

# BARREN

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Excerpt

Without hesitation or even discussing her intuition, Jacqui leaped from her seat. Confidently, matching Arnold's eye level, she shook his hand.

"Welcome to the team, follow me," Arnold said.

"Oh, you meant right now?"

"Do you have somewhere else you need to be?" He replied with an eyebrow raised. His colleagues stood and followed them.

Jacqui glanced back at the men, who together formed a wall behind her. The hairs rose on the back of her neck. *Where is the contract? Shouldn't I get at least a day or two to make the decision final? Why the rush?* Jacqui thought, but the time for asking questions had passed. Arnold and his colleagues were the equivalent congressmen of their fields. Jacqui didn't want to come across unprofessional, perhaps later they would hammer out the details. She then faced forward, holding eye contact with Arnold. Telling them *no* was, without a doubt, off the table.

"Good." He smiled.

Arnold led her to the elevators. Walking behind him, Jacqui caught a glimpse of her reflection in the white halls. Arnold at the lead, the men trailing behind, and her, crowded in the middle. The only thing missing were shackles along her wrists and ankles. Everything was happening so fast. Too fast.

Upon entrance of the steel box, Arnold took the spot near the dim-lit numbers. His hands slipped past every single digit and stopped beside the emergency icon. He slid a square panel to the side, revealing a hidden black button. It took them to:

**LEVEL: UG.**

Jacqui had worked at this hospital for almost two decades; yet she'd never known this was here.

The elevator doors split open, and immediately she wished she could go back. White translucent lights illuminated the mysterious level. Two thick transparent doors stood in front of them. As Arnold walked, an optical device emerged from a wall panel and scanned his retina. The doors parted allowing passage. All of this gave Jacqui the feeling that if she continued, only something horrible was waiting for her. She had been in all types of laboratories, but this...she could not pinpoint what it was, but this feeling had begun lifting the hairs on her arms.

"What is this?" Jacqui asked.

“It’s called the Colony. Fifty floors dedicated to research and development all right under Mercy Hospital. You’ll be working on this level. Disregard the other floors. They have separate purposes.”

*Fifty floors?*

“Why go underground? It seems like a hassle compared to having your own building beside the hospital.”

“Working here, privately, gives the company certain *freedoms* the surface just can’t compete.”

Perhaps he had a point. Mercy Hospital’s third floor: the research and development department could use some work. Systems often went offline for hours and made it difficult to service patients. Jacqui had a few horror stories of her own when dealing with all the new tech. However, one question remained.

“Why haven’t I heard of this before? Why the secrecy?”

Arnold ignored her and kept walking. The place was never-ending, and he sure knew how to power walk for his age. There were no windows, only one or two black doors with Roman numerals on them. With every corner they turned, the long, gray-tiled hallways began to look alike. Soon, Jacqui could no longer distinguish the front from the back. She had no choice but to follow Arnold.

Arnold stopped in front of a charcoal gray wall. There was no entryway, no windows, no signs, no wording of where she was—nothing but the thick wall of cold concrete in front of them. He had led her to a dead end. What in the hell was going on?

He stepped into the corner and a small square panel appeared from the wall. Arnold entered a password into a wordless keypad. Moments later, a horizontal line split down the middle. The entire wall folded into the sides like elevator doors. There were so many levels of security to this place, like it had a secret to protect.

Jacqui entered the room behind Arnold. The sight before her stole both her breath and words. She should have listened to that inner voice. This was a mistake.

The room was the size of an industrial warehouse. Strips of blaring ceiling lights illuminated every inch of this enormous space. The floors were a pale hue of blue; cold, and lifeless. Soft mechanic noises of monitors filled the silence. A sickening chill lingered in the air. However, the most shocking thing of all were the dozens upon dozens of unconscious women chained to hospital beds. There were too many to count.

Jacqui moved closer to a bed.

*Wait a second.* Jacqui recognized her. Curious, she moved even closer. Her light skin was without a blemish, her face was slender and full of something that could only be described as youth. Though her eyes were slightly open, she was not awake.

Jacqui took a step back.

Fear began to take root, shaking every part of her body and Jacqui found herself incapable of moving. Jacqui *did* know her, that girl was the same, brown-skinned girl with the piercing hazel-green

eyes. *No. No this could not...* She was the girl from the **Have You Seen Me** digital screen that Jacqui had just read on level eight of this very same building. *Oh. My. God. She was a missing person!* Bile rose from the pit of Jacqui's stomach. *If that were the case, then who were all these other women?*

There was another door, one of many, in the far corner. Arnold saw Jacqui looking at it. Casually, he whistled while walking over to it and he unveiled the inside.

Jacqui knew she should not go inside, the smarter part of her had long realized that this project was nothing like what Arnold had told her only moments ago, but she had to know.

Stepping through the entryway and flipping on the blaring ceiling lights, Jacqui covered her mouth. There was only one word to describe what she saw. Horror. Pure horror.

Like pillars, there were countless thick glass tubes filled with a liquid substance. Inside each, were pale-skinned babies. She was in complete disbelief at what her eyes were feeding her. Okay, this was a dream, and she must have fallen asleep at her computer, and she was imagining this. However, right now, she was about to wake up in 3...2...1—

“We haven't been able to figure it out,” Arnold said, walking between the lime green pillars. “Something is forcing women, in particular, Premier Care patients, to physiologically spontaneously abort their unborn children, and the ones that make it full term are stillborn.” He stopped in front of one pillar, examining it, staring into the closed eyes of a baby boy. Was it sorrow or anger coming from his eyes? Perhaps it was both. “This is why I recruited you. To handle our current predicament. You will have access to anything you need right in the Colony. On the main floor, this floor, of course.”

Jacqui turned around and found Arnold staring at her, smiling. He wanted this. Then she put the pieces together. The Black women were chained to beds. The stillborn children contained. It all suddenly made sense. She was the missing link in this experiment. This was why Arnold had chosen her.

“My research from my thesis, that's why you need me,” Jacqui said, dropping her head into her chest. “It is purely theoretical: a full womb transplant including the fallopian tubes and restructuring the recipient's DNA. This procedure has never been done before. It is far too dangerous, and there is still so much that could go wrong.”

“What do we have to lose? A few bodies? Imagine how we could change the world if this works? The life you would have if it succeeded?” As Arnold spoke, his expression lit up, like he was a genius on the cusp of changing the world.

Jacqui looked back at the brown girl with the green eyes. Her work had led her here.

“Besides, we've already begun. We're not stopping until we see results. The Aphaia Corporation will not take no for an answer. And now that we have you, that won't be a problem, now, will it?” His words cut Jacqui to the bone.

*Aphaia Corporation.* Jacqui committed the name to memory.

There it was. His true self. The evil she sensed in the conference room had fully bloomed in front of her. She should have trusted herself and left when there was time. Now that she knew about this place, there was no way to unsee it.

She could not hear another word from Arnold's mouth. This man had floating bodies of stillborn babies and Black women chained to hospital beds stored underneath a hospital. Jacqui could care less about any explanation he used to help himself sleep at night. Despite her inner rebellion, she was so shocked. She was stunned at the scale of success in his operation and having gone undisturbed for so long. The number of resources necessary to make this work from the beds, monitors, lights, and high-level security measures to the hospital staff involved, and investors who poured money to ensure its success. With all this working in Arnold's favor, Jacqui had no words.