Behind her, Franke's voice stopped.

"Do you want me to transfer audio to the living room?" House asked.

"No," Brooke said. "Let him ramble on. I'm done listening."

The fire crackled in the fireplace, her wine had warmed to room temperature, bringing out a different bouquet, and her blankets looked comfortable. She sank into them. Franke's voice droned on in the kitchen, and she ordered House to play Bach to cover him.

But her favorite Brandenburg Concerto couldn't wipe Franke's voice from her mind. Studying Millennium Babies. Brooke closed her eyes. She wondered what her mother would think of that.

Three days later, Brooke was in her office, trying to assemble her lecture for her new survey class. This one was on the two world wars. The University of Wisconsin still believed that a teacher should stand in front of students, even for the large lecture courses, instead of delivering canned lectures that could be downloaded. Most professors saw surveys as too much wasted work, but she actually enjoyed the courses. She liked standing before a large room delivering a lecture.

But now she was getting past the introductory remarks and into the areas she wasn't that familiar with. She didn't believe in regurgitating the textbooks, so she was boning up on World War I. She had forgotten that its causes were so complex; its results so far reaching, especially in Europe. Sometimes she just found herself reading, lost in the past.

Her office was small and narrow, with barely enough room for her desk. Because she was new, she was assigned to Bascom Hall at the top of Bascom Hill, a building that had been around for most of the university's history. The Hall's historic walls didn't accommodate new technology, so the university made certain she had a fancy desk with a built-in screen. The problem with that was that when she did extensive research, as she was doing now, she had to look down. She often downloaded information to her palmtop or worked at home. Working in her office, in the thin light provided by the ancient fluorescents and the dirty meshed window, gave her a headache.

But she was nearly done. Tomorrow, she would take the students from the horrors of trench warfare to the first steps toward US involvement. The bulk of the lecture, though, would focus on isolationism -- a potent force in both world wars.

A knock on her door brought her to the twenty-first century. She rubbed the bridge of her nose impatiently. She wasn't holding office hours. She hated it when students failed to read the signs.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Professor Cross?"

"Yes?"

"May I have a moment of your time?"

The voice was male and didn't sound terribly young, but many of her students were older.

"A moment," she said, using her desktop to unlock the door. "I'm not having office hours."

The knob turned and a man came inside. He wasn't very tall, and he was thin -- a runner's build. It wasn't until he turned toward her, though, that she let out a groan.

"Professor Franke."

He held up a hand. "I'm sorry to disturb you--"

"You should be," she said. "I purposely didn't answer your message."

"I figured. Please. Just give me a few moments."

She shook her head. "I'm not interested in being the subject of any study. I don't have time."

"Is it the time? Or is it the fact that the study has to do with Millennium Babies?" His look was sharp.

"Both."

"I can promise you that you'll be well compensated. And if you'll just listen to me for a moment, you might reconsider--"

"Professor Franke," she said, "I'm not interested."

"But you're a key to the study."

"Why?" she asked. "Because of my mother's lawsuits?"

"Yes," he said.

She felt the air leave her body. She had to remind herself to breathe. The feeling was familiar. It had always been familiar. Whenever anyone talked about Millennium Babies, she had this feeling in her stomach.

Millennium Babies. No one had expected the craze, but it had become apparent by March of 1999. Prospective parents were timing the conception of their children as part of a race to see if their child could be the first born in 2000 -- the New Millennium, as the pundits of the day inaccurately called it. There was a more-or-less informal international contest, but in the United States, the competition was quite heavy. There were other races in every developed country, and in every city. And in most of those places, the winning parent got a lot of money, and a lot of products, and some, those with the cutest babies, or the pushiest parents, got endorsements as well.

"Oh, goodie," Brooke said, filling her voice with all the sarcasm she could muster. "My mother was upset that I didn't get exploited enough as a child so you're here to fill the gap."

His back straightened. "It's not like that."

"Really? How is it then?" She regretted the words the moment she spoke them. She was giving Franke the opening he wanted.

"We've chosen our candidates with care," he said. "We are not taking babies born randomly on January 1 of 2000. We're taking children whose birth was planned, whose parents made public statements about the birth, and whose parents hoped to get a piece of the pie."

"Wonderful," she said. "You're studying children with dysfunctional families."

"Are we?" he asked.

"Well, if you study me, you are," she said and stood. "Now, I'd like it if you'd leave."

"You haven't let me finish."

"Why should I?"

"Because this study might help you, Professor Cross."

"I'm doing fine without your help."

"But you never talk about your Millennium Baby status."

"And how often do you discuss the day you were born, Professor?"

"My birthday is rather unremarkable," he said. "Unlike yours."

She crossed her arms. "Get out."

"Remember that I study human potential," he said. "And you all have the same beginnings. All of you come from parents who had the same goal -- parents who were driven to achieve something unusual."

"Parents who were greedy," she said.

"Some of them," he said. "And some of them planned to have children anyway, and thought it might be fun to try to join the contest."

"I don't see how our beginnings are relevant."

He smiled, and she cursed under her breath. As long as she talked to him, as long as she asked thinly veiled questions, he had her and they both knew it.

"In the past forty years, studies of identical twins raised apart have shown that at least 50 percent of a person's disposition is apparent at birth. Which means that no matter how you're raised, if you were a happy baby, you have a greater than 50 percent chance of being a happy adult. The remaining factors are probably environmental. Are you familiar with DNA mapping?"

"You're not answering my question," she said.

"I'm trying to," he said. "Listen to me for a few moments, and then kick me out of your office."

She wouldn't get rid of him otherwise. She slowly sat in her chair.

"Are you familiar with DNA mapping?" he repeated.

"A little," she said.

"Good." He leaned back in his chair and templed his fingers. "We haven't located a happiness gene or an unhappiness gene. We're not sure what it is about the physical make-up that makes these things work. But we do know that it has something to do with serotonin levels."

"Get to the part about Millennium Babies," she said.

He smiled. "I am. My last book was partly based on the happiness/unhappiness model, but I believe that's too

simplistic. Human beings are complex creatures. And as I grow older, I see a lot of lost potential. Some of us were raised to fail, and some were raised to succeed. Some of those raised to succeed have failed, and some who were raised to fail have succeeded. So clearly it isn't all environment."

"Unless some were reacting against their environment," she said, hearing the sullenness in her tone, a sullenness she hadn't used since she'd last spoken to her mother five years before.

"That's one option," he said, sounding brighter. He must have taken her statement for interest. "But one of the things I learned while working on human potential is that drive is like happiness. Some children are born driven. They walk sooner than others. They learn faster. They adapt faster. They achieve more, from the moment they take their first breath."

"I don't really believe that our entire personalities are formed at birth," she said. "Or that our destinies are written before we're conceived."

"None of us do," he said. "If we did, we wouldn't have a reason to get out of bed in the morning. But we do acknowledge that we're all given traits and talents that are different from each other. Some of us have blue eyes. Some of us can hit golf balls with a power and accuracy that others only dream of. Some of us have perfect pitch, right?"

"Of course," she snapped.

"So it only stands to reason that some of us are born with more happiness than others, and some are born with more drive than others. If you consider those intangibles to be as real as, say, musical talent."

His argument had a certain logic, but she didn't want to agree with him on anything. She wanted him out of her office.

"But," he said. "Those with the most musical talent aren't always the ones on stage at Carnegie Hall. There are other factors, environmental factors. A child who grows up without hearing music might never know how to make music, right?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Likewise," he said, "if that musically inclined child had parents to whom music was important, the child might hear music all the time. From the moment that child is born, that child is familiar with music and has an edge on the child who hasn't heard a note."

She started tapping her fingers.

He glanced at them and leaned forward. "As I said in my message, this study focuses on success and failure. To my knowledge, there has never before been a group of children conceived nationwide with the same specific goal in mind."

Her mouth was dry. Her fingers had stopped moving.

"You Millennium Babies share several traits in common. Your parents conceived you at the same time. Your parents had similar goals and desires for you. You came out of the womb and instantly you were branded a success or a failure, at least for this one goal."

"So," she said, keeping her voice cold. "Are you going to deal with all those children who were abandoned by their parents when they discovered they didn't win?"

"Yes," he said.

The quiet sureness of his response startled her. He spread his hands as if in explanation. "Their parents gave up on them," he said. "Right from the start. Those babies are perhaps the purest subjects of the study. They were clearly conceived only with the race in mind."

"And you want me because I'm the most spectacular failure of the group." Her voice was cold, even though she had to clasp her hands together to keep them from trembling.

"I don't consider you a failure, Professor Cross," he said. "You're well respected in your profession. You're on a tenure track at a prestigious university--"

"I meant as a Millennium Baby. I'm the public failure. When people think of baby contests, the winners never come to mind. I do."

He sighed. "That's part of it. Part of it is your mother's attitude. In some ways, she's the most obsessed parent, at least that we can point to."

Brooke winced.

"I'd like to have you in this study," he said. "The winners will be. It would be nice to have you represented as well."

"So that you can get rich off this book, and I'll be disgraced yet again," she said.

"Maybe," he said. "Or maybe you'll get validated."

Her shoulders were so tight that it hurt to move her head. "'Validated.' Such a nice psychiatrist's word. Making me feel better will salve your conscience while you get rich."

"You seem obsessed with money," he said.

"Shouldn't I be?" she asked. "With my mother?"

He stared at her for a long moment.

Finally, she shook her head. "It's not the money. I just don't want to be exploited any more. For any reason."

He nodded. Then he folded his hands across his stomach and squinched up his face, as if he were thinking. Finally, he said, "Look, here's how it is. I'm a scientist. You're a member of a group that interests me and will be useful in my research. If I were researching thirty-year-old history professors who happened to be on a tenure track, I'd probably interview you as well. Or professional women who lived in Wisconsin. Or--"

"Would you?" she asked. "Would you come to me, really?"

He nodded. "It's policy to check who's available for study at the university before going outside of it."

She sighed. He had a point. "A book on Millennium Babies will sell well. They all do. And you'll get interviews, and you'll become famous."

"The study uses Millennium Babies," he said, "but anything I publish will be about success and failure, not a pop psychology book about people born on January first."

"You can swear to that?" she asked.

"I'll do it in our agreement," he said.

She closed her eyes. She couldn't believe he was talking her into this.

Apparently he didn't think he had, for he continued. "You'll be compensated for your time and your travel expenses. We can't promise a lot, but we do promise that we won't abuse your assistance."

She opened her eyes. That intensity was back in his face. It didn't unnerve her. In fact, it reassured her. She would rather have him passionate about the study than anything else.

"All right," she said. "What do I have to do?"

First she signed waivers. She had all of them checked out by her lawyer -- the fact that she even had a lawyer was yet another legacy from her mother -- and he said that they were fine, even liberal. Then he tried to talk her out of the study, worried more as a friend, he said, even though he had never been her friend before.

"You've been trying to get away from all of this. Now you're opening it back up. That can't be good for you."

But she wasn't sure what was good for her any more. She had tried not thinking about it. Maybe focusing on herself, on what happened to her from the moment she was born, was better.

She didn't know, and she didn't ask. The final agreement she signed was personalized -- it guaranteed her access to her file, a copy of the completed study, and promised that any study her information was used in would concern success and failure only, and would not be marketed as a Millennium Baby product. Her lawyer asked for a few changes, but very few, considering how opposed he was to this project. She was content with the concessions Professor Franke made for her, including the one which allowed her to leave after the first two months.

But the first two months were grueling, in their own way. She had to carve time out of an already full schedule for a complete physical, which included DNA sampling. This had been a major sticking point for her lawyer -- that her DNA and her genetic history would not be made available to anyone else -- and he had actually gotten Franke to sign forms that attested to that fact. The sampling, for all its trouble, was relatively painless. A few strands of hair, some skin scrapings, and two vials of blood, and she was done.

The psychological exams took the longest. Most of them required the presence of the psychiatric research member of the team, a dour woman who barely spoke to Brooke when she came in. The woman watched while Brooke used a computer to take tests: a Rorschach, a Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Interview, a Thematic Apperception Test, and a dozen others whose names she just as quickly forgot. One of them was a standard IQ test. Another a specialized test designed by Franke's team for his previous experiment. All of them felt like games to Brooke, and all of them took over an hour each to complete.

Her most frustrating time, though, was with the sociologist, a well-meaning man named Meyer. He wanted to correlate her experiences with the experiences of others, and put them in the context of the society at the time. He'd ask questions, though, and she'd correct them -- feeling that his knowledge of modern history was poor. Finally she complained to Franke, who smiled, and told her that her perceptions and the researchers' didn't have to match. What was important to them wasn't what was true for the society, but what was true for *her*. She wanted to argue, but it wasn't her study, and she decided she was placing too much energy into all of it.

Through it all, she had weekly appointments with a psychologist who asked her questions she didn't want to think about. *How has being a Millennium Baby influenced your outlook on life? What's your first memory? What do you think of your mother?*

Brooke couldn't answer the first. The second question was easy. Her first memory was of television lights blinding her, creating prisms, and her chubby baby fingers reaching for them, only to be caught and held by her mother's cold hand.

Brooke declined to answer the third question, but the psychologist asked it at every single meeting. And after every single meeting, Brooke went home and cried.

She gave a mid-term exam in her World Wars class, the first time she had ever done so in a survey class. But she decided to see how effective she was being, since her concentration was more on her own past than the one she was supposed to be teaching.

Her graduate assistants complained about it, especially when they looked at the exam itself. Her assistants had tried to talk her into a simple true/false/multiple choice exam, and she had glared at them. "I don't want to give a test that can be graded by computer," she said. "I want to see a handwritten exam, and I want to know what these kids have learned." And because she wanted to know that -- not because of her assistants' complaints (as she made very clear) -- she took twenty of the exams to grade herself.

But before she started, she had a meeting in Franke's office. He had called her.

Franke's office was in a part of the campus she didn't get to very often. A winding road took her past Washburn Observatory on a bluff overlooking Lake Mendota, and into a grove of young trees. The parking area was large and filled with small electric and energy efficient cars. She walked up the brick sidewalk. Unlike the sidewalks around the rest of the city, this one didn't have the melting piles of dirty snow that were reminders of the long hard winter. Instead, tulips and irises poked out of the brown dirt lining the walk.

The building was an old Victorian style house, rather large for its day. The only visible signs of a remodel (besides the pristine condition of the paint and roof) were the security system outside, and the heatpump near the driveway.

Clearly this was a faculty-only building; no classes were held here. She turned the authentic glass door knob and stepped into a narrow foyer. A small electronic screen floated in the center of the room. The screen moved toward her.

"I'm here to see Dr. Franke," she said.

"Second floor," the digital voice responded. "He is expecting you."

She sighed softly and mounted the stairs. With the exception of the electronics, everything in the hall reflected the period. Even the stairs weren't covered in carpet, but instead in an old-fashioned runner, tacked on the sides, with a long gold carpet holder pushed against the back of each step.

The stairs ended in a long narrow hallway, illuminated by electric lights done up to resemble gaslights. Only one door stood open. She knocked on it, then, without waiting for an invitation, went in.

The office wasn't like hers. This office was a suite, with a main area and a private room to the side. A leather couch was pushed against the window, and two matching leather chairs flanked it. Teak tables provided the accents, with round gold table lamps the only flourish.

Professor Franke stood in the door to the private area. He looked at her examining his office.

"Impressive," she said.

He shrugged. "The university likes researchers, especially those who add to its prestige."

She knew that. She had published her thesis, and it had received some acclaim in academic circles, which was why she was as far ahead as she was. But very few historians became famous for their research. She doubted she would ever achieve this sort of success.

"Would you like a seat?" Franke asked.

She sat on one of the leather chairs. It was soft, and molded around her. "I didn't think you'd need to interview every subject to see if they wanted to continue," she said.

"Every subject isn't you." He sat across from her. His hair was slightly mussed, as if he had been running his fingers through it, and he had a coffee stain above the breastpocket of his white shirt. "We had agreements."

She nodded.

"I will tell you some of what we have learned," he said. "It's preliminary, of course."

"Of course." She sounded calmer than she felt. Her heart was pounding.

"We've found three interesting things. The first is that all Millennium Babies in this study walked earlier than the norm, and spoke earlier as well. Since most were firstborns, this is unusual. Firstborns usually speak *later* than the norm because their every need is catered to. They don't need to speak right away, and when they do, they usually speak in full sentences."

"Meaning?"

"I hesitate to say for certain, but it might be indicative of great drive. Stemming, I believe, from the fact that the parents were driven." His eyes were sparkling. His enthusiasm for his work was catching. She found herself leaning forward like a student in her favorite class. "We're also finding genetic markers in the very areas we were looking for. And some interesting biochemical indications that may help us isolate the biological aspect of this."

"You're moving fast," she said.

He nodded. "That's what's nice about having a good team."

And a lot of subjects, she thought. Not to mention building on earlier research.

"We've also found that there is direct correlation between a child's winning or losing the millennium race and her perception of herself as a success or failure, independent of external evidence."

Her mouth was dry. "Meaning?"

"No matter how successful they are, the majority of Millennium Babies -- at least the ones we chose for this study, the ones whose parents conceived them only as part of the race -- perceive themselves as failures."

"Including me," she said.

He nodded. The movement was slight, and it was gentle.

"Why?" she asked.

"That's the thing we can only speculate at. At least at this moment." He wasn't telling her everything. But then, the study wasn't done. He tilted his head slightly. "Are you willing to go to phase two of the study?"

"If I say no, will you tell me what else you've discovered?" she asked.

"That's our agreement." He paused and then added, "I would really like it if you continued."

Brooke smiled. "That much is obvious."

He smiled too, and then looked down. "This last part is nothing like the first. You won't have test after test. It's only going to last for a few days. Can you do that?"

Some of the tension left her shoulders. She could do a few days. But that was it. "All right," she said.

"Good." He smiled at her, and she braced herself. There was more. "I'll put you down for the next segment. It doesn't start until Memorial Day. I have to ask you to stay in town, and set aside that weekend."

She had no plans. She usually stayed in town on Memorial Day weekend. Madison emptied out, the students going home, and the city became a small town -- one she dearly loved.

She nodded.

He waited a moment, his gaze darting downward, and then meeting hers again. "There's one more thing."

This was why he had called her here. This was why she needed to see him in person.

"I was wondering if your mother ever told you who your father is. It would help our study if we knew something about both parents."

Brooke threaded her hands together, willing herself to remain calm. This had been a sensitive issue her entire life.

"No," she said. "My mother has no idea who my father is. She went to a sperm bank."

Franke frowned. "I just figured, since your mother seemed so meticulous about everything else, she would have researched your father as well."

"She did," Brooke said. "He was a physicist, very well known, apparently. It was one of those sperm banks that specialized in famous or successful people. And my mother did check that out."

Your father must not have been as wonderful as they said he was. Look at you. It had to come from somewhere.

"Do you know the name of the bank?"

"No."

Franke sighed. "I guess we have all that we can, then."

She hated the disapproval in his tone. "Surely others in this study only have one parent."

"Yes," he said. "There's a subset of you. I was just hoping--"

"Anything to make the study complete," she said sarcastically.

"Not anything," he said. "You can trust me on that."

Brooke didn't hear from Professor Franke again for nearly a month, and then only in the form of a message, delivered to House, giving her the exact times, dates, and places of the Memorial Day meetings. She forgot about the study except when she saw it on her calendar.

The semester was winding down. The mid-term in her World Wars class showed her two things: that she had an affinity for the topic that she was sharing with the students; and that at least two of her graduate assistants had a strong aversion to work. She lectured both assistants, spoke to the chair of the department about teaching the survey class next semester, and continued on with the lectures, focusing on them as if she were the graduate student instead of the professor.

By late April, she had her final exam written -- a long cumbersome thing, a mixture of true/false/multiple choice for the assistants, and two essay questions for her. She was thinking of a paper herself -- one on the way those wars still echoed through the generations -- and she was trying to decide if she wanted the summer to work on it or to teach as she usually did.

The last Saturday in April was unusually balmy, in the seventies without much humidity, promising a beautiful summer ahead. The lilac bush near her kitchen window had bloomed. The birds had returned, and her azaleas were blossoming as well. She was in the garage, digging for a lawn chair that she was convinced she still had, when she heard the hum of an electric car.

She came out of the garage, dusty and streaked with grime. A green car pulled into her driveway, next to the ancient pick-up she used for hauling.

Something warned her right from the start. A glimpse, perhaps, or a movement. Her stomach flipped over, and she had to swallow sudden nausea. She had left her personal phone inside -- it was too nice to be connected to the world today -- and she had never gotten the garage hooked into House's computer because she hadn't seen the need for the expense.

Still, as the car shuddered to a stop, she glanced at the screen door, wondering if she could make it in time. But the car's door was already opening, and in this kind of stand-off, fake courage was better than obvious panic.

Her mother stepped out. She was a slender woman. She wore blue jeans and a pale peach summer sweater that accented her silver and gold hair. The hair was new and had the look of permanence. Apparently her mother had finally decided to settle on a color. She wore gold bangles, and a matching necklace, but her ears were bare.

"I have a restraining order against you," Brooke said, struggling to keep her voice level. "You are not supposed to be here."

"I'm not the one who broke the order." Her mother's voice was smooth and seductive. Her courtroom voice. She had won a lot of cases with that melodious warmth. It didn't seem too strident. It just seemed sure.

"I sure as hell didn't want contact with you," Brooke said.

"No? Is that why your university contacted me?"

Brooke's heart was pounding so hard she wondered if her mother could hear it. "Who contacted you?"

"A Professor Franke, for some study. Something to do with DNA samples. I was to send them through my doctor, but you know I wouldn't do such a thing with anything that delicate."

Son of a bitch. Brooke hadn't known they were going to try something like that. She didn't remember any mention of it, nothing in the forms.

"I have nothing to do with that," Brooke said.

"It seems you're in some study. That seems like involvement to me," her mother said.

"Not the kind that gets you around a restraining order. Now get the hell off my property."

"Brooke, honey," her mother said, taking a step toward her. "I think you and I should discuss this--"

"There's nothing to discuss," Brooke said. "I want you to stay away from me."

"That's silly." Her mother took another step forward. "We should be able to settle this, Brooke. Like adults. I'm your mother--"

"That's not my fault," Brooke snapped. She glanced at the screen door again.

"A restraining order is for people who threaten your life. I've never hurt you, Brooke."

"There's judge in Dane County who disagrees, Mother."

"Because you were so hysterical," her mother said. "We've had a good run of it, you and I."

Brooke felt the color drain from her face. "How's that, Mother? The family that sues together stays together?"

"Brooke, we have been denied what's rightfully ours. We--"

"It never said in any of those contests that a child had to be born by natural means. You misunderstood, Mother. Or you tried to be even more perfect than anyone else. So what if I'm the first vaginal birth of the new millennium. So what? It was thirty years ago. Let it go."

"The first baby received enough in endorsements to pay for a college education and to have a trust fund--"

"And you've racked up enough in legal fees that you could have done the same." Brooke rubbed her hands over her arms. The day had grown colder.

"No, honey," her mother said in that patronizing tone that Brooke hated. "I handled my own case. There were no fees."

It was like arguing with a wall. "I have made it really, really clear that I never wanted to see you again," Brooke said. "So why do you keep hounding me? You don't even like me."

"Of course I like you, Brooke. You're my daughter."

"I don't like you," Brooke said.

"We're flesh and blood," her mother said softly. "We owe it to each other to be there for each other."

"Maybe you should have remembered that when I was growing up. I was a child, Mother, not a trophy. You saw me as a means to an end, an end you now think you got cheated out of. Sometimes you blame me for that -- I was too big, I didn't come out fast enough, I was breach -- and sometimes you blame the contest people for not discounting all those 'artificial methods' of birth, but you never, ever blame yourself. For anything."

"Brooke," her mother said, and took another step forward.

Brooke held up her hand. "Did you ever think, Mother, that it's your fault we missed the brass ring? Maybe you should have pushed harder. Maybe you should have had a c-section. Or maybe you shouldn't have gotten pregnant at all."

"Brooke!"

"You weren't fit to be a parent. That's what the judge decided on. You're right. You never hit me. You didn't have to. You told me how worthless I was from the moment I could hear. All that anger you felt about losing you directed at me. Because, until I was born, you never lost anything."

Her mother shook her head slightly. "I never meant that. When I would say that, I meant--"

"See? You're so good at taking credit for anything that goes well, and so bad at taking it when something doesn't."

"I still don't see why you're so angry at me," her mother said.

This time, it was Brooke's turn to take a step forward. "You don't? You don't remember that last official letter? The one cited in my restraining order?"

"You have never understood the difference between a legal argument and the real issues."

"Apparently the judge is just as stupid about legal arguments as I am, Mother." Brooke was shaking. "He believed it when you said that I was brought into this world simply to win that contest, and by rights, the state should be responsible for my care, not you."

"It was a lawsuit, Brooke. I had an argument to make."

"Maybe you can justify it that way, but I can't. I know the truth when I hear it. And so does the rest of the world." Brooke swallowed. Her throat was so tight it hurt. "Now get out of here."

"Brooke, I--"

"I mean it, Mother. Or I will call the police."

"Do you want me at least to do the DNA work?"

"I don't give a damn what you do, so long as I never see you again."

Her mother sighed. "Other children forgive their parents for mistakes they made in raising them."

"Was your attitude a mistake, Mother? Have you reformed? Or do you still have lawsuits out there? Are you still trying to collect on a thirty-year-old dream?"

Her mother shook her head and went back to the car. Brooke knew that posture. It meant that Brooke was being unreasonable. Brooke was impossible to argue with. Brooke was the burden.

"Some day," her mother said, "you'll regret how you treated me."

"Why?" Brooke asked. "You don't seem to regret how you treated me."

"Oh, I regret it, Brooke. If I had known it would have made you so bitter toward me, I never would have talked to you about our problems. I would have handled them alone."

Brooke clenched a fist and then unclenched it. She made herself take a deep breath and, instead of pointing out to her mother that she had done it again -- she had blamed Brooke -- Brooke said, "I'm calling the police now," and started toward the house.

"There's no need," her mother said. "I'm going. I'm just sorry--"

And the rest of her words got lost in the bang of the screen door.

An hour later, Brooke found herself outside Professor Franke's office. She ignored the small electronic screen that floated ahead of her, bleating that she didn't have an appointment and she wasn't welcome in the building. It was a dumb little machine; when she had asked if Professor Franke was in, it had told her he was. A good human secretary would have lied.

Apparently the system had already contacted Franke, for he stood in his door, waiting for her, a smile on his face even though his eyes were wary.

"Everything all right, Professor Cross?"

"I never gave you permission to contact my mother," she said as she came up the stairs.

"Your mother?"

"She came to my house today, claiming I'd nullified my restraining order by contacting her. She said you asked her for DNA samples."

"Come into my office," he said.

Brooke walked past him and heard him close the door. "We did contact her, as we did all the parents, for DNA samples. We were explicit in expressing our needs as part of the study, and that they had every right to refuse if they wanted. In no way did we ask her to come here or tell her that you asked us to contact her."

"She says it came from me and she knew I was involved in the study."

"Of course," he said. "One of the waivers you signed gave us permission to examine your genetic heritage. That includes parents, grandparents, living relatives if necessary. Your attorney didn't object."

Her attorney was good, but not that good. He probably hadn't known what that all entailed.

"I want you to send a letter, through your attorney or the university's counsel, stating that I in no way asked you to contact her and that you did it of your own volition."

"Do you want me to apologize?" he asked.

"To me or to her?" she asked.

He drew in his breath sharply and she realized for the first time that she had knocked him off balance.

"I meant to her," he said, "but I guess I owe you an apology too."

Brooke stared at him for a moment. No one had said that to her before.

"Look," he said, apparently not understanding her silence. "I should have thought it through when your mother said she didn't allow such confidential information to be sent to people she didn't know. I thought that was a refusal."

"For anyone else it would have been," Brooke said. "But not for my mother."

"She's an interesting woman."

"From the outside," Brooke said.

He nodded as if he understood. "For the record, I didn't mean to cause you trouble. I'm sorry I didn't warn you."

"It's all right," Brooke said. "Just don't let it happen again."

Except for receiving a copy of the official letter Franke sent to her mother, Brooke didn't think about the study again until Memorial Day weekend. The semester was over. Most of her students successfully answered the question on her World Wars final: *Explain the influence World War I had on World War II.*

One student actually called World War I the mother of World War II. The phrase stopped Brooke as she read, made her shudder, and hoped that not every monstrous mother begot an even more monstrous child.

Professor Franke sent instructions for Memorial Day weekend with the official letter. He asked her to set aside time from mid-afternoon on Friday to late evening on Monday. She was to report to TheaterPlace, a restaurant and bar on the west side of town.

She'd been to the restaurant before. It was a novelty spot in what had once been a four-plex movie palace. The restaurant was in the very center, with huge meeting rooms off to the sides. The builders had called it a gathering place for organizations too small to hold conventions. Still, it had everything -- the large restaurant, the bar, places for presentations, places for seminars, places for quiet get-togethers. There were three smaller restaurants in what had once been the projection booths -- restaurants that barely seated twenty. One of the larger rooms even showed live theater once a month.

Cars were no longer allowed in this part of town, thanks to a Green referendum three years before. Someone had tried to make exception for electric vehicles but that hadn't worked either, as the traffic cops said it would be too hard to patrol. Instead, the light rail made several stops, and some enterprising entrepreneur had built underground tunnels to connect all of the buildings. Many people Brooke knew preferred to shop here in the winter; it kept them out of the freezing cold. But she found the necessity of taking the light rail annoying. She would have preferred her own car so that she could leave on her own schedule.

She walked from the light rail stop near the refurbished mall to TheaterPlace. On the outside, it still looked like a four-plex: the raised roof, the warehouse shape. Only up close did it become apparent that TheaterPlace had been completely gutted and remodeled, right down to the smoked glass that had replaced the clear windows.

A sign on the main entrance notified her that TheaterPlace was closed for a private party. She touched the door anyway -- knowing the party was theirs -- and a scanner instantly identified her.

Welcome, Brooke Cross. You may enter.

She shuddered slightly, knowing that Franke had programmed the scanner to recognize either her fingerprints on the backs of the door or her DNA. She felt like her mother, worried that Franke had too much information.

The door clicked open and she let herself inside. A short dark-haired woman she had never seen before hurried to her side.

"Professor Cross," the woman said. "Welcome."

"Thanks," Brooke said.

"Just a few rules before we get started," the woman said. "This is the last time we'll be using names today. We ask you not to tell anyone who you are by name, although you may tell them anything else you wish about yourself. Please identify yourself using this number only."

She handed Brooke a stick-on badge with the number 333 printed in bold black numbers.

"Then what?" Brooke asked.

"Wait for Professor Franke to make his announcement. You're in the Indiana Jones Room, by the way."

"Thanks," Brooke said. She stuck the label to her white blouse and made her way down the hall. All of the rooms were named after characters from famous movies, and the décor in all of them except the restaurants was the same:

movie posters on the wall, soft golden lighting, and a thin light blue carpet. The furniture moved according to the function. She had been in the Jones Room before for a faculty party honoring some distinguished professor from Beijing, but she doubted the room would be the same.

The double doors were open and inside, she heard the sound of soft conversation. She stopped just outside the door and surveyed the room.

The lights were up -- not soft and golden at all -- but full daylight, so that everyone's faces were visible. The Jones Room was one of the largest -- the only theater, apparently, whose dimensions had been left intact. It seemed about half full.

There were tables lining the wall, with various kinds of foods and beverages, small plates to hold everything, and silverware glimmering in the brightness. People stood in various clusters. There were no chairs, no furniture groupings, and Brooke knew that was on purpose. Small floating serving trays hovered near each group. Whenever someone set an empty glass on one, the tray would float through an opening in the wall, and another tray would take its place.

Something about the groupings made her nervous, and it wasn't the lack of chairs or the fact that she didn't know anyone. She stared for a moment, trying to figure out what had caught her.

No one looked the same; they were fat and thin, tall and short. They had long hair and beards, no hair, and dyed hair. They were white, black, Asian and Hispanic or they were multiracial, with no features that marked them as part of any particular ethnic group. They were incredibly diverse -- but none of them were elderly or underage. None of them had wrinkles, except for a few laugh lines, and none of them seemed younger than twenty.

They were about the same age. She would guess they *were* the same age -- the exact same age as she was. It was a gathering of Franke's subjects for this study: all of them born January 1, 2000. All of them thirty years and 147 days old.

She shuddered. No wonder Franke was worried about this second half of the study. Most studies of this nature didn't allow the participants to get to know each other. She wondered what discipline he was dabbling in now, what sort of results he was expecting.

A man stopped beside her just outside the door. He was wearing a denim shirt, a bolo tie, and tight blue jeans. His long blond hair -- naturally sunstreaked -- brushed against his collar. He had a tan -- something she had rarely seen in her lifetime -- and it made his skin a burnished gold. He had letters on his name badge: DKGHY.

"Hi," he said. His voice was deep, with a Southern twang. "I guess we just go in, huh?"

"I've been steeling myself for it," she said.

He smiled. "Feels like they took away my armor when they took my name. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to say, 'Hi. I'm DKG-whatever-the-hell the rest of those letters are.' Or if I'm not supposed to say anything at all."

"Well, I don't want to be called 333."

"Can't say as I blame you." He grinned. "How about I call you Tre, and you can call me -- oh, hell, I don't know--"

"De," she said. "I'll call you De."

"Nice to meet you, Tre," he said, holding out his hand.

She took it. His fingers were warm. "Nice to meet you, De."

"Where do you hail from?"

"Right here," she said.

"You're kiddin'? No travel expenses, huh?"

"And no hotel rooms."

He grinned. "Sometimes hotel rooms can be nice, especially when you don't get to see the inside of them very often."

"I suppose." She smiled at him. He was making this easier than she expected. "Where're you from?"

"Originally Galveston. But I've been in L'siana a long time now."

"New Orleans?"

"Just outside."

"Some city you got there."

"Yeah, but we ain't got a place like this." He looked around. "Want to go in?"

"Now I do," she said.

They walked side by side as if they were a couple who had been together most of their lives. Neither of them looked at the food, although he snatched two bottles of sparkling water off one of the tables, and handed one to her. She opened it, glad to have something to carry.

A few more people came in the doors. She and De went farther into the room. Bits of conversation floated by her:

"...never really got over it..."

"...worked for the past five years as a dental hygienist..."

"...my father wanted to take us out of the country, but..."

Then there was a slight bonging sound, and the conversation halted. Franke stood in the very front of the room, where the theater screen used to be. He was easy to see because the floor slanted downward slightly. He held up his hands, and in a moment there was complete silence.

"I want to thank you all for coming." His voice was being amplified. It sounded as he were talking right next to Brooke instead of half a room away. "Your assignment today is easy. We do not want you sharing names, but you can talk about anything else. We will be providing meals later on in various restaurants -- your badge ID will be listed on a door -- and we will have drinks in the bar after that. We ask that no one leave before midnight, and that you all return

at noon tomorrow for the second phase."

"That's it?" someone asked.

"That's it," Franke said. "Enjoy yourselves."

"I have a bad feeling about this, Tre," De said.

"Me, too," Brooke said. "It can't be this simple."

"I don't think it will be."

She sighed. "Well, we signed on for this, so we may as well enjoy it."

He looked at her sideways, his blue eyes bright. "Want to be my date for the day, darlin'?"

"It's always nice to have one friendly face," she said, surprised at how easily she was flirting with him. She never flirted with anyone.

"That it is." He offered her his arm. "Let's see how many of these nice folks are interested in conversation."

"Mingle, huh?" she asked, as she put her hand in the crook of his arm.

"I think that's what we're meant to do." He frowned. "Only god knows, I 'spect it'll all backfire 'fore the weekend's done."

It didn't backfire that night. Brooke had a marvelous dinner in one of the small restaurants with De, a woman from Boston, and two men from California. They shared stories about their lives and their jobs, and only touched in passing on the thing that they had in common. In fact, the only time they discussed it was when De brought it up over dessert.

"What made y'all sign up for this foolishness?" he asked.

"The money," said the man from Los Gatos. He was slender to the point of gauntness, with dark eyes and thinning hair. His shirt had wear marks around the collar and was fraying slightly on the cuffs. "I thought it'd be an easy buck. I didn't expect all the tests."

"Me, either," the woman from Boston said. She was tall and broadshouldered, with muscular arms. During the conversation, she mentioned that she had played professional basketball until she was sidelined with a knee injury. "I haven't had so many tests since I got out of school."

The man from Santa Barbara said nothing, which surprised Brooke. He was a short stubby man with more charm than he had originally appeared to have. He had been the most talkative during dinner -- regaling them with stories about his various jobs, and his two children.

"How about you, Tre?" De asked Brooke.

"I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't part of the university," she said, and realized that was true. Professor Franke probably wouldn't have had the time to convince her, and she would have dismissed him out of hand.

"Me," De said, "I jumped at it. Never been asked to do something like this before. Felt it was sort of important, you know. Anything to help the human condition."

"You don't really believe that," Santa Barbara said.

"If you don't believe it," Los Gatos said to Santa Barbara, "why'd you sign up?"

"Free flight to Madison, vacationer's paradise," Santa Barbara said, and they all laughed. But he never did answer the question.

When Brooke got home, she sat on her porch and looked at the stars. The night was warm. The crickets were chirping and she thought she heard a frog answer them from a nearby ditch.

The evening had disturbed her in its simplicity. Like everyone else, she wanted to know what Franke was looking for. The rest of the study had been so directed, and this had been so free form.

Dinner had been nice. Drinks afterward with a different group had been nice as well. But the conversation rarely got deeper than anecdotes and current history. No one discussed the study, and no one discussed the past.

She lost De after dinner, which gave her a chance to meet several other people: a woman from Chicago, twins from Akron, and three friends from Salt Lake City. She'd had a good time, and found people she could converse with -- one historian, two history buffs, and a librarian who seemed to know a little bit about everything.

De joined her later in the evening, and walked her to the rail stop. He'd leaned against the plastic shelter and smiled at her. She hadn't met a man as attractive as he was in a long time. Not since college.

"I'd ask you to my hotel," he said, "but I have a feelin' anything we do this weekend, in or out of that strange building, is going to be fodder for scientists."

She smiled. She'd had that feeling too.

"Still," he said, "I got to do one thing."

He leaned in and kissed her. She froze for a moment; she hadn't been kissed in nearly ten years. Then she eased into it, putting her arms around his neck and kissing him back, not wanting to stop, even when he pulled away.

"Hmm," he said. His eyes were closed. He opened them slowly. "I think that's titillatin' enough for the scientists, don't you?"

She almost said no. But she knew better. She didn't want to read about her sex life in Franke's next book.

The rail came down the tracks, gliding silently toward them. "See you tomorrow?" she asked.

"You can bet on it," De said. And there had been promise in his words, promise she wasn't sure she wanted to hear.

She brought her knees onto her lawn chair, and wrapped her arms around them. Part of her wished he was here, and part of her was glad he wasn't. She never let anyone come to her house. She didn't want to share it. She had had enough invasions of privacy in her life to prevent this one.

But she had nearly invited De, a man she didn't really know. Maybe De really wasn't a Millennium Baby. Perhaps a bunch of people weren't. Perhaps that was what the numbers and the letters meant. She had spent much of the evening staring at them, wondering. They appeared to be randomly generated, but that couldn't be. They had to have some

purpose.

She shook her head and rested her cheek on her knees. She was taking this much too seriously, the way she always took things. And soon she would be done with it. She would have bits of information she hadn't had before, and she would store them into a file in her mind, never to be examined again.

Somehow that thought made her sad. The night was beginning to get chilly. She stood, stretched, and made her way to bed.

The next morning, they met in a different room -- the Rose Room -- named after the character in the twentieth century movie *Titanic*. Brooke hoped that the name wasn't a sign.

There were pastries and coffee against the wall, along with every kind of juice imaginable and lots of fresh fruit, but again, there were no chairs. Brooke's feet hurt from the day before -- she usually stood to lecture, but not for several hours -- and she hoped she'd get a chance to sit before the day was out.

She was nearly late again, and hurried inside as they closed the doors. The room smelled of fresh air mixed with coffee and sweat. The group had gathered again, the faces vaguely familiar now, even the faces of people she hadn't yet met. The people toward the back who saw her enter smiled at her or nodded in recognition. It felt like they had all bonded simply by spending an evening in the same room. An evening and the promise of a long weekend.

She shivered. The air-conditioning was on high, and the room was cold. It would warm up before the day was out; the sheer number of bodies guaranteed that. But she still wondered if she was dressed warmly enough in her casual lilac blouse and her khaki pants.

"Strange how these places look the same, day or night."

She turned. De was half a step behind her, his long hair loose about his face. He still wore jeans and his fancy boots, but instead of the denim shirt and bolo tie, he wore an understated white open collar shirt that accented his tan. Somehow, she suspected, he seemed more comfortable in this. Had he worn the other as a way of identifying himself or a way of putting others off? She would probably never know.

"The people look different," she said.

"Just a little." He smiled at her. "You look nice."

"And you're flirting."

He shrugged. "I always believe in using my time wisely."

She smiled, and turned as a hush fell over the crowd. Franke had mounted the stage in front. He seemed very small in this place. A few of his assistants stood on either side of him.

"Here it comes," De said.

"What?"

"Whatever it is that's going to make this cocktail party stop." He was staring at Franke too, and his clear blue eyes seemed wary. "I've half a mind to leave now. Want to join me?"

"And do what?"

"Dunno. See the sights?"

It sounded like a good idea. But, as she had said the day before, she had signed up for this, and she didn't break her commitments. And, she had to admit, she was curious.

She bit her lower lip, trying to think of a good way to respond. Apparently she didn't have to.

De sighed. "Didn't think so."

The silence in the room was growing. Franke stared at all of them, rocking slightly on his feet. If Brooke had to guess, she would have thought him very nervous.

"All right," he said. "I have a few announcements. First, we will be serving lunch at one p.m. in the main restaurant. Dinner will be at seven in the same place. You will not have assigned seating. Secondly, after I'm through, you're free to tell each other your names. We've had enough of secrets."

He paused, and this time Brooke felt it, that dread she had seen in De's eyes.

"Finally, I would like everyone with a letter on your name badge to go to the right side of the room, and everyone with a number to go to the left."

People stood for a moment, looking around, waiting for someone to go first. De put a hand on her shoulder. "Here goes nothing," he said. He ran his finger along her collarbone and then walked to the right.

"Come on, folks," Franke said. "It's not hard. Letters to the right. Numbers to the left."

Brooke could still feel De's hand on her skin. She looked in his direction, seeing his blond head towering over the small group of letters who had gathered near the pastries on the far right wall.

She took a deep breath and headed left.

The numbers had gathered near the pastries too, only on the left. She wondered what Franke's researchers would make of that. Los Gatos was there, his hand hovering between the cinnamon rolls and the donuts as if he couldn't decide. So was one of the twins from Akron, and the woman from Boston. Brooke joined them.

"What do you think this is?" Brooke asked.

"A way of identifying us as we run through the maze."

Brooke recognized that voice. She turned and saw Santa Barbara. He shrugged and smiled at her.

She picked up a donut hole and ate it, then made herself a cup of tea while she waited for the room to settle.

It finally did. There was an empty space in the center of the carpet, a space so wide it seemed like an ocean to her.

"Good," Franke said. "Now I'm going to tell you what the badges mean."

There was a slight murmuring as the groups took that in. Boston, Santa Barbara, and Los Gatos flanked Brooke. Her dinner group, minus De.

"Those of you with letters are real Millennium Babies."

Brooke felt a protest rise in her throat. She was born on January 1, 2000. She was a Millennium Baby.

"You were all chosen as such by your state or your country or your city. Your parents received endorsements or awards or newspaper coverage. Those of you with numbers..."

"Are fucking losers," Los Gatos mumbled under his breath.

"...were born near midnight on January 1, but were too late to receive any prizes. You're here because your parents also received publicity or gave interviews before you were born stating that the purpose behind the pregnancy wasn't to conceive a child, but to conceive a child born a few seconds after midnight on January 1 of 2000. You were created to be official Millennium Babies, and failed to receive that title."

Franke paused briefly.

"So, feel free to make real introductions, and mingle. The facility is yours for the day. All we ask is that you do not leave until we tell you to."

"That's it?" Boston asked.

"That's enough," Santa Barbara said. "He's just turned us into the haves and the have-nots."

"Son of a bitch," Los Gatos said.

"We knew that the winners were here," Boston said.

"Yeah, but I assumed there'd be only a few of them," Los Gatos said. "Not half the group."

"It makes sense though," Santa Barbara said. "This is a study of success and failure."

Brooke listened to them idly. She was staring at the right side of the room. All her life, she had been programmed to hate those people. She even studied a few of them, looking them up on the net, seeing how many articles were written about them.

She had stopped when she was ten. Her mother had caught her, and told her what happened to the others didn't matter. Brooke and her mother would have made more of the opportunity, if they had just been given their due.

Their due.

De was staring at her from across the empty carpet. That look of dread was still on his face.

"So," Santa Barbara said. "I guess we can use real names now."

"I guess," said Los Gatos. He hitched up his pants, and glanced at Boston.

She shrugged. "I'm Julie Hunt. I was born at 12:15 Eastern Standard Time in..."

Brooke stopped listening. She didn't want to know about the failures. She knew how it felt to be part of their group. But she didn't know what it was like to be with the winners.

She wiped her damp hands on her pants and crossed the empty carpet. De watched her come. In fact the entire room watched her passage as if she were Moses parting the Red Sea.

The successes weren't talking to each other. They were staring at her.

When she was a few feet away from him, he reached out and pulled her to his side, as if she were in some sort of danger and he needed to rescue her.

"Comin' to the enemy?" he asked, and there was some amusement in his tone. "Or'd they give you a number when you shoulda had a letter?"

The lie would have been so easy. But then she would have had to lie about everything, and that wouldn't work. "No," she said. "I was born at 12:05 a.m. in Detroit, Michigan."

One of the women toward the back looked at her sharply. Anyone from Michigan might recognize that time. Her mother's lawsuits created more than enough publicity. Out of the corner of her eye, Brooke saw Franke. She could feel his intensity meters away.

"Then how come you made the crossin', darlin'?" De's accent got thicker when he was nervous. She had never noticed that before.

She could have given him the easy answer, that she wanted to be beside him, but it wasn't right. The way the entire group was staring at her, eyes wide, lips slightly parted, breathing shallow. It was as if they were afraid she was going to do something to them. But what could she do? Yell at them for something that was no fault of their own? They were the lucky ones. They'd been born at the right time in the right place.

But because they hadn't earned that luck, they were afraid of her. After all, she had been part of the same contest. Only she had been a few minutes late.

No one had moved. They were waiting for her to respond.

"I guess I came," she said, "because I wanted to know what it was like to be a winner."

"Standing over here won't make you a winner," one of the men said.

She flushed. "I know that. I came to listen to you. To see how you've lived. If that's all right."

"I'm not sure I understand you, darlin'," De said. Only his name wasn't De. She didn't know his name. Maybe she never would.

"You were all born winners. From the first moment. Just like we were losers."

Her voice carried in the large room. She hadn't expected the acoustics to be so good.

"I don't know about everyone else in my group, but my birthtime has affected my entire life. My mother--" Brooke paused. She hadn't meant to discuss her mother "--never let me forget who I was. And I was wondering if any of you experienced that. Or if you felt special because you'd won. Or if you even knew."

Her voice trailed off at the end. She couldn't imagine not knowing. A life of blissful ignorance. If she hadn't known, she might have gone on to great things. She might have reached farther, tried harder. She might have expected success with every endeavor, instead of being surprised at it.

They were staring at her as if she were speaking Greek.

Maybe she was.

"I don't know why it matters," a man said beside her. "It was just a silly little contest."

"I hadn't even remembered it," a woman said, "until Dr. Franke's people contacted me."

Brooke felt something catch in her throat. "Was it like that for all of you?"

"Of course not," De said. "I got interviewed every New Year's like clockwork. What's it like five years into the millennium? en? Twenty? That's one of the reasons I moved to L'siana. I'm not much for attention, 'specially the kind I don't deserve."

"Money was nice," one of the women said. "It got me to college."

Another woman shook her head. "My folks spent it all."

More people from the left were moving across the divide, as if they were drawn to the conversation.

"So'd mine," said one of the men.

"There wasn't any money with mine. Just got my picture in the newspaper. Still have that on my wall," another man said.

Brooke felt someone bump her from behind. Los Gatos had joined her. So had Santa Barbara and Boston -- um, Julie.

"Why'd this contest make such a difference to you?" one of the letter women asked. She was staring at Brooke.

"It didn't," Brooke said after a moment. "It mattered to my mother. She lost."

"Hell," De said. "People lose. That's part of living."

Brooke looked at him. There was a slight frown mark between his eyes. He didn't understand either. He didn't know what it was like being outside, with his face pressed against the glass.

"Three weeks after I was born," Los Gatos said, "My parents dumped me with a friend of theirs, saying they weren't ready for a baby. I never saw them. I don't even know what they look like."

"My parents said they couldn't afford me," Santa Barbara said. "They were planning on some prize money."

"They abandoned you too?" the woman asked.

"No," he said. "They just made it clear they didn't appreciate the financial burden. If they'd won, I wouldn't've been a problem."

"Sure you would have," De said. "They just would've blamed their problems on something else."

"It's not that simple," Brooke said. Her entire body was sweating, despite the chill in the room. "It was a contest, a race. A lot of people didn't look beyond that. There were news articles about abandoned and abused babies, and there were a disproportionate number born in December, January, and February of 2000, because parents wanted to split some of the glory."

"You can't tell me," De said, "that something as insignificant as the time we were born determines our future."

"It does," Brooke said, "if we're brought up to believe it does."

"That bear out, Professor Franke?" De said.

Brooke turned. The professor was standing close to them, listening, looking both bemused and perplexed. Apparently he had expected some kind of reaction, but probably not this one.

"That's what I'm trying to determine," Franke said.

"And I'm askin' you if you determined it," De said.

Franke glanced at one of his assistants. The assistant shrugged. The entire room full of people was crowded around Franke, and was silent for the second time that day.

"This part of the study is experimental," he said. "I'm not sure if answering you will corrupt it."

"But you want to answer me," De said.

Franke smiled. "Yes, I do."

"It's an experiment," Brooke said. "You can always throw this part out. You might have done that anyway. Isn't that what you told me? Or at least implied?"

Franke glanced from her to De. Then Franke straightened his shoulders, as if the gesture made him stronger. "I believe that Brooke is right. My studies have convinced me that something becomes important to a child's development because that child is told that something is important."

"So us losers will remain losers the rest of our lives," Los Gatos said.

Franke shook his head. "That is not my conclusion. I believe that when something becomes important, you choose how to react to it." His voice got louder as he spoke. His professor's voice. "Some of you wearing letters have not done as well as expected. You've rebelled against those expectations and worked at proving you are not as good as you were told you were."

A flush colored De's tan cheeks.

"Others lived up to the expectations and a few of you, a very small few, exceeded them. But--" Franke paused dramatically. "Those of you who wear numbers are financially more successful as a group than your lettered peers. You strive harder because you feel you have something to overcome."

Brooke felt Los Gatos shift behind her.

"I think it goes back to the parameters of the study," Franke said. "Your parents -- all of your parents -- wanted to improve their lot. They all had drive, therefore most of you have drive. We've found a biological correlation."

"Really? Wow," Santa Barbara said.

"But there's more than biology at work here."

"I'd hope so," De said. "I'd hate to think you can determine who I am by reading my genes."

Franke gave him a small smile. "Your parents," Franke said, "all chose a contest as the method of improving their

lives. A lottery, if you will. And most of them failed to win. Or if they succeeded, they discovered Easy Street wasn't so easy after all. You numbered folk have realized that luck is overrated. The only thing you can trust is work you do yourselves."

"And what about those of us with letters?" one of the twins from Akron asked.

"You learned a different lesson. Most of you learned that luck is what you make of it. You might win the lottery, but that doesn't make you or your family any happier than before." Franke looked at Brooke. "There were a lot of studies, some of them prompted by your mother, that showed how many unsuccessful Millennium Babies were abandoned or mistreated. But the successful ones had similar problems. Only no one wanted to lose the golden goose as long as it was still golden. Many of those abandonments were emotional, not physical. People became parents to become rich or famous, not because they wanted children."

"Sounds like you should be studying our parents," Los Gatos said.

Franke grinned. "Now you have my next book."

And the group laughed.

"Feel free to enjoy the rest of the day," Franke said. "Over the rest of the weekend, I'll be talking to individuals among you, wrapping things up. I want to thank you for your time and participation."

"That's it?" De asked.

"When you leave here tonight, if I haven't spoken to you," Franke said. "That's it."

His words were met with a momentary silence. Then he started to make his way through the group. Some people stopped him. Brooke didn't. She turned away, not sure how to feel.

She wasn't as successful as she wanted to be, but she was better off than her mother had said she would be. Brooke had her own house, a good job, interests that meant something to her.

But she was as alone as her mother was. In that, at least, they were the same.

"So," De said. "Is your life profoundly different thanks to this study?"

The question had a mixed tone. Half sarcasm, half serious. He seemed to be waiting for her answer.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Adam," he said, wincing. "Adam Lassiter."

"The first man."

"If I'd missed my birth time, I'd have been named Zeb." He smiled as he said that, but his eyes didn't twinkle.

"I'm Brooke Cross." She waited, wondering if he'd guess at the name, despite the change. He didn't. Or if he did, he didn't say anything.

"You didn't answer my question," he said.

She looked at the room, at all the people in it, most engaged in private conversations now, hands moving, gazes serious as they compared and contrasted their experiences, trying to see if they agreed with Professor Franke.

"When I was a little girl," she said. "We lived in a small white house, maybe 1200 square feet. A starter, my mother called it, because that was all she could afford. And to me, that house was the world. My mother's world."

"What kind of world was that?" he asked.

She shook her head. How to explain it? But he had asked, and she had to try.

"A world where she did everything right and failed, and everyone else cheated and somehow succeeded. If she'd had the same kind of breaks your parents had, she believed she would have done better than they did. If she hadn't had a child like me, one who was chronically late, her life would have been better."

He was watching her. The crease between his eyes grew deeper.

Her heart was pounding, but she made herself continue. "A few years ago, when I was looking for my own home, I saw dozens and dozens of houses, and somewhere I realized that to the people living in them, those houses were the world."

"So each block has dozens of tiny worlds," he said.

She smiled at him. "Yeah."

"I still don't see how that relates."

She looked at him, then at the room. The other conversations were continuing, as serious as hers was with him.

"You asked me if this study changed my life. I can't answer that. I can say, though, that it made me realize one thing."

His gaze was as intense as Franke's.

"It made me realize that even though I had moved out of that house, I hadn't left my mother's world."

He studied her for a moment longer, then said, "Sounds like a hell of a realization."

"Maybe," she said. "It depends on what I do with it."

He laughed. "Thus proving Franke's point."

She flushed. She hadn't realized she had done so, but she had. He leaned toward her.

"You know, Brooke," Adam said softly, "I like women who are chronically late. It balances my habitual timeliness. How's about we have lunch and talk about our histories. Not just the day we were born, but other things, like what we do and where we live and who we are."

She almost refused. He was from Louisiana, and she was from Wisconsin. This friendship -- if that's all it was -- could go nowhere.

But it was that attitude which had limited her all along. She had been driven, as Franke said, to succeed materially and professionally on her own merits. But she had never tried to succeed socially.

She had never wanted to before.

"And," she said, "you get to tell me what you learned from this study."

"Assumin'," he said with a grin, "that I'm the kinda man who can learn anything a'tall."

"Assuming that," she said and slipped her hand in his. It felt good to touch someone else, even if it was only for a brief time. It felt good.

It felt different.

It felt right.