

ACT ONE

by Nancy Kress

"To understand whose movie it is one needs to look not particularly at the script but at the deal memo."

—Joan Didion

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I eased down the warehouse's basement steps behind the masked boy, one hand on the stair rail, wishing I'd worn gloves. Was this level of grime really necessary? It wasn't; we'd already passed through some very sophisticated electronic surveillance, as well as some very unsophisticated personal surveillance that stopped just short of a body-cavity search, although an unsmiling man did feel around inside my mouth. Soap cost less than surveillance, so probably the grime was intentional. The Group was making a statement. That's what we'd been told to call them: "The Group." Mysterious, undefined, pretentious.

The stairs were lit only by an old-fashioned forty-watt bulb somewhere I couldn't see. Behind me, Jane's breath quickened. I'd insisted on going down first, right behind our juvenile guide, from a sense of—what? "Masculine protection" from me would be laughable. And usually I like to keep Jane where I can see her. It works out better that way.

"Barry?" she breathed. The bottom of the steps was so shrouded in gloom that I had to feel my way with one extended foot.

"Two more steps, Janie."

"Thank you."

Then we were down and she took a deep breath, standing closer to me than she usually does. Her breasts were level with my face. Jane is only five-six, but that's seventeen inches taller than I am. The boy said, "A little way more." Across the cellar a door opened, spilling out light. "There."

It had been a laundry area once, perhaps part of an apartment for some long-dead maintenance man. Cracked washtubs, three of them, sagged in one corner. No windows, but the floor had been covered with a clean, thin rug and the three waiting people looked clean, too. I scanned them quickly. A tall, hooded man holding an assault rifle, his eyes the expression of bodyguards everywhere: alert but nonanalytic. An unmasked woman in jeans and baggy sweater, staring at Jane with unconcealed resentment. Potential trouble there. And the leader, who came forward with his hand extended, smiling. "Welcome, Miss Snow. We're honored."

I recognized him immediately. He was a type rampant in political life, which used to be my life. Big, handsome, too pleased with himself and his position to accurately evaluate either. He was the only one not wearing jeans, dressed in slacks and a sports coat over a black turtleneck. If he had been a pol instead of a geno-terrorist, he'd have maybe gotten as far as city council executive, and then would have run for mayor, lost, and never understood why. So this was a low-level part of the Group's operation, which was probably good. It might lessen the danger of this insane expedition.

"Thank you," Jane said in that famous voice, low and husky and as thrilling off screen as on. "This is my manager, Barry Tenler."

I was more than her manager, but the truth was too complicated to explain. The guy didn't even glance at me and I demoted him from city council executive to ward captain. You always pay attention to the advisors. That's usually where the brains are, if not the charisma.

Ms. Resentful, on the other hand, switched her scrutiny from Jane to me. I recognized the nature of that scrutiny. I've felt it all my life.

Jane said to the handsome leader, "What should I call you?"

"Call me Ishmael."

Oh, give me a break. Did that make Jane the white whale? He was showing off his intellectual moves, with no idea they were both banal and silly. But Jane gave him her heart-melting smile and even I, who knew better, would have sworn it was genuine. She might not have made a movie in ten years, but she still had it.

"Let's sit down," Ishmael said.

Three kitchen chairs stood at the far end of the room. Ishmael took one, the bodyguard and the boy standing behind him. Ms. Resentful took another. Jane sank cross-legged to the rug in a graceful puddle of filmy green skirt.

That was done for my benefit. My legs and spine hurt if I have to stand for more than a few minutes, and she knows how I hate sitting even lower than I already am. Ishmael, shocked and discerning nothing, said, "Miss Snow!"

"I think better when I'm grounded," she said, again with her irresistible smile. Along with her voice, that smile launched her career thirty-five years ago. Warm, passionate, but with an underlying wistfulness that bypassed the cerebrum and went straight to the primitive hind-brain. Unearned—she was born with those assets—but not unexploited. Jane was a lot shrewder than her fragile blonde looks suggested. The passion, however, was real. When she wanted something, she wanted it with every sinew, every nerve cell, every drop of her acquisitive blood.

Now her graceful Sitting-Bull act left Ishmael looking awkward on his chair. But he didn't do the right thing, which would have been to join her on the rug. He stayed on his chair and I demoted him even further, from ward captain to go-fer. I clambered up onto the third chair. Ishmael gazed down at Jane and swelled like a pouter pigeon at having her, literally, at his feet. Ms. Resentful scowled. Uneasiness washed through me.

The Group knew who Jane Snow was. Why would they put this meeting in the hands of an inept narcissist? I could think of several reasons: to indicate contempt for her world. To preserve the anonymity of those who actually counted in this most covert of organizations. To pay off a favor that somebody owed to Ishmael, or to Ishmael's keeper. To provide a photogenic foil to Jane, since of course we were being recorded. Any or all of these reasons would be fine with me. But my uneasiness didn't abate.

Jane said, "Let's begin then, Ishmael, if it's all right with you."

"It's fine with me," he said. His back was to the harsh light, which fell full on both Jane and Ms. Resentful. The latter had bad skin, small eyes, lanky hair, although her lips were lovely, full and red, and her neck above the windbreaker had the taut firmness of youth.

The light was harder on Jane. It showed up the crow's feet, the tired inelasticity of her skin under her flawless make-up. She was, after all, fifty-four, and she'd never gone under the knife. Also, she'd never been really beautiful, not as Angelina Jolie or Catherine Zeta-Jones had once been beautiful. Jane's features were too irregular, her legs and butt too heavy. But none of that mattered next to the smile, the voice, the green eyes fresh as new grass, and the powerful sexual glow she gave off so effortlessly. It's as

if Jane Snow somehow received two sets of female genes at conception, a critic wrote once, doubling everything we think of as “feminine.” That makes her either a goddess or a freak.

"I'm preparing for a role in a new movie," she said to Ishmael, although of course he already knew that. She just wanted to use her voice on him. "It's going to be about your ... your organization. And about the future of the little girls. I've talked to some of them and—"

"Which ones?" Ms. Resentful demanded.

Did she really know them all by name? I looked at her more closely. Intelligence in those small, stony eyes. She could be from the Group's headquarter cell—wherever it was—and sent to ensure that Ishmael didn't screw up this meeting. Or not. But if she were really intelligent, would she be so enamored of someone like Ishmael?

Stupid question. Three of Jane's four husbands had been gorgeous losers.

Jane said, "Well, so far I've only talked to Rima Ridley-Jones. But Friday I have the whole afternoon with the Barrington twins."

Ishmael, unwilling to have the conversation migrate from him, said, "Beautiful children, those twins. And very intelligent." As if the entire world didn't already know that. Unlike most of the Group's handiwork, the Barrington twins had been posed by their publicity-hound parents on every magazine cover in the world. But Jane smiled at Ishmael as if he'd just explicated Spinoza.

"Yes, they are beautiful. Please, Ishmael, tell me about your organization. Anything that might help me prepare for my role in Future Perfect."

He leaned forward, hands on his knees, handsome face intent. Dramatically, insistently, he intoned, "There is one thing you must understand about the Group, Jane. A very critical thing. You will never stop us."

Portentous silence.

The worst thing was, he might be right. The FBI, CIA, IRS, HPA, and several other alphabets had lopped off a few heads, but still the hydra grew. It had so many supporters: liberal lawmakers and politicians, who wanted the Anti-Genetic Modification Act revoked and the Human Protection Agency dismantled. The rich parents who wanted their embryos enhanced. The off-shore banks that coveted the Group's dollars and the Caribbean or Mexican or who-knows-what islands that benefited from sheltering their mobile labs.

"We are idealists," Ishmael droned on, "and we are the future. Through our efforts, mankind will change for the better. Wars will end, cruelty will disappear. When people can—"

"Let me interrupt you for just a moment, Ishmael." Jane widened her eyes and over-used his name. Her dewy look up at him from the floor could have reversed desertification. She was pulling out all the stops. "I need so much to understand, Ishmael. If you genemod these little girls, one by one, you end up changing such a small percentage of the human race that ... how many children have been engineered with Arlen's Syndrome?"

"We prefer the term 'Arlen's Advantage.'"

"Yes, of course. How many children?"

I held my breath. The Group had never given out that information.

Jane put an entreating hand on Ishmael's knee.

He said loftily, hungrily, "That information is classified," and I saw that he didn't know the answer.

Ms. Resentful said, "To date, three thousand two hundred fourteen."

Was she lying? My instincts—and I have very good instincts, although to say that in this context is clearly a joke—said no. Resentful knew the number. So she was higher up than Ishmael. And since she sure as hell wasn't responding to Jane's allure, that meant the Group now wanted the numbers made public.

"Yes, that's right," Ishmael said hastily, "three thousand two hundred fourteen children."

Jane said, "But that's not a high percentage out of six billion people on Earth, is it? It—"

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"Five ten-millionth of 1 percent," I said. A silly, self-indulgent display, but what the hell. My legs ached.

She always could ad-lib. "Yes, thank you, Barry. But my question was for Ishmael. If only such a tiny percentage of humanity possesses Arlen's Advantage, even if the genemod turns out to be inheritable—"

"It is," Ishmael said, which was nonsense. The oldest Arlen's kids were only twelve.

"Wonderful!" Jane persisted. "But as I say, if only such a tiny percentage of humanity possesses the Advantage, how can the Group hope to alter the entire human future?"

Ishmael covered her hand with his. He smiled down at her, and his eyes actually twinkled. "Jane, Jane, Jane. Have you ever dropped a pebble into a pond?"

"Yes."

"And what happened, my dear?"

"A ripple."

"Which spread and spread until the entire pond was affected!" Ishmael spread his arms wide. The ass couldn't even put together a decent analogy. Humanity was an ocean, not a pond, and water ripples were always transitory. But Jane, actress that she was, beamed at him and moved the conversation to something he could handle.

"I see. Tell me, Ishmael, how you personally became involved in the Group."

He was thrilled to talk about himself. As he did, Jane skillfully extracted information about the Group's make-up, its organization, its communications methods. Resentful let her do it. I watched the young woman, who was watching Ishmael but not in a monitoring sort of way. He couldn't give away really critical information; he didn't have any. Still, he talked too much. He was the kind of man who responded to an audience, who could easily become so expansive that he turned indiscreet. Sooner or later, I suspected, he would say something to somebody that he shouldn't, and the Group would dump him.

Ms. Resentful wasn't anything near the actress Jane that was. Her hunger for this worthless man was almost palpable. I might have felt sympathy for her pain if my own wasn't increasing so much in my legs, back, neck. I seldom sat this long, and never on a hard chair.

My particular brand of dwarfism, achondroplasia, accounts for 70 percent of all cases. Malformed bones and cartilage produce not only the short limbs, big head and butt, and pushed-in face that all the media

caricaturists so adore but also, in some of us, constriction of the spinal canal that causes pain. Especially as achons age, and I was only two years younger than Jane. Multiple excruciating operations have only helped me so much.

After an hour and a half, Jane rose, her filmy skirt swirling around her lovely calves. My uneasiness spiked sharply. If anything was going to happen, it would be now.

But nothing did happen. The masked boy reappeared and we were led out of the dingy basement. I could barely walk. Jane knew better than to help me, but she whispered, "I'm so sorry, Barry. But this was my only chance."

"I know." Somehow I made it up the stairs. We navigated the maze of the abandoned warehouse, where the Group's unseen soldiers stayed at stand-off with our own unseen bodyguards. Blinking in the sunlight, I suddenly collapsed onto the broken concrete.

"Barry!"

"It's ... okay. Don't."

"The rest will be so much easier ... I promise!"

I got myself upright, or what passes for upright. The unmarked van arrived for us. The whole insane interview had gone off without a hitch, without violence, smooth as good chocolate.

So why did I still feel so uneasy?

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An hour later, Jane's image appeared all over the Net, the TV, the wallboards. Her words had been edited to appear that she was a supporter, perhaps even a member, of the Group. But of course we had anticipated this. The moment our van left the warehouse, the first of the pre-emptory spots I'd prepared aired everywhere. They featured news avatar CeeCee Collins, who was glad for the scoop, interviewing Jane about her meeting. Dedicated actress preparing for a role, willing to take any personal risk for art, not a believer in breaking the law but valuing open discourse on this important issue, and so forth. The spots cost us a huge amount of money. They were worth it. Not only was the criticism defused, but the publicity for the upcoming movie, which started principal photography in less than a month, was beyond price.

I didn't watch my spots play. Nor was I there when the FBI, CIA, HPA, etc. paid Jane the expected visit to both "debrief" her and/or threaten her with arrest for meeting with terrorists. But I didn't need to be there. Before our meeting, I'd gotten Jane credentials under the Malvern-Murphy Press Immunity Act, plus Everett Murphy as her more-than-capable lawyer. Everett monitored the interviews and I stayed in bed under a painkiller. The FBI, CIA, HPA wanted to meet with me, too, of course, once Jane told them I'd been present. They had to wait until I could see them. I didn't mind them cooling their heels as they waited for me, not at all.

Why are you so opposed to genemods? Jane had asked me once, and only once, not looking at me as she said it. She meant, Why you, especially? Usually I answered Jane, trusted Jane, but not on this. I told her the truth: You wouldn't understand. To her credit, she hadn't been offended. Jane was smart enough to know what she didn't know.

Now, on my lovely pain patch, I floated in a world where she and I walked hand in hand through a forest the green of her filmy skirt, and she had to crane her neck to smile up at me.

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The next few days, publicity for the picture exploded. Jane did interview after interview: TV, LinkNet, robocam, print, holonews. She glowed with the attention, looking ten years younger. Some of the interviewers and avatars needled her, but she stuck to the studio line: This is a movie about people, not polemics. Future Perfect is not really about genetic engineering. It will be an honest examination of eternal verities, of our shared frailty and astonishing shared strength, of what makes us human, of blah blah blah, that just happens to use Arlen's Syndrome as a vehicle. The script was nearly finished and it would be complex and realistic and blah blah blah.

"Pro or con on genemods?" an exasperated journalist finally shouted from the back of the room.

Jane gave him a dazzling smile. "Complex and realistic," she said.

Both the pros and the cons would be swarming into the theater, unstoppable as lemmings.

I felt so good about all of this that I decided to call Leila. I needed to be in a good mood to stand these calls. Leila wasn't home, letting me get away with just a message, which made me feel even better.

Jane, glowing on camera, was wiping out a decade of cinematic obscurity with Future Perfect. I couldn't wipe out my fifteen years of guilt that easily, nor would I do so even if I could. But I was still glad that Leila wasn't home.

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Jane had promised that Friday's role-prep interview would be easier on me. She was wrong.

The Barrington twins lived with their parents and teen-age sister in San Luis Obispo. Jane's pilot obtained clearance to land on the green-velvet Barrington lawn, well behind the estate's heavily secured walls. I wouldn't have to walk far.

"Welcome, Miss Snow. An honor." Frieda Barrington was mutton dressed as lamb, a fiftyish woman in a brief skirt and peek-a-boo caped sweater. Slim, toned, tanned, but the breasts doing the peek-a-booing would never be twenty again, and her face had the tense lines of those who spent most of their waking time pretending not to be tense.

Jane climbed gracefully from the flyer and stood so that her body shielded my awkward descent. I seized the grab bar, sat on the flyer floor, fell heavily onto the grass, and scrambled to my feet. Jane moved aside, her calf-length skirt—butter yellow, this time—blowing in the slight breeze. "Call me Jane. This is my manager, Barry Tenler."

Frieda Barrington was one of Those. Still, she at least tried to conceal her distaste. "Hello, Mr. Tenler."

"Hi." With any luck, this would be the only syllable I had to address to her.

We walked across the grass through perfect landscaping, Frieda supplying the fund of inane chatter that such women always have at their disposal. The house had been built a hundred years earlier for a silent-film star. Huge, pink, gilded at windows and doors, it called to mind an obese lawn flamingo. We entered a huge foyer floored in black-and-white marble, which managed to look less Vermeer than checkerboard. A sulky girl in dirty jeans lounged on a chaise longue. She stared at us over the garish cover of a comic book.

"Suky, get up," Frieda snapped. "This is Miss Snow and her manager Mr., uh, Tangler. My daughter Suky."

The girl got up, made an ostentatious and mocking curtsy, and lay down again. Frieda made a noise of outrage and embarrassment, but I felt sorry for Suky. Fifteen—the same age as Ethan—plain of face, she was caught between a mother who'd appropriated her fashions and twin sisters who appropriated all the attention. Frieda would be lucky if Suky's rebellion stopped at mere rudeness. I made her a mock little bow to match her curtsy, and watched as her eyes widened with surprise. I grinned.

Frieda snapped, "Where are the twins?"

Suky shrugged. Frieda rolled her eyes and led us through the house.

They were playing on the terrace, a sun-shaded sweep of weathered stone with steps that led to more lawn, all backed by a gorgeous view of vineyards below the Sierra Madres. Frieda settled us on comfortable, padded chairs. A robo-server rolled up, offering lemonade.

Bridget and Belinda came over to us before they were called. "Hello!" Jane said with her melting smile, but neither girl answered. Instead, they gazed steadily, unblinkingly at her for a full thirty seconds, and then did the same with me. I didn't like it, or them.

Arlen's Syndrome, like all genetic tinkering, has side effects. No one knows that better than I. Achondroplasia dwarfism is the result of a single nucleotide substitution in the gene FGFR3 at codon 380 on chromosome 4. It affects the growth of bones and cartilage, which in turn affects air passages, nerves, and other people's tolerance. Exactly which genes were involved in Arlen's were a trade secret, but the modifications undoubtedly spread across many genes, with many side effects. But since only females could be genemod for Arlen's, the X chromosome was one of those altered. That much, at least, was known.

The two eleven-year-old girls staring at me so frankly were small for their age, delicately built: fairy children. They had white skin, silky fair hair cut in short caps, and eyes of luminous gray. Other than that, they didn't look much alike, fraternal twins rather than identical. Bridget was shorter, plumper, prettier. From a Petri-dishful of Frieda's fertilized eggs, the Barringtons had chosen the most promising two, had them genemoded for Arlen's Syndrome, and implanted them in Frieda's ageing but still serviceable womb. The loving parents, both exhibitionists, had splashed across the worldwide media every last detail—except where and how the work had been done. Unlike Rima Ridley-Jones, the Arlen's child that Jane had spoken with last week, these two were carefully manufactured celebrities.

Jane tried again. "I'm Jane Snow, and you're Bridget and Belinda. I'm glad to meet you."

"Yes," Belinda said, "you are." She looked at me. "But you're not."

There was no point in lying. Not to them. "Not particularly."

Bridget said, with a gentleness surprising in one so young, "That's okay, though."

"Thank you," I said.

"I didn't say it was okay," Belinda said.

There was no answer to that. The Ridley-Jones child hadn't behaved like this; in addition to shielding her from the media, her mother had taught her manners. Frieda, on the other hand, leaned back in her chair like a spectator at a play, interested in what her amazing daughters would say next, but with anxiety on overdrive. I had the sense she'd been here before. Eleven-year-olds were no longer adorable, biddable toddlers.

"You'll never get it," Belinda said to me, at the same moment that Bridget put a hand on her sister's arm.

Belinda shook it off. "Let me alone, Brid. He should know. They all should know." She smiled at me and I felt something in my chest recoil from the look in her gray eyes.

"You'll never get it," Belinda said to me with that horrible smile. "No matter what you do, Jane will never love you. And she'll always hate it when you touch her even by mistake. Just like she hates it now. Hates it, hates it, hates it."

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It started with a dog.

Dr. Kenneth Bernard Arlen, a geneticist and chess enthusiast, owned a toy poodle. Poodles are a smart breed. Arlen played chess twice a week in his Stanford apartment with Kelson Hughes from Zoology. Usually they played three, four, or five games in a row, depending on how careless Hughes got with his end game. Cosette lay on the rug, dozing, until checkmate of the last game, when she always began barking frantically to protest Hughes's leaving. The odd thing was that Cosette began barking before the men rose, as they replaced the chessmen for what might, after all, have been the start of just another game. How did she know it wasn't?

Hughes assumed pheromones. He, or Arlen, or both, probably gave off a different smell as they decided to call it a night. Pheromones were Hughes's field of research; he'd done significant work in mate selection among mice based on smell. He had a graduate student remove the glomeruli from adult dogs and put them through tests to see how various of their learned responses to humans changed. The responses didn't change. It wasn't pheromones.

Now not only Hughes but also Arlen was intensely intrigued. The Human Genome Project had just slid into Phase 2, discovering which genes encoded for what proteins, and how. Arlen was working with Turner's Syndrome, a disorder in which females were born missing all or part of one of their two X chromosomes. The girls had not only physical problems but social ones; they seemed to have trouble with even simple social interactions. What interested Hughes was that Turner Syndrome girls with an intact paternal X gene, the one inherited from the father, managed far better socially than those with the maternal X functioning. Something about picking up social cues was coded for genetically, and on the paternal X.

Where else did social facility reside in the genome? What cues of body language, facial expression, or tone of voice was Cosette picking up? Somehow the dog knew that when Hughes and Arlen set the chessmen in place, this wasn't the start of a new game. Something, dictated at least in part by Cosette's genes, was causing processes in her poodle brain. After all, Hughes's dog, a big dumb Samoyed, never seemed to anticipate anything. Snowy was continually surprised by gravity.

Arlen found the genes in dogs. It took him ten years, during which he failed to get tenure because he wouldn't publish. After Stanford let him go, he still didn't publish. He found the genes in humans. He still didn't publish. Stone broke, he was well on the way to bitter and yet with his idealism undimmed—an odd combination, but not unknown among science fanatics. Inevitably, he crossed paths with people even more fanatical. Kenneth Bernard Arlen joined forces with off-shore backers to open a fertility clinic that created super-empathic children.

Empathy turns up early in some children. A naturally empathic nine-month-old will give her teddy bear to another child who is crying; the toddler senses how bad the other child feels. People who score high in perceiving others' emotions are more popular, more outgoing, better adjusted, more happily married, more successful at their jobs. Arlen's Syndrome toddlers understood—not verbally, but in their limbic systems—when Mommy was worried, when Daddy wanted them to go potty, that Grandma loved them,

that a stranger was dangerous.

If his first illegal, off-shore experiments with human germ lines had resulted in deformities, Arlen would have been crucified. There were no deformities. Prospective clients loved the promise of kids who actually understood how parents felt. By six or seven, Arlen's Syndrome kids could, especially if they were bright, read an astonishing array of non-verbal signals. By nine or ten, it was impossible to lie to them. As long as you were honest and genuinely had their best interests in mind, the children were a joy to live with: sensitive, cooperative, grateful, aware.

And yet here was Belinda Barrington, staring at me from her pale eyes, and I didn't need a genetic dose of super-empathy to see her glee at embarrassing me. I couldn't look at Jane. The blood was hot in my face.

Frieda said, sharply and hopelessly, "Belinda, that's not nice."

"No, it's not," Bridget said. She frowned at her sister, and Belinda actually looked away for a moment. Her twin had some childish control over Belinda, and her mother didn't. "Tell him you're sorry."

"Sorry," Belinda muttered, unconvincingly. So they could lie, if not be lied to.

Frieda said to Jane, "This is new behavior. I'm sure it's just a phase. Nothing you'd want to include in your project!"

Belinda shot her mother a look of freezing contempt.

Jane took control of the sorry situation. Sparing me any direct glance, she said to Belinda, "Did anybody tell you why I want to talk to you girls?"

"No," Belinda said. "You're not a reporter."

"I'm a movie actress."

Bridget brightened. "Like Kylie Kicker?" Apparently Arlen's Advantage did not confer immunity to inane kiddie pop culture.

"Not as young," Jane smiled, "or as rich. But I'm making a movie about the lives that girls like you might have when you're grown up. That's why I want to get to know you a little bit now. But only if it's okay with you."

The twins looked at each other. Neither spoke, but I had the impression that gigabytes passed between them. Frieda said, "Girls, I hope you'll cooperate with Miss Snow. She—"

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"No, you don't," Belinda said, almost absently. "You don't like her. She's too pretty. But we like her."

Frieda's face went a mottled maroon. Bridget, her plump features alarmed, put a hand on her mother's arm. But Frieda shook it off, started to say something, then abruptly stood and stalked into the house. Bridget made a move to follow but checked herself. To me—why?—she said apologetically, "She wants to be alone a little while."

"You should go with her," Belinda said, and I didn't have to be told twice. These kids gave me the creeps.

Not that even they, with their overpraised empathy, could ever understand why.

In the foyer, Suky still lay on the chaise longue with her comic book. There was no sign of her mother. The other chairs were all mammoth leather things, but a low antique bench stood against one wall and I clambered painfully onto it and called a cab. I would have to walk all the way to the front gate to meet it, but the thought of going back in the flyer with Jane was unbearable. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the wall. My back and legs ached, but nothing compared to my heart.

It wasn't the words Belinda had said. Yes, I loved Jane and yes, that love was hopeless. I already knew that and so must Jane. How could she not? I was with her nearly every day; she was a woman sensitive to nuance. I knew she hated my accidental touch, and hated herself for that, and could help none of it. Three of Jane's husbands had been among the best-looking men on the planet. Tall, strong, straight-limbed. I had seen Jane's flesh glow rosy just because James or Karl or Duncan was in the same room with her. I had felt her hide her recoil from me.

"Sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me." How often as a child had I chanted that to myself after another in the endless string of bullies had taunted me? Short Stuff, Dopey, Munchkin, Big Butt, Mighty Midget, Oompa Loompa, cripple ... Belinda hadn't illuminated any new truth for anybody. What she had done was speak it aloud.

"Give sorrow words"—but even Shakespeare could be as wrong as nursery chants. Something unnamed could, just barely, be ignored. Could be kept out of daily interaction, could almost be pretended away. What had been "given words" could not. And now tomorrow and the next day and the day after that, Jane and I would have to try to work together, would avoid each other's eyes, would each tread the dreary internal treadmill: Is he/she upset? Did I brush too close, stay too far away, give off any hurtful signal ... For God's sake, leave me alone!

Speech doesn't banish distance; it creates it. And if—

"Bitches, aren't they?" a voice said softly. I opened my eyes. Suky stood close to my bench. She was taller than I'd thought, with a spectacular figure. No one would ever notice, not next to the wonder and novelty of the twins.

In my shamed confusion, I blurted out the first thing that came into my mind. "Belinda is, Bridget isn't."

"That's what you think." Suky laughed, then laid her comic book on the bench. "You need this, dwarf." She vanished into some inner corridor.

I picked up the comic. It was holo, those not-inexpensive e-graphics with chips embedded in the paper. Four panels succeeded each other on each page, with every panel dramatizing the plot in ten-second bursts of shifting light. The title was "Knife Hack," and the story seemed to concern a mother who carves up her infants with a maximum amount of blood and brain spatter.

Arlen's Syndrome kids: a joy to live with, sensitive and cooperative and grateful and aware.

Just one big happy family.

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But sometimes the universe gives you a break. The next day I had a cold. Nothing serious, just a stuffy nose and sore throat, but I sounded like a rusty file scraping on cast iron, so I called in sick to my "office" at Jane's estate. Her trainer answered. "What?"

"Tell Jane I won't be in today. Sick. And remind her to—"

"I'm not your errand boy, Barry," he answered hotly. We stared at each other's comlink images in

mutual dislike. Dino Carrano was the trainer-to-the-stars-of-the-moment-before-this-one, an arrogant narcissist who three times a week tortured Jane into perfect abs and weeping exhaustion. Like Ishmael, he was without the prescience to realize that his brief vogue had passed and that Jane kept him on partly from compassion. He stood now in her deserted exercise room.

"Why are you answering the phone? Where's Catalina?"

"Her grandmother in Mexico died. Again. And before you ask, Jose is supervising the grounds crew and Jane is in the bathroom, throwing up. Now you know everything. Bye, Barry."

"Wait! If she's throwing up because you pushed her too hard again, you Dago bastard—"

"Save your invective, little man. We haven't even started the training session yet, and if we don't train by tomorrow, her ass is going to drop like a duffel bag. For today she just ate something bad." He cut the link.

My stomach didn't feel too steady, either. Had it been the Barrington lemonade? I made it to the bathroom just in time. But afterward I felt better, decided not to call my doctor, and went to bed. If Jane was sick, Catalina would cancel her appointments. No, Catalina was in Mexico ... not my problem.

But all Jane's problems were mine. Without her, I had my own problems—Leila, Ethan—but no actual life.

Nonetheless, I forced myself to stay in bed, and eventually I fell asleep. When I woke, six hours later, my throat and stomach both felt fine. A quick call discovered that Catalina had returned from Mexico, sounding suspiciously unbereaved. But she was efficient enough when she was actually in the country, and I decided I didn't need to brief Jane on tomorrow's schedule. That would buy me one more day. I would take a relaxing evening. A long bath, a glass of wine, another postponement of talking to Leila. The industry news on Hollywood Watch.

The local news came on first. Ishmael's body had been found in a pond in the Valley.

"...and weighted with cement blocks. Cause of death was a single gunshot wound to the head, execution style," said the news avatar, a CGI who looked completely real except that she had no faulty camera angles whatsoever. I stared at the photo of Ishmael's handsome face on the screen beside her.

"Apparently the murderers were unaware that construction work would start today at the pond site, where luxury condos will be built by—"

Ishmael's name was Harold Sylvester Ehrenreich. Failed actor, minor grifter, petty tax evader, who had dropped out of electronic sight eight months ago.

"Anyone having any information concerning—"

I was already on the comlink. "Jane?"

"I just called the cops. They're on their way over." She looked tired, drawn, within five years of her actual age. Her voice sounded as raspy as mine had been. "I was just about to call you. Barry, if this endangers the picture—"

"It won't," I said. Thirty years a star, and she still didn't understand how the behind-the-scenes worked. "It will make the picture. Did you call Everett?"

"He's on his way."

"Don't say a word until both he and I get there. Not a word, Jane, not one. Can you send the flyer for me?"

"Yes. Barry—was he killed because of my interview?"

"There's no way to know that," I said, and all at once was profoundly grateful that it was true. I didn't care if Ishmael was alive, dead, or fucking himself on Mars, but Jane was built differently. People mattered to her, especially the wounded-bird type. It was how she'd ended up married to three of her four husbands and the fourth, the Alpha-Male Producer, had been in reaction to the second, the alcoholic failed actor. Catalina, Jane's housekeeper and social secretary, was another of her wounded birds. So, in his own perverse way, was her trainer.

Maybe that was why Jane had ended up with me as well.

But I could tell that neither me nor Belinda's cruel words were on Jane's mind just now. It was all Ishmael, and that was good. Ishmael would get us safely past our personal crisis. Even murder has its silver lining.

* * * *

As the flyer set down on Jane's roof, I saw the media already starting to converge. Someone must have tipped them off, perhaps a clerk at the precinct. An unmarked car was parked within Jane's gates, with two vans outside and another flyer approaching from LA. Catalina let me in, her dark eyes wide with excitement. "La policia—"

"I know. Is Everett Murphy here?"

"Yes, he—"

"Bring in coffee and cake. And make the maids draw all the curtains in the house, immediately. Even the bedrooms. There'll be robocams." I wanted pictures and information released on my schedule, not that of flying recorders.

A man and a woman sat with Jane and Everett at one end of her enormous living room, which the decorator had done in swooping black curves with accents of screaming purple. The room looked nothing like Jane, who used it only for parties. She'd actually defied the decorator, who was a Dino-Carrano-bully type but not a wounded bird, and done her private sitting room in English country house. But she hadn't taken the detectives there. I could guess why: she was protecting her safe haven. Catalina rushed past me like a small Mexican tornado and dramatically pushed the button to opaque the windows. They went deep purple, and lights flickered on in the room. Catalina raced out.

"Barry," Jane said. She looked even worse than on comlink, red nose and swollen eyes and no make-up. I hoped to hell that neither cop was optic wired. "This is Detective Lopez and Detective Miller from the LAPD. Officers, my manager Barry Tenler."

They nodded. Both were too well-trained to show curiosity or distaste, but they were there. I always know. In her sitting room Jane kept a low chair for me, but here I had to scramble up onto a high black sofa that satisfied the decorator desire for "an important piece." I said, "You can question Miss Snow now, but please be advised that she has already spoken with the FBI and HPA, and that both Mr. Murphy and I reserve the right to advise her not to answer."

The cops ignored this meaningless window dressing. But I'd accomplished what I wanted. Dwarfs learn early that straightforward, multisyllabic, take-no-shit talk will sometimes stop average-sizers from treating

us like children. Sometimes.

Officer Lopez began a thorough interrogation: How had she arranged the meeting with the Group? When? What contact had she had between the initial one and the meeting? Who had taken her to the meeting? Who else had accompanied her? When they found out that it had been me, Lopez got the look of a man who knows he's screwed up. "You were there, Mr. Tenler?"

"I was."

"You'll have to go with Officer Miller into another room," Lopez said. He stared at me hard. Witnesses were always questioned separately, and even if it hadn't crossed his mind that someone like me was a witness, he suspected it had crossed mine. Which it had. If law-enforcement agencies weren't given to so many turf wars, the LAPD would already know I'd been in that grimy basement. Or if Lopez hadn't fallen victim to his own macho assumptions. You? She took a lame half-pint like you to protect her?

"Everett is my lawyer, too," I said.

"You go with Officer Miller. Mr. Murphy will join you when I'm finished with Miss Snow." Lopez's formality barely restrained his anger.

Following Officer Miller to the media room, it occurred to me—pointlessly—that Belinda would have known immediately that I'd been withholding something.

It seemed obvious to me, as it probably was to the cops, that Ishmael had been killed by the Group. Narcissistic, bombastic, unreliable, he must have screwed up royally. Was Ms. Resentful dead, too? The bodyguard with the assault rifle? The boy who'd guided us through the warehouse?

The Group was trying to combine idealism, profit-making, and iron control. That combination never worked. I would say that to Officer Lopez, except that there was little chance he would take it seriously. Not from me.

* * * *

The media spent a breathless three or four days on the story ("Famous Actress Questioned About Genemod Murder! What Does Jane Know?"). Then a United States senator married a former porn star named Candy Alley and the press moved on, partly because it was clear that Jane didn't know anything. I'd positioned her as cooperative, concerned, committed to her art, and bewildered by the killing. Opinion polls said the public viewed her favorably. She increased her name recognition 600 percent among eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds, most of whom watched only holos and had never seen a Jane Snow picture. Publicity is publicity.

She got even more of it by spending so much time with the Barrington twins. Everybody liked this except me. Frieda liked the press attention (at least, such press as wasn't staking out the senator and his new pork barrel). The twins liked Jane. She liked caring for yet more wounded birds, which was what she considered them. Her thinking on this escaped me; these were two of the most pampered children in the known universe. But Jane was only filling time, anyway, until the script was finished. And to her credit, she turned down the party invitations from the I'm-more-important-than-you A-list crowd that had ignored her for a decade. I'd urged her to turn down social invitations in order to create that important aura of non-attainable exclusivity. Jane turned them down because she no longer considered those people to be friends.

As for me, I worked at home on the hundreds of pre-photography details. Before I could finally reach Leila, she called me.

"Hey, Barry."

"Hey, Leila." She didn't look good. I steeled myself to ask. "How is he?"

"Gone again." Exhaustion pulled at her face. "I called the LAPD but they won't do anything."

"He'll come home," I said. "He always does."

"Yeah, and one of these days it'll be in a coffin."

I said nothing to that, because there was nothing to say.

Leila, however, could always find something. "Well, if he does come home in a coffin, then you'll be off the hook, won't you? No more risk of embarrassing you or the gorgeous has-been."

"Leila—"

"Have a good time with your big shot Hollywood friends. I'll just wait to hear if this time the son you deformed really is dead."

She hung up on me.

* * * *

Leila and I met at a Little People of America convention in Denver. She was one of the teenage dwarfs dancing joyously, midriff bared and short skirt flipping, at the annual ball. I thought she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen: red hair and blue eyes, alive to her fingertips. I was eighteen years older than she, and everyone at the convention knew who I was. High-ranking aide to a candidate for the mayor of San Francisco. Smart, successful, sharply dressed. Local dwarf makes good. More mobile than, I asked her to dance. Six months later we married. Six months after that, while I was running the campaign for a gubernatorial candidate, Leila accidentally got pregnant.

Two dwarfs have a 25 percent chance of conceiving an average-sized child, a 50 percent chance of a dwarf, and a 25 percent of a double-dominant, which always dies shortly after birth. Leila and I had never discussed these odds because, like most dwarfs, we planned on the in vitro fertilization that permits cherry-picking embryos. But Leila got careless with her pills. She knew immediately that she was pregnant, and even before the zygote had implanted itself in her uterus wall, testing showed that the fetus had a "normal" FGFR3 gene. I panicked.

"I don't want to have an average-sized kid," I told Leila. "I just don't."

"And I don't want to have an abortion," Leila said. "It's not that I'm politically opposed to abortion. I'm glad to have the choice, but ... Barry, I ... I just can't. He's already a baby to me. Our baby. Why would having an Average be so hard?"

"Why?" I'd waved a hand around our house, in which everything—furniture, appliance controls, doorknobs—had been built to our scale. "Just look around! Besides, there's a moral question here, Leila. You know that with in vitro, fewer and fewer dwarfs are having dwarf children. That just reinforces the idea that there's something wrong with being a dwarf. I don't want to perpetuate that—I won't perpetuate that. This is a political issue! I want a dwarf child."

She believed me. She was twenty to my thirty-nine, and I was a big-shot politico. She loved me. Leila lacked the perspicacity to see how terrified I was of an average-sized son, who would be as tall as I was by the time he was seven. Who would be impossible to control. Who might eventually despise me and his

mother both. But Leila really, really didn't want to abort. I talked her into in utero somatic gene therapy in England.

In those days I believed in science. The som-gene technique was new but producing spectacular results. The British had gotten behind genetic engineering in a big way, and knowledgeable people from all over the world flocked to Cambridge, where private firms tied to the great university were turning genes on and off in fetuses still in the womb. This had to be done during the first week or ten days after conception. The FGFR3 gene stops bones from growing. It was turned on in babies with dwarfism; a corrective genemod retrovirus should be able to turn the gene off in the little mass of cells that was Ethan. The problem was that the Cambridge biotech clinic wouldn't do it.

"We cure disease, not cause it," I was told icily.

"Dwarfism is not a disease!" I said, too angry to be icy. Waving high the banner of political righteousness. It wasn't a good idea, in those days, to cross me. I was the high-ranking, infallible campaign guru, the tiny wunderkind, the man who was never wrong. Fear can present itself as arrogance.

"Nonetheless," the scientist told me in that aloof British accent, "we will not do it. Nor, I suspect, will any clinic in the United Kingdom."

He was right. Time was running out. The next day we went off-shore, to a clinic in the Caymans, and something went wrong. The retrovirus that was the delivery vector mutated, or the splicing caused other genes to jump (they will do that), or maybe God just wanted an evil joke that day. The soma-gene correction spawned side effects, with one gene turning on another that in turn affected another, a cascade of creation run amok. And we got Ethan.

Leila never forgave me, and I never forgave myself. She left me when Ethan was not quite two. I sent money. I tried to stay in touch. I bore Leila's fury and contempt and despair. She sent me pictures of Ethan, but she wouldn't let me see him. I could have pressed visitation through the courts. I didn't.

My gubernatorial candidate lost.

* * * *

"Barry," Jane comlinked me the night before the first script conference, "would you like to come to dinner tonight?"

"Can't," I lied. "I already have dinner plans."

"Oh? With whom?"

"A friend." I smiled mysteriously. Some inane, back-in-high-school part of my brain hoped that she'd think I had a date. Then I saw Bridget Barrington scamper across the room behind Jane. "Are those kids at your place?"

"Yes, I couldn't go there today because Catalina is sick and I had to—"

"Sick? With what? Jane, you can't catch anything now, the first reading is tomorrow and—"

"I won't catch this—I gave it to her. It's that sore-throat-and-stomach thing we both had. Catalina—"

"You're not a goddamn nurse! If Catalina is ill—" give me credit, I didn't say actually ill instead of faking the way she fakes relatives' deaths every fifteen minutes"—then hire a nurse or—"

"She's not sick enough for a nurse, she just needs coddling and orange juice and company. It's fine, Barry, so butt out. I'm actually glad of the distraction, it keeps me from thinking about tonight. Oh, I meant to tell you—I talked Robert into couriering the script to me! I wanted to read it before tomorrow. He sounded weird about it, but he agreed."

My radar turned on. "Weird how?"

"I don't know. Just weird."

I considered all the possible "weirds" that the producer could be conveying, but I didn't see what I could do about any of them. I settled for, "Just don't catch anything from Catalina."

"I already told you that I won't."

"Fine. Whatever you say."

And it was fine. She was treating me the way she always did, with exasperated affection, and I was grateful. Belinda's poison, flushed out of our working relationship by the flood of feeling about Ishmael's murder, hadn't harmed us. I wouldn't lose the little of Jane that I had.

And the picture was going to be a blockbuster.

"It's a disaster!" Jane screamed. "I won't do it!"

Sitting up in bed, I stared blearily at the wall screen. Beneath the image of Jane's ravaged face, the time said 12:56 AM. I struggled to assemble consciousness.

"What is—"

She started to cry, great gasping sobs that would wreck her face for tomorrow's conference. When had I seen Jane cry like that? When the last husband left. And the one before that.

"I'm coming right over," I said. "I'm leaving immediately. Don't read any more of the script. We'll work this out, I promise."

She was sobbing too hard to answer me.

"Just have a glass of wine and wait for me."

"O ... okay."

I cut the link and called my chauffeur. I can drive if I have to, but it's painful. Ernie and his wife Sandra, my housekeeper, live in the guest cottage. They're both achons. "Mr. Tenler? What is it? Are you okay?" Ernie sounded bewildered. They're good people, but I've kept our relationship distant, not given to midnight calls for chauffeur service.

"I'm fine, but I have to go to Miss Snow's immediately. Can you bring around the car in five minutes?"

"Five minutes?" Ernie's face looked exhausted. "Yeah, sure."

"Are you all right?"

Surprise replaced his exhaustion. I wasn't in the habit of asking after Ernie's health.

"Yeah, I'm fine, it's just that Sandra and I have both been under the weather. But no big deal. I'll be

there in—"

"But if you're sick, maybe you shouldn't—"

"Five minutes," Ernie said, and now suspicion had replaced surprise. What the hell was I doing? I didn't know, either. Painfully I climbed from the bed, tried to flex my aching body, and pulled on clothes. I hobbled out the front door as the Lexus pulled up.

"Here," I said, handing Ernie a pain patch and a plastiflask of orange juice. He stared at me and shook his head.

Jane, in robe and slippers, let me in herself. Her face, red and blotchy and swollen, looked the worst I'd ever seen it. I wanted to take her in my arms, and that turned my voice harsher than I expected. "What's wrong with the fucking script?"

Perversely, my anger seemed to steady her. "It's a travesty."

"Did they reduce your part?"

"That's the least of it! Read it, Barry. I want you to read it for yourself." She led the way to her sitting room. A bottle of wine, half empty, sat on the table. Jane poured herself a third glass as I read, but I wasn't worried about that. Despite her fragile looks, Jane could out-drink a Russian stevedore.

I began to read.

Future Perfect was based on a short story by an obscure writer, which means the studio got the rights cheap. Like much fiction set in the future, it extrapolated from the present, portraying a Mississippi city in which the mayor was an Arlen's Syndrome young woman named Kate Bradshaw. Kate, empathetic but inexperienced, was guided by Jane's character, an ex-DA who was tough, funny, and not above using her mature sexuality for political ends. The story arc brought in prejudice, female friendship, and the choices that politics must make to accommodate radically different points of view. There was a lot of lush Deep South atmosphere. The ending, deliberately ambiguous, featured a knock-out closing speech for Jane's DA.

The script had moved the story to LA. The mayor was an evil Delilah who could read minds. She seduced and destroyed men, subverted democracy, had her enemies tortured. Clones were created. Buildings blew up, many buildings. Jane's character was also blown up, a third of the way into the movie. The mayor is eventually shot through the heart by a noble young HPA agent. The body bleeds viscous yellow blood.

"Jane," I said, and stopped. I had to be careful, had to choose just the right words. She had finished off the bottle of wine. I brought her a box of tissues, even though she had stopped crying. "I know it's bad, but—"

"I won't do it." Her flexible voice held the kind of despair that's gone past raging, gone straight into hopelessness.

"This is only the first pass at the script. We can ask for—"

"You know we won't get it."

I did know. I went to the main point. "Janie, sweetheart, this is the only project you've been offered in—"

"I won't do it."

"Jane, you're not—"

"I should think you would understand," she said, looking at me directly with a very un-Jane look. No softness, no flirtation, nothing but quiet, unvarnished truth. "This piece of shit encourages hatred. Not just portrays it, but actively encourages it. Arlen's kids are different, therefore they must be bad, evil. More than that—they're the result of a genetic difference, so they must be really bad, really evil, and we should clean them out of our society. I should think you, of all people, Barry, would object to that."

We had never, not once in five years, discussed my dwarfism. She didn't know about Leila, about Ethan. This was uncharted territory for us, and with every cell of my being I did not want to go there. She had no right to bring this home to me; it was her decision. Anger hijacked my brain.

"You have no idea what I should or should not object to! Do you think that two weeks spent with a few genetically privileged kids gives you insight into what genetics can do? You know nothing, you're as ignorant and stupid as most of the rest of the so-called 'normal' population. You have no idea the anguish that fucking genemods can cause, you think they're all uplifting improvements to mankind, you think that you can just ... Go ahead, commit career suicide! This script is all you've been offered in three years, and it's all you're going to get offered. You're an aging actress who belongs to another era, a Norma Desmond who will never ... go ahead, tell yourself you're taking the moral high ground! You're standing on quicksand, and I'll be fucked if I let you take me down with you!"

Silence.

She said wearily, "I won't do this script."

"Fine. Get yourself another manager."

I hobbled out to the waiting car and Ernie drove me home.

* * * *

Jane withdrew from the picture. The studio cast Suri Cruise in the part; she was young enough to be Jane's daughter. Leila called to say tersely that Ethan had crawled home from his latest bout of homelessness. He had a broken nose, a black eye, and a mangled hand. She wouldn't let me come to see him: "How would he even know who the fuck you are?" I didn't insist. The LAPD announced periodically that there were no new developments in the Harold Ehrenreich murder case, and over the next few months, Ishmael's handsome face disappeared from the newsgrids.

Ernie recovered from his bout of flu in a few days, but Sandra's turned into pneumonia and she had to go to the hospital. I visited her every day, to her bewilderment. This was new behavior, but I knew the cause. I had nothing else to do, or at least nothing I could make myself do, and hospital visiting was a distraction. Sandra was only there for four days, but her roommate developed complications and had to go into ICU. She was a frightened old woman with no family. I brought her flowers and chocolate and, when she was a little better, played mah-jongg with her. The game attracted a few other invalids, including a young man dying of one of the few cancers that medicine still couldn't cure. I began visiting him, too. Martin never seemed to even notice that I was a dwarf. Perhaps, as someone once remarked, dying does concentrate the mind, squeezing out everything else.

Every once in a while I reflected wryly that I seemed to have taken on Jane's penchant for wounded birds. But I didn't reflect too hard; hospital visiting was a long way from Hollywood management, which in turn was a long way from the nails-tough political world. I didn't want to look at how far I'd fallen.

Jane, too, seemed to be in wounded-bird mode. Sometimes, not too often, a picture of her would turn up on some fourth-rate “celebrity watch” linksite, the holo supplied by a desperate paparazzo who couldn’t do better. In those shots, she was helping some homeless drunk or paying the bills for a child who owned one ragged dress, or so it was claimed. The holos of Jane with the Barrington twins, on the other hand, turned up regularly on all the news vectors. Frieda Barrington probably saw to that.

In July, Ernie and Sandra quit. “I’m sorry, Mr. Tenler, but we’re not comfortable here any more.”

“Not comfortable?” I had just spent twenty thousand dollars remodeling the guest cottage.

“No.” He shifted from one foot to the other. Ernie has a smaller head and butt than a lot of achons, but he’s far from being a proportional, and another job that paid this well for this little work was not going to be easy to find. Not for him, not for Sandra. Where would they go?

“Where will you go?”

“That’s our business.”

It was such a rude answer that I frowned. Something in the frown broke his reserve.

“Look, Mr. Tenler, it’s not that we aren’t grateful. You done a lot for us. But lately you’re so ... we didn’t want the cottage remodeled, and I said as much to you. You keep giving us things we don’t want. And ... and hanging around a lot. I’m sorry, but it’s a huge pain in the ass.”

And I had just wanted to help!

But now Ernie was wound up. “It’s like you’re trying to control us. I know, I know, you think you’re being a good guy, but we ... and those calls! They’re creeping out Sandra. It’s best that we go.”

I gave them a generous severance pay-out and hired a Mexican couple, undocumented, who desperately needed jobs. It felt good to help them along. The comlink calls, I started taking myself.

They came once or twice a week. No visual, and the audio came through a voice changer. Routing was via a private, encrypted satellite system, so there was no chance whatsoever of tracing the calls. I thought at first that they might be from Jane, but this emphatically was not her style. Each call was exactly the same:

“Barry Tenler.”

“I’m Barry Tenler.”

Heavy breathing. Finally, “I know how you feel.”

“Feel about what?”

And now the mechanical voice—this isn’t supposed to be possible, but I swear I heard it—hinted at pain. “I just want you to know that someone understands. Someone in the same position.”

“Look, let me help—” And the link ended.

What “position”? Another dwarf? Another unemployed PR-flack-cum-manager? Another parent of a kid with major genetic problems?

Then I had another mystery because the feds showed up. They proved to be just as elusive as my unknown caller.

"We'd like to ask you some questions, Mr. Tenler."

"What about? Do I need my lawyer?"

"No, not at all. These are just general questions, in the public interest. You'd really help us out."

I blinked. The HPA usually commands "help" rather than requests it, and these were not the erection-jawed types who'd interviewed me after Jane's and my visit to the Group. These two, a man and a woman, were both short, slightly built, mild in manner, deliberately unthreatening. Why? I was curious. Also bored, so I asked them in. Or maybe it was just to see them both perch uncomfortably on my dwarf-sized living room chairs, their knees rising above the cocktail table like cliff faces from a Himalayan valley.

"Have you been ill lately, Mr. Tenler?"

"Ill? No. I'm fine." I knew they weren't referring to chronic pain. Nor to chronic self-pity, either.

"No flu-like symptoms?"

"I did have the flu a few months ago, but nothing since."

I could sense the two of them not looking at each other.

"What is this about?" I asked. "I think I'd like to know before I answer any more questions."

"I wish we could accommodate you, sir," the woman said apologetically. She was maybe five-one, pretty, and when she smiled at me, I felt anger swell in my chest. A cheap tactic if there ever was one. Maybe he'll talk to a woman on his own level ... "Just one more question, please. It would really help us out. Since March, has anyone from the Group tried to contact you?"

"No." If the encrypted calls were from the Group, I didn't know it, and the feds weren't going to, either.

"Thank you, Mr. Tenler," she said winningly, and handed me her card. Agent Elaine Brown, Human Protection Agency.

"Once again, what is this about?"

"Please contact us if anything occurs to you, or if you're contacted by the Group," the male agent said. "There's been chatter among our informants."

I knew better than to ask what kind of chatter; he'd probably said too much anyway. After they left, I stared at Elaine Brown's card, wondering what the hell that had all been about.

* * * *

Two weeks later, I found out. The whole world found out, but I was first.

Another post-midnight phone call, and this time I was not in the mood for it. I'd spent the day at the hospital. Martin, my mah-jongg playing cancer patient, died at 4:43 PM. The only other person there was his elderly mother, who then fell apart. I had done for her what I could, which wasn't much, arriving home late at night. Three whisky-and-sodas hadn't dulled my sense that the world made no sense. The bedside clock said 2:14 AM. I snarled at the screen, "What?"

"Barry Tenler." It wasn't a question. The screen stayed dark.

"Look, I'm not in the mood for games tonight, so you can just—" Then it hit me that the voice was not mechanical, not masked. A woman's voice, and somewhere I'd heard it before.

"Listen to me, this is a matter of life and death for someone you love. Get Jane Snow away to someplace safe and hidden, and do it now. Tonight."

"What the—who are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. Get her away tonight."

"Why? What's going to—no, don't hang up! You're—"

Where had I heard that voice?

"Just go. Good-bye."

I had it. "You're the woman from the Group." In the warehouse basement. To date, three thousand two hundred fourteen. The only sentence I'd heard her utter, and not even a whole sentence. A fragment.

Silence.

"And," I said, as it all came together in my sleep-deprived brain, "you're the woman who's been making those masked calls to me." I know how you feel ... I just want you to know that someone understands. Someone in the same position. "You loved Ishmael."

"They murdered him!" A second later she'd regained control of herself. That a woman like this lost control at all was a measure of her pain. Grief can drive even the toughest person to acts of insanity. Maybe especially the toughest person. She said, "I underestimated you."

I didn't say People usually do, because now fear had my chest gripped tight. She was credible, at least to me. "How is Jane in danger? Please tell me."

A long pause, and then she said, "Why the fuck not? But know one thing, Barry Tenler. You will never find me, and neither will the Group. And tomorrow morning it will all be public anyway. Tell me, have you ever heard of oxytorin?"

"No."

"Did you get ill a few days after your little visit in March to that warehouse?"

The fear gripped harder. "Flu-like symp—"

"It wasn't flu. Tell me, have you noticed yourself engaged in unusual behaviors lately? Has Jane? Has anyone else with whom you've exchanged bodily fluids, especially saliva?"

I hadn't exchanged bodily fluids, including saliva, with anyone. But all at once I remembered the pre-meeting searches in the warehouse. A man had checked me over, including opening my mouth and moving aside my tongue. His hands had felt unpleasantly slimy.

I was having trouble breathing. "What ... what is oxytorin?"

"Nothing that will kill you. The Group is made up of idealists, remember? Idealists who murder anyone who wanders two inches off the reservation." She laughed, a horrible sound. "I know he was dumb and vain, but I loved him. Sneer at that if you will, only you won't, will you? Not you. You're just as enslaved by another beautiful moron. And you can't help it any more than I could, can you?"

"Please ... what is oxytorin?"

Her tone lost its anguished cynicism. Relaying factual information steadied her.

"It's a neuropeptide, a close relative to oxytocin, secreted in the brain and the pituitary gland. Like oxytocin, it has effects on social behavior. Specifically, it promotes nurturing behavior. If you give it to virgin female rats, within forty-eight hours they're building nests and trying to nurse any baby rats you hand to them. If you remove it from mother rats' brains, they ignore their babies and let them die. The same with monkeys. It—"

Nurturing behavior. Bringing Ernie and Sandra orange juice and remodeling their cottage. Visiting hospital patients whom I met by accident. Jane, childless, spending hours and hours with the Barrington twins.

"—has been synthesized synthetically for a long time, but the synthetic version has to be injected directly into the brain. That's not practical when you want to permanently influence a large fraction of the population, so instead—"

"You bastards." It came out a whisper, strangled by rage.

"—the Group went with a compound that switches on the genes that create oxytorin receptors. You don't have more oxytorin, you just have more receptors for it, so more of it is actually affecting your brain. Although susceptibility to the genemod will vary among people—like, say, susceptibility to cholera depends on blood type. The delivery vector is a retrovirus, capable of penetrating the blood-brain barrier, but which first colonizes mouth and nose secretions. The—"

"You used us. Me and Jane. You—"

"—desired end here is a kinder, gentler populace. Isn't that what we all want?"

The combination of cynicism and idealism in her words stunned me, because I knew it was absolutely genuine. Again, a whisper: "You can't."

"We did. And if the fucking leadership had ever taken it themselves, before they decided Harold was a liability—" She was sobbing. I didn't care.

My throat opened up. I screamed, "You can't just fuck around with people's genes without their consent!"

The sobbing stopped. She said coldly, "Why not? You did."

She knew. They knew. About Ethan.

"I'm telling you this because tomorrow morning the Group is putting the story on the Link. You and your ageing Aphrodite are carriers, and when the press gets hold of that, you'll be inundated, if not lynched. Especially since the Group is saying that Jane Snow cooperated, that this is part of her Hollywood liberal-left politics. Plenty will believe it. And even if they don't, sensationalism always works best when pegged to a few identifiable people. You should know that."

"Why are you telling—"

"You don't listen, do you? I already told you why. You're just as fucked as I am. We're alike, you and I, and neither of us ever stood a fucking chance of getting who we wanted. Damn them to hell, all of them ... It always comes down to bodies, Munchkin, and yours has been damned twice. So get yourself and her out of town. Now." The link broke.

I stood staring at nothing for a full minute, for a lifetime. I wasn't even aware of the body she had just mocked. Only my mind raced.

Bodily fluids. Blood, semen, saliva. Jane wiping snot from the noses of the Barrington twins, kissing them, kissing half of the Hollywood press corps in their touch-touch social rituals. And ... sleeping with someone? I never asked her. And undoubtedly we weren't the only two that had been infected; that wouldn't be widespread enough. We were just the two that were going to be publicly named.

The weakness of the Group's expensive, individually created genemods for Arlen's Syndrome had always been the very small number of empathic kids it could create. When Jane had pointed this out, Ishmael had gone into his grandiose "ripple" analogy, which explained nothing. But somewhere above Ishmael were people far more knowledgeable, more committed, more dangerous. People with a plan, a revolution for society. The Group had been waging war with the genomes of children as bullets. Now they had moved up to soma-gene engineering, as saturation bombing.

Anger is a great heartener. I dressed quickly, put a few things in a bag, and went down to the car. The kind of encryption that my caller had used was not available to me, and so the comlink was too big a risk. The pedal extenders that Ernie had used in the Lexus, and which Carlos didn't need, were still in the trunk. I installed them and drove to Jane's. I have e-codes to the gate and the house. Within an hour I was at her bedroom door.

What if she wasn't alone?

Deep breath. I went in. "Jane? Don't scream, it's Barry."

"What—"

"It's Barry. I'm turning on the light."

She sat up in bed, wild-eyed, and she wasn't alone. The Barrington twins curled up on the other side of the huge bed, lost in the heavy sleep of childhood, their hair in tangles and drool on their pillows. "What the fuck—"

All at once my legs gave way. I grasped the edge of the mattress, lowered myself to the floor, and so once again had to look up at her. "Listen, Janie, this is life-and-death. We have to leave here. Now. No, don't say anything—just listen to me for once!"

Something in my voice, or my ridiculous position, got through to her. She didn't say a word as I told her everything that I'd been told. Her feathery light hair drifted in some air current from the open window, and above the modest blue pajamas she wore for this grandmotherly sleep-over, her neck and face turned mottled red, and then dead white. When I finished, I heaved myself to my feet.

"Pack a bag. Five minutes."

And then she spoke. "I can't leave the twins."

I stared at her.

"I can't, Barry. Frieda and John are in Europe, so the are kids staying with me this week, and anyway won't they be in danger, too? I must have infected them by now ... saliva..."

"Catalina will look after them!"

"She's in Mexico. Her aunt died."

I closed my eyes. I knew that look of Jane's. "No," I said.

"I have to! And Frieda would want me to—God, they already get death threats every day! When it's public that they can infect others—"

Nurturing behavior. Virgin rats trying to nurse any baby rats you hand to them.

I said, "It's kidnapping."

"It's not. I'll email Frieda."

One of the girls woke up. She gazed at us from wide, frightened eyes. It was Bridget, the Glinda of the witchy pair. She said in a quavery voice, "Don't leave us, Jane!"

"I won't, darling. I wouldn't."

She looked so small, and so frightened ... Then I caught myself. Oxytorin. I barked, "No electronics that can be traced. Not phones, not mobiles, not games, not anything. Do those kids have subdermal ID chips?"

"No," Jane said. I could see that she wanted to say more, much more, but not in front of Bridget.

Fifteen minutes later, after Jane sent a hasty email to Frieda and John Barrington, we drove out the estate gates, heading toward the mountains.

* * * *

When Leila was one month pregnant, the ultrasound looked like any other baby. The same at two, five, and nine months. All fetuses have oversized heads, spindly little arms and legs. When Ethan was born, there was no way to tell he was a dwarf, except by another genescan. Eighty-five percent of dwarfs are born to average-sized parents, the result not of carrying the dominant gene but of a mutation during conception. Usually the parents don't even realize the child will be a dwarf until the baby fails to grow like other children.

But we, of course, knew. Ethan would be a dwarf. We engineered him to be a dwarf. Then he was born and scanned.

A twentieth century religious writer once said that humanity needs the disabled to remind us of the fragility of health, and of "the power of life and its brokenness." The nineteenth century mother of the famous Colonel Tom Thumb attributed her son's dwarfism to her grief over the death of the family dog during her pregnancy. Leila and I had no such spiritual consolations, no such explanations for Ethan's lack of dwarfism. The ones that science could offer were vague: Engineering fails. Genes jump. Chromosomes mutate. Accidents happen. Nature asserts herself.

I bought the mountain cabin just after Leila left me. I think now that I wasn't quite sane during that awful time. I'd retired from politics and hadn't yet entered show-business management. I had nothing to do. There are notebooks I wrote then in which I talk about suicide, but I have no memory of doing the writing or thinking the thoughts. Eventually, that time passed. I left the cabin and never went back. Years later I deeded it over to Leila, who would go there sometimes with Ethan when he was small. She told me once, in a rare lapse into civility, that Ethan was happy at the cabin. He chased butterflies, hunted rocks, picked wildflowers. He calmed down up there, and he slept well in the sweet mountain air.

Now the twins did the same, falling asleep on the back seat of the Lexus. Still Jane and I didn't talk. But once she put her hand on the back of my neck. That was a gesture I'd dreamed about, longed for, would

have given ten years of my life for. But not like this. Her touch wasn't sexual, wasn't romantic.

It was motherly.

* * * *

We pulled up to the cabin just as the sun rose over the mountains, an hour before the Group was scheduled to break its story. Jane's skin goose-fleshed as she opened the car door and the cold dawn air rushed in.

"I'm going to carry them inside," she said, the first words she'd spoken in an hour. "They need their sleep. Is the door locked?"

"I have the key."

Mundane words, normal words. While below us, the human race was about to be altered at its core.

The cabin, too, was cold. I started the generator—quicker than building a fire—while Jane, puffing a little, carried the girls one at a time into the bedroom. The cabin is small but it's not primitive or austere; I'm not a fan of either. It has a main room with running water from a deep well, a comfortable bedroom, and a bathroom with full septic system. The original furniture had been sized for me, but evidently Leila had replaced it all. The sofa was hard to climb onto. My legs hurt.

Jane emerged from the bedroom after depositing the last twin, closed the door, and sat down on a wing chair across from me. She said quietly, "You could have let me drive."

I didn't answer.

"Is there a radio here?"

"There was. A satellite radio—the mountains don't permit much other reception."

"Where is it?"

"I don't know. I haven't been here for a long time."

She got up and began opening cupboards in the kitchenette. The counters and appliances, like the furniture, had been replaced, but no new cabinets built above them. Jane had to squat to peer into shelves. She searched the two closets, one of which had not existed when I'd owned the cabin, then sat down again. "No radio. But a lot of food and equipment. Who uses this place?"

Again I didn't answer.

"Barry, what's our plan?"

I looked at her then. No make-up, barely combed hair, huddled inside jeans and a green sweater that matched her eyes. She had never looked more beautiful to me.

"My only plan was to get you away before some angry mob came after you. People aren't going to like that their brains have been fucked with, and you're a natural target, Jane."

"I know." She smiled wanly. "I always have been, for anybody with a grudge. Why do you suppose that is?"

"Because the perception is that you have it all." I meant: beauty, talent, success, riches. I meant: my heart.

She snorted. "Oh, right. I have a burnt-out career, four bad marriages, and wrinkles that Botox can't touch. Barry, dear, you look tired. Why don't you lie on the sofa and I'll make you some warm milk."

"Don't mother me!" It came out a snarl.

She looked startled, then angry, then compassionate. Compassionate was the worst. "I only meant—"

"That's not you talking, it's the genemod that the Group infected you with."

She turned thoughtful, considering this. Contrary to Ms. Resentful's perception, Jane was not stupid. Finally she said, "No, I don't think so, because I think I would have reacted the same way even before all this started. If I saw you tired and discouraged, I'd have offered some comfort anyway."

This was true. All at once I saw that this was going to be more complicated than I thought. How could anybody determine which behavior was caused by increased oxytocin receptors, and which was innate? It was the old argument, genes versus free will, only now it was about to turn incendiary.

Jane said, "I'm making you that warm milk."

But I was asleep before she could bring it to me.

* * * *

I woke to Belinda standing beside the sofa, staring at me flatly. "I want to go home."

Groggily I sat up. Everything hurt. "Where's Jane?"

"Her and Bridget went for a stupid walk. Take me home."

"I can't. Not yet."

"I want to go home."

Painfully I climbed off the sofa and headed to the kitchenette. There was fresh coffee in a Braun on the counter, but I couldn't reach it. Hating every second that Belinda watched me, I dragged a footstool from the fireplace to the counter and hoisted myself onto it. A part of my brain noticed dispassionately that I felt no nurturing impulses toward Belinda when she didn't look more helpless than I felt.

The coffee was hot and rich. Good coffee had always been important to Leila. I gulped it down and said, "How long ago did they leave on this walk?"

"I don't know."

She probably did know and wasn't telling me, the brat.

"I really don't know, so stop thinking I'm a liar."

How did she do it? I'd read the literature on Arlen's Syndrome. Subconscious processes in Belinda's malevolent little brain were hypersensitive to six non-word signals: gesture and facial expression, even very tiny movements in either. Rhythm of movement. Bodily use of space. Objectics, such as dress and hairstyle. And what was called paralanguage: tone of voice, rate of verbal delivery, emphasis, and inflection. Taken together, they let her read my emotions like a Teleprompter, but she was not reading my mind. I had to remind myself of that. Nonetheless, for the first time I saw the rationale for burning witches at the stake.

She said, "I don't care if you hate me."

"I don't hate you, Belinda." Said hopelessly; I couldn't hide from her.

"I hate you, too."

I took my coffee outside. Leila hadn't removed the low bench in front of the cabin, from which there was a breath-taking panorama of mountains and valleys, a pristine Eden that, when I'd lived here those nine months, had filled me with despair. Eden is no longer Eden if you've been exiled from it. The ghost of those bad feelings seemed to linger around the bench, but I didn't go back inside. Presently Jane and Bridget came puffing up the dirt road, Bridget clutching a mess of buttercups and daisies.

"Hi, Barry," the child said unhappily. She'd been crying. Immediately I braced myself and there it was: the soft desire to reassure her, help her, kiss the boo-boo and make it all better.

God damn it to hell.

Jane sat on the bench beside me. "Go put the flowers in water, Bridget."

When she'd gone, I said, "We need to know what's happening in LA. There's a library in Dunhill, at the base of the mountain. If you wrap up your hair and wear sunglasses and—oh, I don't know, act—do you think you can go in there unnoticed and use the Link? I know I can't."

She looked at the mountain road, which has no guard rails and, in places, pretty steep fall-offs. Jane doesn't like heights. She said, "Yes. I can do it."

"Don't stay long, and don't talk to anybody. Not one word. Your voice is memorable."

"Only if you'd heard it more recently than ten years ago. And in a better picture than my last one. Should I go now?" Again she looked at the road.

Before I could answer, the twins started shouting inside the cabin. Jane rose to her feet as the girls raced outside. Bridget cried, "Belinda, don't!"

Belinda said, "If you don't take us home this very minute, I'm going to tell everybody that you touched me in my private place and you'll go to jail forever and ever and ever!"

"No, you will not, young lady," Jane said severely. "You just come inside with me this very minute."

Belinda looked astonished. Probably Frieda had never spoken to her daughter that way. I reflected that "maternal behavior" could include discipline. Belinda followed Jane inside.

Had Frieda felt too intimidated by her daughters to reprimand them? Too proud? Too guilty? Had she been too terrified of what they might in turn say to her? I could imagine any of those scenarios, with a child so different from you, so strange, so eerily knowing.

What kind of discipline had Leila given, or not given, to Ethan?

* * * *

Jane returned from Dunhill in a state of restrained anxiety. Nobody, she said, had recognized her at the library. She'd accessed the Link, watched the news, hardcopied the headlines. It was all even worse than I'd expected.

BIOWEAPON RELEASED IN CALIFORNIA

ARLEN'S WAS ONLY THE FIRST STEP—NOW THEY'RE SPREADING MUTATIONS!
ACTRESS A PART OF BIOCONSPIRACY SPREADING EPIDEMIC
CALL FOR IMMEDIATE QUARANTINE OF L.A.
RUN ON GAS MASKS, RIOTS, CAUSE DEATHS OF FOUR
MUTANTS NOW AMONG US—YOU COULD BE ONE!
JANE SNOW AND MANAGER MISSING SINCE LAST NIGHT

* * * *

"They're calling it treason," Jane said.

"It is treason. Or something." Bioweapon terrorism. Invasion of bodily privacy. Violations of the Fourteenth Amendment. Medical malpractice.

"What next, Barry?"

"I'm not sure. I need to think." But all I could think about was what might have happened if I hadn't gotten Jane away, if Ms. Resentful hadn't called me. Riots cause death of four. And that was without the rioters' zeroing in on a specific target.

"What did the twins do while I was gone?"

"Nothing." They'd played inside and I'd sat outside, pretending they weren't there. Jane went into the cabin.

A minute later she was back. "They're making cookies."

"Fine. Just so long as they don't burn down the cabin."

"We won't," Bridget said, and there they were beside us, having silently followed Jane. Belinda had a picturesque smudge of chocolate on her nose. I did not think that she looked adorable. Bridget added, "Why are you scared, Jane?"

Jane knew better than to deny. "I went down to a town where I could get the news, and some people in LA are very angry at another group of people there. It could get violent."

Belinda said, "But why does that mean we can't go home?"

Bridget said, "They're mad at us, too, aren't they? You're scared for us. Why? We didn't do anything!"

Belinda said, "Don't be stupid, Brid. People get mad at us all the time when we didn't do anything." She looked at me. "Like Barry is mad at us."

Bridget scowled, making her suddenly look more like her sister. "Yeah. Why are you mad at us, Barry?"

"Because I didn't want to have to bring you here. But if I hadn't, you might both have been attacked by a mob now."

Bridget looked scared, but Belinda said, "Naw, we got really good security at home. Nobody can get through. I want to go home!"

"And I want you to," I said, which was nothing less than total truth—even as I felt the treacherous desire to comfort little frightened Bridget ... oxytorin.

Belinda did not look frightened. She was working up to a towering tantrum. "Then take us home! Take us home now!"

Jane said soothingly, "We can't, Belinda. It's not safe. The—"

"It is safe! Daddy's estate is safe! I want to go home!"

Bridget said, with heart-breaking hopelessness, "Belinda—"

Belinda kicked her sister, who screamed and fell to the ground. Then she kicked Jane, who made a grab for her. Belinda was quicker, squirming away, tears of rage on her grimy face.

"Don't touch me! Don't you ever touch me! I hate you, you go around feeling sorry for everybody who isn't you! You feel sorry for Barry 'cause he's all twisted and short, and you feel sorry for Brid and me 'cause you think we're so different, just like you feel sorry for Catalina and the pilot and everybody who's not pretty like you! Well, you're not so pretty anymore either, 'cause you're old and you know it and you're scared nobody's going to like you any more if you're not pretty and if you don't do that fucking movie about us! And you know what—you're right! Nobody will like you just like I hate you! 'Cause you're old and not pretty any more and you'll be alone all the rest of your life! And—"

Jane stood still, looking dazed. Looking stripped naked. But now Bridget was up off the ground and barreling into her sister head first, a battering ram to the belly. "Don't you kick me!"

Belinda screamed and the two girls went down, rolling in the scrub grass in front of the cabin, punching and pulling hair and scratching. Jane sprang forward, trying to pull them off each other. The sound of a motor made her, and me, freeze.

And Leila's car roared into sight and jerked to a stop, with her and Ethan inside.

* * * *

Empathy means you understand another's feelings. It doesn't mean you sympathize with them, or respect them. Hitler's brilliant propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, understood perfectly what the German people were feeling in the 1920s and 30s: insecurity, rage, fear, resentment at the punishments for WWI. He used that knowledge to manipulate their emotions, creating the brilliant PR campaigns that put Hitler in power and kept him there.

The Group must have realized too late that Arlen's Syndrome was not, after all, a guarantee that the world would change for the better. So they'd created the virus that increases oxytorin receptors. Correcting a genetic-engineering change with another genetic-engineering change.

I could have told them that does not work.

Ethan got out of the car first, from the passenger side. Both Bridget and Belinda stopped fighting, got up off the ground, and stared. Ethan's right eye was blackened, and his left arm was in a sling. He scowled ferociously at them, at me, at the world.

He was utterly beautiful.

Auburn hair falling over his forehead, blue eyes, a body that Michelangelo could have used as the model for his David. More than that, Ethan had the same quality that Jane did: an innate and unconscious

sexuality so blatant that it was like a slap in the face, a challenge: Come and get me. If you can. His photos had not captured that quality. Bridget and Belinda were eleven years old, and yet I saw that they felt it, Bridget blushing and looking confused, Belinda scowling back, but with surprise behind her gray eyes. Jane's back was to me. Leila got out of the car and called desperately, "Ethan!"

He ignored her and kept walking. It was me he was moving toward. I stood up from my bench, my heart hammering. Ethan stopped in front of me. I came up to slightly higher than his waist.

"You're my father," he said, with utter contempt. "You."

Leila was running from the car, but Jane was closer. She threw herself between us just as Ethan's fist shot out, and the blow intended for my face hit her in the chest.

* * * *

"I don't think any of her ribs are broken," Leila said wearily. "She said it doesn't hurt when she breathes, which is a good sign."

Leila and I sat in her car, a three-year-old Ford, each of us holding steaming mugs of fresh coffee. Mine trembled in numb fingers. Jane slept, courtesy of a pain patch, in the bedroom. The twins, subdued now, had been ordered back to their cookie-making, and had actually gone. Ethan had stalked away into the woods, and I was sickened to realize that I hoped he'd stay away. I was afraid of my son.

"Leila, I didn't realize ... I know you'd said, but ... Of course, behavior is a complex genetic and environmental phenomenon, and when you interfere with—"

"Don't. Don't go informational and theoretical on me like you always do. Just don't!"

"All right."

She turned her face to look at me. "That's the first time I think you've actually heard me when I've said that."

Maybe it was. Information and theory were good hiding places. "And Ethan gets like this—"

"Unpredictably. The psychologist says he has poor impulse control. When he gets upset, there's a major neural highjacking. You've seen the brain scans with all the irregularities in his amygdalas and hippocampus. He gets swamped with rage, and sometimes he can't even remember what he's done. Not always, but sometimes."

"And you've dealt with this alone for—"

"Since he was a toddler. But you knew all this, Barry. I told you."

She had. But I hadn't really heard her, hadn't wanted to hear her. I'd preferred to blame her, as she blamed me.

Leila continued, "When he comes back from the woods, he'll be different. Until the next time. But now that he's old enough to run away ... and looking like he does..."

She didn't have to finish the sentence. I knew what LA could be for a fifteen-year-old who looked like Ethan.

I said, "Did you two just happen to come up here today?"

"No. Jane called me."

I spilled my coffee. "Jane?"

"Yes. She did what you should have done." Now Leila's anger was back. Anger and blame. "Or didn't you bother to think that Ethan might be in danger once the witch hunt down there fingered you? Which it has, by the way, according to the car radio while I could still get reception on the way up here. Didn't you bother to think that your son might make a good substitute target?"

"I didn't think anyone would trace you and Ethan to me."

"Jane obviously did!"

And probably used a private detective to do it. How long ago? Why?

"I'm sorry, Leila. I didn't think you'd be in any danger. I didn't think the media—" I stopped. She knew what I meant.

However nasty the daily world is to dwarfs, there is only one Official Story about us allowed in mainstream media. That's the happytalk Big-Hearts-in-Little-Bodies slant. Dwarfs making good, doing good, being good. Thus is the daily nastiness offset and balance restored to the universe. That the media in LA had now abandoned the formula was a strong measure of how much fear the Group had engineered along with their virus.

I said, "This whole thing ... God knows I didn't want these twins here, either."

"Where are their parents? Or are you guilty of kidnapping, along with everything else?"

Yes. No. "Their parents know the kids are here. They're on their way home from Europe."

"The Barrington twins, of all kids. God, Barry, you really can screw up royally."

Like I needed to be told that. But I pushed down my anger. This was maybe the only chance I was going to get, and I had to say it right. "Listen, Leila. I want to say something. I know I've been negligent, and I know that Ethan is ... I know I had a lot to do with this, because of what I insisted on before he was born. But I want to say three things, and I want you to really consider them. You don't have to, but I'd really like it if you would. First, what I said before is true, even though I picked a stupid time to say it. Behavior is genetically complex, and Ethan's ... problems, his brain irregularities, could have happened even if I hadn't insisted on the in utero genemod. We'll never know."

Leila made a sudden motion, but I kept on, afraid to stop. "Second, just consider—please consider!—that I tried to help with Ethan and you pushed me away. You were so angry that you ... I don't say you weren't justified. But you did push me away, and left me, and refused to let me see him, and I think it's unfair that I then get blamed for not seeing him."

"I wasn't—" she said hotly. I put my hand on her arm.

"Please. Just one more thing. It's not too late. I want to help, want to do whatever I can, whatever you and he will let me do. If we can get past this anger at each other, finally, and cooperate, that has to be better for Ethan!"

She shook my hand off her arm, but she didn't get out of the car. We sat in silence for a few minutes. I held my breath.

Finally Leila spoke in a different voice. "I don't know if I can. I've hated you for so long ... I think ... I think I might need to hate you. In order to go on."

I knew enough to be quiet.

"Oh, God, I don't want to be that person!" Leila cried. "Barry—"

"I know," I said. "I don't want to be the person I am, either."

She blindsided me then. "Do you love her very much?"

Only honesty would do now. "Yes."

"I'm seeing somebody," Leila said. "That's part of why Ethan's so angry. He hasn't ever had to share me."

"I'm glad for you, Leila." But I had to ask. "Is he a dwarf?"

"Yes. We met last year at the LPA convention. He lives in Oregon. He's in insurance."

She was smiling, despite herself. I found myself hoping that it worked out for her. She deserved a little insurance. But then, didn't we all.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you before," Leila said. "I brought a satellite TV. It's in the trunk."

* * * *

Riots had started in South Central LA. Ostensibly the "mutation plague," which was what the media was calling the Group's virus, was the cause of the riots. But they quickly took on life of their own, with all the usual looting, car burning, rock throwing. The LAPD used microwaves and tanglefoam on the rioters, who then regrouped at different locations and started over again. The press, having been the actual cause of the turmoil with its inflamed reporting, now took on its next role in the inevitable sequence, which was The Voice of Reason trying to calm things down. Talking heads appeared on TV, on the Link, on wallscreens, in holos projected over the city. They explained that the virus was not airborne, needed contact with bodily fluids to survive, and did not cause cancer or suicide or nerve decay or zombie-ism. Nobody listened.

A rumor started that the Group leadership was headquartered in a warehouse by the waterfront. A mob torched it, and strong winds carried the fire westward. The governor ordered out the National Guard.

KILL THE MUTANT MAKERS said the improvised placards.

Jane was hanged in effigy.

Frieda and John Barrington landed at LAX and were besieged by robocams; Jane's picture with the twins had been everywhere in recent weeks. Their flyer finally took off but airspace over the city had been shut down and the flyer returned to the airport.

By nightfall the rioting had subsided, damped down by rumors that "muties" were secretly roaming the streets, infecting everyone. People fled inside. In several hours of watching the Link, not once did I hear a single reporter or avatar refer to what the virus actually did: increase the desire to nurture. People cared that they had been fucked with, not how.

That was the part of the whole reaction that I most understood.

"Barry," Jane said, "come eat something."

She and Leila had prepared a meal from the canned goods in the cabin. Leila had made a fire in the fireplace. Ethan, who had returned sullen from the woods and stayed sullen ever since, sat at the table with the twins. He'd spent most of the afternoon outside, smoking God-knows-what, while the twins circled him like disintegrating stars around a black hole. Bridget seemed afraid to speak to him at all, but Belinda and he had several long, low conversations during which Ethan scowled a lot. Leila and Jane moved back and forth between table and kitchen, elaborately and artificially polite to each other. I didn't need Bridget or Belinda to tell me what everybody felt. Nobody wanted to be here with these other five people, and there was nowhere else any of us could go.

"Barry," Jane said again.

Belinda said, "He doesn't like you to act like his mother."

I said, "Shut up, kid, or you'll wish you had."

Bridget, wide-eyed, said, "He means it, Belinda."

She shut up, glaring at me. Leila glanced my way, puzzled. Ethan raised his head, and I would have given anything for just one moment's of Arlen's Syndrome so I could tell what my son was thinking then.

Bridget said, "I don't like it here with you guys." Her eyes welled, and immediately Jane's arms went around her. "It's okay, Bridget, you girls are just tired. I think you should go to bed right after you eat, sweetheart. Everything will look better in the morning."

Oxytorin.

I was too tired to think straight. But one sentence from Ms. Resentful came back to me: "Susceptibility to the genemod will vary among people—like, say, susceptibility to cholera depends on blood type." I'd seen no susceptibility to increased nurturing from Belinda. As she watched Jane hug Bridget, Belinda's look could have withered a cactus.

Leila produced three sleeping bags from the closet that hadn't existed when I'd been here last. The twins were bedded down on the floor of the bedroom. Ethan disdained to so much as glance at his bag, which was laid out in a corner of the living room. Jane and Leila would share the bed. I got the couch.

Ethan and I were the last to go to sleep. I lay on the lumpy sofa, all lights off except for a dim glow where Ethan sat watching something inane on the satellite TV. His beautiful, beautiful face—how had Leila and I created such beauty?—lost its sulky look and relaxed into the smile of a normal fifteen-year-old.

Normal. A word dwarfs don't like and seldom use. For good reason.

But this was my son, and so I made one more attempt to reach him. "What are you watching?"

"Nothing." The scowl was back. It angered me.

"Obviously it's not nothing, or you wouldn't be watching it. So what is it?"

"Don't pull that logic crap on me," Ethan said. "I don't know you." And then—although did even he hesitate before he said it? I thought so, or else I wanted to think so—"Crippled little Munchkin."

We stared at each other across the dim room.

Then I rolled over, wrapped myself in my blanket and my pain, and tried to sleep.

Some unknowable time later, Jane was shaking me by the shoulder. "Barry! Barry, wake up—Belinda is gone!"

I jerked upright and looked at the sleeping bag by the cold fireplace. The bag was empty. My mind went cold and clear. "See if both cars are here."

Of course, they weren't. My Lexus was gone.

* * * *

"He doesn't even have a driver's permit," Leila said.

She was driving; my legs ached too much. I had made Jane stay with Bridget, who was still asleep. Leila drove slowly in the dark, and as we passed the places where the mountain road dropped off sheerly, she shuddered. But her hands on the wheel didn't falter. This wasn't the teenage dwarf I'd married, the girl dancing exuberantly at the LPA convention, the young bride who had blindly accepted my arrogant authority.

"I thought he understood how dangerous it would be to go back home," Leila said. "I thought he understood."

"He did. That's why he's going."

She glanced over at me, then returned to her driving, her endless scanning of the roadside. Was that a break in the bushes? Had a car gone off there? Was that a skid mark in the headlights?

She said, "No, that's not why. It's that girl. Belinda. She wants to go home, and I saw her whispering to him all afternoon, and I should have realized ... but he doesn't like children! And she's only eleven! I didn't think she could influence him."

Leila was right. I should have anticipated this; I'd seen far more of Belinda than Leila had. Belinda would have known exactly what Ethan was feeling, exactly how to play on his weak spots. She didn't even have to think about it, merely let her instincts take over. Empathy in action.

"Barry, he's not a bad kid underneath. He can be very sweet sometimes. You've never seen that."

"I believe you," I said, wondering if I did. "And the other times—well, he can't help it, can he? It's in his genes."

"No, it's not." The intensity of her anger surprised me, even as she kept on scanning, looking, dreading what she might see. "You attribute everything to genes. It's not true. Genes made you a dwarf, and you think that's wrecked your life, but genes didn't make you so bitter and unhappy. I know that because when we met, you weren't bitter and unhappy. And you were a dwarf then, too. I didn't want Ethan around your self-created misery. I still don't. And maybe he does have some predisposition to danger and anger and impulsiveness, like the doctors say. But he doesn't have to indulge it. He chooses to do that. Just like you choose to be miserable and envious."

"Leila, there's so much wrong with that simplistic analysis that I don't even know where to start correcting it."

"Then don't. I don't need your 'corrections.' You can't—what's that!"

I saw it a second after she did. The Lexus, smashed head-first against a tree, which was the only thing that had kept it from going over the embankment.

Leila, younger and with less spinal constriction, was first out of the Ford, running toward the car, uttering loud wordless cries. I followed her, stumbling as my treacherous legs collapsed under me, getting up, trying again to run. Those were the longest seconds—minutes, hours, eons—of my life. Until. I. Reached. That. Car.

They were both alive. Belinda seemed unhurt, mewling in her seat belt. Ethan, who had taken the brunt of the crash—had he turned the wheel at the last minute to save the little girl?—slumped unconscious against the steering wheel. Blood trickled through his bright hair.

"Don't move him," Leila said frantically. "If anything's broken ... I'm going for help!"

She ran back to her Ford. I undid Belinda's seat belt, yanked her out, and dropped her on the dark roadside weeds. I could feel her fear, just as she could feel my fury. She shrank back against the fender. I climbed into the passenger seat beside my son.

He stirred. "Mommy..."

"She'll be here soon, Ethan. Help will be here soon."

He said something else, before sliding again into unconsciousness. It might have been, "Fuck you."

Maybe no child, other than those with Arlen's Syndrome, understands how a parent feels. Maybe I hadn't earned the right to even be considered a parent. Maybe, as Leila said, my bitterness and anger would be worse for Ethan than if I weren't there at all for him. I don't know, any more than I know any more what's genetic and what's not. Did Jane go all maternal with the twins because she had more oxytocin receptors, or did the Group's virus make her a good candidate for growing more oxytocin receptors because she'd always had a penchant for wounded birds anyway? Susceptibility to the genemod will vary among people.

In the darkness, I sat for a long time beside my injured son. Finally, with great deliberation, I spat on my fingers and gently, gently, pushed them inside his mouth. I felt the softness of his slack tongue, his strong young teeth. Strong teeth, strong long bones. He was not a dwarf. I spat a second time on my hand and did it again.

Overhead, medical and police flyers droned in the dark night. When they arrived, I borrowed a cell phone and comlinked Elaine Brown, Human Protection Agency.

* * * *

A week later, I sit in a Temporary Government Quarantine Facility in San Diego, watching TV. On the other side of the negative-pressure barriers, researchers from the United States Army Research Institute for Infectious Diseases, dressed in Level 4 biohazard suits, go through two airlocks to reach Jane and me. The Barrington twins are here, too, but not Leila or Ethan. Ethan is in a hospital in LA, and she is with him, along with her boyfriend from Oregon. He flew down immediately to be with her.

They treat us well here. There are endless medical tests, of course, but I'm used to that. Everyone is both respectful and curious. If they're also frightened, I don't sense it, but of course Bridget and Belinda do. Bridget is a favorite with the staff. Belinda wants to go home, although she likes all the attention from Jane. The twins' parents "visit" via Link several times each day. Frieda sometimes has a distinct look of relief. Her kids are behind glass, and she can break the link with Belinda whenever she needs to.

The Link has brought the most attention to Jane. Death threats, pleas for help, fan letters, offers from the ACLU to sue the Group if any members of that organization can be found, which so far they haven't

been. Jane would be a high-profile and appealing case. The movie is on again, but not with the same script, or even with the same studio. There's another chapter now to the Arlen's Syndrome story, and Jane has become an actor in that saga in both senses of the word. The whole thing looks like box-office gold.

Jane is not unhappy. If that's not exactly the same thing as being happy, it seems to do.

The Link is also how I visit with Ethan. He had three broken ribs and a damaged spleen, which seems to be repairing itself without surgery. Youthful spleen can do that. We gaze at each other, and sometimes he's sullen, and sometimes I'm impatient, and sometimes he sees me shift on my spine in chronic pain. Or maybe he catches a sadness in my eyes. At such times, his expression softens. So does his voice. He'll ask if I'm okay. When he asks, I am.

Is it wrong to genetically modify human beings? First I thought it was, when I tried to alter Ethan's FGFR3 gene in utero. Then I thought it wasn't, seeing both Ethan and the Arlen's Syndrome kids. Now I don't know again. There's still panic out there about the Group's virus, and the virus is still spreading, and eventually it may—or may not—make enough of society more nurturing. In turn, that may—or may not—change society. If enough people are susceptible. If feelings of compassion actually translate into actions of compassion. If the weather holds and the creek don't rise and seven or eleven comes up enough on the dice. This is barely Act One, Scene One of whatever comes next. Chaos theory tells us that, in a system of circular feedback, a small change in initial conditions can cause huge and unpredictable changes down the road. Human behavior is a system of circular feedback. Is Ethan more compassionate toward me because he's growing more oxytocin receptors, or because I'm more open to his (and everyone else's) compassion? How did the same genemod for empathy produce both Bridget and Belinda?

I have no idea. And to tell the truth, I don't really care. I'm supposed to care, ethically and pragmatically, but I don't.

Jane comes into the room and says, "Guess what? The studio is getting Michael Rosen to write the script! Michael Rosen! It's sure to be terrific!"

I smile back. Michael Rosen is indeed a terrific writer, a creator of sensitive and layered scripts that both challenge audiences and fill seats. He's also a handsome womanizer, and Jane is looking more beautiful than ever. I know what will happen.

"That's good," I say. "Congratulations. The movie'll be a smash."

"Thanks to you." She smiles at me and goes out again.

Nothing has changed. Everything has changed. I turn to my computer and get back to work.