

surrogate

by marci stillerman

Four people watched the birth of Jason Nes Rayner on the fourth of July, a bright hot day. Delivered safely out of Claire's womb, squalling and unwashed, and placed in the arms of his mother, Rose. Pressing the newborn to her chest, Rose weeps for joy. Her husband Nathan wraps his arms around her and their newborn son, and David, husband of the surrogate, Claire, kisses hiswife's happy, weary face. It has been an incredible experience for David to see his wife give birth to the child of his lover, a child he hadn't fathered. Rose and Nathan's child. Jason Nes Rayner, Jason for Nathan's father, Nes, the Hebrew word for miracle, claims his place in a circle of love. Rose and David, Claire and Nathan, friends since childhood. David a doctor, Rose teaches history. Claire writes books and Nathan owns an automobile agency. David, in love with Rose, thought they would marry. But Rose was ready before he was. When Nathan asked her, she accepted. A month after the wedding, Rose knew her marriage to Nathan was a mistake. It was David she loved. And loves. But it was too late. David married Claire who loved him since they were children. In the next six years, Claire and David have three children and Claire publishes two books. After three miscarriages, Rose and Nathan, wanting a child desperately, sadly decid to adopt. "But you can have your own child," Claire says. "I will carry it for you." Rose and Nathan consent, overwhelmed by Claire's generosity. David thought it not a good idea. "Why not?" Claire said. "I love being pregnant. And since we're not planning to have any more children, this will be my last chance." "There are things to consider," David said. How would a surrogate pregnancy, Claire carrying Rose and Nathan's child, affect their own relationship? What about their children? How would they understand their mother giving away a baby she bore? And Claire's writing? Pregnancy absorbs every ounce of her creative energy. Was she willing to put it on hold for most of a year? David felt it too bizarre, Claire carrying his lover's child. "It's what I want to do,"

Claire said. "I love you and our children. Nothing will ever change that. And it won't stop me from writing. I've already begun another book. It will be our gift to them. A gift of love." When he saw how happy Claire's offer made Rose, David couldn't refuse. Their families would be forever connected; parents and godparents to the child Claire would carry for Rose and Nathan. Jason Nes is a loving, beautiful child, a California blond like Rose with Nathan's dark Mediterranean eyes. A strong, active boy. Four sets of arms always eager to hold him, adoring eyes watched that every step he takes is safe. He reflects the love that pouring over him, warm to the embrace of family and friends, a joyous, singing little boy, flying through days of play and laughter, learning and growing. Claire and David's children, his playground mentors and guardians, vying with each other to be his favorite of the moment. But their love for Jason brings stress to the four friends. Rose aches with jealousy when, in the moments of unhappiness every baby feels when he is over-tired or frustrated, Jason goes to Claire for his first comfort, bypasses his mother to run into Claire's willing arms. Despite Jason's preference for her lap over his mother's, Claire feels loss for the child she'd carried next to her heart for the nine-month eternity before his birth. It's difficult to relinquish him to Rose. She longs to pick him up when he wakes in the morning and put him to bed at night. To be the one he calls mommy. David's love for Jason is mixed. He resents that Claire seems to love him even more than she loves their own children. He regrets that he'd consented to the surrogacy. But he does love Jason and feels guilty for wishing he'd never been born. Nathan is obsessed with his son. He wants to be the most important person in his life, hates sharing him with the others. He wants to protect him from all life's dangers. He brings him to work with him every day. Jason is as much at home on his father's huge car lot as in his own back yard. He loves the cars, inside and out, loves to go for rides. He leaves his sticky little fingerprints on all the gleaming bodies. He calls every salesman uncle. On the Fourth of July, his third birthday, Jason Nes is unaware of the hidden feelings swirling about his universe. His little life is bright, every moment filled with

love and promise. The celebration of his birthday begins with a picnic barbecue in Nathan and Rose's big yard. Jason plays in the swimming pool with the older children. There are games in the playhouse and popsicles in the new tree house. The adults gloat over their beautiful, gifted children and drink champagne. When the barbecue is over and it grows dark, there are the amazing fireworks, falling gardens of fire, shooting cannons, bursting stars lighting the sky. Later, after Jason's bath, Nathan, wanting a few more minutes with his son, carries him outside to see the stars. The night is extraordinarily quiet after the holiday light and noise. The gleaming pool shines in the dark like a huge blue eye. Jason is dazzled. He struggles to escape Nathan's arms and go to the pool. When Nathan refuses to let him down, he wails and kicks. "It's time for bed," Nathan says. "Let's find your mommy." Seeing Claire come across the lawn from her own house where she'd kissed her children goodnight, he puts Jason in her arms. "When you've put him to bed," Nathan says, "get David. I'll find Rose and fix us a nightcap." David and Rose. A stolen moment never to be repeated. Many hours later, when the four friends have succumbed to the euphoric haze of champagne and weariness, the vigilance that informs a parent's every hour had momentarily lapsed, Jason slips out of the house. The luminous pool beckons. The irritating yapping of a neighbor's small dog let out at dawn, brings his master outside, across his lawn, to find Jason Nes floating face down in the pool, his small heels rigid above the glassy water. No one knows how long he's been in the water. His eyes are open but with the wonder gone. Not a bruise on the small body. Had he struggled, cried out in terror? How frantic had he been with no protecting arms to scoop him up and wrap him in a warm towel? How had he even conceived of such abandonment? At the funeral, friends drone the litany of Jason's losses: school, and friends, his first girl friend, and the sting on his tongue of his first beer. Dances and sports and love and children of his own. The rabbi says Jason's life was a mission, short but fulfilled. He'd made everyone who knew him happy, had lived joyfully in his short time from sleep to sleep. His death, a hard lesson learned with

no leniency. No one to blame. No one to be forgiven. And yet, there was the unfenced pool, the unlocked door. The mother's hour with her lover while the surrogate put her birth baby to bed, the last to see him alive. The small white coffin carried by Jason's father and grandfather. The night of the funeral, long after the others had fallen into drugged sleep, Rose stands under the same moon that had watched Jason splash and gasp and give up his life. Pressing to her chest his soft blanket, she stares into the evil eye of the pool. And screams.

