

PROLOGUE

“The patient’s still asleep, Doctor.”

“The results look promising. Wish they were all like this one. Did you assign a number?”

“Yes, Doctor. I’ll get the labels on right away.”

“Fine. The anesthesia should be wearing off soon. Is her escort still here?”

“He is. I’ll tell him it should be another half hour or so.”

“Another med student?”

“Yes, but there’s no problem. He’s relieved just to be here.”

“He’s relieved that she’s here. I expect he’ll be more careful in the future. Call Tillman stat. He’s been impatient. Tell him the shortage should be rectified soon.”

“Okay.” The nurse scurried out to make the call, then opened the door to the waiting room. It was full, as usual. What her employer lacked in charm, he made up in skill. She gestured to the waiting med student. He looked patently out of place among the others in the room. They were all women, some quite pregnant, some only barely pregnant -- but not for long.

“Sir, she should be ready to go in about a half hour,” the nurse informed him curtly.

“Everything went... okay?”

“Like clockwork,” she assured him. Better than you’ll ever know, she added silently. She returned to the recovery room. The patient was stirring.

“My baby...” she muttered groggily.

“No more baby, dear. Doctor took care of it.”

Her green eyes grew moist. “It’s... it’s over?”

“Yes, dear, it’s all over,” the nurse replied smoothly. But of course it wasn’t. Not by a long shot.

One

What was she truly mourning? Selene Mannon wasn't quite sure. Was it the deceased... or the lie?

The young woman fidgeted in the hard wooden pew as the funeral service unraveled before her like a video. Though she was barely twenty, death was not unfamiliar to her; she'd lost her father ten years earlier. In fact, she'd sat in this very same pew with her mother, Gloria.

And what place had Gloria taken *this* time? The guest of honor's.

Gloria Mannon reposed peacefully in the plain pine casket that loomed before Selene while the white-haired pastor cranked out his eulogy. Same old script, different names. *Go ahead, just fill in the blanks*, Selene thought dismally. He'd never once uttered an original thought in her presence. Why break that record today?

Selene released a sigh as the pastor praised Gloria, the ailing widow who had raised her only child alone for the past decade. Selene would've agreed with him wholeheartedly until a few days ago -- on the day Gloria had revealed a startling secret that ripped Selene's life apart. The bitter memory chilled her.

Gloria had been getting Hospice care at home for several months. On this particular day, the generally cheerful nurse seemed more subdued than normal when she said goodbye to Selene.

"What's with Tammy, Mom? She was so quiet," Selene remarked as she entered her mother's room.

"It wasn't anything she said, but I could tell she thinks I don't have much time left."

"She didn't say it because it's not true."

"Honey, I'm just a lump in a bed. This is not living life. Time to quit."

Selene bit her lip. Her mother's body had become a stranger's, a skeleton, all shriveled up. When had she wasted away to this point? Selene had become so inured to her mother's illness that she had barely noticed how much deterioration had actually set in. Gloria's mind remained as sharp as ever, but her body was the instrument of her betrayal.

Seating herself next to her mother on the bed, Selene gently took her hand, comforted by the familiarity of that simple gesture. There was no one on this earth she loved more.

The sudden chirping of Selene's cell phone interrupted her thoughts. "Mom, it's Linda. Should I let it go to voicemail?"

"No, of course not, honey."

Selene took the call, trying to sound upbeat. "Linda, hey! Okay. How did the semester go?"

Gloria smiled weakly at her daughter's conversation. "Tell her hello for me."

"Linda, my mom says hi." Linda Simon, her best friend since childhood, had moved back to California with her mother two years earlier after her parents' divorce, but she and Selene still kept in touch. "I can't really talk right now. I'll call you later. Bye."

"I'm so glad you two are still close. You'll need her, honey."

"Mommy, please. No more gloom and doom."

Gloria reached for Selene's hand. "You always admired Linda's parents. Especially her mother."

"They were always nice to me."

"No, it was more than that. They were... young. Much younger than your father and me."

"So what?" Selene's discomfort grew.

"Nothing. I was just commenting. Listen to me now, Selene. There's something I've been wanting to tell you, but I just didn't know how to start."

"Start at the beginning, Mom. Like you always tell me." Selene forced a smile.

"I have to start at your beginning. It was a miracle, you know. A true miracle. But honey, I'm... I'm not quite your mother."

Selene's light blue eyes narrowed in alarm. Was her mother's lucidity slipping?

"Mom, you gave birth to me. I saw the pictures. Of course you're my mother!"

Sunlight trespassed on their confrontation as it spilled past the parted lace curtains opposite Gloria's bed and eerily spotlighted the older woman's face. "Yes, I gave birth to you. Raised you. That's the most important part." Tears overflowed, marking her

pale cheeks in tiny parallel streams. She resolutely summoned what little strength remained to continue. "The cancer, all those years, took its toll. And all those treatments, poisoning my body. They... I couldn't... conceive."

"But you did conceive!" Selene felt her fear increase. Perhaps Gloria's mind was surrendering to the ravages of her body.

"No." Gloria's voice had hardened. "They used your father's sperm, but a stranger's egg. They fertilized it in vitro and implanted it in me. I was almost forty-eight, Albert fifty-five. Not your traditional child-bearing years, even for the nineties." Her lips quivered as she tried unsuccessfully to smile. "You were the best part of my life. You still are." Love shone out of her eyes.

Gloria's words slowly sank in. She had given birth to Selene, but she wasn't her biological mother. Selene was struck mute.

"I loved you always, from the second you were conceived. But I'm leaving you all alone soon. I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologize!" The words spewed out harshly. Selene softened her tone. "I love you too, Mommy. Don't worry about me. You just rest." She wondered if Gloria had heard her last words. Her mother's paper-thin eyelids had closed as she drifted off to sleep, her last vestiges of energy consumed by the difficult conversation.

Selene's heart hammered sharply at her chest; she thought it might explode. How many times had she wished for a younger mother? This must be God's cruel joke, a cosmic type of revenge on her for not appreciating what she had.

Somebody out there was responsible for her birth. How old was the woman when she'd donated her egg? Did she resemble Selene? Did she wonder about the baby she might have made? The questions intrigued her until the full import of Gloria's revelation struck her. The notion that Gloria Mannon was not her biological mother was incomprehensible to Selene. It was impossible.

Yet it was the truth.

As Gloria slipped further and further away over the next few days, Selene pushed the bombshell out of her mind. She threw herself into making Gloria as comfortable as possible. She made a private bargain with God: if you let her live longer, I won't ask why

she lied to me all these years. *So she avoided the topic, as did Gloria, whose thoughts waned by the day, numbed by increased doses of morphine.*

Finally, on a bright spring day borne to herald life, Gloria Mannon lost hers. Selene had entered her bedroom early that morning to open up the curtains, as always. Sunshine spontaneously illuminated the room. "Good morning, Mom. Beautiful day outside." Gloria had not responded, and Selene realized she was barely conscious. "I'll call Hospice!" she cried, resolved to take action, any action to alter a hopeless situation. The cheerful warmth of her mother's bedroom belied the sense of horror that had overtaken her.

"No, honey," Gloria whispered. Her breaths were short and raspy.

"We really should. The nurse will come and give you something." Now facing the moment she had most dreaded, she felt herself falling apart. Her mother's imminent departure had haunted her endlessly, yet she had held the reality of it at bay. She dropped into a wooden chair at her mother's bedside and clasped her hands tightly together, feeling almost lightheaded. This isn't happening. It isn't. Her hands shook as she separated them again. She absently ran one through her hair while she locked onto her mother's eyes, beseeching her to live.

So frail and shrunken in her brass-railed bed, her body literally eaten away by cancer, Gloria looked ancient. Used up. She weakly grasped the edge of her blanket as tears formed in her cloudy hazel eyes. "What I told you... about..."

"Forget it, Mommy." Selene was crying now. She longed to be brave for her mother, but a mass of turbulent emotions had engulfed her.

"Love you always." These were Gloria's last words as peace finally enveloped her. Outside, the sun retreated behind passing clouds, withdrawing its focus on Gloria's withered face. Selene dared not move for several moments, hoping against hope that her mother would awaken.

She didn't.

A gentle tap on her shoulder snapped Selene back to the present. Her aunt, Lila Phillips, took hold of her hand and guided her out of the church. Friends of the family and several of Selene's friends from her nearby college gathered around her outside. The

sun glared brightly, too hot for May. Words floated up and around her like butterflies, fluttering here and there but never landing.

Selene soon found herself at a freshly dug grave, with little memory of the short ride to the cemetery. She forced herself to concentrate as the pastor once again heaped praise upon the deceased. No one had ever had a harsh word to say about the woman in life; in death she became a virtual saint. Selene wondered privately what they all would have thought if they knew how Gloria had deceived her daughter throughout her life.

Selene's forehead collapsed wearily into the palm of her hand. What had Gloria done that was so wrong? She had only wanted a child to love, and she had certainly loved her daughter with all her heart. As Selene struggled to reconcile her past and present feelings toward her mother, she suddenly realized the pastor had finished and the coffin had been lowered to its final destination. As everyone else walked away, Selene remained alone for a final farewell. After a few minutes her aunt led her to the waiting limousine.

Back at the Mannon home, Selene avoided her visitors as much as possible. She concentrated on mundane tasks, emptying wastebaskets and watering the plants that Gloria had carefully cultivated.

"Nourish these plants, Selene, and they'll nourish you back." Selene smiled at the memory of Gloria's treatise; she had never grown tired of her mother's home-grown philosophies.

"Are you watering that thing or drowning it?" Dottie Stanwick's shrill voice cut through her reflections. Dottie, a retired schoolteacher, had been one of Gloria's closest friends.

Selene stared in dismay at the over-saturated soil. She had been too distracted for even the simplest chore. "See, I just kill plants. I can't take care of them, Dottie, and I don't want them to die. Please, will you take them all home with you?"

Dottie rubbed Selene's shoulder lightly. "You bet I will. They're the nicest reminder I could have of your mom."

Selene glanced dejectedly at the soaked plant. Now she knew why she hadn't inherited Gloria's green thumb. Still, she felt her own roots had snapped along with Gloria's death. No parents, no connection... to anything. She felt like a picked flower that would soon wilt and die for that lack of connection.

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Later that evening Lila closed the door behind the last visitors and turned to her niece. "Everyone loved your mother. Easy to see why."

Selene stared at her parents' wedding picture, displayed among a large collection of lovingly framed photographs documenting the lives of many people who were now dead. Life seemed so fragile, so... pointless. She contemplated what had lain beneath those smiling faces. Had the joy in their lives compensated for the pain? Had they devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the care and support of their families, as Gloria had? At what personal cost? And if they could be resurrected from the dead and given the option to relive their lives, would they choose to?

"*Selene.*" Lila's sharp tone shattered the younger woman's reverie. "There's something that my sister insisted we talk about."

"She already told me."

"Told you? Told you what?" Surprise as well as concern tinged Lila's voice.

"That I was implanted in her womb. That she wasn't my biological mother." The words tumbled out automatically, their meaning surreal to Selene. "She told me last week."

Lila's kind, round face filled with sympathy. "I didn't know she told you." She sat down on the sofa beside her niece.

"She lied to me my whole life! How do you do that to someone you say you love?" Anger poured out of her, no longer controlled.

"Of course she loved you! You were her whole world. Before you came along, she was desperate for a child, but the treatments... well, I know you understand. So, when Dr. Tillman offered her hope, she grabbed it."

"Dr. Tillman?"

"He was the infertility specialist. He worked at the same hospital as me, in New York. They called him 'Dr. Miracle.' What a gifted man!" Her lips curved upwards in admiration.

Curiosity trumped Selene's animosity. "Did you work with this guy?"

"No, I wasn't in obstetrics. I was a pediatric nurse, same as now. He had quite a reputation, though, so I recommended him to your parents."

"Then I'm alive because of you."

"In a manner of speaking. But mostly it's due to Dr. Tillman. It took several tries, but it finally worked. I never saw prouder parents than Gloria and Albert."

"Who... who donated the egg?"

"Oh, they don't tell you that. People donate eggs and sperm on the condition of complete anonymity."

"But somewhere there's a woman who's my biological mother. Did they get her medical history?"

"Of course they did. She was fine, believe me. They use only healthy donors. I think she was a medical student. We weren't supposed to know that, but the doctor's secretary let it slip one day. She was a friend of mine."

"Is she still a friend?" Excitement crept into Selene's voice.

"She retired a few years ago and we lost touch."

"What about your Dr. Miracle?"

"He's long gone, I'm sorry to say. Car accident about ten years ago. Such a loss."

"Did he have any partners? Are they still at your hospital?"

Lila placed an arm around Selene's shoulder. "Sweetie, I know where this is leading, but don't do this to yourself. They'd never tell us who the donor was. I know how much you miss your mom -- God knows, I don't know what I'll do without my big sister - - but you can't go and find a replacement now that she's gone. Just honor her memory and..."

Selene's anger resurfaced. "Give me a break, Aunt Lila!! No one bothered to tell me all these years that a big part of who I am is from some stranger. I have a right to know where half my DNA comes from."

"Calm down, sweetie. We'll talk about this tomorrow. I think you should get some sleep now."

"You're right. I'm sorry I yelled. Excuse me." Selene rose without another word and retired to her room. Dropping down on her bed, she closed her eyes only to see Gloria's face. Surely it had been no random decision to reveal her secret to Selene before she died. Couldn't it be that Gloria hadn't wanted her to be alone?

Gloria must have guessed at her daughter's childhood fantasies of having younger parents. Unable to contain her unsettling thoughts, she approached her tall white dresser and tenderly picked up the pretty red-haired doll gracefully propped up against a brass lamp. Carrie was her very favorite doll, her comfort doll, a gift from her parents for her tenth birthday.

She closed her eyes and could hear the sweet voices of little girls singing Happy Birthday.

"Make a wish, darling, then blow out all the candles!"

The little girl at the head of the dining room table hesitated before the glowing birthday cake. Eleven flaming candles -- ten for her age and one for good luck -- beckoned her attention, yet her eyes remained fixed on her mother.

Turn into Linda's mother. The words floated in space. She hoped she hadn't uttered them aloud, then assured herself she hadn't. Everyone waited expectantly.

At her right side, Linda Simon chided, "Come on, Selene. Blow already!"

Mommy, turn into Linda's mother. Shame filled her slim form as the silent wish repeated itself. She sucked in her breath and blew out all the candles. Her friends applauded.

When the party ended, her guests' parents arrived to retrieve their children. Everyone took note of Karyn Simon's entrance; she always attracted attention. She looked utterly glamorous in her smart tailored suit and sheer silk blouse. Her thick hair grazed her shoulders and framed her pretty face. She stopped to hug the birthday girl. Selene knew she was thirty, but to her, Mrs. Simon seemed more like a carefree college girl.

Gloria Mannon greeted the woman warmly. "You look stunning as always, Karyn."

"Thank you, Gloria. We're on our way out to dinner. Come on, Linda, Daddy's waiting in the car. Where's Albert?"

"Feeling a bit under the weather, I'm afraid. He's been resting, but he should be down soon."

As Linda and her mother left, Albert Mannon quietly entered the foyer, joining the last remaining guests and his wife and child. He was sixty-five years old, but he looked

more like eighty. He joined his family just as Selene's friend Jessica was saying goodbye. An elderly woman came over and took Jessica's hand. "I'm Jessica's great-aunt. You must be Selene's grandparents."

Not again! Selene blushed. Although people frequently mistook Gloria and Albert for her grandparents, it still embarrassed her. Her parents, on the other hand, always seemed to take it in stride. Gloria, currently in remission from her latest bout of cancer, knew she looked every one of her fifty-eight years and more. She took no offense and beamed at the woman. "No, no, Selene is our daughter!"

"Oh... sorry," Jessica's great-aunt murmured.

When the last of the guests had departed, Selene sat on the living room carpet amidst her birthday presents and picked up the wonderful doll her mother had carefully picked out for her. Gloria had a knack for selecting things Selene would adore. "I'll name her Carrie," she announced to no one in particular.

"That's a sweet name," Gloria called from the adjacent dining room as she cleared away the debris. "Were we quiet enough for you, Albert?"

"No, I couldn't sleep a wink." He walked over to Selene and surveyed the jumble of presents and discarded gift wrap. "Young lady, stop playing and clean up this mess. Your mother has enough to deal with."

"Okay, Daddy," she replied meekly. She hated to incur his disapproval, yet as usual she was unable to avoid it.

"First noise, now this chaos!"

"Don't get yourself all riled up now, Albert," Gloria warned him gently.

"I can't stand..." Suddenly his hand flew across his chest. His face reddened.

"Are you in pain, Albert? Should I get a nitro pill?"

"Damn the pills. Peace and quiet and neatness are all I..."

Albert's sentence was never completed. He fell to the floor in a heap, adding to the disarray he so detested.

"Oh my god!" Gloria shrieked. She bent down and reached for his arm. "No pulse!" Rising quickly, she raced to the phone to dial 911.

"Daddy can't die on my birthday." The words escaped from Selene's lips before she could retrieve them.

"I'm so sorry, baby." Gloria's eyes filled with tears. Selene couldn't help wondering what she was so sorry about -- Albert's death, or the fact that it happened on her birthday.

The doll in Selene's hand grinned up at her, a reminder of the woman who had purchased it ten years earlier. "Mommy wanted me to find the egg donor. I know it," she uttered aloud as she sat back down on her bed, trying to think rationally.

It was so ironic, so bizarre that the one thing she had always longed for might be a reality. A younger mother. What would she be like? Would she look like Selene? Think like her?

Selene found her aunt sitting on the living room couch, holding a photo of Gloria and weeping quietly. She sat down next to Lila and put her arms around her. "I didn't mean to get so upset, Aunt Lila. There's just been... a lot to take in."

Gloria wiped her cheeks with a tissue and smiled at her niece. "I understand, really I do. And I've been thinking -- how would you like to come back and stay with me and Bill for a while?"

"Would he be okay with that?"

"Of course he would. And that guest room of ours is sitting there empty, just waiting for you."

Selene couldn't see a downside to Lila's generous offer. The last semester of sophomore year had just ended and she could take a leave of absence. With her mother and Linda gone, there was no one left in town she cared much about, so a visit to New York would make sense. What's more, since she'd been conceived in New York, it was also a way to find the answer to the question that now haunted her: who was -- technically speaking -- her mother?