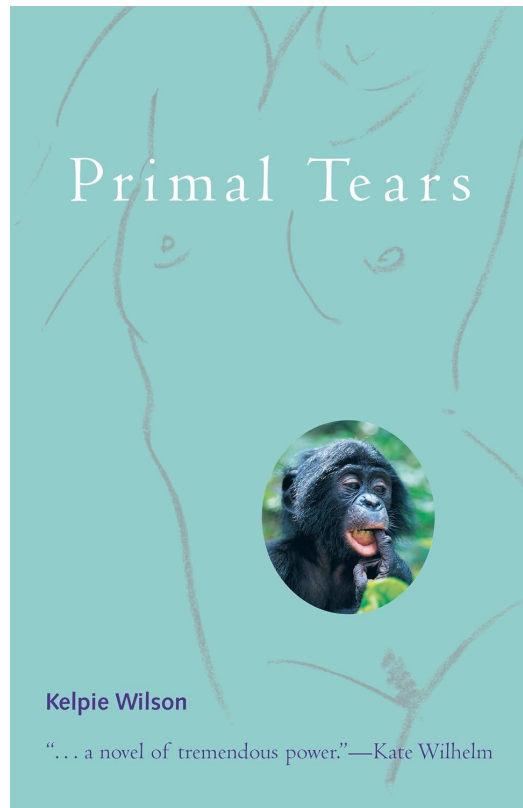


Primal Tears

Kelpie Wilson



2005

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A cross between a human and a bonobo? Carl Sagan and others have speculated: Is it possible? What kind of creature would it be? And how might this affect our world? Kelpie Wilson takes the premise and runs with it in this engaging novel. *Primal Tears* is the story of Sage, born to a young woman who has volunteered to be a surrogate mother for an endangered species of chimpanzee. The process goes awry, and Sage, a lovable youngster, is neither completely one species nor the other. When her existence becomes public knowledge, she needs all the best characteristics of both species to find a place for herself in our human-dominated world.

“Primal Tears is a novel of tremendous power. Passionate and erotic, at times tenderly lyrical, it confronts head-on, without flinching, brutal environmental and feminist politics. Its protagonist, Sage, is unique, magical, and haunting.”

—Kate Wilhelm, author of *The Unbidden Truth*, *Clear and Convincing Proof*, and *Skeletons*

“Kelpie Wilson’s Primal Tears has rounded, memorable characters, evocative descriptions, lively dialogue, an exciting plot, ... and an understated, evenhanded wit that is very engaging. ... It is a clear-eyed, courageous look at some of the most denied and neglected threats to the biosphere and the place of humans in it.”

—David Rains Wallace, author of *The Monkey’s Bridge* and *The Bonehunters’ Revenge*

About the Author

Writer, editor, and engineer **Kelpie Wilso** is well known as an environmental activist. Her articles have appeared in *Wild Earth*, *The Progressive*, and the *Earth First! Journal*. She is currently an editor and writer for www.tmthout.org, an online news service with a worldwide audience. Wilson lives with her husband in a solar-powered cabin in the Siskiyou Mountains of Oregon.

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PRIMAL TEARS

Kelpie Wilson



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*To George, Pat, and Robin
with love and thanks.*

Part I

*Every tear from every eye
Becomes a babe in eternity.*

—William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence”

1

Sarah Carrigan was dismissing her last class of the day when the secretary leaned in the door and handed her a note. “Hixton wants you,” she said. Sarah pressed her tongue to her palate in distaste. Hixton. What could he want?

“Bye, Ms. Carrigan.” Her student Nathan waved his whole arm as he bounced backward out the door. Sarah smiled and waved back, loving the boy’s dimpled, radiant face. “Goodbye Nathan. See you on Monday.”

Sarah’s smile faded as she looked down at the note.

In her two years at Bethel Bay Middle School, Principal Hixton had seldom spoken to her. The word from the rest of the faculty was: don’t bother him and he won’t bother you. Hixton ran the school by the book and rarely left his office. The note summoned her there now.

Sarah thought about it as she brushed her long wavy black hair and refastened it in a beaded hairclip. Hixton delegated the annual reviews to his vice principal, Mr. Turpin. They had already been done and hers were excellent. Could this have something to do with her tenure? She was eligible after this term. She had assumed it would be automatic, but they could keep her on probation for another year, though she couldn’t imagine why. Maybe Hixton was going to tell her that they had accelerated her tenure review and given her early tenure. Somehow she didn’t think that was it.

Sarah’s steps echoed against the battered metal lockers as she walked down the empty hallway toward the office. The walk seemed longer than usual. No one was at the front desk, and she slipped around the corner to Hixton’s inner sanctum.

Principal Hixton sat erect behind his desk. Buzz-cut gray hair, a red face and a heavy, square jaw made a brick of his head. He glanced up at her standing in the open doorway. His gaze settled on her breasts, making her wish that she had fastened the top button of her blouse.

“Have a seat.” Hixton indicated the chair in front of his desk but didn’t wait for her to sit. “Got some news for you. As you know, the district budget’s been cut again. Going to have to let you go.”

Sarah froze, still standing in the doorway. Her head was light, as if part of her had left the room. “But,” she heard herself say, “all the cuts were coming out of extra-curricular programs. The teaching staff is supposed to be the same. A school board decision ...”

“No.” He cut her off. “I have discretion. Told the board I had a teacher who wasn’t performing well, in closed session. They agreed we didn’t need your position. Nussbaum can cover some of your classes, and Satterlee will take the rest.”

Anger erupted molten and flooded Sarah’s skull, burning her cheeks. “But... what is wrong with my performance? I have had excellent evaluations over the last two years. No one has ever said a word to me about poor performance ...”

“We’ve had complaints. Complaints from parents.” The man would not meet her eyes. He shifted his gaze from her chest to a spot on the wall. “Besides, you really think you are fit to teach children? Filling their heads with ungodly lies. It’s bad enough that state curriculum keeps creation science out, but you have to go and tell them lies about it.”

Sarah’s body went rigid—her jaw casehardened and her spine a steel rod. She couldn’t believe this was happening. She snapped out her response:

“Look. Nir. Hixton, I’ve got students, some students, whose parents believe that we were brought here by star people from Mars. If I taught Bible creationism, you know, then those parents would complain.”

Her voice began to quaver, but she went on: “Evolution is science; it has nothing to do with religion. All I’m doing is following the curriculum handed to us by the state, and you can’t fire me for that.”

Hixton narrowed his eyes as his gaze finally locked with hers. “I’m not firing you for that. Officially we’re letting you go for budget reasons. A layoff. No seniority, no tenure. Nothing you can do about it. I’m telling you, my view is that you are from Satan. But that’s just my view. There’s nothing on the record about that or about parent complaints. Just budget. Last hired, first fired. Your husband has a good job; you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

Sarah’s jaw slackened as the man’s words drove into her gut. She searched for a response but could think of nothing. She turned and walked out.

Sarah blinked as she emerged into the fresh spring afternoon. There was something wrong with her eyes. Blackness soaked the edges of her vision. She was in a tunnel. In the center of the tunnel was the schoolyard, where flowering plum trees glowed pink and chartreuse in the sun. Behind her was Hixton, lurking in his dark office cave. Slowly, as she walked away from the building, the spring sunlight dissolved the tunnel. She had to escape now, quickly. She got in her car and drove through town, headed for the beach.

Bethel Bay was a typical small town on the south coast of Oregon. There was the wild ocean to the west, and in the east, muddy, clear-cut hills rose behind the town. The lumber mill blocked the best view of the ocean. The town itself was little more

than a collection of tacky clapboard buildings strung out along the highway like trash spilled from the back of someone's pickup.

Bethel Bay's bland eateries and accommodations had little to offer sophisticated city tourists, but still they came for the sparkling white sand beach sweeping in a long arc north of town. Dark stacks of sea-drenched rock rose from the near-shore waters where the relentless waves had chiseled them into eerie turrets and gothic arches. The cold ocean caroused in these castles, surging and spraying cascades of foam high into the air. People walked the long strand lost in the sweep of cormorants and the droning *om* chant of the surf.

South of town lay the broad mouth of the Savage River, opening in a mile-wide grin as it shoved a tongue of silt-laden water out into the ocean. A road ran along the banks of the river, headed east into the mountains, where twenty miles inland the pavement gave way to a nearly endless network of crude dirt logging roads. Up one of these tracks was a three-hundred-and-sixty-acre holding of private land surrounded by the Siskiyou National Forest — the old Savage Ranch.

Vanloads of flower children had come in the early 1970s, looking for land, and one summer evening, a '64 Ford Econoline van had huffed and whined its way up the steep grade of Forest Service Road number twelve-ninety-two and deposited Babs Shepard and her six-year-old son Kevin at Savage Ranch. The ranch was home to a group of hippie squatters who were scraping together the funds to buy it, and Babs had a savings account. She built a simple cabin and settled in with her son.

Thirteen years later, Kevin met Sarah at the University of Oregon in Eugene. He was an English major; she was in biology. They fell in love.

Kevin brought Sarah home to Savage Ranch, and she fell in love all over again with the land and the Kalmiopsis Wilderness—a vast territory that lay just beyond the eastern boundary of the ranch. It was known for its botanical wonders and Sarah the biologist considered it her own secret garden.

Kevin and Sarah dedicated their spring and summer breaks to hiking the rugged trails over craggy ridges and down into precipitous canyons. There was plenty of time for idling among giant firs, cedars and pines, and dipping into the deep green pools of the boulder-strewn rivers.

On their first overnight trip, the summer after she had met Kevin, Sarah lay naked on a sun-warmed rock in the middle of a river so clean you could drink from it. Stretched out on her stomach, she felt the boulder's stored heat soak into her hips and breasts as she listened to the water. Her body absorbed the sounds vibrating through air, water and rock. There was a light constant tinkling, a rushing like a thousand whispering cellos, a deep, irregular chuckling. She leaned out over the stream, dipped her face in it and drank deeply. Slowly, she rolled back and touched her wet, tingling lips to Kevin's for a kiss. In that moment she was changed, bonded to the land and the man who joined her to it. This place would be her home forever.

Sarah finally stopped shaking as she approached the turn for the beach parking lot. She parked, got out of the car and stretched, inhaling the fresh sea air.

Barefoot, she ran north along the wet, packed surf line. “Stupid bastard, stupid bastard,” she chanted over and over to herself as she ran, jamming her heels into the spongy surf-soaked sand. She kicked up a slurry of sand and water that spackled her slim, muscular legs.

Sprinting a final fifty yards, she threw herself onto a drift of white sand. She lay panting, curled on the sun-warmed, wind-rippled flank of the dune, embracing it like a giant mother.

She thought about the parents who complained. She wondered how many there were and remembered the note she had gotten from Cara Dumont’s mom the previous fall: “My little girl don’t need to hear she is related to a monkey. We don’t believe in that so knock it off.” Sarah had responded by sending Mrs. Dumont a copy of the state curriculum including the optional unit on primate evolution.

She stared at a sand flea hopping blindly around on the dune and realized that she should have seen this coming. She had not taught primate evolution her first year. She had started with the origins of one-celled life and stopped at the end of the Cretaceous. No one complained. Sarah felt the irony of it. Apparently, it was okay for dinosaurs to evolve. But this year she had decided to add in the optional unit on primates. She had wondered why it was optional and figured that it was probably covered in high school. Now she realized that it was never covered at all in places like Bethel Bay.

What should she do? She could try another school district, but that would mean a longer commute. Soon all she could think of was Kevin. She needed to talk to him, and he would be done with his Poet’s Club meeting soon. She headed back to her car and drove across town to the high school.

Sarah slid over as Kevin got in and took the wheel. His straight brown hair grew in a glossy pelt on his head, and his trim beard and mustache were sleek around his handsome face. Her Kevin-Bear. She hugged him tight and told him what had happened.

“It’s like a witch hunt,” she said, as they drove up the mountain toward home. “Hixton would just as soon burn me at the stake.”

“Yeah, he’s pretty bad. But hey, the old inquisitor should kick off soon, or at least retire. Then you can get your job back. In the meantime, let’s get you on at the high school.”

“But I love my middle school kids. Anyway, Bethel High won’t be hiring until somebody retires or quits.” She stared out the car window at the cows grazing in a field full of old stumps by the river. “What I don’t get is the board; why didn’t they support me?”

“Well, let me take a guess. There’s Mrs. Teece. Isn’t her son the coach for after-school soccer? Maybe she made some kind of deal to let you go in exchange for keeping the soccer program.” Sarah groaned. That had to be it.

“Hixton.” Kevin said. “He always was an extra-churchy type. I sure am glad Russ Miller isn’t like that.”

Sarah nodded. “Um hmm. At least your job is secure.”

Kevin had been a star player on Bethel Bay's basketball team and the town remembered him fondly, although he had his problems too. He encouraged his students to publish in a class literary journal, and some parents objected to the uncensored expressions of teenage anger and lust. But Kevin's principal was an easy-going man who supported him.

They crossed the border into the national forest, where tall firs still lined the road. Shafts of tree-filtered sunlight swirled around Sarah's face as Kevin took the tight curves up the mountain towards home. She blinked back a tear.

Kevin nudged her with his elbow. "Hey, you know Hixton works on his brother's sheep ranch on weekends. I heard he secretly has a thing for little lambs. He's been a bachelor his whole life, so he must do something to get his rocks off." Kevin flashed a wicked grin and his thick eyebrows wriggled up and down. "We'll hide out in the pasture some night with a camera and catch old Ezra in the act. Then you can blackmail him."

Sarah couldn't help it. She laughed. She stroked her husband's arm and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. Kevin always knew how to make her laugh.

"Oh my god, it's unbelievable to me these people don't accept evolution. How can they ignore the evidence?"

Kevin snorted. "Don't go looking for rationality in Bethel Bay. This is the Oregon Bible Belt."

"But evolution doesn't mean you can't believe in God. Why can't God be the laws of the universe—the force that guides evolution?" Sarah paused and scowled. "Simple chemicals become complex beings under the influence of the unified fields of gravity and electromagnetics as determined by God. God isn't some kind of cosmic wood carver who sets things down that are already finished. That's what I told my class, anyway."

"You did the right thing," Kevin said. They left the Forest Service road and drove slowly up their half-mile of rough dirt driveway.

Sarah was silent, wondering if she really had, and realized that it didn't matter now. Her job was gone. Walking down the steep path to their door she said, "I guess I'll have plenty of time now to work on the house."

The house was nestled into a south-facing hillside two hundred feet above the narrow valley floor that lay at the heart of Savage Ranch. In the valley was a ten-acre meadow along the creek bottom where the community garden grew scraggly tomatoes and brawny broccoli in the cool mountain air. Most of the two-dozen houses on the land were perched on the hillsides surrounding the garden.

Sarah and Kevin had built the house themselves, with help from Kevin's old high school buddies and their Savage Ranch neighbors. The living, dining and kitchen areas ran along the south side of the house, and bedrooms were back up against the hill on the north side. The south wall was glazed to let sun in during the winter, with a roof overhang to keep it out during the summer. A wood stove provided heat, and solar panels on the roof made their electricity. All that was left were what Kevin referred to as "cosmetic details."

Now Sarah was thankful for all the unfinished details. She looked at the kitchen with its raw sheetrock walls and makeshift plywood cabinets and realized that she would have plenty to keep her busy without a job. She petted their cats, Teasel and Muumuu, and went outside to check on the hens. Kevin started chopping vegetables for one of his wonderful pasta dishes.

After dinner they sat on the deck sipping wine. The sun had dropped below the low ridges to the west, and a wash of crimson still lingered on the high craggy peaks in the east.

Sarah gazed out at the distant peaks and grieved for the loss of her classroom and her precious relationships with the children. Then her thoughts turned to Sunrise School, a small private school that a group of Savage Ranch parents ran cooperatively. An old cabin on the land served as the schoolhouse. About a dozen children of all ages attended, including a few from outside families who wanted an alternative to the public school.

"I know what I'm going to do," she told Kevin, "I'm going to talk to Heather tomorrow about working at Sunrise. It doesn't pay much but I'd have a lot more freedom to teach what I want. And I'd get to be with the children." Sarah almost choked on the word.

Kevin winced. Having a child was an old topic between them.

Sarah looked at him and a lump rose in her throat. She turned her gaze back to the mountains. She knew Kevin hated to disappoint her, but he had to stick by his principles. That's the kind of person he was. Still, she had tried to change his mind.

The discussion would always end with Kevin ticking off all the problems caused by overpopulation: global warming, pollution, the energy crisis, hunger, war, disease. As a scientist and rational thinker she had to agree with him. She was fully aware that it was folly to bring a child into this world.

When she first met Kevin, she had been ambivalent about children. She thought she might want a family some time in the future but found herself persuaded by his rationale against it. But one day a feeling sparked in her and she found that the more deeply she fell in love with Kevin, the more she wanted to have his child. She begged him for just one, but he refused. He agreed to adopt, and finally she had to be satisfied with that. It was their only choice since he had gotten that vasectomy last year.

"Sarah ..." Kevin touched her cheek and made her look at him. He gave her a guilty smile. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head, butted it into his shoulder and then settled into his arms. "It's okay," she said. "I'm going to like Sunrise School better."

Sarah would come to terms with things. She had learned long ago that she wouldn't get everything she wanted from life. Here, surrounded by the beauty of the mountains and with Kevin's warm arms around her, she was nearly convinced that what she had was enough.

The next morning, Kevin's dad dropped by for coffee. Rob Shepard was fifty years old and balding. He wore his remaining gray hair in a long skinny braid down his back and sported a small silver ring in one ear. Rob was never seen in anything but a frayed brown coverall, pockets crammed with pens, pencils and a calculator. He lived in the small cabin on the other side of Savage Ranch where Kevin had grown up. But for most of his childhood, Kevin had lived there with his mother, Babs.

Rob and Babs had been together for six years before Babs had pronounced him a hopeless nerd and left to wander around with little Kevin until she found Savage Ranch. There she settled into a life of children, gardening and painting. But when Kevin turned twelve, she called up Rob in Berkeley and told him it was his turn. Babs was ready to move her painting studio to the city where she could make some contacts and sell some art.

Rob moved up to Bethel Bay and opened an electronics repair shop. Since he wasn't much of a cook, Kevin did his best to recreate the tasty pastas and casseroles Babs had fed him during her tenure as parent.

Now Rob dropped in most Saturday mornings for coffee and conversation out on their deck overlooking the forest and garden below. It was still cool this May morning. The air was sweet and fresh, and warblers were singing and flitting from tree to tree around them. A cloudless blue sky promised heat later in the day.

"Hi guys, what's up?" Rob called from the open front door.

"Coffee's on the counter, Dad, help yourself," Kevin said.

Rob walked through the house and out onto the deck, stirring cream into his coffee. He pulled up a chair and eased his stiff knees into a bend to sit.

"Sarah got canned yesterday."

"Canned? You mean you lost your job?" Rob looked up and stopped stirring his coffee.

Sarah told him the story.

"Sheesh! I knew things were backward up here, but I didn't think it was the dark ages. Huh. You know, back in Berkeley in the old days, they would've raised a ruckus. Get some good lawyers on it. What will you do?"

Sarah had gotten angry all over again telling the story. She made fists of her hands and felt her jaw go stiff again the way it had yesterday in Hixton's office. "I don't know," she said. "Lawyers. I don't know."

"Yoo hoo," came a voice from the front door. It was Fern.

"Come on in," Sarah called. Her hands relaxed in her lap.

Fern was their closest neighbor on Savage Ranch. She lived alone in a cluttered little cabin down next to the creek. She was in her early forties, had a glorious head of long wavy auburn hair and a figure that Kevin called "lush" built on a petite frame. Fern had been Babs's best friend and when Babs took off, she became a substitute mother to Kevin. She worked as a librarian in Bethel Bay.

Fern got coffee and took her seat, and after telling the whole story once more to Fern, Sarah felt her outrage and hurt dry to a thin crust of emotion. Soon, she thought,

those feelings would crumble into powder and she would sweep them away and be done with them.

"You know Hixton belongs to that secret church, the Kristian Kommand," Fern said. "Those boys have their own militia. They run training camps in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness and everything. You should see the books they bring in that they want me to put in the library—conspiracy tracts about the government and Jews and liberals—awful stuff."

"Wow, honey, do you think Ezra Hixton fired you because you're half Jewish?" Kevin wondered. Sarah shuddered, and all four of them sat silently.

"No," Sarah finally replied. "I don't see how he would have any idea. I'm half Irish too. Anyway, what does it matter? He called me a Satanist."

Kevin frowned and started pacing the deck. "Geez. We need to tell everybody about this, so we can all be alert. Remember what happened to that lesbian couple in Coos Bay? Or the African college student in Portland who was killed?"

"Now wait a minute." Sarah slapped the arm of her chair. "I can't see Hixton or any of those old sheep rancher friends of his murdering anyone. Come on."

"Well, we don't know anything about the Kristian Kommand," Fern said. "Might be some of those boys are capable of nasty stuff. And you know they don't have much use for us old hippies out here at Savage Ranch."

Rob pulled a leaky pen and a tiny notebook with frayed pages out of a pocket. He shook the pen to get it to write and then scribbled some notes. "Hmmm, well, I've got a friend back in Berkeley who follows these militia types and may be able to tell us something. Want me to call him?"

Kevin frowned and paced. "Yeah, Dad, that would be good. That's spelled with K's, right, Fern?"

"Yep. I only know because of those disgusting letters to the *Beacon*, There's one almost every week."

"Oh man," Kevin said, "those letters. They go on and on about Satan and all kinds of crap. But I don't remember who the hell signs them. Guess we'll have to find a paper and look."

"Fern, how did you know that about the militia training in the Kalmiopsis?" Sarah asked.

"My old biker buddy, Stanley Redwolf. From my exotic dancer days. Such a sweet-talkin' thing. Real gentleman for a biker. He comes into the library and takes me out for coffee and we catch up on the gossip. He's been married and settled down for years now, but he loves to reminisce about his bad old days." Fern rolled her eyes and arched her neck coquettishly. "I could discreetly probe him for more information the next time he comes around." She poked her finger in the air.

They all laughed, and with their mood lightened, Rob got up to go call his friend in Berkeley, Fern walked home and Sarah went down to the garden.

Sarah pulled weeds and shook soil from the root clumps before tossing them in the compost pile. She thought about Fern as she worked. She had never met anyone like

her before. Over cups of tea in her little cabin by the creek, Fern told Sarah the most amazing stories about her life. She was never intimidated by anything, and though she had had a hard life in many ways, she had always come out on top.

Fern came from the little southern Illinois town of Cairo, where the Ohio River flows into the Mississippi. "The locals call it Karo, hon', like the corn syrup."

She had grown up poor, her father a preacher at a Holy Roller church, but she did well in school and escaped to the university in Urbana, where she majored in psychology. She supported herself working as a stripper at a windowless tavern in the middle of the cornfields a few miles outside of town. They billed her as "Little Egypt, a belly dancer from Cairo."

"I didn't know beans about belly dancing," she told Sarah, "but it didn't matter. I just found some long veils and wiggled it and jiggled it."

Fern was accepted at Stonewell University in San Jose for graduate work in primate psychology, but she never finished her Ph.D. The more she studied the apes and monkeys, the more horrified she was by their treatment. The confinement was bad enough, but she was appalled by some of the psychological experiments. Baby chimps were separated from their mothers at birth so that scientists could observe the development of neurosis and gauge the psychological importance of contact with the mother.

"Any idiot could tell them that babies need their mothers," Fern would rage. She dropped out of the program, moved to San Francisco.

In the city she learned how to belly dance for real from a tribe of Earth Goddess worshippers who practiced in Golden Gate Park every Sunday. She worked at a topless club in North Beach and studied Jungian psychology at a metaphysical college.

Eventually, Fern made her way up the coast to Oregon and discovered Savage Ranch. She worked as a stripper ("They call it exotic dancer, hon', but it means stripper just the same") up in Coos Bay for a while, but soon landed a part-time librarian job in Bethel Bay. In her time off, Fern traveled to Europe and Asia, worked on her cabin and enjoyed a string of uncommitted affairs with the most interesting men who passed through the area.

Sarah had asked Fern about the stripping. Wasn't it hard to take your clothes off in front of strangers?

"Naw," Fern had replied. "All I ever did was show those guys my titties. What's the big deal? Women in Africa walk around topless all the time. I felt sorry for those men. Bottle-fed, most of 'em, I'm sure. They never even saw their own mother's breasts. No wonder they've got problems."

Sarah was amazed at Fern's attitude. She envied her freedom and self-confidence.

Sarah thought about yesterday. She was proud that she had stood up to Hixton and not dissolved into tears, but it had come at a cost. She couldn't keep up that kind of resistance for long. It was more natural for her to go along on the ways and byways that others mapped out. I worry too much, she berated herself in the garden. And I wish I had more courage to take risks. But I'm too shy and I don't know how to be myself.

Sarah could blame her upbringing: moving nine times between Ohio, Texas, California, Alabama, and Virginia. Her father had been a pilot training consultant working for a big aerospace company. Moving a lot had made her shy. There was always a new school, new kids.

Her mother was a joiner. She would throw herself into organizing luncheons and charity fundraisers to fill all the hours that she wasn't taking care of her husband and raising her three children: Sarah and her two younger brothers. At her mother's insistence, Sarah had once tried to join the Glee Club at school. But she found there was some sort of molecular force at work that drove the other girls into solid clumps and left her a solitary grain, clinging to the wall. Sarah couldn't understand it and never went back.

Sarah's thoughts turned to her father. It was always painful. Daddy had died her junior year of high school. Not in the plane crash they always feared, but almost as suddenly from cancer.

Sarah remembered the way her father's eyebrows would arch with pleasure whenever he told her the story of his first solo flight. "Courage, Princess!" he would shout and then pick her up by one arm and one leg and swing her around and around just like she was flying.

Tom Carrigan taught his children about duty and courage. It took courage to do your duty to your country. And it also took courage to accept the consequences of your actions.

When she was with her father, he made her feel brave and beautiful. After he died, the doubts crept in.

Julia Carrigan lived now in a condo in the Chicago suburb of Glencoe. She was remarried to a wealthy commodity futures trader. Sarah knew her mother was disappointed that she had turned out to be only a schoolteacher. Not much to brag about. And now she didn't even have a job.

She stood up and looked over the fallow garden beds. She was not tough like Fern or brave like her father. She was not successful like her mother wanted her to be. And she could not even do what she really wanted to do right now, which was to have a baby.

3

Later that afternoon, after a hot shower had rinsed away the itchy garden soil on her arms and legs, Sarah walked down to Fern's house. It was ten degrees cooler in the shady draw where Fern's small, boxy cabin nestled into a grove of aromatic cedars.

"Come on in, chickie-babe." Fern waved her in the door. The cabin had one room downstairs that was both kitchen and living room with a bath to the side. There was a half-loft bedroom above reached by a ladder.

To Sarah, Fern's cabin was a magical place, like a fascinating museum. Not dead and dusty, but lively as a pagan temple. Sarah always took a few moments after entering Fern's house to look around.

Above the front door was a magnificent, six-foot-long stained-glass dragon window. The beast glowed in rainbow hues that brightened the dark interior of the cabin. The main room was populated with more dragons and dozens of goddess images that Fern had collected on her travels around the world. Her treasures—brass and ceramic statuettes, bits of batiked and woven fabric, special stones and crystals and dried flowers—crammed small shelves on every wall. The long picture window behind the couch looked out on the tumbling creek and a luxuriant garden of ferns and mosses. The smell of medicinal herbs drifted down from the rafters where they hung in bunches.

Fern brought tea over to the table and poured it. She patted Sarah on the shoulder and said, "Hey, I got an interesting call this afternoon. My old pal John from Stonewell Primate Lab."

"Who's that?"

"You remember. I told you about him. He checks in with me now and then. Obviously, he's still in love with me." Fern gave a little leer as she languidly twisted a loose strand of her hair and pulled it back behind one ear.

"Oh, right. Your old boss. I thought you were the one who was in love."

Fern sighed. "Yeah, but he'll never leave his silly wife. She is so wrong for him, no intellect whatsoever. Oh well. Anyway, we were chatting and he told me about some of their new work. You won't believe this."

Sarah lifted her eyebrows expectantly.

"Stonewell wants to step up their breeding program for bonobos. You know about bonobos?"

"Sure. They're a kind of chimpanzee; only they're even more closely related to us than common chimps. They share ninety-nine percent of our genes. And the females are continuously receptive to sex, just like us." Sarah grinned. "They have sex all the time and it keeps the males happy and makes bonobo society peaceful. Right? Is that why Stone well is studying them?"

"Partly. But most of what John is doing is bonobo conservation. There's only a few thousand left in the Congo. With so many wars there and the human population exploding, they aren't going to last long, I'm afraid. Stonewell and all the other primate labs are breeding them as fast as they can, but it's not fast enough."

"Oh," Sarah said. "That's terrible. I didn't realize they were in such trouble. So what's John's part in it?"

"Get this. He's starting a bonobo surrogate mother program to help increase the gene pool. They want women, human women, to volunteer to carry bonobo embryos to term."

"Wow! "

Fern continued. "It's modeled on a program they've already got that uses cows to help the endangered guar. The guar—it's one of those African striped cattle with

the long pointy horns. The cows help bring more young guar to term than the guar mothers could by themselves. So now Stone well is going to do the same thing with bonobos and women."

"That's ... that's amazing. It makes perfect sense though, if you can think about it objectively."

"I know. Personally, I don't see a whole lot of difference between cows incubating guar and women incubating bonobos, or even women acting as surrogates for other women, but think about this: can you imagine how ol' Hixton would get his knickers in a twist if he heard about it?"

Sarah laughed. "Oh my god, you're right, it would drive him up a wall. Women giving birth to chimps. We'll have to find a way to put a newspaper article about it on his desk. I'd love to see the look on his face."

"I thought you would like it. That's why I had to tell you." Fern smiled enigmatically and changed the subject. "I'm glad I got you to laugh. So how are you feeling about things now?"

"Oh, Fern, I'm going through a little crisis of self-confidence." Sarah started to spill her heart out to the older woman. "I spent all those years studying biology, but I was never sure exactly why. My mother wanted me to be a doctor, but I hated pre-med. Then she thought I should be a research scientist, but I barely made it through one semester of graduate school. I mean, I wanted to do something to help people, cure disease or develop better crops, but it's all genetic engineering now. I wasn't comfortable messing around with the basic ingredients of life like that. It gives me the creeps to put mouse genes in a strawberry."

Sarah stopped, thinking of the bonobo surrogate program. "It's not like the bonobo program you were talking about. That's unnatural, certainly, but it's not rewriting the code of life, like playing God."

"No, it's not. It's trying to help a species that we've nearly eradicated. I don't see anything wrong with it, either. But I agree with you about genetic engineering. So that's why you quit graduate school?"

"Partly. It was as bad as pre-med, so cutthroat. What I really should have done was go into botany or wildlife. But my mother said that would be stupid because there's no money in it."

Fern put her arm around Sarah and said: "Sarah, there's no doubt in my mind that you're in the right place. You need to feel the earth between your toes. You'll find what's right for you. You're in a transition period; you're waiting for the next thing that's going to occupy your time and your mind."

"I don't know. I think it might be more than that. I think maybe losing my job is making me confront some issues I've buried. You know, my problem with Kevin."

"Kids?"

"Yeah. If I didn't love him so much, I guess I would find someone else to raise a family with. But then I wouldn't want to. He's the one." She tried to focus on a brass

image of Kali sitting on Fern's shelf, but her eyes moistened and the goddess's six arms wavered and blurred.

Fern followed her gaze. "Kali is the dark goddess of death. And the goddess of childbirth as well. The Hindus would find Kevin's attitude strange for a married man. It's holy to give oneself over to creation even though it ends in death. Death is holy because new creation arises from the ashes."

"Yes, and look at India. More than a billion people. They'll be importing food soon. Incredible poverty and misery, especially for women, and female infanticide too. Then add in the pollution from trying to raise the standard of living for the middle class and your Kali is having a field day. What kind of creation arises from the ashes of a Bhopal?"

Fern shrugged. "I don't know; I'm a mere mortal after all. All I do know is that I've never had any desire to reproduce. Kevin's reasons are part of it, but not the whole thing. It's not something my body desires. To me, having babies is about as appealing as shitting pumpkins. But I understand how you could feel differently."

Sarah laughed. "What an image. To me it's the closest thing to magic I can think of. Sure, I know all the science behind it—endocrinology, embryology, and so forth. But still, it seems like such a miracle. To grow a new being, just with my body."

Fern got up and carried the teapot over to the sink and began rinsing it out. "Well, you and Kevin are planning to adopt, aren't you?"

"Yes, and I guess it will be sooner rather than later. I think I'll be happy then. I hope. I know Kevin will be a great dad ..."

Fern came over and gave her a big, motherly hug. "Hang in there, honey. You'll find what's right."

Sarah got through the last two weeks of school with difficulty. She mourned as she packed up her supplies: prisms and lenses and magnets, boxes of animal bones and skulls, her books and worksheets. She left the extra rulers, protractors and graph paper she had bought for next year's class. Teachers always had to buy a lot of their own supplies if they wanted to do anything creative because there was never enough money in the budget.

The children made her sympathy cards and some told her that she was their favorite teacher. Those expressions meant a great deal more to her than the goodbye party given by her colleagues in the teachers lounge at lunch one day. A few of the other teachers told her privately that they suspected that Hixton was persecuting her, but most seemed smug in their tenured security, as if the sinking of Sarah added ballast to their own small ships.

Strangely, Sarah's thoughts lingered on Fern's news about the bonobo breeding program. A fantasy of volunteering grew in her head and helped her get through those last days at school.

The weekend after school let out, the Saturday morning coffee klatch gathered again on Sarah and Kevin's deck. The morning sun was warm, but it had rained on Friday

and the breeze was fresh. Sarah had gotten up early to bake apricot scones, and the rich smell of sweet fruit and butter floated out from the house.

Fern arrived first this time and was already dipping a scone into her coffee. She was wearing a jade-green sleeveless blouse and short cut-offs that displayed her fine legs. The three of them watched Rob walking up the path towards the house.

"Smells wonderful!" he called out.

Rob walked around to the front door and through the house to the deck, helping himself to a scone and coffee on the way. He settled in his chair and glanced down at Fern's legs, silently appreciating her beauty. He'd long wanted to make Fern Kevin's official step-mother, but she had gently but firmly let him know that he was not and never would be her type.

"So tell Fern what you found out, Dad," Kevin urged.

Rob nodded. He took a bite of his scone and set it on the table.

"These are delicious, Sarah," he said with his mouth still full, and swallowed. He took a sip of coffee. "Well, my friend in Berkeley couldn't tell me a whole lot about the Kristian Kommand. They're listed in the Militia Watch database, but no estimate on the size of the group. They seem to be most active in the West and have connections to larger groups like the Aryan Nation and the Christian Identity movement."

Rob paused to take another sip of coffee and then continued: "Bo Breaker is the one who writes those letters. The lady who works at the *Beacon* told me something about him. Scary character, for sure. Grew up here. Special Forces training, but he never made it to 'Nam. They discharged him right before he was supposed to ship out. Can't find out why. Guess he was too crazy even for the Army. He's a miner now with claims all over the Siskiyou National Forest and even inside the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. Forest Service is having trouble with him threatening hikers. Says it's all his own private property. Will be soon if he gets it patented."

"What does that mean?" asked Sarah. "How could he do that?"

"It's the stupid 1872 Mining Law," Rob said. "After a miner has a claim for a certain amount of time, he's allowed to buy it from the government. He applies for a patent and then the government has to sell it to him for just pennies an acre. This creep will probably own part of the Kalmiopsis Wilderness soon."

"Did you talk to Nick?" Fern asked Kevin. Nick had been Kevin's best friend since junior high. Nick's family went back four generations in Bethel Bay, and he knew everyone.

"Yeah. Nick says Breaker's a real gun nut and he's got a huge arsenal stashed out at one of his mining claims. Never been to jail, and he doesn't go to bars, so he doesn't get in fights, but Nick thinks he's pretty tightly wound."

"Stanley Redwolf says that Mack Johnson is in the Kommand."

The group was briefly stunned by Fern's revelation.

"The county commissioner?" asked Kevin.

"Yep. Stanley saw him get out of a jeep with Bo Breaker, the Hixton brothers and one of those other ranchers. They were up at the end of a Forest Service road on the

south end of the Kalmiopsis. Place called Chrome Ridge. Bo's got a mining claim there. Stanley saw them unload a lot of long wooden crates and camping gear. He was up there on his little dirt bike. He hid in the brush when he heard them drive up and he had to stay there while they unloaded everything and transferred it to those all-terrain vehicles."

"So," Kevin summarized, "Stanley was growing a pot crop up there, I bet. And the Kristian Kommand is doing military exercises on Bo Breaker's mining claim."

"And there's likely nothing illegal about what they're doing, so there's nothing we can do about it," Rob said, concluding the conversation.

It was one of the few nights that got really hot in the mountain summer. Sarah and Kevin lay naked and wet on the sheets. They had made love and then showered and a barely-felt breeze now tickled their skin. Moonlight streamed through the windows, and tree frogs peep-peep-cheeped in the night.

"I've been having some really strange thoughts that I need to tell you about," Sarah said.

"Oh yeah, like what?"

Sarah lay on her side and a strand of her hair fanned across her face, veiling her eyes. She drew her fingers along Kevin's muscled abdomen, enjoying the silky feel of his skin. "You'll never believe this. Remember that Stonewell Primate Labs program that Fern told me about? I told you about it."

"Umm, yeah," Kevin said.

"Well, I think I want to do it. Volunteer to incubate a bonobo baby. So what do you think?"

Kevin rose up on one elbow and brushed her hair back from her face with his fingers so he could see her eyes. "Wow." His brows twitched. "You're serious, aren't you? That would be ... cool, I guess. Wow."

Sarah met his eyes and then flopped on her back, staring up at the ceiling. "You think it's ridiculous. Oh my god, it probably is."

"No, no, Sarah, it's cool. I just need a minute to let it sink in. Yeah, it's totally cool. What an incredible thing to be able to do, to help save an endangered species. Why, if I could do it I'd incubate a whole litter of spotted owls and Del Norte salamanders and coho salmon and wolverines and grizzly bears and ... well, the grizzlies and wolverines might hurt a little bit coming out, but wow, I think it would be great." He reached over to tickle her belly.

Sarah wriggled away from him and hid her head under the pillow and laughed until she needed air and then sat up and said, "Really, you don't think it's totally insane?"

"No, honey, it's perfect. You can get to see how your female equipment works without creating another resource-sucking, wildlifeendangering human. And the world gets another bonobo. It's perfect."

Sarah laughed again. Kevin astounded her with the way he cut through to the bare facts of the matter. She rolled over on her back and thought for a bit and then said:

"The only problem is that it might be really hard for me to give it up. I'm sure they won't want me to keep it very long. So I've been thinking. Can we start applying for the adoption? It'll probably take a long time so we might as well get started. I want a baby I can keep too."

"Sure. Of course. You know I really want us to. I'm ready for it if you are. And the surrogate program, I think it's great. It isn't risky at all, is it? When can you find out more about it?"

"I'll ask Fern. I'll call her friend at the lab there. I'm pretty sure I want to do it, but you're right, I need to know more first. I love you."

Kevin put his arms around her and held her as they slowly relaxed into sleep. They were almost asleep when a coyote howled up on the mountain somewhere.

"Owoooooooooo," Kevin howled sleepily.

"Oowoooooooo," Sarah answered her mate. And they licked and nipped each other like two cubs snug in their den.

4

Two days later, Sarah and Fern were sitting at Fern's kitchen table, sampling the honey almond ginger cookies that Fern had just pulled out of the oven. Sarah had a wide mug of steaming green tea with milk in front of her.

"Fern, I was wondering, do they still need women to volunteer for the bonobo surrogate program? How would someone apply for it?"

"So," Fern said. "You want to incubate a bonobo." Fern smiled the same knowing smile Sarah had seen weeks before.

"You knew I'd want to do this all along, didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't know for sure, but I thought you might. So I went ahead and asked John to send me the application form." Fern went over to her cluttered oak desk and pulled a thick manila envelope out of a drawer.

"That looks bigger than the adoption forms Kevin and I have to fill out." Sarah's eyes widened.

"Well, they have to find women who are psychologically stable enough to handle the experience. What do you think? Is that you? You know they'll want you to be down there for the last few weeks of the pregnancy and the birth. You can be home the rest of the time, though."

"I wouldn't be applying if I didn't think I could do it. The hardest thing for me would be giving up the baby after it's born. Of course I know I couldn't keep it."

Fern nodded. "You'll have to put down all your reasons and motivations on this form. That's how they're going to judge if you're right or not. So Kevin is supportive?"

"Oh yeah. He thinks it's really great. He'd do it too if he could." The two women laughed.

All the application forms for the adoption and the bonobo surrogate program had been filled out and sent in. Now it was just a matter of waiting. In August, Sarah tiled the bathroom, weeded the garden and watched the tomatoes ripen.

In September she got a call from Stonewell Primate Lab. She hung up the phone and ran to find Kevin.

"I've been accepted! I made it through the first hoop. We've got to go down there for a personal interview before they make the final decision."

They made an appointment for the next week, and on Sunday they started the long drive down to San Jose. Gradually, the giant redwoods and hordes of motor homes on Highway 101 gave way to vineyards and rows of new red tile-roofed houses. Both vines and houses, planted in neat, monotonous rows, had increased since the last time they had come this way.

They threaded their way through heavy traffic in San Francisco and down the peninsula to San Jose, and pulled into the motel parking lot. They went to bed soon after dinner. They had to be at the lab at eight the next morning.

The tall, sturdy middle-aged man who met them in the lab's reception area was Fern's old friend, John Stengers. "Welcome Sarah. Kevin." He shook their hands and Sarah appreciated his warm smile and even, handsome features. She could see instantly why Fern liked him so much. He spoke to them in a smooth, sonorous voice: "Before the formal interview, we thought you might like a tour of the labs. We won't be showing you everything, but we thought you'd like to see the bonobo section at least."

"I'd really like to meet the biological, uh, I mean genetic parents," Sarah said.

John smiled as if he liked her idea. "Of course."

Two sets of glass doors to the right and left led off the reception area to different wings of the building. John took them through a third set of doors opposite the entrance out onto a covered concrete walkway skirting a large courtyard. Wire mesh enclosures filled the courtyard, and a long glass wall separated the cages from the walkway.

"Originally the enclosures were all open, but we had to put the glass up pretty quickly."

"Why?" Kevin asked.

John grinned. "We called it 'feces fairway.' The chimps liked to demonstrate their throwing abilities whenever anyone walked by. They were especially hard on visitors." Kevin chuckled appreciatively.

Inside the enclosures were a few trees and hardy shrubs, rope swings and children's playground equipment. Some of the cells were empty and some had one or two chimps sitting on the ground, eating.

"We're here at breakfast time. Everybody's pretty' calm because they're eating. Now those two over there in 'B' House are common chimps, but the one in 'D' House is a bonobo. That's Dexter. Looks like he's taking a little time away from the girls this morning."

"Are the girls his mates?" asked Kevin. Dexter glanced up at them with shiny black eyes and then went back to chomping at pieces of sugar cane. He was slightly smaller,

more slender, and had a flatter, less snouty face than the two common chimps eating bananas next door. His body hair was sparse, revealing tautly muscled arms and chest, but a thick black thatch of hair coiffed his head.

“No,” John said, “the girls are his mother and her best friend. We have a new bonobo female that we’ve mated with Dexter, but she’s in the next house.”

“You mean cage,” Kevin said. Sarah nudged him.

“Well, we call it a house. Of course these animals aren’t free to come and go as they please, but we take them out quite a lot. There’s a fenced, two-acre park right behind this building, and we try to get them all out at least once a day. They also spend a great deal of time indoors in the classrooms.”

“Classrooms?” Kevin asked incredulously.

“Again, we call them that. Those are the indoor areas where we work with the chimps. Since most of our work is investigating learning and cognition, we teach, or try to teach the chimps a lot of different things. Like language acquisition and comprehension in Ameslan. That’s American Sign Language.”

They walked past all the enclosures and John led them through another glass door. They turned to the left and walked down a short hallway and then turned left again. They were in a long corridor with closed glass doors that led into the classrooms. They went through a door marked “D” and stood in a foyer. John locked the doors behind them and pressed a buzzer. They could see through a second set of locked glass doors into the room beyond. There was a desk that looked like a nurse’s charge station and a kitchen to the right. Soon, a small woman with short blond hair, wearing a smock and jeans, came to the door and let them in. A penetrating odor struck Kevin and Sarah as soon as the doors opened: the muskiness of a zoo, the incontinence of a county rest home.

“Sarah, Kevin, this is Jeanette Orsini. She’s in charge of this unit. Maria is housed here. Maria is the genetic mother.” John nodded to Sarah.

“Hello, hello, come in,” Jeanette beckoned them in. “Maria is a sweetie, but she’s a little shy. She’s recently come from the forest. I think it’s best if we introduce you one at a time.”

Jeanette took Sarah first through a solid door with a small glass window and into a large room with a tile floor. Skylights in the ceiling flooded the room with natural light. Sarah could see three adult bonobos scattered around the room. Two of the adults had young ones with them. The older of the youngsters sat in front of a terminal with a pair of headphones on, manipulating a joystick to play Pac Man. Its mother stood behind it, picking nits or maybe just lint from its fur. The other mother lounged in a beanbag chair suckling her infant and scratching her ear. The third female—Jeanette said it was Maria—sat in a corner eating cereal from a cup.

All the adults looked up when Sarah and Jeanette came in the room. Maria scooted behind a screen, but the others were unconcerned. Jeanette took Sarah over to greet Priscilla and Pete at the video terminal. Pete dropped the joystick and leaped into Sarah’s arms and started tugging on her hair.

“That’s enough, Pete. Oh boy, now you see why none of us have long hair.” Jeanette pulled Pete away from Sarah, but Sarah was charmed. Pete stood on the floor now and gripped her hand. Priscilla took her other hand and sniffed it.

“Hello Priscilla, I’m really pleased to meet you,” Sarah said. Sarah smiled and watched the dark skin of Priscilla’s face wrinkle and stretch as she first pursed her lips and then peeled back her pink lower lip to reveal gums and sharp-looking teeth.

“She’s smiling at you,” Jeanette said. Priscilla went back to grooming Pete, and Jeanette led Sarah over to meet the others. Helena merely sniffed Sarah’s hand apathetically as her baby nursed. They went to the screen where Maria was hiding.

“Maria, please come out and meet this friendly person. She has a banana. Come on out please, just for a minute.”

Jeanette pulled a banana from the pocket of her smock and handed it to Sarah. Sarah moved past the edge of the screen where Maria could see her and held out the banana. Maria looked up and tentatively reached her hand out. Sarah squatted down on Maria’s level and Maria slowly took the banana from her. She held it but made no move to eat it.

Sarah caught Maria’s gaze: “Poor Maria, you must miss the forest and your people so much. It must be so hard to be a bonobo in a strange place you don’t understand.” Maria stared back at her with deep, liquid black eyes and a down-turned mouth. Slowly she opened the banana and nibbled on it.

“She really is sad, isn’t she?”

“Yes. You can tell when bonobos are happy. They smile and laugh just like we do. Bringing them from Africa is awfully hard on them. That’s why we’re so glad you want to help with this program. We don’t want to have to pull many more animals out of the wild, though goodness knows their survival out there is pretty dicey. We’ve only got about sixty animals living in breeding colonies in zoos and institutions like this one. So it’s essential that we increase the captive genetic stock quickly so we can maintain a viable population if their native habitat gets destroyed. Maria’s not pregnant right now, she just miscarried and we’re not sure why. John thinks it’s the stress. But we have a supply of her embryos in storage. We injected her with FSH—that’s follicle stimulating hormone—so she would super-ovulate; release several eggs at a time. Then we did an in vitro fertilization with sperm from Dexter. In vitro, that means in glass, a petri dish. Oh I forgot, you’re a biologist, you already know that. Anyway we have seven viable embryos that are now in cryostorage.”

“So you’ll implant one of those embryos in me?”

“Yes. We’ll do the implantation at Stonewell’s med school hospital. It’s a safe, non-surgical procedure. We’ll keep you here for several weeks because you’ll need regular injections of prostaglandin and immune system suppressants to help your body accept the pregnancy. After that you can go home for six months or so.”

Sarah nodded and they went back out to the kitchen area. Kevin went in to meet the bonobos and came back exclaiming: “Boy, that little Pete! What a character. He

tried to climb on top of my head and pull my ears off.” Then they went next door and met Dexter, his mother and another female with a young infant.

After meeting the bonobos, they followed John down the hall to the lab. John pointed out the examination tables where the animals’ blood and urine samples were taken. He showed them the cryo unit where sperm and embryos were stored. The waist-high, heavy steel box had a digital readout with buttons and lights glowing on the front. John lifted the heavy insulated lid, and a chilly vapor poured out. Inside were racks holding stacks of blue and white plastic boxes. John pulled a rack of blue boxes partly out of the liquid nitrogen bath.

“These are two cell embryos. We fertilize the eggs and allow them to develop to the first cell division. Then we pack them in dimethyl sulfoxide in vials and pop them in the embryo freezer”— he pointed to another polished stainless steel unit on the lab counter —“where they freeze down slowly to minus eighty degrees Celsius. Then we can transfer them into these racks for storage. We have a seventy percent viability on them.”

He slid the rack back into the cold chamber and pulled up a rack of white boxes: “The sperm we pack in glycerol. Some of it comes from the lab here, some from other labs around the world, and some from the field.” He put the rack back in its slot and closed the lid.

“What does that mean, from the field?” Kevin asked.

“Well... you’re not going to like how this sounds, but it’s really not so bad. Doesn’t hurt the animals at all. We capture a male and knock him out. You’ve seen how that’s done on TV, I’m sure.”

“Sure, all those wildlife programs. You shoot them with a tranquilizer dart. But how do you get sperm out of them—give them wet dreams while they’re out?”

“Almost. We use a mild electrical stimulator in the anus. It’s effective, although we’ve found that for some reason, the sperm we obtain from that method is less motile than what we can get here in the lab.”

“Aarrgh. How do you get samples here in the lab?” Kevin wanted to know all the gritty details. Sarah grimaced.

“Oh, that’s easy. We’ve got the apes trained to masturbate a sample in exchange for a food reward. It comes pretty naturally to them.”

Then John led them out to the end of the corridor and back to the reception area. “We’ll let you go have lunch now and relax a little for the interview this afternoon. Make sure you think about what you’ve seen and talk about it with each other. We want you to be sure about wanting to do this.”

Kevin took Sarah’s hand and they headed out to find some lunch. Not wanting to brave noontime gridlock, they walked to the edge of campus, where all they could find was a chain diner. Sarah slid into a pink and orange booth in the noisy restaurant. As soon as they both were seated she said, “Kevin, you better watch what you say or you’ll blow our chances.”

“What do you mean? What did I say?” Kevin looked hurt.

“Telling them the animals were in cages, implying that they’re mistreating them or something. They’ll think you’re some kind of radical.”

“Well, I am some kind of radical. I don’t think animals should be in cages.” He glared at the shiny plastic menu. “We’ve got lots of choices here. Do you want plastic chicken or plastic tuna or a plastic hamburger?”

Sarah sighed and gave him a sad look. “I think I’ll just have a salad.”

“Oh darn, honey, I’m sorry. I know how important this is. I’ll be more careful.”

The interview must have gone well, because at the motel that night they got a call from John.

“We want you in, Sarah. We’ve still got a lot of paperwork to do before we can start the program, but it should be done by the end of October. After that, it’s any time you’re ready.”

October gave way to November with no word from Stonewell. In mid November, Kevin and Sarah got a call from the adoption agency informing them that Tracy, a pregnant teenager in Portland, was interested in an open adoption. Tracy had looked through the portfolio Kevin and Sarah had on file at the agency and had decided that they were the perfect parents for her child. “She likes it that you’re teachers and live in the country,” the caseworker told Sarah. The baby was due in May. They could have it three months after birth. Were they interested?

“It’s perfect,” Sarah said. She danced around the living room with the phone in her hand. “If I get implanted right away, I’ll have birthed the bonobo before we go to Portland to pick up our real baby. The bonobo only needs eight months.”

“Won’t that be cutting it kind of close?” Kevin asked.

“A little, but let’s say yes and see what happens.”

Sarah called Stonewell that day. Stengers was angry on the phone. “It’s unbelievable. The administration pulled our funding for the program, funding that was already approved. It’s outrageous and all they’ll say is that it’s a routine cutback when really, it is unprecedented interference.”

“But why?” asked Sarah.

Stengers was silent a moment. “Okay, I’ll tell you. A journal article describing the program was picked up by one of those rabid talk show hosts last year, and he’s been telling people all over the country to call the administration and protest. I’m sorry, Sarah, but this program is probably dead for a long time.”

Sarah felt the nausea of rage stirring her gut. “I can’t believe this,” she told Stengers over the phone, “this is the second time those bastards have gotten me.” She told him about losing her job for teaching evolution.

“Do you want to do something about it? Because we still have funds left from the development phase of the program. Legally, I could use them for a test case. The lab would love to have the chance to do at least one procedure to test the protocols we’ve been working on for so long. If you’re willing to come down right away, I think we can pull this off.”

Two days later she was back in San Jose. The lab did the implantation procedure right away, and it was as easy as they had said it would be. She felt a little cramping when the doctor inserted the catheter into her uterus. He took a syringe and injected two bonobo embryos through the catheter into her womb. If they both implanted she would carry twins.

She was instructed to stay in bed for the first two weeks. Lying alone in a bare motel room day and night was far more difficult than she had anticipated.

At times, lying in the semi-dark, Sarah grew depressed. How bizarre that here I am, she thought, still young, probably fertile, yet I'm going through this procedure. And it won't even give me a child. It will give me a token, the baby ape, which I will exchange for a real baby, my adopted child.

The next week was Thanksgiving, and Kevin managed to get the whole week off. Soon he was at her bedside, massaging her feet and kissing her cheek. Sarah could tell that he was impressed with her for going through with it.

"You're a real earth mama now," he whispered in her ear "Damn, I'm proud of you."

Sarah smiled, basking in Kevin's affection and regard. "Well, we don't know for sure yet whether I'm pregnant..."

But soon they knew. She was pregnant. John Stengers made Sarah an appointment at the University Medical Center for a sonogram. The sonogram showed a tiny pulse, the beating heart cells of an embryo. But there was only one. The other embryo had failed to implant. She and Kevin stayed at the hotel a few more days and went back to the hospital for one more sonogram and a meeting with John.

"Sarah, the embryo seems to be developing nicely. I think it's okay for you to go home now. Try to take it easy for another six weeks if you can. Then normal activities are fine. And we'll see you back here in March for the mid-term sonogram."

Two months after returning home, Sarah got a call from the adoption agency in Portland. Tracy, the pregnant teenager, had changed her mind and decided to keep her baby. Sarah grieved. Now they would have to wait for another pregnant teen to decide that Kevin and Sarah were the ideal parents for her child and hope that she would be mature enough to stick to her decision.

That night Sarah dreamed of a small furry body clutching her bosom. She woke and ran her hands over her smooth belly. She wasn't really showing yet, but her belly was taut as a ripe melon, and she was overcome with tender feelings as she remembered her dream.

5

Sarah waited on a wooden bench outside Stonewell Primate Lab. The campus was buzzing in the warm March sun with the stressed-out energy of students at mid-term. A young woman in a suit and heels clicked by, in a hurry to a class or an interview. A stoned-looking boy zipped through on a skateboard. Doors hissed and thumped on

their hydraulic cushioned hinges with constant opening and closing. Under it all, air ventilators throbbed loudly.

Sarah felt nostalgic for campus life, but only a little. She was back at Stonewell for her own mid-term exam, an amniocentesis test the lab wanted to do. She checked her watch again. The student tour group was due in a few minutes. She was determined this visit to spend more time learning about the bonobos. It would be interesting to see what kind of a public face the lab put on.

“And this is Stonewell’s Primate Lab, where we’re exploring new thresholds of animal cognition and learning.” The tour guide, a graduate student, enunciated his words carefully as Sarah quietly attached herself to the group’s rear flank. The tour funneled through the double glass doors leading into the reception area, and then funneled back out onto what the guide called “feces fairway.” Most of the animals were in the outdoor enclosures in the courtyard and the guide began to introduce them by name.

“Eeeew, what are those two doing?” squealed a girl wearing bright red lipstick that matched her too-tight Stonewell T-shirt. Two bonobos hung by their arms from the same tree branch, facing each other. One had her legs wrapped around the other’s waist. Sarah could see that they had swollen, pale pink genitals, which they rubbed together in a rhythmic, side-to-side motion, making the branch vibrate and bounce.

The graduate student stammered: “Uh, that’s called G-G rubbing, uh, genital-to-genital rubbing. Those are two females and they’re rubbing their, uh, vulvas together. They do that as an expression of friendship and to relieve tension.”

The graduate student recovered from his initial embarrassment and went on: “Bonobos have a social organization that can be categorized as matriarchal. Sexual bonding helps the females form close relationships with each other. Male status depends on the mother’s status. In the wild, males stay with their mothers even after they are grown

“Lesbos. Gross.” The girl sneered. The tour group moved on quickly to visit the classrooms.

Sarah hung back and watched the female bonobos for a while. She thought that they might be Maria and Helena.

Then Sarah noticed that there was a narrow space between the first cage and the brick wall of the building. There was no glass in front of the wire mesh there. She saw a male bonobo squatting on a tire in the middle of the cage. She sidled into the gap. The bonobo came over and leaned against the wire mesh and grinned at her with his lips pulled back over his gums. She stuck her hand through the mesh and said, “Hello, bonobo.”

The bonobo gently took her hand and looked into her eyes. He was about her size, only a little shorter.

“Oh, you are so sweet.” The bonobo made soft smacking noises with his lips and then lifted her hand to his mouth and muzzled it. She felt the warm wetness of his tongue. Still he looked into her eyes.

For a full minute, she silently returned his gaze. Dexter, she thought, yes Dexter was in the first cage. Dexter put his other arm through the fence and pulled at her

shoulder. "You want a hug, don't you?" She dropped her purse and put both her arms through the mesh and around Dexter. He pulled her tightly to him and stroked her back and neck with his leathery palms. Their chests and foreheads and noses were pressed together through the mesh, and she could smell his fruity breath and the musky odor of his skin and fur. The long hair on his back was like rough raw silk in her stroking hands. His muscular chest was hard against her breasts.

All at once, she became aware of his pink penis, long and erect, poking through the mesh and brushing her thighs. She felt a warm flood of arousal between her legs, gasped and pulled away from him, but his eyes drew her close again.

Dexter began to talk—a high-toned moaning with short vowel sounds and pants.

Sarah said, "I hear you but I don't understand you. Except I can tell you would like to get out of this cage. But there's nowhere for you to go that's better than here."

"Heee-ee," Dexter said.

"Listen, though, you're going to have a baby. I have it right here." Sarah pulled Dexter's hand through the mesh and placed it on her swelling abdomen.

"Feel? It started to kick last week. It's yours and Maria's. I'm only carrying it for you." Dexter softly stroked her belly and then drew back. He turned and scampered up a pole to a platform where he busied himself with an old running shoe, ripping and closing its Velcro fastening.

Sarah checked her watch. It was time to go. She picked up her purse and squeezed back out of the gap between the cage and building. She turned and waved goodbye to Dexter and went into the building to check in with John Stengers and Jeanette, who would be escorting her to her amniocentesis appointment.

She found Jeanette, and as they walked out of the building, Sarah asked her about Maria. Was she developing a special friendship with Helena?

"Yes, Maria's doing a lot better. And I suppose you could call her relationship with Helena friendship. In fact it should develop into that, but right now it's mostly the way that bonobos establish their dominance hierarchy."

"Oh." Dominance didn't sound as nice to Sarah as a simple lesbian friendship. But an image of Dee Dee flashed briefly into her mind, and she thought she understood. Sarah told Jeanette about Dee Dee, who was her best friend in fourth grade. As usual, Sarah was the new kid. Dee Dee adopted her immediately as a friend, but the price was being Dee Dee's slave. Dee Dee would sprawl on the moldy green shag rug in her parent's basement rec room and make Sarah get all the games and toys out and put them away again.

"So, it really is kind of the same thing, isn't it? Even humans have to figure out who's got the power in a relationship."

"You're right, it's the same with bonobos," Jeanette replied as they walked into the parking lot and Jeanette got out her car keys.

"Why are we driving? The Med Center isn't that far. I feel fine. I can walk."

"Sarah, we're not going to the University Med Center. I'm taking you to a private clinic. Here, get in the car and I'll explain why."

Sarah climbed into Jeanette's minivan and they pulled out into the Silicon Valley traffic. Jeanette slipped a cassette tape into the player and pushed the play button. "Listen to this."

A deep, thunderous voice issued from the speakers:

"And now your intrepid reporter has this bit of ama-aa-zing information. What do you suppose is going on at Stonewell University's Primate Research Lab? An anonymous informant tells me that crazed animal-worshipping mad scientists there are going ahead with their satanic scheme to rum normal human women into test tube incubators for a race of demon monkeys. The monkey lab people hope to breed enough of these evil apes to create what they call a viable population. And what do you suppose that means, loyal listeners? Do you think a few monkeys in the zoo is enough for them? No. they'll want to till our national parks with them. You won't be able to take a trip to Yosemite without worrying that your wife or your daughter will be raped by one of these sex-crazed demons. Because these are no ordinary monkeys, dear listener. Oh no. These are bo-no-bos. The most oversexed monkey on the planet. And what are the ho-mo-sex-u-al-loving administrators of Satan-well University doing about this mad plan? LU leave that for you. dear listener, to ponder while we hear this important message."

Sarah barely breathed during the radio monologue. The minivan had been stuck at a red light for more than a minute, and traffic exhaust was making her feel nauseous. "Shshsh-it." she said, exhaling. "That's Roland Maxwell, isn't it?"

"Yep." Jeanette replied, "he's been on our case for years. His program goes nationwide too. The Lmversiry's gotten thousands of letters because of this creep."

"Oh lord." Sarah said as she rubbed her forehead. "When was this on? And what's the homosexual stuff about? It's not about the bonobos, is it?"

"It was on last week, and no. I don't think its about the bonobos. They have another gripe with the Universin' about teaching gay history. So. we don't know if anyone at the lab is really feeding him information about us. but we don't want to take any chances with your safety From now on. all your medical care will be done by Dr Jordan. He's a good friend of the lab and an excellent doctor

I hope that is okay with you."

"Sure," Sarah said.

They drove up to Dr. Jordan's clinic in a strip of medical offices on a quiet shaded street. After hearing the tape, Sarah was glad not to be on the campus. She felt safe with Dr. Jordan and the amniocentesis and ultrasound went smoothly. Dr. Jordan and Jeanette could tell from the ultrasound that the baby was a female. Jeanette was happy about getting another breeding female for the bonobo colony.

Sarah went back to her hotel and went to bed early that evening. Jeanette had asked her to wait around for the amnio results in case they had to do more tests. She got up the next day and had a swim at the pool and then whiled away the morning reading a novel. She was about to go out for some lunch when John called and asked her to come into the lab to discuss the results.

"Is it okay?"

"Well, it is a little unusual. You'd better come down here so we can discuss it in person."

Sarah tried to stay calm, but she felt nervous. She had already lost the adoption; she didn't want to lose the pregnancy too.

Jeanette and John were both in John's office when she arrived. She could tell from the strain showing in their faces that something was seriously wrong.

"Okay, tell me."

Jeanette reached out and took Sarah's hand and guided her into a chair.

"Sarah, this is really difficult to tell you." John looked briefly into her eyes and then down at the floor. "The genetic analysis shows that your baby is not what it's supposed to be."

"But the ultrasound—Dr. Jordan said she looks healthy—only a little bigger than we expected." Sarah frowned and looked at

Jeanette, who looked back with panic in her eyes.

"Sarah, Maria is not the mother of your baby. You are."

Sarah was speechless. The sound of blood rushing to her skull pounded in her ears, and she could barely hear the explanation Jeanette was trying to make to her now: "It's unmistakable. Human cells have forty-six chromosomes, bonobos have forty-four. Your baby has forty-five. Somehow, some of Dexter's sperm must have gotten frozen along with the embryo. Somehow that sperm fertilized one of your own eggs. Truly, Sarah, we never would have dreamed that such a thing would be possible. Apparently bonobo sperm is far more vigorous than we realized."

Sarah must have looked incredulous, because John started to explain: "It's like a mule. A horse has sixty-four chromosomes and a donkey has sixty-two, and when they mate they can produce a mule, which has sixty-three."

Jeanette took up Sarah's hands and squeezed them. "We're so sorry this happened to you. Dr. Jordan can take care of it today. If you're ready, we can head right over to his office. After the abortion, we'll put together some kind of compensation for you. And please, don't think it's been a waste, we've already learned a lot from this, and—"

Sarah didn't let Jeanette finish. "Abortion! I'm not having an abortion. The baby's healthy? And it's mine? So, Dexter's sperm fertilized my egg?" Her eyes were wild as she looked back and forth between Jeanette and John, seeking and receiving their nods of confirmation.

"It's my baby. I'm going to keep it."

"There is absolutely no way in hell we can let this pregnancy come to term." John's eyes glittered and his nostrils flared wide. Sarah thought he must be angry with her, and she was afraid of him. "I know this is shocking to you. Believe me, when you think about it for a while you'll realize that it has to be." She could tell that John was making a massive effort to keep his voice calm.

"Sarah, I'd like you to come home with me tonight," Jeanette pleaded. "You shouldn't be alone in a hotel at a time like this. You can have some time to think about it for

a while.” Jeanette reached over and clamped her hand over Sarah’s wrist. John rose from his chair and moved toward her, his arms flexed.

“No! I’m going back to my room. I want to be alone!” Sarah wrenched her wrist from Jeanette’s grip and burst from the office and into the hall. She ran past a classroom door just as it opened, spilling out a rush of students. She darted around a corner, saw a women’s room and ducked into it.

She found refuge in a stall and sat there, cradling her head in her hands, elbows resting on her knees. For a while she thought she might throw up. For many minutes she crouched there, breathing deeply and trying to slow her pounding heart. Other women banged in and out of the lavatory, but none of them was Jeanette, looking for her. After the class change period was over, it grew quiet. Sarah caressed her belly and stretched. She stared at the metal walls of her stall, dun-colored paint chipped with graffiti. “Save the Whales.” “Pre-med SUCKS.” “Jesus Saves.” None of it made any sense to her. Will Jesus save the whales?

They must not have seen me duck in here, she thought, and they’ve gone to the hotel to find me. She thought about how to evade them and decided it would be best to stay where she was, because if she went out in the hallway to leave, a lab staffer might see her. She spent the whole afternoon sitting on the toilet seat, thinking about the small creature growing behind her navel and trying to ignore the sound of toilets flushing all around her.

She understood why Jeanette and John thought they were right, and she knew that an abortion was the logical and probably the morally correct thing to do. Still, no matter how she posed the problem to herself, she couldn’t imagine ending the life growing inside her. Then she remembered the Roland Maxwell tape Jeanette had played for her, and she thought about Ezra Hixton and his hideous cronies back home. It scared her, but she felt a rush of pride in herself. She would never again let twisted men like them dictate her life to her. “Courage, Princess.” In her mind she heard the echo of her father’s voice.

By nine o’clock, after the last class of the day, the restroom was deserted. Sarah figured that she would need to wait till at least ten because some of the lab staff were sure to work late. She huddled in the stall another hour. Then she cracked open the door and peeped out into the empty hallway. She crept along the hall to the entrance, seeing no one, and slipped out the door.

She caught her breath for a moment as she looked around. A few people were out on the campus walkways. Her rental car was parked in a lot nearby, but she didn’t dare go near it. The lab was near the edge of campus, and she could see the lights of a convenience store across the street. She walked quickly there and called a cab to take her to San Jose, where she got a hotel room and called Kevin.

6

Sarah lay on Fern's couch, pillows supporting her head, as she wrestled with a large coffee table book, trying to wedge it between her swollen breasts and expanding belly at a good reading angle. It was comforting to be surrounded by Fern's goddesses and dragons. She could look to her left and see the stained-glass dragon floating brilliantly above the front door. To her right, she could look out the picture window at the little creek flowing by.

She was perusing Fern's "Atlas of the Ancient Gods," looking for a name for her baby.

"I'm thinking a name from mythology," she told Fern, "because this whole experience is so bizarre and non-rational."

"My cow died last night so I don't need your bull, thank you ma'am," Fern drawled as she drilled her with a harsh look. "You had a chance to make a rational decision, and didn't take it. Aren't you the one who says abortion should be used when a child is unwanted?"

Fern's voice had a hint of a screech in it that made Sarah wince.

She defended herself anyway. "But I want this child."

"Do you? Want this child? How can you, you don't even know if it's a child or a ... a ... cub." Fern glowered at her.

"Whatever it is, I'm going to love it. I know it's not rational but it's the only thing that makes sense. To me." Sarah sniffed. She was still trying to justify herself to Fern. She paused to think about how to say it.

"Before, I was stuck between my feelings and my rational self and I thought I'd found a way to resolve them, with the surrogate program and then adoption. In a way this seems better, because this baby is really mine. But right now all I can think about is how scared am.

"Damn right you should be scared," Fern muttered.

Sarah knew Fern was annoyed because she had recruited her to help negotiate with John Stengers. She also knew that Fern would continue to support her, but on her own terms, which meant no holding back her opinions.

Fern had convinced John that there was no way to force Sarah into an abortion and that Sarah and the baby would be safe at Savage Ranch. Yet she had also tried her best to talk Sarah into an abortion. She felt responsible for the whole fiasco. If she hadn't told Sarah about the program, this never would have happened. Fern was as angry with herself as she was with Sarah.

"Well, if you want a meaningful name, you're looking in the right place." Fern's voice warmed as her tone dropped a register. "Myth is great for making sense of the unknowable and the unthinkable. Logic picks things apart to understand them, but some things can't be taken apart without destroying them. Like your head and your heart, which are connected through your body."

Fern made a gesture with two fingers touching first her forehead then the valley between her breasts. “Myth gives us a story or a metaphor to relate our experience to. Then we have some understanding, some resolution.”

“I’m also excited, Fern.” Sarah half smiled. “Not just scared.” She bent back to the book. “So, what do you think of Artemis?” she asked, gazing at a picture of a woman draped in a short white robe, a bow and arrow in one hand, and bowl of fruit in the other. She was standing on a golden crescent moon, with a bear, a deer and a snake at her feet and a crown of silver stars above her head.

“Artemis—also called Diana, goddess of fertility and of wild animals.” Fern gestured as if drawing down the heavens. “Artemis was invoked by men to bring luck in the hunt and by women to help in childbirth.”

Fern was in her element now, discoursing on her favorite subject. She stood, regally posed, the dragon window glowing in colors above her head. She wore a clinging rayon dress with a low, scoop neck, deep blue with a printed pattern of gold filigree, and her long hair flowed over her shoulders like russet wings. To Sarah, she looked a very goddess herself.

“Childbirth? Wasn’t Artemis a virgin goddess?” Sarah asked.

“Yes, but I’ll tell you why she’s a goddess of childbirth. Because, they say, a woman is possessed by a wildness that shakes her very soul at that time. Only the goddess of wild animals can guide her through that experience. Artemis is also a snake goddess. Women are like snakes because in childbirth and in sex, we writhe and flex our spinal columns, the snake in our bodies.”

Fern demonstrated her point by undulating like Little Egypt. She dropped into a squat and hissed, twisted her arms together over her head and slid her head from side to side. The golden bangles on her arms clinked as her arms swayed like copulating serpents.

Sarah was fascinated by Fern’s performance, but she still had a question: “Artemis was never a mother, was she?”

“No, she is just one aspect of the Goddess. Artemis is the virgin, Demeter is the grain-mother, and Hecate is the dark goddess of death. They are all the moon goddess because the moon represents her tripartite form: the waxing, inviting maiden, the ripe fullness of the mother and the waning crone of death. But my point is that the Goddess has always been associated with wild animals and with creation. Isn’t that what you want from a name?”

Sarah nodded. She went back to flipping through the book. “Artemis is nice but kind of long. Artemisia is the botanical name for sage. Wasn’t sage used in ancient rituals?”

“Actually, the old-world sage is genus *salvia*; the new-world sages are genus *artemisia*. But Native Americans use it just like the ancients did, to purify and make a sacred space for worshipping the Goddess or the Great Spirit.”

“I think I’ll call her Sage.”

“Sage, that’s nice.” Fern had an idea then. “And artemisia could be her species name. You are creating a whole new species, you know—*Homo artemisia*.”

Sarah’s mouth dropped at this realization. “Oh my ... oh my ... what have I done?”

“Well,” Fern said coldly, “it’s too late for that question. Better pull yourself together. Joanne should be here soon.”

Joanne was a licensed midwife. She lived at Savage Ranch and had delivered nearly all the babies there. Today was the day that Sarah and Fern were going to clue her in to the true nature of Sarah’s pregnancy.

They heard Joanne’s truck pull up in the driveway, and Sarah took a deep breath. Joanne walked in with her medical bag and sat down in a chair next to the couch. Fern and Sarah gradually told her the whole story, beginning with Fern’s part in enticing Sarah to join the surrogate mother program for bonobos.

Joanne took it all in calmly. When they were done with the explanations she took Sarah’s hands and gazed directly at her:

“I can see how you think all of this fills your needs. And I’m liberal enough to say: hey, it’s cool to do your own thing. But really, Sarah, have you thought about the child? What kind of life it will have?”

Sarah grimaced. She started to speak, but Joanne continued: “Look, I know you’ll really care for this baby, no matter how it turns out. I’ll help you, but if there’s any problem, you’re going straight to the hospital. I won’t risk losing you.”

Then Joanne asked questions about bonobo physiology, most of which they had answers to.

“The bottom line,” Fern said, “is that bonobos are barely different from humans. Reproductively, they are almost identical; their menstrual cycle is a week longer, but the physiology of the reproductive tract and the timing and amount of the hormones secreted by the ovaries are almost exactly the same. The biggest difference we need to be concerned about is in the length of gestation. It averages one month shorter than ours.”

The outrageous truth finally hit Joanne. She shook her head slowly. “This is crazy,” she whispered. She pinched the bridge of her nose and shivered, as if trying to awaken from a chaotic dream. Finally, her professional demeanor returned.

“Okay. You told me that you conceived just before Thanksgiving. That makes you a week short of seven months now. So we have one more month, give or take a week or two. Do you know what your blood type is?”

“Yes, I was checked for that when I was being worked up for the surrogate program. I’m A-i, indistinguishable from the bonobo A-1 blood type. And as far as birth weight goes, the average body weight for an adult female bonobo is about eighty pounds. The Stonewell people told me that a newborn bonobo would be between three and four pounds. But this baby should be bigger, I guess.”

Joanne took Sarah’s blood pressure and listened to her heart and the baby’s movements with a stethoscope and asked her about her diet and energy level. Soon she was

satisfied that everything was going as well as could be expected given the uncertainties. She packed up and gave Sarah a hug goodbye.

Eight and a half months after conceiving, Sarah went into labor. It was morning and she had just finished a cup of tea when a contraction shook her to her toes. Five minutes later she had another one.

Joanne arrived a few hours later. Over the next sixteen hours, everyone took turns coaching Sarah, holding her, and massaging her, except for Rob who waited out in the kitchen and cooked and made tea. He wouldn't come into the bedroom. "Women's work," he said.

"Well, what do you think you're doing in the kitchen, you old fart?" Fern chastised him affectionately.

Sarah labored hard, but her cervix wasn't dilating quickly enough. Small babies often didn't have enough weight to stretch the opening, Joanne told her. Sarah grew more and more alarmed. The thought of the hospital terrified her. Her body felt weak and rubbery. She was hyperventilating with all the deep breathing Kevin made her do.

Fern told her to think of Artemis and the spinal serpent that brought Artemis' energy to her womb. Sarah found it hard to think about snakes, but she imagined the kindly face of the Goddess smiling on her. Just at the moment when she knew she would never be able to push hard enough, the wild horses stampeding her body broke through, and the baby slipped to freedom.

As the baby slid from Sarah's womb, all eyes swept down its little body.

"Hair, thick hair on its head, almost black."

"What a flat little nose."

"Hair on its arms and legs, dark brown hair."

"It's a girl, all right."

Joanne expertly cleared the little one's lungs and quickly placed her on Sarah's exhausted belly. "Almost six pounds, I'd say."

"She's beautiful!" Sarah cried. And she was. She had pale brown skin and a thick mop of dark brown hair on her head. Her arms and legs and her back, down to her chubby little buttocks, were covered with a fine down. Her face was sweet, with a button nose and wide mouth. Her eyes were still closed. She was breathing, and waving her arms and legs.

Later, after Sarah had slept and everyone got something to eat, the group gathered around little Sage again. They examined her gently—all intently curious to see which of her characteristics were more human, and which more bonobo-like. Her fingers and toes were long, and her feet curled up and gripped just like her little hands. The downy hair covered her limbs and her back, but not her front or her face.

Her face was different. She had a slight brow ridge, like a baby Neanderthal, and a nose that was wide and flat, but not inverted like an ape's. Her lips were pink and bow-shaped like her mother's. Her skin was an even light brown, no rosy cheeks, and it was wrinkly in places. All newborns were wrinkly, Joanne told them.

Sage nursed eagerly and Sarah's milk flowed in response. Soon Joanne pronounced everything well, and Sarah's new life as a mother had begun.

By fall, Sage was smiling and alert. Their neighbors on Savage Ranch had all been by to see the baby. For those not apprised of her true origins, Sarah told them that Sage had "Fletcher's Syndrome." They were told she was in touch with a specialist in the Bay Area who assured her that aside from some minor deformations of the hands and feet, strange facial features and the hairiness, Sage would be healthy and normal.

No one questioned Sarah's story, but at the Savage Ranch Winter Solstice party at Heather's house, warm and steamy with people and the savory aromas of vegetarian casseroles, Heather's boy Max announced: "I think she looks kind of like a little monkey."

Sarah handled it well: "Oh yes, Max, she does. That's one way to tell that what she has is Fletcher's Syndrome. It's like Mongo-loidism, the old name for Down's Syndrome. People thought that those kids looked like the Asian people called Mongolians because of the little fold in their eyelids."

Max and everyone else in the room nodded in understanding. Heather moved quickly to cover for any offense her boy might have caused: "Well, she's a beautiful little girl. And we're so glad she's healthy. She certainly seems healthy and active."

Sage was passed around, and everyone wanted to hold her. "This kid really has a grip," remarked Heather's husband, David. Sage clung tightly to his shoulder as she wrapped the fingers of her other hand around his thumb.

The Christmas season was difficult. Sarah's mother, Julia, had invited them to come to Chicago for the holiday so she could see the baby, but Sarah was afraid it would be too hard to face her mother. She pleaded the difficulty of traveling with an infant. She sent pictures and explained about the birth defect. She got a long, sympathetic letter from Julia, and no more pressure to visit.

7

Auntie Fern was a frequent visitor at Sarah and Kevin's. At first, when the baby was newborn, Fern was cautious about intruding on the family's privacy, but she soon found herself so fascinated by the little creature that she had a hard time staying away. And there were all those measurements she needed to record for John Stengers.

Sage was a quiet, happy baby. She never cried, at least not the way ordinary babies cry. If Sarah set her down and moved too far away from her, she would utter a squeaky little cry, just once or twice. Then she would fall silent. A minute or two later she would squeak again, continuing this pattern until Sarah came back and picked her up.

Sage never crawled. At ten months, she suddenly started walking on all fours. Since her arms were almost as long as her legs, it wasn't hard. She scurried around the house knuckle-walking much faster than most babies could crawl. It seemed like one day the house was normal and the next everything had to be put up high or locked away.

Sage liked her new mobility, but she wanted to walk on her feet like Mommy and Daddy. She worked hard at it, and by eighteen months she was toddling about, moving as fast as she once had on all fours.

At two and half they heard her first word. It was “cat.” They weren’t surprised. Sage had been babbling for months. When she finally said “cat,” it sounded more like “ckhaa.” But since she was pointing at Muumuu when she said it, no one doubted her word.

John Stengers had told them that Sage would have some language ability but she would most likely have trouble speaking. The larynx is higher in an ape, he explained, giving it a smaller cavity in which to resonate and release vowel sounds, restricting those sounds to the short and high. And not only is the human brain larger than an ape’s, he told them, but the human spinal cord is thicker. Those extra nerve bundles go by and large to the intercostal muscles of the rib cage that control the breath.

“Think of the human rib cage and larynx as a musical instrument, somewhat like an accordion,” he said one day when he was up for a short visit to examine Sage. “That’s why we teach our apes sign language. They don’t have the speech instrument that we do. You may discover that all that Sage can do is screech and hoot.”

As it turned out, Sage’s pronunciation of “cat” wasn’t much different than that of a fully human toddler’s. The question now was, would she develop better articulation or keep talking like a three-year-old for the rest of her life?

Sarah started teaching full time at the Sunrise School when Sage was five. Sage came to school and played with blocks and crayons while her mother taught the older children. In the mornings, there was kindergarten, and Sage began learning her letters and numbers.

Sarah was terribly concerned about Sage’s speech competence. She wanted her daughter to be as normal as possible, and though Sage tried hard, when she was excited she was difficult to understand. Her speech degenerated into noisy screeches that made most people want to plug their ears. Sarah would spend endless hours with her, working on pronunciation and breath control.

One day she and Kevin had a fight about it. “Face it, Sarah, she’s an animal,” Kevin said. “Don’t expect too much from her or you’ll give her a complex.”

“I’m trying to make sure she develops all her potential. You’re just jealous because I spend so much time with her.”

Once said, she realized it was true; she was preoccupied with Sage. The fight was good. It made Sarah realize that she had to accept whatever Sage was going to be and not neglect Kevin, either. The thought of becoming an obsessive, pushy mom was sobering. That was not what she wanted.

Sage learned how to climb trees when she was five. She had been climbing furniture and walls and people for years and probably would have climbed trees sooner except that Sarah discouraged her. But once begun, in no time at all Sage discovered that with her long arms and prehensile toes she could climb very high indeed. Sarah worried about it, but Kevin said you only had to watch her to see how good she was, and there

was really no danger. But Sarah made a hard and fast rule for Sage: no climbing on any limb that was skinnier than her leg. And she had to look carefully and make sure that the limb was sound.

For the most part, Sage abided by the rules. She loved to please her mother, and while she wasn't truly frightened by anything she had yet encountered in her young life, she seemed to understand that there were scary things out there.

Sarah was pleased with her child. She was a happy little girl and she seemed to be nearly as intelligent as the other children. She could read the kindergarten books, although she had trouble with writing. Her speech impediment was her biggest limitation. Physically, she was far stronger than the other children her age.

It was only when Sarah looked very far into the future that her vision for Sage began to cloud. But being a mother and teacher of young children, it was easy to occupy herself with their day-to-day needs and not fill her head with worries or plans for the future, even if deep inside she knew it couldn't last.

Kevin endorsed this approach. He was happier avoiding the big questions of the future. He was reluctant too, to face his own part in the situation. Sometimes, if he let himself think about it, he felt guilty for getting that vasectomy. He realized now that it wouldn't have been such a betrayal of his principles to have one child with Sarah. But he hated feeling guilty, and besides, there was nothing to be done about it.

The biggest difference between them now was the fact that Kevin left Savage Ranch every day to teach while Sarah grew more and more isolated from the world. Fortunately, the other residents of Savage Ranch didn't think it odd that Sarah and Sage never left the ranch. Most of them considered their home to be a paradise that no one would ever want to leave.

Sarah had even quit going to town to shop. She said it was because she was trying to save gas money. Kevin had to go to town every day anyway to work. Since he could do the grocery shopping on the way home it didn't make sense for her to drive in just to shop. But the real reason was different.

The first few years after Sage was born, Sarah had driven in to town almost every Saturday morning to take an exercise class and do the grocery shopping. Kevin was happy to watch Sage and it gave her a much-needed break.

One morning she walked into the grocery store still in her exercise tights, her shirt damp with sweat. She got a cart and made it through the produce aisle and was heading toward the dairy counter, past the meat coolers, when she saw him.

He was tall, narrow in the hips and broad in the chest, and he wore camo fatigue pants and a tight olive drab T-shirt that showed off his boot-camp build. He looked up at her, a piece of frozen meat in his hands. His hair was slicked back, blond going gray, the color of old hay stored in the barn too long. His short trimmed mustache bisected a face that was a collection of hard angled planes. The skin was almost yellow where it stretched tight around his occipital bones. She watched his expression change as he recognized her.

Sarah saw the man's jaw set in contempt and his eyes narrow as he stared hard at her. She was startled and swerved the cart down the detergent aisle in order to avoid him. It was Bo Breaker. It had to be. He knew who she was and he hated her. She could see it in his eyes. Sarah was too disturbed to finish her shopping. She checked out with her produce in the express lane and drove home. And she never went to town without Kevin after that.

Although Sarah claimed she didn't miss going out, Kevin started to invite Nick over more often. Sarah needed to see people other than her Savage Ranch neighbors. Kevin and Nick had been best friends since seventh grade, and Kevin had told him the truth about Sage, though Nick had not believed him at first: "Man, I never should've let you go off to that college. Gave you some weird-ass ideas." But eventually he accepted that Sage really was a humanape hybrid.

Kevin and Nick would play music and gossip about town life. Nick was glad to get out of his house and away from his wife, who was always on his case about money. At least when he was at Kevin's she couldn't accuse him of neglecting his crab boat for the Anchor—a bar at the harbor that often kept him on shore.

Sarah enjoyed having Nick around and she loved the music. He was the best bass guitarist on the South Coast. His fingers snapped like rubber bands against the thick bass strings, beating out flowing rhythms, lyrical and rock-steady. Kevin played lead guitar, and growing up, the two boys had divided their free time between making music and fishing on the Savage River.

Nick grew fond of Sage and he would wrestle with her tirelessly. One day Sage asked to try his guitar. Soon Nick was teaching Sage basic chords and riffs. Her strong small fingers had no problem plucking a nice sweet sound out of the instrument. Kevin bought Sage her own bass guitar and she could keep the beat going while Nick noodled around and Kevin played melodies and rhythms. Sage sang with Kevin, her baby voice piping out: "I been waitin' so long— To be where Fm goin'—In the sunshine of your lo-o-o-o-o-o-o-ve."

Sage loved all the other children on the ranch, but her special friend was Carver. Carver was Marilee's youngest child and had been born with severe bilateral clubfoot three years before Sage. Carver had endured countless surgeries on his feet and ankles, and often wore braces for months at a time. He had to wear special shoes.

Carver and Sage spent many hours together in the woods near the community garden on nice days. Carver would sit under a tree and read a book while Sage climbed the tree to observe the squirrels, birds and insects in the forest canopy. She would tell Carver what she saw, and he would tell her about the book he was reading. Sage could read, but only with effort. She much preferred to have Carver tell her stories from the books.

"There's a bug up here that's eatin' an ant. Or maybe it wants the weaf the ant is carrying. It's big an' black with shiny green wings," Sage called down to Carver.

"Hey, cool," Carver hollered back. "That sounds like the dragon in this book. Remember, I told you the two friends rode up to the dragon's cave to put a spell on him

so he'd stop eating everyone? Well, the dragon ate their horse with all their supplies to get back home."

Sage imagined some tiny people who used ants as horses and their struggle to escape from the big black and green dragon bug. Being with Carver was fun because he paid more attention to things than the other kids did. He also paid more attention to her and the things she said. She really liked having a special friend.

Carver also helped her sometimes when she didn't understand what was going on. Sometimes when all the kids were having a rowdy game, she would get carried away. Not that she hurt the other children, but sometimes she would keep tickling or chasing or hugging longer than a child wanted. When the child pushed her away, or slapped her to get her to stop, she didn't understand what was wrong. If Carver was there, he would come over and comfort her and explain that Harmony or Cory was tired, that was all, and didn't want to play anymore.

Sage was always careful when she roughhoused with Carver, because she knew he was more fragile than the other children, and was often recovering from operations. But she didn't understand that she was that much stronger than the other children were. She knew she was different, but she thought of herself as being different like Carver, and Carver was weaker, not stronger.

Heather's little girl Harmony was only five months older than Sage, and the two were often playmates. Harmony had a collection of dolls with long, flowing hair, and they spent hours brushing and styling the dolls' hair. They had Barbies, ponies, teddy bears and trolls. They brushed each other's hair, Harmony's long fine blond hair and the dark coarse hair that fell below Sage's shoulders and framed her face in short bangs. They even groomed Harmony's long-haired Irish setter, Ruby.

One day when the little girls had every doll and toy in their collection spread out on the patch of lawn in front of Harmony's house, Harmony cocked her head and scrutinized Sage. "You don't really look like me even though you have long hair. I think you look more like Ruby. You're hairy all over like a dog." Then Harmony laughed a nasty little laugh, like she was trying to be mean.

Sage was stunned. "Does that mean you don't want to play with me anymore?"

"No," Harmony replied sullenly. "But from now on you have to always be a troll and I always get to be a Barbie."

"That's stupid," Sage blurted, "you don't look anything like a Barbie." But she had to admit to herself that she did look something like a troll.

"Mommy, do you think trolls are as beautiful as Barbies?" Sage asked when she got home.

"Oh, honey, of course they are." Sarah was quick to realize what had happened with Harmony. She was sitting in one of the overstuffed armchairs near the stove and she pulled Sage into her lap. "Children come in all shapes and sizes, and all of them are wonderful. Don't ever let anyone tell you otherwise."

Auntie Fern easily cheered Sage when she came over to visit the next morning. She told Sage that all long-haired girls were equally good and should stick together, and

if Harmony was going to be mean then Sage and Fern would have their own long-hair club.

8

One beautiful spring day, Sage got permission to go on an expedition with Carver. Carver's feet had healed from his last surgery, but they were tender, and his legs were always thin and weak. Still, he made steady progress up the forested hillside, sometimes dropping to all fours to scramble up a steep part. Carver loved to explore the woods as much as Sage did.

Soon they reached the farthest upstream corner of the ranch. There stood a towering black rock outcropping that was a favorite spot for the children. A mossy little glade lay at its base, cupped by a trio of gnarled oaks.

Sage and Carver were eating their lunch when a sudden cacophony of chirping drew their attention to a pair of squirrels spiraling up and down a tall pine in a dance of love. They were lovely fat squirrels with glossy silver coats. Their full bushy tails twinkled in the sun as they whipped around and around the tree trunk.

First one, then the other of the pair slipped and squirmed its body over its mate's as they raced around the tree. It was a sensuous squirreling so filled with energy and delight that Sage and Carver could hardly take their eyes off the show.

"What are they doing?" Sage asked.

"I think they're courting," Carver said. "It looks like fun."

"It looks like tickling," Sage said. And she looked at Carver, grinning her invitation. Carver grabbed her and they rolled in the moss, laughing, over and over until they were gasping for breath. Sage felt Carver slow down and she relaxed, ready to let go, but he pulled her tightly to him. His arms were strong. He began to rub his whole body sensuously against her. She responded, pressing against him, and it felt good. It felt especially good to grind her pelvis against Carver's. She could feel something swelling hard between Carver's legs and she rubbed herself on that. Her body began to feel long and liquid. Carver's body continued to tense until quite suddenly, he relaxed and let go of her.

"Uhh ..." he moaned. He rolled over on his back, panting. After a minute he turned and said to her, "That squirreling is nice." Carver squinted his eyes like he was thinking hard. "But... I think it's special. We shouldn't do it all the time. And we shouldn't tell anyone. It'll be our secret thing. Okay?"

"Okay." Sage knew it was wise to keep "squirreling" a secret, though she wasn't quite sure why. She thought it had something to do with sex, which she knew grownups did. It wasn't bad, but she didn't want to even say the word to Carver. It was embarrassing. It was better to call it squirreling and to keep it a secret.

Carver opened his book and began to read. Sage announced that she was going to climb to the top of the rock.

The black rock was mostly solid with good handholds and it didn't take her long to reach the top and climb up into the branches of the oak tree rooted into the promontory. From there she could see the green garden in the meadow below and just above it, her house with its broad deck. She couldn't see any people. Her parents would be in the house doing chores.

She was high above them. She wondered how much higher it was to the very top of the ridge. She looked behind her and saw a trail leading up. She decided to follow it a short way, to see where it went. She couldn't get lost. She walked a few hundred yards till she reached a small clearing, when she was brought up short by a loud grunt.

"Hunnh! Well, howdy there, looks like Bigfoot hisself. Or Littlefoot. Hell, it's Bigfoot's daughter's what it is. Aw shit, I'm dreamin'."

Alarmed, Sage scanned the brush on the other side of the clearing. Sitting on a tattered blue plastic tarp tucked back under some pines was a white-haired old man with a scraggly, yellowed beard and a grimy blue cap. He was smoking a hand-rolled cigarette and he took a long thirsty drink from a dark brown bottle. A four-wheeled off-road bike was parked nearby where the trail turned into a rough dirt road.

"Son of a bitch! I knew I'd see one a' you fellers sooner or later. Sure have heard ya out there in the woods bangin' on rocks. Seen yer footprints. Now where's a goddamned camera when ya need it." The man was trying to get to his feet, but he kept falling back on his butt.

Sage took off. She ran down the path and scrambled down the rock outcrop, sliding a few times and bruising herself. She squeaked at Carver: "Man, in the bushes. Let's go." She tugged at his hand and he packed up in a hurry and followed her as quickly as he could down the hill toward home. Once they were halfway home and back in their own familiar forest where she felt safe, Sage stopped and told him in detail what she had seen. Carver decided that this was one adventure they should tell their parents about.

Nick was sitting with Fern, Kevin and Sarah on the deck when the children arrived.

Nick figured it out right away. "That's Johnnie Blue Creek. They call him that 'cause for years he lived on his claim up Blue Creek. Then I guess his partners bought him out or something. He's been kind of caretaking different mining claims for a while now; supposed to do some prospecting. But he never does nothin'. He's just looking for a place where he can hang out and keep drinking himself to death."

"Well, he better not start prospecting on Savage Ranch." Kevin was shaking with anger. "I'm going up there and make sure our 'No Trespassing' signs are still up. Don't you worry, Sport, he won't bother us again." Kevin gave Sage a squeeze.

The two men left, and Sarah and Fern had to comfort Sage and explain the strange man to her.

"He smelled bad, Mommy."

"He's a drunk, honey, that's what you smelled."

"No, he didn't just smell bad that way. I know, 'cause sometimes Nick and Daddy smell that way. It was a different smell. He smelled like a bad man. And he thought

I was a Bigfoot. Am I a Bigfoot, Mommy? Is that what's wrong with me?" Sage was becoming hysterical, and her small voice climbed to higher and higher registers until she was almost screeching.

Sarah was puzzled by Sage's information about the man's smell, and disturbed by her question about Bigfoot. She looked at her daughter. She was slim with a nearly upright stance, though her knees stayed flexed and never locked straight when she walked. Her legs were short while her arms were unusually long, all four limbs covered with a sparse coat of fine brown hair. Today she was wearing a favorite outfit, a sage-colored T-shirt and shorts set with pink roses printed on it. Sage's face was smooth and hairless, her nostrils wide and flat. Freckles dotted the bridge of her nose and her cheeks —dark chocolate flecks sprayed against her light brown skin like sprinkles on a cafe latte. Her wide mouth usually curved in a pretty smile, but at the moment her lower lip protruded in distress. Her dark hair was braided in two thick pigtails that brushed her shoulders, and her bangs just covered the bony ridge over her eyes. Barely noticeable as a baby, her brow ridge had become more pronounced. Likewise, her face was turning more and more prognathous as her jawbone protruded and her forehead receded. It was unmistakable; she was beginning to look more like an ape. Now her rich brown eyes stared into space and her heavy brow creased deeply in pain.

"You are my daughter," Sarah said. "And Bigfoot is a myth. He doesn't exist. That man is an alcoholic, and alcoholics are sick people. Sometimes they hallucinate and see things that aren't really there."

Sarah reached out and pulled Sage to her breast, stroking her head.

"Maybe ..." Sage's voice came muffled from her face buried in Sarah's chest, "... maybe Bigfoot had Fletcher's Syndrome, like me."

"What's that, honey?"

Sage lifted her head. "Maybe there was somebody with Fletcher's Syndrome and he looked different and people called him Bigfoot. Maybe that's how the myth got started."

"You could be right, but look, you don't have big feet at all." Sarah was impressed with her daughter's reasoning, but she was afraid of where it would lead. She shot a cornered look to Fern, who shrugged her shoulders.

"So is that why we never go to town, because people will think I'm Bigfoot?"

Sarah cringed. "No, I never thought people would think that. It's just that people do stare when other people are different. I thought we should wait until you are older. People in town aren't like people out here. Some of them are perfectly nice of course, but some are mean, like that man."

"Mommy, could I have a surgery like Carver, to make me better?"

Now Sarah was really alarmed. She didn't want Sage to think there was anything wrong with her. "No, honey. You're a healthy little girl. You're just a little bit different. But you don't need any surgery. I love you just the way you are."

Sage allowed herself to be comforted and soon seemed to have forgotten about the incident.

But Sarah and Kevin did not forget. Johnnie Blue Creek had packed up his camp and gone when Kevin and Nick got there. They put up more 'No Trespassing' signs and talked with Rob about installing an electronic surveillance system at all the access points for the ranch. Nick had been hearing rumors lately about the Kristian Kommand. They were stepping up their training exercises at Bo Breaker's mine. Nick hadn't heard anything specifically connecting Johnnie Blue Creek to the Kommand. "But hell," he said, "you know all those miners hang out together, only lucky for us, nobody would believe a word of what Johnnie says. Everyone knows he's a shit-faced drunk." One crisp fall day, in the middle of hunting season, the phone rang and Kevin answered. It was Rob, letting him know that their alarm system had tripped.

"It's up at the old mining road, above the rocks. I checked it out with my scope, and it's a guy with high-powered binocs, checking us out. Seems to be looking right at your house. I've got this surveyor's laser here, and I thought I could give him a poke with that. It won't blind him or anything, just let him know we see him. What do you think?"

Kevin ground his teeth. "Yeah, do it. Those assholes have got to know we aren't helpless out here. I wonder who it is? It could be a hunter, I guess, or it could be the Kristian Kommand."

Kevin decided that it was time for his family to do a little training of their own. It had been years since he and Sarah had done any backpacking. It would be good for them all to get out and learn the lay of the land. After all, there was only one road out of Savage Ranch. The only other access was the trail into the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. If they ever got trapped, they could walk across the Kalmiopsis and get out to the highway that ran through the Illinois Valley up to Grants Pass and Interstate 5.

Their first trip would be short. They would take four days and walk over the ridge and down to the Chetco River, avoiding the old mine there. As long as they stayed away from the four-wheel-drive roads, Kevin wasn't worried about running into any miners. Those guys never walked.

As always, Sarah relied on Kevin to organize their equipment and plan the trip. He was skilled in woodcraft and map and compass techniques that she had never mastered. She was happy to get out in the wilderness again.

Sage thought backpacking was the most fun thing her family had ever done. She was a natural in the woods and had no trouble carrying a pack. As soon as they got back from the trip, she wanted to know when they could go out again.

9

Sage turned ten and her reading skills went through a marked improvement. She was still a slow reader, but her curiosity motivated her to keep at it. That winter, she learned to use the computer, and she spent many hours clicking around the Internet.

One day, she typed in “Fletcher’s Syndrome.” She wasn’t sure how to spell “syndrome,” but she typed s-i-n-d-r-u-m into the dictionary program and it gave her the correct spelling. She carefully wrote s-y-n-d-r-o-m-e down on a scrap of paper and then hit each letter key in order. There was nothing on Fletcher’s Syndrome. She tried “Down’s Syndrome,” which she knew of because one of the children at school had it. A downpour of listings flooded the screen.

The computer was set up on a desk at the end of the living room section of the house. Although she was at the far end of the great room, if she raised her voice, Sage could talk to Sarah as she worked in the kitchen. She called out, “Mommy, how come there’s nothing on Fletcher’s Syndrome on the Internet?”

Sarah was washing dishes. Her hands froze in the tepid water. She was trapped now. She sighed and slowly reached for a towel. She took a minute to turn around and face her daughter.

“Because there is no such thing.”

How do you explain to a child that you have told a little white lie for her benefit? Sarah knew that adopted children grow up more emotionally secure if they know from the outset that they are adopted, and never have to go through the trauma of discovery. But she had felt that she had no choice but to conceal Sage’s true origins from her.

Sarah sat them both down on the couch in the living room and explained it all to Sage; explained her heritage and the story of her conception and tried to put the white lie in the context of a society hostile to animals, Savage Ranch and new ideas. Sage took it much better than she could have hoped.

“But I’m not adopted, Mommy. I am yours. Only Kevin’s not my real daddy, so I’m different.”

“That’s right, honey, I birthed you, you came out of my body. And Kevin is your daddy, because he loves you like a daddy, but he’s not your biological father.”

“And I’m not sick then.”

“No, you’re not sick at all, you’re a healthy, beautiful little girl. You’re a just a little different, like you said.”

When Kevin came home that evening, Sage rushed to greet him and tell him that she loved him and he was still her daddy. She spent most of the evening sitting in his lap and reassuring herself of his love.

It was harder to explain to Sage why she couldn’t tell any of her friends who she really was. “Why are people so mean about animals?” she asked, and: “Why did you make me if people are going to be mean to me?”

“People can be mean about things they don’t understand,” Sarah began, cautiously. “People have been mean to people of other races. You remember what we studied in school, about the white people who enslaved Africans and killed Indians. But eventually they learn and understand that those people are just like them. It’s the same with animals. Some people think it’s okay to hurt animals or torture them, but more and more people are learning that animals are people too. Or that people are animals. And you are a special person because you are both. At some point, you’ll have to decide

how you want to be. If you just want people to leave you alone, you can tell them you have Fletcher's Syndrome. If you decide you want to try to change people's minds, you can tell them who you really are and then be brave enough and strong enough to stand up for yourself. But you can't make that decision until you're much older. For now, we'll keep telling everyone that you have Fletcher's Syndrome."

Sage had always been told that she was special, but she thought she was special like Carver was special. The true awesomeness of her real specialness had yet to sink in. But she did feel happier to know that she wasn't sick. She thought it would be hard to keep her secret from Carver, but she found she was glad not to have to tell him. They could go on being the two "special" kids on the ranch, with the same kind of specialness.

That winter, Sarah was home on her day off and Sage was at school, when she heard a car coming up their driveway. They rarely had unannounced visitors, and she wondered who it might be. Maybe it was the Jehovah's Witnesses again. She heard the person shuffle down the path and then the knock on the door.

Sarah let the woman in. She was fifty-ish and stout with bleached and lacquered hair. She wore a powder-blue suit under a pink quilted coat. Little runnels of perspiration streaked the makeup on her cheeks. She had obviously had a difficult time negotiating the steep path in her heels. "I'm Loretta Manning from Child Welfare. I've been told you have a little girl with a birth defect here?"

"Yes, what do you want?"

"Well, we want to make sure you know about all the services the state provides to crippled children. Special education, testing, help with prosthetics and wheelchairs ..." The woman thrust a handful of brochures at Sarah, intently scanning the room as she spoke.

"We don't need any help. Who told you to come out here?"

"Is your daughter here today, Mrs. Carrigan? We would really like to do some tests so we can see how best to help her." She ignored Sarah's question.

"I said we don't need your help. Please leave my property now."

"Yes, uh, we'll check in with you again in six months to see if there's anything you need." The woman wore an odd smirk on her face as she turned to leave.

Sarah trembled as she closed the door after the woman. She was sure that someone pretending to be a state agent had just cased her. For one thing, she knew a state worker would never use the word "crippled." The current accepted term was "altered." And the woman looked like a sheep rancher's wife dressed for church. Most likely the Kristian Kommand church.

Sarah dropped onto the couch. She couldn't believe those people would come to her house. Her mind flashed back to that day in Hixton's office when he had fired her; then the awful Roland Maxwell tapes Jeanette had played for her; the frightening encounter with Bo Breaker in the supermarket; and finally the miner who had seen Sage; and whoever it was that had spied on them this last fall. What was going on? Were they in danger?

Mentally, Sarah tripped and fell into the deep, dark, doubtful places she had avoided for so long. She dwelled on the day she had learned the truth about her baby and the long hours she had hidden from John and Jeanette in the restroom, deciding to keep the baby no matter what. What had she done? What had she been thinking of? Yes, she remembered thinking there was no way she could destroy the life inside her, but she also remembered the gleeful surge of power she had felt, thinking that having a hybrid baby would show them. The narrow-minded bigots. Did she decide to have Sage out of revenge? That was a terrible reason.

Sarah's head spun and her vision tunneled. She clasped her hands to her head and yanked on her hair. The pain seemed to clear her thoughts. No, she didn't do it out of revenge. She did it out of love. Love for her baby, no matter what species it was. I did it for love, she screamed silently to herself.

10

It was a wet Tuesday morning in May, almost lunchtime, when Kevin burst into Sunrise School and rounded up Sarah and Sage, got them in the car and tore home over the rutted roads. He shouted to Joanne as they left the school that there was an emergency and could she please bring her truck up to the house within twenty minutes.

"Nick came and got me at school," he explained to Sarah in the car. "We've got to get out of here now. Nick will try to create a diversion on Savage River Road to buy us a little time, but we've got to pack up and hit the trail now."

"What is going on?" Sarah was close to panic.

"Please, let's stay calm. Nick got word that Hixton is about to escort a bunch of feds up here this afternoon to take Sage away. He even saw them in town, white cars with government plates, parked outside the courthouse. We can't drive out of here, because they're watching Savage River Road. I saw a sheriff's cruiser on the road driving home. So, we got the packs all ready, right?"

"Uh huh, but it's raining so hard now ..."

"We'll survive. It's not too cold. Only we might have to walk farther than we planned for so let's pack some extra food." Kevin pulled into their parking area and the family ran down to the house. In fifteen minutes, they had warm and waterproof clothing on and Kevin had packed up extra oats and dehydrated beans in waterproof bags. He lashed his Winchester thirty-thirty onto the side of his pack, and stuffed boxes of bullets into his coat pockets.

Joanne drove up in her big four-wheel-drive rig. They threw their packs in the back under a tarp and then crammed into the cab. Kevin explained things as best he could to Joanne while she drove them out past Savage Ranch and up one of the old mining roads that penetrated into the Kalmiopsis Wilderness. After two miles she stopped at a locked gate. The trail took off here, and the family stepped out into the rain and loaded up the heaviest packs they had ever carried.

Kevin led them at a ferocious pace, attacking the first mile of trail along the open ridge-top. After the trail dropped down into a draw with more cover, he allowed Sarah and Sage to slow and catch their breath. Rain was falling steadily, and their boots already squished with water. Kevin was aiming for an old prospector's trail he knew of that went deep into a roadless canyon. They found the trail and it was overgrown, but still easier than bushwhacking through the thick undergrowth.

Old blazes—two axe chops, a short one over a long one—in the largest pines and firs kept Kevin on course when the path disappeared beneath thick oak scrub. The family was silent on the trail, alert to sounds of airplane engines or helicopters. By dark, Kevin guessed they had covered about three miles on the old trace. They made a campsite in a flat by a spring under giant old firs.

Sarah and Sage were exhausted and cold, but they couldn't build a fire in case of aerial surveillance. So far, they had heard nothing. They set up the tent and ate a meal of dehydrated beans and noodles, changed to dry long underwear and crawled into sleeping bags.

Rain fell steadily outside, and Kevin pulled their bags away from the walls of the tent where they might wick water from the nylon and get soaked. Sarah was shivering. He held her and rubbed her back till she warmed up.

"I think we should sit tight here tomorrow and listen for any signs that they're looking for us," Kevin proposed. Sarah agreed. She wanted to know how Nick knew about the raid.

"Madeline from the *Beacon* came over to his house this morning with a copy of a letter to the editor that was delivered to the paper. It was from Bo Breaker."

Kevin could feel Sarah shuddering beside him.

"It was a warning about the 'devilment' at Savage Ranch, and it said something about how humans are made in God's image and that the beast was made in Satan's image and that we were 'harbouring the beast' up at Savage Ranch. Madeline said they thought it was libelous and they weren't going to print it. Oh, and it also said something about a judgment coming down on Savage Ranch today. So when Nick saw all the government cars in town, he figured he ought to warn us. Then I saw the sheriff's car on the way home. I think they really are after us."

"But how could Bo Breaker get federal agents to come after us?"

"I don't know, but you know all that stuff we've been hearing about Congressman Grabitt and his American Morals Committee? With Roland Maxwell as advisor? Maybe our local inquisitors got in touch with them about us."

Kevin reached around Sarah and Sage and hugged them both tightly. "Sage, are you okay, honey? You aren't talking much."

Sage answered in her high little voice, soft with sleepiness, "I'm okay, Daddy. I don't think they can find us here."

"That's right, Sport, they could never find us because we'll blend right in with the bears and the deer. Don't you worry, we're going to be fine. Let's get some sleep now."

When Sage slept, Sarah whispered to Kevin, "Where are we going to go?"

“I was thinking Mary Wekanak’s. Remember? It’s not that far, I know we can make it.”

Kevin told Sarah his plan: they would head down to Mary Wekanak’s house on the Klamath River. Mary Wekanak was an elder of the Yurok tribe. Her son Horkie lived in Bethel Bay and crewed with Nick during the crabbing season. Years ago, before Sage was born, Horkie had invited Nick, Kevin and Sarah to a traditional Yurok salmon ceremony that his mother organized. They had run Nick’s boat down the northern California coast to the mouth of the Klamath River and then transferred to a couple of motorized dories to make the seven-mile trip upriver to the reservation.

Sarah remembered the ceremony now with pleasure. Several hundred people of all ages, many Indians but also many non-native friends, came to the campground on the banks of the Klamath River, just upstream of the tribal headquarters. They camped out the night before and woke up early to pray to the Great Spirit and help with the fire and other preparations.

Mary had dressed in her full traditional regalia: white deerskin dress with fringes and strings of dentalia shells, an abalone shell pendant, and a beautiful basket hat woven from beargrass and decorated with red flicker feathers and the shiny black stems of the maidenhair fern. She supervised the cooking of fat chunks of salmon on cedar skewers staked to angle in over the long bed of coals. Mary spoke an eloquent prayer of thanks to the salmon and the river before the throng of hungry’ people lined up to partake of the rich salmon and all the other fixings on the sagging plywood tables.

Nick was going to get word of their coming to Mary through Horkie, and Kevin felt sure they would be safe there until Nick could come and get them with his boat. The only problem would be getting to the Yurok reservation. It was almost a hundred miles south, and they would be traveling on foot through some of the most rugged, roadless wild country left on the west coast. Good cover, but hard going.

First they would head down to the Chetco River in the middle of the Kalmiopsis Wilderness, cross it and follow the river on the trail that ran alongside it, walking at night. The Chetco trail would take them east and then south up to the headwaters of the Chetco. From there, another trail would take them further east and down into the Illinois River Valley, a populated area, but they could cross the highway at night and head right up into the High Siskiyou Wilderness. Up there were trails that would take them all the way south to the Klamath River.

Sarah agreed that it was a good plan and they were strong enough to make it. A screech owl began to hoot nearby, over and over with a sound like a rusty wheel. The rain continued to drum, and Sarah lost consciousness and slept deeply.

It was still raining the next morning. The family stayed snuggled in the tent, and Kevin was pleased that the rain would wash away any footprints.

By mid-morning the rain was replaced by thick, cold fog. They stayed put the whole day, listening, and heard an airplane once, far away. “I’ll bet the feds gave up,” Kevin said hopefully. “I can see them trying to check out a tip from Bo Breaker if it was easy

to do, but why would they launch a search effort on the strength of that crazy's word? Still, we better not think about going back to Savage Ranch right now."

Cautiously, the family packed up on the second morning and started back to the main trail. They would have to cover some ground if they were to reach the Klamath River before their food ran out.

Sometime midmorning, the unmistakable drone of an airplane engine coming from the northwest whipped them into action. They threw their packs under deep brush and Kevin crawled away into a thicket of golden chinquapin while Sarah and Sage huddled under a huge Douglas fir surrounded by oak brush. Kevin had coached them to separate in hopes of presenting a smaller target for any infrared sensor looking for masses of body heat. The airplane brushed their zenith and continued straight to the southeast. An hour later they heard the same plane coming back, a little further to the east. They hid until the sound of its engine faded into silence.

Kevin had gotten a good look at it and thought it was the same plane the county sheriff used to find marijuana crops. "That county commissioner is a member of the KK church. Makes sense."

All that day they hiked up and over steep craggy ridges till finally they began the long descent to the Chetco River. The Chetco was one of the last undammed, untamed wild rivers left, but its beautiful canyon walls and cobble bars were wounded with gold mining scars, both old and new. There was still an active mining claim down on the bar where they would cross, and the miner had the right to drive into it, even though it was in the wilderness.

They stopped just below the last ridge above the river and camped hidden away from the trail, covering the tent with branches for camouflage. Kevin pored over his maps that evening while the light held, and again the next morning. They were only two miles from the river and the mining road. The road worried Kevin, and he was looking for a cross-country route that would take them further up the river to cross, away from the mine.

The tent had been taken down, and Sarah and Sage were stuffing their sleeping bags into stuff sacks, when Kevin heard a stick snap down in the notch below them where the creek ran and the trail followed it.

"Sss." He hissed shortly. The swish of rubbing nylon stopped, and Kevin motioned for them to quietly lie down. Listening intently, they could hear nothing over the deafening sounds of their own breath and pounding blood. Sage almost sneezed but she held her nose. Then they heard sticks snapping again and heavy footfalls and leaves crunching. A bare clink of metal on metal.

A man cleared his throat with a deep low sound. "Shhhh," said another man. Sarah was shaking and trying to breathe as quietly as she could. The men walked on. After about half an hour, enough time for them to get up to the ridge and back, the family heard them come back again. There seemed to be only two. This time the men were talking.

“They got to show up somewhere. Hell, they got to go down to the mine. Where else they going to cross the Chetco? We’ll wait for ’em there.” The men moved on down the trail, presumably back to their camp near the mine.

After a long time, Kevin spoke: “Miners. Must’ve got the gate open and driven down to the mine. More KK members, no doubt. Well, girls, looks like we get to bushwhack.” He winked at Sage, who smiled gamely back. Sarah gulped.

When bushwhacking across wild, mountainous country, it’s best to follow either ridges or valleys. But ridges in the Kalmiopsis are short and they don’t run north-south or east-west or make any other kind of sense. Those who are trying to get somewhere in particular must be prepared to do a hellacious amount of up and a torturous lot of down and then an unbelievable amount of up again. Riverbeds aren’t easy traveling either; they can turn into deep gorges around any bend and force hikers to haul themselves back up to the steep, craggy ridges once again.

For Kevin and Sarah and Sage, making their way along the brushy, overgrown creek beds was now their best option. They would be too visible on the ridges. But first they had to get to the right creek bed, and they would have to climb up and over a series of craggy ridges to get there. It wouldn’t be easy because brushfields of manzanita and oak shrub made most south-facing slopes nearly impassable.

Kevin spread out the topo map to take a look. He wiped his brow with his filthy bandana and dropped it on the ground next to the map. The bandana, twisted, ripped and knotted with adhesions from where he had blown his nose on it, was a good model of the landscape they had to traverse. He turned to the map with its ragged elevation lines, bunched up and spread out to indicate slope, and plotted their course.

Kevin led them away from the Chetco River, up and over a steep hump into the next small side drainage to the east. Then he made them climb another hump and another. He was trying to reach a point on the Chetco where a major tributary from the south drained into the river. They would slog their way up that creek to the top of the Chetco drainage. Up there at about five thousand feet above sea level, they could catch the trail that traversed the rim of the upper watershed for several miles before dropping over into the Illinois River valley.

Then they hit a scree slope so sheer it was almost a cliff. There was no way around it. They would have to cross. It was a few hundred yards long so they couldn’t use a safety rope.

Kevin went first and he tried to kick a rough trail into the slope with his boots. Sarah watched, not daring to breathe, terrified of having to do it herself. When Kevin was almost across, he slipped. Sarah nearly screamed, but then she saw him grab a tough rooted shrub growing in the loose rubble and save himself. Sage was surefooted and seemed to have no problem crossing the slope. Somehow Sarah crossed too.

After that they had to climb up and over one more hump with the thickest brush yet. They tried flinging themselves at the vegetation to push it aside, but the manzanita branches were so stiff and sharp they threatened to rip the clothes off their backs, the skin off their bones. The oak was softer and springier, but so dense they just bounced

off it. The only way through was to take their packs off and push them along the ground through narrow rabbit trails in the oak thickets. Sharp stobs scratched and gouged their faces and arms, drawing blood. The day was sunny and warm, and pollen from the oaks got up their noses, making them itch and sneeze. Sweat ran stinging into their wounds.

While they were crawling like rabbits, they heard an airplane go overhead again and they froze in place, tired enough to welcome the rest.

They finally got down to the creek and washed off the pollen and blood and dust. Kevin thought it would be best to wait until dark to cross the river since the trail from the mine ran along it on the other side. They were exhausted anyway and needed to rest and eat. So far, Kevin estimated, they had hiked twelve miles of trail and done five miles of bushwhacking.

"This was the hardest part, gals. It's going to get a lot easier, I promise you."

Sarah fervently hoped he was right, because she had never been so tired in her entire life.

It was dark and moonless when they crossed the river. Kevin went first to set up a rope to help them keep their footing in the swift, spring waters. He made another trip to help Sage with her pack because she was too short to hold it up out of the water. He was worried about Sarah, but she made it across with her pack fine, only she complained about having wet boots. The footing was too unsure and the river too turbulent to risk a barefoot crossing. Kevin had to make one more trip across and back to untie the end of the rope and bring it back.

Once on the other side, they listened for sounds above the noise of rushing water and cautiously walked up the trail along the river. After two hundred yards of trail walking they reached the tributary that would take them south. They left the trail and climbed a short way down a bank thick with blackberry bramble into the creek. It scratched their hands and ripped at their jeans, but they barely noticed. Sarah sighed, wishing that they could stay on the trail. Bushwhacking was wearing her out. Her feet were wet and numb with cold. They waded in silence up the creek for an hour until Sarah slipped on a boulder and cracked her knee.

"Damn, how bad is it?" Kevin asked.

"It hurts. Nothing broken, but I think we should rest now."

Sarah held Sage's hand. She knew Sage must be tired too, but she wasn't complaining. The family carved out a resting place in moss and pine needles on a small terrace under low oak brush. It was lumpy, but none of them cared as sleep quickly overcame them.

The next day was spent slowly crawling up the creek bed, wet to the knees. They had to keep a sharp eye out for snakes; it would be too easy to surprise a rattler. Sarah was near exhaustion.

To take her mind off her condition she tried to focus on the beautiful wild irises coming into bloom all around. After a while she noticed that the irises had changed as they climbed higher up the creek. Lower down they were purple, deep and brilliant

with gold starbursts in the center of each petal. Exactly the type of flashy iris the ladies of Bethel Bay planted in their front yards, only smaller. But now she was starting to see a yellow iris. They were a drab, pale ochre, though the frilly edged petals were just as delicate and lovely as the purple ones.

She knew that the yellow ones were a different species that grew in the interior, while the purple ones hugged the coast. But what was this she was seeing? A yellow iris with deep purple veining. Then a pale lavender one with yellow veins. No two were alike and they were all fascinatingly beautiful. They were in the hybrid zone, she realized, the place where two species mingled and merged. Who could say where one species ended and another began? It wasn't always a sharp border like a line on a map. It was a zone, undefined, unmapped, unnoticed.

A drop of sweat ran into Sarah's eye and stung. She wiped it away and looked up from the ground. Kevin's blue backpack bobbed up and down above the oak brush ahead. What a pillar of strength he was. How could she ever repay him for what he was doing for her, leading her and Sage through this wilderness? But they were in it together. They always would be.

Following him was Sage, steadfastly covering the rocky ground. Sage's way of walking was to lift each knee high, angled outward from her center, and carefully place each foot before lifting the other knee. She moved in a curious sort of bent-kneed waddle, yet she was fast. Sage walked funny and talked funny. Her funny little hybrid. Her jenny mule.

Sarah strained and her thighs ached as she lifted her legs over one more boulder. This couldn't be happening. These militias and government men weren't really going to drive them from their home. Because of Sage? Who could be threatened by Sage? She was so harmless, so innocent.

Hixton's face flashed in front of her. She remembered his teeth, yellowed incisors clapped together as he hissed Satan at her. Satan was a hybrid. Part goat, part man, part scaly beast. That's what they were all afraid of. Not Sage in particular but the hybrid zone where borders were mushy and permeable. They were so afraid of it that they would turn murderous to contain it. They wanted Sage, to box her up. Oh my Goddess, what would happen to them? What was it that made men like Hixton and Breaker so afraid? Sarah couldn't sustain these thoughts and soon she was mindlessly plodding again, making her way slowly up the creek.

Toward the end of the day, the creek gully shrank to a shallow depression as they reached the broad alluvial terrace at the base of the high red peaks that curved in a rim around the upper watershed.

Here the forest was an open Jeffrey pine savanna. It was easier going but there was less cover. Nervously, Kevin kept scanning the skies. They walked till the light gave out and they found a sheltered camp in a cedar grove near the head of the creek a mile below the rim trail. They would rest and hide the whole next day and then start walking the rim trail at night. There was no cover at all up there, but since they

were far from any old mining roads, Kevin was confident there would be none of Bo Breaker's men on the trail.

From the rim down to the Illinois Valley, the trails were good, following moderate slopes. Sage would lead the way; her night vision was much better than Kevin's or Sarah's. They would have to be careful at the trailhead and cross the highway in the valley under cover of dark. Once across the highway they would head up into the High Siskiyou Wilderness on old logging roads. Kevin doubted that Bo Breaker's men would look for them there. A long, relatively gentle trail traversed the High Siskiyou Wilderness and dropped right down to the Klamath River and the reservation.

Morning began with the whup-whup-whup of chopper blades slicing the air over their heads. Kevin's eyes flew open. The chopper passed over quickly, but three minutes later another one thumped by directly overhead.

"Oh crap," Kevin said. "We've really got to hunker down now."

He told Sarah and Sage not to move and he quickly took down the tent and pushed their packs and bags up under the oak brush along the creek. They waited silently all morning as helicopters flew back and forth overhead.

Kevin's mind raced as he tried to figure out how such a huge search effort could have been mounted and how they were going to slip through it. Sage was getting fidgety, but Sarah was exhausted and Kevin could tell, despairing. She escaped into sleep despite the chopper noise. Kevin held Sage and stroked the long silky hair on the back of her neck, trying to get her to relax and go back to sleep. Finally, around noon, he smelled it.

"That clever son of a bitch," he said, loud enough to wake both Sarah and Sage.

"What?" Sarah said.

"That damned Bo Breaker, he's trying to burn us out. Smell the smoke? Shit. It won't work though, too wet, too early in the season to get a good burn going."

"Well, it got all these choppers in here to find us," Sarah pointed out.

"Yeah, well, we're almost out of here. We've just got to hold out through the day and we'll head out on the rim trail tonight."

They spent a tense afternoon hiding from the air traffic and smelling the smoke as it got thicker and closer. At one point they heard chainsaws and men shouting in the distance, a hotshot smokejumper crew out cutting fire lines. Finally it got dark enough to send the choppers and spotter planes home. It was a relief to move again. They were all stiff and sore from immobility in their cramped hiding place.

But the smoke had drifted upslope by now and when they stood up, they could no longer breathe. Kevin tied wet bandanas around their mouths and noses and they crawled slowly up the last mile in the creek bottom, sucking up the cool, clean air low above the water.

Sage started coughing out of control. Sarah stopped and held her and Kevin found a bay leaf for her to suck on. That helped. "Come on, Sport, we got to get out of this smoke." Kevin took Sage's pack and lashed it onto his own.

Sarah, desperate now to get Sage away from the smoke, ignored her own heavy pack and practically carried the child up the rest of the slope.

Finally, they reached the rim trail. They headed east as quickly as they could and within an hour managed to get out of the thickest smoke.

Walking along the rim trail was good. It felt like flying after all the pushing through heavy brush they had done in the last few days. By midnight, they hit the gap between the Chetco watershed and the Illinois River watershed and started down the long ridge that would take them into the Illinois Valley. By morning, they were there, with pounded, tender feet. They found a cozy, hidden camp away from the trail.

Kevin left Sarah and Sage in the camp and crept through the woods to observe the trailhead. There was no one there. He returned and told Sarah that he was going to hitchhike into the nearby town of Cave Junction to get some more food. Sarah didn't want him to go, was afraid he would get caught, but Kevin insisted they needed more food if they were going to make the next sixty miles to the Klamath. "Besides, I can pick up some clean, dry socks."

Late that afternoon, Kevin came back to camp with food and chocolate. Sage was delighted. Sarah was just happy to see Kevin again. "I checked the papers," Kevin told them. "They talk about the fire, but nothing about us."

Kevin caught a few hours of sleep and they took off after dark to cross the highway and head up into the Siskiyou Wilderness. They were well into the high country again by morning, and after another night of hiking were in California. There was no sign of any search effort or any of Bo Breaker's men. Finally, after three more nights of hiking, they camped on the last ridge above the Klamath River and the reservation.

By the next afternoon, their blistered feet delivered them to Mary Wekanak's doublewide trailer house tucked into the woods at the far end of the reservation. Sarah shook with relief as they crossed the dirt yard with its collection of corroded fishing gear and dented drift boats. Chickens scattered as the door to the house opened and Mary Wekanak smiled at them. The old Indian woman gathered Sage and Sarah into a grandmotherly embrace.

Nick was waiting for them too. He slapped Kevin on the back and said, "Well, what's the plan, bro?"

11

Sage stood at the wheel of Nick's fishing boat. The sky was blue and clear as a crystal bowl. Sunlight flicked dancing diamonds from ocean waves chopped by a stiff breeze. Sage was warm in the sun, but the wind kept her from getting too hot. She wore a tank top and cutoffs and loved the invigorating feel of the wind in all of her hair. Everywhere she looked was a limitless horizon. Soon, she knew, she would see the whole world.

Nick had shown her how to use the navigation instruments to keep on course. She was a pirate captain on the high seas. She was an explorer discovering new continents. The truth was almost as exciting as her fantasies. Nick was taking them to Canada to stay with Kevin's old professor on an island. It was like some of the stories Carver had read to her.

The last three weeks had been the most exciting of Sage's young life. She was scared sometimes, but she was also happy, glad finally to be out in the world. She had resented never getting to leave Savage Ranch. Her friend Harmony got to go to town a lot. She went to the beach and to stores where she could buy toys and things. Sage still hadn't been to a store, but she had loved meeting all the new people at the reservation. She would miss Mary Wekanak especially, because she had told Sage that she would be her grandmother.

And now she was on the wide, open ocean, and she was with Nick, which made her happy. She had little thought for the future and what it might bring. That was for her parents to worry about.

Kevin and Sarah had racked their brains trying to figure out where they could find refuge. They wouldn't be able to stay at the reservation long. Too many people came through there and word would get out eventually. They discussed calling Jolin Stengers to see if he would help protect them and negotiate some kind of agreement with the government, but Sarah couldn't see taking the risk of losing Sage yet.

"She's too young," Sarah insisted. "I know she'll have to face this eventually, but she needs more time, to grow up, to just be herself, to be my baby for a little while longer."

Kevin couldn't argue, he didn't want to lose her either.

Finally, Kevin thought of his old psychology professor from college, Garth Boldt. Dr. Boldt had been Kevin's favorite teacher, and Garth had appreciated his student Kevin as well. Kevin took Garth fishing on the MacKenzie River, and they often drank in the same pub on Friday afternoons. They had stayed in touch, and Kevin knew that Garth and his family had moved up to an island off the coast of British Columbia a few years back. He had a grant from a private foundation to study social behavior and sexual bonding in the killer whale.

Kevin had called Garth and explained their situation as best he could.

Garth was fascinated and invited the family to stay on the island: "Come on up to Canada for a while. Hilda and the kids could use some company. You should be safe. This is a nature preserve so we're the only ones who live here. Mail and supplies come once a month. My project runs for another three years, so you'll have some time to figure things out."

Sarah was nervous about the arrangement. She knew Garth of course, from their Eugene days, and she remembered him as one of those males who bulldozes his way through life, full of conviviality and charm, but not one to understand the word "no."

Only Hilda was home when Nick pulled the boat up to the island's dock. The two boys, Sven and Erik, were out observing orcas with their father. Hilda was tall and

slender, with delicate features. She looked to Sarah to be in her late thirties. A beautiful woman, Sarah thought, but with a wan, vacant sort of look. Hilda invited them into the house.

The house was a spacious log cabin with two bedrooms. Hilda said they had built it from a kit the year before. But there wasn't enough room for both families.

"We have a sizeable canvas wall tent that will do you all for now," Hilda told them. "We lived in it the whole first year, before the cabin was ready. Can I get you some coffee or something?"

Nick and Kevin accepted the coffee, but Sarah felt like she might choke on it. She missed her home. She did not relish the thought of living in a tent, dependent on the good will of people she barely knew. Hilda was extremely quiet and barely acknowledged Sage, who sat silently by Sarah's side on the living room couch. Sarah wondered if Hilda was simply disturbed by Sage's appearance.

When Garth and the boys, Sven and Erik, ages fifteen and thirteen, returned later that day, the atmosphere improved and Sarah was relieved. It was hard to feel down around Garth; he wouldn't let you. A large man in his fifties with thick curly hair, his deep rumbling laughter was infectious. He made much of both Sage and Sarah, constantly joking and making them laugh. The two boys were polite, though Erik was shy and stayed close to his mother.

Nick left the next day for home, and Garth and Kevin set up the canvas tent on the wooden platform the Boldts had built for it.

Sarah walked into the tent and looked around in the dim green light. The smell of mildew was strong, smacking her in the nose like a blow. It was foul and rotten. Everything was rotten. She didn't want to be here. She wanted to be home. Suddenly, she was overcome with grief and couldn't stand it anymore. She slumped down and squatted on the filthy tent platform. She hung her head, and holding her face in her hands, she began to cry.

Sarah saw now how wrong it had been to put off dealing with reality. The very foundation of her life was crumbling into rot and decay. What had she done? How could she have avoided thinking about Sage's future for so long? Would they have to hide for the rest of their lives? She should have planned for this somehow. Sarah sobbed quietly for a long time and the tears seeped through her fingers and dripped onto the rough wood floor.

Eventually, her tears ran dry. It was true that she had failed Sage. But Sage wasn't rotten. She was bright and beautiful. Sarah felt a deep wave of love for her daughter. That love was her foundation and it wasn't rotten, it was strong, just like this sturdy cedar platform. Courage, Princess. Slowly she lifted her head out of her hands and wiped her eyes. Despite the total disruption of their lives, Sage and Kevin were her dearest loves and they were here, together still. She would never let anyone harm Sage. She had to focus on that and the task ahead, which was to make this smelly tent a home for them.

Sarah gazed through the open tent door. The wrinkled, spotted canvas framed a stunning view of the wild seashore. It was beautiful here. She had taken a risk, having Sage, and this was the result. She would just have to deal with it. She was strong and she would get stronger. She would be like Fern. She would face adversity but she would come out on top. Somehow, things would work out. She picked herself up and began to roll up all the window flaps and air the place out.

Soon the family settled in and after a week started to get into the routines of their new life. Most mornings, Hilda home-schooled the boys. Sarah and Sage joined the class.

Afternoons, the boys went out with their father in the orca boat, *The Orcasm*. With Kevin to help, Garth was now spending mornings out in the boat as well. The first morning they went out, Kevin learned the basics of operating the boat, and then waited for Garth to explain his other duties to him.

"This is great, Kevin, Til get in a lot more observation time. Before I was switching off mornings and afternoons because I did not want to keep the boys out that long."

"Well, believe me, I'm happy to help. It's good to have something to do." Kevin was excited about being out on the boat. He was enjoying the adventure. "So fill me in a little more about your research."

"Ahh," Garth's eyes shone with obsession. "It's basic. Very basic research. Into the origins, my man."

"Origins of what?"

"Of everything. You know, the whole shebang, why we are who we are."

"So what does that have to do with orcas?" Kevin gamely asked the questions until Garth was ready to reveal his grand theory.

"Orca, Kevin, the Killer. How is he different from other cetaceans besides what he eats for lunch?"

"Um ... I don't know. Predators are more intelligent, aren't they? Because they have to be smart enough to catch a seal or whatever."

"Yes, good, Kevin. But that's not all. What do they do with that intelligence and that killer instinct when it comes time to relate to the pod? Orcas are very social animals." Garth stared at Kevin like a cat about to pounce.

"You got me, what?"

"S-E-X, young Kevin, that's what. Orcas are the sexiest cetacean there is. They do it all the time. The females are continuously receptive—like human females are supposed to be. Hunh." Garth snorted and went on:

"Sex is a way for them to re-channel their aggression. They hunt in packs, drive their prey to exhaustion and then rip it apart. Little squabbles develop over who gets the most. They have to share. How do they change their mode of operation from single-minded killing to cooperation? What lets them do this? Sex! Aggression channeled into sex lets them relieve the accumulated tension through orgasm. These orcas are screwing all the time. Otherwise, they'd be fighting and ripping each other to little bits."

"Sublimation ,..." Kevin muttered, remembering the term from Garth's psych class.

“Yes, exactly, sublimation.” Garth was excited. “This is the opposite of our culture, isn’t it? We sublimate our sexuality into aggression. The orca sublimates his aggression into sexuality. What’s the most aggressive species on Earth? Man. That’s why my research is important. If we can turn that aggression into love, we can have peace on Earth.”

Kevin was intrigued, but he wondered what kind of reception Garth’s work would have. Would people really take lessons on sex from orcas? Hadn’t the free-love experiment already been tried back in the 1960s? Kevin kept his thoughts to himself.

Sage loved going out on *The Orcasm* with the boys in the afternoon. Most of the time they cruised along the shorelines of dozens of small islands in the vicinity, looking for orcas. When they spotted some, they would follow them, but it was difficult to see more than their fins poking up out of the water. Sometimes they had to open the throttle wide to keep pace with the pod as it went in for a kill. Sage saw a lot of thrashing water when the orcas stopped and circled their prey, but she could never see what actually happened.

Once, toward the end of the day, they followed the pod back to a calm bay. The water was glassy smooth with only the slightest ripple. They could see the sandy bottom of the bay, and the orcas sliding past one another in the depths, rubbing and nuzzling each other, their piebald bodies flashing as they moved through shafts of sunlight in the water.

Garth grew excited. “Write down everything you see. There’s a copulation. Okay, those two are stimulating each other orally. And if Fm right it looks like XD and XJ. XJ has a deformed fin, that’s her; all right. Whew. XD is her son, we think.”

Sage saw the animals rubbing each other. It looked like affection to her. She couldn’t tell if they were copulating or not. She giggled, because people didn’t usually talk about copulation, or “poking” as the kids at home called it.

Back on land, Sarah tried to stay busy, preparing lessons for the three children and cooking and cleaning, but she missed her home. Hilda wasn’t much company. She did her best to ignore Sarah and spent most afternoons reading old mystery novels. Thank goodness, she thought, at least Sage is happy. The two boys seemed to be nice playmates for her. They had lively discussions together in the classroom in the mornings, and then after lunch they would either go out on *The Orcasm* or they would all three head out into the woods.

One afternoon, Sage went off with the boys to the river. They waded upstream to a place where an old cedar leaned out over a deep green hole. Red sockeye salmon glided over the sun-spackled gravels and rested in boulder shade before their next push up the watery staircase to home. The boys stripped off their clothes and scrambled up the cedar tree to a fat bough directly above the hole and dove in. Sage followed them. The youngsters climbed and dove a dozen rounds till they all three collapsed on a moss-covered boulder in the sun, dripping naked and breathless.

Sage lay on her back with closed eyes and smelled the incense of cedar and the wet skin of the boys on either side of her. She listened to the chortling of the river as it

tickled its rocky bed, and the haze of bird talk and insect hum in the air. Her breasts had a fullness that seemed new. A breeze played at the lips of her swollen vulva and stirred a tingling that delighted her. Sage opened her eyes and saw Sven gazing at her breasts with a smile on his face. She smiled back and jumped up and threw a pinecone at his head. Sven chased her into the water and they had a rousing water fight with Erik joining in.

Sage thought she was kind of sweet on Erik. She liked his shyness; he reminded her of her friend Carver back home. She tickled him repeatedly and loved it when he tickled her back. Sven scared her a little; he was older and more aggressive, like his father, but she liked him too. When they got back to the cabin, Sven told Sage he had something to show her up in the tree house they had a little ways away in the woods. Erik wanted to come too, but Sven told him to go read a book, they would be right back.

Sage and Sven raced to the big Sitka spruce together and climbed the rickety ladder up to the little house, which was barely large enough for two.

"What do you want to show me, Sven?" Sage asked.

"Um. This." Sven said slowly. He started to unzip his jeans.

"But Sven's father said it was okay and we should do it."

It was nearly two months later, well into the cold, wet fall season. The family was spending most of their time in the tent with the little wood stove running full bore. They were already starting to get cabin fever.

"You're telling me that you've missed your period for almost a month now, and that you've been having sex with Sven since August. And you had sex when you were swelling. You know what that means. Sage? You could be pregnant."

"I know, Mommy, that's why I'm telling you." Sage was almost crying in that scrunched-up way of hers. Her eyes didn't make tears, but her voice got squeaky and tight. "Sven said Garth told him that I couldn't get pregnant, because I'm a hybrid. And that it was unhealthy for Sven and me to go without sex."

"But we talked about sex. Remember? I told you that you probably couldn't get pregnant but you shouldn't have sex when you were swelling anyway, just to be sure. And besides, you're too young." Sage had turned twelve in July.

Sarah was dismayed. Last spring, Sage had started her cycles of ovulation swelling followed by menstruation. Sarah had been relieved at the time to see that her swellings were modest in size. She had seen a female bonobo in heat, and couldn't imagine walking around with a swelling the size of a small loaf of bread between her legs for three-quarters of the month. It would make things very difficult for Sage if she had to deal with that. Recently Sarah had noticed that Sage's breasts had grown quite large. But she had thought she still had time. And now her little girl was seemingly pregnant.

"I thought Garth would know, because he studies sex and all."

"Garth doesn't know anything," Sarah said. She was furious. The man had practically ordered his son to seduce her child.

"Mama, I'm not ready to have a baby," Sage said.

12

Sarah and Kevin decided that their only choice was to immediately drive back to the States. They would sneak into Savage Ranch and have Joanne do the abortion. Sarah knew that Joanne had the equipment because she was always worried that someday the fundamentalists would make abortion illegal again. The Boldts didn't know anyone who could help them in Canada, and they certainly couldn't take Sage to a clinic. Garth Boldt arranged for a friend to drop off a van on Lummi Island in the San Juans. They could sail there at night and avoid customs at the border. His boat could make it that far in three days. Luckily, they had good weather and made the trip without trouble.

Garth was truly sorry, he said, for what had happened. He urged them to come right back and call ahead. He would come back down to Lummi and pick them up. Sarah was upset. She didn't want to come back here. Her mind kept spinning in an effort to come up with somewhere else they could take refuge, but nothing clicked in.

They found the van where it was supposed to be, and caught the first ferry to the mainland. They got on Interstate 5 and headed south. They passed through Bellingham, and soon Sage was to see her first city, Seattle. Sage peeked carefully out the van windows, hiding her face behind an old straw hat. She saw mile after mile of suburbs. Ten miles north of downtown, the solid line of cars slowed to a slither. It took them an hour and a half to get through downtown to a point where traffic found its legs again.

Kevin cursed the whole way through the traffic jam. Sage was scared. She knew it was all her fault. Finally she ventured to ask, "Is Daddy afraid we'll get caught if we slow down?"

Kevin laughed then. "No, Sage. Sorry I'm in such a foul mood. I hate this kind of traffic. Actually, we're less likely to get caught here in the middle of this mass of humanity than we would be closer to home, where people might recognize us."

Sage puzzled this out. She was amazed at the size of the city, how it seemed to go on forever. And no one would know you here, because there were so many people all around you, and nobody knew anyone.

As they were passing through Portland, Sage called her mother to show her the blood soaking her panties. "Is it my period, Mommy?" Sage wanted to know. "I hurt real bad too, real bad cramps." Sage massaged her belly and groin, trying to smooth the pain away. At first, Sarah wasn't sure if it was a period or a miscarriage, but soon there was so much blood that she suspected the latter. They needed to get home, now, fast.

They drove into Savage Ranch near midnight and went straight to Fern's house.

"Fern! Teasel! Muumuu!" Sage leapt from the van and hugged Fern savagely and then scooped up the two cats that Fern had adopted after the family's flight.

"Well, knock me down and steal my teeth," Fern said.

Sarah embraced her old friend and then quickly and quietly explained what had brought them back home.

Fern hopped in her car and drove the half-mile to Joanne's house and brought her right back. Joanne examined Sage and said it looked like a spontaneous abortion. She gave Sage some herbs to reduce the cramping and said she wanted to observe her for a couple of days, but that she should be fine.

Sarah couldn't believe she was really home. They didn't dare go up to their own house, but it was like heaven being back in Fern's overcrowded cabin, smelling the incense and herbs.

"I missed you all like the dickens," Fern told her. "Has everything been okay? I mean, besides Sage getting pregnant?"

Sarah spilled her heart out; it was such a relief to have someone to talk to again. They stayed up late talking after Kevin and Sage went to bed. Finally Sarah asked Fern how she had been.

"Pretty good, considering. Nick must have told you about the FBI raid here the week after you left. They didn't do much, really. Mostly they went through your house looking at your papers and your computer. They didn't leave a mess, but I have no idea what they took. They questioned me and looked at all my papers and my computer. I got a good lawyer, but I told them the truth, Sarah. What else could I do? I don't see how we've done anything illegal. They haven't charged anyone with anything. The one I worry about is John Stengers. I'm afraid he'll lose his position at the lab over this."

"That's terrible. I was hoping he'd be able to help us ... I don't know ... somehow deal with the government. I don't know how much longer I can take living as a fugitive."

"Aw, chickie, I don't see how John can help you right now. But listen, here's some good news. Remember Eva and Rick? They moved to that land in Idaho? They were back for a visit a few weeks ago and I told them about your situation. They said they would love to take you in if there was ever a need. And their place is remote; more remote than here. They're good people, Sarah. Very reclusive, but that's what you want. It used to be a commune with twenty people, so there's several extra cabins on the property. You could really have your own space and not have to interact with them much."

"Oh my god, Fern, thank you. I don't know what I'd do without you." Sarah embraced Fern again, feeling the solidity of the older woman's body and the strength in the soft arms that held her. She went to bed then, relieved to know they wouldn't have to go back to Spratt Island and the Boldts.

Rob came by the next morning while Sarah still slept.

"Has anyone been outside since you got here?" Rob turned and looked at each of them in Fern's small living room. "Because Johnnie Blue Creek's hanging out up at his claim again, spying on us."

Kevin was alarmed. "Yeah, I think we both went out to the outhouse this morning. Can you see this place from up there?"

"I'm not sure," Rob answered. "I haven't been up there to check in a while. It seems pretty overgrown around this house, and the outhouse is deep in the woods. Hopefully he couldn't see you."

"I went out to the van this morning too, to get some stuff," Sage said.

"Yeah, hmm. Well, there's a better chance of him seeing the driveway, I think," Rob mumbled. "But hopefully he was still asleep. If he's even up there right now."

"I hear you, Dad, we'll stay in the house while it's daylight. We can only be here a few days anyway. Joanne says Sage should be able to travel soon."

Leaving Savage Ranch again was heart-wrenching, but it had to be done. Joanne pronounced Sage ready to travel on the second day after their arrival, and they packed up to leave that night, with directions to Rick and Eva's place in Idaho. Sage plastered her face to the van's rear window, waving to Fern and the cats as the van pulled slowly up the steep driveway.

Kevin drove, winding the van down the dirt Forest Service road to the county road that ran along the Savage River. There was no traffic and he turned right to go east to Grants Pass and Interstate 5. As soon as he made the turn and saw the headlights pull out behind him, he knew something was wrong. Then two police cruisers appeared from around the curve up ahead, lights flashing and sirens wailing as they skidded to a stop, blocking the road. He saw more flashing lights in the rear-view mirror. His only choice now was to drive over the side of the road into the river, or stop. He applied the brakes, as slowly and calmly as he could.

Sarah and Sage screamed. They couldn't see anything from the back of the van but flashing lights. They scrambled up to the front with Kevin and they all held on to each other, shaking hard. Kevin urged them to be calm, and soon the officers approached and put them under arrest.

The police pulled Kevin out of the van first and handcuffed him. He did not resist. Then they cuffed Sarah and Sage and loaded them all into a police van and drove them back down the river road to the county jail at Bethel Bay.

Kevin had been to school with one of the arresting officers. When they got to the jail, they started to separate him from the women. "Hey, Joey, come on man, let me stay with my family," he pleaded.

Joey sneered at him. "You are one sicko, Kevin. Best thing for you if you never see that bitch and that... that monkey thing again."

Sage was shocked to hear someone talking that way to her father. They took Kevin away and put Sage and Sarah into a small bare cell with a single hard concrete bench and a concrete floor with ugly stains.

After a few hours, Kevin and Sarah were brought into a harshly lighted room with three chairs in it. The sheriff came in and told them that they would be held for a maximum of seventy-two hours until a judge could tell them what they would be charged with. Sage, he said, would be remanded to the custody of the court and there was a standing order from a judge to turn her over to federal authorities.

"You can't do that!" Sarah screamed. "She's my child!"

“Ma’am,” the sheriff said, “those are my orders. You’ll have a chance to take that up with the judge. Meanwhile, you can either calm down, or we can put you in restraints.”

Sarah clung to Kevin, and the sheriff let them sit together for a few minutes before asking the jail officer to take them back to their cells. When Sarah got back to her cell, Sage was already gone.

Sage’s shoulders ached. Her arms had been cuffed behind her for at least three hours, she guessed. They had cuffed her ankles too, and she couldn’t get comfortable on the hard seat of the prisoner transport van. She had been sick on the winding road from the coast over to the Interstate. The glum female officer accompanying the driver had cleaned her up with a towel, but the van still stank of vomit.

The officer had tried to talk to her, but Sage pretended that she couldn’t speak. Let them think she was stupid. She had heard them say they were taking her to a federal facility in San Francisco. They were heading south and it was starting to get light out. Soon they would be going through Medford, Sage figured. She had studied the maps a lot on the drive down from Lummi Island.

South of Medford there were no cities or even sizable towns until Redding, California. Ten million acres of wild country between Interstate 5 and the coast, she remembered Kevin saying. If she could get out of this van, she knew she could get away. Maybe get down to the reservation on the Klamath River and stay with Mary Wekanak, the Native American elder who had been so kind to her.

They were climbing over a mountain pass now, and the sun was hidden behind a mass of gray clouds that hovered low above the horizon. Sage saw the sign that said: “Welcome to California.” She started whimpering and the officer turned around to see what the matter was. She squeezed her legs together like she had to go really bad.

“What’s wrong with her?” asked the driver.

“I think she has to go,” said the officer.

“Well, she’ll have to wait till we get to Redding for our scheduled stop,” said the driver.

Sage kept whimpering and squirming.

“I don’t think she can wait that long. Better stop in Yreka at the CHP station.”

“Okay.”

But twenty miles before Yreka, Sage started gagging and acting like she was going to vomit again. The female officer was alarmed; she didn’t want any more mess to clean up. “Look, there’s a rest area ahead. Let’s get her in there and let her relieve herself. I’ll put my jacket over her head so no one can see her and get upset.”

The driver agreed and pulled off the highway. Sage paused from her whimpering and gagging to look out the window and noticed that the rest area was in a little park on the banks of a wide river. A sign said it was the Klamath River. The far shore of the river was a steep, brush-covered slope. The river ran no more than thirty feet behind the restroom. There was nothing hut a low timber fence separating the dog-walking lawn from the wide rushing river.

The female officer removed the cuffs. She gripped Sage's wrist tightly and threw a jacket over her head and guided her into the restroom.

"Here, go in this stall here. You know how to take care of this yourself, I hope."

Sage peed and then made retching, spitting sounds. When she was finally quiet, the officer opened the stall door and grabbed her wrist again. They walked out of the restroom. Peeking from under the jacket over her head, Sage saw the driver leaning against the tourist maps smoking a cigarette. She knew what to do.

Sage wrenched her wrist out of the officer's grasp, completely surprising the large woman with her strength. Then she bounded off toward the river. Before either of the officers could draw a weapon, she had leaped over the timber fence and was in the water, hurtling downstream in the strong, chill current.

13

Sage kicked off her sneakers to swim. In no time, she was around a bend and out of sight of the rest area. The water was cold. She kept moving; treading to keep her head above water also kept her warm. The river was high and swift but there were no rapids to contend with. The morning was gray and drizzling. For some time, she had seen no sign of a road. Riding the rivet; she traveled through mountains that dropped in a steep V-shaped canyon right to the river's edge. After an hour, Sage grew numb from the cold and swam for the shore.

She stripped off her wet cotton jeans and T-shirt, figuring she was better off without them. She kept her synthetic pile jacket and her underwear. The fur on her legs provided some insulating warmth. She threw her cotton clothes in the river. Maybe they would find them and think she had drowned. She made her way along the jumbled boulders and chaparral on the steep riverbank. The sun came out as the day warmed up towards noon and she jumped back in the river for the free ride. But then she remembered the planes and helicopters that had pursued her family in the Kalmiopsis, and she found a hiding place under a boulder. She grabbed handfuls of leaves and grass to make a soft nest there and slept for the afternoon. She continued along the riverbank that night and slept the next day on a bed of pine needles.

During her second night of travel, she came upon the first houses along the rivet. The first one she saw was empty and she broke in and took food, a knife, matches and some rope, a pair of pants, a heavy wool sweater, a ragged plastic tarp and a knapsack to carry it all in. Then she headed up into the mountains away from the river.

Sage wandered in the mountains for days. She slept in a different place each night. When it rained she would find the biggest, oldest tree around and sleep on the soft bed of needles at its base, almost hugging the trunk, wrapped in the plastic tarp. Even in a heavy rain, she could stay dry.

Finally, she found a little abandoned cabin deep up a hollow at the end of a rutted road and decided she would feel safe there. It looked like no one had been there for

years, and certainly no one would come in the winter. She started making forays to the houses on the river to fill her backpack with provisions. Since many of the houses were unoccupied summer homes, it was easy to raid them. She didn't think the people would really miss the bags and boxes of beans and rice and oats she took.

The weather started to get cold and stormy, and she knew it was time to stop her raiding and settle in for the winter. The cabin had a stove, and she set about collecting downed wood from the forest floor before the snow got too deep, and cutting it with the axe she had stolen. She would not freeze.

Sage had given up the idea of getting to the reservation and Mary Wekanak. She didn't think Mary could protect her. If her parents hadn't been able to protect her, how would Mary be able to? Sage figured she was safer right where she was. Anyway, she didn't want to be around people. She was too angry—angry at all the people who had betrayed her—the nameless, faceless ones who hated animals like her, but also those, like Garth Boldt, who were wrong about things and made others suffer for it. After many days alone with her thoughts in the cabin, she started to put her mother in that category too.

Sarah is supposed to be such a smart woman, she thought, how could she have created a freak like me? What kind of a future did she think I would have anyway? Did she think I could stay like a child at Savage Ranch my whole life? Was she going to keep trying to pass me off as a retard or a cripple to the rest of the world? For the rest of my life?

The more she thought these thoughts, the angrier she became. She started to dwell on her memories of Sven and Erik and the sex with Sven. She loved it. It felt better to her than anything ever had. She wanted to be back with them and created a fantasy for herself where she had been pregnant and kept the baby, stayed on Spratt Island and lived with Sven and Erik. She would have sex every day with both of them, and they would raise the baby together and love it. Garth and Hilda were conveniently absent from this picture. Then her thoughts would turn to Sarah again and she would be overwhelmed with resentment.

She was horrified when I got pregnant, Sage thought, because she didn't want me to have another freak. But she had no problem bringing me into this world.

The anger helped, because it helped her avoid a much deeper feeling, her love and longing for Sarah and Kevin. She could not allow those feelings or she would sink into total despair. She could not afford that, because she had to survive, and she was on her own now with no one to help her.

Finally, her thoughts became too much for her, and Sage took up whittling with a pocketknife she had found, carving sticks of oak into sinuous snake-like forms. There was some sandpaper in the cabin and she smoothed the little sculptures till the wood felt like satin. She ran her hands over and over them like worry stones to ease her pain.

Sage also found that the tension in her head and body could be relieved by frequent masturbation. One day, as she reached down to touch herself, she spied one of her sculptures sitting on the table. She reached over and picked it up. She stroked its

smooth thickness, then licked it and slid it gently into her vagina. Her muscles contracted around the thick curves of the object, sending ripples of pleasure through her body. Heat rose to her nipples and forehead. Soon she shook with spasm after spasm of release.

After these sessions with herself, Sage felt a tenuous sense of peace. She did not need Sven and Erik to give her pleasure. She did not need anyone to take care of her. She was self-sufficient in every way.

Whenever the weather permitted, Sage escaped from the cabin and went out walking. One sunny day, she saw fresh bear tracks in the snow and started following them. They led her to a bear's den, tucked under the end of a giant rotting log in a stream bank. She didn't want to disturb the bear, but she was lonely and kept coming back to the place to see if the bear might be there and awake. One day, the bear was there, sitting at the entrance to her den with two cubs tinier than Sage could have imagined.

The bear grunted and shook her head in warning. Sage knew not to approach any closer but squatted where she was and watched the little cubs tumble over each other clumsily looking for a teat. Sage laughed and started talking to the mama bear.

"Hello, Mama. Will you be my friend? I'm so lonely. I could sure use a friend, someone to take walks with. Can I come visit you, and watch your babies grow?"

Sage came to the den every day, and Mama got used to her and no longer grunted at her. As the babies grew big and curious, they would sniff the air in Sage's direction and amble over to where she was sitting. As long as Sage didn't move, Mama would let them come up to her and nuzzle her ankles and nip her with their needle teeth.

One day, Mama and the babies were gone. Sage had been expecting this. The cubs were now old enough to go foraging, and Mama would be hungry after the long winter. Sage went back to the cabin and gathered up everything that she thought she would need and put it in the knapsack. She was going wandering with the bears.

Sage was delighted to find the bears just downstream of the den. Over the next few weeks, they stayed near the creek, eating new shoots of beargrass and the bulbs of lilies that Mama dug up from the small lush meadows that appeared when the snow receded. Sage tried the shoots and bulbs and found them good, if a bit fibrous and chewy. She knew she needed to eat fresh food after all the beans and oats that had gotten her through the winter. She was glad that her jaws and teeth were so strong. Humans would have a hard time eating this stuff.

Mama also clawed apart rotten logs to get at the ant nests inside. Sage wasn't sure if it was the larvae or the ants Mama was after, but when she tried a mouthful, she found that the grubs were tasty if she could brush away the biting ants.

She learned a lot from watching Mama and found that almost anything Mama ate, she could eat too. Soon Mama was on her way out of the meadows into new territory. Sage had run out of the food in her knapsack, but she didn't need it anymore. Mama had taught her how to live off the land.

They moved downstream as the summer ripened. Tall firs and cedars shaded the creeks, and the little ones began to practice their climbing skills. One day Little Brother

ended up much too high. Mama did her best to call him down, but he wouldn't budge. Mama sniffed the air and Sage thought she caught a whiff of the scent. Men!

Sage had been hearing the distant sound of chainsaws all morning. They were near a logging operation, and earlier Sage had jumped at the nauseating sound of a giant tree crashing to the ground. Now she stopped and listened. The chainsaws were silent, but she heard men's voices in the distance, growing louder. Were they coming over here? There was a trail nearby. She couldn't let them see her. But she couldn't let them see Mama and the cubs either. They might have guns.

Sage scrambled up the tree and sat on a branch just below Little Brother, who had his nails dug deep in the trunk. "Come on, Little Brother. Pull your nails out gently, one at a time. I'm right here to catch you. Come on, you can do it." Sage talked him down.

Little Brother tumbled the last fifteen feet out of the tree. Mama gave him a swat in the direction of a thicket, and Sage and the bears dug themselves in and watched as two loggers on a cigarette break walked past on the trail.

Mama now treated her almost like one of the cubs, and when they came upon a dead and rotting deer carcass one day, she tore off a piece of the flesh and shoved it Sage's way. Sage ate this too and found it tender in its half-rotted state.

Sage stayed with the bear family all summer, roaming the high mountain meadows and the steep forested draws, and something happened to her. She lost most of her anger. She was happy and she existed in that state of wordless immediacy that is completely lost to most of us by the time we are five or six. She soaked up Mama's mothering and the playful riot of the cubs, absorbed in the up-and-down wavelets of emotion expressed through grunts and nips and licks and snuggles, all four of them, mother and twins and the odd cub, Sage.

As the days grew shorter and the nights cooler, Mama made her way to the lower parts of the watershed to eat acorn mast. Sage knew this mast would help Mama and the cubs put on their winter fat. But the acorns were too bitter for her, and she was nervous about being closer to the people. There were far more roads and clear-cuts down this low. Sage walked warily and competed with the birds and squirrels for berries and pine nuts.

The crisper the days got, the more sluggish Mama became. Finally, she turned her long brown snout back toward the den site. The cubs were big now, but still nursing. Mama spent a few more weeks lackadaisically eating berries and grasses in the high meadows and napping in the den. Soon she was spending almost all her time sleeping in the den with the cubs.

Sage lay down with the family in the den. She was warm in that humming pile of bear flesh and fur and she didn't want to leave, but she was getting hungry. One morning she awoke and got up. Mama looked at her groggily, like she was crazy to be going anywhere. Sage kissed Mama and Little Brother and Little Sister goodbye and went back to her cabin.

This time on her foraging rounds to the summer homes, she took books as well as food. She began to crank up her human mind again, as she thought of it. As she reflected on the summer, she realized that it had been good, very good to be an animal, but that she couldn't sustain that forever. Unless she could learn to hibernate with the bears, she would always have to face the winter and its boredom and loneliness.

She acquired a pair of snowshoes, which let her explore the mountains in their snowy coverlet. She especially loved snowshoeing along the high ridges where she could see for miles. She came upon coyote sign: scat, and the bloody explosion of a kill made in the snow. One day she surprised a coyote eating a ground squirrel that he had dug out of a snow burrow. She made friends with him after a fashion. He let her approach him and talk to him. One night in the cabin she heard him wail outside, and she came out and walked in the moonlight with him. But she couldn't keep up with his long loping strides, and she couldn't lay ear to ice crust and hear a rodent breathing four feet down under snow and claw it out before it woke from slumber.

So she stayed in her cabin and read books, mostly mystery stories but also some novels she recognized as "bodice rippers." She remembered that Fern held them in contempt and complained about having to stock them in the library. Nevertheless, Sage had caught Fern reading books with similar covers depicting young women in long dresses with the tops of their breasts exposed. Only Fern called them "historical fiction."

Sage had found a box of these books and she read a few now and marveled at how crazy people were when it came to sex. The women seemed ridiculously confused. They didn't seem to know what they wanted. At least the men knew that sex was good, but they never knew how to be nice about it. No wonder the women were confused—the men didn't know how to make sex nice for them. She started telling herself: Sage, you are lucky to be away from people. It will be better to live your life without all this pain that people make a part of sex.

At the same time, Sage found herself wanting sex more than ever. Her body was still changing. Her monthly vaginal swelling had gotten bigger than it was the year before. She started tracking her cycles and she saw that for three weeks out of every lunar month, the flesh from her vulva to her perineum swelled to the thickness of a sandwich bun.

She tried to be satisfied with self-pleasure and her fantasies about Erik and Sven, until one day she thought about Carver and their sex games when she was little. Then she screeched in pain at the thought that she might never see her dear friend again.

Sage was lonely. She began to realize how strongly she missed Sarah and Kevin. She couldn't remember now exactly why she had been angry with them the winter before. She thought about how much they loved her and each other and how happy they had all been at home. She longed to feel that love again. She felt afraid and wondered if they were still in jail somewhere. She got angry all over again with the government and the Kristian Kommand and all the ugly animal haters in the world. That's how she thought of them. She knew that was what was wrong with them, they were animal

haters and they hated all animals, not just her. And the saddest thing, she figured out, was that they hated themselves, because we are all animals. Kevin had always told her that humans, no matter what they think, are animals too.

She thought she would probably live in the mountains the rest of her life, but she wished she could at least visit Savage Ranch. She thought about Fern and Harmony and all her friends there. In her mind, they were tiny, as if she could only see them from a great distance, yet sometimes she heard their voices as if they were right there in the cabin with her.

When spring came, she went to wait by the bear den once more. Emerging from the den, the youngsters were slow and sleepy like Mama this time. Mama still let them nurse, but she seemed thinner this year. It took the bears a week to really wake up and start foraging in earnest. They were hungry. They moved faster this year to get straight to the best ant nests and lily fields. Sage loved being with them still, though the cubs were getting bigger. She had to be careful they didn't hurt her when they played. Mama seemed testier too, not as indulgent as when they were small.

Sage took to hiking by herself, mostly to the high rock castles on the peaks and ridges of the mountains where she could see off into the distance and wonder what was going on in the wide world out there. When she got lonely and wanted the company of the bear family, she had no trouble finding them. By now she knew their favorite feeding grounds and their oscillations up- and down-slope following the sequence of the budding and ripening of their favorite foods.

Sage was completely at home in the mountains now, and she relished the freedom she had to explore her domain. But a sadness was growing in her too, because she knew that by summer's end the cubs would part from their mother, and the warm bear family that had sheltered her would be no more.

14

No longer wallowing in bear love, Sage opened herself to all the beings of the mountains. She wanted to learn how to speak with the coyote and the hummingbird, even the plants and the trees, and she approached everything she encountered with love and a willingness to absorb its essence. Her own being seemed to melt away in the presence of a tiny tree frog or even a drop of dew hanging on a rush, sparkling in the early morning sun.

On the edge of a high mountain meadow, Sage found a perfect lily. She pulled the stem toward her and tipped the lily's cup to her face. Light soaked through the petals and pooled, blood red in the bowl of the flower. Flecks of gold made a lacy fritillary on the petal tips. Six brilliant, pollen-coated anthers floated about a pale green pistil. She sipped the sweet aroma from this cup and felt the aliveness of the lily and the meadow and the surrounding forest.

As she entered it, the meadow closed around her, rushes and herbs shoulder-high in their summer fullness. An olfactory midtone of soap laced with citron enveloped her, while odors of mint and sage peaked over a base of carrot and butterscotch. She recognized many of these herbs as medicinal plants she had learned on gathering expeditions with Fern and Joanne. She thought of Fern briefly but was jolted from her memories by a buzzing arrow that nearly impaled her ear, yet it was only a hummingbird. Like a miniature whirlybird engineered from emeralds and rubies, the hummer zipped away to confront another male. Their arcing trajectories intersected overhead where they battled for dominance of the meadow. Sage watched, her body twitching as she tried to follow the violent arabesques of the two tiny adversaries.

She was on her way to the magnificent white peaks she had often admired from the viewpoint above her winter cabin. It had taken her three days to hike here. She was approaching the final sloping shoulder of broken boulders leading up to the peaks. The closer she got to the top, the more deeply she fell into a kind of trance. As she approached the saddle ridge between two immense monoliths, it seemed to her that they spoke.

Sage was never sure afterward if the mountains had actually spoken, or if it was just her imagination. Whatever the case, she remembered every word they said to her. When she finally left the wilderness, friends helped her write a book, and this is the story she told of her encounter with the mountain beings:

You can find the Truth in the Rocks and Mountains. Hasn't Truth always been found in the Wilderness? In the Wilderness, I found two Gods who spoke to me. They called me and I came to them. They were two glistening, white marble beings, with a flat rocky ridge between them. To the south was the whale, with a jumble of cracked boulders that looked like a giant eye. To the north, an ancient sea serpent with a jagged finny crest. I was drawn first to the whales eye and went there, stepping on fragments of white marble laid like terrace stones. Purple penstemon and gold mountain arnica lined my path. I crawled onto the cool rock ledge under the whales eye and saw the green richness of the valley below and the sea serpent winding above the northern lip of the vale. Her long sloping shape shimmered in the strong summer sunlight.

Then the sea serpent spoke to me. "Be like me, " she whispered in the warm summer wind. She told me that if you are made of soft slick marble, swimming in oceans of turbulent air, a long smooth fish shape is the only thing to be. My eyes ran along her outline, a crisp white wing against the deep blue thickness of the air. Her round bowhead elegantly curved and tapered to her point of a tail, which glimmered and flicked in the mountain air, spinning rainbows of light toward me. I thought she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life.

"Yes," I told her, "I want to be like you. I want to be shaped by air. I want to be beautiful. "

The sea serpent listened to me, and flicked her tail. "Look beyond me, " she said. I looked out to a mountain off in the west. It was an ugly crag, red and black. It had rocky lumps and lesions and a knob like a hooked nose. "Oh, " I said, and then the sea serpent spoke once more.

"Beauty can only open you to the truth," she said, "if you are made of hard wrought granite and peridotite, you may shape the wind more than it shapes you, and that will be the right way to be."

"And if you are not so resistant to the winds ...?" I tried to ask her a question, but just then a falcon swept by, inches from my face. It landed in the naked limb of a gnarled pine. I watched it perch, adjusting its feathers. Then it stretched out its wings, straightened its talons. And the wind lifted it gently as it set its feathers to spiral up. As my breath spiraled up to follow the bird, the whale spoke to me for the first time as I sat below his eye. "Now you see," he said.

Ever since then I have known that Truth is in the mountains and the rivers and trees. Any questions you have, you can find the answers there. People always want to know how to live. They ask me, should I stay and work and make money to buy things, or should I try to be free? I tell them to go into the mountains for a while, or sit by a stream in the woods. Somewhere where nature can be seen. That's where the answers are, that's where they have always been. If we think we want to live like the ants, there are ants to watch. They work hard together to support their queen. If we want to be like the coyotes, roaming free, there they are. When we decide we want to be like ourselves, we can learn that from the mountains too.

The trouble is, too many are cut off from the Truth now. It is hard to find in the cities. All the noise and fuss in the cities is just people talking to themselves. They don't hear the Gods talking anymore.

Sage camped on the ridge between the monoliths for three days, fasting and listening to their wisdom, sipping dew from pine needles each morning. Finally her thirst and hunger were too great and she started back down the mountain to her cabin.

In the rhythm of walking in the late afternoon sun, she suddenly remembered what Sarah had told her long ago on the day that Sage had discovered that she was not a crippled human, but something else, a child of two species.

"At some point, you'll have to decide how you want to be," Sarah had said. "If you just want people to leave you alone, you can tell them you have Fletcher's Syndrome. If you decide you want to try to change people, you can tell them who you really are and then be brave enough and strong enough to stand up for yourself. But you can't make that decision until you're much older."

Sage knew then that the time was coming for her to make this decision. She was almost fourteen now. She could live in the beauty of the mountains, but she would have to endure the lonely cold of winter. If she wanted to see her friends and family again, she would have to brave the ugliness of the world, but it would make her strong. And maybe she could be the one to teach people not to hate animals. But she had no idea how to proceed. Maybe she should try to find Mary Wekanak on the reservation. Maybe Garth Boldt could help her. She could contact Nick through Mary and he could take her up there. She wondered again where Kevin and Sarah might be. She wanted to go to Savage Ranch, but that seemed much too dangerous. She would have to think of the best way.

Part II

The send would have no rainbow Had the eyes no tears.

—Native American Proverb

15

Sage was halfway back to her cabin. As she crossed over a ridge into a new drainage, she heard the voices of people rising up from the deep woods. Startled, she realized first that this was an area far from roads or trails. She and the bears had occasionally come near hikers when they wandered close to the trails that wound throughout the wilderness. She always hid from them, and usually the people did not notice Mama even when she was within clear view. Generally, Sage avoided the people trails and found the faint deer and coyote paths easy enough going.

What were people doing here? She had never seen them this far from the trail before. She recognized the forest as an exceptionally old and rich one. The Douglas firs and pines were gigantic, some ten and more feet in diameter. Mama had come here on occasion to harvest ant grubs in the abundance of rotting logs that littered the forest floor like giant pick-up sticks.

Sage was curious and drew closer to the sound of the voices. Carefully, she positioned herself where she could see the people. It was a crew of more than a dozen, setting up a tarp shelter in a small clearing by the creek. They looked young, like teenagers. Her age. Boys and girls, wearing loose raggedy clothing and bandanas on their heads. Shouts and laughter rang through the forest as they struggled with the poles and stakes. She watched a smaller group that split off to make a campfire. They sat on plastic buckets around the fire and started to cut vegetables, singing while they worked.

Then she noticed one boy who walked a little funny. Tenderfooted and stiff-ankled, like Carver. Carver. It was Carver! As she watched, she was sure, though he had grown since she had seen him last. He was shirtless, his torso thick and muscular. His tawny hair had grown long, and he wore it in a braid down his back with a red bandana tied over the top of his head.

Sage was ecstatic. She could barely keep herself from hurtling down the hill to embrace him. Her loneliness, so long denied, tingled painfully in every square inch of her skin, like blood returning to cramped legs. Fear held her back. She would watch and wait for Carver to go off by himself and then approach him. She watched the group as they ate dinner and talked around their campfire. She crept closer after night fell

and heard snatches of their conversation. Something about “action,” and “we’ll rig it first thing tomorrow,” and “media.”

Soon the kids started leaving the campfire and going off to sleep, mostly in pairs, a boy and a girl or two girls. There were only boys left when Carver got up and headed off to his pile of bedding under a giant fir. Sage followed him in the moonlight.

“Psssst. Carver.”

Sage rose up from the dark and put her hand gently over Carver’s mouth and watched his eyes pop in recognition and surprise. “Be quiet, okay? I don’t want anyone to know I’m here.” She couldn’t believe the sound of her own high-pitched voice that cracked as she tried to keep it low and soft.

“Sage!” Carver pulled her to him and hugged her. “Oh baby. We thought you drowned. That’s what the cops said. You drowned in the river.”

“No. I’ve been living here, in the woods. I’m so glad to see you. I ... I haven’t talked to anyone for almost two years.” She sniffed his neck. He smelled marvelous. She clung to him and buried her face in his broad chest to stifle her screeches of joy.

Carver held her and whispered in her ear, “You’ve been in the woods this whole time, living on nuts and berries and stuff?”

“Yeah.” Sage relaxed her grip on Carver and sought his face. There was just enough light to see the shine in his eyes. She had never known how beautiful his face was. Suddenly, in her mind, she saw the faces of her parents. “How’s my mom? And Kevin? Are they in jail?”

“No. They were for a little while, but they’re out now. The government couldn’t find anything to charge them with. Your ma will flip. She’s been really sad. They moved to Eugene because your dad lost his job, but they come back and visit all the time. Hey listen—I was going to go home to get some more supplies soon anyway. I can tell Fern and she can get a message to them that you’re alive.”

Sage shivered in Carver’s arms. Her cocoon of loneliness was shredding and she felt raw and new as she emerged.

“I want to go home but I’m afraid.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t go back there if I were you.”

“So who are all these people you’re with? What are you doing camping out here?”

“This is an action. We’re Tree Nation. They want to log this forest and we’re going to camp out here in the trees so they can’t do it. Everybody thinks it’s terrible that these forests are still being logged, but you can’t get the politicians to do anything about it. The only way is to occupy the forests. We’re moving in and we might not ever leave.”

“I already live here. I can help you.”

Carver unzipped his sleeping bag and wrapped them both in it. That night they rediscovered their childhood game of “squirreling and took it to new heights. Sage was more than pleased with Carver’s penis. They had never taken their clothes off for squirreling, so she had only known it as an anonymous swelling before. Carver had a stash of condoms in his pack, and they used most of them in a half dozen joyous

repetitions of their game. Just before daylight they finally fell into deep exhausted slumber under the shelter of the giant fir tree.

In the morning, when Carver stumbled over to the campfire in search of coffee, Jojo and Otter gave him sly smirks.

“So who snuck into your sleeping bag last night, dude? It sounded pretty passionate over there.”

Carver smiled. “You’ll see. I’ll introduce you soon.”

An hour later, Carver led Sage into the clearing and introduced her to his friends. Some gasped in shock at the sight of her, but they all admired the dark brown fur on her arms and legs and her pretty, shy smile. Everyone had heard of her. Her capture, escape and drowning had briefly made the news two years earlier. Although the press had reported the accusations of Roland Maxwell that she had been part of a sinister plot to corrupt the human race, most people didn’t believe it. Dr. John Stengers and Sage’s mother, Sarah Carrigan, had both made brief public statements to set the record straight about Sage’s origins.

Sage had already been a topic of discussion among this group of young people who had come together at an Earth Day festival for the purpose of setting up this action camp. Carver had been in demand to tell his stories about Sage. Some saw her as a modern missing link, the being who proved that humans were part of a continuum of life, an animal like all the rest. And now here she was, resurrected.

As exciting as Sage’s appearance among them was, the Tree Nation crew couldn’t just drop everything. The loggers might arrive any day, and they had to be prepared. The group’s objective that day was to set in place the spider web, a complex system of cables that linked several dozen giant trees. Some of the trees would have platforms in the canopy rigged up out of sheets of plywood where the kids would live, one or two to a platform. They would pitch tents on the platforms and string plastic buckets of gear and food and water within reach. They would be able to travel in the canopy on special travel cables set up for a pulley with a sling suspended from it. That way they could visit each other, share meals and beds, and generally carry on life the way they did on the ground. They would also rig a large net in the center where they could all gather together in a warm, intimate pile.

Sage was the rigger of their dreams. They were flabbergasted at her ease in the trees. She could climb straight up a ten-foot-diameter giant with no equipment. Her long, strong fingers and prehensile toes gave her a firm grip on the thick bark. Once in the canopy she could swing and leap from branch to branch with perfect confidence. With her help, it took them half the time they thought it would to rig the spider web.

16

Fern drove north. She hadn’t called Sarah first, in case they were still tapping their phones. She just got in her car and headed for Eugene. She drove twenty miles over the

speed limit without noticing, impelled by the news she had to tell Sarah. Her thoughts flew at the same speed. She could barely believe it. Sage was really back.

Thinking back on the past two years, Fern realized what an incredible mix of pain and ecstasy it had been. Losing Sage was devastating, but then she had found John. John's sporadic visits to check up on Sage during the first ten years of her life had been excruciating for her. Having him nearly wanting to clasp him and hold him tight and resisting, knowing he would never leave Christina. Then when Kevin and Sarah were arrested, they arrested John too. They couldn't find anything to charge any of them with, but John had lost his job. Christina left him and he showed up on her doorstep and moved in. He swore to her that he should have done it years before.

Then the call had come from Richard Martin, one of the wealthiest men in the world. He had made his fortune by inventing an ingenious combination of software and hardware in satellite design, eventually owning or controlling most of the world's communications satellites. Martin Enterprises had been responsible for true wireless broadband. People could now watch movies on their cell phones—for all the good that did, Fern thought.

Martin had reached this pinnacle through what some claimed were extra-legal practices. Another company had been leading the deployment of wireless broadband when all the commercial satellites except Martin's were knocked out with mega-virus attacks. They traced the attacks to Chinese hackers, but some thought there was something bigger behind it. Martin's systems were the only ones that could resist the attacks, leaving him in control.

Martin had contacted John because he wanted to support his work. He had read a paper of John's about bonobo pheromones. While trying to increase the captive bonobo gene pool, John had discovered that bonobos don't breed unless they are happy. He thought the bonobos were producing a pheromone that limited their fertility under stress. Martin wanted to use John's research to invent a better contraceptive. Martin's passion, outside of making money, was wild nature. He believed that human overpopulation was driving too many species to extinction.

The trip to Seattle was a regular commute for Fern now. Martin had supplied John with a whole new lab at his two-thousand-acre "campus" headquarters on Puget Sound. After Martin gave a generous donation to Stonewell, John was able to get most of his original bonobo colony transferred to the new lab, along with Jeanette Orsini.

And Fern had work too. Martin had hired her to research reproductive behavior in human history. John had hinted to Martin that humans may once have had effective natural birth control, and Martin wanted to pursue all leads. Fern was now spending half her time in Seattle, to be with John and do her job. She was thrilled to have real work to do again, actually using her research skills. It was like she was getting a second chance. No, a whole string of second chances: a second chance at a research career, a second chance with John, and now a second chance with Sage.

Sage was back! She couldn't wait to tell Sarah.

Sarah sat in the darkened living room of their Eugene bungalow. Kevin would be home from his teaching job at South Eugene High soon. She really should get up and start dinner, clean up a little, but it was still so hard for her to find the motivation to do anything. She sighed and thought about what Dr. Pasquali, her therapist, kept telling her: "Pick something, anything, and just do it. You need an occupation to take your mind off Sage. Look to the future. Use your talents in education to make a contribution. Those kids need you."

Sarah knew Dr. Pasquali was right. She knew intellectually that it was important to teach and help children, but it didn't feel important to her anymore. She tried to care. She lay on the couch for hours, berating herself because she didn't care anymore. Moping on the couch, she was getting fat, and that made her feel even worse. Kevin was being good about it, but she knew he was getting frustrated with her.

Kevin's reaction to losing Sage was different than hers. He did not get depressed, he got angry. He spent more and more of his evenings at a loud, boisterous student pub that Sarah couldn't stand. He would come home drunk on ale and snore like a chainsaw all night, and she would have to bed down in the living room to get any sleep at all.

She had started to volunteer at a Head Start program, and she felt good about that. When she was with the toddlers, she managed to forget about Sage. But she still wasn't ready to go back to a paid job. She didn't think she had the focus or concentration to handle it yet.

Sarah had just pushed herself up from the couch to start dinner when a loud knocking rattled the front door, followed by Fern bursting through into the living room.

"Sarah! Sage is back!" Fern shouted as she rushed to Sarah and grabbed her in an embrace. Fern hopped up and down, shaking Sarah as she babbled: "Sage is alive. Carver found her in the woods near the Klamath River, down in California. She's safe and she's with a bunch of kids at a Tree Nation camp. She's been living on her own in the wilderness. Living with bears."

"What... ?" Sarah was stunned. Sage was living?

"I know you can't believe it, Sarah, but it's true, she really is alive. When does Kevin get home? We can drive down tonight and see her."

A flash flood of feelings overcame her. She clung to Fern and dragged her to the couch and made her repeat every detail of what she had learned from Carver.

When Kevin got home and heard the news, he was triumphant. "She did it. She survived. God, I love that little ape." He grinned and shouted, "Whoo hooo! Sage is back."

They packed camping gear and food into their Subaru wagon and drove with Fern down to Yreka, just south of the California border. They followed Carver's map up miles of Forest Service roads till they came to what seemed like the right place. It was after two in the morning, and they didn't think they could find the Tree Nation camp in the dark, so they parked and laid out their sleeping bags in the woods nearby and slept.

Sarah woke at first light and shook the others awake. They found the path to the encampment and started hiking. It was about a mile to the fire circle and camp kitchen in the middle of the grove of ancient trees. Morning dampness clung to the litter of camping gear around the kitchen, though embers still glowed in the fire pit. Seen through the dark stippling of fir branches in the canopy, the sky was pearl gray and still. The platforms lashed to the mighty trees were motionless except for the slow turning of quantities of dangling bags and bottles and buckets. A complex of cables crisscrossed the canopy. Surely if anyone were awake, the whole arboreal habitat would be vibrating like a spider web with a fly caught in it.

Kevin shouted into the silence: "Sage. We're here. Come down and see us."

Sarah gazed hopefully up at the platforms and then one of them shook and a little brown head poked over the edge of a plywood sheet, and Sarah could see that it was really true. Sage was back. She yelled down, "I'm coming," in her high little voice, and she leaped over the edge of the platform to embrace the tree and climb freehand down the wide trunk, gripping thick runnels of bark with her strong fingers and toes.

Sarah held her breath in fear as Sage scampered down the tree, but before she knew it, Sage had reached the ground and was bounding toward her open arms.

Sarah hugged her daughter so tight that Sage yelped in pain. "It's okay, Mama, I'm really here and I'm not going to go away."

Sage hugged and kissed Kevin and Fern with much squirming and squealing till they all calmed down and could sit around the fire circle to hear the story of Sage's escape and survival.

After a bit, Sarah pulled her gaze away from her miracle daughter and looked around at the ragged bunch of young people. They worked cheerfully together to tend the fire, prepare breakfast and clean up. They seemed an affectionate, happy group and they clearly treasured Sage.

Sarah felt the blooming of a new wonder. Not only had Sage returned to her, but she had found a place in the world, however tenuous. It was possible now to imagine a future for Sage, surrounded by friends, doing some kind of work to save the trees... Sarah couldn't go beyond the vaguest vision of what it might be, but it was something.

They stayed that night in the camp, in sleeping bags on the ground, but since Kevin had to get back to work, they left late the next afternoon.

Sarah and Kevin agreed that the camp was the safest place for Sage for now, but before parting, Sarah made Sage promise to stay tied into her safety line at all times when she was up in the trees.

Sage smiled with pleasure at the admonition. It was actually nice to have her mother nag at her again. "Don't worry, Carver always yells at me when I do that too. I'll be good and stay clipped in."

On the drive back to Eugene, Sarah, Kevin and Fern turned over options for the future. It was obvious to Sarah that Sage couldn't stay up a tree forever, but Kevin thought that if they could keep the Tree Nation kids from telling anyone else about

Sage, it would be possible for her to keep living in the wilderness. “We can go see her any rime we want to—just go on a backpacking trip and she’ll meet us out there.”

Sarah and Fern didn’t think that was an option. “She’ll get lonely out there, honey,” Sarah said. “She’s already spent way too much time by herself. Besides, what if some hunter sees her? She could get shot.”

Sarah wondered if John Stengers could help them now, and Fern thought that Richard Martin might help. “He’s really a good person, I think,” Fern said. “I bet he could fix things with the government to let us keep Sage.”

Kevin wasn’t sure about trusting anyone in authority, but they all agreed that Fern should go to Seattle as soon as possible and tell John that Sage was alive. Perhaps he would know what to do.

Darkness fell as they crossed the mountain pass from the Rogue River basin to the Umpqua River basin. Big semi trucks hauling double and triple trailers crawled slowly up to the summit and then sped down the other side. Kevin had to concentrate on his driving, and Sarah was suddenly overcome with exhaustion. Even Fern was quiet in the back seat.

Sarah had gone from quiet, withering despair to loud jubilation in the space of two days. It was a profound transition. She was happy, and it felt wonderful to be fully engaged in life again, but there was another feeling. It was an old familiar feeling that was not so welcome. Fear. Once again she would live with constant worry about what would become of her unique and precious offspring. But it was worse. The fear had a greater edge now. What if she lost Sage again? She didn’t know if she could survive that loss a second time.

17

Back at Tree Nation camp, Sage and Carver visited Virgo Jane and Tanika on their platform high in the treetops. The four of them lounged in a nest of sleeping bags, wool blankets and foam pads spread out on a sheet of plywood suspended from ropes hitched around the bole of a two-hundred-foot-tall Douglas fir. The platform shimmied and the ropes creaked whenever any of them moved, but they were used to it. Besides, they were tied in themselves. They all wore climbing harnesses clipped into safety lines, day and night. They were a hundred feet up, and from that height, the big campfire circle below was no bigger than a dime.

They shared a meal of garbanzo beans, nutritional yeast, and day-old bread. The bread was an excellent whole wheat sourdough scrounged from a dumpster in the nearby college town of Ashland. Sage had a handful of ant larvae on her plate that she was mixing with the garbanzos. She offered some to the others, but only Virgo Jane would try them.

“Mmm, not bad.” Virgo Jane chewed slowly.

Tanika giggled. “Eew gross! I mean, it’s cool you can do that, but how can you stand the fact that those things are alive and so wriggly?”

Virgo Jane did look queasy. But she was a serious young woman and chewed the ant larvae slowly and deliberately. “No, actually they taste good. Kind of like sushi.”

Sage gazed at Virgo Jane. She was a long-limbed, hard-muscled climber—next to Sage, the best climber in their camp. Sage thought she looked fantastic sitting cross-legged on the platform in her halter top, her short red hair in tight ringlets.

Tanika giggled again. “Just don’t try to kiss me with those crawly things in your mouth.” But Virgo Jane loved a challenge. She grabbed Tanika and tried to kiss her.

Sage had been fascinated to discover that Tanika and Virgo Jane were lesbians. She had met some old ladies—friends of Fern’s from the library—who were lesbians, but she had never thought about girls her own age being gay.

“Hey, hey,” Carver shouted, “don’t rock the boat.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to lose my dinner,” Sage said.

Virgo Jane and Tanika settled down, the platform stopped rocking, and the conversation turned back to the usual topic, animal rights.

Tanika said, “Sage, you are so cool because you are more like a real animal than the rest of us. Look how easy it is for you to eat those grubs. Most of us humans are too out of touch with nature to be able to do that. Except V.J., but she just does it because she always tries to be so macho.”

Virgo Jane elbowed Tanika in the ribs.

Sage looked up from her meal and slowly shook her head. “It’s not because I’m half bonobo. I was grossed out at first too, but I did it because I was hungry. Now I’m used to it.”

“Well, I don’t eat meat anyway,” Tanika said. “I’m a vegan. I don’t think humans should eat any animals, even worms. It makes us too violent.”

Carver got a glint in his eye. “But Tanika, what about your nutritional yeast? Yeast is an animal, one-celled, but still an animal.”

“Oh god. Carver, leave me alone.”

“Hey you guys, we’ve got more important things to talk about.” Virgo Jane was serious again. “Like what are we going to do about Operation Debutante?”

Operation Debutante was their plan to introduce Sage to the public. It was Sage’s idea. She had been at the Tree Nation camp a short time, but she had already adopted the crusading spirit of the young people. She had decided that her mission would be to save the bonobos.

Sage had come to that conclusion two days earlier while alone in a tree a mile away from the camp. It was hard for her to spend twenty-four hours a day with the others. She was used to being alone. Once a day, usually, she would slip away for a few hours and go climb a tree by herself. She used the time to think about all of her new experiences at Tree Nation. She hadn’t forgotten the message that the mountain beings had given her and the choice she had made to try to teach people not to hate animals. Sitting high up in the tree she decided that she would start with her relatives,

the bonobos. She would find out everything she could about them and their home in Africa. She would become their ambassador to the world.

She had come back to the Tree Nation camp and told everyone around that night's campfire her plan. "My people need me," she said. Virgo Jane instantly dubbed the project "Operation Debutante," Sage's coming out to the world.

Carver tried to talk her out of it, but Virgo Jane and Tanika were enthusiastic. They thought Sage could accomplish miracles.

"We could call it Operation Debutante," Virgo Jane said now, "or we could call it Operation Second Coming. "

"Huh?" said Carver.

"You know, like Jesus. Jesus was the Son of God and woman, but Sage is the Daughter of Beast and woman. It's the perfect antidote to patriarchy."

Carver was skeptical. "V.J., that sounds fanatical. It's dangerous to talk that way. You could get her killed."

"Okay, okay, I mean, I wouldn't say it in public, but it's what I think," Virgo Jane said.

Sage frowned. "I think if people see who I am, that I'm not that different from them, they might save bonobos and other animals."

"Yeah, right," Carver said. "More people are starving in India and Africa today than ever before in the history of the world. People don't care about other people, much less animals. But maybe you guys are right, maybe it would shake some people up if they knew about Sage."

"Yeah, shake their shit up," Tanika squealed.

Sage gazed at Virgo Jane. She couldn't take her eyes off the girl's sculpted torso and fine-featured face with its nimbus of orange curls. Sage especially loved her lips, so full and red. Virgo Jane smiled at her. She gently touched her finger to the tip of Sage's flat little nose and blew her a kiss.

Sarah, Kevin, Fern, John and Richard Martin sat around a polished oval hardwood table in a plush conference room at Martin's corporate headquarters. A wall of glass gave them a view of Puget Sound. Sarah gazed out at sailboats tacking in the breeze. Shafts of sunlight skirted the edge of a pendulous gray cloud mass and painted sparkling flecks of light on the gently swelling surface of the sea. She tried to let the tranquil scene relax her, but she was so tense she twisted a napkin to shreds in her lap.

They had just finished a lunch of smoked salmon ravioli and wild greens with porcini dressing, followed by a hazelnut creme brulee, but Sarah barely tasted the excellent food. She kept sneaking glances at Richard Martin. She wanted to like him.

He was more attractive in person than he appeared in pictures she had seen. His thinning hair was carefully styled. He wore dark suit pants and an open shirt, no tie. His jacket hung over the back of his chair. The rest of them had all dressed for the occasion: John in his gray suit, Kevin in his tweed jacket and new jeans, Fern in a pale green linen blazer over a flowery print dress with a plunging neckline, and Sarah in the cerulean silk suit that matched her eyes.

Sarah looked at Martin again. Although he was tall and spidery, with sharp elbows and knife-edged knees, there was a softness to him that she had not expected. It was something about his mouth that could relax until he looked like a little boy. Despite such signs, she worried. They would be talking about Sage's future today. Could she trust a man as powerful as Richard Martin?

Conversation during the meal had been mainly about Tree Nation and the likelihood of a raid on the tree sitters by the government. Now waiters were taking their dishes away and replenishing drinks. Richard Martin looked at Sarah.

"Sarah, what do you think we most need to do to guarantee Sage's safety?"

Sarah was surprised to be asked directly. She hesitated a moment and said: "I don't know exactly, but we can't let the government near her, or any of the militia types." Sarah's voice hardened. "And she always needs to have the freedom to make her own decisions and to be with the people who love her, like her parents."

Richard nodded. "Yes. In order to protect her, it may be necessary to restrict her movements, but it should always be by her own choice. Let me tell you, Sarah and Kevin, what my interest in Sage is about. It's not that I want to control an ape-human hybrid. If that were the case, I could breed one or several in my own lab."

John Stengers gave him a sharp look.

"Yes John, I know you would never permit it, but believe me, if I really wanted to, I could find a scientist to do it for me. But that's not my interest, and besides, like you, I would find it immoral. But, the fact that Sage exists is significant. And I think that we all recognize that her existence has the potential to stimulate a badly needed shift in human thinking. At the same time, those of you who love her, who love her as child, as a protege," he nodded toward Fern, "want to make sure that she is safe from a hostile world. And I think that we all recognize that her safety and happiness may more easily be guaranteed by her becoming a public person than by hiding for the rest of her life."

Kevin grimaced. He didn't care for Richard's long-windedness. "I don't know it's so obvious we all just recognize it, Richard, but the important thing is that it is what Sage wants to do. And what I want to know from you is, if Sage changes her mind and decides tomorrow that what she really wants is to live on some isolated farm somewhere for the rest of her life, would you help her do it?"

Martin didn't hesitate. "Of course. I would still be interested in Sage even if she did not become a public person. I would support her as long as John could have regular access to her to monitor her continued mental and physical development. There would be much to learn of interest to science, though of course, nothing could be published while she was alive, if we wanted to keep her existence secret. And I have a beautiful place, a large house in a five-thousand-acre valley full of old-growth forest about forty miles from here. She can live there in secret for as long as she likes. Or it can become her refuge any time she gets tired of being in the public eye."

Now Fern spoke. "You know, I've got to confess, I agree with Richard. I think Sage's impact on our culture could be tremendous. I think she should come out to the public."

But I also love Sage, and I know her, and I don't think she'd be happy on an isolated farm. She's a social creature. She's having the time of her life now with Tree Nation. I hope she can stay with those kids as long as possible, but I also think that when the time comes for her to go public, she'll have a wonderful support group of Tree Nation buddies."

"I suppose her life wouldn't be too different from any young celebrity?" Sarah asked, tentatively.

Richard laughed, "Except that if she trashes any motel rooms, I'm not footing the bill."

Everyone laughed and the tension in the room eased.

"Come on," Richard said, "let's go sit in the lounge where we can be more comfortable and talk about her first appearance on the Pearl Show."

Back at Tree Nation, a heated discussion was taking place around the campfire about Richard Martin. Fern had brought him down to meet Sage a few days earlier, and his visit had been unsettling to the tree people.

Virgo Jane sat next to Sage in the circle and massaged Sage's neck and shoulders.

"Sagey, what do you think of Richard Martin?"

Sage was thrilled at Virgo Jane's touch, and she had trouble thinking about the question. She had to suppress an overwhelming desire to grab VJ. and start rubbing her body against the lithe young woman's. Would Virgo Jane be interested in having sex with her? What about Tanika? So far she had only slept with Carver, but she saw how some of the others switched partners every few days. Could she do that too? She was wild to try it. The possibilities for sex at the Tree Nation camp exceeded her most passionate fantasies about Sven and Erik on Spratt Island.

Sage tried to concentrate and remember the question as Virgo Jane's strong hands stroked and smoothed the muscles knotted to her spine. Relaxation became pleasure as strings of nerves in Sage's body softened. Martin. VJ. was asking about Richard Martin.

"Uh ... I don't know. Fern thinks he's all right, and when she brought him here the other day, he didn't smell bad to me."

Carver explained: "Sage can smell when people are bad or dishonest. Like the time that old miner saw her. Remember, Sage?"

"Yeah. And when they arrested my family, those people smelled bad to me." Sage twisted and caught Virgo Jane's eye, momentarily drawing away from her hands. "But don't worry, if we had a disagreement or something you wouldn't smell bad to me. It's only people who are trying to hurt me, I think."

"Huh? That's interesting," Virgo Jane said. She drew her hands away from Sage and made them into fists in her lap. "But listen, Richard Martin worries me. How can we trust him? He's a rich man and we have no idea what his real interests are. Corporate power is the root problem. Until we deal with that, nothing is going to change."

Carver was exasperated. "Look, the only reason I support Operation Debutante is because we all agree, sooner or later, they're going to find Sage here. We can't hide

her forever. Makes more sense to me to try to control the situation. We've got to have some big guns on our side. Martin is a big gun."

"Oh god, listen to you. Guns." Tanika was disgusted.

But Virgo Jane nodded. "Okay, I can be a realist too, Carver, but how do we know Martin is cool? Why would he help us overturn the patriarchy? Huh? Why? He's the one that gets all the benefits."

"Look," Carver said, irritation in his voice, "maybe even rich people can tell that the planet is dying and they've got to do something about it. Fern thinks he's okay. I've known her all my life and if she says so, I have to believe her. Besides, what other choice do we have?"

Sage felt the absence of Virgo Jane's strong hands on her back. She leaned a little closer to her till their bare shoulders touched and Sage felt a thrum of pleasure at the connection. She smiled to herself, sure that it would be soon.

18

Two weeks after the meeting with Richard Martin in Seattle, Sarah picked up the paper and looked at the help wanted ads for the first time in months. Her interest was piqued when she saw that the Eugene school system was looking for a part-time curriculum specialist in biology. She called the district office and found to her astonishment that the position involved developing a new curriculum to teach evolution at the district's middle schools.

She couldn't believe it. It was perfect. Here was a chance to resume her career and feel good about herself again. She had a storehouse of ideas in her head about how to teach evolution to children. She had used some of them with her Sunrise School class. But could she really afford to take a job right now, with Sage's future in limbo?

That night over dinner, she told Kevin about the job and her reservations. "But, I don't think I should look for a job right now. Who knows when Sage might need me? I don't know if I should make the commitment."

Kevin slammed his fist on the table. "Damn it, Sarah, you've got to do it. It's the perfect job for you. You've got to get out of this house and do something."

"But Sage is still living in a tree and who knows what might happen when the loggers show up?"

"She'll go to Richard Martin's when that happens. Sage is going to be fine. She doesn't need you hovering over her all the time."

Sarah sniffed and looked at Kevin. She knew he was right, but it felt so harsh to her.

"Oh baby, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you." Kevin pushed away from the table and leaned toward her for a hug. Sarah buried her face in his shoulder and let herself be comforted.

"It's hard. She's grown up so much, I hardly recognize her. I can't imagine what she's been through. She doesn't seem to relate to me much anymore."

Sarah and Kevin had spent the previous weekend at the camp and she had begun to struggle with the profound changes in her daughter.

Sage was no longer a child. Gone was the appealing baby fat that had made her little ape so human to her. Her face was bonier now, more defined. She knew it was partly the shock of seeing a dead child returned to life as a randy teenager, with no intervening steps. But there was more.

"You know, since Sage has been away she has become both more and less human to me."

"How do you mean?" Kevin said.

"Well, physically she hasn't just grown up, she's also gotten a lot stronger and oh, I don't know, wilder looking. Her face ... her brow ridge is heavier. But then her bust and her hips have filled out, so her figure looks more *Homo sapiens*. But it's not just her face, it's also in the way she moves. So quickly sometimes, more like a wild animal."

Sage had become a woman. She had also become an ape.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Kevin said. "Sometimes you'll notice that she seems to tune us all out and you'll realize she's intently watching a bird or a squirrel like a cat would."

"Right, and on the other hand she's more human to me when I see her joking with her friends and then talking so seriously about their work to save the trees and the animals. I know she's glad to see us again, but I could tell that she feels like she doesn't want mom around cramping her style."

"She's growing up." Kevin took her hand. "That's what it's all about. You've got to reject your parents."

Sarah nodded in agreement, and the two of them exchanged sad smiles.

The next day Sarah called for an interview. The interview went well and a week later she had the job. She would start in September. She would do classroom observations to test pieces of the new curriculum, but most of her day would be in an office. They told her she could even work from home part of the time if she wanted. It really was the perfect job, because if something did come up for Sage, she would have a lot of flexibility.

Sarah celebrated by taking herself out for coffee. She sat at an outdoor table in Eugene's downtown shopping district and watched the parade of students, mothers with kids in tow and business people caressing cell phones as they rushed to appointments.

For the first time since settling here, Sarah was glad they were back in Eugene. Though she missed the peace and beauty of their mountain home, she would never have found an opportunity like this in Bethel Bay. It was time for her career to go someplace. She reflected on her life. Hadn't she had it all? A loving husband, a child and now a career again. All rather unconventional of course, but that was who she was. Sarah started to smile and then stopped. Who was she trying to fool? It was all well

and good to keep up a brave front, but Sage's existence wasn't just unconventional, it was revolutionary. The future was as unknowable as the inside of a black hole.

She sighed and took another sip of her latte.

It was one of those late summer days when tall cumulus clouds loomed over the Willamette Valley. One minute she was basking in hot golden sun and the next minute her table was in a warm blue shadow. It was a day when clouds might burst open and dump rain for fifteen minutes in town as they rolled and bumped their way east toward the Cascades. In the mountains, irritated thunderheads might spit lightning like rage. Lightning might start calamitous forest fires that would blanket the valley with smoke for days.

Sarah watched a young mother walk by pushing her tiny infant in a stroller. The baby slept, its little fists balled up near its face, its mouth open and breathing. She remembered her first weeks with Sage and the marvel of Sage's breathing. What if she just stopped one night? She had hardly been able to sleep some nights for worrying, listening in the dark for the tender sound of air respired by little lungs.

The sun reappeared and Sarah put on her sunglasses. She vowed once more to stop worrying so much. What was the point, Kevin would ask. What the hell could they do about any of it anyway?

That night, Sarah sat on the couch after dinner with Kevin and watched the news. Things were dismal as usual. They were on the verge of another war in the Middle East, bombs had gone off in a shopping mall in Pittsburgh, and the lightning had started a fire in the mountains. Because of the drought and record heat, they were worried about getting it under control. A reporter started talking about the new trend for wearing mustaches: "They're fuzzy. They're scuzzy. They're all over town."

She went into the kitchen away from the television noise and dialed Fern's number.

"Fern, I got the job."

"Oh that's fantastic, Sar. Congratulations."

"But I'm not sure if I should do it. What if Sage needs me? What if something happens when they break up the camp?"

"Hon', don't be ridiculous. You know we've got that all taken care of. Richard Martin won't let a thing happen to her. You need to focus on something else so you don't drive yourself crazy."

Sarah scrunched her nose and nodded in the dark kitchen, knowing that Fern was right. "Yeah, I guess so. Well, what's new with you? And how's John?"

"Oh, John. He's still a sweetheart but I tell you, some of his habits left over from Christina are more than a little annoying. Can you believe he expects me to cook dinner for him every night?"

Sarah laughed. She knew how outrageous that must seem to Fern. The rest of Fern's news was all about a new arrival at Martin Enterprises. Richard Martin had hired a woman to help with her research project.

"Darlin', the woman's name is Sanene. Sa-ne-ne Ak-be Ato from Ghana, a no-shit, real-live Ashanti princess. She studies cross-cultural mythology and just got her doc-

torate at Cambridge. Black as night and she has the most adorable accent. She truly sounds like a princess.”

Martin wanted Sanene to help Fern with the human reproductive history. While Fern researched historical and anthropological evidence, Sanene would contribute her knowledge of myth, which might illuminate details that were otherwise obscure. Fern suspected that Sanene was really there because she was Richard Martin’s latest lover, but she was glad for the help and found Sanene pleasant to work with.

“Who knows what we’ll find, Sarah? Very few researchers have looked at this question before now. It’s so exciting to think that our research could change women’s lives. Something has to change, doesn’t it?”

Back at Tree Nation camp, Sage was involved in her own research into love and its consequences. It hadn’t taken Sage long to complete her seduction of Virgo Jane. In fact, it would be hard to say which one of the athletic females had seduced the other.

Sage taught Virgo Jane to do G-G rubbing, which Garth Boldt had told her about. Boldt had even showed her some pictures of two female bonobos doing it. At the time those pictures had made Sage feel ashamed, but since she had decided that being an animal was better than being a human, she was eager to do anything that would bring her closer to her bonobo heritage.

Virgo Jane gave Sage long massages that made her purr with satisfaction. Then she would wrap her legs around Sage’s strong back and press her small soft lips with the tiny bud of her clitoris up against Sage’s vulva. Sage was built a little differently from Virgo Jane. Her lips, when swollen, were hard with tumescence, and the shaft of her clitoris was exposed, not buried under the flesh of her vagina as Virgo Jane’s was. Hugging each other close, they would wetly slip-slide till they came to mutual, gasping pleasure. After making love they would stay up and talk for hours, Virgo Jane giving her opinions about politics and ecology and Sage listening and asking questions.

Sage spent alternate nights with Carver. The fullness of his penis inside her was an ecstatic sensation that made her squirm till she was light-headed, and one final stroke brought her to a deep, shuddering orgasm. Carver was sweet and tender with her and she loved to kiss him. They told private jokes and stories from their childhood at Savage Ranch. Being with Carver made her feel safe and secure. At night she would relax completely after their lovemaking and fall instantly asleep.

For most of the month, in between her periods, Sage was aware of wanting sex all the time. It was kind of like always being hungry for sugar or chocolate, a feeling she remembered from childhood, but much more intense. She found that if she could have sex twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening, she could keep her urges under control. This was important now that she was back among people. Living with the bears, Sage had stopped to masturbate in the forest whenever she felt like it, but you couldn’t do that around humans.

Neither Virgo Jane nor Carver seemed to be jealous of the other. They both knew that Sage’s need for sex was greater than either of theirs, and the three of them would joke about how much work it was to keep Sage satisfied.

By the end of the summer, Sage noticed that the other Tree Nation tribe members were switching partners even more actively than before. The camp usually had about ten inhabitants including Sage, Carver, Virgo Jane, Tanika, Jojo, Cheyenne, Otter, Tracy, Mark and Willow. A few others came and went, but all were sworn to secrecy regarding Sage.

Carver told her that so much sexual activity was unusual for the group. He thought it had begun after Sage had arrived and that Sage had stimulated it.

“Really?” Sage asked. “Why would that be?”

“Because you’re so sexy, little girlfriend. I’ve always known that.” Carver gazed at her fondly. “Everyone who hangs around you gets really horny.”

Sage was puzzled. If she was so sexy, then why were Carver and Virgo Jane her only consistent lovers? Sage had shared a nighttime nest with a few of the other tree people, but she mostly had sex with Virgo Jane and Carver. The other Tree Nation campers seemed reluctant.

She had one intensely passionate night with Mark, but that was all. She was deeply hurt, in fact, when Mark rejected her repeated invitations to spend the night. Mark mostly slept with Willow now. Sage wasn’t jealous of Willow. She didn’t want to have Mark exclusively, but she couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t share himself with her, especially since he had enjoyed it so much that one night.

After a while she came to accept that Mark and many of the others were scared of her. She knew she was different from anyone they had ever seen before. She had to make allowances for that.

Otter was an exception. He would surely have spent more nights with her, but Sage could tell that Carver was jealous. Otter was Carver’s best friend.

Sage didn’t understand why Carver was jealous. She would still love him just as much. She wouldn’t spend any less time with him. She knew Carver knew that her appetite for sex was endless. If she spent fewer nights with him, they could make up for it during the day. But even though she didn’t understand what jealousy was about, she didn’t want to do anything to hurt Carver, so she stopped encouraging Otter.

She might have only Carver and Virgo Jane as lovers, but as long as they both loved her, she could be happy.

The best thing about the Tree Nation group wasn’t the sex anyway. It was the camaraderie and the singing and dancing around the campfire. As the nights grew longer and cooler, they spent more time around the fire circle at night. They had drums and guitars and they made up long incantations about the forests and their love of the Earth. The chanting and the syncopated drumming made their bodies want to move. Carver couldn’t dance well with his twisted feet, but he was the group’s best drummer. He led the others in spooling an intricate, endless skein of rhythm that kept the dancers twirling for hours around the fire.

When they tired of dancing and drumming, they talked. Sometimes their discussions about life and love and the world would go on all night. Sage was fascinated. For all its problems, it was a huge world that she had never seen. Except for that trip in the van

through Seattle, she had never been to a city. The others told her she wasn't missing much and as far as they were concerned they never wanted to go back. They would rather go live with the bears as Sage had done.

19

One weekend in late October, Sarah, Kevin, Fern, John and Richard Martin arrived at the action camp, along with Sanene, who had never been to Tree Nation before. They brought supplies.

After the visitors set up their tents, everyone pitched in to chop vegetables for a curry with beans and rice. When the food was done, they spread pads and blankets on the ground to sit on around the blazing campfire and ate hungrily until they were full.

Virgo Jane and Sage put all the food away in plastic buckets and hoisted them into the trees to keep the critters out. Sarah, Jojo and Tanika did the dishes, and Fern prepared a pot of apple cider spiced with cinnamon sticks and cloves and set it on the fire to heat. Everyone settled in again, full and warm, circled around the fire.

As they sat watching the fire, a hush fell over them. Glowing red embers with skirts of ash swirled upward in the column of smoke and danced briefly against the backdrop of a black velvet sky sequined with stars. The air was crisp and sweet and cold and flavored with the pungent wood smoke.

Richard Martin broke the silence. He had a question for Virgo Jane.

"Virgo Jane, how did you get your name? Are you an astrology buff?"

"Yes, Virgo Jane, I've been wondering about that too," Fern said.

Virgo Jane scowled. "No. Actually, I'm not even sure I believe in astrology, though I am a Virgo. Jane isn't my real name either. I use it 'cause I get arrested at protests so much, and lots of times they'll let you out of jail if you don't give them your real name. I liked Virgo Jane better than Jane Doe. Anyway, everybody calls me that now and it's a lot better than Suzie."

Carver laughed. "Suzie Q, that's you, V J."

"Yeah well," Virgo Jane scowled, and then flashed him a saccharine smile, "forget I told you that Carver, if you know what's good for you. Anyway, I especially liked the name Virgo after I looked up what it means. Did you know that virgin doesn't mean never having sex? It means not belonging to any man—a woman who is self contained. It comes from the root word 'vir' meaning powerful, like virility. So using Virgo as a name is like a reclaiming."

"Reclaiming?" Richard asked. "What do you mean?"

"Reclaiming the ancient power of women. There were tons of ancient goddesses who were virgins, like Artemis and Athena. But the patriarchal gods drove them out of the world. Except for the Virgin Mary, but she was just a vessel. There's this Greek myth about Themis, goddess of justice. Zeus chased her all over the world. He kept

changing into these different animals—like first he was a bull and she was a cow; then he was a panther and she was a mouse; finally he was a swan and she was a goose. He caught her and raped her. After that she retired to the heavens as the constellation Virgo because there was too much evil in the world.”

“So now Virgo is back and she’s baaad,” Tanika said, grinning.

Now Sanene spoke for the first time since her brief greetings to each of them. She wore a purple, gold and indigo woolen cap over her close-cropped hair, and tiny gold drops hung from her ears. Sage thought her face was lovely, fine-boned with full lips like ripe figs. Slowly, with melodious voice and Oxbridge accent, she said: “It would seem from what you say that you are a true Virgo in the astrological sense as well. You possess the virtue of discrimination between the way of the world and one’s own inner truth. This is the key characteristic of the sign.”

Virgo Jane looked at her with wonder.

Fern called out across the circle: “Sanene, since Virgo Jane is interested in myth, shall we tell her the story of the rainbow snake?”

“Oh yes,” Sanene said, smiling at Fern. “This is a perfect setting for story telling, although it is very cold.” She shivered in her parka, leaned in closer to the fire and began the tale:

“This story is from northeast Arnhemland, in Australia, and it is very, very ancient. Perhaps as much as forty thousand years old.” Firelight cast weird shadows on Sanene’s face, and her teeth glinted in the dancing light as she spoke.

“Once upon a time, at the beginning of time, there were two sisters. They were traveling around the country when they decided to sit down by the pool that belonged to the Rainbow Serpent, Yurlunggur. They began to menstruate, and their blood flowed together into the sacred pool. This caused Yurlunggur to rise up out of the pool. He unleashed a wild tempest with rain and lightning. The sisters were frightened and danced to make the snake go away, but this only increased their menstrual flow and attracted the snake, who swallowed them up.”

Sanene clapped her hands together and everyone heard the snake gulp as the two sisters went down.

“Then a strange thing happened. The two sisters became part of the snake and the snake rose up into the heavens, higher and higher as it became the rainbow. Soon the snake reached the very top of the sky. There in the heavens the sisters looked down on the land and named everything that was there. The rains stopped. The floods subsided and the snake came crashing down to the earth and split open. The two sisters emerged unharmed. They say that if the sisters had not menstruated in the snake’s pool, there would be no birth and no death, no male and no female, no wet season and no dry season. And so the sisters created the laws which run the Earth.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone absorbed the tale and listened to the hiss and crackle of the fire.

Virgo Jane got up and turned her rump toward the fire to warm it. “Weird. What does it mean?” she said.

“Well,” Fern said, “when Sanene told me this story, it reminded me of something I’d heard about menstrual synchrony. They’ve done studies on women living together in college dorms and found that their cycles synchronize so that they all have their periods at the same time. It’s caused by pheromones.”

Tanika said, “The tree women all do that. Bleed at the same time. Sage too.”

“Have you happened to notice whether you bleed on the full moon or the new moon?” Fern asked.

“On the new moon, when it’s dark,” Tanika said.

“The dark, bloody time,” Virgo Jane said. She snickered at the evil sound of her words.

“Fern,” Sarah said, “I’ve heard about those studies. We used to joke about it when I lived in the dorm in college. But why would women cycle together? And why do we cycle with the moon? Other animals don’t do that.”

“That’s right,” Fern said. “Humans are the only animals whose menstrual cycle is the same as the lunar cycle. It has to do with living near water instead of living in the forest. Early hominids evolved on the shores of vast lakes in central Africa that have now dried up. The female hominids waded in the water and ate clams and mussels. This was high-protein food perfect for building large hominid brains. Then, because the women spent so much time near the water, the tidal pull of the lakes entrained their menstrual cycles into the rhythm of moon and tides. Great apes living in the forests have cycles of about forty days, not related to the moon at all.”

Virgo Jane said, “You just asked us if the tree women bleed on the full moon or the dark moon. What difference does that make?”

“Well, imagine this: the female menstrual cycle was the first organizing principle for human society. Women bled together at the dark of the moon and then ovulated at the full moon. The men would take off when the women started to bleed and go hunting. They wouldn’t come back until they’d bagged a giraffe or something and the moon was full. Then the women would cook the meat and they would feast and dance and have sex, at the most fertile time for the women.”

“It’s well known that you always start a safari at the new moon to take advantage of the early rising of the waxing moon,” Richard said.

Virgo Jane shot him a pained look. “You go on safaris? And kill animals?”

Richard gave her a patient smile, with a hint of smugness. “Yes, I go on safaris. Photo safaris. I have never fired a gun at an animal in my life.”

“Hell,” Kevin interjected, “of course the men are going to take off when the women are PMS-ing. Ask Sarah where I go that time of the month. I’m down at the pub, chucking miniature spears against a dartboard and bringing down literary elephants with my superior wit. I’m afraid I never bring her home anything more palatable than cold pizza, though. It’s a wonder she still puts out for me.”

Sarah groaned and asked: “So what does all this have to do with the Rainbow Snake story?”

Fern nodded. "Okay. So the men didn't want to hang around a bunch of menstruating women and they wanted to hunt during the waxing moon, but the real mystery is why they would bring any meat back to the women. Think about how much trouble it would be to cart a giraffe you killed several day's travel away from home all the way back. Why didn't the men make their own camp right by the carcass and hang around and eat it till it was gone?"

"Because they wouldn't get any sex if they didn't show up with the meat," Carver spoke up.

"Carver, I can see you are an alert young man." Fern grinned at him. He looked embarrassed. "You are perfectly right. But what's to keep one of these great hunters from just taking the woman he wants and having his way with her? Raping her?"

People in the circle nodded thoughtfully, considering this.

Fern went on. "This is where the organizational genius of the women came in. They avoided being raped because when they were all bleeding together, they were a huge voice saying NO to the men. It made them strong, like an immense, all-powerful serpent—the rainbow snake. Then, when they were all receptive at the same time, they were an overwhelming YES. No man could resist it. Kind of like the Lusty Lady on a Saturday night. And just like those dancers, they kept their families fed that way."

Fern grinned, and John and Kevin both laughed.

"It was a good system," Fern continued, "but menstrual synchrony is never absolute. The women could get out of synch with each other, but all they had to do to fool the men was smear blood from the menstruating women on the ones who weren't. Or maybe they used paint. Red ochre, common iron oxide, is found in archeological sites all over the world. You see, if the women didn't stick together, a few dominant males might have been able to monopolize all the females by mating with them in series as they ovulated at different times. This is what happens with baboons, gorillas, common chimps. Bonobos are a little different, as you know."

Fern gave Sage a wink.

"So, what the menstrual sisterhood did was harness the energies of all the males and get them working to bring meat to their women and children. This system brought in the extra calories that jumpstarted the growth of humanity. It was the beginning of culture and it was the cause of our eventual spread all over the world."

"That's quite a story," Sarah said, and she thought for a moment in silence, listening to the hiss of the fire. "But why a snake? Does it have anything to do with Eve and the serpent in the garden?"

"Yes." Sanene answered this time. "It is the very same serpent we are speaking of. Let me first answer your question about the meaning of the snake. If you had ever seen the women of my people dance at the full moon feast you would understand. The women dance in a long, sinuous line around the men. Together they make the body of a giant serpent. The snake is good and powerful, but it is also something to be feared. The women of our Umgud clan of Ashanti always tell the little children, girls and boys,

‘Respect the python, the python is a wise healer, but if you go against her, she will kill you.’”

Sanene paused to reminisce and then smiled. “I remember my grandmother. When we children were too bothersome to her—perhaps she was cooking something special and we were in her way— she would shake her head,” Sanene shook her neat head, “and she would hiss at us like a snake.” Sanene framed her face with her open hands and hissed. Her spine undulated in a wave that rocked her head. Her eyes widened and her pupils dilated till they were two black points swimming in a circle of white, shining in the dark. Shivers ran down the listener’s backs.

Fern said, softly, “So ... if the first women were looking for a way to make their point with the men, they couldn’t have chosen a better symbol than the snake. They themselves could embody the snake so easily.”

Sanene nodded and turned to Sarah. “To finish answering your question—most of the later stories we have about the serpent are much like the story of Eve. The creative, organizing power of the women came to be resented by men, by some of them anyway, the priests. The story in the Bible is just one of hundreds. Patriarchal versions of creation myths always start with the slaying of the cosmic serpent. Zeus had to slay the sea monster Typhon, child of Gaia. Marduk battled Tiamat; Thor beheaded Nidhoggar, the giant ice worm; and the Indian god of storms, Varuna, chopped up the serpent Vritra who hoarded away all the waters of the world. Cutting the monster up into pieces is significant.”

Virgo Jane had become completely enthralled. Eyes wide, she stared at Sanene: “Why?”

Sanene smiled at her and made a gesture by pulling her interlaced fingers apart. “It was by separating the women that their power was defeated. This is why so many of the serpents, like the Medusa or Hydra, are shown as many-headed. It was a collective power of all the women acting together, and what the men had to do to break it up was to literally separate the women from each other. When women are isolated in separate houses, their pheromones cannot act so strongly to synchronize menstruation. The priests took over and they invented their own source of the sacred blood. That is why even today cardinals of the Catholic Church wear red robes. The Abrahamic religions are the most extreme; their God, Yahweh, takes control of fertility away from women. Remember? God grants Sarah a son at age ninety and then flaunts his power by demanding the sacrifice of Isaac. That’s what they are really after—to control woman’s power of reproduction.”

Kevin had been fidgeting dining this last and finally had to speak. “Okay, ladies, this is all very interesting, fascinating in fact, but what could it possibly have to do with John’s project of building a better contraceptive? Isn’t that why you’re doing this research? What are you thinking—you’ll distribute snake-shaped vibrators to every woman in the world so they can finally free themselves of men forever, or what?”

Fern laughed. Sanene was taken aback. She wasn’t used to Kevin’s joshing.

John answered the question: "What Fern and Sanene are uncovering is evidence that group pheromonal action once regulated reproduction in our species. Pheromones gave women menstrual synchronization. As a result, they pretty much knew when ovulation would happen, and they could decide not to have sex then if they didn't want a pregnancy."

"So what does that have to do with bonobos?" Virgo Jane asked.

John turned to her: "We think that bonobos have a pheromone that acts as a contraceptive. It's the only way to explain certain facts about bonobo ecology. You know how promiscuous bonobos are. Other apes have a limited estrus period, so when they come into heat there is a lot of competition, but bonobo females are sexually available to males all the time. This has real advantages from an evolutionary standpoint. There is no reason to fight over sex, and so they live much more peacefully than other great apes. This is bound to increase the survival of their young. Yet at the same time they don't overpopulate. So the big question is: given how sexually active they are, what keeps them from getting pregnant every time they ovulate? In answering this question, what we hope to come up with is a contraceptive for people that would be much easier to use than what we have now. It would be absolutely reliable and safe. It would also be cheaper and easier to manufacture and distribute. We think that the bonobo pheromone is the key to this."

"But why are pheromones so great?" Kevin asked. "Why are they better than the Pill, for instance? That uses hormones, right? What's the difference between pheromones and hormones? And do you want me to tell you the one about the Pharaoh and the whore?"

The young men in the circle all laughed.

John smiled and replied: "The Pill uses high doses of synthetic hormones—estrogen and progesterone—to disrupt a woman's cycle. Synthetic hormones are a problem because they affect more than just the reproductive cycle. They can cause depression, weight gain and circulatory problems."

"Phhht." Fern snorted. "Depression and weight gain, just what women need."

John patted Fern's hand and turned to Kevin. "So you can see why pheromones are the Holy Grail of birth control. "

"Yeah, but how do they work?"

"It's like using a push button instead of a sledgehammer. Pheromones work by setting a series of chemical switches in motion. It starts with the hypothalamus, which is a control center in the brain that responds to pheromones. Pheromones reach the hypothalamus through the nasal passages. The hypothalamus talks to the pituitary gland, which tells the ovaries what to do, and the ovaries are the producers. They not only produce the egg, but they produce all the hormones, progesterone and estrogen, that conduct the egg through the reproductive cycle."

John thought for a moment, rubbing the day-old beard on his chin with his palm.

"Look at it this way: normally the hormones work together to grow the egg in its ovary, take it to the right place where sperm can reach it to fertilize it, and then escort

it to the com A bed they have prepared for it, the blood-rich uterine lining. That's why the body produces hormones. But if a pheromone intervenes, it can throw the timing off and the whole show goes down the tubes, literally. But at no harm to the woman, because it is the body's own hormones that are being regulated."

"So ...," Kevin was trying to digest this information. "Is it kind of like trying to grow a seed but taking away the fertilizer, or the water, or the sunlight?"

"Sure, it's kind of like that. When we do find the bonobo pheromone, it may be that we can make a few changes in it and it will work for humans. Then we could produce something like a jar of scent that a woman only has to open and sniff maybe once a week. One jar like that could last her for the rest of her reproductive life. No prescription refills, no injections, implants or surgery. No side effects."

"Wouldn't that be the greatest thing?" Fern said. "Imagine a woman in Saudi Arabia, say. She lives secluded and has to wear a sack over her head when she goes out. She has no control over any aspect of her life, least of all the number of pregnancies she has. But she has this little jar of face cream stuck away in her personal things, in the back of the tent..."

The young Tree Nation women nodded in sympathy and murmured to each other:

"Wouldn't that be great?"

"Fm so sick of that stupid diaphragm."

"I really want to get off of the Pill."

"Anything that gives women more choices is welcome," Sarah spoke up, "and I love the story of the Rainbow Snake. It's inspiring to think that once upon a time we had it all figured out."

Sage had been following the conversation with wonder. Could the rainbow snake be the same as her rainbow sea serpent—the white marble mountain that flicked rainbows from its tail? Just as that thought came to her, Sage felt a gleam of light caress her eyes. She looked up and saw a gibbous moon rising in the east over the dark shape of Black Horse Butte.

Carver and Otter had been warming their skin drumheads at the fire, turning and tapping them to see if they felt right. As the moon rose higher, they began to drum.

20

Virgo Jane and Tanika were on the outs. Wlien Virgo Jane started spending time with Sage, Tanika took up with Jojo. But she was bored with Jojo and she was tired of sleeping around. She really wanted Virgo Jane back. Sage, Virgo Jane and Tanika had tried all sleeping together, but it wasn't working for Tanika. She decided that she didn't want to have anything to do with either Sage or Virgo Jane, and she wouldn't even speak to Virgo Jane. It made living in the camp uncomfortable for everyone.

It had been a long, cold and snowy winter. It was late March now and everyone was looking forward to the snow melting and the first spring wildflowers. Bur that would

be another month at least at this elevation. And then they would face the possibility of a raid by law enforcement to break up the camp and let the loggers in. The only thing stopping them now was the snow. Once spring came they couldn't actually cut trees until the end of spotted owl nesting season in July.

Bulky dark clouds scudded across the sky and rolled over the sun like tanks. Everyone huddled together in the net in the center of the grove. Everything they owned was damp and filthy, and they longed for a sunny day so they could wash and dry their clothes, but it wouldn't be today. Suddenly, Sage cocked her head, listening: "I hear something. Helicopters."

"Oh, it's probably Stupid Pathetic out looking for more old growth to cut," Jojo said. Stupid Pathetic was their nickname for Stimpson Pacific, the timber company that seemed to have a monopoly on timber sales in that region.

"Yeah, maybe they'll stop by and say hello again," Virgo Jane said. In the fall they had come by twice, hovering over the camp and generating a strong whirlwind that blew all their gear around and wrecked the kitchen. "Come on, Sage, let's go down and stow the kitchen away, just in case."

But before they could get halfway down the tree, the helicopter was right on top of them. Three men quickly rappelled from the big Sikorski Sky Crane. The wind was ferocious, stinging the tree sitters' eyes and whipping everything around. Bits of branches, clothing and gear were flying everywhere, making it difficult to climb out of the net to their platforms and ropes. Virgo Jane and Sage finally made it to their platform. From there they could see that the three men were each at an anchor point of the net.

The invaders had undipped the net anchor points and were hooking the net to cables suspended from the helicopter. Tanika and Carver were still in the net. It looked like the men intended to lift the net with their friends in it right out of the grove. The net also held a good part of their food supply and other gear.

"Sage, you get that anchor back. I'll do the Bear-a-sol," Virgo Jane shouted over the artificial wind. Sage understood. The Bear-a-sol was a canned pepper spray that you could use to repel bears. Each platform had a supply of it, not for bears, but for a situation like this.

Sage leaped from her tree to a branch of the neighboring tree where one of the men had completed his job and moved on. She had to climb up higher in the tree and then crawl out to the end of a branch to snag the line suspended from the helicopter. She stretched her long arm out to the vibrating cable and hooked it with the end of a finger and pulled it toward her. She started to haul the cable back to the thick end of the branch where she had a more secure perch, but the helicopter suddenly bounced up six feet and lifted her into the air.

Sage hung on to the cable as it lurched upward. Frayed metal strands dug into her palms, cutting painfully as she clamped her hands around the line. She tried to keep her hold on the branch with one foot, but she was ripped away.

But just as suddenly as the heli bounced up, it bounced back down and Sage was able to grab the branch with her feet once more. Slowly, she dragged herself back to the tree's bole, pulling the cable with her. Wedged into a stable position against the wide trunk, she hauled the cable up so she could reach the clip that held the net anchor loop and she snapped it open. The cable whipped out of her hands and she quickly pulled the net over to the tree anchor and reattached it.

Meanwhile, Virgo Jane hitched her harness to the pulley on the travel cable and zipped across the grove. She surprised the man who was working the net free from its anchor point there and hit him with the pepper spray. He was wearing goggles to protect his eyes from the wind, but she managed to get it in his nose and mouth. The man doubled over, coughing and spitting.

Cheyenne and Jojo saw what Virgo Jane was doing and armed themselves. Jojo got another man down, but he had to wrestle with him because the man had seen him coming. He almost got Jojo in an arm lock, but the wary youth slipped free and blasted him right in the nose with the spray.

Sage flew around the grove, boldly leaping from one tree to another to reach all the anchor points and reattach them. The net bounced violently, and Carver and Tanika were trapped.

Cheyenne, Virgo Jane and Mark surrounded the last man, aiming cans of Bear-a-sol at him. He had drawn a riot baton, but before he could use it, the attack was called off from above. The helicopter slowly lifted, taking the assault team with it.

But as soon as the Sky Crane was gone, they heard the angry buzzing of engines in the distance. Regrouped on the platforms, the tree sitters saw that a dozen snowmobiles carrying loggers and chainsaws had arrived.

"Those bastards," Carver said, "they're trying to get in here before spotted owl nesting season. They'll cut these trees and lay them down in the snow."

Sage was staring down at the loggers when suddenly she noticed one of them aiming binoculars at her. He gave a shout. "Jesus Christ, it's Bigfoot!" A dozen pairs of eyes turned toward her before she could duck out of sight.

That night, Sage and Virgo Jane slipped silently down the trunk of their tree and quickly strapped on snowshoes. They could hear the drunken grumbling of the loggers camped on the other side of the grove. There was just enough moonlight to see their way. They were headed to Sage's old cabin, her designated refuge for a situation like this. They could only hope that Richard Martin would find out about the raid soon and send someone to get them.

The others were staying. They took down the net and moved all the supplies to the individual trees. They wouldn't pool the supply cache like that again. If Sage and Virgo Jane could get out, Virgo Jane would alert the media, and if the tree sitters could hold out a little longer, they would get reinforcements soon.

It was the end of Sage's tree-sitting days. Now that she had been seen, the news would get out. She was sad as they trudged through the snow to her old cabin. And she was afraid.

They reached the cabin before daylight and spent the morning huddled together in sleeping bags on the old mattress there. They woke to the sound of a helicopter landing in the yard. Virgo Jane peeked out the window and made sure that it was the Martin Enterprises logo on the helicopter's tail section. The pilot and copilot helped them in and they were on their way to Martin's house in the five-thousand-acre forest northeast of Seattle.

21

Sage had been at the mansion in the woods for a week now. She had met with Martin and his public relations people and had learned about all their plans for her. She thought it was what she wanted, but still, it was overwhelming.

Thank goodness she was home alone today. Everyone was gone but the guards and the housekeeping staff. Sarah and Kevin had been up for the weekend and had left that morning. Virgo Jane was in Seattle meeting with reporters about Tree Nation and the ancient forests. Fern was at the Martin Enterprises campus, working with the PR team. Carver was still in the trees, trying to keep the loggers out. She missed him.

Left to herself, she vacated the house and emerged into the cool spring air. She lay in the sun on the second-floor deck, trying to calmly sift through her thoughts. Glad as she was that family and friends were with her in Seattle, it was good to be alone right now. She had spent two years without any human contact at all. Here she was introduced to new people every day: scientists from John's lab, the people from the Pearl Show who had flown out to meet her, and all the people who worked for Richard. There was an army of them. So many people and so few bears.

She longed for the bear family at that moment and tried to imagine their faces. Mama with her wide gray-flecked muzzle. Little Brother and Little Sister with their playful eyes and nipping teeth.

She was nervous about the television appearance on the Pearl Show in three days. She was afraid she would clam up and not be able to speak at all. Richard wanted her to think about what she would say, but thinking about it made her feel once again her anger with Sarah.

Why had her mother brought her into this world? She was a freak—like those conjoined twins on TV—but worse. At least they had each other. She was all alone and there was no one else in the entire world like her.

She wrapped her lanky arms around her chest and stroked the long hairs on her shoulder blades. Back home, the other children were never allowed to tease her, but Harmony would sometimes call her “dog.” She'd had a way of looking at Sage with her icy blue eyes and pinched-up nose, tossing her long blond hair and barking “woof woof” that made Sage cry at night and not tell Sarah why.

Sage quivered with anger; her body gone rigid in the lounge chair, hands gripping the armrests. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Fern always said deep breathing

could calm you down. A spot of sun shone warm on her cheek. Slowly, she relaxed. She could smell the musty forest floor and the sharp tang of fir needles. A woodpecker rattled in the distance. She could hear the whine of a vacuum cleaner from somewhere inside the house.

Suddenly a loud chittering erupted near her ear. It was a damned cheeky squirrel. Her anger alchemized to adrenalin as she snapped from the chair. Her short legs flexed and sprang and she clamped the stout fir limb hanging over the deck with her long sinewy fingers. She tucked her legs, piked her narrow hips up and over the branch, twirled her body around it and let go, spinning herself high into the tree after the scampering rodent. The squirrel merely danced furiously to the skinny end of a long branch and clung there, squeaking like a bath toy.

Sage laughed. Chasing squirrels was good. She felt the blood pumping through her muscles. She pressed her face against the cool moss growing on the tree's trunk and felt its damp, springy softness. It was more comforting than the pillow on her bed.

For a moment she was happy, but as her body cooled, confusion settled in again and the future was a cold dark tower of slick glass that she couldn't get a foothold on, or even see the top of. She tried to fight the strange hot feeling in her forehead and around her eyes. It was the feeling she got when she wanted to cry but couldn't. Instead she screeched—a long loud piercing shriek followed by many short eeeee eeeee eeeee's.

Gradually, her tension eased. Sage sank back into her mossy seat, her arms hanging limp beside her.

A guard came out to see if she was all right. She sat up and waved at the man, shouting down from the tree, "It's okay. I'm just letting off steam." He nodded and went back to his monitoring station in the house. Screeching was a habit she had gotten into when she lived alone in the forest. She had been too embarrassed to screech at Tree Nation, but then she had been happy there.

The gray squirrel chided her from the end of the branch. It whipped its tail around as it chattered, and Sage marveled at its bristling bottlebrush of a tail. Each brindled hair was tipped in white, giving the tail a floating, iridescent shimmer as it snapped back and forth in the sun. Sage smiled. She thought of her white marble sea serpent. She imagined being back in the mountains where rainbows of light flowed from the serpent's tail to envelope her. She thought of that evening at Tree Nation camp where everyone sat around the campfire and listened to Sanene's rainbow snake story. She remembered Sarah saying that she loved the story, and she felt a wave of affection for her mother. She did belong in this world—she had a mother who loved her, which was a lot more than some people had.

Then Sage had an inspiration. She would go on television and tell Pearl about her time in the mountains when the mountain peaks spoke to her. Richard would like that. It was a personal story. That's what he said people wanted to hear to show that she was as human as they were. Mostly though, it would satisfy Sage to tell it, because

the vision was hers and hers alone. It had come to her as she was, half human, half animal. She would tell it and people could think whatever they wanted to about her. The next two days were taken up with preparations for the television show. They spent a lot of time deciding what she would wear. Sage couldn't see what all the fuss was about. Fern came back from town with a long white dress with ruffles and lace and silver ribbons. "It's an angel dress, darlin', it'll make you look like an innocent child."

"It looks like something you'd get buried in." Virgo Jane scowled.

Sage didn't like the dress either. "Fern, I never wear anything like that," she said. "It looks like the dresses you said you had to wear to your Dad's church. Why can't I wear what I usually wear?"

Sage wanted to wear the stretchy workout clothes she had been wearing since she arrived at Tree Nation and was able to abandon her old ripped T-shirts and jeans salvaged from empty cabins. She loved the tight-fitting thigh-length shorts and jog bra tops; they gave her total freedom of movement.

Luckily one of Richard's assistants found an outfit that everyone liked. It was a royal blue spandex bodysuit with a strappy top and a matching little skirt in a blue and peach floral. It went well with Sage's complexion.

Sage pulled on the outfit and stood shyly in front of the mirror. She liked it that the top showed off her strong arms and shoulders and the soft full curves of her chest. Her torso was her best feature. She wished her legs weren't so short. Her long arms reached nearly to her knees. She flipped the hem of the flouncy skirt with her fingers and turned to see what it looked like from behind. "What do you think. Fern, do I look okay?"

"Hon', you look cuter 'n a sackful of puppies. Really, you look just adorable. Here, let me fix your hair with these clips and it'll pull the whole look together."

They had cut and styled Sage's shoulder-length brown hair to give her fluffy bangs that minimized her brow ridge. Short wisps of hair framed her face and partly concealed the downy fur that since puberty grew on the sides of her cheeks. Fern brushed the top strands back and fastened a hair clip set with flashing sapphires on each side of her head. As always, Fern found Sage's button nose and dark freckles completely endearing. She kissed the top of Sage's head and Sage turned to smile at her.

Richard approved of the look. He said she would come across well on television and they were ready to go. They packed up the whole entourage early the next morning and boarded Richard's jet to Chicago and Pearl's sound stage.

Pearl was a sweet-faced brown-skinned woman with comfortable curves who featured diet and exercise advice on her show. She was the world's most famous warrior in die batde of the bulge. It was the secret to her success, because millions of ordinary American women could see that she was just like them, only successful. And she was phenomenally successful. She had been the highest-paid entertainer in the world for the past fifteen years. Richard called her "the consummate professional in the business." Her show was perfect for Sage's debut.

The taping went well. Sage was surprised to learn that she was not as nervous and tongue-tied as she thought she would be. Pearl was very nice and talked to her the whole time they were fixing her hair and adjusting the lights, so by the time the cameras started rolling, Sage barely noticed that she was being taped.

They were almost done with the taping and Sage had finished telling the story of Tree Nation and what the tree sitters were trying to accomplish, when Pearl asked her a question that hadn't been on the list.

"Sage, you have a mother, Sarah, and a wonderful adoptive father, Kevin, but has anyone introduced you to your real father?"

Sage was floored.

"I... I don't know where he is. No." Her father? Her real father; the bonobo? Somehow, Sage had never imagined him as anything more than a vial of sperm in a laboratory. Yet he could exist somewhere. She had never thought about it, probably because no one had ever said anything to her about it. Sage blinked and dropped her jaw. She could feel the heat in her forehead and around her eyes. The back of her throat itched. She wanted to shriek, but she held it back.

"I would like to meet him someday," she managed to choke out. Then she hung her head.

"I'm sure that if that's possible, it will happen, Sage." Pearl reached out and stroked her arm and gave her a warm smile. "Sage, I'm sorry, did I upset you by bringing up your father? Are you crying?"

Sage looked up with dry eyes and said in her high little voice: "No, I can't cry. Apes don't cry. We don't make tears like humans."

Pearl flung her arms around Sage and that was the end of the interview. The show aired the next day. The following day Sarah and Kevin were in Richard Martin's office and they were angry.

"How could you let them air that segment about Sage's father?" Kevin demanded. "Sage says that question was not on the list. She was humiliated."

Sarah bit her lip. She had spent the whole morning with Sage, who was still shaken and insistent that Sarah tell her everything she knew about her father. Sarah told her about her encounter with Dexter that long-ago day at Stonewell Lab. This only made Sage angry. She demanded to know why she had never been told about this before. "I thought it would just confuse you, honey," was Sarah's lame answer.

"No. It's because you didn't want to think about my real dad being an animal. You're always trying to make me more *Homo sapiens*. It's the only way you can deal with me." Sage ran out of the room and slammed the door.

Eventually, Sage came back in, and they hugged and made up, but Sarah knew that Sage was still deeply upset. She also realized that it was her fault for never broaching the subject before. She had meant to do it; only Sage had been taken away from her so young.

Kevin was still raving. "And that goddamn segment, they've been airing it over and over again; every time I turn on the television it's there. How can they do that to my little girl?"

Richard sat silently behind his desk and nodded. Finally, when Kevin's steam ran down he ventured a reply: "Kevin, Sarah, I'm sorry. But you know what? It's great television and it's having exactly the effect we want. You can't imagine how sympathetic the average person feels toward Sage right now, and that was the moment that did it. I know it feels like a violation of Sage's privacy, but damn it, that's what being a public person is sometimes. Believe me, I know all about it."

Kevin glared at him, but he remembered the big media splash a few years earlier about Martin's divorce. The press was full of speculations about how much money she would get out of him, and the reasons for the divorce. The story was nightly news for months. Rumors of adultery on both sides were chased down by eager reporters and detailed for the viewing public. It couldn't have been pleasant to go through. It wasn't pleasant to watch, but Kevin knew that a lot of idiots loved that sort of thing.

Richard continued. "The key is to control it. I wasn't able to control what happened with Beverly because she egged them on. She was the source of most of those leaks about my so-called affairs. She was deliberately trying to make me miserable so I would give in to her lawyer's demands. I'm afraid to say it worked to some extent. But I learned. They'll never take advantage of me like that again."

Kevin sneered and said, "Well, if you learned so goddamned much, why did you let Pearl take advantage of Sage like that?"

Now Richard raised his voice. "I told you, that was great television. It was just what we need. I'm sorry you can't see that."

Sarah said, "Wait, Kevin, Richard is right. I mean, I don't like how it was done, but it's really my fault. I should have told her about Dexter long ago. Which is what I have to ask you, Richard: where is Dexter? Is he still in John Stengers' colony? Is he here at your campus?"

"Yes, as far as I know he is. And what we need to talk about now is whether or not Sage will agree to be filmed when she meets him for the first time."

Kevin gasped.

"Kevin, I knew you would react that way, but think about it. Pearl would love to do it. Please, think about what it could do for bonobo conservation and awareness. I'm sorry. I thought you two realized that it would be like this."

"No, I guess we're just the last two people with an old-fashioned sense of privacy left in this goddamned country. You can ask Sage if she wants to do it, but I'll tell you, Martin, I don't want any more sneaky tricks pulled on her. She decides and don't you forget it."

Sarah anxiously patted Kevin's hand.

When Fern heard about Kevin's blowup, she decided to stay out of his way for a while. There was no way she could tell him that the question about Sage's father had

been her idea. She had approached Richard about it before the show and he had liked it.

“Excellent idea!” he had exclaimed.

“Well, I thought of it after Sage rejected the virginal white dress. I’m worried that she could appear sinister to some people. We’ve got to do something dramatic to demonstrate her innocence. You know, people are all too ready to attribute demonic characteristics to anything seen as ‘bestial.’ I figure it’s best to make her into a cuddly little teddy bear right from the git-go.”

“Fern, you and I are on the same wavelength,” he had said.

Sage agreed to do the first meeting with Dexter live, on the air, guaranteeing a record audience. Pearl came to Seattle, to Bonobo House, the facility where the bonobos lived, right next to John’s lab.

Sage brought Dexter some pictures of herself and a teddy bear as a present. Dexter loved stuffed animals, but they never lasted long in his possession, so it was a good present. Only Jeanette and a camerawoman were in the room with them. Jeanette introduced them and told Dexter that Sage was his “baby” in Ameslan. Unbelievably, Dexter seemed to understand. He started hooting and Sage joined in with him. They embraced. Then Dexter put his arm around Sage and took her over to a corner where he had a nest of old tires and blankets. They sat down together and he started running his fingers through the hair on her head, grooming her. Pearl, as narrator observing through the one-way glass, explained that grooming was the way that bonobos and other apes express affection, and they cut the sequence right there.

22

Sage began to settle in to the demands of her new public life. Virgo Jane and Carver had come to Seattle to be her companions and to be part of the board of directors that had been set up to make decisions about Operation Debutante.

The official name of the corporation was Sage, Inc. The other members were Sage herself, Sarah and Kevin, Fern, John, Sanene and Richard. Kevin and Richard had drawn up bylaws that gave Sage veto power over any decisions about where and how she would appear in public.

Fern and John had moved into Richard’s mansion so that Fern could be closer to Sage. The house had three separate wings, one of which was Richard’s apartment where Sanene also stayed. Fern and John shared another wing with the young people, and the third wing was reserved for guests and household staff.

It was a massive building but it wasn’t opulent. Richard had scandalized Seattle society by refusing to create an avant-garde palace for himself in the style of the other high-tech billionaires. He hated contemporary art and had no interest in building museums or owning sports teams. All his charitable giving was to environmental causes,

and his house reflected this interest. It was more like an outsized camp lodge than a mansion.

Fern had a new job working with Richard's publicity staff setting up appearances for Sage. The number of television talk shows and news magazine shows that wanted Sage was endless. Production crews from all over the world were flying in to interview her.

Kevin and Sarah were free of work for the summer and were also staying in Richard's house. Sage's crisis after the Pearl Show had convinced Sarah that her daughter really needed her, and she should quit her job and stay in Seattle, but Kevin insisted that he would be going back to his job in Eugene at the end of the summer. After much discussion, he finally convinced Sarah that it would be best for her to come back too.

"Look," he said, "she won't even be here all that much with all the traveling she's going to be doing, and when she is here she spends all her time in Bonobo House or with her friends. She's trying to be a grownup, and having us around every minute isn't helping. We can still come up to see her any weekend. It's only a four-hour drive."

Sarah acquiesced. Kevin was right. Sage had just turned fifteen and she seemed to be handling things well. Fern would be with her, and if Sage did need her, Sarah would come to Seattle instantly, no matter what else was going on. Besides, she was enjoying her job. If things went well, her curriculum would be adopted by the state and perhaps other states would pick it up too. Since Sage's debut, the science educators association had contacted her and wanted her to give workshops on teaching evolution. All kinds of magazines and television shows wanted to interview her, but except for *National Geographic*, she turned them all down. She had never craved fame.

After Kevin and Sarah left for Eugene in August, Sage decided she would move into Bonobo House for a while to get to know her father. Fern and Richard agreed that it would be good for her to take a few weeks off from the interviews.

Bonobo House was the largest and most elaborate primate facility in the world. The apes had indoor classrooms, similar to those at Stonewell, connected to a biosphere enclosure the size of two football fields. It was a forest gymnasium for the bonobos, lush with fast-growing tropical plants and trees, fitted with strong artificial branches and vines for climbing and swinging. The walls and ceiling were made of a heat-responsive clear plastic matrix that opened pores to regulate the temperature inside. Since Bonobo House maintained the temperature and humidity of an African tropical forest, most of the staff stripped down to T-shirts and shorts for work.

Sage brought a few changes of clothes, a toothbrush and her pillow. Jeanette showed her a cozy little alcove tucked back behind a fern garden that would be her sleeping area. It had a door that closed for privacy if she wanted it.

After her first full day at Bonobo House, Sage realized how confused she was about Dexter. She struggled under a double load of guilt. Part of it was guilt she felt about Kevin, who was her real father in so many ways; she didn't want him to feel he had been supplanted. But her biggest crime, as she saw it, was not being able to fully embrace Dexter.

Sage was terribly split. What she had come to think of as her human side was embarrassed by Dexter. He was smelly and he swaggered around with an erection a lot of the time. Sage especially hated being around him at meal times. He and the other males would snarl and posture when the food arrived. Then they would rub each other's penises until they all calmed down and could begin eating. Sometimes one of the females would get involved and then there was copulating as well.

It was too much for Sage and she tried to avoid meal times, eating her meals with the humans in the staff lounge. But feeding happened to some extent all day long. To keep the bonobos from getting bored, Jeanette stashed bananas and other snacks in crevices in the trees and under rocks. If the other bonobos were nearby when Dexter discovered a cache of bananas, they had to go through all their usual shenanigans.

Sage was learning Ameslan and beginning to converse with Dexter. Dexter only had about two hundred and fifty words. It was about like talking to a four-year-old, and Sage found that disconcerting. This creature was her father.

But the other side of Sage, the ape side, had a wonderful time romping and playing with Dexter and with all the other bonobos. Many of the younger apes were Dexter's children, which made them her half brothers and sisters.

Sage would follow Dexter and the other bonobos around the forest gym and try to keep up with them as they leaped and swung from branch to branch, hooting like banshees. It was fabulous fun, and Sage was truly physically challenged for the first time in her life.

Sage was fascinated by the differences between her body and the bodies of her bonobo companions. She discovered that she was about as tall as the largest male, but not nearly as strong. The bonobos had sparse hair on their chests and bellies, but she had none. And the hair on her back and upper arms, thighs and calves was thin and silky, while theirs was thicker and rougher. Her pelvis was wider and her carriage more upright. Her lips were fuller and her skull was much rounder.

She also noticed that while she sweated profusely from their exercise and needed to drink lots of water, the bonobos barely got damp. In her judgment she was exactly halfway between a bonobo and a human in physical traits. This seemed right to her, though she sometimes wished for bonobo strength so she could keep up with them.

At the end of a session, they would tumble into a heap and tickle and groom each other. Dexter would look at her and sign "tickle." Sage would respond "me too" and they would fall into a rolling ball of fur and fingers until they flew apart laughing and hooting.

It was the males and the juveniles who participated in these circuses. The older females were mostly nursing infants and liked to stay by themselves. Sage tried to talk to them in Ameslan, but they were aloof. There were sixteen breeding females and they often spent their time in pairs. Sage knew about the special relationships that bonobo females cultivated with each other and knew that they bonded sexually, although she didn't often see them doing any G-G rubbing.

Sage was patient in her approach, and soon a young female named Mandy allowed her to comb her head and shoulders looking for lice nits. After a week of this, several of the bonobo females had come to trust her enough to hand Sage their babies to hold. There were nine young infants in the colony, and Sage fell head over heels in love with them. Whenever she held one of the babies she was nearly overcome with longing for one of her own. She wasn't allowed to hold the youngest infants for long and she knew that to really become a part of the social life of the colony, she would have to cultivate a personal, sexual relationship with one of the older females. That was not something she was ready to consider doing.

One day, after handing a baby back to its mother, she looked around her and realized that the life of this tribe of bonobos was taking place in a completely artificial environment. She had a vision of the endless beauty of the forests and mountains of home. She remembered the freedom that her bear family had to roam. She knew that humanity was systematically destroying the forest homes of bonobos and millions of other creatures, and suddenly she was overcome with anger, losing her self-control. Sage started screaming at the top of her lungs.

Dexter came running over to see if she was all right, if she needed to be defended. When he couldn't see anything wrong he turned to Bobby, the nearest of the younger males, and bared his teeth, ready to attack him. The whole group was disturbed for the rest of the day after her outburst, with many aggressive attacks followed by the kissing and making up typical of the bonobos.

After that incident. Sage stopped spending all her days and nights with the bonobos. She had had enough. She went home to Richard Martin's woods to be with Carver and Virgo Jane.

23

After the publicity from the first Pearl Show, the Forest Service had been deluged with letters and e-mails telling them to leave the old-growth trees alone. Finally, the government gave in and created the Klamath Ancient Forest National Park.

The Tree Nation camp was dismantled, and Jojo, Cheyenne, Mark, Willow and Otter came north to visit their friends and celebrate. The first thing they did was to make a camp in Richard's forest. They set up a tarp shelter for the kitchen and rigged a few tree platforms. They loved sleeping in the trees.

Sage was happy again. The stress of the public appearances and the tension she felt about her relationship with her father slipped away with the merry drumming and dancing around the campfire. She left the pretty barrettes in her room at Richard's house and braided her hair into permanent pigtails.

But Sage soon discovered that things had changed with Tree Nation. Otter had brought his new girlfriend Kathy along. She was nice, and Otter was clearly in love

with her, but seeing them together made Sage realize that another option for love had been closed to her.

The other thing that was different was that no one was changing partners anymore. It was Mark and Willow, Cheyenne and Jojo, and Otter and Kathy. Everyone was a couple and she and Carver and Virgo Jane were a ... well, they were what they were.

Sage began to feel sad so she climbed a tree. She stared down at the camp kitchen from her perch in the tree, her chin in her hand. Her lips pouted as she tried to think things through.

Two nights earlier, Sage, Virgo Jane and Carver had spent the night together for the first and probably the last time. Being kissed on both ends of her body at once was the most electrifying thing that had ever happened to Sage. She climaxed over and over again.

Carver had always been in awe of Virgo Jane. He found her beautiful, but intimidating. Virgo Jane was sweet to Carver on that night but she would not allow him to enter her. She explained to him in a whisper, even though Sage was right there and listening too, that she couldn't do it. "It's not you, Carver—it's penises. I can't."

Sage made love to Virgo Jane and then to Carver. Finally, all three fell asleep in a pile. In the morning, they each knew that things would go on as before—an alternating menage a trois, not a tangled triangle. But Sage couldn't feel sad just then; it had been the best night of her life. Only now did she feel angry that she couldn't have what she wanted.

Sage had a dull pain in her head. It was too much to think about. Fern had come out to the camp that morning and told her that it was time to come back in and talk about her upcoming schedule. There were hundreds of proposals for her to sift through and make decisions about and she didn't know how many more interviews already scheduled.

And still no one had told her when she could go to Africa to be with the wild bonobos.

24

It was a weekend in late September and Sarah and Kevin had come up to visit. The Tree Nation camp had disbanded once again, and Sage was back to spending part of her time at Bonobo House. She had been there all morning playing with her father, her half-siblings and the rest of the bonobos.

She took a break to have lunch in the staff lounge with Sarah, Kevin, Fern and Virgo Jane. The staff lounge was on one end of the enclosure, separated from the bonobos by a brick wall. The room had the same greenhouse ceiling adjusted for normal room temperature. Potted bromeliads and ficus made it a pleasant space.

Sarah was sitting at the large round kitchen table looking through a file of letters and e-mails from entertainment people. The others were busy making lunch.

“What do you think of these, Sage?” she asked. “You’ve got a lot of offers to be in movies.” Sarah gave her daughter a skeptical look.

Sage turned from the counter where she was spreading peanut butter on toast: “Fern says it’s a lot of work and not that much fun. Anyway, I don’t know how to act, and besides most of those movies sound stupid.”

Sarah nodded in agreement as she flipped through the film proposals. One filmmaker wanted Sage to play the part of an alien from outer space. Another wanted to cast her as Eve, the ancestress of all humankind. In his movie, a sabertooth tiger would kill her and humanity would never have evolved. The time traveler from the future would cease to exist at the moment Eve was eaten. “Some of these movies are downright depressing,” Sarah said.

Sage came over to sit beside her mother and pulled a pile of letters from the file. “Look at this bunch. They’re all from musicians. If I were going to do any performing, I’d rather sing and dance. With Carver and Virgo Jane, like we do around the campfire. Some of these musicians want me to perform with them.”

“I think that’s a great idea.” Fern sauntered over and leaned on the back of Sage’s chair, peering over her shoulder at the letters. “Is Chaka in there? I can see you all with Chaka Khan. Or Aretha.” Fern straightened and began to move. “R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me. Just a little bit, just a little bit...”

Sage jumped up to dance and sing with Fern, following Fern’s way of isolating hips, then shoulders, then chest in a sensuous roll that made her breasts shimmy. Sage was a naturally talented dancer.

Kevin explained to Virgo Jane: “You see, when Fern worked at the strip joint in Coos Bay, they let her bring her own music, and ‘Respect’ was her theme song. She never took any crap from those boys.”

“Isn’t that great?” Sarah smiled at Virgo Jane. “I’ve always loved the way Fern is completely unashamed of her body. She was such a good role model for Sage.”

Virgo Jane looked uncomfortable. “Well, I...”

“What is it, dear?” Sarah asked. She was curious about Virgo Jane, this young woman with whom Sage was so involved. She seemed so serious all the time. Sometimes Sarah wondered how stable she was.

“Oh, nothing. Just that’s not the kind of dancing I like to do.”

“Well, what’s your kind of music?” Sarah asked.

Sage and Fern had stopped singing and prancing around the room and everyone’s attention was now on Virgo Jane. Virgo Jane had a crafty look on her face. “Marley-bone,” she said. “There’s a letter in there from her. She wants us.”

Sarah read the letter. “It says she’s going to be in Seattle next week and she wants to meet Sage. She’s reserved the entire front row at her concert for you. Is this your kind of music too, Sage?”

Sage nodded. “Yeah. I’ve only ever heard her CDs. We listened to her a lot in the trees. When we had enough batteries. I really want to see her.” Sarah could see Sage

struggling with her thoughts. Finally she seemed to yield to a generous impulse. "You guys come too. You'll like her."

The next week they arrived early at the Seattle Center for the concert. Marleybone's security met them at their limo and escorted them backstage to meet her before the show.

Marleybone was a British girl from Manchester. She was half European and half Pakistani. Sarah had learned that she was extremely popular in Europe. Sage had given her a CD to listen to and it seemed to be a kind of rap opera with huge vocals.

Marleybone met them in her dressing room. Her wildly teased hair was jet black with bleached blond streaks in it, and her arms were covered with tattoos of animals and trees picked out in small blue dots. But her most amazing feature was her eyes. They were big and round in her tiny face and black and fiery as two lumps of burning coal. She seemed nervous. She thanked them all for coming and then asked Sage if she could hold her hand.

She held Sage's long-fingered ape hand in her two small hands and closed her eyes. She stroked Sage's hand and took deep breaths. It seemed an odd thing to do, but Sarah had no idea what pop artists were like. Maybe they all did bizarre things like this. Finally Marleybone opened her eyes and told them she had to get ready to go on stage.

The house lights were out when Sage's entourage took their front-row seats, and Sage wasn't recognized. Suddenly the lights blazed like a flash of lightning and Marleybone leaped on stage.

"I am a Pict!" she screamed. "A Fairy, a Leprechaun. I am one of the little brown people. We were in England first. We were in America first. Now we are back again. We come in peace, for we are all one. All one! Now is the time!"

Then she flew to her marimba, a beautiful mahogany instrument, and began playing it with the thighbones of some animal. A deer, perhaps? Sarah wondered. Marleybone's rhythms were hypnotic. She let her band build up a throbbing synth sound in back of her and then she unleashed her voice. It was an instrument of unbelievable power bursting from a tiny, bird-like body. She rapped and she chanted. She screamed and she wailed. She sang and she soared with that voice.

Sarah didn't much like the music. There was too much brutality in it. She would be lulled by the mellow marimba tones and then jolted by the screaming.

She glanced over at Sage, who was sitting on the other side of Kevin. Sage was entranced. She shivered and jerked in her seat as if her mind was gone or enslaved to the wail and the beat of Marleybone.

They didn't see Marleybone after the concert, but the next day she met with Sage and Fem and Sage's producer; Annie Tsumura, and they agreed that Sage would dance and sing with Marleybone on her next U.S. tour starting in November. She would also talk to audiences about bonobos and the need to save their wild habitat.

Annie Tsumura designed an installation of ropes and bars for the stage, and Fern helped Sage choreograph her routine.

Fern had to coach Sage a lot at first. The girl was muscle-bound from her life in the trees and she needed to loosen up in the hips. “One, two, three ... one, two, three ... shimmy ... shimmy ... Yes! Shimmy like a snake!”

Between choreography with Fern and rehearsing her routine, Sage’s days were full. Still, she was at Bonobo House nearly every day. Usually she would get some rehearsal time in there as well. Marleybone had given her a special CD with the songs she would dance to on it, and she could put it on over the loudspeaker system and practice her aerial work. She would get started and soon everyone else would join in until the entire biosphere was rocking with swinging bonobos.

When Sage practiced her shimmies, Dexter and Mandy and the other adults didn’t know what to make of it. Some of the youngsters tried to imitate her, which resulted in Sage breaking down into giggles and the instigation of a tickle-fest.

Sometimes Carver would bring his drum into the biosphere and Sage and Virgo Jane would dance together. Usually the adult bonobos would ignore the drumming and go about their business, but sometimes they would come near and sit and even slap their thighs in time. They were starting to find the beat. The youngsters were always around, and Carver even let them bang on his drum.

The fall passed peacefully this way, and Sage was happy. Fern sat out in the audience at Sage’s first show in New York. A slow build of tabla drums and synthesizer chords created a sense of mystery on the darkened stage. Suddenly, a single spot swept the stage and came to rest on Sage, following her as she descended a rope. Conga drums joined in and Sage began to brachiate around the stage, swinging arm over arm from rope to rope, pigtails flopping in time. Her sequined bikini flashed like diamonds, and the drums beat faster and faster as she accelerated in wildly swinging arcs till she flew so fast she was only a streak of light. The crowd cheered uncontrollably.

After coming to rest, Sage lithely dropped to a bar and danced across it on tiptoe, twirled up to a higher bar and grabbed a rope that spun her onto a platform where she shimmied as Marleybone entered the stage. Marleybone’s sinuous vocals slithered and screamed and the crowd screamed with her. At the end of the number, Sage dove off the platform, caught a rope and flew again around the stage, her movements traced by dancing spotlight beams in saturated hues.

Fern was delighted. It was just what she had hoped for. The routine was stunning. Blessed Sage.

Sage had been afraid that she would get stage fright in front of the crowds, but she found that she loved it, at least the dancing part. The roar of the crowd was like helium to her.

The speaking part of the performance was harder. In the middle of the second act, Marleybone would bring her up to the microphone to talk about bonobos and wildlife and ask people to help by consuming less and to “make room for the animals” by having fewer children. She also talked about “making room for the soul” by leaving wilderness

areas where people could go to be nearer to the mountain spirit beings, or whatever their concept of God might be.

But often it seemed to her that the crowds didn't hear her words. They barely responded to what she said. Virgo Jane said it was because they were all high on drugs. The crowd wanted only one thing, to watch her dance. Any movement she made on stage was greeted with feverish applause, but when she stood still and talked, what she felt from the crowd was a nervous, impatient hum.

They had been on tour for five weeks by the time they got to Austin, Texas. Fern was back in Seattle with John and would rejoin them in Los Angeles in a week, leaving Sage, Virgo Jane and Carver on their own. Marley knew a lot of musicians and industry people in town and she invited them all to a party at their hotel suite.

There was half an hour before they had to leave for the stadium. Sage gazed out the window. They were on the top floor of the hotel. They always stayed in tall buildings like this. It was good for security, but Sage was starting to feel that her whole life was taking place inside a lonely bubble floating high above the world. She had gone from an isolated mountain community, to an island, to a wilderness and now to jet planes and high-rises. She had never seen how real people lived.

Sage looked down on the riverfront. Bridges crossed the river and became the arteries of the city, radiating out to the horizon, carrying cars, trucks, motorcycles, people. Trees lined the endless streets. She wondered what it would be like to live down there in one of the houses—maybe with an old oak tree in the yard. She wanted to walk there, swim in the river, climb the trees. Some of the people in those houses would be coming to see her tonight. So many people had seen her now, but she hadn't seen any of them. Being on stage was such a lopsided affair.

Marley knocked on the door just then and asked to come in. It was time for the handholding. Marley liked to do it before every performance, just as she had the first time they met. She said it would get them on the same vibrational level.

Marley sat on the ottoman in front of Sage and silently reached for her hands. Sage closed her eyes and felt Marley's fluttery fingers settle coolly into her grasp. Slowly, Marley's hands and arms and shoulders relaxed and Sage could feel her tension dissipate. She knew there was a great pain somewhere deep in Marleybone and that Marley used her as a sink, a place for her hurt to drain into. Sage could do that. She imagined herself now as a direct taproot into the earth, channeling Marley's raw and abraded vibrations and tuning them to the slower, deeper rhythms of nature. It was a meditation technique that Fern had taught her. She breathed slowly and deeply to help the process along.

After nearly half an hour, Marley opened her eyes and gently lifted her hands from Sage's lap. She smiled at Sage, and Sage felt an electric tingle as their contact broke. They were both ready to go on stage now.

After the concert that night, back in their suite, people milled about at the party. Everyone there had come up to Sage and greeted her immediately after arriving, but now they were all ignoring her. Sage had that feeling again, the feeling she had some-

times had back at Tree Nation, of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, like she was both poles of a magnet at once.

Carver stood next to her. They were ignoring him too. "It's the cool factor; Sage. None of them want to betray their real feelings, so they're pretending we don't exist."

Sage watched the people as they moved in and out of the room. They all looked so much alike, black-clad and thin, metal jewelry piercing their flesh, dyed red or jet black hair and blue tattoos. A few of the men wore kilts, which amused her.

Sage and Carver decided to mingle, and as they moved from room to adjoining room in the suite, they saw people sniffing white powder and smoking pipefuls of fragrant herb. Sage drank a glass of vodka and orange juice that someone poured for her. It tasted good and she had another one. The people at the party began to talk and joke with her, feeling more at ease. Sage couldn't say much. All the sounds echoed in her head. She pretended she understood and grinned.

After a while, Carver said, "I wonder what happened to V.J.? And Marley? I haven't seen them for hours." He slurred his words. He had also had too much vodka.

Sometime later, Sage wasn't sure how long, Marley appeared and took her by the hand. Carver said he was going to bed. Marley led her down a long hall. The walls pulsed, bulging in and out. Sage was dizzy but managed to walk. Marley pulled her into a room where Virgo Jane lay naked on a bed.

Virgo Jane's curls, shiny like polished copper, the bright triangle of matching hair at her pubis, her tender pink nipples and her smiling mouth were like beacons to Sage. She wanted to embrace her lover right then, but found she couldn't move.

Marley sat Sage down on the edge of the bed and started kissing' Virgo Jane. Sage crawled across the bed and soon the three of them were kissing and rubbing and licking. Sage was aroused in a curious fuzzy way, as if there were cotton wool wrapped all around her. She found herself watching Virgo Jane and Marley. They were both so beautiful. She almost felt sad. Then a movement caught her eye as a tall, slender man entered the room. Marley saw him too and summoned him to the bed.

The man wore tight leather pants and an open black leather vest strung with chains that bounced on his bare chest. His waist-length blond hair fell in loose hanks about his clean-shaven face and down his broad back. His bare, muscular arms were rounded and beautiful. Sage's eyes dropped to his waist. He wore his pants so low-slung that she could see the creases where the tops of his thighs met his little belly. She saw a tender line of pale hairs that plunged from his navel into the laced-up leather at his crotch and it took her breath away.

He stopped to lay out some white powder on the table, took a long dagger with glittering gems on its handle from a sheath at his waist and cut the powder into lines. He smiled at Sage and pointed to a line on the table. Somehow she walked over there and sniffed it up. Then he poured her a glass of vodka from the bottle sitting on the table.

Virgo Jane watched Sage and the man doing the drugs, but when he started to loosen the leather bindings at his crotch, she got out of the bed and began putting

on her clothes. Sage saw her say something to Marleybone, shaking her head, but Sage couldn't make out the words. Sage took another drink from her glass and closed her eyes ... Sage fading ... pulsing red swirls ... Virgo Jane loudly saying "eat me." Everything going black.

Sage woke up the next morning, her head splitting with pain and her gut stinging with acid. VJ. lay in bed next to her.

"Uunnggh, what happened to me, V.J.? I feel awful."

Virgo Jane chuckled. "You are not much of a party girl. Good thing, though. Things got really weird after you passed out. Marley was so high that she got kind of crazy. She had this weird idea that she wanted us all to cut ourselves and mix the blood. We'd be blood sisters. She babbled on and on about it. It didn't turn me on at all, and you were passed out, so I dragged you back to our room."

Virgo Jane didn't drink or do any drugs, so Sage knew that she wouldn't have been high and would remember everything.

"VJ., did we go to bed with Marley?"

"Yes. You don't remember?"

"Barely. Was it fun?"

"Yes. Until that man came in and gave you even more drugs and alcohol. It was after that that Marley really got on the blood sister thing."

Sage was sick all day. VJ. was right; she wasn't much of a party girl. She didn't even remember making love with VJ. and Marley, and that was a shame because she was eager for new sexual experiences. What was the point of sex if you got so drugged you weren't really there? She did remember the sexy long-haired man and heartily wished she had stayed awake long enough to see him unlace his leather pants. She vowed that she would stay away from drugs and alcohol the next time there was a party.

Later in the afternoon, when Sage was feeling well enough to drink some juice, Carver came and sat on her bed with Virgo Jane. They discussed Marley's obsession with blood mingling.

"It's totally stupid," Carver said. "What was she thinking? What about diseases?"

"It's a tribal thing, I guess," VJ. said. "I suppose I should feel flattered that she wants us to be part of her tribe, but I don't think I feel that close to her."

"No?" Sage was surprised. She was pleased to hear this. She thought Virgo Jane was partly in love with Marleybone. She had even worried once or twice that VJ. might leave her for Marley. Sage was starting to learn what jealousy was.

"No," Virgo Jane said. "I'm not infatuated with Marleybone anymore. She's brilliant, it's true, but she's a mixed-up druggie. Not my type."

"We've already got a tribe anyway," Carver said, "Tree Nation."

The three of them looked at each other and nodded, remembering their days in the trees.

Carver took Sage's hand and Virgo Jane's and said, "Remember that time we walked over to the clear-cut and smelled death?"

Sage remembered. That summer at Tree Nation, a few weeks after she had arrived, they had hiked down-slope to a freshly cut logging unit. Huge stumps, buried under piles of slashed branches and bark, bled their sap. Sap pooled on the raw stumps and dripped onto thick rinds and shredded shards of bark, giving off an over-poweringly sweet vanilla smell. The smell of death. They had scooped up the sap and glued their hands together with it as they stood, palm to palm, in a circle and swore they were an unbreakable brother-sisterhood for the trees that would not rest until the remaining ancients were safe from the saws. The sticky patches of pitch turned into hard black scabs that stuck to their hands for weeks.

"The blood we share is the blood of trees," said Sage.

25

Sarah and Kevin insisted that Sage take two weeks off from concerts and interviews during their winter break from school to rest and spend time with them. But first, since everyone was in Seattle that week, they held a board meeting.

The Sage, Inc., board met in the spacious conference room at the Martin Campus. Their agenda was to assess the impact of Sage's public appearances: the television interviews and the Marley bone tour.

They took their seats at the conference table. First on the agenda was a report from Matt Lerner, their media consultant.

"Sage has fantastic numbers, fantastic." Lerner's mini-goatee jiggled as he spoke. "Her audience response on talk shows is through the roof. Marleybone was good for us too. And you're getting about a thousand letters a week from fans. A lot of them mention your spiritual message, Sage. They love the talking rainbow mountain story you've been telling. We're thinking about starting a fan club— Sage's Rainbow Club. What do you think?" Matt looked directly at Sage.

Sage grinned wide with pleasure, her nose wrinkling as her lip curled up to reveal her pink gums. "I like that idea."

Matt beamed at Sage, then addressed the whole group: "The focus groups show that she is practically worshipped by soccer moms and the whole under-thirty demographic, especially females. White male numbers are a little softer. But overall it's great."

The board members nodded enthusiastically, as this was what they wanted to hear. But Lerner had more to say. "We need some caution here." Lerner pouted and the goatee tucked under his chin. "Under-thirty is notoriously fickle. What's sizzlin' today is fizzlin' tomorrow. To get lasting market penetration you need a deeper age stratum. Soccer moms are good, but they could just be following their kids. You want boomers, and you got 'em to some extent, but some of them are suspicious."

"What, do they think this is a hoax or something?" Richard said.

"Maybe. It's all been out there, you know: clones, alien babies. They've seen it all and they're on the lookout for scams. It doesn't matter that you've got Dr. Stengers

on board and the National Science Foundation. Authorities don't have the credibility they once did."

Richard scowled.

"There is something you can do about it. Get her face time with people. Do more live public appearances. Get her some small venues too, classrooms and Rotary Clubs. She'll get media coverage on top of it and people will see she's real, not taped, and can talk on her own. It'll help with the tabloids too. They'll start treating her as a celeb and not just another freak."

Kevin got a horrified look on his face. "That's a good thing?"

Virgo Jane said, "Since when do we care about tabloids?"

Matt nodded wearily to each of them and then looked at Richard.

Richard wagged his head gravely. "Face time. I should have thought of that." He turned to Sage. "Sage, what do you think about meeting more people, face-to-face?"

"I'd like it," Sage said. "I'd like to actually talk to people. Especially kids. They're much nicer than adults. Maybe we could visit some schools?"

Here was a chance to finally meet some ordinary people. Not more weird rock stars and not the kind of people she met on talk shows. Those people sometimes asked her hard questions she didn't really understand. Questions about Richard Martin and his money, or rude questions about her sex life, which she told people was none of their business. But the few times she had gotten to meet kids had been great. Kids were nice and wanted to know things like what did she eat and how she did some of her gymnastics tricks. They wanted to know all about bonobos too and could they really talk like people.

"Schools would be interesting," Richard said. "What do you think, Matt?"

Matt thought for a moment. "Schools might be difficult logistically. You have to deal with school boards and you don't have control over the security. But we could set up some special events, sort of receptions I guess, where you could meet with thirty or forty kids and their parents and grandparents. Dig a little deeper into the demographic strata. You've got to remember that what you're selling is not simple," Lerner cautioned. "You're not asking people to buy your product or vote for your candidate. You're asking them for a huge lifetime commitment to caring about your cause. It's more like joining a church, and that usually works best with lots of face time."

"Well then, that's what we'll start doing," Richard said. Everyone agreed, and they set time later on the agenda to plan a schedule of small group meetings.

Next Kevin had a concern. "What do you think about the whacko letters? We've been getting a couple of dozen a week. And that protest?"

Sarah gripped the arms of her chair. She and Kevin had had a long discussion about the letters and the protest outside Sage's talk show appearance in Kansas the week before. She was anxious to see what Matt Lerner would say.

"Well, I've looked at the letters. They almost all use the same language. They talk about the 'demon ape whore' and 'the beast'. I think it's safe to assume that

they come from the same source— some off-the-wall group that has members in the west and the south —because that’s where the postmarks are from. You need to be concerned, because groups like that usually have a few violent nut cases. But I think your present security levels can handle it. Right?”

Lerner glanced at Richard, who nodded in the affirmative.

Lerner continued: “The protest was more mainstream religious types. The anti-evolution crowd. Frankly I’m more concerned about them because they have some appeal, holding up their babies and calling them God’s immortals. Not much we can do about it. Best thing you can do is ignore it, but be prepared. If Sage is confronted, she should say something like, ‘I’m one of God’s creatures like anyone else.’”

“And what about Grabbitt’s bill in Congress?” Kevin asked. “Looks like it’s going to pass. Do you think that will hurt us?”

The bill outlawed the creation of hybrid ape-humans like Sage. Grabbitt had tried to include language that would have made Sage herself illegal and put her into the custody of the Surgeon General, but he had been forced to drop that provision.

“It’s just the usual politics,” Richard said. “It gives the opposition something to rally around, but Sage is safe enough.”

Then Sage wanted to know when she could go to Africa. Sanene was gloomy about it. The situation in the Congo was still horrible, and she didn’t see how they would be able to get in to where the last bonobos live.

“Can’t we do something?” Sage screeched, allowing herself to get upset. Sarah came over and started to rub the back of Sage’s neck, stroking the long silky brown hairs that sleeked down along her scapulas and the back of her arms. She felt her daughter’s flesh quiver with tension under her hands.

Richard shrugged. “Sage, honey, it’s complicated. There are only two ways to stop a war like that. One is to bomb the country’s infrastructure to smithereens and then send in UN troops to pick up the pieces. Only there isn’t much infrastructure to bomb there. And besides, a lot of civilians end up getting killed. The other way is to pump a whole lot of money into a place to jump-start economic development. But that would only encourage the loggers and miners who are building roads into the forest and wiping out bonobos, because natural resources are the first thing any investors are going to go for. We’re trying to work with the current government to arrange a sizable aid package in exchange for bonobo conservation, but power shifts could set us back to square one at any time. And besides, aid like that never gets to the local people who live near the bonobos. They’re more likely to get payoffs from the loggers and miners, so they’ll support them and defeat the whole initiative. And their populations are growing and they need meat, and bush meat is about all there is in that part of the world.”

Sarah kept stroking Sage’s back, glad that Sage let her do it. Listening to Richard’s distressing analysis, she tried to stay calm herself and to not transmit her own tension and worry to her daughter.

Richard continued: “Women are averaging six children apiece. Lots of those kids end up starving on the streets of Kinshasa, where they get recruited as soldiers. Young

boys make the best soldiers, because they've got no inhibitions. It's all a game to them. And now it's a game they can play because the new guns are smaller, lighter and more lethal. The kids can pick them up, carry them around and shoot them. Like we toted squirt guns around when we were kids. It's a hell of a situation."

"I know what we should do." Virgo Jane was seized by an idea. "We should start focusing all our work on sending aid to Africa. We can help the people and save the bonobos at the same time. Let's have a goal of opening a modern health clinic in every single village in the Congo. And starting chicken ranches in every village so the people can have meat."

Glances were shared around the table as they each considered this.

"I think that is a good idea," Sanene said cautiously. "If you can provide some real development assistance, you will likely find a much better reception when you get to Africa. But it will be extremely difficult. Africans are sensitive about self-determination, and you don't want to do anything that seems imposed upon people. Still, it's worth trying."

"It makes sense to me," Sarah added. "With all the money Sage has been earning from her public appearances, you've already got a good start." Sarah was impressed with Virgo Jane's idea. Maybe the girl wasn't as immature as she had thought. She seemed quite sensible, in fact.

Richard looked thoughtful. "It will be some time before the situation in Congo quiets down enough so you can go there. You might as well spend the time raising money for development aid. I'll match anything you raise."

Virgo Jane's face brightened. "Thank you, Richard," she said.

The group turned to planning their next course of action, agreeing that they had ended Operation Debutante and begun Operation Congo. But both Richard and Fern were noticeably quiet. Neither of them contributed much for the rest of the meeting.

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The next day, Fern found herself alone with Richard in the mansion's kitchen at mid-morning, both aiming for the coffee pot.

"Good morning. Say Fern, do you have a moment? Can we find a quiet corner somewhere for a char?"

"Sure."

Richard led her to one of the dining nooks near the kitchen. The windows looked out on a forest of spruce and fir with an understory of sword fern and salal. "It's lovely here," Fern sighed, "almost like home."

"I'm so glad you like it. Fern, I wanted to tell you how much I appreciate your work. Keeping the kids focused and organized, and the fascinating information you and Sanene are uncovering. You're a key part of this project."

“Well... thank you.” Fern was startled. She felt flattered. And suspicious. She had observed Richard’s way with people. He was always charming and would often anticipate people’s needs and fears, providing support and answers ahead of time. But she rarely heard him praise anyone. What did he want from her?

“And also, I want to talk to you about some alternatives.” Richard gazed at her.

Fern regarded him skeptically. His pale thin eyebrows furrowed in what looked like sincere concern on his massive, bony brow. His steel blue eyes locked with hers. He is a good-looking man, in his raw-boned way, she thought. It wasn’t the first time the thought had come to her. Power tempered with sincerity was attractive. The arrogance that most powerful men displayed was reduced to a trace in Richard.

“Alternatives?” Fern said.

“I’ll be direct. The Congo project. I don’t have high hopes for it. I gathered by your silence at the meeting yesterday that perhaps you felt the same.”

Fern gently snorted. “You’re right. I’ve traveled in the Third World. Not much in Africa, but extensively in India and Southeast Asia. I don’t think they have much chance of success. They may be able to help some people, which is fine, but they won’t save the rainforest that way. Too much pressure from economic interests. And the growing population keeps the political situation so unstable that no democracy can take hold to exert any control over the economic interests—the international corporations and the World Bank. Health clinics and chicken ranches by themselves won’t slow population growth fast enough to make any difference.”

“Exactly. That’s why I want to talk to you about alternatives. If there is any prayer of helping bonobos and Africans themselves, we must do more.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“John’s project. We have to find a way to speed it up.”

“Yes, actually, I’ve been thinking about that.” Fern tasted excitement in the back of her throat. Richard was thinking along the same lines as she. “You know John has been taking samples of Sage’s underarm and urine secretions. He’s started testing them on human subjects, so far with no effect. His next step is to isolate and synthesize variations of likely compounds from both Sage and the bonobos, looking for something that works. Only I think he should keep looking at Sage herself. Maybe what he’s collected from her so far isn’t all there is.”

Fern paused, parsing her thoughts. “The reason I’m thinking about this is Annie.”

“You mean Annie Tsumura, Sage’s producer.”

“Yes. Annie’s been trying to get pregnant for months now. She can’t understand why it’s not working. She knows she’s fertile because she had to get an abortion two years ago when she was on a major film deadline and got pregnant. She couldn’t afford to have a baby then; it would have ended her career. Now that she’s established and ready, she can’t conceive. Her doctor can’t find anything wrong. She’s around Sage nearly every day. It makes me wonder. Annie blames it on stress. But stress didn’t keep her from conceiving two years ago.”

Fern stopped and drew a breath. She was getting excited and she could feel her face flushing. She wanted to stay cool around Richard. Let him ask her questions, don't keep talking like a flibbertigibbet.

On cue Richard prompted her: "Interesting. But how could we test your idea? How could we find out if it is Sage or something else that's keeping Annie from conceiving? I guess we could let her go and see what happens, but she's extremely good at her job and I would hate to have to replace her right now. "

Fern's eyes sparkled and the corners of her mouth slid slyly up.

"You've got some kind of crazy brainstorm, don't you, Fern?" Richard was grinning too. He looked like a kid who was about to be shown where the secret clubhouse was in the bushes behind the garage.

"We could collect observations on the people she comes into contact with in the course of her activities. I don't know if you could make it fly, but I was thinking that these face-time events, the small group receptions and Rainbow Club meetings, would be ideal. We need to screen the applicants for security reasons anyway, and it would make sense to do a health screening as well. We can't risk Sage's health by exposing her to people with infectious diseases. We could have them fill out a health questionnaire and get information on the reproductive history of the women. Urine samples would tell us if any were pregnant. Then if we could somehow track them down a year later we could find out if any had become pregnant during the month they had seen Sage, or had miscarriages. The hard part would be the follow-up; it might be hard to get people to answer such personal questions. Anyway, it's just a crazy idea."

"Fern, Martin Enterprises controls ninety percent of the computer security systems in the world. It is a trivial exercise for me to obtain the medical records of just about anyone."

"We could do it then. It would be easy. But..."

"But it would amount to a highly unethical experiment. No informed consent."

"Yes. John would never go for it."

"Does John need to know?"

Fern held silence for a moment. John. How could she do anything without telling John, the only man she had truly loved? It had been such a long road to their happiness. Could she risk it now? And for what? She decided to ask Richard a question.

"Richard, why are you doing this? Why are you spending so much of your money on the lab, and Sage, Inc., and now perhaps this experiment? You know we don't have a prayer of actually changing anything." Fern played the cynic to see how Richard would respond.

Richard grunted. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He seemed to go deep inside. Finally he opened his eyes, stared out the window and said dreamily, "Two things. Revenge? Perhaps."

He turned his focus on Fern: "First. Growing up in Southern California. Escondido, San Diego County. Back then it was the most beautiful place on Earth. As a child, I was all over those oak-covered hillsides. I crawled up creek bottoms, climbed boulders,

captured snakes and frogs, and rescued baby rabbits. I was an only child. I had no friends. Mother was a financial genius, always commuting to LA. My father lived in Florida. He didn't have much to do with me. But I was happy, with my snakes and frogs. Until..."

Fern was amazed to hear Richard's voice crack. She didn't think he was capable of showing emotion like that. He recovered himself and went on.

"Until they built a subdivision all around me and an eight lane freeway that cut me off from the open land. I was twelve. I was geeky and gawky and I'd lost my best friends and only reason to live. Mother was too busy to drive me out into the hills, but she bought me a computer. It was a prototype compact that one of her companies was developing. It took up the entire workbench out in the garage and it had less computing power than your pocket organizer does now. A scientist from the company came over and showed me how to program it. It could play chess with me. I was hooked. But I never got over what they did to my wild land. I want to stop the destruction. Or at least I want revenge. Whatever that could mean."

Richard bowed his head and rubbed his eyes. He looked at Fern again and she could see that he trusted her and was going to tell her more.

"And the second thing?" she asked.

"The second thing was my college roommate. Klinsky. Guy was a physicist, headed for the space program. I envied him. I'd always wanted to be an astronaut. I still think our destiny is the stars and I dearly hope we'll get there one day. But old Klinsky, he used to say things that chilled me to the bone. He thought overpopulation was a good thing. He said it was the only thing that would motivate governments to spend what it takes to explore other planets. Thought it meant job security, I guess. Now I know what an idiot he was. We're burning through Earth's resources so fast that we'll destroy civilization before any space colonization can get off the ground.

"Besides, it's not going to be as easy as it looked when I was a kid. How can humans survive for years in space without gravity and radiation shielding? Maybe we can solve those problems, maybe not. And if not, what the hell are we doing destroying all the beautiful rainforests and wetlands and coral reefs on this planet, replacing them with asphalt and toxic waste dumps? If we're really stuck here until the sun burns out, why are we killing off the only other sentient creatures we may ever encounter, the great apes, the whales and the dolphins? Ah, it makes me sick. Fern. I had to try to do something, and just giving away money is not enough."

Fern nodded in agreement. "So I take it you weren't part of Mars Next then?"

Mars Next was a manned Mars mission backed by some of the world's wealthiest investors. Recently it had failed spectacularly when all seven of its crewmembers died of a mutated viral infection en route to the Red Planet. The investors were attempting to bring the ship back via remote control, but there was a huge outcry about bringing a deadly infection back to Earth, and lawsuits had been brought.

"No, I was not, thank god. But what about you, Fern? I know you're here because you care about Sage, but what makes you consider doing something more now?"

Fern was letting her guard down. Hearing his stories made Richard seem more of a real person to her, less intimidating. She started to slip into her southern Illinois drawl.

"I don't know. I always wanted to do something good, I guess. My father was a preacher, and he almost had us signed up for a mission in South America once. We kids were real excited about it, but Mother had a nervous breakdown and went into the hospital. She was different when she came out, not quite all there, and there was no question of going after that. In college, and grad school, I studied psychology. I wanted to help crazy people. I wanted to help myself. And I did; I recovered from the Cairo Evangelical Free Church." Fern laughed.

"So when I got to the Stonewell Primate Lab, and saw how they were torturing those poor creatures, I thought it was sick, and I made a big scene about it with the department head. I thought I was being noble and good, but quitting the department in protest meant I wasn't around to reform things. I left that up to people like John." Fern paused a moment to pat a stray lock of hair back into place.

"I dropped out. Moved to the beautiful Northwest and became a hedonistic librarian. Figured I'd cultivate my own garden and have a good time. Let the world take care of itself. I thought I was perfectly happy, until Sage came along."

Richard finished her thought: "And then you had another chance, to try to make a difference, do something vital. And this experiment we're talking about could be essential, might be the only way we can accomplish anything fast enough to make a difference for the few bonobos who are left in the Congo."

"Yes. Only John might not think it's so good." But an idea had taken hold of Fern. John had stayed with the lab despite his moral reservations. He had had a major hand in changing things for the better. She would do the same, help Richard with a morally questionable experiment that would serve a much greater end.

"But, you know what," she said, "I think we should do it anyway. The results don't pan out, we don't tell anybody. If they do, maybe John will forgive us for our ... unorthodoxy." Fern produced a devil-may-care grin. Richard matched it with one of his own.

"What the hell," he said, "why not?"

"What the hell," she replied.

27

To everyone's great surprise, one of the first towns to apply for a Sage Salon (the title they had given to the face-time project) was Bethel Bay. They got a note from Marabel Teece, the town's mayor, who at one time had sat on the school board and been responsible for hiring Sarah to teach at the middle school. Sarah was shocked when she heard about it. This was the same woman who had failed to stand up for her when Principal Hixton had fired her.

The letter said: “Since Sage Shepard is a native daughter of our town, we sincerely hope you will look upon our request with special consideration.”

At first, Sarah hated the idea. But Kevin reminded her that they still had lots of friends in Bethel Bay. It was his hometown, after all, and Sarah could see that it was a matter of pride for him. Matt Lerner thought it would be excellent publicity and assured Sarah that Richard’s security team would protect them from any threats.

The gathering of fifty carefully screened residents was held in the town’s Methodist Church, which had a large “community room,” a low-ceilinged room with a faded and worn maroon carpet and comfortably padded chairs.

Kevin looked around the shabby room where over the years he had attended choir concerts, lectures and meetings of the poetry club. The place hadn’t improved any with time. The acoustical tiles on the ceiling were water-stained, and the room smelled faintly of mildew. It felt strange to be back here as if nothing had happened.

Sarah started things off with a little speech:

“As many of you know, I once taught at Bethel Bay Middle School. When I was laid off during the budget crunch and had time on my hands, I decided to volunteer to help with the recovery of the bonobo chimpanzee, an endangered species. I would be lending my womb to incubate a bonobo fetus as a surrogate mother. When they discovered during my mid-term sonogram that the baby was actually half human—my baby—not the bonobo mother’s, the Stonewell lab asked me to abort. I could not do it.”

Sarah scanned the audience. Many of the women were gazing at her with moist eyes. She could tell that a good portion of them had had a similar experience, knowing that the best thing would have been an abortion, yet not being able to choose, letting fate decide.

Sarah was passionately applauded and then Kevin and Sage got up on the stage together. Kevin held Sage’s hand and said: “Hey friends and neighbors, when I was a Bethel High Cougar, we used to say: Cougars aren’t mild—Cougars are wild!” Half the audience joined in on “Cougars are wild.” Kevin looked around the room, beaming a smile. “I’m real proud to be back here in my hometown today. Thank you all for the invitation to my daughter, Sage Shepard.”

As Kevin spoke, Sage looked out over the audience. There was Harmony, smiling at her, and Max, and their mother Heather. Sage almost gasped as she realized that Harmony was seeing the true Sage for the first time. And she was smiling at her. She accepts me now, for who I am, Sage thought, and she smiled back as she felt a great hope rising in her that she really could make people think and change and that people would stop persecuting animals and each other and learn to live in peace.

Kevin squeezed her hand, and Sage caught Harmony’s eyes and began to speak of her love for the mountains and rivers of their area. She said she was thrilled to meet more people from her hometown and then she launched into her standard speech: “Look at me,” she said, “I am half human. I am also half ape. My relatives in the Congo are dying and they need your help. And I mean all my relatives, the people and the

apes.” She passed a hat to collect donations and she concluded with, “and now I’d like to meet each one of you.”

This was what most people came to her salons for, Sage realized. They wanted to shake her hand, to touch her. She hoped it wasn’t merely a morbid curiosity that motivated them, but a genuine interest in the non-human. She began to travel around the room and concentrated on the children. She much preferred to let them ask her questions while their parents listened. She made sure to touch each person though, and look him or her directly in the eyes. She found that it calmed them and reduced the number of embarrassed snickers in her presence.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Teece had cornered Sarah. She was a round little woman with a mouth like a bow and bouncy curls. She placed her pudgy warm hand on Sarah’s arm.

“Sarah, thank you for not mentioning the real reason you were let go. That old so-and-so, Hixton. I never liked that man. I don’t want to speak ill of the dead, but we are better off without that one.” Sarah raised her eyebrows questioningly. “Yes, he passed on last year. Well, I want you to know there was nothing I could do at the time. About letting you go. Oh, but I tell you my dear, I was ready to wring your little neck when you all got arrested and this all came out.”

Sarah looked alarmed. Mrs. Teece gripped her arm even harder. “No, don’t worry, I don’t really mean it. It’s just that everyone knew I had supported you, and they thought I was crazy for associating with you, but then Kevin was arrested too, and everyone knew him. Well, anyway, I want to say that I am so proud of you now. You did a good thing. Your Sage is a lovely little creature and such an example of evolution. I always did support it, you know; I watch those shows, Nova and Discovery, so I understand it, though my son thinks it’s crazy and goes out to the bar to watch the game when I put them on, anyway—”

“Thank you, Mrs. Teece,” Sarah said quickly, thinking it would be her only chance to get a word in. “And thank you for inviting us back here; it’s a wonderful homecoming.”

“Oh, and do you know I’ve got the Chamber convinced? We’re going to put up signs at both ends of town that say: ‘Bethel Bay, Hometown of Sage Shepard.’ Won’t that be nice?”

Nick came up to her then and Sarah pulled away from Mrs. Teece to give him a big hug. His voice was full of emotion: “Sarah, it’s so good that you don’t have to hide away in the woods anymore. Sage is such a great kid. You must be so proud.”

“I am. And sometimes I wish we were still hiding away in the woods, believe me. We miss you all so much.”

Later they invited Nick and their Savage Ranch friends to a party in the tour bus that was their transportation and lodging. It was a wonderful time, and after taking their leave, Kevin and Sarah and Sage were sad to realize that they would never feel so at home anywhere else.

The following day, Nick saw an old high school friend in town. The man stopped him at the corner in front of the gas station and spoke briefly.

“Let Kevin know. The Kristian Kommand isn’t taking this lying down. Bo Breaker is in training. And he’s got backing. Some fellow in the mining industry.”

Sage and her crew were on the road constantly from January till June appearing at Sage Salons and Rainbow Club meetings. They traveled everywhere by bus, and Sage was amazed at the size of the country and the contrasts—the vast empty plains and the sprawling cities and suburbs.

They met with people in church basements, college classrooms, convention centers and restaurants, and Sage finally got to see how people really were. They were warm and friendly and nice, for the most part, but there were some strange things that happened too.

One time, in Nebraska, a man spit on her. Or tried to. Her security team was right on him, grabbing him from behind in mid-spit. He ended up drooling on himself. Sage was disgusted and confused. How could that man hate her so? He didn’t even know her. She had smelled him coming, too. It was that bad smell like that old miner had, Johnnie Blue Creek.

Another time when someone in a restaurant smelled bad to her, she signaled to her security guard and had him removed before he could do anything. Sage and Fern learned not to tell Sarah about these incidents because she would get too upset.

With the arrival of spring, Sage’s companions started getting restless. Cheyenne and Jojo left to go live and work on an organic farm outside Eugene. They were tired of all the traveling and the cities. They wanted to breathe fresh air and make things grow. Sage was envious. That sounded nice to her, but she had obligations.

Carver told Sage that he was getting weary of the travel but said he would stay on just to be with her. Virgo Jane was the one who kept them all going. She was a relentless fundraiser, never missing an opportunity to extract a contribution for Operation Congo. It was VJ. who did most of the talking at the Sage Salons. Sage had enough to do after the presentation, greeting people and making small talk.

Soon it was mid-June and they were back in Seattle for a rest. In July, Sage turned sixteen. There was a small party at Richard’s house. Cheyenne and Jojo came up from Eugene. A few days after the party, Sage, Inc., held a board meeting. Matt Lerner was eager to give his report.

“The Rainbow Clubs are taking off. It’s phenomenal. You’ve got dozens of groups in every major city now. Sage’s Salons really jumpstarted it, but they’re starting up everywhere. I haven’t seen anything like this since AA and the self-help movement in the 1980s. Here’s what we need to do: these groups are on their own and they need guidance. They need trained leaders, they need workshops and conferences, and they need books, tapes, CDs. We’ve got low-hanging fruit that’s practically rotting on the ground here, people. I need your authorization to get going.”

Kevin was skeptical about turning Sage into a marketing phenomenon, but Fern was enthusiastic. “Look, it’s a great opportunity for Sage to spread her message about saving bonobos and the forests. It’s like multiplying the few of us a thousand times.

If we can train a group of committed leaders to work with other people to get them concerned about bonobos —”

“But what do these clubs do right now?” Kevin asked. “Why are they so damn popular?”

“Well,” Matt responded, “people are taken with the idea of Sage as a spiritual leader. The rainbow mountain story is popular; the book’s been on the best-seller list for eleven weeks now.”

Rainbow Mountain was a slim volume that told Sage’s story in her own words (as interpreted by a ghostwriter), climaxing with her vision in the mountains.

“They read from the book at club meetings. Some of them practice meditation, and a lot, particularly in the west, do group hikes in the outdoors and ...”

“What?” Kevin asked.

“Well, in some places the Rainbow Clubs are serving as sort of ... um, sex clubs, I guess. People who are inspired by bonobos. People with unusual sexual habits are showing up to recruit partners. You know, gays, wife-swappers, nothing really kinky. But we can’t let it get out of control. So that’s why we need the workbooks and leaders and so forth.”

Kevin laughed. He didn’t say any more.

“And that’s why we need Sage to come to more of the meetings. We need to establish the right tone for these things. They’re going to pay a lot more attention to Sage’s spiritual and political message if they get to meet her in person. They’ll forget about that bonobo sex stuff.”

Fern frowned and said, “Wait a minute, this is not a bad thing. Religion is just channeled sexuality. Kundalini is the most fundamental of fundamentalisms. We shouldn’t be too puritanical.”

“Let’s not get into this now, okay,” said Kevin, “because we’ve been through it before. If we’re going to do this, let’s not create some nutty cult. Let’s keep it about bonobos and the forests and leave the sex and religion out of it.”

Fern gave up the argument, and Sage decided that she didn’t understand any of it and would not even try to think about it.

Sage was glad to be back in Seattle where she could drop in at Bonobo House any time she wanted and fling herself about in the vines and branches, roughhousing with her cousins until exhaustion. It was the best way for her to forget about the tensions and strangeness of the tour and all the new people she had encountered.

Soon after their return to Seattle, Carver told her that he had decided to go back to school. His mother was pressuring him, he said, but Sage could tell he really wanted to. “It will just get harder if I wait,” he said to her. “I’m enrolling at U-Dub, so I can see you every weekend when you’re home. They have a great pre-med program.”

“Yeah, I understand. You’re so smart.” Sage pursed her lips and took Carver’s kiss. She was sad. She thought about what it would be like to be a college student and normal. But she could barely spell. She knew college was no place for her. “I’ll miss you.”

"I know," Carver said, "I'll miss you too. But you've got to get out there and raise that money so you can go to Africa. Just think, Sage, you're going to see the bonobos."

Carver held Sage and rubbed her arms and kissed her neck.

Sage trembled with emotion. "I can't wait, Carver. To see the bonobos, wild and free in their forest. I have to go."

Carver nodded and hugged her more tightly. Her body was such a miracle to him. He hated to be away from her. But he knew his mother was right and he had to pursue his own career. Much as he loved her; he couldn't follow Sage around for another year. It would matter little in the long term anyway. He would be a doctor and after Sage got back from Africa they would settle down in Seattle together, traveling to Africa to visit the bonobos whenever she wanted. For some reason he could not name, Virgo Jane did not appear in this vision of their future.

Fern had signed Sage up for a full schedule of Rainbow Club meetings that fall, and Virgo Jane was still enthusiastic. They were only halfway to her goal of raising a billion dollars for Africa.

At one Rainbow Club meeting in New York, Fern had an epiphany. A beautiful Brazilian woman named Janaina brought Sage a little metal charm of a naked woman with the head of a monkey. The woman said they were being manufactured in Brazil.

"It is you, Sage. They have made you a saint, in the religion of Santeria. Do you know Santeria? It is an African religion, brought to the Americas by slaves. Very popular there and in Cuba, Miami, and here in New York too. Their saints are called Orishas and they say you are the female aspect of Agan, the spirit of the ancestors. They say your coming is of tremendous importance because Agan has never been visible to people before. Generally it is a spirit of the night, not seen and only felt.

"When I saw this I went to a woman I know who is Egbomi, a priestess. She told me that it is good luck that you have come to us. It means that the ancestors are willing to help us and that soon we will all have great wealth and happiness. I wanted to make sure that you knew about this."

Fern took this as a sign that they had broken through on a whole new level, and that soon people all over the world would experience religious revelations about Sage. Fern had no faith in politics. She was increasingly convinced that only religious conversion could change human consciousness and save the planet.

After a short break for the Christmas holiday, Sage and Virgo Jane went back on tour. Sarah insisted that they return to Seattle every two weeks that spring so Sage could rest. In her opinion, Virgo Jane was too driven. Sage was happy to slow down some and have more time with Carver. By May she was more than ready to call it quits and settle down in Seattle for the summer.

It had been a year and a half since they had launched Operation Congo. At the next board meeting, Sage was overjoyed when Richard told them that his analysts had finally deemed it safe for her to travel to Africa. She would leave in the fall.

They had raised seven hundred and fifty million dollars through Sage's public appearances and television shows. Rainbow Club members had been big supporters. With

Richard's match, they would be going to Africa to announce a one point five billion-dollar gift for health clinics and poultry ranches in the Congo basin.

Part III

Time to plant tears, says the almanac.

—Elizabeth Bishop, “September Rain Falls on the House”

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It was September and finally time to leave for Africa. Sage, Virgo Jane, Sanene and Fern would travel on the continent for six weeks, spending as much time as possible with the bonobos. Afterward they would continue on to tour Asia and Europe for another four weeks. Carver would stay in Seattle. He could not afford to interrupt his coursework.

They boarded Richard’s private jet in Seattle for Accra, Ghana. Richard, Sarah and Kevin were coming too, but they would only be in Ghana for a week. Richard would help complete the arrangements for Operation Congo, and Sarah and Kevin wanted to see some of Africa. There was also a cameraman named Roger Ohrfield who would record Sage’s meetings with African people and the chimpanzees.

They would base their trip at Sanene’s family compound in the town of Kumasi. Kumasi was the traditional seat of the Ashanti kings, and most of the relatives of the royal family lived nearby.

That evening, as they jetted through the night across the North American continent, they gathered in the plane’s lounge and listened to Sanene tell the story of the Ashanti resistance to British rule in 1896. The resistance was led by one of her ancestors, a powerful Ashanti queen. Ghana finally achieved independence in 1957, the first African country to break free from the colonial powers. They were all struck by Sanene’s deep pride in her heritage and her country. It made them even more excited to see Ghana.

They landed in Accra at daylight and were served breakfast on the plane before piloting into two Mercedes Benz limos for the trip to Kumasi. Leaving Accra mid-morning, Sage saw crowds of people walking into the city, carrying an amazing assortment of things on their heads: piles of cardboard boxes, bundles of cloth, trays of coconuts, stacks of firewood. Bright hand-painted signs lined both sides of the road. From the pictures they looked like advertisements for beer, barbershops, computers and phone services. Sage cracked open the window to see what the air was like outside. A hot, humid breeze carried the fishy odor of the sea and diesel exhaust from the busses and trucks.

They left the coast for the interior; and as they climbed higher; the air cooled slightly. The hilly landscape was a mosaic of farms and forest. Sage was excited to see banana trees, and made her limo driver stop to let Sanene buy bananas from a woman who had a stall by the roadside.

Although Kumasi was only two hundred miles from the coast, it took most of the day to get there. The road was paved, but narrow and winding. Cautious driving was called for as colorfully painted busses full of people and trucks stacked full of crooked hardwood logs came barreling past them on their way down to the port at Accra. They began to see mining pits everywhere. Ghana was part of Britain's old Gold Coast colony and was one of the world's most important gold-producing regions.

"At least we still have a government-owned mining company," Sanene told Sage, Sarah and Kevin who rode in the limo with her. "In other parts of Africa, all the profits leave the country in the hands of international corporations. As the first African country to throw off colonialism, we were known as the 'Black Star of Africa.' Because of our gold, Ghana had great potential at independence in 1957, but I am afraid we haven't lived up to it. We never seem to keep up with our population growth. We invest in our people and we have ambitious plans for education, but it is more and more a struggle just to keep everyone fed."

Sanene's pain showed in her face. "We count our blessings. We live in peace and so we are better off than many other African nations."

Finally, they reached a high, flat plain and the outskirts of Kumasi. They drove slowly through the city. There were solid buildings of stucco with tile roofs and flimsier shacks with metal roofs. Many of the streets were paved. There were streetlights too, though Sanene said they hadn't worked in years. There were palms and lawns and green shrubbery. Nearly every house had some banana trees and a small garden. Chickens scratched in the yards. School was getting out, and children in neat brown school uniforms ran and played in the streets.

They reached the city center and passed a bustling market with countless ramshackle stalls selling produce, cloth, shoes, radios and a thousand other things. Sage gasped at the sight of all the women draped in brilliant lengths of printed cloth. "They're so beautiful. Please, Sanene, will you buy me some cloth like that?"

"Of course, dear Sage. Perhaps, after you are here a few days, we can go to the market and you can pick out what you like for yourself."

Then they were at the edge of the town and climbing up a moderate slope to a hill overlooking the city. They approached a long cement wall, encrusted on top with colored shards of broken glass, beautiful but lethal. Two men stood outside a double gate of wrought iron, waiting for them. They swung the gates open and the cortege drove through into the Akbe Ato family compound.

The compound was modeled after an Italian villa. Terrazzo floors and fountains combined delightfully with orchids and banana trees. Bright birds squawked in the gardens. A young boy stood in the midst of a grove of mango trees and whipped a

long stick back and forth. Sanene told them he was there to chase birds away from the ripe mangos.

Servants took them immediately to their rooms to freshen up from the journey and rest for half an hour. Then it was time for the evening meal where they were introduced to Sanene's family.

Sanene's father, Kwaku, was an executive of the government-owned mining company, Ashanti Goldfields. He was a man of good humor, educated at Cambridge like Sanene. He wore western clothes — a pink Izod shirt and khaki pants. Her mother, Mina, wore a dress made of traditional cloth, a red and white geometric print, in a flattering Western cut. Mina had been educated locally at the University of Ghana in Accra, and she was of the royal Ashanti line. Grandmother and Aunt were also of the royal line, and both wore beautiful traditional clothing, while Sanene's brother and sister-in-law and their children all wore casual western shorts and T-shirts.

The food was delicious, if unfamiliar. They were served akara, a spicy fried bean cake, grilled chicken, a savory pastry filled with mashed plantain and onion, a fresh vegetable salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, okra and peppers, a spicy soup with beef, ginger and red pepper, and something called fufu. Dessert was chocolate pudding with bananas.

Fufu was a starchy dish that looked and even tasted like mashed potatoes but was stretchy like bread dough. The Africans rolled it into little balls and dipped it into their soup.

Sage rolled her fufu into a ball and began playing with it, pulling it like taffy until she saw Sarah give her a disapproving look. Embarrassed, Sage put the fufu back on her plate and sipped her soup, daintily. She shot a grimace back at Sarah. She knew that she might offend someone if she wasn't more careful and it was important for her to pay attention to such things, but she was annoyed that her mother had caught her bad table manners.

She knew she was being silly to resent her mother's presence in Africa, but the whole point of this trip was for her to finally connect with her African homeland on her own terms. She reminded herself that Sarah had wanted to sign up for the whole expedition. Sage had had to be very firm that she was not wanted, but it was difficult. She didn't like having to reject her mother. She glanced back at Sarah and gave her a conciliatory smile.

The Americans ate heartily of all the dishes. They hadn't had a real meal since breakfast. Servants kept their plates full and poured an excellent California Chardonnay. Kwaku and Richard talked computers while the other Africans concentrated on learning the names and relationships of their guests.

Richard had met Kwaku years before in connection with establishing Internet protocols for the African continent. Kwaku had organized an important conference, and the two men had enjoyed beers and conversation during the evenings. Kwaku had tried to get Richard to visit his home for many years, but Richard had not had time until now. He and Sanene had met in London when she accompanied her father to another

computer conference. Kwaku was happy to see his daughter's liaison with his old friend, but was enough of a traditionalist to want to set the seal of marriage on them. He had mentioned his concern to Richard, and tonight, after the dessert, bottles of champagne were brought out and Richard announced his intentions.

"A toast to my new son-in-law," Kwaku cried, as Sanene beamed and her mother wiped tears from her eyes. "And now it is time for you to endure the most arduous of Ashanti customs, the recitation of proverbs."

"Oh no, it can't be that bad, Kwaku." Richard grinned.

"No, probably not, because my father isn't here. He could keep you up all night listening to them. Lucky for you, I know only a few. First, proverbs about marriage: 'Marriage flourishes only in the garden of patience.'"

"Yes, so true," Sarah sighed. Kevin nudged her and looked around. Everyone was smiling at them.

Kwaku continued: "If no time is allowed for cooking, one eats half-cooked food." Nods all around.

"If a marriage fails, it is because the wife has not worked hard enough at it." The Ashanti women hooted and Kwaku drew back like he expected this reaction.

Then Grandma recited something rapidly in her high, scratchy voice. Sanene translated for the guests. "Grandma said don't forget the other half of that proverb: 'If a marriage fails it is because the husband does not appreciate how hard his wife is working.'" The whole table laughed.

Sage noticed that the old woman's eyes were laughing even though her mouth was twisted in a grim and disapproving frown. She remembered Sanene talking about her grandmother scaring the children as she impersonated the python healer, and she thought of the strong Ashanti Queen who had led the rebellion against the British. This woman was related to her.

"And now some traditional Ashanti proverbs," Kwaku said. "The Ashanti people are like two crocodiles with one stomach, we swim together, and yet when it is mealtime we struggle with one another."

The Americans looked puzzled at that one. Kwaku explained. "It means that we believe struggle and competition are good and necessary, and wealth is not to be despised, even though our greater goal is unity. Unity in diversity defines us as a people."

Grandma recited something that translated as "Virtue and goodness are better than gold."

Kwaku bowed to the tiny old lady. "Mother has recited you our greatest proverb, our golden rule."

"Kwaku, tell me that proverb you told me last time I saw you, the one about selling your mother?" Richard asked.

"Ah, one of my favorites: 'If power is for sale, sell your mother to obtain it. Once you have the power there are several ways of getting her back.'"

“Oh, that’s ...” Sarah did not say “awful” as she meant to, out of fear of offending, but Mina turned to her and said quietly, “Yes, it is rather awful, isn’t it?”

Sage glanced at Grandma. She was expressionless.

Richard grinned. “That’s great. My philosophy to a ‘T’. I love the way you Ashanti think. And I am honored and flattered that you consider me to be at all worthy of becoming one of you.”

“Oh, come off it now Richard, you know we’re delighted to have you join the family. Let’s have another toast, to Richard and Sanene.” Kwaku raised his glass high.

It had been a wonderful evening, but after the last toast, the guests started drifting off to bed. The long trip had exhausted them.

The next few days passed quickly for the Americans. Richard and Fern and Sanene worked in Kwaku’s office in the family compound to finalize their travel and security arrangements. Kevin, Sarah, Sage and Virgo Jane, along with Roger Ohrfield, the cameraman, went sightseeing. They drove forty kilometers west to a monkey sanctuary.

There Sage had her first experience of an African tropical forest. She wandered away from the others and crouched in the dim, torpid atmosphere. She had never seen so much green. The conifer trees of home were green enough, but when you stood under the canopy, you mostly saw columns of living wood—masses of rich browns with muted reds and yellows. Here you could barely make out the tree trunks. They were choked with vines and leaves of every size and shape. The reds and yellows here were bright flashes of color in the blooms and fruits hanging overhead.

The monkeys were astonishing. They reminded her of her squirrel playmates at home, but with a difference. They looked like her. Sage didn’t know how to feel about that. She had always thought squirrels were silly and yes, beneath her. Now here were these creatures who acted even sillier than squirrels, flinging themselves from tree to tree above her head and screaming like the world was ending. She thought of her own screeching episodes and was embarrassed.

She looked to her right and saw Roger a short distance away, half hidden in the trees with his camera trained on her, capturing her moment of introspection. He was young and good-looking, and she lusted after him, even though she knew he was married. She wondered what he thought of her. Then she snickered and thought, really, humans were the silliest creatures of all. Always worried what other people thought of them.

The next day, a group of reporters came to the house to interview Sage for Ghanaian television. Kwaku welcomed her in Twi, the Ashanti language. The reporters asked her a few questions in English, including the purpose of her visit.

As rehearsed, she made a short statement about Africa being the home of all mankind as well as all chimpanzees. She said she had to come to learn more about her heritage from both of her parents. And she wanted to see what she could do to encourage sustainable development for the benefit of both people and animals.

Now that Sage’s visit to Kumasi was public knowledge, Sage could venture out without causing a panic. As promised, Sanene took the Americans to the town market on the day after the news report. As they wandered through the packed streets, lined

with stalls, children stared at Sage. The adult women and older men did not stare. They would glance at her and then look away politely, but some of the young men gaped openly and rudely at her.

They passed a section of produce with mingled scents of spice and ripe fruitiness and rot, and moved on to the cloth market. Sage looked over a dozen stalls before one of the women smiled invitingly at her. She went into the woman's stall and began fingering the brilliant cloths. She chose a blue, green and red geometric print and a yellow and brown print that looked like flowers and leaves. Fern and Sarah also bought several cloths. Virgo Jane scorned fashion in general, but she bought a small square of red cloth to use as a headscarf that she would wear with her usual jeans and black T-shirt.

"I will help you arrange these cloths in traditional style to wear at the party if you like," Sanene offered. There was to be a reception for the Americans at the house the next day. Kwaku's friends and business associates as well as other members of the Umgud clan wanted to meet Sage.

The next morning, after bathing, the women all gathered in Sanene's room to dress for the party. Sage chose the yellow and brown print to wear that day. It was thick, waxy cotton and made nice sharp creases when Sanene draped and pinned it. Sarah wore a print of blue and white gauze that Sanene belted with a strip of gorgeous red and blue kente cloth. Fern's choice was a bold green and black diamond print of soft cotton that clung to her figure. Virgo Jane wore her new red scarf, and Sanene wore a bright orange and yellow print dress with a ruffle at the hip.

Banquet tables were laid out in the gardens and around the pool. People began arriving at eleven o'clock in the morning, and soon there were more than a hundred people milling around, laughing and talking. After spending hours with Kwaku greeting guests as they arrived, Sage was finally free to wander. She took Virgo Jane's arm and they headed to the gardens, drawn by the sound of music. The guests followed Sage with discreet glances as she walked among them. A group of traditional drummers and dancers was performing in the mango grove. Sage's hips started shaking to the beat and her eyes grew bright with excitement.

"We're here, V.J., we're really in Africa."

Virgo Jane patted Sage's hand and smiled. "It's too bad Carver isn't here. He'd love the drumming."

Soon, Sage couldn't help herself, and she began to dance. The dancers welcomed her into their circle and she watched and imitated and tried to keep up with the intricate steps, hip thrusts and arm waves.

While Sage was dancing, Sanene introduced Virgo Jane to a cousin of hers, Prince Kwesi Nkrumah Umgud, who was active in social reform. He was a tall young man with blue-black skin and a beautiful egg-shaped head with high cheekbones and short-cropped hair. He wore a traditional kente cloth toga, as did many of the male guests. He stood near the punch bowl with Virgo Jane and told her about his work.

"Mining reform is my biggest concern. Everyone thinks Ghana is so progressive, but a terrible thing has happened in the last decade. The World Bank has forced us to let more mineral concessions to offshore companies and they are raping us blind. They come to a village, get a village elder who cannot even read to make his thumbprint on a document and then they move everyone off the land so they can dig a pit to mine gold. They pollute the rivers with arsenic and mercury and leave with all the money when they are done."

"That's terrible." Virgo Jane was shocked. "What can you do?"

"Well, education." Prince Kwesi twirled his punch cup sadly. "Some change has happened already." He smiled and his face filled with hope. "Ghana is a great country. We must save our natural resources for our future generations, not let British and American companies make off with everything."

"Colonialism has never really ended, has it?" Virgo Jane said.

"No. You are correct. We are still dealing with it. It has only changed its name. It's now all done through the World Bank. They call it globalization."

"Prince Kwesi," Virgo Jane asked, "isn't there anything you can do besides education?"

"Yes, we have some other projects. If you are interested, let me introduce you to my friend Louise."

Prince Kwesi introduced her to a young French woman with lanky brown hair and a strong handshake, and after a bit, the three of them moved off to a bench under a banana tree for a long conversation.

Late that night, when Virgo Jane and Sage finally made it to bed, Virgo Jane couldn't stop talking about Prince Kwesi.

"V.J., he's a gorgeous man, that's for sure," Sage smiled sleepily.

"Sage, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm telling you what he told me. Do you realize that Sanene's father refuses to admit that there is a problem with big mining companies in Ghana? I asked him about what Prince Kwesi told me and he said we shouldn't listen to him, that he was blowing the problem out of proportion."

"Uh huh."

"Sage, are you even listening to me?"

"Yeah, but I like Kwaku, He's a really nice man. Why do you always have to be so critical of everybody?"

Virgo Jane rolled over on her back. Sage could feel VJ.'s body go tense and stiff under the covers and she was sorry she had said anything. VJ. was probably right about the mining companies. She just didn't want to get into a depressing discussion after such a nice day. "Come on, let's go to sleep," Sage whispered.

"Sage, here's another thing. Until ten years ago there were still ten thousand wild chimpanzees left in Ghana. Now there are none."

"Oh no." Sage felt a lump in her throat. She sighed and reached out to put her arms around Virgo Jane. They held each other tight for a long time before drifting off to sleep.

The day after the reception, the Operation Congo team began to arrive at the compound. Gita and Prabander Nareem were an Indian husband-and-wife pair who had worked for the UN. The Nareems were now working with the Congolese government to negotiate the deployment of their aid package. Harry and Mike were the two ex-Green Berets who would provide their security.

Everyone gathered in the living room to meet the new team members and get an update on their plans. The Nareems reported that things were going as well as expected in negotiations with the government in Kinshasa, but as far as getting into the bush to see bonobos, it would be difficult. There were still rebel troops in the area. "But we're trying to work something out with the Ugandans who are backing those troops. We may get permission, for a price, of course. And it is extremely touchy because we don't want to offend Kinshasa."

Richard authorized a large payment to the Ugandan government if necessary. Sarah and Kevin listened to the discussion with growing consternation. Later, they took Richard aside and told him they were concerned about the situation.

"How can these two guys be adequate security for Sage?" Kevin demanded. "It seems like things have gotten more unstable. Do you really think this is still a good idea?"

Richard listened patiently. "I'm not going to discount your concerns," he said, "but you should know that Harry and Mike are the absolute best in this business. All the big relief agencies—Oxfam, Catholic Relief, and so on—use them. There isn't anybody better. And they're not alone. They'll be picking up additional forces in Kinshasa. As far as the situation being unstable, believe me, it's no different than usual."

Sarah watched Richard's face. She wanted to trust him. He turned to her and she said, "Richard, if things get worse, Harry and Mike will call off the mission, right?"

"Of course. Keeping Sage safe is the first priority. I know she wants to see the wild bonobos more than anything, but Harry's only mission is her safety."

Sarah nodded and sighed. She looked at Kevin helplessly. "I don't see what else we can do. Sage wants to do this. If we stopped her now, I don't think she'd ever forgive us."

The next morning, Sarah went for a walk in the mango grove with Fern to say goodbye. They sat down on a wooden bench under one of the trees. She needed to say something, but she felt inarticulate. Finally she blurted out: "Fern, take care of Sage for me. Don't let anything happen to her. I know Richard has these great security guys in charge, but..."

"They're men, right?" Fern said as she clasped Sarah's hands. "And you're afraid they'll take too many risks?"

"Yes, I guess that's what I mean. So if something doesn't feel right to you, please, speak up, okay?"

"Come on Sarah, have you ever known me to hold my tongue about anything?"

Sarah laughed. "All right. I knew I didn't really have to say anything to you. You understand. Oh Fern, you've been such a good friend. You're like my big sister." Sarah put her arm around the older woman and leaned her head on Fern's shoulder. Fern gave Sarah's waist a squeeze.

Leave-taking was hard for the three who were heading back to the States, but Sage was hopping with excitement as the trip to the Congo drew nearer. She hugged Sarah and Kevin and she remembered to thank Richard before he boarded the limo for the long ride back to Accra. "Richard, thank you for everything you've done for me, and the bonobos. I know it's costing you a lot of money."

Richard embraced her. He patted her head and then held her at arm's length. "I want to do something for those bonobos as much as you do, my dear." His expression was fierce. "My dream is that someday you'll be able to visit them any time you like. Now you be careful, okay? And do everything Harry and Mike tell you; they're the best. You'll be safe with them."

While they waited for things to settle out in the Congo, Sanene arranged a trip to a chimpanzee research station in Cameroon. There they would visit Sage's more distant cousins, the common chimpanzee, *Pan troglodytes*, still living in the wild. On the way back they would stop in Yoruba territory in northern Nigeria to visit some Yoruba religious leaders who had requested a meeting with Sage through Fern's Brazilian friend, Janaina. Fern considered it an important meeting. The Santeria Orisha spirits had their origin in Yoruba tradition. Fern was anxious to find out if the Yoruba also regarded Sage as the incarnation of the Orisha called Agan.

Their jet plane had arrived with Harry and Mike and was ready for them at the Kumasi airport. Harry told them that the Russian-made Ilyushin jet was the preferred cargo plane in Africa used by relief agencies and smugglers alike. It could handle the roughest of jungle airstrips and it would be the workhorse of their Congo village development program, once it got started, delivering supplies and personnel to the remotest outposts. The plane got them to the research station in Cameroon in four hour's time.

The research station was eye-opening for Sage. Although the chimps there were used to humans, they didn't know what to make of her. At her first encounter with them, she was attacked. As she approached a mixed group of males and females with her hand outstretched in greeting, the dominant male charged her. She ran behind the group of researchers who had escorted her, and watched as he bared his teeth.

The researchers thought that she was enough like the chimps to be perceived as an enertiy, a chimp from a neighboring territory who needed to be driven away. The chimps had been known to kill their neighbors in battles over territory. Sage was upset, but Dr. Samuels, head of the research team, assured her that the bonobos were different. "Those guys are the 'make love not war' chimps. Our guys here are the 'all's fair in love and war' chimps."

Sage asked why they were so different.

Dr. Samuels explained:

“We believe that it has to do with food availability. The bonobo chimpanzee, *Pan paniscus*, is only found south of the Congo River, where there are no gorillas. North of the Congo, chimps and gorillas divide up the resources. Chimps eat fruit and gorillas eat tender leaves and shoots—salad, basically. Because there are no gorillas in the south, the bonobos can eat both fruit and salad. Since there’s more food available year round, the females can afford to hang out together in large numbers. Because the bonobo females are always together, they can form powerful coalitions that dominate the males.

“Here in the north, since the gorillas are eating up the good salad material, the chimps have to rely on the scarcer fruit trees. Our chimps often have to separate into mother and child pairs to avoid competition from other chimps. They don’t form the kind of bonds that bonobo females do, and the males take over. So the whole society is more aggressive.”

After Cameroon, they flew to Nigeria. The meeting with the Yoruba religious leaders was both hopeful and disturbing. They were greeted warmly and feted with bean cakes and cassava and palm wine for two days before they realized why the religious leaders wanted to see Sage. There was a dispute between the two most exalted elders over whether or not Sage was truly the incarnation of the Orisha Agan.

Elembe Ogumbo was the elder who supported this status for Sage. They were staying at his compound, and one evening he told them the story of Agan:

“One time there was an old man who was dying. He was a respectable man, but his sons were thieves. When he was dead, instead of burying him properly and making all the observances and sacrifices, the eldest son ran away in fright. The second son wrapped a shroud around his father, but then left to tend his garden. The third son took the body to the market to sell his father’s parts to makers of magical charms.”

Though they had obviously heard the story many times before, the audience gathered around the old priest gasped loudly. It was an unthinkable violation to do such a thing to one’s own father.

“The third son grew tired before arriving at the market so he threw his father’s body in the bush to rot. Later, the eldest son married, but his wife could not produce any children, until one day she went to a stream to draw water. There she was attacked and raped by a chimpanzee. The chimpanzee made her pregnant and she gave birth to the child, Agan. Agan came to remind people to honor their ancestors.”

The priest looked carefully at Sage with kindly eyes. “And it is my belief that you are the incarnation of Agan. That our god Ogun has sent you to us to remind us to honor our ancestors. And not just our human ancestors but our animal ancestors as well. Today we log and log and mine and mine and take and take. The Orishas are unhappy, and they have sent you to us as a warning.”

Sanene then asked the elder why the other faction of Yoruba disagreed with this interpretation.

“Bah! They are getting money. From the loggers. They sell their villages to logging concessions. And to oil men. I wanted them to see you, so they know you are real and

not some robot like we see in movies. That's what they say, you know. But now they have met you and they can see. They will change their minds."

Because Harry and Mike were anxious to avoid any conflict, they packed up and left Elembe Ogumbo's compound the next day and flew back to Kumasi.

They were in Kumasi only a few days when the Nareems contacted them and asked that Sage come to Kinshasa at the request of the Congolese government. The head of government, Colonel James Moyo, wanted to meet her.

On the drive from the Kinshasa airport to the government buildings, they passed through the worst slums they had yet seen in Africa. Sage was horrified to see nearly naked bodies lying everywhere in the streets. The only indication that the bodies were still alive was that they lay in the shifting patches of available shade and not out in the blasting sun. Tiny children wandered alone, digging in refuse heaps, their bodies covered with open sores. The stench of the streets was appalling, even filtered through the limousine's air conditioning. Sage and Virgo Jane silently clung to each other in distress. There was really nothing to say about the human tragedy rolling by outside their windows.

Harry and Mike had brought on additional security to accompany them to the meeting with Colonel Moyo. Half an army was bivouacked in the halls of the dilapidated Government Conference Building. Men lounged and played dice. They cleaned guns and ate peanuts. Some stood guard at the doorways to important offices. They stared at Sage as their party squeezed through the crowded corridors.

They were escorted into a capacious hall paneled in African teak, lit by high windows. A fax machine burbled and screeched in a small adjoining room where a clerk was filing papers. A tired-looking man in a green military uniform was installed in an immense leather chair behind a large teak desk. Seated to one side of the desk was a light-skinned African woman of late middle age. A bright orange dress covered her ample bosom and revealed shapely legs. She had a twinkle in her eye and a welcoming smile.

The arrivals were introduced to the Colonel. The woman was Mrs. Lumbala, a Congolese businesswoman who had taken up the cause of endangered bonobos. She had been the most recent person to visit the bonobo research site deep in the heart of the forest that had been abandoned eight years earlier when war had overtaken the area.

The meeting was brief. Colonel Moyo examined them all in a rapid shifting of glittering black pupils. His gaze settled on Sage for a moment and his eyes opened wide. Then he stood and spoke, addressing himself to Sanene:

"On behalf of the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, I extend my thanks to you and your fiance for your gift of aid to our country. We wish to assist you in your objective of establishing contact with the endangered bonobos in the war-torn part of our country. We will offer you such protection as we are able. And we offer you the services of our friend, Mrs. Lumbala, as your guide. God go with you." The colonel nodded and sat down. The audience was over.

The Nareems suggested that Mrs. Lumbala accompany them to the Grand Hotel Kinshasa where they were staying. They could secure a private dining room to eat and discuss their plans.

Virgo Jane was depressed and angry at all the misery they had seen in Kinshasa that day. She couldn't abide the thought of sitting in a private dining room and being waited on by servants.

First, she went to the hotel desk and got a sackful of the nearly worthless Congolese francs. Then she and Sage, accompanied by two of their security men, went outside the hotel to a throng of beggar women and their children hanging around near the gates. They distributed the money to them. Then they went back up to their room and drank water. Neither of them had any appetite for dinner.

Meanwhile, Fern and Sanene with the help of Harry and Mike and the Nareems worked to complete their arrangements with Mrs. Lumbala for the trip to the interior.

Fern was impressed with the woman. She had been educated in Belgium and she spoke English in a soft voice with a slight French accent. She was a successful businesswoman running her deceased husband's jungle transport company. She had contracted delivery and transport services for many relief operations as well as regular commerce. She owned five Ilyushin jets similar to theirs. She showed them her letter of commendation from Catholic Relief. She had started a sanctuary for orphaned bonobos. She was an outstanding example of what Africans could do for themselves. Although she was wealthy, she said, she gave most of her money away. She supported an entire village of relatives in the interior.

She knew of their arrangements with the Ugandan government and said that as soon as things were finalized, she would be available to escort them into the bush. In the meantime, it would be best for them to go back to Kumasi and wait.

After Mrs. Lumbala left, Sanene asked the team what they thought of her. The Nareems said that she had a solid reputation with the relief agencies and was known to be reliable and honest with them. Harry's take was a little different, but he was not overly concerned.

"Yeah, she's known as a good heart, but there's no doubt she's into some smuggling on the side. Cigarettes and liquor is what we hear. It goes with the territory. Anybody owns a plane of any kind in Africa is into illegal commerce of some form or another. We've never had any word that she associates with the arms and minerals people. Her late husband was a different matter; but she seems to be a good egg. At least as good as they get in this business. Our take is that Colonel Moyo's hired her to look out for his interests in our dealings with the Ugandans. She runs liquor and cigs to the rebels, so they aren't going to touch her. Frankly, it'll be good for us too, to have her along." Harry shrugged his massive shoulders.

Back in Kumasi again, Sage and Fern decided to use their waiting time to tour the markets in the region. Sage wanted to add to her collection of colorful African cloth, and Fern thought it was important for more Africans to meet Sage in person. She

thought it would help with Elembe Ogumbo's work to establish her as the incarnation of the ancestors.

Fern had gotten religion. Old feelings stirred in her. Suddenly she could remember again how she had felt as a child on the verge of glossolalia in her father's church. It was so true and right. Sage really was the physical incarnation of the ancestors, as her ape and human genes mixed and made manifest the Orisha spirit called Agan. The African religious leaders had truly grasped that fact, and they wanted to make their people aware of the significance of Sage's coming.

Fern got chills at the thought of it, and she felt an overwhelming anticipation of something. Something that she hoped, even prayed might be a sweeping, worldwide cultural catharsis, a still point where myth and reality would come together in people's minds and transform everything.

What the chimpanzee researchers had said about the differences between the violent, warlike common chimpanzees and the peaceful, affectionate bonobos was the key. It all had to do with resources. The bonobos were simply more secure. They had time to work on their relationships. There was nothing inevitable about violence in chimpanzees or humans.

Violence, Fern thought, was a holdover from humanity's past. We hang on to it not because we still need to compete over food and resources, but because we can't remember any other way. All we need to make the shift to a new way of being is a better birth control method that is easy to use, and a new story that will make people want to use it. When population growth stops, competition will end, and so will the violence. The Yoruba religious leaders had the germ of the new story. But how could she make sure it took root and grew? And how could it be transplanted to other cultures?

Escorting Sage through the crowded markets, she saw how the people stared in wonder at Sage. Fern imagined it would only be a matter of time before they understood what Sage was and begin to worship the ancestors for real. In Fern's mind that would mean that men and women would change all of their ideas about fertility and large families and the role of women. They would have only a few children but do everything in their power to educate them. They would honor and care for the elderly so that people would no longer have large families out of fear of being abandoned in their old age. Lurking far beneath her euphoria was the nagging thought that economics and politics would keep things as they were, but she didn't want to think about that.

Meanwhile, Virgo Jane spent her time in Kumasi with Prince Kwesi and Louise Mignot in their office near the university. She told Sage that they were studying the mining companies and searching for vulnerabilities. "We can stop this, Sage," she said, "we have to."

Finally, after nearly two weeks of waiting, they got word from the Nareems that it was time for them to make the trip to see the bonobos. They would fly to Kinshasa to pick up Mrs. Lumbala first.

When they got there, Mrs. Lumbala insisted on bringing her own pilot along to help them navigate to the remote airstrip. "It is easy to lose your bearings," she said, "even with modern instruments, since we don't have accurate coordinates for the airstrip. The jungle is endless and featureless from above, there are no landmarks. But my pilot has an amazing feel for this country. You will be glad to have him along."

Harry and Mike had no objection. They were now a party of fifteen: Sage, Fern, Virgo Jane and Sanene, their six security men, the cameraman, Mrs. Lumbala and her pilot. And they had their own two pilots as well.

Although the Ilyushin was a cargo plane, it had a passenger compartment that could seat twenty. Sage and Virgo Jane took seats in the row behind Mrs. Lumbala on the right side of the plane. Sanene and Fern were across the aisle from her. The men were all seated forward of them. Although comfortable, the passenger compartment wasn't sound-insulated; there was no point in trying to carry on conversation. The trip to the interior would take about three hours, and the women settled in to nap.

Sage fell asleep quickly despite her excitement and the loud drone of the jet's engines, but she woke to a strange smell. She couldn't place it at first. There had been so many strange smells in Africa, unfamiliar people and animals. This was an animal smell. It was something like ... she couldn't place it. Then suddenly she realized that it was the smell she noticed in bad people, people who intended her harm. She opened her eyes, and peering through the gap in the seats, she could see Mrs. Lumbala in the seat in front of Virgo Jane. Mrs. Lumbala was not napping, she was sitting bolt upright. Sage was sure the smell was coming from her.

Sage didn't know what to do; the woman was right there and she didn't want to alarm her. But if she went to Harry and told him, he would think she was crazy. Virgo Jane was sound asleep. She would go tell Fern. Harry would listen to her.

Sage slid out of her seat and across the aisle and swung into the seat next to Fern. "Fern, wake up," she whispered. Fern shook her head groggily. "Come back to the bathroom with me, okay?"

Fern followed Sage to the back of the plane, thinking she must be having some kind of trouble with her period. Sage opened the door to the bathroom and squatted on the seat. There was no way that Fern could squeeze in there too, so she leaned in the open door.

"Fern," Sage spoke into her ear, "I smelled the bad smell. I think it's coming from Mrs. Lumbala."

Fern was skeptical. "Are you sure, honey? Are you sure it's coming from her?"

Sage nodded vigorously. "Yeah. I'm sure. It has to be coming from her. Everybody else was sitting too far away. I don't like her very much anyway."

Fern didn't know what to do. She thought of Sarah's warning and knew she couldn't ignore this. Fern told Sage to take a seat in the back row while she went forward to tell Harry.

Fern drew Harry to a storage area in the front near the cockpit where Mrs. Lumbala couldn't see them. She told Harry about Sage's unusual smell sense and her suspicions of Mrs. Lumbala.

"I know that it sounds strange, but believe me, Sage has never been wrong about things like this. She really is half animal. We've got to trust her sense of smell."

Harry didn't quite understand what Fern was talking about, but he was a veteran of many situations where twisted loyalties were involved, and he had been warned of trouble by unlikely characters before. Once it was a market woman, completely unknown to him, who had told him to leave the village because the chief's son was planning to knife him in his sleep that night. Once an old Ibo medicine man with a set of snake skulls hung around his neck told him to beware, he was being followed by spies from the government. It turned out to be true. Harry listened to the warning and told Fern that they would be landing soon, but they wouldn't make a move off the plane till he had thoroughly checked out everything.

Fern went to the back of the passenger compartment and brought Sage up to sit with her in the row behind Sanene, who was still sleeping. Soon they noticed the plane losing altitude. Mrs. Lumbala turned and looked over at them and smiled. Fern thought she looked nervous. After a few minutes, they could see a brown scar in the endless forest canopy down to their left, and the plane circled around it and touched down.

As soon as the plane braked to a stop at the end of the runway, the pilot turned it around so it was headed out. Then it grew quiet as the engines powered down. Virgo Jane woke up and rubbed her eyes. There was nothing to be seen at the edge of forest by the runway. Harry said in a loud voice, "Mrs. Lumbala, there appears to be no one here to greet us."

Mrs. Lumbala started. "N-not to worry, sir, once you disembark they will appear. There is a small hut in the forest past the end of the runway here. There is a caretaker who keeps the runway clear. He will greet us and then go and find the men who will guide us to the old research station. But first you must go outside."

"No, I think first you will go outside, Mrs. Lumbala. You and your pilot."

"Certainly."

Mrs. Lumbala rose slowly out of her window seat and slid across the aisle seat to the aisle. She stepped into the aisle and then, like a shot, she slammed her body across the aisle into the empty seat next to Sanene. Before anyone could see what happened, she had her arm around Sanene's neck and a snub-nosed pistol pointed at her temple.

"If you want this woman to live, you will all exit the plane, now."

Just then they heard a scuffle and a bang up in the cockpit. But since the door was closed, there was no way to tell what had happened. It was silent again.

"All of you men drop your weapons now. Or I shoot this woman." Mrs. Lumbala ground the barrel of her pistol into Sanene's temple. Sanene squirmed at the pain but made no sound.

Slowly, Harry gave the command: "Weapons down."

Sage was shocked. She couldn't believe what was happening. Mrs. Lumbala was seated right in front of her and she could see the sharp edge of the gun barrel grinding into Sanene's temple. Blood dripped down Sanene's cheek.

"Well, are you going to leave the plane? Or do I shoot the lady here? After I shoot her I can shoot several more of you before you can do anything about it." Mrs. Lumbala addressed Harry, at the front of the plane. She seemed to have forgotten that Fern and Sage were seated right behind her.

Fern pulled on Sage's left arm, trying to get her to duck down onto the floor with her. Sage couldn't take her eyes from the gun at Sanene's head. The hairs on the back of her neck bristled. The bad smell was overpoweringly strong, making her nauseous, but she had to do something. Her right arm was free. Sage slowly rose a few inches up from her seat. Fern was still pulling her left arm down, but she managed to raise her right shoulder above the level of the seat back.

Suddenly, Sage whipped her unnaturally long arm over the seat, wrapped her unnaturally long fingers in a hydraulic grip around Mrs. Lumbala's hand and the weapon and wrenched them both skyward. The gun went off, putting a bullet through the ceiling. Mrs. Lumbala squealed in pain. The men grabbed their weapons. Harry sprang forward and yanked Mrs. Lumbala out of her seat and handcuffed her.

Meanwhile, the door to the cockpit flew open and their co-pilot pushed Mrs. Lumbala's man through, handcuffed. Their pilot powered up the engines again and started the take off.

Outside, men were emerging from the forest, shooting weapons. "Let's go, let's go, let's go," Harry yelled. "They got SAMs!"

The engines screamed as the pilot punched up the throttle. They went airborne before halfway down the landing strip. Charges exploded outside the windows with searing flashes of light and deafening cracks of sound.

Then something hit them, near the back, jerking the whole plane sideways. The nose dropped. It seemed the pilot had lost control. But he pulled them out and soon they were out of sight of the landing strip. No more charges could reach them. But now the plane had a fierce, thudding vibration, making it louder than ever.

Harry assessed the damage and he called everyone forward to tell them their situation, yelling at the top of his lungs to be heard. "That charge that hit us blew a good-sized hole in the tail section. Luckily it didn't damage any of the controls. Kisangani's only an hour away. We might make it before this tub vibrates itself to death. Now that we're out of range, the pilot can slow down a little. We should be all right."

Harry looked at Sage admiringly. "Sage, you really did it for us. That was a tough spot. You are incredibly quick, and strong. You know you broke the woman's wrist. Now sit tight everyone and when we get to Kisangani we'll debrief and tell you what we think happened. For now I'll tell you it looks like the Ugandans did the dirty to us."

They made it to Kisangani. Harry apologized profusely, especially to Sanene, who had a large swollen bruise in addition to the painful laceration on her temple. "I should

have sent a crew ahead to check things out first. Only ...” Harry hesitated, looking puzzled. “Only I’m not sure we would have run into the same kind of reception without you gals. Especially without you, Sage. Uganda has no reason to keep you out of the forest back there, that I can see, especially since there were a lot of bucks for them if they got you in there. The only reason for them to do what they did is because someone was offering them an even better deal for keeping you out. But not just keeping you out. For seeing you dead.”

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Sanene’s temple throbbed with a lump the size of a goose egg. She lay on a couch in her father’s living room and pressed an ice bag to her head while trying to listen to the conversation. Fern was leading a discussion about the rest of their trip.

Sage had previously scheduled meetings and appearances throughout Asia and Europe starting in a week. Fern made it clear to everyone that they would be completely justified in canceling these engagements and returning home for a rest given their experience in Congo.

“I don’t think we should feel at all obligated. On the other hand, if we feel up to it, I think our biggest consideration should be security concerns. First of all, how does everyone feel about continuing on?”

Virgo Jane was adamant. “I’m not going to be intimidated by these assassins, whoever they are.”

Sage was more subdued, but she agreed with Virgo Jane. “I don’t want them to think they can scare us. We need to continue our work.”

Fern turned to Harry. “Well, what’s the security assessment? How safe do you think we are in continuing on?”

Harry replied: “Ladies, first I want to apologize once again for my misjudgment of our situation in Congo. And thank you for your continued confidence in me. Mrs. Lumbala, we’ve learned, has been a covert agent for years. She’s worked for the minerals industry and factions of various governments that are tied to it. She dealt primarily in information, not smuggling, which is why she looked clean.

“The minerals industry, apparently, has an anti-development agenda. They are joined at the hip with small arms manufacturers. Whenever nations and communities make progress toward development and democracy, there’s a sudden influx of small arms.

“How Lumbala fits in, is that she was providing transport for all the relief charities. She would have had knowledge of all major international development efforts and their transportation plans. With that knowledge, the arms and minerals people could make sure that plenty of small arms and ammunition were distributed in an area before development got there, sabotaging programs and endangering relief workers. I’d say

they've been highly effective in discouraging humanitarian efforts in Congo, Angola, Tanganyika and several other countries.

"So the good news is, we've nabbed Lumbala, and rolled up that part of their operation. Relief agencies now know that they need to keep their transportation schedules confidential. As far as continued risk to Sage and the rest of you, well, as long as Sage is in Africa she will be in great danger."

Harry addressed himself to Sage. "Projecting motivations is always difficult, but I imagine that these people still view you as a threat."

"Can you explain?" Fern asked.

"Yes. Undoubtedly, they view Sage as the source of a lot of development money. A billion dollars in aid is no small change in Africa, especially considering that it's not a loan. Aid like that has the potential to change the incentive structure of government, reduce their dependence on resource extraction. Encourage education and democracy. So Sage continues to be at risk. However, I would assess that risk differently in Africa than anywhere else. There are no strong, stable authorities here to provide a protective infrastructure for Sage. This is not the case on the rest of her itinerary, and I feel confident that our team can ensure the safety of all of you. While our opponents can stage an ambush in the deepest Congo without blowing their cover, it would be extremely difficult and risky for them to mount any kind of attack on Sage in China, Japan or even India. Certainly not Europe. They couldn't do it without leaving a trail, and they don't want to draw attention to themselves or their agenda. In fact, I would suggest you leave Africa as soon as possible, although you are relatively safe here in Ghana, especially here in Kwaku Ato's home."

Virgo Jane was disturbed. "Sanene, your father ... he's in the mining industry. Is he part of this?"

Kwaku and Mina were in Accra for the week on business. Sanene shook her head painfully. "No, he can't be. Ashanti Goldfields is independent—well, at least partially. It's true they have more and more outside investment. But Kwaku would never ... he would never..."

Harry interrupted, sparing Sanene, who was having difficulty speaking through her pain. "Minerals is like any industry. There are good actors and bad actors. I doubt Sanene's father has any inkling that this kind of thing is going on. In fact, one reason you're safe here is that the bad actors would be anxious for him not to find out what they are doing."

"So," Fern asked, "do we want to continue on to Japan?"

Sanene spoke softly: "Fern, I do not want to go. I shall go back to Seattle to rest. Perhaps if I am recovered I will join you in Europe, later."

They all agreed that Sanene should return home and heal. They had planned for Annie Tsumura to join them in Asia and Europe anyway to help with media relations; they could do without Sanene's help. With the blessing of their security team, Sage, Virgo Jane and Fern all wanted to continue.

Fern got to work on confirming arrangements, placing a call to Annie first. But Annie's news jolted her.

"Fern, guess what! I'm pregnant."

Fern could feel Annie's joy transmitted through the satellite link. Her heart sank. Annie would have to stay home.

"But Fern, it's not a problem, I'm only a couple weeks pregnant and the tour is only for a month and a half. I'll have plenty of energy. Even if I get morning sickness, I'll deal. I'm a tough old gal."

"No!" Fern almost shouted into the phone. "I'm sorry, our schedule is going to be too rigorous. We can't risk your baby." Poor Annie, Fern thought, she tried so hard to get pregnant and then as soon as Sage leaves, she's successful. She can't risk being around Sage again. Sage's bonobo hormone could cause her to miscarry. Fern would not be responsible for dashing Annie's hopes like that. Annie was perplexed by Fern's decision and accused her of treating pregnant women like invalids, like it was the dark ages, but Fern wouldn't budge. She called Richard and asked him to find a substitute, preferably a man.

Just before leaving for Japan, Virgo Jane looked for Sanene to say goodbye. She found her in the garden, lying in a lounge chair, watching birds. The lump at her temple was still large and that whole side of her face had a deep purple tinge. Her eye was swollen nearly shut. Virgo Jane stroked her arm and told her how much they would miss her and said she hoped she would heal quickly. Then she asked her question.

"Sanene, you will tell your father, won't you?"

"About the bad actors?"

"Yes. He must know. Perhaps the good people in the industry can stop what they're doing."

Sanene gave Virgo Jane a sad little smile. "I will tell him, but he won't believe me. He won't believe me because he doesn't want to. My father has never been able to credit people with bad intent."

"But he has to believe you. Look at what they did to you."

"He'll say it was misguided rebels. The same thing the Congo government is saying about it."

"Sanene, you've got to convince him. He has to believe you, you're his daughter. And if he knows, he can do something about it. He can help us expose what's going on. Get government sanctions, UN sanctions against these corporations."

Sanene shook her head. "Virgo Jane, he will not believe me because he does not want to believe me. Because if he were to act, he would place not only himself, but our entire clan in great danger. He will do small things: he will give to the poor; he will speak in favor of democracy; but he will not risk his family. Don't you see? My father may seem powerful, but he only plays a role in a much larger system. The system is driven by unstoppable forces. One of those forces is the global economic system that puts profits before people. As long as the whole world believes that way, what can one person do?"

“Speak up, Sanene. Tell the truth. Make people listen.”

“Yes, but there is another force to contend with, just as powerful: the force of population growth. It has the effect of stopping people’s ears to the truth. Ghana had a chance, once. At independence we had money in the bank. Our prime minister, Kwame Nkrumah, had a plan for industrial development and modernization, but rapid population growth ate up all the surplus within a few years. Ghana had to go back to exporting raw materials, timber and gold, to buy food for our people. Now we are stuck. They bleed us dry, taking our gold, our timber and our land. Meanwhile our population grows and grows, while we have less and less good land to grow crops. There’s no way out that I can see.”

“Horseshit. Somebody’s got to have some goddamned courage. God, it disgusts me.” Virgo Jane snorted and stamped her feet like a little bull.

“Virgo Jane, there is one possibility. The two forces are connected, you know. As long as there is the pressure of continued population growth, greed is stimulated. In the fear of scarcity, people hoard; it is a natural thing. And so they support the ideology of profits before people. Because there are always more and more people, and fewer and fewer profits for the ordinary person. One must secure enough goods for one’s own people. Crowding stimulates competition, and growth is the fuel that keeps the whole system running. If only we could have more success with the clinics and with convincing women and men to want fewer children. Your Congo program is the right thing to do. Focus on that. Now that Mrs. Lumbala is gone, you have a chance.”

Virgo Jane was still fuming. “B.S. You’re the one who said that we have to change the mythology first, or women won’t use birth control even if it’s available. How are we going to do that if everyone is blinded by money? If no one will speak up and tell the truth? All your fancy theories are just a way to wiggle out of doing anything that takes real courage. But why should you care anyway, you’ve got yours. You’re a princess and you’re getting married to the richest man in the world.”

Virgo Jane turned on her heel and walked out of the garden. Sanene was too weak to call after her.

On their flight to Tokyo that evening, Virgo Jane asked the Nareems when they thought the Congo village program could get started. “I know it may be a long time before we can get in to see the bonobos, but can’t we at least start building our clinics?”

Prabander shook his head. “You know the primary obstacle here is not money. Congo is very rich in natural resources and if the government would be successful in diverting even a small part of the proceeds from minerals and timber to village development, it would have been done long ago. At this point your money is only a threat to those in control.”

Sage was aghast. Was there nothing they could do to help the bonobos?

Prabander must have seen the looks on their faces, for he stopped himself. “Forgive me. Do not let what I say discourage you. It is just an extraordinarily difficult situation in Congo right now. I am sure things will get better and we will eventually make progress. It is very important to keep working at it.”

The next few weeks passed in a blur. They had arranged for Sage to appear with popular music acts in stadiums. The crowds in Tokyo, Delhi, Beijing and Djakarta weren't much different from those in the U.S. All the young people seemed to dress alike, in the same kinds of brand-name sports clothing.

They also met with development officials. Every country wanted Sage's help in raising American money for development efforts. The Nareems advised her to make no promises, and she didn't.

Fern was still intrigued by the idea of reaching people through religion. She scheduled meetings with traditional religious leaders everywhere but China, where it was not permitted. Shinto, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders were all interested in meeting Sage, but none of them saw Sage's coming as a revelation the way that the Yoruba elder had.

Fern had hoped that the Hindu priests would make a connection between the monkey god Hanuman and Sage, but they seemed to regard her more as a freak of western genetic engineering than a natural phenomenon. Fern tried to explain that she was a natural hybrid illustrating the fundamental continuity between humans and other animals. But the Brahmins didn't buy it. "All is written in the Vedas," they said. "If not found in our holy scriptures, it has no relevance." They offered prayers for Sage's soul that she would reincarnate as a full human being, preferably a high-caste one, on her way to join Brahma in the eternal light.

The Buddhists praised Sage's good works and said that she was a mighty example of right living and having compassion for all beings. They also said she was a perfect illustration of a being with "no-self."

"For you cannot suffer from the illusion of having a self, since you are not even human. Self is only the illusion that causes all our suffering. You may experience suffering, but it is not of your own making. You are free of illusion and are a perfectly realized, though lowly being, like all animals," said an old sage to them through an interpreter.

They were sitting on mats on the ground in a temple courtyard. The scents of frangipani and sandalwood thinly masked the omnipresent Indian smells of raw sewage and rotting vegetation. The sage was seated on a low platform before them. Sage was puzzled. "But I have a self. I'm not an animal," she told him. "I mean, I am an animal, partly a human animal and partly an ape animal. I can speak, I have language."

The old sage replied: "Then if you have an illusion of self, it is because you are doubly ignorant. You have an illusion that you are a human being who has an illusion of self. You must work to become enlightened. Give up the illusion of self and you will no longer suffer."

Sage thought she had been insulted, but later; back at their hotel, Fern explained that it was considered a good thing to not have a self, and that was what all the Buddhists were trying to achieve.

"You mean they want to be like animals?"

“No, not exactly. It’s more that they want to be everything. If there is no self, then the entire universe can flow through your being, even if you are just sitting in one spot, and no matter what happens you won’t suffer. You give up yourself to become one with everything. It is supposed to be blissful. And even for those of us who never attain Nirvana, we may be able to achieve calmness.” Fern had always fancied herself a bit of a Buddhist. At least she had learned to meditate and on rare occasions she would remember to do it.

Sage laughed. “Fern, when have you ever been calm?”

“I know, I don’t practice what I preach, but believe me, meditation can be helpful.”

“I know. We did it at Rainbow Club meetings, remember?”

Back in the States, many of the Rainbow Club members were followers of Buddhism and a variety of New Age faiths based on eastern religions. Those Buddhists had embraced Sage, and many of them had worked hard to help her raise money for Operation Congo. None of them had called her a “lowly animal.”

Fern tried to take Sage to public markets whenever they had a chance. She still hoped that Sage’s presence would inspire spontaneous reverence and understanding in the common people. It was no problem convincing Sage to visit markets. She was excited about adding to her collection of cloth. She bought embroidered silks in China and Japan, batiks in Indonesia and diaphanous sari cottons in India. She had taken to wearing her cloths wrapped sarong-style around her bike shorts and jog bras. She delighted in the variety of hues and textures in her collection.

Security approved her market excursions as long as they weren’t announced ahead of time. She always caused a sensation, the ape girl with her fine strong body in a bikini top and colorful sarong, striding next to the voluptuous American lady with her thick mane of wavy auburn hair, flanked by their six security men in khaki uniforms.

She met many people in the markets. There was always a variety in every crowd. Some were friendly and smiled and waved. Some were frantic to try to touch her, though her guards would never allow it. Some would run away in fear or shield themselves with their hands making the sign of the evil eye. Once in Calcutta, a shopkeeper refused to sell to her. But most people were openly curious and friendly. Sage loved the markets. She was meeting ordinary people, the people of the world. She felt partly compensated for not getting to see the bonobos.

Virgo Jane thought all the market hopping and meetings with religious leaders were a waste of time. “Don’t you have enough outfits, Sage? And I don’t know why you bother meeting with all those old priests. They’re not going to help you. They’re the ones who created patriarchy. Remember Sanene’s stories? Those priests stole their power from women, and I don’t care how much mumbo jumbo about enlightenment they spout, they’re all a bunch of frauds.”

They were nearing the end of the tour, which would finish in Rome, Munich, Paris and finally London. Fern had not contacted the Vatican as part of her program of meeting religious leaders. She saw no reason to, because early on in Sage’s debut, the Vatican had issued a statement condemning the kind of genetic mixing that had

produced Sage. The statement declared that a human-ape hybrid was a far worse abomination than either cloning or genetic engineering. Yet, two days before they were to arrive in Rome, Fern got a call from the Vatican requesting Sage at an audience with the Pope.

Virgo Jane thought they should snub the Pope, but Fern, and their new publicist, Curtis Rodale, thought it was an opportunity not to miss. Perhaps if the Pope actually met Sage, he would see her essential humanity. Perhaps he would issue a statement about the need to preserve bonobos and other great apes. Perhaps he would change his mind about birth control.

Virgo Jane listened to these fantasies. "You guys are dreaming. I can't believe how gullible you all are. The Pope is never going to change. It would be better for Sage to issue a statement condemning the Pope. That would help wake people up."

Curt Rodale was alarmed by Virgo Jane's radicalism. Sage said that if she was going to condemn anyone, she ought to at least meet them first, and Sage, Fern and Curt went.

After passing through numerous guard stations and security checks, they were conducted into an ornate hall that was the Pope's private audience room.

The room had white walls with gilded wooden trim and ornaments. Dark paintings lined the walls, and a red carpet led like a path of blood to the pontiff's dais at the front of the room. Fern tried to look at the paintings as she walked down the aisle with Sage, but strong smells of disinfectant, burning candle wax and sweet incense made her feel dizzy. Fern shook herself out of it, and focused on the wizened old man in front of them, dressed all in white. Like a big baby in a christening gown, she thought.

They were invited to sit. Their chairs were a level below that of the Pope. He said, "My child, please give me your hand a moment." Sage stood up and he took her hand and looked her up and down. Sage was used to being stared at so it didn't bother her. What a funny-looking man he was. He had the whitest skin she had ever seen, with angry red freckles on his sagging cheeks. Fie smelled of talcum powder. Sage was careful not to stare directly into his eyes. She had learned from experience that this made people angry.

The Pope asked her if she worshipped God.

"Yes, I do, in my own way."

"And what way is that, my child?"

"I go to the wilderness. I have found God there, in the mountains. Or at least I can feel something, a presence that seems to be God."

The Pope nodded and smiled. He seemed pleased. "You should come into God's house, little one. There you can come even nearer to God. You should become a Catholic. I will have one of our brothers speak with you about joining our church." And then the Pope mumbled some words in Latin and made curious gestures over her head.

Fern told her later that she had been blessed. Sage had found the whole experience quite weird, mostly because of all the pomp. The other religious leaders she had met

with lived in much more humble circumstances. She didn't understand why such a vast palace surrounded the Pope, and why he had his own army. The whole thing didn't seem very spiritual to her.

Italians were obsessed with Sage. Her picture was on the front page of every paper all four days they were there. Her audience with the Pope made the front pages of papers all over the world, headlines screaming: POPE CONVERTS APE GIRL and POPE ASKS APE GIRL TO TURN CATHOLIC.

Curt and his assistant were frantic to keep up with all the media calls. "No, she hasn't converted. No, she's not an atheist, she has her own spiritual beliefs and they're private." It went on and on for the rest of their trip through Europe.

In Paris, they lost Virgo Jane. She had gone to a meeting of an anti-globalization group called People's Last Stand and called later that evening and told them she wasn't coming back to the hotel, that she would stay with her friend Louise Mignot while they were in Paris. They had a lot to talk about.

But the night before they were to leave for London, Virgo Jane came back and took Sage into their bedroom; she had something to tell her.

"Sage. I want you to know— I will always love you." Her words came out in gasps. Her eyes glistened as she gripped Sage's hands. "But I have to stay here in Paris. I'm not going back with you. I have to stay and work with Louise. We are going to send a message to the mining and oil companies that they will never forget. I have to do this work."

Virgo Jane shook Sage's hands to emphasize her strong feelings. "But I do love you, don't ever forget that." And she embraced Sage and hugged her tightly, kissing the back of Sage's neck as she sobbed gently.

Sage was stunned. "But... but, how long will you stay? You will come back, won't you? In a few months? I still need you, VJ."

Virgo Jane inclined her head sadly and looked into Sage's eyes. "I can't make any promises right now. I don't know what's going to happen with this work. It might take a while to do what I need to do."

"You have a new lover, don't you? That Louise woman you've been staying with."

Virgo Jane kept her eyes locked with Sage's. "Yes. But that's not the reason I'm staying here. It's really about the work. I have to do this. Sage, you wouldn't believe what the oil companies are doing to people in Nigeria. I'm sorry, but it's the most important thing to me right now."

"More important than saving the bonobos."

"For now, yes."

"More important than me?"

"No. I told you I still love you. We'll stay in touch. We'll see each other again, I promise. I just don't know when."

Sage was heartbroken. She tried not to be jealous, but she was, and by the time they got through her last appearances she was beat and depressed. She couldn't wait to get back to Seattle.

Sage was overjoyed to see Carver. He had missed her terribly as well, and since it was Christmas break and he was free of school for three weeks, they packed up their camping equipment and lost themselves in the middle of Richard's forest. They camped and hiked and made love in the rain, snug in their tent. When the rain let up, Carver drummed by the campfire and Sage danced. She tried not to think too much about Virgo Jane. VJ. would come back soon. She just had to.

Soon it was time for Carver's school term to start. Sage did not want him to leave.

Carver held her tight against his chest, stroked her hips, and nuzzled her ear. "Oh little girlfriend, you know I wish I could stay. But I've got to get my degree." He held her at arm's length and looked into her eyes. "It's all I can do, Sage. You don't know how jealous I've been of you and Virgo Jane, the way you two could climb around in the trees and swing with the bonobos. I could never do any of that. But as a doctor, I can always be part of Bonobo House."

Sage was moved. She knew he was saying that he could always be part of her life that way and be there to take care of her. He always had taken care of her, like a big brother. But it scared her. Did that mean Bonobo House was her only future?

After Carver left for school, Cheyenne and Jojo came up for a week. Cheyenne reassured Sage that Virgo Jane would come back. "She worked so hard on the Africa trip, Sage. I bet she just needs a little break. I know that she truly loves you."

Sage began dividing her time between camping alone in the forest and playing with her relatives and friends in Bonobo House. She wasn't ready to face crowds of people again. Matt Lerner wanted her back to give interviews. He had been hounded relentlessly ever since Sage's audience with the Pope. Fern told him to tell the news media that Sage was on retreat. She needed and deserved a rest.

Several weeks after returning from the world tour, Fern and Richard met at his apartment in the mansion to discuss the results of their experiment. Sanene was out of town at an African history conference, and since they were trying to keep their meetings confidential, Richard's apartment was a good place. It was mid-morning and John was at the lab.

Waiting for Richard to bring them coffee from his kitchen, Fern strode around the apartment's living room and admired his Gauguins. He owned three paintings from the Polynesian period. She stood in front of one. Gauguin's women of Papeete were all sensuous curves and evocative colors. She thought of the man who owned these millions of dollar's worth of incredible art, and she felt the heat of the islands stir her inner core. But outside it was cold, and a violent wind sluiced through wildly swaying trees and heaved packets of rain that splatted and tinked against the windows.

Fern wore her typical costume for business meetings, a blouse open at the neck with a short skirt and matching jacket and today, black tights for warmth. She took a seat on the white leather couch, adjusting the olive wool skirt under her thighs as she sat. She got out her notes and reviewed them.

They had collected more than a year of data before Sage had left for Africa. Nearly ten thousand people had attended Sage's salons and Rainbow Club meetings and had close face-to-face contact with her. About a third of them were women of reproductive age. Fern knew this much already, but today Richard was going to give her the report on what his data analysis shop had concluded.

Richard handed Fern her coffee with cream and sat down on the couch next to her. He took a sip from his cup and gave her a wink. "Okay, Fern darlin', here's what we've got."

Richard looked down at the top paper of the stack sitting on his knees and began: "Statistically, nearly a hundred per thousand or three hundred of these women would have been expected to get pregnant over the course of the year. Out of those three hundred, if they followed national trends, sixty-five percent would have given birth for a total of a hundred and ninety-five babies. The rest would either have had abortions—about twenty-five percent—or would have miscarried—about ten percent. But when we examined their medical records, we found only thirty-four births or pregnancies among these women after they met Sage, and no record of abortions. Also, there were forty-nine women who tested as one month pregnant or less when they met Sage, and only two of them carried their babies to term. This is astounding, Fern. It means that Sage is producing a natural pheromone contraceptive, and it works on women."

"That is ... amazing." Fern was speechless.

"The data shop found lots of other interesting stuff too. Of the thirty-four pregnancies that did make it, the women had unusually stable and happy lives, though they weren't particularly well off financially. Most were married, though not all, and mostly, it was their first child. I guess what really distinguishes them is the lack of heavy stresses that we found in other women's lives. Ummm, here are some examples from the women who were pregnant when we tested them who didn't give birth: fifty-two percent had major credit card debt; thirty-seven percent were looking for jobs or their husbands were; thirty-one percent divorced; twenty-nine percent on antidepressants. A surprising number had children or husbands in jail, or with drug or alcohol problems."

"It seems like these would have been mostly unwanted pregnancies anyway then," Fern said. "I mean, maybe not consciously unwanted, but unwanted in a pragmatic sense."

"Yes, but Fern, what do you think? Was our experiment ethically wrong? If not for Sage, there might have been a hundred and sixty-one more babies born in the last year. These women didn't get to exercise any conscious choice."

"Actually, Richard, I don't think our conscious minds always know what's best for us. Look at me—sometimes all my brain can say to me is 'give me chocolate ice cream.' But I try not to listen, really I do." Fern tossed her head and gave her shoulders a little shiver that shook her breasts. She was an unconscious flirt. Except that she caught herself that time and was immediately embarrassed. She smiled and hoped Richard hadn't noticed.

Richard gave her a wry smile in return. "I don't think our minds, period, always know what's best for us. I had a dream last night that I went to bed with one of my secretaries. Marvelous woman, but married, and one of my best assistants. On both accounts it would not be in my best interests to pursue that desire, even though it was totally unconscious. I'd never entertained a single thought like that about her before. Actually she reminds me of my mother."

Fern laughed nervously. She thought he was probably pulling her leg, but she wasn't sure. She knew the woman he referred to and she was attractive, and probably about Fern's age, which would make her not quite old enough to be Richard's mother. "Well, I get your point. It's not our conscious or our unconscious minds we should listen to but our bodies and their stress levels."

"And signals from the environment, our larger body. They're not getting through anymore. Here in America we can insulate ourselves so easily. Air polluted? Close the windows and turn on the air conditioning. And in Africa, Asia, it's like, let's have lots of babies even though we're starving, because maybe at least one of them will make it to the city and send us back some cash. Perfectly logical from an individual's point of view, but disastrous for the planet."

"It reminds me of your college roommate, the astronaut. He thought we needed to turn up the heat to make the steam escape, but because there's nowhere for us to go, we'll just blow up."

"Yes, and don't you see, Fern, we've found it now. We've got the governor; the regulator that can keep the boiler from blowing up. This pheromone could be the answer we've all been looking for." Richard had dropped his usual aloof facade and was actually quivering in excitement.

"Um hmm. A regulator," Fern mused. "Lots of animals have them. Like tree shrews. When they get overcrowded and stressed, their adrenaline levels shoot up. It makes their little ovaries shrivel down to nothing. They stay that way till the population goes down. Our bodies don't react like that anymore. And our brains aren't picking up the signals, or if they are they aren't making the right connections to our reproductive behavior, either consciously or unconsciously."

"Do you suppose that's how it works with Sage's pheromone? There's an interaction between the pheromone and the adrenal glands?" Richard was speaking calmly again.

"That's what the theory is."

"Explain it to me, would you?"

"Well, as John is discovering from his bonobo research, the key is the luteinizing hormone, LH, produced in the anterior pituitary gland under signals from the hypothalamus. LH is what stimulates the ovaries to release the egg from the ovarian follicle. LH also helps maintain the uterine lining, so if the egg is released and fertilized but the woman comes under stress, early in the pregnancy at least, a lack of LH will cause a miscarriage. John thinks that the pheromone signals the hypothalamus to cut production of LH, but only when the adrenals are reacting to stress at the same time.

Particularly chronic stress, because the body would be saturated with adrenaline and it would take only a minute amount of pheromone to tip the balance.”

Richard nodded. He was following her. “So that’s why the women with stable, happy lives got pregnant, and the stressed-out ones didn’t.”

“Exactly. It jibes with John’s theory anyway. Of course we’ll have to check with him to be sure ...”

Richard looked at her directly and spoke firmly. “Will you tell him?”

Fern stuck the end of her thumbnail in her mouth. She nibbled on the nail and nodded.

“Yes. I don’t know how he’ll react. I think he’ll be angry. Our experiment is a gross violation of his standards. I hope he’ll realize that we didn’t really do any harm. I don’t think we did harm ...” Fern left her question unvoiced. She glanced up at Richard. He seemed a hulk of a man to her suddenly, inscrutable as a basilisk.

Richard blinked slowly and said in a deep, grave voice: “I know we did no harm. Do you think John can understand the need to get to work on these results right away? We need to isolate the right chemical and get it to the synthesizing lab as quickly as possible. I want it in production in a year or less.”

Fern was immobilized by his reptilian stare. She heard the wind outside battering trees. For a moment she couldn’t speak. Finally she said in a quiet voice, “I hope so, Richard. I’ll certainly try and convince him.”

Richard’s sudden air of absolute sovereignty over their project made her remember who he was, one of the richest men in the world. What he wanted, he would get, and for the first time she realized that if John, or for that matter she herself, stood in his way or slowed him down, he would simply sweep them away like a tsunami. He would take her out like those viruses that knocked out his competitor’s satellites. It was lucky, she thought, that they both wanted the same thing. Now she would just have to convince John.

There was no sense putting it off, and she drove through the wind and rain to the Martin Campus to search for John at the lab next to Bonobo House. She found him in his office, surrounded by teetering piles of paperwork and scientific journals. He had been working extremely hard, and she felt a twinge of guilt about adding another burden to his pile. He looked up from his work and smiled a welcome to her.

Seeing the gentle smile in his lined face, Fern almost abandoned her mission. But she also noticed for the first time how white John’s hair was becoming. We’re getting old, she thought; we don’t have much time left to make a difference. She regained her courage.

“I have something to tell you that you’re not going to like.” And she told him about the secret experiment with Sage’s audience. As she expected, he was indignant about their methods.

“The invasion of privacy, getting all those women’s medical records without permission, is horrendous. But the truly horrendous thing is that I have gotten so used to it, that I don’t even expect to have privacy anymore. It’s typical of Richard to proceed

like this.” John grimaced as though he had a bitter taste in his mouth. “But you, my dear, I am surprised.”

John looked at her calmly, but Fern felt as if she had swallowed a cold, hard stone.

John continued, still with a chill calm, “Though I don’t know why I am surprised; I’ve suspected something for quite some time now. I should have known that a leopard never truly changes her spots.”

Fern was taken by surprise. What could he be referring to? Then she knew and it made her angry. “What the hell are you talking about, John?”

John could not look at her. “Your damned affair with the little rich boy. I know you can’t resist men when they throw themselves at you. Aaaaah, shit.” John banged his fist on the desk.

“There’s nothing like that going on.” Fern jumped up. “Nothing. Yes, it’s true I’ve had meetings with Richard, but they’ve all been about this experiment and nothing else. You can get angry at me for that, but please, there’s nothing else going on. I love you, John.” She threw herself into his arms.

John had tears in his eyes as he clutched her desperately.

“Are you sure?” he whispered.

“Yes. Oh yes. Oh darling.” She kissed his face everywhere and began to cry.

Later; at home in their suite in Richard’s mansion, they discussed the experiment again. John agreed to change his approach to testing Sage’s pheromones. So far he had only collected sweat samples from her underarms and groin, and none of the samples had showed a contraceptive effect in either bonobos or humans. Those were the most likely places for pheromone-secreting glands, but such glands might also be found around the nipples, or on the upper lip, scalp or forehead. He would start taking samples from these other areas of her body and test them.

Even though he agreed to take another look at Sage as a source of contraceptive pheromones, John told Fern he was still skeptical of her results.

“But what about the experiment? We’ve shown that Sage does have an effect.”

John shook his head. “I’m not so confident. Your sample size was small and you had no controls. But mainly, your sample was not random. It was self-selected from people who wanted to hear Sage’s message and were probably less likely to be getting pregnant anyway. It was far from a random sample. I’m afraid what you did was not scientifically valid.”

“I suppose. At any rate, with this new approach, we should have some answers soon. Wouldn’t it be wonderful, if we really found it?”

“I guess so.” John clasped her hands in his and squeezed them, compelling her to pay attention to what he said: “I think we should get out of here. I’m tired of living in Richard’s house, aren’t you? Let’s get our own place near the lab. Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“All right, but what about Sage? She’s been so depressed since we got back from Africa. She misses Virgo Jane, and so much of what we saw over there disturbed her. I’m worried about her.”

“I know, but you’ll still see plenty of her. She’s over at Bonobo House almost every day anyway. I can’t take being under rich boy’s thumb every minute of my life anymore.”

Fern understood. She promised that she would start looking for a place for them the next day.

Several days later, Fern was packing and moving boxes of their belongings out of the suite. She had found a house already and John wanted to move right away. She was stacking boxes outside their door when Richard grabbed her from behind.

“Fern,” he said, “come talk to me.”

Fern felt an awful thrill of forbidden pleasure at his touch. But all he wanted was to talk more about their results. He told her that he planned to buy up as much of the plastic feedstock industry as he could. He would inject the pheromone into every plastic article manufactured in the world. That would be the ideal way to distribute it. “Like those ‘No Pest’ strips,” he guffawed, “a human pesticide.” Fern was repelled and escaped from him as soon as she could.

Back in her suite, sorting through drawers, Fern wondered, could he really do it? What if it went wrong somehow? What if it was so effective in stronger concentrations that it slowed down human reproduction too much? Or put an end to it completely? What about women like Annie, who could be denied their dreams?

Should she tell John what Richard was planning? Richard had no right to decide the lives of millions of people like that. But she felt torn. She wanted things to change so badly, and all their educational efforts seemed so slow. Other than Elembe Ogumbo, the world’s religious leaders were not responding to Sage’s message.

Fern stopped what she was doing and sat on the bed to really think. There is human dignity and choice to consider. Richard is scary, but then, perhaps he is right to take action. The consequences of not taking action could be just as bad. Fie didn’t really mean what he said about the human pesticide. He was joking. Oh Goddess, I just don’t know.

Somehow, she thought, we need to continue on the path we set originally, to find a simple contraceptive, with no side effects, that can be distributed to women all over the world to use discreetly, without the knowledge of their husbands if need be. We should be able to find a way to package it so that it only affects the women who choose to use it. And we need it quickly. I can’t tell John yet. If I tell him, he might become alarmed and stop work on the project altogether. And if he does that, Richard will just replace him with someone who has far fewer scruples. I’ll sit tight for now.

32

It was early February and Virgo Jane was still in France, but everyone else was present at the first board meeting since they had returned from Europe. Matt Lerner’s first item was a report on Sage’s tour. “Great stuff! I think we should put out a book

about her visit with the Pope: *Sage and the Pontiff*. Pope stuff always sells real well. How do you like that?"

"Ugh, I don't." Kevin was disgusted.

"Kevin." Fern placed her hand on his arm. "I know it sounds exploitive, but it might be a good way to get her message out. Think about how many Catholics there are in the world."

Kevin looked unconvinced. Sarah shrugged noncommittally.

Fern tightened her grip on Kevin's wrist. "Let's talk about it later. We can brainstorm about what might be in it."

"Please think about it," Matt said. "We need some more product out there."

"What about some results, Matt?" Fern asked. "Are Americans changing their behavior at all in response to Sage's message? And what about consumer spending or credit card debt? Are people trying to live more simply yet? Have fewer children? Conserve energy? Are they thinking about sacrificing a little today for a better future tomorrow?"

"Boy, it's pretty hard to tell. The polls show that some segments are changing their way of thinking, mostly the better-educated folks who are right in our demographic. People say they support smaller families, but we don't see any big change in birth rates, nationally. And as far as spending behavior, no. Nationwide, there's no change in debt and spending except upward, as usual."

"And about what percentage, nationwide, do you think we are influencing?"

"I'd say about twenty percent."

Fern looked gloomy. "That's not much more than we started with. About twenty percent of the population was already concerned about overpopulation and ecological destruction."

Matt tried to put glitter on it. "Yeah, but we've got every one of those people solid now. Commitments have deepened; there's no doubt about that. And it's only a matter of time before it spreads more to the general demographic."

"Time we don't have," Richard grumbled under his breath.

Their next report was from Gita Nareem on Operation Congo. Prabander had returned to the Congo to keep working on their negotiations.

"I am sad to say, progress is not what we had hoped it would be. We had hoped for a partnership with Catholic Relief to carry out our program, but they are putting all kinds of obstacles in our path. The most serious one is they want us to sign an agreement that we will not distribute contraceptives at our clinics."

A general groan of disgust rose up from the boardroom table. "Forget them then," Richard said. "We'll find another partner."

"Yes, but the problem is that the Catholics already operate ninety percent of the clinics and schools in the Congo. It would be extremely difficult to create a new infrastructure from scratch, especially in the current wartime situation. It is interesting though, they have hinted that they would relax their restriction on the clinics under one condition."

“What?” was the general question.

Gita blinked. “This is odd, but if Sage were to become a Catholic, they said

“Oh what a bunch of sh ...”

“No way!”

Sage shook her head vigorously. “I can’t do that. I don’t believe in their religion.”

Richard was thinking. Finally he said: “Go ahead and tell them we agree to their condition about contraceptives. Let’s get our clinics in place first and then see what happens.”

Fern looked at Richard strangely. She knew what he must be thinking.

They all agreed to go that direction for now.

“I have some other bad news to report, I’m afraid,” Gita said. “The bushmeat situation has gotten worse. Since Sage’s visit, certain religious leaders have been preaching about (.lemons. They consider Sage a demon.” Gita paused to let this sink in. “And, they are warning people that the forest apes are being directed to mate with human women to produce a race of demons that will take over the Earth. These stories are being spread by log truck drivers, miners and others who profit from the bushmeat trade. They are using the stories to justify further killing of the apes.”

“Oh my Goddess!” Fern screamed. “Oh my ... oh Sage.” Fern turned desperately to Sage to see how she was taking this.

Sage’s eyes were as big as soup spoons. She was utterly speechless and then slowly she began to draw breath, in and in. Her lips parted, her mouth formed an ‘O’ and slowly her breath released, beginning as a soft whistle that grew and expanded until it was a high-pitched, ear-piercing, bone-shivering shriek that went on and on and on until suddenly she slumped onto the floor.

Sarah rushed to her daughter and gathered her in her arms. Sage had fainted.

By the next day, Sage had recovered well enough to sit up in bed, but she refused to eat. Sarah wouldn’t leave her side. Finally by evening, Sage drank some juice and started to talk.

“I... I’m bad, Mommy. I made things worse,” she sobbed dryly and though she couldn’t cry, her panting and soft squealing helped relieve the pressures in her mind. Sarah held her and stroked her back. Finally she fell asleep, and Sarah, exhausted, slept too.

Over the next few weeks, Sage slowly recovered. Fern had gotten more information from Gita, and she told Sage that there were other stories circulating in the Congo as well—that eating apes could give you AIDS—and those stories were having the effect of discouraging the bushmeat trade. She told Sage that they needed to be patient, and they would begin to make progress in the Congo.

Then came the most devastating news of all. They heard it first on television news. “A group of twelve women in Lagos, Nigeria, immolated themselves today in front of oil company headquarters. They were protesting the poisoning of Nigerian villages by oil drilling.” The screen showed crude oil spilled in the center of a village and a sick, dying woman in a blackened hut. “Two of the women who poured a mixture of crude

oil and gasoline over themselves and lit it on fire were reported to be European women, members of the anti-globalization group, People's Last Stand."

Immediately, Sage and Fern knew that Virgo Jane was involved.

Within a few days, Virgo Jane's identity was confirmed. This time, Sage didn't knock herself out with a supersonic wail. Instead, she retreated into Bonobo Flouse. She lost herself in manic physical activity, ripping branches from the trees as she brachiated round and round the enclosure. She refused to talk to anyone, even Carver, and she refused to leave. She slept and ate with the bonobos.

"Leave her be," Jeanette said, when Sarah tried one more time to get Sage to talk about her feelings. "I'll keep a good eye on her. She'll come and talk to you when she's ready. This is really the best thing for her now." Sarah had to agree.

Sage fell into a depression. She slept a lot. In her waking hours she began to form a strong attachment to Mandy, her favorite of the bonobo females. They would sit, side by side, leaning on each other and watching the wild and woolly bonobo world unfold around them. Mandy had a tiny infant that she allowed Sage to hold. Cuddling baby Josie felt like warm honey dripping into Sage's bitter, withered heart. She longed for a child of her own that she could hold and nurse, but knew that it could never be.

As Sage drew physical comfort from Mandy and her infant, she thought of Virgo Jane and how solid she had been, always there to lean on and to help her interpret the world. Sometimes Sage would hug Mandy from behind and pant-sob into her shoulder. But then Mandy would turn to her and flick a finger asking Sage to present her vulva for consolation.

Sage wasn't up to it. Not only was her libido dampened by grief, but she couldn't bear the thought of the bonobo sexual whirl. Once she got started, there would be no stopping. Her father was out there.

Sage sank into a deep questioning. Her hormones became irrelevant and she simply sat and reflected, both buoyed and anchored by the waves of vital bonobo life lapping about her.

The more she thought about her life with *Homo sapiens sapiens*, the more she despaired. Sage, *Homo artemisia*, was the single, solitary member of her species. What could be lonelier? She tried to hang on to the thought that Virgo Jane, at least, had loved her, but then again, perhaps Virgo Jane hadn't really loved her after all. She hadn't in the end, at least. She had abandoned her for Louise and her suicide mission. Where would she ever find another lover like Virgo Jane? Humans were attracted to her, she knew that, but they were also afraid of her. Only Carver was left.

No matter how she looked at it, there was no way for her to exist anywhere but in an enclosure somewhere, whether it was Bonobo House or the high-rise bubble. She daydreamed about the endless forests of Africa, imagined flying through warm mists swirling about a leafy green forest canopy, the comforting hoots of her bonobo family all about her.

But how could she ever get there? Richard, her mother—they would never allow her to go back to Africa. She was stuck here, and all she could be was a daughter

to her parents, a little sister to Carver, a science experiment to John and the other researchers. Why had Virgo Jane left her? Virgo Jane was the only one who had made her feel like a real person.

Sage spent two months in Bonobo House, not speaking to any humans. Finally, she began responding to Jeanette in Ameslan, "How are you feeling?" Jeanette signed one day. "Okay. The banana flowers are blooming," Sage responded.

Jeanette called Fern, who rushed over and asked Sage if she was ready to talk now. Sage signed "yes" and she hugged Fern and drysobbed and said, "I'm okay now, Fern. I want to see Carver. And my mom."

Sarah drove up immediately from Eugene and spent a week at Bonobo House, hugging Sage and crying with her and letting her just talk. Sage didn't want to talk about the past. Instead she told Sarah bonobo gossip: Mandy didn't get along with Cheska because Cheska's son had beaten Mandy's son Hiram to a cache of dates and gobbled them down without sharing. Not only that, he knocked the younger Hiram off of a limb in his haste. Mandy and Sage had witnessed the entire incident.

Carver was relieved and joyful to have Sage back, and he came every weekend to camp out in Martin's forest reserve with her. Sage spent her weekdays working in Bonobo House with Jeanette.

Jeanette appreciated Sage's help with the bonobos, who could be stubbornly non-cooperative when they wanted to. She could roughhouse and tickle an ape into the medical examination room, while Jeanette would have to lure them in there with food treats, which didn't always work. And Sage could amuse and calm the bonobo females while the technicians collected blood samples and other body secretions for the contraceptive research. Jeanette really hated to give the bonobos sedatives.

Out in the forest, Carver tried to get her to talk about Virgo Jane. He said she shouldn't bottle her feelings up, but Sage didn't want to talk. "It sucks, Carver. That's all there is to say about it. Just hug me, okay?"

He did and she listened to the sound of their two hearts beating until the hard, tight feeling behind her eyes went away. Carver stopped pushing her to talk and they spent most of their time together watching birds and making love.

Sage began to feel almost normal. As long as she stayed in the bonobo world and didn't try to think about bigger issues, life seemed manageable.

33

Fern kept trying to think of ways to tempt Sage to leave the cocoon of Bonobo House. There was so much more they had to do to convince people of the seriousness of the ecological crisis and the need to take action. She still felt that religion was the key to changing people's minds. Even when they had the new contraceptive, they would still have to convince women to use it voluntarily. She would not accept Richard's alternative.

Fern had a strong memory from a time when she was a child and had walked into a Catholic church to see what it was like. There had been a statue of the Virgin standing on a crescent moon with a snake curled about her feet. The ancient Queen of Heaven, Fern now knew. Surely there must be a way to use that remnant of the Goddess religion that was still a part of the church.

Fern started working on a draft of *Sage and the Pontiff*. She would describe Sage's months secluded in Bonobo House as a religious retreat. As soon as she thought Sage was ready for it, she would arrange for her to spend a week in her mountains and set up a publicity event for her return. They would have cameras at the trailhead to catch her serene visage as she descended from the mountain. Fern would coach her on what she needed to say, but she felt sure that Sage would do it, once she got over her current mood. She simply had to.

Fern started attending Rainbow Club meetings all over the country as Sage's representative to prepare them for Sage's next spiritual revelation. She told them that Sage was in retreat now, but that she would be back in the public eye soon with a new message for the world.

Fern might not have become as obsessed with creating a new religion if she had had anyone else to talk to during this period of time. Sanene had gone back to Ghana. She and Richard were through. Since Sanene hadn't confided in Fern, she didn't know what it was about, but she thought it probably had to do with Richard's single-mindedness. Richard was obsessed with the pheromone contraceptive and he badgered her about it nearly every day. He couldn't talk to John directly because at this point the two men hated each other. He would demand that Fern find out everything that had happened at the lab that day and report it to him.

She couldn't talk to Richard about her idea, either. She mentioned it once when she was reporting to him in his office at Martin Campus and he ridiculed her. "Just more mental masturbation," he sneered. "You can't go back to the past, Fern, to matriarchy and the rule of moral law. Come on, this is what you and Sanene discovered in your research. The cat's out of the bag. Men no longer believe in the women's wisdom, and the only thing that counts in this world today is physical force. There are no 'higher laws' anymore."

Richard's attitude was alarming. He might be right that men no longer respected women, but women could at least respect themselves. She had to get the new religion well started before John's work was done and Richard had a chance to embed the pheromone in plastics everywhere.

Fern tried to talk to John about the new religion, and he tried to be supportive, but he didn't really understand. In his own way, he was as cynical as Richard. He would listen attentively to her ideas, but he never had anything to add, no advice. He simply didn't think it would do much good to turn the Rainbow Clubs into an organized religion. He would cautiously remind her of what happened to religions, how they inevitably became rigid and worked against their founding principles. When she insisted that Goddess religion was different, he would smile and shrug his shoulders.

Fern would have loved to be able to talk to Sarah or Kevin about her ideas, but Sarah was being extremely protective of Sage right now and wouldn't hear of any plans to bring Sage back out to the public. She wanted Sage to have plenty of time to heal.

Shortly after Sage's eighteenth birthday in July, Fern told her that the Rainbow Clubs were holding a major convention in San Francisco in September. "There'll be thousands of people who would give anything for a glimpse of you. Don't you want to help out the Rainbow Clubs?"

"I guess." Sage was sullen.

"I talked to Carver; he's free to go with you, and so am I. Come on, it'll be fun."

Sage brightened a bit. "Okay, why not?"

When it came time for the convention, Sage, Fern, Carver and two security guards and a driver loaded up the tour bus and headed down to San Francisco. Fern was right; Sage did enjoy it at first. But after a few hours, the crowds repelled her. She didn't like being around them anymore. Before she had felt proud to display her strong, young animal body to them, but now she felt more like a freak than ever. It's not that people weren't nice. They were extremely nice and solicitous to the point that it made her suspicious. She didn't trust people anymore. She didn't understand what they wanted from her.

At the end of the three-day convention, they said their goodbyes and boarded the bus. Fern kept asking her if she had had a good time. Yes, she had said, but Fern was too concerned about her. It was annoying.

They departed San Francisco late in the afternoon. It had been a long busy weekend, and Carver, Fern and the guards soon fell asleep. It was dark by the time they reached Redding, but Sage couldn't sleep. She kept thinking about how confined her life was. Sure, she could go to places like a Rainbow Club convention, but it didn't mean anything to her anymore. Where she really wanted to go was back to the wilderness.

Suddenly she realized that in less than an hour, they would be at the California-Oregon border, and that just before the border was the Klamath River rest stop where she had escaped from the federal agents so many years ago. Quickly she scribbled a note to Carver and Fern. Then she went up front and made casual conversation with the driver. When she saw the sign to the rest area she asked him to stop there for a minute. She wanted a breath of fresh air.

As the driver decelerated and braked into the rest area, the guards woke up. But it was too late. The driver opened the door and Sage was out and gone, into the wild torrents of the Klamath River.

Carver and Fern had found Sage's note pinned under a salt shaker on the bus dining table. It said in wobbly capital letters: DONT WURRY ABOUT ME. IM GOING TO SAVIG RANCH. CALL U WEN I GET THEIR.

Kevin, Sarah, Carver, Fern, John and Richard all gathered in Seattle for an emergency board meeting to decide what to do about Sage's defection.

Kevin spoke first, "Obviously, she intends to walk from the Klamath River home, reversing the trip we did six years ago." Kevin thought Sage's escape was gutsy. He admired her for it.

Sarah was more worried than that. "But how can she be safe? The Kristian Kommand, miners, hunters, anybody could find her out there. We've got to go look for her."

"Honey, she lived in the wilderness for two whole years and nobody ever saw her. I think she'll be fine. But if you want, I'll go in there and look for her. Not that I'd have a prayer of finding her, but if she saw me, she might present herself."

"But then I'd worry about you being out there," she cried.

"Sarah, you're being irrational." Kevin was firm.

"Look," Richard said, "why don't we send two of our security team along with Kevin? How about Bob and Susan? Sage knows both of them. If you guys go out and cover the territory as best you can, maybe, like you said, Kevin, she'll see you and present herself. Personally I would like to see her back here as soon as possible. We were going to call a meeting soon anyway, because John has some incredible news. We've discovered the bonobo pheromone."

This was new information to Sarah and Kevin. They both turned to stare at John.

John stood up: "Let me explain so you'll know how we reached this conclusion. What we've been doing is isolating the female we want to test alone with a single male for two cycles, which is about eighty days. Isolation from the other females places them under stress because they're naturally so social. But usually they'll get pregnant anyway, because they are not getting the pheromonal input from the other females that prevents implantation when they are under stress. So with the females in this stressed condition, we can test different pheromones on them for a contraceptive effect.

"We started with secretions from the armpit glands of bonobo females in the colony and tested them on the isolated subject. No effect. Then we tried vaginal secretions, secretions from glands near the urethra and the perineum, and then secretions from areas on the chest and scalp. No effect.

"Then one day it occurred to me to test the tear duct glands. Although bonobos can't cry, they do have tear ducts to lubricate their eyes. I don't know why I thought of it, but any gland is a potential source of pheromones. One day I noticed how much time bonobos spend making eye contact with each other; and I thought maybe they were communicating something more than just their feelings. So we took some samples of bonobo eye secretions and we have now confirmed that their tears are the source of the pheromone—the pheromone that prevents females from conceiving when they are under stress."

"Incredible!" Kevin exclaimed.

Sarah's jaw dropped. She felt like a python trying to swallow a pig. She looked at Richard and saw the excitement in his eyes. She gulped and said, "So will it work on humans? And if it doesn't— what about Sage's tears?"

Sarah was irate. She had left the conference room abruptly at a break in the meeting and started walking around the Martin Campus to try to work off her anger. She took long, rapid strides, chewing up the sidewalks with her rage. She glanced around her. The bare lawns with their blocky shrubs were tucked in around the sterile glass buildings like a grubby blanket around a homeless person. The air stank of traffic. Low clouds glowered above. The foul environment made her even madder. It was Richard's place. Why didn't he do more to make it human and beautiful?

Richard Martin. She had trusted Richard, but now she suspected that all along he had only been interested in one thing: to use Sage in his experiments. No doubt he had just played along with them on all of the other projects to try to keep them happy and under his control. What a fool she had been. It was clear now that Richard would be perfectly willing to sacrifice her daughter to advance his own agenda. He only cared about getting her back so he could harvest her tears. Who knew what other plans he might have for her?

And then there was Fern. She couldn't believe how Fern had pressured Sage to go back out in public before she was ready. Fern was turning into a fanatic herself, almost as bad as Virgo Jane. Fern thought Sage could convert Catholics to some Rainbow Religion that she was going to invent. She was really going off the deep end. And how dare she. How dare she play with Sage's life like that?

Kevin was a pain too. He was too cavalier about everything. He didn't even care. At that thought the fuse behind Sarah's eyes melted through and tears gushed out, hot and stinging, making a mess of her face. She stopped, wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her sweatshirt, sniffed and wiped her face again. She continued on.

She had reached the campus park, a small grove of second-growth forest, thick with underbrush. She walked more slowly now, the soft cinder path easier on her feet. It wasn't Kevin. That was just how he was. She knew he did care, deeply. He took things more casually than she did, at first, but he would be out there beating the bushes in the Kalmiopsis for months if that was what it took to find Sage.

Fern again. She was angry at Fern for being so stupid. It's not that she had done anything that wrong. She had told Sarah she was going to ask Sage to go to the Rainbow Convention. Sarah could have put her foot down if she had wanted to, but she didn't. She wasn't so much angry as disappointed. What had gotten into Fern anyway? She had noticed that Fern had lost her sense of humor recently. Why? It didn't make any sense.

Whatever was going on, Sarah knew she could never rely on Fern's judgment again. That made her terribly sad, but it was her own fault, really. She had become too dependent on Fern. She had tried to make her into a substitute for her own mother, for uninvolved Julia. It was time she grew up and realized that she didn't need a mother anymore.

Sarah did not know what to think about Richard. It was true that he had never done anything deliberately to hurt Sage. She just didn't trust his intentions anymore. But they would need to command his resources in order to find Sage.

Sage. Oh my god, where was she? Was she safe? They had to find her.

Sarah reached the end of the forest path and slowly turned around to head back to the meeting room and the others. A sick feeling pressed down on her head and grabbed her around the waist like a mugger.

34

Sage woke up to an overcast day, clouds moving in from the west. She was camped high in the white marble mountains again, right at the spot where she had once spoken to the rainbow sea serpent. She had arrived the night before at dark and had immediately pulled out her blanket and slept. Once again she had managed to filch a few things from one of the empty cabins along the Klamath River.

The nights were longer now, it was September, and she slept well and long. The sun pitched a few feeble rays over the ridge to the east and Sage woke instantly. But instead of leaping out of bed immediately, she lay there for a minute.

She had had a dream. About Virgo Jane. She dreamed that she saw Virgo Jane carrying a giant barrel of oil—much bigger than anyone could possibly carry—up a steep flight of steps. It was the oil company building. She stopped at the top of the stairs and turned to look at Sage. She held out her hand and without saying anything, implored Sage to come with her. In the dream, Sage was filled with longing and took a step forward. Then she woke.

Now Sage looked around her. She was here. She had come to this place in her mind so many times, whenever she was confused or sad. She stood and put her hands together and bowed to the sea serpent to the north. She turned to the south and bowed to the whale's eye behind her. She turned to the west and bowed to the ugly knob mountain, and she turned to the east and bowed to the rising sun.

She ate her breakfast and then walked out on the saddle ridge to a spot where she could see all three of the mountain beings. This time it was the red and black peridotite knob that spoke to her first.

"I endure," it said. "I am mass immovable. The turbulence of the ages challenges me and I send it spinning. All the winds of change can do is wash away my soft parts. I endure, growing knobbier and uglier every day. It is my power. Each of my knobs, each of my lumps and hooks, is an instrument to seize the winds and make them dance to my tune. I am strong. You can be like me too."

Sage turned to the long white marble form that reminded her of a sea serpent. The early morning sun shone low in the east still, sparking iridescent rainbows from the tail of the marble beast. Clouds shadowed the head of the rock, yet it appeared to glow with an inner blue-white radiance.

She waited a long time, watching the sea serpent. The sun moved behind a cloud-bank, and rainbows no longer danced from the serpent's tail. It continued to quietly glow blue-white. Then Sage remembered something. The words came to her: "You can-

not suffer from the illusion of having a self, since you are not even human. Self is only the illusion that causes all our suffering.” Those were the words that the Buddhist sage had spoken to her in India.

She looked at the sea serpent again and this time it spoke to her. “Give up the illusion of self,” it said. “Look at this one before you. I swim with the winds, I do not fight them. They shape me. I am soft, yielding marble. One day, they will wear me down to nothing. On that day I will be enlightened. I will be no-self. It will be many millions of years from now, but every day I experience the bliss of giving up self. I surrender my boulders, my pebbles, my grains of sand, my molecules to the cleansing wind and rain. With great gladness. With great happiness.”

And Sage remembered the rest of the old sage’s message: “If you have an illusion of self, it is because you are doubly ignorant. You have an illusion that you are a human who has an illusion of self. You must work to become enlightened then. Give up the illusion of self and you will no longer suffer.”

I have been doubly ignorant, Sage thought, but no more. I will no longer try to be human, *Homo sapiens sapiens*. And if I can give up my humanness, I will defeat both forms of ignorance, because animals have no self. Though I don’t agree we are lowlier. That thought sparked a current of anger in her, and she was drawn once more to the red and black knob. “Yes, I acknowledge you,” Sage said. “And I won’t give you up while I still have a self remaining.”

The wind had kicked up and was driving dark-bellied clouds eastward, pregnant with rain from the sea. The wind whipped about the red and black knob and whistled along the white marble fin. It socked Sage like a giant fist, and she made her way back to the whale’s eye, pursued by a legion of stinging water needles.

What looked to her like the eye of the whale was a natural rock shelter. She could wedge herself back between cube-shaped boulders and stay quite dry. For two days she stayed in the protection of the whale’s eye while the storm raged. Awakening on the third day, there was nothing left of the storm but a few ragtag clouds that vanished by noon. She packed up her things and started her journey north, to the Kalmiopsis Wilderness, on her way to Savage Ranch.

He had all his supplies together and now all he had to do was clean the gun one more time. Bo Breaker was obsessed with cleaning his guns. He was an expert marksman and he was convinced that even small soot deposits could queer the true bore of a gun. Especially his Brown Precision Tactical Elite with the custom stock molded to his own spec. It was an ought three hundred, perfect caliber. Why spend all that money on a fine piece of machinery like that, and then ruin its bore by not taking care of it? Neglect of fine weapons angered Bo more than almost anything.

Bo was excited. And a little nervous. The Contact had told him that the highest levels of the Kristian Kommand were counting on him. And he had told him that higher-ups had wanted to send in a younger man to do the job, but that he had stood up for him, knowing that Bo’s knowledge of the country was invaluable. “So if you

have any doubts about your ability to take care of business, let me know right now. We can't afford failure this time."

The Contact had fixed Bo with a hawk-like gaze. Bo met his eyes, "Don't worry, Sir, I have no doubts. My eyesight's as good as ever. You won't find anybody better."

But Bo was nervous. He was almost sixty now, and he had slowed down. But the ulcer and the hernia were minor problems, really. He could do the job.

Kevin, Bob and Susan strung out along the trail, loaded down with backpacking gear. They looked like any of the other city refugees you might find out on a late season trip in the wilderness. They had started from Savage Ranch and headed south, hoping to intercept Sage along the way somewhere. They would retrace the steps that Kevin's family had taken on their Hight through the wilderness. Kevin figured that Sage would do the same. She had an amazing memory for the lay of the land, and he knew she would have no problem finding the route. It would be the safest way to go because she would avoid the old mine on the Chetco River.

They left the trail and began to bushwhack over the ridges to the creek they would follow up to the rim. It was even harder than Kevin remembered it. He knew he was in worse shape now, but he couldn't imagine how he and Sarah had done this with a child while being pursued by planes and helicopters. Even Bob and Susan were having a hard time dragging their packs through the brush.

They took their time, and eventually reached the rim trail, but with no sign of Sage. They headed east, down to the valley where they would cross the highway before heading up again into the High Siskiyou Mountains that they would traverse before dropping down to the Klamath River.

But Kevin forgot that they had crossed the highway at night, which is what Sage did that night, in order not to be seen. As Sage crossed the highway and headed west into the Kalmiopsis, Kevin, Bob and Susan lay slumbering in their bags. Sage smelled people as she passed them on the other side of the river, but it only made her hurry on to avoid them. Kevin headed east and south, while Sage headed west and north. The weather had turned fine. The days were short but golden and warm, and the nights were cold but clear and silver with moon and stars. Sage loved every bit of it. She spent each day shifting in and out of different states of consciousness as she wandered slowly through the mountains.

Every being she encountered, a bear, a stag, a big-voiced winter wren, a rattlesnake basking on a hot sunny rock, would absorb her consciousness. For a moment she would become that animal. Her self would vanish and she would feel in her own nerves and sinews the sensation of pressing her muzzle to a rotten log to suck sweet grubs from it; or the tension in her neck before lifting her heavy rack of antlers to flee; or the vibration of music in her throat as she sang the winter wren's song; or the utter relaxation of her long snake muscles melting endlessly into a warm rock.

She remembered what Fern had told her about the goal of enlightenment. It was not to become nothing but rather to become everything. By ridding the self, she began to let the whole universe flow through her. And it was blissful. She was incredibly happy

and she no longer thought about the Congo, or Virgo Jane, or the crew back in Seattle, or her goal of getting to Savage Ranch. She headed northwest merely because that was the direction she was going in. She had completely forgotten her destination, absorbed wholly in the now of each being she encountered.

One day, after she had reached the Kalmiopsis Wilderness, she smelled water, a small lake. She was near the trail, and she knew that the trail would lead to the lake since lakes were always places that humans wanted to go. She knew she should avoid the lake, but she wanted to see what animals might be there, and she made her way there anyway. I'll only stay for a minute, she thought, and I'll be able to hear and smell any hikers before they see me.

The lake was a gem set in granite. Warblers swooped from graceful cedars on its banks, gathering up wayward insects like avenging angels. Tiny red newts paddled submerged in the lake with their waterbaby hands. Then Sage saw the eagle. It was perched at the top of the tallest cedar on the far end of the lake. A magnificent, powerful bird, its eyes swept back and forth over the lake.

Sage was transfixed. She stood and stared. Cicadas hummed all around, filling the air with a vibrating sound that resonated deep in the core of Sage's being. Never had she been so fully empty* of self. Her body was a singing cavern that held one note, the note of Eagle.

Bo Breaker didn't have enough information. All that the Contact had told him was that their spy at Martin Enterprises said that the ape girl had run away from them at the same place where she had escaped the feds many years ago, and they thought she was headed home to Savage Ranch. Martin had security people out looking for her and he would have to avoid them. But there were no other clues to where she might be in the vast wilderness.

The Contact was apologetic. "Our spy is a low-end security guy; there's only so much he can find out. But hell, in this case I don't think Martin himself knows much more about where she could be."

Bo started off following the Martin people, but when they took off through the brush, he figured he would stick to the trail. He couldn't follow them in the brush easily, and besides, she would have to cross the trail at some point anyway. He would go down to the south rim trail and sit up at night with his infrared scanners and hope for good luck. He would also do a regular check of all the water holes on the south rim. It was dry up there and there weren't many places to get a drink. It was a basic hunting technique that worked with most animals. But Bo was nervous. This wasn't just any animal. This was Satan's spawn.

Bo was nearing one of the few small lakes on the south rim. He stashed his pack and took his weapon out and began his approach from downwind.

Slowly, he came up over the low rim rock on the downstream side of the lake. He peered around a boulder to scan the lake and instantly he saw her. Bo breathed, slowly, deliberately, the way he had learned in Special Forces training. He was good,

goddamn it. The fools should never have discharged him for that minor incident with the Commander.

Silently, he moved into position. He raised his weapon. She was completely still, staring at something in the distance. The range was no problem for him. This would be easy.

Slowly, gently, Bo centered his aim. He took a deep breath. Then, controlled and steady, he began to let the breath out. In the middle of the exhale, his finger moved to squeeze the hair trigger of his weapon.

At precisely that moment, the eagle spread its magnificent wings and leaped into the air. Sage, who had been standing with her arms crossed over her heart, flung open her arms, following the eagle's flight with her spirit.

Startled, Bo relaxed his grip on the rifle too soon and instead of penetrating her heart, the bullet severed the third finger on her left hand.

Sage dropped to the ground and was off like a deer into the trees.

Bo cursed and cursed. He cursed the eagle for flying. He cursed himself for not cleaning his gun well enough. He cursed the demon for her luck. He ran over to the spot where she had been standing and noted with satisfaction a trail of blood leading into the bush. Then he saw it, the severed finger. He wrapped it in his bandana and stuck it in his pocket and then investigated the blood trail. After a hundred yards, he lost it. There was no sign of any kind. She had vanished.

Bo sat down to think about what to do next. He could stay out here and keep looking for her, but she would be wary now and very hard to catch. Perhaps he would get lucky and she would bleed to death or die of an infection. Or perhaps he would be unlucky and she would go to ground—head straight to her people at Savage Ranch. He decided to move closer to Savage Ranch and try to intercept her.

Bo hiked back to the trailhead and went to town for more supplies. He came back and set up a camp out in the hills behind Savage Ranch. He stayed there for more than a month, sleeping by day and patrolling with his infrared scanner by night. Deer, elk and bear showed up in the scope but never the ape girl.

He went to town periodically and kept his ears open and learned that Kevin Shepard was still around looking for her too. He waited another month till it was frigid and storming and snow was collecting on the mountaintops. Then he figured that God was with him and the ape girl had indeed perished from blood loss or infection.

He got out the finger he had saved. It was long, and the last digit had a hook in it. Apes have hooked fingers to help them hold on to branches, but Bo didn't know that. He shivered when he saw it. It was truly an appendage of the Devil.

He called up the Contact and told him that he had killed the ape girl and buried her in the woods, but he had cut off her finger and brought it back as proof. The Contact told him to take the finger to the police and tell them that he was out deer hunting and had found the body of the ape girl dead in the woods. Then he was to direct them somewhere far away from where she was buried. "That way they can't do any ballistics tests on her body to connect her with your weapon. Tell them when you

found her she was already partly decomposed and animals were eating her. Then they won't be too surprised when they don't find the body."

Bo did as he was told and soon the news of Sage's death spread all over the world. Thousands mourned in the streets, and the leaders of the Kristian Kommand gloated in their corporate boardrooms.

"He killed her!" Sarah screamed when she heard the news. "He killed my baby. She never had a chance."

But no body was ever found, and there was no evidence that Bo had killed her, and the courts couldn't prosecute him. Bo Breaker was free to go back to his miserable trailer house surrounded by mud and tree stumps, where he spent the rest of his days compulsively cleaning every one of his three dozen weapons every day, until his fingers rotted away and his liver grew a cancer fed on benzene fumes.

35

Richard was frustrated beyond belief. He grieved for little Sage; he had truly loved her, but more important than her life even, was the loss of her body. Sage's tears were now gone forever, and with them his hope of quickly finding and deploying the human population regulator.

Sage's tears had the pheromone that worked on humans. Fern's experiment had proven it. If only John had taken a sample of her eye secretions before she had disappeared. But he hadn't, and Richard could barely control his fury at that incompetence.

There was still hope that bonobo tears would point the way to the human version of the pheromone, but it was a hit-and-miss affair of chemical speculation and could take years and years if they were successful at all. They had already established that the bonobo pheromone did not work on human women. John had completed that bit of work and then turned over all the results and quit the contraceptive research program.

"You've got what you want from my bonobos now," he told Richard. "You can give this data to any good synthesis and testing lab and do whatever the hell you want with it. Let me run Bonobo House and take care of the bonobo conservation program. Let me know if you need more biological samples and I'll provide them. Just stay the hell out of there. I don't want you trying to breed another hybrid like Sage that you can harvest your pheromone from."

Richard was disgusted with John's attitude, but it was true, he had thought of breeding another hybrid. Maybe in a few years if there still weren't any results—anyway he didn't need John anymore and he was better off not working with him if he was going to have such a negative attitude. Richard didn't really understand what it was about, but thought it might have something to do with the fact that he and Fern had been so friendly with each other.

But Fern too had grown aloof and she never came to his office anymore to talk. As far as he knew, she spent most of her time back in her cabin at Savage Ranch, though she still came up on week' ends to be with John.

Another year went by and Richard invested more and more into his new synthesizing lab. He now had a hundred and twenty employees working on the problem with no results yet.

Still, he kept consolidating his holdings in plastics and planning for his eventual success. As soon as the pheromone was identified and synthesized, he would have it in every plastic bag, box, bottle, bauble and trinket manufactured worldwide. He, Richard Martin, would save humanity from itself.

Sometimes he would dream about stepping up on the platform to accept his Nobel Prize, but then he would realize that he would never be able to take credit for his heroism. People were so damned shortsighted and selfish. He would become a target for every extremist idiot on the planet. He would end up like poor Sage. But posthumously, he could take credit. He would leave instructions with his estate.

Richard continually kept tabs on all the global indicators, and one day he noticed that his data shop had uncovered some interesting developments. In some parts of the world, birth rates were down significantly. It was puzzling, because there was no good reason for it.

True, the Rainbow Clubs had had some effect in persuading people in North America and Europe to have fewer children. The clubs had united to form the Rainbow Church of Immaculate Contraception, which was now actively proselytizing.

But outside North America and Europe, the Rainbows had few followers. And some of the most dramatic changes were occurring in India, Africa, China and Indonesia.

Richard looked at the stats for hunger, disease, war and poverty as well as bank loans, development aid and investments. There weren't any significant changes that could have affected the birth rate like this. Operation Congo had built a few clinics and chicken ranches deep in the bush and fattened innumerable government officials, but it couldn't explain a significantly lower birthrate in the city of Kinshasa.

Suddenly it struck him. He called his lab director and gave him instructions. If his suspicions were correct, the lab should be able to confirm them in two months or less.

36

"Praise the Goddess! Oh Praise the Goddess! The great mother snake has swallowed us. Once again we are safe in her belly. Once again we devote ourselves to her praise."

Fern sang out to herself as she drove north on Interstate Five. She felt the power of Mother Earth surging up through the asphalt, through the car's tires, through her body.

She could not believe how happy she was. How suddenly everything had changed. The week before, Richard had called them all up to Seattle. Even John came to hear what Richard had to say. Carver persuaded him to go.

Richard told them the good news, and in Fern's opinion it was the best good news the human race had ever heard. Better than any religious revelation. Better than any scientific discovery or invention. Richard told them that for the first time since we became *Homo sapiens sapiens*, a significant evolutionary event had occurred.

He had been studying global statistics and discovered that birth rates had started to decline significantly in several places around the world. He had a hunch and he plotted the declines on a map. He found the highest concentrations of birth rate decline near the cities and villages Sage had visited on her world tour. He had his lab collect tear samples from women in many of those locales, including women in Seattle, where even the popular press had noted a decline in the birth rate.

The lab found that these women were manufacturing a pheromone in their tear ducts that prevented pregnancy in women under stress.

Women who were exposed to Sage had been permanently altered by her pheromone, which stimulated a dormant gene to express itself in the lachrymal gland. The gene directed tissues to grow in the gland, making a little pheromone factory.

Fern laughed again at the thought of it. So now all of us who were exposed to Sage have become like her. We all produce the pheromone. Or at least enough of us do to have an effect on the birth rate. And our pheromones are stimulating the change in other women who we come in contact with. In a short amount of time, every woman in the world will go through the change. Nothing can stop it.

What that means is that our situation is no longer hopeless, she thought joyfully. Human population will drop to sustainable levels. There will be room for the animals again. Women will be highly valued, even cherished, because we won't be able to reproduce if we are not well treated. No one will be able to afford war. We will forget it ever existed. We are back in step with the rest of nature, dancing to the same music. It doesn't mean we won't still be human or that we'll give up on exploring the stars. But we won't be forced out before we're ready, desperately trying to create some lebensraum for a privileged few on a dead planet like Mars.

And then there was the very best news of all—the reason for her drive to Eugene. That morning Fern had a visitor at her cabin. She crept out of the woods and softly opened the door to grin at Fern who was sitting at the kitchen table and drinking her morning tea. Fern jumped at sight of that familiar little face, the deep set chocolate brown eyes and the two dark pigtailed tied with shreds of cedar bark.

Fern fed her a huge scrambled egg breakfast and listened to her tales. When she was finished with the meal, she took her leave and melted back into the forest.

Immediately, Fern got in her car and headed to Eugene. She pulled into Sarah and Kevin's driveway and burst from the car, not bothering to close the door behind her. She ran into the house and told them the news.

First Sarah cried and cried. Then she laughed.

With joy and triumph, Sarah laughed.

—**THE END**—

Note

Bonobo chimpanzees, like all great apes, are a highly endangered species. Here are two important groups working to protect bonobos that deserve your support:

The Bonobo Conservation Initiative

www.bonobo.org

Bushmeat Crisis Task Force

www.bushmeat.org

The Ted K Archive

Kelpie Wilson
Primal Tears
2005

<www.archive.org/details/primaltears00wils>

Ecological sci-fi thriller about an endangered species breeding program gone wrong. Sage, a hybrid creature half human, half bonobo chimpanzee, has trouble fitting into society, but her existence may hold the key to solving one of the greatest problems facing the human race.

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www.thetedkarchive.com