

# Toys

by Tom Purdom

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A picture appeared on the fifteen centimeter television screen in the middle of the instrument panel. An unmanned patrol vehicle had picked up a scene that looked bad and the central computer had brought it to the attention of the dispatcher. A mob seemed to be gathering around Three Thousand One Strawberry Row. About fifty people were standing around in little groups in the adjacent yards. In the yard of the house itself, in front of the main entrance, a boy was sitting on top of a small elephant. Two dragons were sitting on their haunches with their wings raised and a gorilla and two watchtigers were pacing on the grass.

A car slid onto the left side of the screen and flew up to the house. It stopped next to a fourth floor window and a female voice screamed through a loudspeaker. "Get out of that house, Andrew Bruder. Get out of that house right now. Who do you think you are?"

Round faces looked up through the twilight. A childish voice yelled at the woman through a loudspeaker inside the house. "Get outta our yard, Mrs. Bruder. Back off or we'll let our hostages sit here until you're gone. We aren't kidding. This is no game."

The boy mounted on the elephant cupped his hands over his mouth and told the woman to go have a heart attack. A tiger raised its head and snarled. The elephant trumpeted. The gorilla hopped around on all fours and beat its chest.

"I had the computer call everybody in a twenty-house radius," the dispatcher said. "The reports are coming in now. Ten to twelve children have taken the Rice family hostage. They seem to be led by the Rice's nine year old son, Tim. Their main weapons seem to be their pets, but they may have other weapons inside the house. They want a committee of three parents to enter the house and negotiate with them, but they won't say what they want."

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The police car leveled off two hundred meters above the regular traffic lanes and sped east with its siren screaming. Inside the cockpit, Charley Edelman's left hand tightened around the neck of an imaginary cello. He glanced at Helen Fracarro; she shook her head and shrugged. The joyride was over. One moment you were riding around in the evening talking about children's books with a woman whose soft, romantic face would have made a Spanish cavalier howl with frustration-- and the next moment you were listening to a quiet voice tell you the State of New Jersey needed your services once again, and please get ready to earn your fabulous two hundred thousand a year salary the way you had agreed to earn it.

"What'll they do if nobody negotiates with them?" Edelman asked the dispatcher.

"They haven't said yet."

Fracarro pressed a button on the instrument panel and flashed the central computer. "This is Team Six. Transmit all available data on people with the last name Rice who live at Three Thousand One Strawberry Row, Harriman Township."

A screen lit up on the right-hand side of the instrument panel. Documents sped across Edelman's vision at sixteen hundred words per minute. The housing development in which the Rice family lived came into

sight. Edelman asked the computer for a plan of the house and a recommendation on which psycho gases should be used if they went inside. Both answers came back as they passed over the east end of the development and made their turn. The computer's first choice, psycho gas G-11-1, would cover a room in one hundred and twenty seconds and would make the children submissive and suggestible. The supply in the standard police car gas kit was the bare minimum required, however, and they couldn't mix it with other gases. The second choice, gas G-11-8, would cover a room in one hundred and forty seconds and would make the children deliriously happy-- a dangerously unpredictable state-- but they had twice as much as they needed.

Fracarro turned off the siren. They dropped to the west-bound lane and passed over the house concealed in the traffic. Below them thousands of white plastic towers gleamed in the evening sun. Ten thousand lower-income families lived in a crowded grid two kilometers square. Every family had a lot twenty meters square surrounded by a high plastic wall and in the southeast corner of every lot there was a square, five-story house exactly like every other house in the development.

"How do the people in the neighborhood sound?" Edelman asked.

"They're getting restless. Several people may be planning to break into the house in spite of the hostages and give the kids a good bruising. The computer just talked to a woman who's pleading with us not to let her husband go in."

"Can you give me a prediction on how long we've got before they get violent?"

The dispatcher paused. "You've got twenty-five minutes," she said after a minute. "It looks like it may be a real explosion when it comes. I just had the computer replay some of the calls. Those people sound like they're programmed for murder."

Edelman's left hand closed around the imaginary cello again. He had been a musician for twelve years before he had become a cop and at times like this fifty thousand a year and a back seat in a third-rate orchestra looked better than two hundred thousand a year and a socially important job that was supposed to make the best possible use of his IQ and all the sterling virtues the psychologist claimed they had found revealed in his psych tests. The genetic engineers had turned lizards into dragons, but they hadn't turned Charley Edelman into St. George.

He had done undercover work in a lower-income housing development for one of his sociology courses and he had a vivid picture of the conflicts that sometimes destroyed lower-income family life. In a family like David Rice's, every member of the family would be waging an unending war for a bigger slice of Daddy's eighteen-eighty a year. There was no end to all the lovely, desirable, tormenting things modern technology had created.

Medical treatments that could add a hundred years to David Rice's life span and give him a biological age of twenty-five until he died; surgical-chemical treatments that could make his daughter as beautiful as any woman who had ever lived; continuous life-long psychotherapy; home computers; expensive pets; educational toys guaranteed to raise a child's IQ twenty points; custom-made learning programs that could teach Mom and Dad how to have complete sexual satisfaction, or their male offspring how to be the best kid in the neighborhood at any sport or competitive skill you could name... Every house below his car was an arena and the people who fought the dirtiest were the children. He was looking down on hundreds of parents who would be glad to take out their anger on any child who gave them a good excuse. He might be yellower than the psychologists said he was, but if the wrong parent got his hands on a kid, somebody might get killed and they might lose the hostages, too.

"I guess we'd better go in," he said. "We can always pull back if it looks like somebody's about to get hurt."

Fracarro nodded. "Shall we try the clown-and-witch act?"

Edelman asked the computer for an estimate on how the children would react to psychodrama Five B and he and Fracarro rattled off a string of numbers-- their individual numerical estimates of the emotional stresses on the children. The computer averaged their estimates and made some calculations based on the information it had about the children inside the house and a graph appeared on the right-hand screen. The clown-and-witch act would probably put the children off guard, but it might not have any significant effect on their behavior.

Edelman shrugged. "We'll give it a try anyway. Can you send us a hospital, Dispatcher?"

"It'll be there in twelve minutes."

"What about the animals?" Fracarro asked. "What have they got in the house?"

"Two gorillas and a watchtiger are unaccounted for."

They checked their side-arms and put on their gas masks. Edelman helped Fracarro squirm into her combat coverall and hooked her pack onto her back and she returned the favor. Tough plastic covered them from head to foot and they had bulletproof padding around their torsos and their heads. A gorilla could still break their bones if it got a grip on them, and a bullet in a leg, or an arm, could cripple them and set them up for something worse, but they were protected from some of the more obvious injuries Tim Rice might try to inflict on them.

The crowd shouted at them as they descended on the house. They stopped beside the balcony outside the fifth-floor window and the two dragons raised their heads and hissed. The elephant's master shook his fist. A girl pushed her head out the front door and stuck out her tongue.

"Back off, Coppy," the loudspeaker screamed. "Beat it. We've got three hostages and we're armed. Don't push us. We aren't playing."

Edelman stepped onto the balcony. The car dropped away from him and he looked around wildly. He took a special attachment out of his pack and squinted as he held his pistol in front of his face and screwed the attachment on the muzzle. He jammed a heavy four-centimeter ball into the attachment and winced as he fired it at the tough, burglarproof plastic. The plastic cracked and he stuffed another ball into the attachment and fired again.

"Can't you hear us?" the loudspeaker blared. "We aren't kidding. You won't leave here alive."

The third ball slipped out of Edelman's fingers. He stamped his foot peevishly and bent over and picked it up. In the yard on his left a woman ran up to the fence and climbed on a chair. *"He's gonna hurt my son! Stop him!"*

The people standing in the yard with the woman moved toward the fence. The watchtiger snarled at her and two men pulled her off the chair. Five men and women drew together and started talking.

On the balcony below Edelman, Fracarro's first ball slammed into the window in front of her. Edelman held his gun in front of him at arm's length and winced as he fired again. Flaw lines appeared all over the window and he tapped it with the muzzle of his gun and broke open a hole big enough to walk through.

He threw a gas bomb through the hole and stepped inside in a crouch. He waved his gun back and forth in wide arcs and his eyes darted around the room as if he expected a hundred bad guys to leap at him out of the mist.

A console crowded with screens and dials covered most of the wall in front of him. Most of the stuff on the shelves hanging on the wall on his left looked like lab equipment. An electron microscope was sitting next to a colorfully boxed kit for altering genes with a laser beam; an automated air station was recording the content of the local atmosphere; something was swimming inside a life-support tank...

He slipped into one of the five code languages he had been taught during his five years at the police college. "I'm in the boy's room," he said into his intercom. "It's full of wonderful educational toys."

"This one looks like the daughter's room," Fracarro said. "It looks like she put up a fight. Do you see any educational death rays?"

Edelman tiptoed up to the console and looked over the equipment. In the center of the room the gas bomb was still hissing. A ventilator in the ceiling was humming at emergency speed, but the green mist was getting thicker every second.

\* \* \*

The screen in the middle of the console lit up. Tim Rice scowled up at him. "I'm warning you for the last time, Coppy. I'm watching every move you make. I've got eyes in every room in this house. I can kill you anytime I want to."

Edelman backed away from the console. He turned on the loudspeaker on his belt and straightened up. His voice took on the wooden, pompous tones of a television superhero giving a lecture on the evils

of badthink.

"We're not here to take your hostages, Tim. Don't jump to conclusions. We're here to protect you from that mob out there. Our calculations based on advanced mathematical behavioral psychology indicate they may storm you in about twenty minutes. Where are you? We can't help you if we don't know where you are."

Tim tipped his head to one side and looked at him as if he had just been offered ten acres on Pluto. "Who do you think you're fooling? I can handle that mob with half the stuff I've got already. Why don't you go back to headquarters and finish your card game?"

"Quit insulting our intelligence," a girl said over a loudspeaker on the console. "Kids aren't as dumb as you think they are."

"We've been planning this thing for months," Tim said. "You aren't gonna spoil it with dumb tricks like that. We've made up our minds-- we're gonna have every single thing we've got a right to have. Nobody's gonna stop us. If you're looking for somebody to protect, you'd better look after those overgrown clods outside."

Fracarro swore in Italian. "If you had any brains, you wouldn't have started this thing in the first place. What are you trying to get-- room and board in jail for the rest of your life? What do you think this is, some kind of television program where they go *bang bang* and the people get up and do the commercial afterward? If we have to come in there and get you, you'll be lucky if they let you out before you're fifty."

Edelman winced. The girl on the loudspeaker said something in Italian just as flawless as Fracarro's and Fracarro's voice rose to a scream. Tim threw back his head and laughed and Edelman backed out of the room waving his gun. He stumbled over the sill as he went out the window and caught himself with a yelp.

Childish voices laughed. The air car came up to meet him and he stamped his foot peevishly and crawled through the open door.

Fracarro was waiting for him on the fourth floor balcony. She was waving her pistol at the shattered window and screaming like a madwoman. "You little mistakes! Get up here and do what you're told. Nobody talks to me like that. When I get my hands on you..."

"Get in," Edelman snarled. "You're ruining everything."

"Get out of here before I sic a gorilla on you," Tim Rice blared. "Go park some place with your high-IQ friend."

Edelman pulled Fracarro into the car. The traditional ya-ya chorus boomed out of the loudspeaker and the children in the yard joined in. Fracarro struggled for a moment and then they backed away from the house and looked at it as if they were wondering what to do next.

"I think they bought it," Fracarro said.

Edelman rubbed his arms. He could still feel her young body moving inside them. They had been working together less than ten days but he had already spent two sessions with his psychotherapist ventilating his feelings about her. He valued his relationship with his wife too much to risk wrecking it for something that would be different and exciting but no better. There were times, however...

"I move we go in the fourth floor," he said. "We'll let the ventilator pull the gas out of the fifth. They sound like we'd better leave them a way out."

Another chorus of noises from the children and animals urged them back as they moved toward the house. "I'm warning you for the last time," Tim Rice blared. "I'm not playing games. Beat it."

Edelman leaped onto the balcony with his gun drawn. His foot dragged across the top of the rampart and he pitched forward onto his hands.

Fracarro's boots landed beside his head. She pulled him up with a snarl. "How did you ever get past the examiners? If they'd told me I was working with a clod like you, I'd have handed in my resignation."

"Leave me alone," Edelman said. "You're the one that made them angry."

\* \* \*

The ventilator had already pulled half the gas out of Beatrice Rice's room. Fracarro pulled the pin on

another gas bomb and Edelman pulled back a sliding panel in the middle of the floor and lowered an emergency ladder that had been folded into a storage space between the floors. They bumped their heads together as they bent over the hole and the intercom speaker mounted over the elevator picked up a giggle.

Fracarro straightened up. She pointed imperiously and Edelman bent over and examined the small area he could see. The lights had all been turned out and now that the sun had almost set most of the room was in shadow.

He dropped a bomb through the hole and started down the ladder with his gun drawn. As his head disappeared below the floor level, Fracarro dropped to one knee.

An immense hand struck his entire body. Fingers pulled on his stomach and his lungs. The blood drained out of his brain cells. His legs buckled and his fingers slipped off the ladder.

He hit the floor with a bone-bruising thud. His stomach turned over as the gravity dropped back to normal. He raised his head and stared around the room with eyes that seemed to be covered with a red mist.

"I warned you," Tim Rice yelled. "Get out of here or I'll give you another dose."

Edelman groaned. His body hurt from the tail bone up. His head ached and he felt nauseated, but he could still think well enough to remember he had to act as if he hurt worse than he did. "You crazy kid. You can kill somebody doing that."

"I told you we weren't playing games," the loudspeaker boomed. "We're gonna get a fair deal if we have to crush every stupid cop on the east coast. Get back up that ladder. Move."

Edelman forced himself up. He held on to the ladder with one hand. He was obviously in the family exercise room. Fencing foils, jump ropes, and Indian clubs hung on the walls and the control panel for the gravity changer had been set in the wall next to the elevator.

Alternatives slid across his mind. If he had the power company cut the power off, it probably wouldn't affect whatever other weapons the kids had and it might set off a panic and put the hostages in worse trouble than they were in already. He wouldn't be able to use the elevator, either, and if he got his hands on the hostages, he might want to get upstairs without phoning the power company.

Most devices had automatic cutoffs on them, however, especially devices that used up as much energy as gravity changers. Few parents were stupid enough to let their children run up huge debts to the power company. And the files he had examined in the car had indicated the Rice family had used up most of its power budget for the month. Another jolt like that and the unit would probably lock itself up.

He glanced up the ladder. Fracarro was already lying flat. Apparently she had unlimited faith in his devotion to duty.

"You don't understand, Tim. Listen to me. Don't let her frighten you. We're trying to protect-- "

He dropped toward the floor and rolled on to his shoulder. His fingers lost their grip on his gun but the weight on his back felt two hundred pounds lighter. Either the power was out or the kid was hoarding what he had.

\* \* \*

A light blinked over the elevator. Fracarro scrambled to her feet. Edelman picked up his gun and jumped up. Something snarled on Fracarro's floor. Fracarro's gun banged. A watchtiger shrieked. A girl screamed the name of a pet over the loudspeaker. A gorilla snarled.

The elevator door opened. He turned around with his gun at eye level and the radar sights leaped out. A gorilla bounded through the door and ran toward him on all fours.

The gravity changer clutched at him again. He threw himself to one side and Tim suddenly threw the field into reverse. For a confusing, nauseating moment he scrambled above the floor in free fall. His knees banged into the floor as the gravity returned to normal and he threw himself around and tried to fire at the black, hairy monster leaping toward him.

The gorilla struck at his gun with its open hand. The gun flew across the room. The gorilla's left hand shot toward his face and he rolled out of its way and jumped to his feet.

"Get 'em!" a voice yelled over the loudspeaker. "Kill 'em. Let 'em have it."

Edelman crouched with his hands raised. The gorilla rested on its knuckles and looked up at him warily. Its eyes glittered above the homemade gas mask strapped on its nose. It was more intelligent than any gorilla that had ever lived in the wild and it had been bought to be a bodyguard as well as a pet-- in a world where any nine year old boy who wanted to could buy a learning program that would make him an expert in any unarmed art in a few months of solitary, drugged study with a practicing dummy.

The gorilla's powerful legs pushed it toward him like a cannonball. Its right hand shot toward his stomach. He jumped away from the blow and his right foot swung toward its legs.

The gorilla twisted around in midair. The edge of his boot-sole slid along its left leg. He pulled in his foot and the gorilla landed in front of him and launched itself at him again. His hand closed around its right wrist and guided it past him, it launched a kick at his side as it went by.

He started bending away from the kick as soon as he saw it coming. It rammed into his thigh and he hit the floor on his shoulder and rolled out of the fall yelling for help. "Call him off," he heard Fracarro yelling through her loudspeaker. "I'll kill him. *Call him off.*"

He pulled out his knife out of its sheath. The gun was lying under a chair on the other side of the room. The gorilla was scrambling to its feet and two voices were yelling over the loudspeaker at the same time. "Stay where you are, Hector," a girl was screaming. "Leave her alone." "Keep him away from the gun, Joey," a boy yelled. "Don't let him get his hands on the gun."

The gorilla raced toward the gun on all fours. Edelman scrambled across the room jabbering like a frightened idiot and jumped in front of it with the knife poised at his hip. The gorilla hurled itself at his face and he grabbed it by the wrist and steeled himself to plunge in the knife as it went by.

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The floor dropped away from him. His stomach turned over and he lost his balance and stumbled. The elevator door slid open and he saw a boy in a gas mask standing in the elevator with a tube cradled under his arm.

He threw himself behind the chair. A green light filled the room. He grabbed the gun and pulled himself into a ball and the elevator door closed.

He stood up cautiously. If the kids hadn't been watching him, he would have slumped into the chair and put his head in his hands. The laser beam had probably been too weak to penetrate his suit-- it had looked like the kid had modified the beam that had come with his genetic engineering kit-- but if he had been looking at it when it went off he would have been blinded.

"What are you doing down there?" Fracarro screamed. "What stupid games are you playing now?"

He slipped back into character as soon as he heard her voice. "He nearly blinded me," he whined. "He shot a laser at me. The gorilla nearly stole my gun."

Fracarro swore in Italian. "Tell this smelly hairball of yours to turn around," she yelled at the kids. "If it makes one move I don't like, I'm going to turn its hide into a fountain."

The loudspeaker picked up a gasp. "Turn around, Hector," a girl said. "Stand still. Keep your back to the lady. Please don't move."

The gorilla on the fourth floor snarled. Its feet shuffled on the floor. Fracarro walked across the room and a moment later the drug in her injector took effect and a big body slid to the floor.

Edelman looked around the room and frowned stupidly. He bent over as if he were pleading and started talking in code language. "Tell them you're going to shoot the gorilla if they don't surrender," he whined. "They came up once. Maybe we can draw them up again. I'll try to time it so I press the button for this floor after the elevator's already started."

Fracarro answered him in the same imperious tone she had used when she had asked him what he was doing. He couldn't see her but he knew she was probably gesturing as if she were rejecting everything he was saying. "I'll stand near the ladder so I can drop if he gets up here," she said. "If you don't get him going up, we can get him going down."

Edelman shook his open hand at the ceiling. He looked like a pagan pleading with his gods. "Give him

time to recharge his laser," he said. "We'd better give him time to argue with the girl, too."

"Check. Ready?"

"Ready."

Fracarro swore again. Her foot stamped on the floor. "I didn't come here to play games," she screamed over the loudspeaker. "We've taken all the nonsense I intend to take. Send your hostages up or I'll blow your hairy little friend to pieces. You've got ninety seconds. If I don't see the first hostage in the elevator by then, I'll shoot him in the leg. He'll get it bullet by bullet until he's dead. You aren't the only people who can make threats."

Edelman threw up his hands. He stood under the ladder and pretended he was begging her to stop. She shouted at him to shut up in English and he backed away from the ladder and looked up wildly. The elevator door was one jump behind him.

Seconds slipped away. Down below, wherever they were, the kids were arguing. If they decided they would rather threaten to kill the hostages than send somebody up to fight, Edelman didn't know what he was going to do. He had seen an opportunity and he had grabbed it without thinking out every alternative. Hostages were useless, once you killed them and he had done everything he could to look harmless.

"Don't!" a girl screamed. "We're sending them up. Wait!"

"Hurry up!" Fracarro yelled. "First the hostages, then you. Move."

The motor echoed in the elevator shaft. Edelman pressed against the door and shook his fist excitedly. His gun hand brushed against the control panel and he pressed in the button with his knuckles.

The elevator stopped behind the door. He dropped to his hands and knees and the door slid open. A boy and the other gorilla were standing inside. The boy's eyes widened and he swung the laser beam around.

Edelman hurled himself at the boy's legs with his face turned toward the floor. The beam flashed above his head. The gorilla snarled. His shoulders crashed into a skinny body and the boy went down.

The elevator door caught on his leg. He yanked in his foot and the door slid shut. "Stop him!" the boy yelled. "Kill him. Get him out of here."

The gorilla's hands grabbed Edelman's shoulders. It yanked him up before he could pull himself away from it. He pulled up his legs and kicked it hard in the stomach. He didn't have time to be afraid. His conditioning and his basic instincts had taken control.

The gorilla grunted. The door slid open and he twisted himself around so it couldn't throw him out of the elevator. For a moment the gorilla's side was exposed to the door.

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Fracarro leaped across the room. She jammed herself into the door and pressed her injector against the gorilla's thigh. The gorilla shoved Edelman against the side of the elevator and turned on her with a snarl. Its eyes glazed. Edelman kicked it again and it slid to the floor.

The boy was pulling himself up in a corner behind the gorilla. He was holding his wrist phone in front of his mouth. "Take me down," he yelled. "Stand by to repel boarders."

Edelman grabbed at him over the gorilla. He twisted away and reached inside his shirt. A stubby cylinder appeared in his hand. His thumb shoved a switch forward and a focused supersonic beam hit Edelman in the face.

A terrible ache spread through Edelman's skull. The skin on his face burned. He stumbled against the side of the elevator with his hands over his eyes and thousands of invisible whips turned his fingers into fire.

The boy swung the beam toward Fracarro. She stumbled backward as soon as it hit her and the door slid shut. The elevator dropped.

Edelman pulled his hands away from his eyes. The boy swung the beam around and he kicked it out of his hand. He lunged across the elevator like a man demonstrating self-defense in slow motion and the edge of his big hand collided with the side of the boy's neck. He finished the job with a chop on the back

of the neck and the boy keeled over and landed face down on the gorilla.

The door opened. High, excited voices echoed against the walls of the basement. They all had on gas masks and the boy had a supersonic beam in his hand.

Edelman grabbed up the beam lying next to the unconscious gorilla. The beam in the boy's hand burned his face. One of the girls yelled something about getting him for what he did to Hector and he pointed the beam in his hand at the boy and thumbed the switch forward with that terrible ache spreading through his brain again. For a moment he and the boy stood there lashing each other with invisible whips.

The boy yelled and threw up his hands. He staggered backward with his head bent over. Edelman stepped through the elevator door with the beam in one hand and a gas bomb in the other.

Half a dozen children were standing around a wheeled console that had been parked in the middle of the broad walk behind the pool. On the other side of the console, frightened eyes peering over gags, Mr. and Mrs. David Rice and their daughter Beatrice were sitting on deck chairs with their hands tied underneath the seats.

The elevator door slid shut behind him. The boy and the two girls backed away from him down the side of the pool. Every child in the room had on a gas mask. In the group around the console three boys and a girl were holding long poles as if they were lances.

A chubby boy stepped away from the console and pointed a toy rifle at Edelman's legs. "Stay where you are, Coppy. Don't move one step farther. We aren't kidding about the hostages. They've got time capsules loaded with TSA-58 sitting in their stomachs. The girl standing over there has the neutralizer. Turn around and go back, or she'll destroy every pill in that jar."

Edelman stopped. On the other side of the console a girl was holding up a double-chambered flagon. One chamber was half full of pills and the other chamber was full of some liquid and she was gripping a valve in the waist with her right hand.

Nightmares danced in his head. The gun the boy was holding looked like a spring-powered toy dart gun but the cylinder sticking out of the muzzle was a self-activating injector, not a dart. The poles all had injectors mounted on them, too, and he thought he could guess the name of the chemical the injectors were loaded with. TSA-58 could be manufactured in either pill or liquid form.

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Edelman didn't have to fake his reaction. TSA-58 was one of the hundreds of unpleasant facts he had lived with every working day since he had become a cop, but it still made every cell on his skin cringe. A modified version of one of the enzymes used to improve IQ's, it interfered with the metabolism of the brain and flooded the brain cells with a by-product that attacked the memory cells the same way mutation-causing chemicals attacked the genes. The victims acquired false and fantastic memories and they had to be re-educated as if they were children and taught exactly what information in their heads was real and what was false. They could spend years of their lives tormented by nightmares and demons and pestered at every step by false information.

Fracarro whispered code talk in his ear. "I heard him. I assume you're going to move in on them. I'll give you three minutes and then I'll come down the elevator and toss in a smoke bomb. Tell me if you don't want me to. I've already told the dispatcher to get the neutralizer on the way. I've filled this room with smoke and I don't think they can see me. I won't use a gas bomb until you say so."

Edelman glanced at the console. One of the screens was jet black.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "I came here to talk to you. Why won't you tell us what you want? What are you trying to do?"

The boy gestured with the gun. "We'll talk when those clods out there send down a committee. Beat it. Scram. Go."

The boy, who had been waiting outside the elevator, shook his supersonic beam. The other kids stirred restlessly. "Go back to your card game," a boy yelled. "We'll call you when we need you."

"Give it to him, Petey," a girl said. "Don't be yellow. Uhuru!"

His wife's face hung in front of Edelman's eyes. How would they feel about each other if all the little



memories that had shaped his personality had been destroyed?

"We can't let your parents come down here," he said. "They'll turn into animals as soon as they see you. Tell me what you want and I'll take your message back. I don't care what you wring out of them. That's your business. I'm here to make sure nobody gets hurt."

One of the boys armed with poles rapped the butt of his weapon against the floor. "Uhuru!" he yelled. "Uhuru!" The whole group looked too agitated for comfort. They had been sitting down here watching danger come closer and closer and now the authority figure himself was standing in front of them.

"Give it to him," the girl yelled again. "Show him."

Edelman shrugged. He backed up with his eyes on the gun. "Tell me what you're trying to do and I'll tell your parents I think they'd better give in. I can see you've got us beat. You've pulled off a smooth operation."

A boy pointed at the elevator. The door slid open. Two bombs flew through the air, black smoke under high pressure hissing out of their vents.

A black cloud surrounded the kids at the end of the pool. The smoke blotted out the lights seconds after Fracarro tossed the bombs. The kids shrieked with excitement. The boy with the rifle screamed like a sergeant in a cavalry epic. "Lancers! Surround the hostages. Stand fast."

Edelman tossed a smoke bomb into the darkness. He yelled at Fracarro to stay where she was and lowered himself over the edge of the pool. Fracarro yelled back and another pair of bombs hissed across the water.

He paddled across the water through the darkness, the sonic beam held above the waves. The boy with the rifle shouted orders and four children ran down the side of the pool.

"Grab him! Hold him until we give him the needle. *Uhuru! Banzai!*"

The children ran down the walk laughing and yelling. Edelman's hand touched the far wall and he started working his way down the wall toward the end of the pool. The ventilators were pulling the smoke out at top speed but Fracarro was still throwing bombs. The darkness pressed on him like a blanket.

"Let me know if you need help," Fracarro whispered in his ear. "I'm lobbing them in every two minutes. Tell me if you need light."

His hip bumped into the end of the pool. He pushed himself away from the wall until he thought he was opposite the hostages and eased himself out of the water on his stomach.

"What's going on?" the boy with the rifle yelled. "Where are you?"

"I can't find him," a girl yelled. "I just ran into the wall."

Edelman's left hand bumped into a shoe. A kid gasped. His hand snapped shut around an ankle and he rose to his knees. The kid yelled and he grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him into the water.

A pole clattered on the plastic floor. Kids yelled on either side of him. "He's here! He's down here! Get back here!"

He stepped forward in a low crouch, hands to his chest. He bumped into a figure in the dark and his hands quickly established it was either Mrs. Rice or her daughter. She grunted behind her gag and he turned left and tried to find the gap between the chairs.

Children ran down the side of the pool. Fracarro screamed like something out of the jungle and somebody splashed into the pool. A hand clutched at his pant leg. "He's here," a boy yelled. "I got him. I got him."

"Hold on," the boy with the rifle said, "I'm coming."

He pushed the kid aside and lurched through the gap. Footsteps came at him from his left. Arms closed around his legs. A girl shrieked with pleasure. "Give him the needle. Hurry. Hurry up."

"I'm right here. Get out of the way."

Edelman's heart jumped. He threw himself away from the girl holding on to his legs and fired the sonic beam on the sound and prayed the batteries would last until the stupid kid fainted.

The boy backed away from him moaning. The moans disappeared in the general racket and he swung the beam in a wide arc. More children screamed in front of him. The three hostages moaned through their gags.

He pulled his knife out of his belt and squatted behind one of the deck chairs. His hands found the plastic wires that tied the hostage's hands to the chair. "Go when I tell you," he mumbled. "Crawl into the water and swim to the elevator."

He sliced through the wires without worrying if he drew blood. Somewhere in the darkness a boy was groping toward him with a big ache in his head and a needle in his hand. If he had three seconds left in the batteries that powered the sonic beam, he was lucky; if the kids had built a beam generator that could generate a beam like that for more than thirty seconds, they had done a first-rate job.

He sliced through the last wire and groped toward the next chair. His fingers brushed against a hand and he repeated his instructions and slid the blade across the bonds. At least three children seemed to be yelling and shrieking after Fracarro down by the elevator.

"He's behind the hostages," the kid with the rifle yelled. "Are you still there, Janie? I've still got the gun. Find him and I'll get him."

He squatted behind the third hostage. His hands found a large, definitely masculine hand. The fingers tightened as if they were squeezing something and he started slicing. Every nerve in his skin was jangling alarms.

A body moved toward him from the left. A hand brushed against his shoulder. He whirled and the body scrambled back. "He's here," the girl yelled. "He's setting them free."

The boy banged against something in the dark. "I'm coming. Hold on."

Edelman threw himself flat on the floor. He pressed against the deck chairs and peered into the darkness.

The girl's hands grabbed his thighs. "He's here. He's lying down. Where are you?"

Edelman rolled away from the chairs. He hit the girl hard with a wide sweep of the arm holding the sonic beam; she grunted and crashed into the back wall. He scrambled away from the chairs and crouched on his hands and knees like a panic-stricken animal.

"He hit me," the girl moaned. "He's near the chairs."

"Where's everybody else? Where're the lancers?"

"We're right here. What do you want us to do?"

A bomb clanged against the console. Edelman edged toward the chairs with his eyes straining into the dark. He found the chair David Rice was sitting in and sliced through the wires with two angry strokes. He shoved Rice on the shoulder to let him know they could go and threw himself against the back wall.

Three chairs scraped. Three bodies splashed into the water. The girl and the boy with the rifle yelled.

"What're we gonna do?" the girl wailed. "They'll kill us."

"Get out of here, Janie. Everybody away from the chairs. Lancers-- charge! Sweep the area clean."

The girl ran past Edelman. The lancers yelled like actors in a medieval costume play and he dropped to his knees and faced the charge with his arms squeezed behind his back.

A pole rammed into the bulletproof padding over his stomach and he twisted it out of the kid's grasp and swung it along the floor at ankle level. A kid tripped over it and went down howling. He jumped down and ran toward the far wall. Behind him everybody was yelling at once. "No more bombs," he hissed at Fracarro. "Give me some light. Take the hostages up as soon as they get there."

"They're coming out of the water now. I think everybody down here is out of play. What about you?"

"I think I can disarm them."

"I'll be back down. I'll take the kids I've got down here up with me."

He waited in the dark with the pole and the sonic beam in his hands. The kids were yelling at each other as much as they were yelling at him.

"Quit acting like crybabies," the boy with the rifle yelled. "Nobody made you do anything. Turn around and make another charge."

"What good'll that do? He's in the water with the rest of them. They're gone. We're gonna go to jail."

"My mother'll lock me up and throw the key away. Darn you, Petey. Darn you."

The smoke thinned. Five shadows emerged from the gloom. A girl yelled.

"Get him," the boy with the rifle yelled. "Charge!"

Two kids lowered their poles and ran down the walk. Edelman gripped his pole slantwise across his

chest and waited for them with his eyes on the shadow that looked like the boy with the rifle.

"Banzai!"

"Uhuru!"

"Aim for the legs!"

They stopped just before they reached him. Their poles made little circles in the air as they searched for an opening. The gas masks hid their eyes, but their knees were shaking.

He fainted at the kid on the left. The kid stepped back and the butt of his pole cracked against the pole on his right. Edelman lashed back and forth-- CLAT! CLAT! He stepped between them and threw it at the boy with the rifle.

The boy yelled and threw up the rifle. Edelman ran down the walk yelling like a wild man and launched a long kick. The gun flew out of the boy's hands; he grabbed him by the shirt and shoved him against the back wall.

He pivoted like an hysterical dancer and pointed the sonic beam at the two girls who had been standing near the boy. One of the girls picked up the pole he had just thrown and backed away from him. "Leave me alone. Leave me alone."

The other girl howled. She grabbed the pole out of the first girl's hands and lunged.

"Get him! Kill him!"

The needle shot toward Edelman's leg. The two boys yelled behind his back. He sidestepped and danced behind the girl's back. The last seconds left in the sonic beam banged into her head and he snatched the pole out of her hands.

He kicked the rifle into the pool and stepped toward the two kids coming at him. His pole cracked like a pistol when it hit. One pole bounced off the ceiling and the other pole splashed into the water.

The two kids backed away with their hands raised defensively. One kid cursed at him. The other kid turned around and started crying.

The girl who had grabbed the pole ran over to the boy who had been holding the gun. She turned toward Edelman and raised her fist. "You toad! Why couldn't you leave us alone? What difference did it make to you?"

The elevator door slid open. The boy gripped the girl's arm. The boy, who was crying, ran up to the wall and started beating on it with his fists. "She'll never let me leave the house again. She'll spank me until I get sick to my stomach."

The boy who had been holding the rifle straightened up. "Enjoy yourself, Copsy," he said. "Someday I'll be just as big as you are and twice as mean."

"You don't have to try very hard," Fracarro said. "If he'd wanted to, he could have pulled that gun on his hip and sent half of you to the hospital as soon as he stepped out of the elevator. If you'd tried a stunt like this with the kind of cops they had fifty years ago, you'd probably be dead now."

"There's a police van waiting outside," Edelman said. "We'll take you up in the elevator two at a time. It's up to you. You can go with us now, or you can stay here and face your parents. You'll be arrested later anyway-- you've committed several very serious crimes and we aren't going to ignore them-- so you may as well come in now and be safe."

"I thought you were trying to protect us," the boy said. "You don't have much respect for truth, do you?"

"I'm offering you the best protection we've got," Edelman said. "What do you expect me to do-- stand here and fight off your parents, too? I've had enough games for one night."

The boy looked around the room at the other kids. Edelman waited tensely. If they wouldn't come voluntarily, he and Fracarro would have to drag them out one by one. He hadn't risked his life and his memory just so a mob of angry parents could tear them apart.

The kid held out his hands. "O.K., Copsy. Take me away. Just make sure you never let me out. I never tell lies when I make promises."

Edelman relaxed. Behind him the other girl sniffed. The girl who was standing next to the boy turned her face to the wall and started crying.

"Let's go," Fracarro said. "Class is over."

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