

CHAPTER ONE

“It’s a boy.”

Merriam’s mouth sagged at the corners when she made her announcement yesterday, like she was reporting a cockroach sighting in the break room. She reminded us that Navin’s paternity leave starts today; we’ll all need to pick up the slack while he’s out.

Of course, we knew it was a boy months ago when Navin started parading around the office with that artificial womb strapped to his belly. His wife Lanelle is president of Jarvis Corporation, so naturally, they paid for the deluxe womb with the clear walls where everyone can see the little darling.

Like the pompous show-off he is, Navin didn’t drape the womb with a coverlet. Oh, no, he wanted to draw attention to his miniscule contribution to the process. At the beginning of the pregnancy, he kept insisting that the genital tubercle on the fetus was a glans clitoridis. He caught me in the break room one morning, and actually juggled the womb until the little fetus rolled over. Then using a stylus, Navin proudly poked at a tiny nub. “See? It’s a girl!”

But once the tubercle continued to extend, Navin could no longer carry his false hope around with the unborn child. The appendage was definitely phallic. After that, Navin adopted the privacy coverlet that most expectant parents wear.

Andrew says there was a time, long ago, when those three words—‘It’s a boy’—meant more than even the words ‘I love you.’

He says the birth of a boy was heralded as a major event, bringing untold pride and joy to parents and the community. Evidently, a boy held the mystical guarantee of the continuation of a family’s lineage.

When I was young, I imagined my mother crying tears of disappointment when she heard the news that her first-born was going to be a boy. Back then, the artificial womb was still experimental, and too expensive for my mother's salary as a young orthopedic surgeon. She didn't get the disheartening news until I was nearly 20 weeks along. I visualized my father hanging his head in shame at not being able to carry out the simple task of creating a girl child.

My mother said they tried all the usual tricks to produce a girl, but it just didn't work out that way. Always the martyr, she lamented my father's cursed Y chromosome that screwed everything up, and shamed us both in the process. But my dad has never acted like he was disappointed. In fact, he and I are a lot closer than he is with my sister Jillian.

According to Andrew, all children were given the father's surname, and that is how families were recorded generation after generation.

I don't know how Andrew remembers all this trivia. He and I went to the same schools but I don't recall seeing all this stuff about how revered male children were. All I've ever read was how men screwed up the world so bad that women took away their ability to make any kind of business or political decisions.

My grandmother says that if a woman is responsible enough to nurture a child from birth to adulthood, she can certainly nurture a business. She says all men ever did was cheat and steal from each other.

When I ask my father about this role reversal, he seems reticent to discuss the matter. Notice how I used 'reticent'? Andrew says I need to improve my vocabulary, to raise my score on the Approved Partner Registry.

I've been on the APR for over a year now. The board won't consider men until they're twenty-five years old, and then the open enrollment is only once a year. The first two times I

applied, I was rejected. It's that questionnaire! They ask the same thing twice, only they put a little twist in the second time to see if you slip up. Like on one question, I strongly agreed that I preferred work that is routine, which was the right answer. But then on the question where it asked if I considered myself creative, someone who comes up with new ideas, I disagreed and got penalized.

But aren't those kind of the same question?

Andrew says I was just trying to answer the way I thought they wanted me to. But what does he know? He's never taken those stupid tests. He's never had to sweat it out, waiting for the results. I know, I shouldn't be so hard on him. He's not on the APR and his chances of getting on are slim. He has Erb's Palsy.

The brachial plexus muscle in Andrew's shoulder was damaged during childbirth. That kind of accident rarely happens these days, but his mother and father were in some third-world country as part of a humanitarian effort to help people recovering from an earthquake. His mother had assured everyone she'd be back in plenty of time for delivery, but then the country was hit with a second quake and they were stranded.

She went into premature labor at some godforsaken outpost. A midwife was sent for, but Andrew's father panicked. The baby was coming. Some hidden instinct to take charge overwhelmed him. He pulled Andrew's head to the side as he tugged to free him from the birth canal and the muscle in his shoulder tore.

Now his left arm hangs useless at his side, and it's definitely smaller than his right. He always wears long-sleeved shirts, even in the summer, to hide the deformity. Funny how just a moment's panic during those few seconds of childbirth can determine your whole life.

Back in the U.S., his mother's insurance paid to try and correct the damage, but the surgeon did a crappy job. Too bad Andrew wasn't born a girl. His mother would have insisted on a top surgeon, for sure.

So of course, he'll never be a candidate for the APR. Only attractive men with above average IQs, and strong compatibility traits are accepted. I mean, I'm pretty good looking, but I still had a hard time getting in.

My supervisor, Merriam, once told me I was a knock-out. She said if she weren't already married, she'd take some of that Mason magic. That's sexual harassment, but I'm not going to report her. I appreciate the compliment.

My best friend Ben took the APR test the day he turned 25 and aced it. Within a week, he was getting all kinds of requests from women, and last year he got married. I try not to be jealous but come on, he had three different women interested in him. He's going to call me any day now to say he and his new wife are launching a pregnancy, and I'll have to be all positive and supportive.

I grab a nutrition bar as I pass through my kitchen, rip away the end of the wrapper, and gnaw off a bite. The dry nuts and oats get stuck in my throat and I can hardly swallow. How do some guys have all the luck? Even Oliver has a steady girlfriend from the APR. I can remember in high school when the three of us did everything together. I always thought we'd get married and have kids and hang out in somebody's backyard cooking burgers while our wives huddled to talk about work. Now the only friend I have left is Andrew.

I stuff the rest of my tasteless nutrition bar in my pocket, then lock the front door with the Universal Identification chip embedded in my wrist. Nearly everyone uses these now. It's the law.

I've heard horror stories of people's UI chips being cut right out of their arms, stolen by unsavory individuals. But I think that's just urban legend. What good would it do to steal someone's UI chip? There's way too much information stored in those for anyone to assume another's identity. A UI has everything from your DNA to your credit history in there. And with retinal scanners everywhere, it's impossible to try and impersonate someone else.

It's still dark outside, but not as cold as it was last month. The weather service says it will rain today, but thankfully it hasn't started. I've got my umbrella just in case.

I can't afford an automobile on my salary, so I take the train to work. Cars are discouraged anyway; they cause traffic congestion, and some of the older models still use a fuel that pollutes the air.

The transit line runs right next to our neighborhood, so it's no big deal to walk the three blocks to the MARTA station.

The homes in our area are older; they aren't wired for all the electronics so I have to actually turn on the lights when I walk from the living room to the kitchen. And the climate control gauge has to be manually set, but at least the system filters and humidifies the air.

Most women on their way to the top of the corporate ladder aren't interested in these older homes, but mine will do until I get settled with someone.

There are a few single-income families scattered around the neighborhood. The husband stays home with the kids while the wife works long hours to get ahead. They don't stick around long though. Once the money starts rolling in, they move to the suburbs with the fully-automated homes.

Right up the block is a new family that moved in a couple months ago. I slow down to look at the playset in their side yard with the tiny slide and brightly-colored plastic swing. Toys

are scattered around the front yard; there's a playpen on the large covered porch where the dad sits at a small desk. I think he's writing a book.

A gust of wind blows a pinwheel stuck in the grass; it's red and blue and green blades whirl around. It reminds me of a movie I saw when I was young. A father is helping his daughter with a science project on wind power. They have the mechanics all set up, but then the little brother comes toddling along and messes it up.

The daughter is crying, and the little boy is crying, but the father takes them both in his arms and soothes them. I love that scene, with the kids on the dad's lap. He knows just what to say to make it all better. And he doesn't get mad at the little boy. He loves his son as much as his daughter.

Ever since I saw that movie, I've wanted to be a father like that. I want to teach a child to catch a ball and draw a picture and read a book. We'll make sandwiches for lunch, spreading the peanut butter across the bread and over our thumbs. We'll pretend we're explorers and wade through a creek in our boots looking for salamanders and unusual rocks.

My roommate Damon doesn't care if he ever gets into a relationship, much less married. He's on the road all week, setting up and demonstrating 3D copiers. Most companies just send a video demonstration of their equipment, but Damon's company claims that by sending a live rep, they answer more questions, and get fewer complaints and service calls. They must be right because they're the top seller of 3D copiers in the country.

On the weekends, Damon is happy hitting the bars with his buddies to watch sports. Or they hang around the house, drinking beers and playing video games. I don't have a lot in common with Damon, but that's okay. We aren't supposed to judge others.

I've been sharing the house with him for a couple years now. When I first graduated from Georgia State my dad wanted me to move back home—'to save money' he said—but I really think he was looking for an ally against my mom and my Grandma Lisa. That lasted about six months before I had to get out on my own.

The house Damon advertised fit the bill; it was on the metro line, and the rent was reasonable. Once I'd moved in, I asked him if he was on the registry. He looked at me like I was crazy.

"Why would I want a woman bossing me around all the time," he said. "Or expecting me to change dirty diapers, and wipe snotty noses."

He said he was registered with the escort service and as soon as he found a woman who wanted to fuck a couple times a month, he was taking his name off. That kind of talk can get a guy in real trouble, but Damon doesn't seem to care. He acts cocky like that whenever he's around his friends and me. In the two years I've known him, I've never seen him with a woman to know how he behaves around them.

Getting into the escort service is pretty easy compared to the registry. You just enter some information online and you're in. But with the registry, you have to actually go into one of their offices. I guess they had too many inaccurate registrations, where a man misrepresented himself. Now you have to prove that you're not a troll.

And you have to take the tests at the center instead of online at home. I heard there was a lot of cheating; guys helping each other with the answers. I know I would have asked Andrew to help me if I'd had the chance.

I've never told anyone this, but I had some 'performance' issues as well. Two different women reported me to the registry and I was classified as PME: A premature ejaculator. How embarrassing is that?

During high school, sex wasn't even an option for most guys. Solexa was just coming on the market and a lot of parents put their boys on the drug before they got their first wisp of underarm hair. Those pills did a great job of suppressing the libido, but they didn't do much for a guy's confidence. Once I got accepted at Georgia State, my mother decided to wean me off the stuff.

Unfortunately, the college girls were just like they were in high school, so driven to excel that they didn't pay much attention to guys. The few girls who weren't on the fast track didn't appeal to me, so I was a virgin when I got on the APR. What did those women expect? I had no experience.

Nevertheless, I had to take remedial training with a surrogate for two months. And believe me, having sex with a surrogate is not as much fun as you might think be. It's like she's evaluating everything you do, timing you, trying to get you to slip up.

Thank goodness I passed the course, and got the PME removed from my profile, but I'm constantly worried that someone will find out.

My counselor assures me that a PME classification is sometimes preferred. Lots of women aren't interested in sex, they just want to get pregnant, so a man who can get in and get out quickly is a benefit. But I've masturbated enough to know how good an orgasm feels. I want the fireworks, and I want to be married to a woman who wants them, too.

A raindrop hits my cheek, then another on my forehead. Here it comes. I dash the last half a block to the MARTA station. Once under the overhanging roof, I skid to a stop, swipe my UI, and step through the security scanner.

Downstairs, a crowd waits on the platform for the next train to downtown Atlanta. I don't have to be at work until 8:30, but there's always a good mix of women on the 7:23—the early birds who like to be at their desk before eight—so I try to catch it every morning. Maybe I'll get noticed.

Our station is far enough out of the city that I usually find a place to sit, but if a woman gets on, I always give up my seat. It's a show of respect. And I never know when a woman might strike up a conversation just because I'm polite. It's happened a couple times already. And of course, they ask if I'm on the registry. I don't get many hits on my profile, but it's all about playing the numbers.

Someday I'll get lucky. I don't mean to sound conceited, but honestly? There isn't a day goes by that a woman won't turn her head to get a second look at me, or pause just a moment longer when she's scanning the crowd of faces.

They're not allowed to say anything. There are strict laws about sexual harassment, and they are rigidly enforced. But that doesn't stop women from looking. I see it in their gaze, the twitch of a brow, the slight parting of their lips. They're fantasizing about me.

Even now while I make my way to an empty seat on the train, a woman gives me one of those up and down inspections, like she's checking out the whole package. She turns to whisper something to the woman seated beside her, and she gives me the once over, too.

I don't care. I like the attention. I want to get married and live in a nice house instead of our rundown rental. What's wrong with that?

As soon as I was hired at Campbell and Fetter, I signed up to volunteer at the company's daycare on the first floor. My assignment is three year-olds. Inexperienced men are prohibited from handling infants under a year, but evidently, once babies are out of diapers, and are mobile, men can be trusted to monitor these children. Basically, I follow little tykes around, making sure they don't conk each other on the head, or trip and fall on sharp objects.

There's this little kid, Evan. He's really shy. The first time I noticed him, he was off in a corner playing by himself. We're supposed to encourage the children to be active, so I had started the song 'Watch Me' and there were maybe ten kids all jumping around. As we flew past Evan, flapping our arms like birds, I called to him to come on and join us, but he wouldn't. So after the song, I flew over to him, perched on one of those tiny chairs, tucked my arms up, and peeped at him until he finally smiled.

He's such a cute little dude, with his wispy red hair poking out all around his head. I've kind of made him my special project. Whenever I see him, I fold in my arms, flap my elbows and peep. He makes his own little wings and peeps back.

He doesn't talk though. Deana, one of the supervisors, says he's a slow learner. Maybe. I think he just doesn't have anything to say yet.

Today I brought a stone I found once in Michigan. It's called a Petosky stone. When it's dry, it just looks boring and gray. But when it's wet, you can see all the little segments that used to be living coral. Evan's too young to understand what a fossil is, but I think he'll be surprised to see how different a plain rock can look when it's wet.

I'm working from three o'clock to eight today. It's one of my favorite shifts because most of the children are picked up by six. Then the rest of the kids are fed supper, and sometimes we watch a movie.

Evan's mom almost always works late, so he and I can hang out for some quality 'man time.' If there's a movie, we'll make the sound effects, like a door creaking open, or a dog barking. Evan's really good at animal sounds.

My building is on the same block as the train station, which is good this morning because as we all ride the escalator up to street level, I can hear the rain coming down. The pace of the crowd slows at the exit, like we're all assessing the situation, judging if we can walk without getting too wet, or if this calls for a mad dash.

Then umbrellas pop open, almost in unison, and the crowd disperses. I'd offer a dry spot under my umbrella, but all the women have their own.

I guess that's the whole problem: women don't need men anymore.

My grandfather says there was a time when a woman would intentionally act helpless just so a man would come to her aid; like she'd forget her umbrella, so a man would offer the use of his. It was all part of a master plan to find a husband.

In the olden days, a man wanted a female companion, 'a pretty little thing on his arm', my grandfather says, like he was showing off an exotic bird or rare flower.

But it's not like that anymore.

If a woman wants a companion, she usually chooses another woman. They think alike, they see things from the same perspective, they're on the same wave-length. Women aren't interested in listening to men talk about themselves, and they don't want us hanging around all the time.

I've heard different theories on how everything changed. My grandfather says this role reversal started once the majority of Congress was female. Grandma Lisa says that education

reform is responsible. Teachers were trained to encourage girls as well as boys to excel in school. My mom insists that advertising restrictions stopped women from being viewed as sex objects and portrayed them as strong and independent.

Personally? I think women gained their greatest freedom when the artificial womb was invented.

It's probably a little of each of these things. All I know for sure is that men once ruled the world, and now they don't.