

GERMLINE



A NOVEL

Who will control mankind's
genetic destiny?

"Spellbinding!"

W. French Anderson, M.D.,
director, Gene Therapy Laboratories,
"The Father of Gene Therapy"

NELSON ERLICK

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PART ONE

THE FIRST COMPONENT? YEAR SIX OF THE PLAN

GERMLINE

by
Nelson Erlick

PART ONE
THE FIRST COMPONENT
YEAR 6 OF THE PLAN

CHAPTER 1

SUNDAY
The Loring Estate
Berks County, PA

12:48 A.M.

Beneath the spinning laser lights, in the midst of his ballroom crammed with guests dancing to the band's charged Latin beat, E. Dixon Loring stared up at the bearer of disaster who walked along the mezzanine. The courier, in turn, located Loring, the party's host: a robust man, six feet two inches tall with perfect posture, a thick shock of black hair, and strong, wide, chiseled features. The courier's eyes never wandered from Loring. Slowly, the courier descended the grand staircase and skillfully slipped among the guests meandering across the ballroom floor. As he approached Loring, he reached into his jacket pocket.

Not yet fifty, Loring had achieved success much earlier in life and had long since perfected an aura of confidence, power. Those entering Loring's sphere felt compelled to gain a sliver of his grace. But never the courier. Loring gulped down his Dom Perignon.

The courier handed him an envelope.

"Have you seen the contents?" Loring asked.

The man's lips grew taut. "The envelope is sealed, sir."

Barely able to hear the courier's voice above the soiree's din, "Did he say anything?"

"He said that it was inadvisable to transmit the decrypted information by any means other than courier."

Loring tore open the envelope. Merlin had obviously cracked Bergmann's personal files. If those files corroborated what?

"Sir, I'm sure he didn't intend for you to read it? here," the courier said, glancing at several guests, uncomfortably close.

Loring shot a scowl at the courier, then unfolded the envelope's contents. He scanned the document, picking up key phrases:

- ? "...we are not creating replacement tissue for grafts or breast reconstructions..." on the middle of page one;
- ? "...organic scaffolding will be used to make towers for the suspension bridge to Hell..." on the bottom of the page;
- ? "...I've read their Reconstruction Treatise. It details..." on page two;
- ? "...the SUE must be destroyed..." on page four;
- ? "...everything in ReGenerix Technologies must go. The horror must be stopped now, *before* it's born..." on page five;
- ? and finishing with "...Claire, I've left instructions for you and the children. You'll find them in the usual place. I have loved you, always. You've known, but I'm not sure the children do. When this is all over, tell them. Maybe they'll understand. Good-bye, Claire. God forgive me."

"Bergmann's cracked," Loring muttered.

"Sir, would you like to formulate a response to? "

"How long ago did you receive this?"

The man touched a button on his watch. "Two hours and forty-two? "

Loring shoved the courier from his path, briskly weaved through his guests, and charged up the grand staircase two steps at a time. At the mezzanine level, he whipped out his wireless, punched in "#1", and held it to his ear. He strode down a deserted hall to a private elevator.

"Yes, Mr. Loring?" a voice sounded over the receiver as the elevator doors shut.

"Merlin, where are you?" Loring asked.

"Research Triangle Park, North Carolina," the voice answered. "Did you get my? "

"Where's Bergmann?"

A pause. "We don't know. He's not at his house. We're en route to the facility now. ETA is ten minutes."

"Seal off ReGenerix Technologies."

"Already done."

"We may be too late." The elevator doors opened. Loring headed for the last room on the right. "Merlin, you read Bergmann's logs hours ago. Why didn't you stop him yourself?"

"It was your decision to make, not mine," the voice whispered. "And Bergmann is a pivotal element in the Plan."

Loring burst into his library at the end of the corridor. The door locked behind him. "After all these years, don't you know that I trust? " A wailing horn sounded from his receiver. "What's going on?"

After a moment, "Security breach at ReGenerix."

"Where?"

"Bio-scaffold Room. A team is on its way."

Loring hurried to the desk at the far end of the library and booted the computer system with inlaid keyboard on his desk. "Patching in to ReGenerix closed-circuit."

"Here, too," answered the man at the other end.

He sat back and waited for the projection screen on the far wall to activate. The ReGenerix Technologies Incorporated logo, a gold bird rising above a field of grain, filled the screen. After submitting to a retinal scan and voiceprint analysis of his password, the security camera view of the Bio-scaffold Room appeared on-screen. Six machines lay in view, each containing fine strands of polylactic acid polymer that emerged from copper-colored rods and wound onto densely wrapped spools. Beneath each machine lay stacks of micron-thin porous plates. Loring panned the surveillance camera past a central workstation to the remaining scaffolding. Within the seventh machine, a man in a white coat lay on his back, eyes open, chin snuggled impossibly between his shoulder blades. “Merlin, is that? ”

“We’ll know in a moment,” the man answered.

Loring watched four guards burst into the room. Guns drawn, three of them covered the fourth, who rushed to the man caught in the machine. Loring manipulated the security menu and spoke directly to them. “This is Mr. Loring. Is that Dr. Bergmann lying there?”

All guards turned toward the security camera in the corner opposite the machines. The nearest man answered, “Uh, no sir.”

“Then who the hell is it?”

“Dr. John Neuman, a project manager.”

“Dead?”

“Very, sir. His neck’s crushed. Not the sort of thing that could happen by acci? ”

“Any sign of Bergmann?”

The guards looked around and shrugged. “Sir, we? ”

Loring heard a distant bang. The camera shook. “What was that?”

“An explosion,” Merlin answered in his ear. “It’s in the Archive Room.”

Bergmann? it had to be! The Archive Room contained project backup data. If Bergmann engineered a catastrophic loss of the mainframe data in Command and Control, and took out Main Lab, he would eradicate the two million man-hours of research behind Project MacDuff. “Merlin, were all project files downloaded to designated backup sites, off-campus? Or are all copies still in ReGenerix’s mainframe?”

“I don’t know. It will take some time to check,” he answered.

“Get on it!” To the security personnel staring at the camera, “Bergmann will be heading for C and C. Get a team there, now!”

The lead guard depressed his communicator. After a static-filled exchange, “There already is a team there, sir.”

“Great. Have them? ”

“Sir, they can’t get in. The titanium doors have been sealed and pressurized.”

“How long to breach it?”

The man sighed. “Twenty minutes.”

“You’ll have to do better than that!”

“Sir, even if we were under full-scale attack? ”

“We *are* under full-scale attack! Blow them off if you have to!”

“Dixon, we’ve got another problem,” Merlin’s voice rang in his ears. “Someone’s activated Protocol 1117? from inside C and C.”

Loring crossed his arms. “Don’t tell me. The override’s been taken out.”

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing we can do. In ninety seconds, all Project MacDuff files will be irretrievably purged from ReGenerix’s mainframe.”

“Which means that we’ll have to take Bergmann alive? ”

“Unless we have a full backup set of project files off-site,” Merlin finished. “I should know soon.”

“You were right, old friend. I should have listened to you and had Bergmann removed at the first sign of trouble. You’re due another big ‘I told you so’. As usual.”

“Do you smell something?” Loring heard one of the guards on-screen ask.

The four men in the Bio-scaffold Room lifted their heads and sniffed.

“Yeah, I do,” one man answered. He crinkled his nose. “Bitter, like? ”

“Nitric acid?” another finished.

Loring checked the screen. Behind the guard on the far right, at the base of one of the machine legs, was a small white disk. He zoomed in on the machine’s base. As the site focused, it appeared to be two biscuits shaped like disks strapped to the machine’s support struts by duct tape? with blasting caps and timers attached. “Get out of? ”

The camera displayed static.

“What’s happening, Merlin?” he yelled into his wireless.

“I’ve just entered the building. Bio-scaffold is gone. The mainframe has been purged. Bergmann is in Main Lab. And Dixon, whatever he has planned for the SUE and for himself, we will not get there in time.”

Loring winced. “Without off-site copies, this will be a total loss. Six years!”

“Have faith. We are not there yet. Hold!”

“Merlin, what is it?”

No answer.

“Merlin?”

“There may yet be a chance. Dr. Bergmann in Main Lab would like to speak to you.”

“Put him through!”

The screen displayed Main Lab: a sterile, white three-hundred-foot-long chamber with a seven-story ceiling. Impregnated high in the back wall was the eighty-by-twenty-five-foot double-thick observation window from C&C. Main Lab proper, seemingly built to accommodate a battalion, was empty, except for a single, hastily constructed dais supporting a black cylinder on a bolted table. Freestanding poles, cameras, and monitors partially ringed the cylinder, all controlled from behind by a workstation. Dr. Wyndom Bergmann strode to center stage, his yellow biohazard suit muffling footsteps that echoed across the expanse. “Nice tux, Dixon. Leaving the party, or just arriving?”

“Wyndom, you said you were taking a month’s vacation.”

“No, *you* said I was taking a vacation.” Bergmann laid his hand on the cylinder’s gleaming black veneer and ran his fingers along its long axis. The SUE was precisely four feet long and utterly smooth, except for fiberoptic ports protruding from each side and flattened ends with hormonal- and nutrient-infusion pumps and excretion-sac outlets. The new modifications, specifically the infusion pumps and sonographic monitor for sequestered application or network integration, had not yet been installed. Bergmann ripped off the hood of his biohazard suit and exposed his ruddy face and thick blond hair. “You lied to me.”

“I informed you, in writing, that we were pushing forward with the prototype.”

“Initialize, yes, demonstrate, no! Tell me, Dixon, who did you invite to watch the beginning of the end of humanity?”

Loring pressed back into his chair and released a long sigh. “You’re overwrought. I shouldn’t have scheduled the demo without you. I allowed production pressures to override the

human side of the equation. I know this was just once a dream in your mind. That the SUE is your handiwork.”

“Classic E. Dixon Loring, charming to the end.”

“I’ll cancel the demo if that’s what you want. But we are, after all, working for the betterment of Man.”

Bergmann checked on three disks planted at the base of the SUE and workstation. “I’m no longer gullible.”

Loring zoomed the camera in on the disks. Each had blasting caps. “What are those?”

“RDX, the main ingredient in C4. Hexamine with nitric acid and acetone, baked with flour. Archives was first, then scaffolding. There’s half a dozen planted here and in C and C.”

“Wyndom, pull back from the edge. We can forget what’s happened.”

“Forget that I had to kill poor Neuman? Forget the four men who died when the scaffolding room went up?” Nearly in tears, “Forget the plague you plan to unleash on the world? Correction, the world you plan to create as a plague?”

“You SUEs could save ten million ba? ”

“I’ve seen your treatise!” Bergmann pointed at the black cylinder. “Look at the size of this place! Room enough for ten thousand Bokanovsky bottles!”

“The document was a capabilities treatise. Wyndom, don’t throw your life away on a piece of fiction.”

He banged on the SUE’s fiberoptic port. “Without this, you can’t complete your plan.”

“I order? ”

“You are no longer in a position to order people.”

“I can take the lab by force.”

“But not in time to take me alive.” Bergmann turned away from the camera. He reached into a sack stashed behind the workstation, removed a biscuit, stuck a blasting cap in it, and held it out, gently. “And I cannot allow you to take me alive.”

“Dixon, it’s me,” Merlin’s voice sounded through Loring’s wireless, still pressed tight against his ear.

“What have you got?”

“A complete set of project files at the San Francisco facility,” Merlin declared.

Loring turned back to the screen with a subdued grin. “Wyndom, you don’t want to die. Think of your family. That track-star son of yours at NC State. That brilliant daughter at NYU. And lovely, faithful Claire. What will become of them?”

“You’ll never find them!”

“You’re forcing me to? ”

“I’ve destroyed all specs and data on Project MacDuff. In moments, this lab goes too. You’ve lost.”

“Before you blow yourself and a quarter billion dollars into next week, you might want to reconsider.” Loring leaned forward. “The information has already been disseminated.”

Bergmann smiled. “Nice try. You never saw this coming.”

“Three weeks ago, the Executive Gala. You were drunk, loud, more belligerent than usual. With that big mouth of yours you shot off ‘Bokanovsky’ one too many times.” Loring sat back, grinning. “Wyndom, you’re brilliant, but you’re not the only one who reads classics.”

“You’re stalling!”

“Check it for yourself. All Project MacDuff files have been copied and stored safely beyond your reach.”

Loring watched as Bergmann carefully placed the explosive on top of the SUE and took out a notebook computer. He punched in a series of commands. "It's true." After a long, shuddering exhale, "At least you don't have my soul."

"A soul? Life is just chemistry, which we can quantify and manipulate."

Bergmann grabbed a freestanding pole and smashed it against one of the Main Lab cameras, then against a monitor filled with Loring's smile. The monitor showered sparks, tipped, and crashed onto the floor. He spun around with the outstretched pole, striking each camera and monitor to a glittering symphony of orange-yellow sparks and glass shards.

Loring's screen went blank. Reestablishing contact with one of the security cameras in C&C, he directed the camera toward Main Lab, then zoomed in through the great window onto the lone dais with the black cylinder. "Destroying the lab accomplishes nothing. Another site will be up and running within months, probably weeks." Loring whispered, "Surrender the lab. Spare your family the grief."

Smoke filled C&C, obscuring Loring's view. The shadows of three guards appeared through the haze. They trained their automatic weapons on Bergmann, visible on the lab floor far below the window.

"Wyndom, it doesn't have to end here."

"You're right, it doesn't." Bergman, resigned, visibly shaking, picked up the RDX-impregnated biscuit sitting atop the SUE. "But hopefully, it will." He threw the explosive at the control room. It arced, long and loping toward the glass? and fell short of the wall. It disappeared from view.

A searing blue fireball erupted. The security camera stopped transmitting.

Loring turned off the screen, strutted to one of the library shelves behind him, and picked up his favorite novel. He skimmed it absently, fluttering through its pages, and lingered on the last paragraph while he listened to Merlin confirm what he already knew. Relieved, he closed the book.

PART TWO

THE SECOND COMPONENT? YEAR SEVEN OF THE PLAN

