

THE QUARRY

Swipe Left

Emma Burchett

‘I heard there’s an app now,’ Zoe said as the traffic light changed from red to green.

‘Did you,’ Nate said, entering the intersection and waiting to make the right hand turn.

‘Yeah. Sera told me.’ Zoe looked out the window. The steady stream of oncoming traffic continued, and the light turned amber. *Proceed with caution.*

‘Seraphina also believes anything she reads on the Internet,’ Nate said as he took the turn. ‘So forgive me if she doesn’t exactly exude authority when it comes to knowledge.’

Smiling, Zoe shook her head. Reaching into her handbag, she pulled out the letter, crumpled from constant handling since they’d received it the day before. She unfolded it and tenderly smoothed out the creases.

Mr and Mrs Foreman,

We are pleased to inform you that your application for a child has been approved. The Government would like to congratulate you on your upcoming joy and invites you to present

yourself at the Family Planning Centre for your initial consultation and family unit enrolment. Please take care to note that this offer will expire within 500 days upon receipt.

Wishing you a smooth process and a rewarding experience.

Yours,

Cattalina Prewitt

Birthing Director

Department of Populous Control

Zoe ghosted her fingertips over the words. She was going to be a mum. *Nate* was going to be a *dad*. She hummed and daydreamed about their future child. Would they have a little boy? A miniature *Nate* would be so lovely, with his dad's dark hair but her hazel eyes. Then again, a little darling girl would be so much fun to dress, and *Nate* would be wrapped around her little finger quicker than Zoe could say 'daughter'.

Her thoughts turned to the study, which would now obviously be turned into a nursery. Her smile unconsciously widened as she pondered what theme they'd choose for the room. Jungle safari? Heavenly clouds? Under the sea? Dreamy night sky?

They made a left and Zoe could tell they'd arrived because the building was surrounded by its usual cluster of protestors. The crowd's chant of 'Our bodies, our choice!' permeated through the window. Zoe folded the letter back up and slid it safely back into her bag.

'I just don't understand the Endolutionists,' she said, eyeing the small but vocal group.

'Nature gave us bodies to grow life in!' a woman in the crowd shrieked as the car passed. 'I want to grow a baby in my own body!'

'Don't they remember learning about the population surplus in primary school?' She leaned forward to catch the crowd in the side mirror. Her gaze landed on the woman who'd declared she wanted to grow a baby herself, and Zoe felt a phantom finger run up her spine. That woman gave Zoe the heeby-jeebies. She sat back in her seat. 'Genetic castration was the only answer.'

'If the Endolutionists had it their way,' *Nate* said as he reversed the car into a parking space, 'You'd have to have a baby every time you wanted to have sex! Imagine that. We'd all just fall off the planet and straight into space. Then there'd be no Endolutionists left. How self-redundant.'

They both laughed and unbuckled their seatbelts before climbing out of the car. Zoe linked her arm with Nate's, giving it an affectionate squeeze. She couldn't wait to give their child Nate's sense of humour.

As the Foremans approached the building, Zoe's steps began to slow. 'Damn, they're intimidating,' she whispered to Nate. Nate gave Zoe a reassuring squeeze as he swept her slowing gait up with his own stride, propelling them through the throng.

'It's unnatural!' someone shouted from behind them. Zoe glanced over her shoulder and spied the same woman she'd noticed from the car. The woman's eyes lit up with fervour when she saw she had Zoe's attention. 'IT'S UNNATURAL!' she shrieked again. 'A conspiracy to keep us docile like good little—' her words were cut off by the door sealing shut behind Zoe and Nate.

'So I hear you two are looking to create a baby,' the Engineer announced as she settled into her chair. Zoe's eye caught one of the diplomas on the wall behind the desk. *Greta Burkes—Obstetrics Engineering*. She recalled from her nursing training how Obstetricians had been their own branch of medicine, back before the Childless Accords in '64. Midwives too. She shifted in her seat and plastered on a bright smile.

'Yes,' Nate mirrored Zoe's smile as she reached for his hand. 'We're ecstatic to have been approved.'

Burkes pulled a folder out from one of her drawers. 'Your application was very agreeable,' she said with a glance at the papers inside. 'I remember reviewing it with the committee just a few months ago. Mr Nathan Foreman, twenty-eight, software developer, steady income, low risk assessment, room for career advancement, and ideal work hours for raising a family. Mrs Zoe Petrakis Foreman, twenty-seven, registered nurse, flexible work hours, steady income, moderate risk assessment, capacity for at-home health care of a child.'

She flicked through several sheets, 'You both passed the aptitude tests with flying colours, your financial records and home visit were both perfectly sound... Yes,' she said, closing the folder with a *fwap*. 'An ideal work-life balance with the resources and aptitudes for raising a child. I have some paperwork we'll need to go through, to enrol your family unit and

update existing records to reflect your pending child, et cetera et cetera. And of course, the confidentiality agreement, which mandates that regardless of whether or not you choose to create a child here in this facility, all procedures and information you come across will be held in strictest confidentiality.’

Nate reached for the document as it was slid across the desk. He signed it and passed it to Zoe. She picked up the pen, twirling it between her fingers before slowly signing her name on the dotted line.

‘Fantastic,’ Burkes said as she slid the agreement into their folder. ‘Now, I know it probably feels like a lot of red tape with all the paperwork, so perhaps we might take a tour of the centre now. It’s a little more fun than the repeated signature signing.’ A laugh escaped Zoe’s lips before she threw an embarrassed hand up to cover it. Following Nate and Burkes’ lead, she sprang to her feet. ‘Over the next coming nine months you’ll grow very accustomed to this place, I assure you,’ Burkes continued as she stepped around her desk. ‘Some couples choose to visit their child once a day if you can believe it.’

‘Oh,’ said Zoe, glancing at Nate in surprise. ‘Does the baby grow that quickly?’

Burkes led them out of her office, explaining over her shoulder. ‘On a day-to-day level, the growth will hardly be noticeable, so a visit once a week is more likely to help you notice the development—size being the most notable. However, you are welcome to visit as frequently or infrequently as you like. Our services are open twenty-four-seven for visitation, and there will always be lab technicians on hand to answer any questions you might have about the growth process.’ She pulled up short by a double set of doors, tapping her ID card against a sensor before leading them through. ‘This is our Hallway Wing. It’s where the magic happens.’

Zoe and Nate couldn’t contain their gasps. For as far as the eye could see, tanks lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Inside, small solid shapes floated in a viscous liquid. The room was filled with the dull hum of constant *bings* from each tank, and lab technicians crossed from one tank to another, consulting tablets in their hands.

‘Amniotic chambers,’ the Engineer declared as they stared in amazement at the children in various growth stages around them. The baby closest to Zoe was almost triple the size of the one in the tank above it. She looked for its chart on the screen beside it, but the display only showed a padlock and the baby’s identifying number.

She tried to picture her own future child floating in one of these tanks. Visiting it after work to read books, or simply talk to it. The parenting books all advocated talking to the baby once it reached 23 weeks in the tank. It was an important bonding experience for both the parents and child, they said. Zoe's imagination helpfully supplied her the tank and Nate beside her, reading children's nursery rhymes, but before she could formulate her child, her thoughts were interrupted. A gentle yet insistent pinging had begun four tanks down, and a lab technician brushed past Zoe with a polite 'Excuse me,' to tap his ID card on the screen. The screen unlocked and he scrolled through the diagnostics.

'Everything alright, Serkan?' Burkes asked pleasantly.

'Oh yes, twenty-two-seven-one-eight just needs another dose of vitamin B12. Nothing critical.' He pulled a small tablet from the pocket of his coat and began tapping away as Nate leaned down to whisper 'How cool is that?' in Zoe's ear. Burkes then began leading them down the length of the room, pointing out various equipment and explaining the finer details of their functions. Most of it whizzed over Zoe's head, but Nate was certainly impressed, particularly when the diagnostic software was discussed.

'So as you can see, all foetal development takes place in this wing,' Burkes said as they turned right and took an early exit. The room continued to sprawl on ahead without them. 'When your own child is growing here, you'll be free to visit and view them as you please.' They walked for another minute or two before arriving at a giant window where several couples stood, peering in with delight.

'Oh honey, he's perfect,' one woman gushed, squeezing her wife's arm.

'She has your nose,' a husband told his wife, nuzzling her temple. She giggled and rolled her eyes.

'Of course she does,' she said. 'You picked it!'

'This is our observation room,' Burkes said as they passed through. 'On your child's due date, you will be directed here once they have been cut from their growth cord and cleaned up. When your paperwork has been finalised, you are free to take them home.'

Nate's excited gaze sought out Zoe's, but her answering smile was a beat too slow.

'This is a lot to take in,' he said, wrapping an arm around Zoe. 'I think Zoe's feeling a little overwhelmed.'

‘Expectant mothers have gone through this for centuries, it’s not uncommon,’ Burkes said kindly with an understanding smile. ‘Come, let’s return to my office and I can take you through the child enrolment forms. Have you decided on a boy or girl yet?’

Nate and Zoe shared a look. ‘We haven’t, yet, no,’ Nate said as Zoe shook her head.

‘Not to worry, plenty of time for that. For now, I’ll just show you how to log in and use the app so you can play around with features and personality and get an idea of what the final product might look like. It might help your decision-making process.’

‘I told you there was an app,’ Zoe whispered to Nate as they followed the Engineer back through the halls.

‘Yes, well, a broken clock is right twice a day.’

It was another hour before they parted company with the Engineer, clutching their paperwork and organising to make a follow-up appointment once they’d decided on their genetic instructions.

‘I cannot wait to see what child you come up with,’ Burkes said warmly as she walked them back to the lobby. Nate had certainly had a bit of fun swiping through the various options when she’d shown them how to use the stylised app. He’d almost turned it into a game to see how bizarre looking they could make their child. ‘Look, it’s Quasimodo,’ he said as he enlarged one eye to be five times the size of its other. His fingers pinched and expanded on the screen as they played with the eye’s size. With a stern frown, Zoe trapped his fingers under her hand before he could toy with the age slider. ‘Take this seriously, Picasso,’ she’d told him as she glanced down at the baby’s face. Quasimodo would not age well.

They stepped back out onto the street, blinking at the immediate barrage of insults and jeers.

‘Let’s get out of here,’ Nate said, steering Zoe around the worst of the crowd. ‘Get out of here you crazies!’ he yelled over his shoulder.

Zoe chanced one last glance back at the protestors. Her eyes met with the woman’s. She pressed a kiss into Nate’s shoulder and allowed him to steer them back toward the car.

Nine months and three weeks later, when the lab technician produced baby Lolita from the observation room, Zoe and Nate joined the chorus of coos from the soon-to-be parents. Zoe stretched out her arms, eagerly taking her new daughter into them and cradling her to her chest. With tears in her eyes, she smiled up at Nate, who kissed her proudly on the lips. As one, they glanced down at their daughter. Hazel eyes—a mirror copy of Zoe’s—blinked up at her, and tiny fingers reached out to wrap around Nate’s index. Lolita gurgled with a gummy grin.

Zoe’s smile froze on her face as she gazed down at her perfect daughter. Dread trickled into her arms, and the baby suddenly felt so much heavier.

With trepidation, Zoe realised she felt absolutely nothing for her child.