



Chapter

4

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# THE TRANSGRESSION

On the surface the Van Deman Center was no different from any other place of business. There were the few employees who arrived earlier than necessary and those who managed the time clock as though it were a slot machine. Shortly after she was hired, the practice administrator noticed Mia Evans' ritualistic early arrival and promptly enlisted the new employee as keeper of the key to the rear door, a duty that garnered no extra salary but was appreciated nonetheless by a much less eager administrator.

Although her official responsibility was to facilitate morning access to the building for the other employees and any supply deliveries, the distinction of being first on-site soon evolved into a self-appointed employee break-room/kitchen cleanup duty, assuming that the after-hours effort of the professional janitorial service had been perfunctory at best.

In truth, anyone else would have considered the compact kitchen provided for the employees to be clean enough once the evening janitorial crew had completed its blitz. Despite what those professionals considered their best effort, she still envisioned the area as disordered, as nasty. Mia Evans could not rest until the

room was returned to her immaculate standards in preparation of her peers' arrival to work.

Evans lived up to her own expectations. Each morning in near obsessive fashion, she brewed the coffee, replenished the community refrigerator with soft drinks from the storage closet, and sanitized the break table with cleaning tissues borrowed from the patient examination rooms – thin sheets of paper saturated with hazardous liquid chemicals that annihilated bacteria or viruses on contact. The sterilizing wipes were drawn from the top of a cylindrical plastic container resting near each exam room sink that resembled similar products used to wipe babies after diaper changes.

Mia's reliability with her assumed early hour cleaning duties and first-to-arrive status continued to be appreciated by the practice administrator. Despite the gratitude, Evans' responsibilities grew without regard to a parallel rise in her pay.

Once a week a nondescript white van arrived at the rear entrance to the Van Deman Center, a vehicle similar in color to that of Tinker Murtagh but roughly three times the size and scripted with legitimately painted lettering. Instead of *WE PAINT MISSISSIPPI* scrawled across the side, this van was neatly designated *SPECIALTY CHEMICALS, INCORPORATED – Dallas, Birmingham, Atlanta*. Finding the Jackson area an easy stopover on Interstate 20, the thoroughfare connecting its corporate locations, Specialty Chemicals, Incorporated delivered a fresh supply of liquid nitrogen to the Center every Wednesday morning. Ready and waiting at the back entrance to sign in receipt of the delivery and admit the delivery technician was the punctual Mia Evans.

"Here to top things off again? Huh, Frank?" Mia asked Frank Rizzo, the Specialty Chemicals technician assigned to the Van Deman account.

"Yeah, Mia, but I'm running a little behind with this drop-off."

“Behind? You’re always here at 7:45, give or take a minute or two, have been ever since I started working here.”

“My problem is they’ve added another delivery stop for me on the way over to Dallas. Some new medical clinic in Monroe has started to use our products, and the extra time there will put me late getting back to the main plant,” Frank explained with some hesitation as he handed Mia his laptop for her signature. Even though she had signed in receipt for the chemicals on multiple occasions, she still fumbled with the stilet, trying to apply just the correct amount of pressure for her signature to display on the screen. As Frank watched her awkwardly scribble *Mia Evans*, he wondered if he should push his plan with her.

“My wife already complains enough about this job I’ve got, what with all the traveling back and forth between Dallas and Atlanta and back. Of course, I’m gone two or three nights a week, and she has to help with the kids’ homework all by herself. You know, says it’s a real pain, but really, she’s kinda good at stuff like that since she’s a teacher’s assistant. Anyway, the extra hour with the new customer in Monroe – that’s the real bitch for me. Puts me an hour late getting home on the nights I make it home – another hour for me to be away from my family. The wife says she’s sick of being a single parent. Might as well be divorced, the wife said crying the other night on the phone while I was stuck in a motel just outside of Birmingham.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry, but ...” Mia responded handing the laptop back to the delivery man.

“Look, you look like a responsible gal,” Frank carried on as he looked down the short hall of the rear entrance, at nothing in particular. “The company’ll have my ass if my delivery production falls, and my wife’ll have my ass if I don’t make it home more. She’s about to cut me off, anyway, if you know what I mean. A guy’s got to have a little ...”

“Wait a minute!” Mia threw her hands up, palms forward.

“No, really, I’m just trying to get a little help here,” Rizzo countered.

“I’m sorry, but you’re reading me the wrong way. I’m just here doing my job; I’m meeting you here every Wednesday morning to get the delivery from the chemical company, just like I’m s’posed to.”

Frank looked puzzled, not with the eyes of someone sexually rebuffed as Mia expected. “Damn, girl, you’re reading me the wrong way,” he pleaded as Mia turned to walk away, planning immediately to report the incident as sexual harassment to her administrator. She then remembered that her superior had a dental appointment for a root canal and planned to take the day off. “Wait, this could be good for both of us,” he called out to her.

“I told you I’m not ...”

Rizzo interrupted Mia. “What I’m talking about is paying you, on the side, of course, if you’ll ...”

Mia then interrupted him in turn, stopping to turn halfway back toward Rizzo. “You know, Frank, my boy, you’re a real oversexed asshole. Gosh, did you have me fooled. I thought you were a nice guy. Comin’ here every week and all, bein’ real friendly to me. Now I know why.” She turned back toward the employee kitchen, remembering that she had forgotten to wipe out the microwave with the bacterio- and viricidal “baby” wipes. First, she would need to scrub out the splattered food stains as a result of yesterday’s late afternoon leftover lasagna snack, then sanitize the entire interior surface with the special wipes.

“No, Girl. Like I said, you’ve got me wrong!” Frank called out to her, and then lowered his voice, not wanting to attract attention. He was fairly certain that few, if any, of the other employees were in the building at such an early hour, but could not be certain. He needed this girl’s help, help that could cost him his job while

at the same time save his marriage. He would up the ante of his proposal, make the help worth her while.

Mia decided to ignore him, her thoughts now immersed in double-checking the staff kitchen for dust particles and other disorder that would escape the superficial sight of every other employee. In returning to her obsessive concern about cleanliness, she slowed long enough for Frank to continue his plea. His tone was hushed, compellingly secretive. "This is what I'll pay you to do. I can show you how to top off the tanks with the liquid nitrogen. It's really easy to do, a simple process. You just have to do it kinda slow. That's why I'm in such a mess over the time."

"What? I can't do that!" Mia exclaimed, first amazed at the guy's audacity, then alarmed that her screaming response had been heard all over the building. Then she remembered that, of course, she and Rizzo were the only two people there.

"Yes, you can. It's really easy to do," he countered. "I'll drop off the containers, even pull the cart around to the embryo storage chamber. Then you'll do the rest. The pay'll be worth it to you. I guarantee it."

"That's not what I'm talking about. There's security involved. No one has access to that chamber except the doctors and the laboratory director and her assistant. I'm really not sure that Dr. Van Deman has even given the new doctor the authority to go in there yet. He probably has, but I'm not sure."

"You're correct about the security; I knew you were a smart girl. But all that's standard," Frank explained patiently. "For sure, there's a voice recognition system and a backup fingerprint program in case the voice entry fails. All I have to do is give you a recording of me saying my name *Frank Andrew Rizzo Junior* and that's all there is to it. I've got one of those little digital recorders right here." Frank Andrew Rizzo Jr., produced a small, handheld voice recorder from his right front pants pocket. "Picked this thing

up at Wal-Mart yesterday,” he announced proudly, as though demonstrating a unique discovery. “This’ll do the trick,” he said with reassurance, feeling that Mia was warming up to his proposal.

He next motioned for her to follow down an adjacent corridor that narrowed just as it wound toward the embryo storage vault. The vault was indeed housed, as Mia had touted, in a restricted zone of the building complex, that is, restricted to physicians, certain laboratory personnel, and delivery persons with security clearance. From her new employee orientation of over a year ago, Evans recalled the administrator’s stern admonition regarding the sensitivity of the area and its off-limits status to low-status employees like her.

The mysterious shroud hanging over the operations of this section of the Center was propagated by those warnings and became a central item in each new employee’s job orientation, falling in line immediately behind learning the location of the restroom and that of her personal locker. Feeling a mistaken sense of immunity to the simplified “hands-off, stay-away” rule associated with the embryo culture lab, Mia nervously accepted his invitation and followed in the forbidden shadow of Frank Rizzo. His security status was granted as a bonded employee of Specialty Chemicals, giving him green-light authorization to proceed through this section of the building. Of course, that green light did not extend to Mia Evans.

Mia’s pulse quickened over the certainty of dismissal if she were discovered penetrating the guarded area; the *if* being the issue, *if* she were caught. *The lowly likes of Mia Evans*, she thought. *I’m such an unimportant employee, nothing but kitchen help, a step-and-fetch-it for the administrator of this place. She herself is nothing more than a glorified medical office manager, too lazy to get up out of bed every morning and unlock the building herself.*

As Mia lurked closely behind Rizzo, she wondered if Dr. Van Deman was aware of how truly lazy his administrator was. Surely, when he hired her to manage the practice he had not realized that his chief officer would let him down in such critical matters as receiving important supply deliveries, like the stuff Rizzo was pushing down the hall on a dolly. Van Deman's a smart man, she thought, deciding that he must be intelligent to do the kind of work he did.

Walking forward, moving closer to Frank Rizzo, staying within his protective shadow, Mia envisioned the administrator standing before her, shaking a finger in disapproval if she were caught, and then pointing that bony finger toward the permanent exit door. Her supervisor was normally a pleasant woman and, though lazy in Mia's opinion, was still a stickler for rules, as far as everyone else was concerned. That was one of the reasons Mia had taken the position at the Center: she initially liked the woman and her systematic approach to things. But Mia Evans' inquisitive nature had overcome her at the moment, altering her perception of right and wrong.

No doubt her getting caught snooping around in the restricted area would garner a swift kick out that permanent exit door and all without a penny of severance pay. "Flagrant disregard for the Center's policies results in immediate dismissal," the woman's words were clear and crisp at Mia's hiring, as the administrator entered Mia's social security number in a blur across a computer keyboard.

Remaining on Rizzo's heels, Mia thought again about her first day on this job which predictably began with employee orientation. Sitting at attention across from the woman who every two weeks would electronically deposit a desperately needed paycheck into her checking account, Evans had heard, "Many of our patients have been all over the South to other

infertility clinics, even all over the country, until they wisely selected the Van Deman Center. These patients have been riding an emotional roller coaster trying to have a family: highs and lows, ups and downs, twists and turns. A lot of them have divorced over their ordeals, borrowed more money that they could ever pay back, had multiple surgeries and other procedures by other less-qualified doctors – all because of trying to produce a baby. Fortunately, most of the patients we get here have plenty of resources to pay us cash in advance for all of the things we can do for them.”

The administrator had continued to deliver indoctrinating new-employee phrases as she punished the keys of her Dell, the information derived from Mia’s completed *New Employee Information* form sliding permanently into the free space of the hard drive devoted to Mia Evans. “You know, ahh, yes,” she scrolled back to the *Employee Name* section, “yes, Miss Evans,” placing emphasis on the referenced name *Evans*. “Miss Evans,” the administrator continued, making a stronger mental note of Mia’s name this time, “the Center for Disease Control and Prevention over in Atlanta keeps detailed national statistics related to the success rates of fertility centers. The Center updates our data with them at least every two years. And our first rankings were extremely high.”

While she pretended to be impressed at the time by the statements regarding the ethical feats of her new employer, Mia’s immediate need to receive a steady paycheck seemed guaranteed by the promise of a steady stream of patients through the practice’s front foyer. Recalling the espoused laurels of the Van Deman Center and the admonishment of *We adhere to strict quality control over our supplies, equipment, and procedures* quickened her pulse as it seemed to skip several beats behind Frank Rizzo and his dolly.

Suddenly Mia caught the reflection of her flushed face. She and Rizzo were approaching the shiny, chrome-surfaced door leading to the forbidden embryo culture lab and its sophisticated support equipment. As austere and imposing as the seal to a financial bank vault, the entrance was branded *Unauthorized Access Strictly Prohibited*. The idea of being caught violating any of the rules of the practice normally would have garnered at least a skipped heartbeat or two. In contrast, Mia surprised herself with an abrupt emotional rush from this flagrant violation of boundaries. She saw excitement in committing an act that could mean certain dismissal and possibly worse.

The climate control system clicked on with a jerking noise that diffused air automatically from the ceiling vents overhead. Normally such a sound would have gone completely unnoticed, or at least ignored; however, the break in the surrounding silence jolted Evans. The swish of fresh, flowing air encircled her as the reverberation echoed back and forth across the corridor as well as ahead of and behind her. Rizzo seemed oblivious to the disturbance as Mia was jerked back to the reality of the risk she was taking and how her actions could change her life forever. She forcibly repressed her second thoughts.

Already her early morning assignment to unlock the rear of the building had distinguished her somewhat from the other non-medical staff, a distinction unattached to a salary increase. The office administrator had implied a little extra Christmas bonus for her trouble, and somewhere below “a little” is what she received.

Forgetting that it was her personal choice to arrive early to work that had landed the self-appointed kitchen duty and resulting extra chores, Mia mulled over her disappointing Christmas salary bonus as she continued to follow Rizzo down the deserted corridor unabated. *Stingy bitch!* she thought of the combination administrator/personnel director as she pushed closer to Frank.

Any remaining guilt was rapidly fleeting, her violation of company directives seeming more and more justified.

Encroaching on the actual entrance to the off-limits area, Mia began to feel a harmony with Rizzo: his ideas were becoming more and more plausible, more and more sensible. As a nitrous oxide delivery specialist, he would save time and his marriage while Mia Evans would pocket some extra cash. The extra money would come close to making up for her twelve-fifty per hour before taxes, plus benefits.

*Stingy bitch!* she thought again, this time smiling at the thought of betraying the administrator's trust, a betrayal that was more than justified; it was deserved. Mia Evans' sentiment was now completely devoid of guilt, replaced with the fear of getting caught. Stingy or not, Mia was certain that the administrator would fire her on the spot if caught entering this area. While the thought of possibly being arrested for trespassing in the embryo lab was horrifying, Mia could imagine nothing worse than losing her job. Mia needed a job.

Her chest fluttered at the thought of being fired, as second-guessing her decision to join Rizzo resurfaced. The short run of skipped heartbeats, or anxiety-induced PVCs, and the dizziness which followed made the walls of the corridor seem to bend and sway. It was a struggle just to step forward behind Rizzo. Mia fought against gasping for air, fought against passing out, fought against falling to the floor to be discovered by an angry Center administrator. Rizzo, no doubt, would feign ignorance. With the fingertips of her right hand, Mia grabbed for the pulse in her left wrist, reassured that she was still alive and conscious. Thankfully, her cardiac rhythm had steadied as the PVCs resolved. Her breathing became less labored as she refocused on Rizzo's torso ahead.

"You OK?" he asked, pausing briefly in response to the deep,

uneasy breaths behind him. Turning his head back toward her, he noticed that her complexion had lightened a couple of notches and she had fallen behind a bit. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Oh, uh, I’m OK – just stayed up too late last night watching Jimmy Kimmel.”

“You’re not having second thoughts about this are you?” Rizzo asked, seeing through her lie.

“No, well, I ...”

“Look, there’s no one in this building but us right now. You said so yourself, and it’s been that way at this hour ever since I’ve been makin’ these deliveries.” Rizzo’s reassurance that the two were the Center’s sole occupants somewhat soothed her fear of discovery as she envisioned the clueless security guard encircling the building’s exterior in a golf cart. Mia’s grasp for justification in breaking the employee code of ethics twisted her reasoning beyond the stingy administrator to the stingy doctors.

*All Dr. Van Deman and Dr. Chamblee care about is making lots of money and keeping it all for themselves, she thought. They should be sharing more of it with me and the rest of the employees – particularly with me since I’ve taken on extra duties.* The office secretary’s growing resentment over lack of compensation for the extra work she had assumed was buried in that very fact: she had voluntarily assumed the extra duties. Her desire to get to work early had been a personal choice and the unlocking-the-back-door thing a prerequisite to that. Mia had often wondered why the Center’s administrator had not enlisted the nighttime security guard to unlock the rear entrance for the early morning employees and deliveries, but decided that not only was she more reliable, she was cheaper, too.

“Are you sure that nothing’s wrong?” Rizzo asked again, noticing that Evans was still standing in the middle of the hall, no longer

following on his heels. Mia could not muster an answer, fighting a mounting tremor in her tense muscles that she hoped to defeat. If she had tried to answer him, her embarrassing fear would have been obvious.

Turning back around to face the awaiting closed door, Rizzo shrugged his shoulders and swiped his magnetic pass card almost absent-mindedly through the security control port embedded in the wall just to the right of the entrance to the lab. "You won't need this card. No, not really," he mentioned, not anticipating a response.

Mia immediately regained her composure, gathering nerve to move closer and absorb his instruction. "Now, what did you say I'm s'posed to do to get through this door?" she asked, steadying her voice as much as possible.

"It'll be a piece of cake. Since you won't have my pass card, you can just punch in the six digit security code right here on this metal key pad," he explained the alternative, pointing to a compact bank of shiny, grey numbers and symbols arranged in standard fashion and positioned adjacent to the card receptacle. "Of course, you'll only have to fool with this if the voice recognition system is on the blink, like it's been for the past few weeks," Rizzo added, pointing to a microphone inconspicuously recessed above the other devices. "Before I leave, don't let me forget to give you the digital recording of my ID info. Hey, it won't earn me a Grammy, but it'll gain access for you on my dime."

Because of the resentment she had mustered against the Center's doctors and practice administrator, her facial muscles aborted her attempt at a smile, her lips flattened against cold front teeth. She could not even render a nervous grin. Somehow she forced acknowledgement with a nod, albeit a weak one. Each step toward the embryo storage vault had heightened the rush she felt over the risk she was taking. But her excitement over the

secrecy and sophistication that had drawn her to this wing of the building continued to be overshadowed by a fear of being fired or arrested.

She knew she should stop, beg off from the scheme, and tell this Rizzo guy that she was just pulling his leg, that she had changed her mind. Her actions were bordering on lack of professionalism, she knew, and then decided that there was no *bordering* about it. Mia knew that she had instantly violated professional decorum by ignoring the restrictions established for this section of the Center. Then she reconsidered her salary in the face of her rich employers. “Professional?” she nearly questioned aloud. “Hell, these people that sign my check consider me nothing more than a clerk, an errand girl, a nice voice on the other end of the phone, a smiling face at the front desk, a smiling face with pretty white teeth.” Mia was defiant under her breath, her voice barely audible enough for Rizzo to perceive, assuming he was really paying any attention anyway.

Her insubordination justified, Mia’s muscles relaxed with guiltless ease. Her pulse remained steady, and she smiled pleasantly. Mia Evans was determined that she choose curiosity over professionalism and doubted if any of her sisters in the clerical staff would act differently. Feeling the relief of peace, Miss Mia Evans was hereby vetoing the bitch’s dictums; after all, the supervisor really didn’t think that professionalism applied to a stupid paper pusher, did she? In her twisted push to justify the morning’s actions, Mia had overlooked the true value and appreciation of her type of daily work at the Henry Van Deman Center of Reproductive Technology. Without the routine that she considered so mundane and the wages she viewed as so grossly inadequate, the patient schedules of both doctors would never run smoothly and the Center’s higher-end technology would never take place.

As Rizzo proceeded through the final security maneuvers to get them into the embryo lab, Mia hoped that at least her workdays would no longer be bathed in boredom. As she entered this sacred place, she was soon to discover what patients were receiving at the hands of Drs. Van Deman and Chamblee. She would soon be privy to what really went on behind closed doors. Mia had no intention of violating specific patient confidentiality – she was professional in that regard – but was warming up to the possibility of becoming more involved in what the Center was doing to help the unfortunate, infertile people, all the while making a little extra money on the side at Rizzo's expense.

Unlike the other members of the clerical staff, Mia would no longer be left to endless hours of pecking on a computer keyboard. Oblivious, her peers would remain on the cold, banal outside. They would tragically be stranded to converse among themselves, exposing the commonplace drama of ordinary lives – boyfriends, children, ex-husbands, ex-boyfriends, girlfriends of ex-husbands, girlfriends of ex-boyfriends, poor finances. They would also dwell on the mundane such as where to purchase the most attractive scrub suits or what was new at Target – all a circle of stagnation broken only by the infusion of an occasional new hire or two and the attached fresh gossip.

Mia felt true remorse for her clerical sisters, but was certainly not sorry enough to trade places with them. In making patient appointments or posting patient treatment charges, they would remain miserably frozen at their computer screens, unaware of the sophisticated technologies playing out behind the closed doors of the Center, one of which was beginning to open under the direction of this nitrous oxide delivery man.

Evans breathed even easier. Having a grasp of the inner sanctum would add meaning to her work, even though her regular salary would remain a pittance. Once more, she would

still be able to keep this job since no one was watching her enter forbidden ground.

But to the contrary, someone was watching Mia Evans creep along the corridor to the embryo culture lab and was delighting in every minute of it. During a furtive glance or two as she worked through her diminishing guilt and fear, Mia had stared directly into the looming eyes of Tinker Murtagh via the lens of the security cameras tucked into the ceiling air conditioning vents. Believing correctly that the exposed security cameras were in place as safety measures at the entrances and exits to the building as well as to protect the parking areas, Mia and the other employees remained unaware of the intricate in-house spy network that Dr. Van Deman had installed. Furthermore, the Center's administrator and Dr. Knox Chamblee, in addition to the security guards, remained ignorant of the widespread placement of additional live cameras.

As Tinker Murtagh electronically scanned the sectors in range, he was curious about the young woman, the first person to enter the building each morning. He was not at all interested in the security guard still spotted outside the building, who at that moment was violating the property's no-smoking rule. The snooping eyes of Tinker Murtagh had already judged her fairly attractive and physically fit. *Probably works out*, he thought again. *I wonder if she puts out*. Tinker's appreciation of the opposite sex transcended racial barriers.

Since the digital video feed was black-and-white, Tinker could only reason that the girl's complexion was a rich caramel color, definitely not ebony. Her coarse-looking hair had been well relaxed so that it fell down to her shoulders, making Tinker long to touch it. He liked thick hair and wondered how much time or money it took to get the girl's hair to behave that way.

Her anxiety was obvious. Studying her under magnification,

Tinker judged the girl to be in her very early twenties and much more appealing than was his first impression. Definitely cute, he decided, and not too shy, definitely not shy, but probably hot – yes, hot, but not shy, no, not at all shy. The caramel-colored, cute, hot, uninhibited female was for some unclear reason following the delivery guy, whom Murtagh had noticed in the building the week before when he reviewed the recorded video of that morning. Tinker felt growing excitement that he was experiencing this particular morning's action live.

“What're this guy and girl doin' together, all alone in this medical building, just the two of 'em?” Tinker asked aloud. *Is the chick looking for a little tryst with this guy she's trailing? A little video porn action comin' up, maybe? Probably on the soft side?* he wondered in anticipation of a break in the monotony of Internet video surveillance, a morning wakeup spectacle for Tinker Murtagh. The two in the corridor were moving toward the central infertility lab, an area visited only by the same two doctors and a couple of regular laboratory technicians who generally did not appear there until somewhat later in the mornings. On some days Tinker had spotted others in the perimeter of the area and assumed them to be patients.

Tinker's pulse quickened in anticipation as he leaned into his computer screen. A clear deviation from the morning routine was unfolding before him, something over-the-top, perhaps. Never before had he spotted this particular girl in this usually quiet part of the building, nor had he noticed her as nervous. Not even a heterosexual male could deny the good looks of the physically buff guy that the nervous-looking girl was following, as Murtagh continued to look on with envy concerning what he was sure the couple was going to do. He might even want to magnify the action up close on the screen.

“Frank Andrew Rizzo” emanated from the tiny speaker that

was no more than several dark slits marring the smooth finish of the wall. Seeming to engulf the entire corridor, the sound was heard only by Rizzo and a startled Mia as she jumped back several inches from the wall. She shuddered again as the latch to the thick metal barrier popped loose on cue.

While Tinker remained glued to his computer monitor and switched screens in anticipation of the next step, Rizzo moved purposefully into the room as Mia fought her last-minute reluctance to follow. “Stop here and put these on,” he said, reaching into a plastic bin that served as storage for disposable shoe covers, a collection of commonly-used surgical supplies that resembled a pile of light-blue-colored wads of corrugated paper. Rizzo tossed her a pair which, unraveled, revealed an extra shoe cover.

Puzzled, she separated the elastic-lined material and raised the third cover with her right hand as she held the remaining pair in her left. “They’re to keep the floor clean since the people 'round here don’t let the regular housekeeping crew in to clean up after their sloppy asses,” he chuckled, understanding her question from the confused look. “These people are real worried about security and crap like that. But, screw that – here you are – here we are. So much for all that expensive security.”

Tinker continued to watch in earnest as Mia gently returned the third shoe cover to the bin as though it would break and clumsily stretched the remaining material over her low-rise pumps. “Hey, are you OK?” Rizzo asked as Mia realized her suddenly colorless fingers were trembling. She imagined Dr. Van Deman or Chamblee or any of the nurses putting on their own shoe covers with much greater dexterity, a procedure they no doubt performed many times a day. *Dr. Van Deman, Dr. Chamblee*, Mia thought again as a wave of guilt overcame her.

Reconsidering her earlier criticism of her employers, she

recalled Dr. Chamblee's kind greeting for her a couple of times when passing hurriedly in the hall, though he had never called her by name. She had seen Dr. Van Deman a few times as well, and though he had not acknowledged her existence as had the younger doctor, she reasoned he was simply too busy to do so. On behalf of the doctors, the administrator did pass along a birthday bonus and automatic payroll raises, seemingly not based on merit but apparently linked to showing up for work.

Unexpectedly Mia felt hollow, a fleeting feeling usurped by one of fear. Her curiosity over the intricacies of the infertility lab and the proposal to make a little on-the-side money as this fellow Rizzo's assistant no longer seemed important. She felt foolish; she felt stupid. As she watched Rizzo move across the brilliant white, vinyl-covered floor of an area that was off-limits to the inconsequential likes of Mia Evans, her pulse quickened further as she fumbled for her cell phone to check the time. Remembering that others would be entering the building in a little more than 15 minutes, maybe less, her hands trembled so that she nearly dropped the phone.

She clumsily slid the thin cellular device back into her jacket pocket as Rizzo rolled a slim mat ahead of his dolly. Mia understood this action as one that served the same purpose as the human shoe covers. Shortly ahead of Rizzo was a trio of shiny, aluminum-colored, shoulder-high canisters topped by a series of ringed metal tubes contorted into Dr. Frankensteinian-lab style semicircles – an incongruous grouping when compared to the sleek, molded appearance of the rest of the infertility laboratory. Crowning the tubes every foot or so stood a fifties-era-style mechanical gauge that Mia assumed played some role in Rizzo's purpose for servicing the facility and topping off the level of the embryo freezing medium. Remembering that a close study of Rizzo's work was the reason she had entered this lab

and violated company policy in the first place, Mia fought her returning anxiety and focused on the subtle complexities of the sanitized surroundings. Despite Rizzo's demonstration and instruction that the first thing she was to do was to connect the cable to this flange, describing it as the ol' tried-and-true male to female mechanism, Mia's curiosity was drawn elsewhere, ignoring his sexual metaphor. Unknowingly, Rizzo shared the opinion of Tinker Murtagh regarding the girl's subtle allure that could be really hot in the right setting. As he analyzed the correct amount of nitrous oxide needed for the first canister, he hoped that maybe that venue would come later. That would be a really nice way to consummate a business deal, he decided.

Continuing to ignore her instructor as he spouted instructions to his audience of two – one having no sound capability and the other mesmerized by the furnishings of the oblong section of the room where she stood nervously – Mia kept her feet firmly planted in position as though to move them would have yielded discovery. She swiveled her neck to survey her surroundings thoroughly, twisting her waist uncomfortably as she kept her covered feet in place. Mia was mentally inhaling all that she saw.

Just across from where she stood a short distance from the canisters were the words *Embryo Culture and Laminar Flow Lab: No Unauthorized Admittance*. The imprinted sign was affixed to another solid-appearing door that, though Mia had not touched it, exuded the weight of the highest level of security. The periphery of the door was lined with a rubberized seal that extended beyond the limits of the door itself, overlapping any space between the closed door and its frame. This airtight fitting was designed to eliminate any foreign particle contamination within the embryo culture laboratory. Had Mia been able to invade the Embryo Culture Lab as well and open the small pass-through chamber leading from that facility into the adjacent

egg-retrieval room, she would have initiated a one-way, positive-pressure air blast rivaling a mini-tornado.

Mia reveled in the sleek and orderly appearance of the infertility lab, an obsessive-compulsive's dream – a sharp contrast to the remainder of the building's cushy, inviting interior. The only medically-related furnishings that appeared remotely familiar to Evans were the flat screen computer monitors that stood in sleep mode at uniformly placed intervals along the counter surfaces. In juxtaposition to Mia's clerical section of the Center, which invisible to the patient eye had remained cluttered despite the practice's extensive electronic medical record system, there were no mounds of paper or stacks of files weighting this area's working space.

Much to the relief of her strained neck and waist muscles, Mia summoned the nerve to take a few steps away from Rizzo, who by now was preoccupied with hurriedly finishing the service call and infusing the embryo freezer with nitrous oxide. She moved slowly along the main section of the lab toward the juncture of the L-shaped space.

Meanwhile, disappointed about no secret tryst between the couple, Tinker Murtagh had turned to the pages of his morning newspaper. The girl's sudden movement caught his attention just as he was enjoying Marshall Ramsey's cartoon on the editorial page of *The Clarion-Ledger*. She seemed to be looking around as though making a real study of the joint, he decided. In fact, and much to Tinker's surprise, she again stared directly into the security camera he had accessed, seeming to pause for a moment. *Did she wink at me?* he wondered, before laughing at himself for a few seconds. He then turned the next page and took a loud slurp of coffee from the thin Styrofoam cup. He was certainly correct that there was no way she could have spotted the security camera in that high tech, well-organized space.

The truth was that Mia Evans was even more fascinated by the sanitized aroma of the lab than the austerity of the furnishings or the procedures possible behind its closed doors. The scent was an odor of cleanliness, not typical of any cleanser or disinfectant that Mia had ever used or seen. Remembering what Rizzo had said about the lab being off-limits to the routine housekeeping crew, she assumed that the infertility lab technicians did their own cleaning and sterilizing with some specially derived formula, maybe one not available to an ordinary medical office, much less the general public. “That crummy kitchen would be immaculate, not a germ alive anywhere. Nobody in this joint would ever get sick if I could use this Formula XYZ or whatever they call it,” she decided aloud.

“Hey, did you say something?” Rizzo blurted without turning his head in her direction. Time was growing short, and he needed to get going – finish this job and move on to the next stop. “Are you watching what I’m doin’?” he asked over his shoulder, again not turning to check to see if the girl was even paying any attention to what he was doing with the cables, valves, and meters that controlled the flowing nitrous oxide and maintained the frozen human embryos. “Maybe bringing this chick in on this wasn’t such a great idea,” he muttered under his breath. “This frozen stuff won’t have a chance if I turn this over to her. Bad idea, Rizzo,” he ascertained.

Mia heard Rizzo call out but was too fascinated by her surroundings to bother. As she continued to walk through the central area of the lab, she neared a corner that led to the foot of the dogleg space. The plain white walls were lined with more counters hosting more thin computers, some of which had come alive with blinking cursors and lists of words, some sounding familiar, a few more vague. The catch phrases included *media of the day*, *ICSI*, *IVF*, *follicular aspirates*, *oocyte observations*,

*number of eggs denuded, sperm processing, embryo development, transfer date, cleavage (yes/no), embryo status (abnormal or damaged).*

“Where is the cleaning closet in here?” she whispered, still curious about finding the specialized supply closet and the source of the area’s smell. Slinking alongside the counters, Mia came across several old-fashioned clipboards branded with names of pharmaceutical companies. Pinned to the clipboards that were scattered among the thin video monitors and their flashing medical terms were common-looking paper charts.

While penciling answers to the newspaper crossword puzzle, Tinker glanced at his own monitor finding nothing of interest at the moment. Meanwhile, Mia looked around awkwardly although she was positive that no one was watching. Rizzo was still around the corner at the other end of the lab; she was completely alone. No one would ever know she was prying as she picked up one of the clipboards.

Typical of any other medical facility, the sheets mounted to the plastic clipboard were designated with a series of numbers printed in the upper right-hand corners. Lying flat on the counter a few inches away was a separate gray folder, constructed of heavy-weight material but still much thinner than the standard-sized patient charts which Mia sometimes still shuffled back and forth within the building. The numbers on the outside of the chart matched those imprinted on the sheet topping the short stack on the clipboard.

Patient anonymity potentially blown by the carelessness of a hurried laboratory technician, who had left the chart turned face-up, Mia picked up the material as she hurriedly looked in Rizzo’s direction. Not only could she not see her accomplice, but she had also crept to a distance where hearing him could be impossible as well. Realizing that she should rejoin Frank Rizzo, since he had

probably finished working and was preparing to exit the infertility lab, she was just too curious to leave.

“How did she hear about us?”

Mia’s startled reaction to the unfamiliar, feminine voice was to toss the patient chart back to the gleaming Formica counter, but she stopped herself before doing so. That would have made too much noise. Panic is often a sobering insult, dashing one’s delusions of grandeur, thoughts of diversity, or just plain stupid curiosity. Instead, Mia softly returned the patient record to the counter, trying to position it exactly as she found it, a difficult task in that her hands were trembling uncontrollably, the writing on the chart nothing but a blur. She stared at her hands in self-disgust as she then quickly replaced the clipboard as well atop the short stack of others. *Why had she placed herself in such a predicament?* she wondered, wanting to kick herself. She needed this job and was just about to lose it.

Mia looked toward the sound, moving closer and closer to her, as it was joined by another voice, the second voice male. “Van Deman plans to handle everything himself, considers her a super-private patient. He doesn’t even want you to know who she is, and I’m sort of surprised he even told me,” Dr. Knox Chamblee shared with the chief laboratory technician. “Anyway, the patient’s stipulation for coming to us was strict confidentiality, even among our own staff. You won’t have to lift a finger. How about that?” he added to the tech responsible for the day-to-day operation of the infertility lab as well as the embryo and egg storage facilities.

As she listened, the chief technician shrugged her shoulders in indifference.

Part of Mia’s surprise was realizing that the infertility lab must be larger than she first thought. She could tell from the direction and gradual increasing volume of the voices that the individuals were coming toward her from another hall, apparently a short one

extending past the next corner near where she stood frozen in fear.

The voices from the deeper part of the lab were coming closer. One of them was definitely Dr. Chamblee; Mia was sure of it. He was always so nice to her when she passed him in the hall or talked to him on the phone, or at least he used to be before he was sure to find her in the wrong place and fire her. Youthful, handsome Dr. Chamblee even sent polite intra-office emails with little smileys attached to his signature. He probably did that with all of his emails, but Mia considered it a special gesture on hers, nonetheless. She was sorry she had tossed those negative thoughts toward him earlier in the morning.

Since Chamblee had never called her by name, Mia wondered if he could even put her name with a face – probably not, since he had never addressed her personally when passing in a corridor – one of the corridors where Mia belonged. “Hey, how’s it going?” he would ask in greeting. Another salutation that was not meant for an answer other than a smile and nod was *Things going OK up there in the front office?*

Whether or not Dr. Chamblee knew her by name was moot at that point. He was getting ready to get the shock of his life, unexpectedly catching the likes of Mia Evans in an off-limits area, and then would fire her on the spot, no name needed. As Mia glanced hopelessly around her, grappling for an escape, she hoped that Chamblee would at least recognize her as an employee and not as a burglar or someone who had wandered in off the street. Maybe that would keep him from calling the cops. Getting fired was no longer the issue; staying out of jail seemed extremely important.

Mia needed to run, but instead she hurriedly tiptoed back toward the entrance to the fertility lab. Even though the voices were growing closer, their volume remained soft, professional,

and not nearly loud enough to mask running or panting. Clumsily, and in only a second or two, Evans reached the spot where she had first watched Rizzo begin to service the embryo freezing unit.

He was gone. Rizzo was gone.

“Oh, shit! Where is he?” Mia screamed through clenched teeth so that only she could hear, glaring back toward the direction of the encroaching voices. The people coming toward her continued to chat away, unaware of their audience.

“She’s flying in tomorrow from California, Henry told me – made her flight arrangements from L.A. into Jackson himself,” he explained to the chief infertility tech. “Oh, I guess I shouldn’t have said *L.A.* That might tip you off to her secret identity,” he joked.

The tech shrugged her shoulders again in indifference. Each day was simply another payday for her.

“Surely that woman is not flying commercial,” Chamblee stopped for a moment to mull over what Van Deman had divulged in confidence. “Someone like her must own a jet, at least a small one, not to mention a personal pilot,” Dr. Chamblee mused aloud as he sprang forward to catch up with the technician. “Well, whoever this prima donna is,” she contributed, “the chick probably figured that the Jackson airport was so small that no one would ever recognize her, so small that no one would ever expect a famous person to be flying into our airport.” Chamblee did not argue.

“Hah!” the tech continued. “I wonder if Miss Special Pants realizes that we have movie theaters down here in Mississippi, even DVD and MP-3 players?” she asked sarcastically.

“Yeah, not to mention cable and satellite TV and indoor plumbing!” Knox played along.

As Mia heard the two laughing, she nearly spun around in place looking for a place to hide. She was afraid to try the main door for fear of setting off some type of alarm. Besides, she could see the

same type of security apparatus to the right of the door that Rizzo had accessed to gain their entrance.

Relieved, she spotted another alcove jutting in another direction off the main section of the infertility lab and darted for it, returning to tiptoes and hoping for an exit. She soon reached a nondescript door next to a compact, waist-high counter that housed another computer monitor and work area. Just as Mia grabbed for the doorknob, she noticed a microscope and a few other pieces of laboratory-type paraphernalia lined along the counter next to a wire rack housing test tubes. In her terror what Mia did not notice was an unobtrusively placed, imprinted sign mounted to the right of the door and abutting a wall cabinet. The sign read *Masterbatorium*.

“Thank God,” she gasped as the door easily opened. Quietly she closed herself inside the dark room which she sensed was about the size of a janitor’s closet and stood perfectly still, pressing her right ear against the door. There was no sound. The door was thick, but Mia assumed it still possible to hear if Dr. Chamblee and his companion approached her sanctuary. She remained motionless except for shallow, quick breaths, her concentration so intense that her ear ached from the firm pressure against the door. She switched sides for relief, and the left ear revealed nothing else. There was no sound from the doctor or the female. They had not followed her.

Those few moments standing motionless in the dark with two burning ears afforded Mia the opportunity to reconsider the enormity of her predicament. No one knew exactly where she was, she was sure. Even that worthless service technician, yeah, Rizzo was his name, Frank Rizzo, was not exactly sure where she was. Apparently, after enticing her to join him on this cockeyed scheme, he had left her stranded in an off-limits area and couldn’t have cared less where she went or what happened to her.

Trying to remain motionless and undetectable in the dark room, Evans nevertheless shook uncontrollably, tightly, like a housecat just before pouncing on an unsuspecting prey. Her skin felt clammy as she held her arms folded tightly against her chest. Beads of sweat erupted on her forehead and began to trickle into her eyes. Claustrophobia, much less achluophobia, had never before been fears of hers, but swiftly she was afflicted with both. The oppressive walls of the dark prison were quickly closing in as her every breath sucked the last few ounces of oxygen from the room.

Mia felt that unless she was released from the darkness soon she would begin to scream uncontrollably, like a madwoman. She had to be sure of where she was, of what could be behind her, or worse, *who* could be behind her.

Assuming correctly that a light switch was positioned somewhere along the wall adjacent to the door, she groped in vain until her trembling hands reached the frame. She found the control switch with the fore- and middle fingers of her right hand, then hesitated briefly before turning on the light. She reconsidered the fact that being discovered would mean losing her job, or perhaps getting arrested, though she really did not believe that the doctors or the administrator, that ogre, would turn her over to the police. They would want to shun such negative publicity.

Mia Evans needed some time to think, and she desperately needed to get out of the darkness. Then she realized that the area outside the door was well-lit, likely preventing a beam of light from appearing under the door into the lab area.

“Come on; you’re a smart chick. Get hold of yourself,” she whispered, as she chose to go ahead and flick the switch.

Mia closed her eyes in dread as she followed through with resolve, impulsively holding the doorknob from turning with her

left hand as she popped the light switch up with her right. The room was filled with light, but not only from the fluorescent unit recessed above her. Just as Evans released the switch, the door knob turned, overpowering her feminine grasp. An unathletic-looking, light-skinned, balding man who looked to be in his late thirties was standing in the now-opened doorway, holding a small plastic sample cup with screw-on cap. Mia wanted to scream, and tried, but nothing came from her throat.

“Wow!” the man exclaimed. “I was expecting a few dirty magazines, maybe a poster of Heidi Klum or Katherine Heigl – maybe even a selection of adult videos if I needed them. But wow, not a personal assistant!” Fortunately for Mr. Wesley Sarbeck, a quick nap after his 4:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. police patrol would help him satisfy his half of the fertility equation.

Mia threw herself from the room designed for male sperm-donor collection, nearly knocking down the gentleman who stood smiling in surprise, still holding his empty specimen cup. She rushed toward the direction from which Dr. Chamblee and the female had appeared, hoping to find a door to the outside of the building and no one in her way. To her relief, Chamblee was nowhere in sight, and the tech who had admitted Wesley Sarbeck for his specimen collection was engaged in another far corner. The same woman, who had been talking with Knox Chamblee shortly before, was now performing the morning ritual of powering-up lab equipment while humming a Broadway show tune, unaware of the blur that was Mia Evans running by her in tiptoe fashion.

Just as the nice-looking girl bolted out the exit to the rear parking lot, Tinker Murtagh looked up from his freshly completed crossword puzzle. “This place is a surprise a minute – never know what’s gonna happen next,” he remarked as he finished his coffee with a final, loud slurp.