

Chapter 1

Two Years Earlier

Though Cara was a promising geneticist, she didn't particularly stand out. Her credentials were impeccable, and her work exceptional, but she had no political ambition. Every year at review time, she'd question the wisdom of her disinterest and upon reflection arrive yet again at the same conclusion: she loved what she was doing so there was no need to push for better prospects. Apart from her admittedly uncommon indifference to advancement, Cara considered herself well suited for a life-long career in the Corporation.

She was aware that some people thought her life lacked variety by the comments that slipped out of them. Men she'd dated, in particular. From their perspective, her days consisted of staring at a computer. She probably even looked drab to them. To work, she never wore dresses or heels or make-up, or colors other than black and navy. Jewelry? None. People said she was absorbed in her work and that was true, but only because it was fascinating. From Cara's perspective, her inner experience so completely satisfied her mental bougeotte, that she just *didn't have room* for much else.

Cara was an intellectual adventuress; the lab was her jungle and each experiment an expedition into the vast unknown. The colorful collage of the living world dazzled her to the edge of awe and inspired an irrepressible curiosity. To her, the simplest living creature was a mindboggling, kaleidoscope of genetic traits where one trait alone was a prism of possibilities and all the traits combined, a colossal candy store of opportunity. Everything alive was an exotic gene bazaar bearing unknown numbers of sparkling gems and precious stones, the untold genetic bounty, from which nature selected and crafted the limitless potential called life.

All of life, including her own, was a mosaic of riddles and clues. Every little thing she learned was a bright, glossy shard that fitted somewhere in it and the grand, unifying montage of the natural world. Untangling the mysteries of a single cell to clarify a human condition informed her as a scientist, yes... but it meant more than that. For Cara, life and work intertwined like vines growing toward the same sun.

The day everything changed looked like any other day. Cara arrived at work at the usual time, analyzed data, met with colleagues to discuss mutual projects, and after eating a late dinner she headed back to her office to finish up. But on this day a person she hardly knew was waiting outside her door, and this person had a problem.

Gwendolyn Hayes worked in the same building as Cara, along with three hundred other employees. They'd served on a committee together a few years back but they'd barely spoken since. Despite this lack of acquaintance, Gwen asked Cara to meet with her the following day to discuss a private matter.

Cara tended to be optimistic about life's obstacles. Problems were just puzzles in reverse. Whether personal or work-related, she broke problems up into known versus inferred facts and moved the pieces around. If a new perspective didn't arise, she started over, separating the pieces, recombining... until a practicable solution naturally emerged. In her experience, there was *at least* one solution buried inside every problem for each mind to find; and since new minds were born each day, over time the number of solutions for any problem was infinite.

Given her confident outlook on problem solving, it never occurred to her that Gwen's words would unnerve her, but when they met for dinner the next evening, Cara never tasted her meal. Something about Gwen's story usurped all flavor and aroma from the food and even kept Cara from sleeping that night. Finally, just before sun up, a confounding awareness crept from the shadows of sleep-deprived thought into plain sight.

Cara realized the conversation at dinner alarmed her so much that within minutes she'd boxed Gwen up in a stereotype. Gossip about Gwen surfaced in her mind like an advertisement seen too much and served to glue the stereotype in place. By the time they'd ordered, Gwen was in the box, the lid tightly in place, and Cara, like a spider, was wrapping the package round and round with tape.

At one point Cara had the impulse to jump up from her chair and dart out of the room. There was no denying it; she'd felt an almost irresistible urge to escape intangible danger but social obligation forced her to stay. So, instead of removing herself physically, Cara distanced herself psychologically by pasting on a stigma conjured from rumor; but by the end of the evening the stigma didn't fit, and instead clung to Gwen awkwardly like clothes on a paper doll.

She didn't understand it. Cara hadn't reacted in the way she expected, and didn't know why she'd reacted at all. She knew better than to give in to the kind of irrational prejudgment that allows a person to slap a label on someone, but that's what she'd done. She'd given credence to rumors and used them to rationalize a stereotype but didn't know why.

She'd read that denial allowed a person to bypass both conscience and reality to protect the psyche. If that was true, and she'd defended herself against something Gwen said, she didn't know what it was. The thing eluded her like an unseen monster in a dream.

She lay in bed trying to figure it out but ended up with harder questions than the niggling one she'd started with. Like, the gossip aspect. Cara never had trouble seeing past gossip before, especially this kind. The gossip about Gwen had been infused with shaming subtext, the trademark feint of someone angling to destroy or repress. But Cara hadn't just remembered the gossip; the recollection had almost hypnotized her and she'd slipped into thoughts of disapproval and distrust built solely upon it. Apparently, swallowing unsubstantiated gossip had been preferable to believing Gwen's story.

Cara *knew* she couldn't presume to understand the pressures that pushed other people towards the decisions they made. She barely understood what motivated her own, never mind someone else's. Everyone lacked common sense about something and requisite guidance in many things. This unavoidably resulted in blind spots and gaps in understanding that a person found only by tripping on them. One day, Cara too might cross a line that some powerful person had drawn in the sand, and like Gwen, require the help of strangers.

Cara finally fell into a deep sleep right before sunrise, but in the rose-hued light of the new day, the construction of the convenient stereotype still stared her in the face. She knew she'd felt threatened by Gwen's story, but *what was it* that spooked her? Was it the complexity of the problem? That didn't seem likely since, at least on the surface, Gwen's dilemma was simple: she reported to someone who was in trouble with his manager. But simplicity is no consolation where the consequences are dire. According to Gwen, her boss's manager had an inordinate amount of power, enough to cause people to lose their jobs at the snap of a finger.

“He’s just a regional manager but he’s dumped lots of people,” Gwen claimed, “and he’s about to get rid of me.”

She had no means of knowing if any of what Gwen said was true, but Cara had to admit that some of the persons involved were people she tended to avoid. The regional manager in particular was someone Cara didn’t trust even though she couldn’t point to something concrete. Similarly, the RM’s inner circle consisted of people Cara would never have described as reliable. Cara didn’t know the origin of her aversion to people who seemed disingenuous; she just knew it was strong. Conversations with them made her uneasy and that was reason enough to sidestep them, but she gave a particularly wide berth to insincere people who had prestige disproportionate to their abilities. There was no known reason for it that she could remember; the disinclination seemed instinctual.

The logical component to her distrust of a disingenuous manager, however, *was* clear to her by watching her own manager. Any leader who hadn’t earned their position of authority and wasn’t qualified to do their job was going to be confronted with failure every day; and, since no one could face daily bombing for long, they’d hide their ever-growing sense of inadequacy by playing the expert at something. Since no one would dare correct them, they’d begin to feel entitled to arrogant assumptions, and act on those assumptions with no regard for how others would be affected. Meanwhile, no one was doing the job that the disingenuous leader was hired to do.

Cara wished she had a manager who’d gone through the humbling process of earning their power. Such a person would know that success and failure were primarily due to good fortune and bad luck. A person could take credit for persistence and patience, but the rest was a crapshoot of genetics and the wheel of fortune.

Lying in bed and staring unseeing at the ceiling, Cara began to remember more of the conversation from the night before.

“Have you heard the skinder about me?” Gwen asked. “It’s easy to spread rumors about someone like me, you know, because I’m unprotected. I don’t have anyone with leverage in the C who would stick up for me.”

Cara remembered fighting to hide a discrediting frown in response to that statement. But in thinking back, Cara realized she’d had the urge to use dismissive body language the entire evening.

“You might guess,” Gwen challenged, “that men are behind chinwag like this. Some do start it, but it’s the women who keep it going. People who spread this kind of gossip, are women who feel unsafe without a male guardian but deeply resent their dependence. They *hate* their powerlessness and you’d think they’d direct their anger at the system that keeps them dependent... but they’re too scared to do that. They won’t bite the hand that protects them. Instead, they vent their resentment in a *safe* direction, at a woman accused of threatening their protectors.

They don’t see they’ve destroyed themselves in the process. They turn into hateful creatures who have convinced themselves they’ve got the right to despise and mistreat *two* types of women: women who’re *more* protected than *they* are... because they resent the unfairness of that... and women, like me, who choose to live without the protection of men.” Gwen had stopped then and looked pointedly at Cara. “Do you know which of those two types you are?” “What?”

“You’re both. I understand what drives them,” Gwen went right on. “They’re furious, and the anger has to go somewhere. I’m not sure that they realize any of this, *consciously* because...

Because, safety is everything to them, and since it's not safe for the powerless to *openly* resent the system that *owns* them, maybe it's not safe for them to admit it to themselves either. I guess that's called lying by *omission of thinking*; it requires an opaque conscience."

The waiter had appeared in that moment and inquired about dessert. Although she stopped talking, Gwen seemed not to hear him so Cara answered no for them both. Once he'd gone, Gwen came back from wherever her mind had drifted and said,

"I give the same cooperation and respect to a woman as a man, with added deference only to the people I report to because it's my job to do what they ask. Otherwise, I treat everyone the same." She leaned toward Cara and peered into her face. "You'd think that was a good thing, right?"

That's when Cara wanted to bolt from the room.

"Whether you're dealing with men who feel insecure around capable women *or* dealing with *women* who always want a man to be in charge, you'll have a problem." Gwen stopped and studied Cara's face. "You look surprised. I bet you thought insecure men are the biggest impediment to a woman's success in the C, but the women who depend on those men they are *just* as bad. They may be cowards when it comes to standing up to men, but they're *happy* to undercut *unprotected women*. So, if you're perceived as a threat to a man who protects them, watch out! They'll feel both justified *and safe* in ganging up on you, and gossip is just the first line of attack."

"You've had a successful career here," Cara reminded her. "I don't see how some chatter could negate years of faithful service."

Gwen considered that for a moment and then said, "I've succeeded in the C because I acquired technical skills that management needs, and some of the gossips wish they had these skills too, but they won't try to learn them for fear of losing their protectors. They know their success would provoke fear in insecure men and then the eye of suspicion would pan over to them. They'd become one of *those women*."

"And *they* are... who exactly?"

"Successful. A man who doesn't like competent women is that way because society has told him the lie that he has to be something impossible; that he has to be better, stronger and smarter than all women. Such a man is probably suspicious of women in general, but he's going to *deeply* resent a woman with whom he feels he has to compete in his day-to-day life. She'll trigger fear in him... the fear of losing face, the fear of never getting what he deserves and all because of *'that woman'*. Dependent women know well what happens next, anger and retaliation, and they're willing to accept a lesser position rather than be the recipients of that."

"Why do you keep saying 'insecure *men*' as if men own exclusive rights? Everyone's insecure about something," Cara argued.

"I'm not talking about *all* men," answered Gwen. "Men and women who admit their insecurities to themselves are healthy because they acknowledge reality. I'm talking about men who lack self-awareness and deny that they have fears. They behave badly because they don't admit... may don't even know... they're insecure. The type is easy to spot. They act and talk like they're bigger and better than others and pick on people they envy, either behind their backs or when they're defenseless."

"Plenty of women are not self-aware," Cara countered, "and act out unknowingly on their insecurities."

“Yes, and *if those women had power*, they’d cause the same types of problems as insecure, unaware men.” Gwen stopped a moment and then said, “You know this scenario exists. Why are you debating it?”

“Because you speak of it as if it were a pandemic.”

Gwen rubbed her forehead as if to ease the tension in her mind. “When a specific pattern of obliviousness holds back a whole planet of people, it’s earned that status. How about we call it *pan-denial*?”

“I think pop psychology would call your perspective an overgeneralization. I would call it an exaggeration,” Cara noted mildly, hoping to question Gwen’s viewpoint without causing her to feel attacked.

But Gwen folded her arms across her chest. “Men who face both their strengths and weaknesses make good leaders but they’re not the kind of men who are running the Corporation. If you need something tangible to better understand what I’m saying, look in your own backyard. The men in positions of power in the C all have low self esteem and serious vendetta issues.”

“And I’d call *that* a general observation with no supporting data,” Cara stated firmly.

“You don’t need to take *my* word for it,” retorted Gwen. “If you keep your eyes open, you’ll see it for yourself.”

“So...” Cara ventured, “let me see if I’m clear on the perceived threat: you think you’re at a greater risk of losing your job than your reporting manager even though he’s the one who’s at odds with the RM?”

“Yes,” Gwen replied. “A man will always be more advantaged than an unprotected woman, even if he has no overt power in the system and *yes*, even if *he* caused the problem... *because he only has to defend himself against other men* whereas an unprotected *woman* in the same situation has to defend against men *and* women.

Most women, you see, won’t help the men-in-power beat up a powerless man if they can avoid it, because they perceive *all* men as *potential* protectors, as possible future protectors. After all, the tables sometimes turn...so they’ll hold back on undermining a man, but never think twice about slamming an unprotected woman. Sadly, the same fear that makes them run for cover, holds them back in life.”

“Wait... who?” Cara asked.

“Women who seek male protection. They won’t admit it, though, not even to themselves. Instead, they hide. They run from themselves and the lives they might have had by accusing women like me of things we’re not.”

Cara often overheard gossip at work when she was temporarily stuck in one place. Stories popped up most frequently in the exercise pods and espresso stations. She could tell when the gossip was malicious even before she heard it by the way the people huddled together and glanced furtively about.

The huddlers may have been talking about someone else but it was their own shame, the gossip’s shame, that glued them together, and hung in a cloud over them like a poisoned fog. It was as if the huddle *knew*, deep down, that the act of judging another person was inevitably hypocritical and that it was only a matter of time before the judge became the judged. Gossip was a boomerang and their shame was the fear of things to come, a premonition of when the very same group minus one would be shaming them.

Now, Cara vividly remembered the rumors, though at the time she didn’t know they were talking about Gwen. The condemnations ended up in the forgotten-things pile in her brain, where all

negative nonsense without proof was tossed. But during the dinner with Gwen, the gossip was unearthed, and now the biting words were scrolling across her mind like a repeating marquee. The rumors centered on a reputed affair with a married man who was also the woman's reporting manager and though nothing was presented to substantiate any of it, guilt was the presiding perception. Cara understood from it that the woman got in trouble when she sided with her manager against *his* manager, though it wasn't told like that. The gossips said she tried to protect her lover because he'd promised to assist her advancement in the Corporation. Gwen claimed she'd stood up for her boss because he was being abused and that any decent person would have done the same. But Cara guessed Gwen hadn't understood the risks involved when she questioned the RM's authority. Indeed, it appeared Gwen had unwittingly set herself up for trouble and trouble had come.

Cara and Gwen talked for hours that night, first in the restaurant and then later in the park. "Don't call it gossip when it's *lies*," Gwen stated. "They're telling lies to manipulate people's perception of me."

"If there's a hidden agenda, then there's profit," Cara observed. "How are they benefitting by lying about you?"

"If their lies succeed in making me look unethical, my accusations of abuse against the RM get called into question. The gossips think they're keeping themselves safe by protecting their protector."

Cara threw her arms up in frustration. "*There's no safety in a lie!* Eventually you get *caught*. How's that *safe*?"

Gwen gave her an odd look, and started the next sentence slowly as if speaking to a child. "*If they get caught...* they just tell another lie. It's amazing how often people let liars string them along with one lie after another. When it's chronic, then you *really* have a problem. I've seen liars overload whole *groups* of people with irrelevant details and confusing lies, bringing meaningful work to a standstill for years! If you try to expose what they're up to, they'll accuse *you* of the tricks *they're* pulling, and bury you in an avalanche of slurs and slander. That's how liars get what they want."

"That sounds time-consuming," commented Cara. "A liar wouldn't have time to do anything but lie."

"That's right. A liar has no life," Gwen agreed. "They're a *mirage*, an empty shell, with only a *tiny* bit of the person they were meant to be left inside. A tad of their true selves is still in there somewhere, I'm sure of it... but even that's riddled with holes. I think lying is a kind of *addiction* but it's different from a drug problem. A lying addiction always seems to be tied to something they're hiding, that's socially unacceptable. They're either afraid they'll lose something or be rejected if people find it out."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because liars are *so desperate*, in the way that only the hopeless are. At first glance, you think they're just very determined; but if you watch long enough you'll see the desperation. Too bad they don't channel their energy into something positive, but they don't, and *that's* their *real* sorrow... But even their sorrow gets turned into something negative, *envy*. The achievements of honest people trigger jealousy in a liar and fear then drives them to undermine earned success. Earned success is threatening to them because honest endeavor exposes deceit, competence exposes the fake... so liars grab what the honest have gained... to *have it*, and *hide who achieved it*; they con, and cheat, and scorn, wanting that there be nothing left of true accomplishment but their signature chaos and destruction.

The liar's charade is the dance of the narcissist. You can see them at work, right here in the Corporation, in meetings and conferences; you'll know them by what they do: they sap energy and focus wherever they go; they run you round and round causing *entire groups of talented people to implode*. BOOM," Gwen banged the table. "Talent's gone. When liars are allowed to win, everything falls apart."

A memory unearthed itself then, proffered by Cara's mind like a well-preserved artifact. Cara was at work riding a bicycle in an exercise pod next to a woman who went off on a five-minute rant about someone. She spoke at length about how 'the woman got a promotion' and 'injured the poor man's family' by having an affair, as if the promotion and the affair were equally egregious, *related crimes*. Mention of the *man harming his family* was conspicuously absent... but even so, the intensity of the narrator's indignation, by itself, held Cara's attention until the woman disclosed she didn't know any of the people in her story.

"Gossip alone is nothing," Gwen said. "Rumors are only a problem if Roger's passing them around, because Roger uses gossip to fulfill the RM's agenda."

"Roger?" Cara considered the unexpected twist, and then dismissed it. "Rumors can temporarily affect your reputation, but they can't cause you to lose your job."

"No, but the RM can," said Gwen, "and your coworkers won't question it because they already heard why you got fired in the hallway."

Roger Ennis was a caricature of the type of person Cara tended to avoid. He was obsequious to the extreme with management and if he'd meant it as a joke it would actually have been funny, but Roger was always on the con. With his coworkers, he play-acted the affable equal, but he was just a plaster-of-Paris replica of the 'regular guy'. He was good at his game but what gave him away was how his smile never matched the expression in his eyes. He was a walking, talking peephole board with a smile painted on his plywood facade.

Roger had risen surprising far up in the Corporation given that he was rarely seen doing his job. He squandered his days wandering from lab to lab chatting with people and interrupting their work. On his visits, Roger frequently boasted that he'd been instrumental in his boss's promotion to Regional Manager. Cara didn't know if this was true, but based on the social submissiveness that Roger enjoyed from his coworkers, it did seem that people believed Roger had leverage.

"Roger's a creep," Cara acknowledged, "but neither he nor the RM have the power to fire someone without proof of misconduct. They have to follow HR protocol and people, *like yourself*, who are clearly meeting their job requirements have nothing to fear."

"Roger's the river on which all things flow to management," Gwen said. "He's one of their informants and in return if he wants to set someone up to look like they're not doing their job, he can pull it off."

Cara let slip a scoff. "Come on! Undermining competent people is outside *every imaginable*, wise-business-practice. It's not just counter productive, it's financial suicide."

"It's happening."

Cara sighed. "Then it's a rogue practice being done in secret and all you have to do is expose it."

"It may be against C policy, it may even be against the *law*, but it's no secret," retorted Gwen.

"If someone's a threat to the RM, Roger sets them up to look incompetent."

Cara folded her arms across her chest. "How?"

"Intimidation and blackmail," Gwen replied, "plus they have someone in HR who covers for them. You can't report anything about management to HR. Years ago you could, but everything's changed."

The memory of Gwen from the evening before popped like a soap bubble and in its place came an old memory, the image of her mother's face, and the sound of her voice saying, "*Nothing will ever be the same.*"

Cara learned history in school and though she'd read about the period leading up to the war *many* times, there was still no end to the enigma. How the war started, why the war continued, how to address the crippling side effects... and no matter how many public officials addressed these questions, the answers never made sense. And now, here was Gwen's situation, which sounded suspiciously like *yet another* opportunistic by-product of the war. One more example of '*since no one's been looking for ten years, I think I'll just help myself to this, and this...*'

At the start of the new World War, the political structure of big business was reshaped to mirror the newest department of national security, the Domestic Military. No one questioned the 'restructuring', as it was called, because aligning the country's resources to the war effort seemed to be in everyone's best interest. Such a swift and radical change, however, was bound to have unintended, negative repercussions and an unquestioning protection of management by HR was a conceivable, collateral consequence.

Cara could rationalize with the best, but negative fallout was still negative even if how it happened was understandable. A regional manager who routinely terrified his reports was a big problem. Cara did agree with Gwen that this problem should be addressed, but who could take on such a challenge?

"Your boss is in management," Cara observed. "Even as a low-level manager he's three tiers higher in rank than Roger. He could at least report *Roger's* abuses," she proposed.

Gwen groaned. "Manager, smanager. The only thing that matters, is whether you're in the management *club*, or not. If you *are*... or you're a club *mascot* like Roger, then HR will protect you. You could be a megalomaniac leech consorting with killers, but no matter. If you're in, you're in."

"But your boss is not," Cara finished.

Gwen's eyebrows converged like dark clouds before a storm. "No."

"What was the original conflict," Cara asked, "and was it between your boss and the RM or your boss and Roger?"

"I've no idea. All I know is there's a dogfight, and I'm inextricably linked to the losing side."

Cara frowned.

"You're wondering why I don't know..." Gwen remarked.

"Yes!"

"It's because the blowup took place in a weekly meeting that I don't attend. I'm not *invited*, and now I know why. They don't want any honest witnesses around. But, judging by the way my boss reacted, the argument is over an undeserved accusation, and whatever it is, it's really scared him."

Although Cara found it difficult to believe Gwen could lose her job because of a localized feud, something stopped her just short from pronouncing it impossible. She wanted to. There was even a moment during dinner when she'd meant to say it aloud, *impossible*, but her lips had refused to form the word. Doubt sat like a speck of dust on her previously trusting mind, the mind that had believed her world was sensible and safe. All she had to do was brush it off and go back to her certainty that the Corporation was a haven for scientists. Her haven. But Gwen's words had wedged themselves into the doorjamb of her unconscious; now the door was propped open, with someone beckoning from inside.

It's not that Cara thought the people managing the Corporation were infallible, she just didn't think about them at all. The names and faces of the people in upper management appeared frequently in Corporation News so she knew who they were, but they were so far removed from her day to day work that they were more like NetTV personalities than people. None of them were scientists except the CEO, and he'd left the lab decades ago to start the new Finance Innovation Center. It did seem a mismatch to have a science company run by people whose sole interest was money, but that's the way it was. Thinking about it now, however, since science clearly wasn't about money the mismatch in interests did lend itself to conflicting values and, potentially, to vastly different priorities.

An image from the night before appeared in her mind, of Gwen's face in the yellow glow of a street lamp. They'd left the restaurant and ended up on a park bench.

"You don't get how Roger has more power than my boss," Gwen guessed.

But Cara had done her postdoctoral work at a military science center and had witnessed how an inexperienced Second Lieutenant had nothing over a First Sergeant who'd known the Colonel for twenty-five years.

"It sounds like your reporting manager is at a disadvantage because he's the new guy who doesn't know how things work," Cara said, "and Roger's the guy who knows everyone."

"Roger doesn't just know everyone," Gwen growled, "he's got something *on* everyone."

"What do you mean?"

"Roger tracks people on camera and keeps the footage," Gwen replied. "He's shown me digitals of employees working in labs... just to intimidate me, I'm sure. He wants me to believe that he can watch anyone, anytime, anywhere and gather information that he can use against them."

"The building wardens live-stream the security cameras," Cara pointed out. "Is Roger a warden?"

"Yes, but the digital he showed me was a top-down view, as if the camera was in the ceiling."

Cara's brows knitted together. "The security cameras are mounted on the walls."

"That's right," affirmed Gwen. "Roger puts pinhole cameras in the ceiling when he wants to spy on people. I know you won't believe it until you see it, so next time you go into a lab or office, look up at the ceiling tiles over the areas where people work and see if you can spot tiny holes in any of them. They're *very* small; you'd never see them unless you were looking." Gwen sighed impatiently. "So far I've only seen holes in tiles that I can't reach. But one day, I'll see what's above the tile behind one of those holes."

"Gwen," Cara spoke with concern, "those holes could be there for any number of reasons. You're really jumping to conclusions."

"I know what they're for," Gwen grumbled angrily. "I just can't prove it yet."

"Well, *so what* if someone watches you do your job really well," Cara rallied. "Let 'em!"

"Sadly, it's not that simple," said Gwen. "Roger's a liar and he has informants... When the people he's watching say something in front of others, he knows about it soon after, and he'll change what they meant to whatever suits him. The combination of digital and coworker-sourced information means he could create a fictitious scenario and nail anyone for anything he wants. Every situation can be twisted into whatever he or the RM want it to be."

"They'd get into a lot of trouble for installing unauthorized cameras," Cara maintained. "To authorize it, there'd have to be a legitimate, business reason such as... to investigate a person suspected of wasting time and materials."

"You mean, like Roger?" Gwen laughed. "I've never seen him work, have you?"

Cara smiled. "Well... I won't comment about Roger because he's not one of my reports, but if someone is suspected of abuses," she said, "I guess the investigation could require the use of cameras. But that's got nothing to do with you or me and anyone else who's doing their job." Gwen grew somber. "If Roger was protecting Corporation interests, I wouldn't be concerned. But Roger's only protecting himself and the RM."

"You could argue that protecting one's regional manager is the same as protecting the Corporation," Cara stated.

"Not if that manager is terrorizing the talent."

Cara fell silent.

"I know these things are hard for you to accept," Gwen said quietly, "but if a voice inside you is warning you that what I'm saying *could* be true, then *start watching Roger*. Closely. Roger's methods aren't just against C policy; they're against the law. He buys his informants, usually with cash but sometimes with special privileges. But *way*, worse than that, Roger creates an atmosphere of fear using blackmail. He finds out things about people that they don't want anyone at work to know. That's how he keeps people on a string."

"And the RM knows about this?"

"Yes."

"No manager would risk such a thing," Cara declared. "If he were found out, he'd be let go immediately."

Gwen's gaze was unwavering. "HR protects him."

Of the five hours Cara sat talking with Gwen, much of the time was taken up with stories about the people Roger had blackmailed and intimidated. The stories got worse and worse, as if Gwen had purposely started out easy to test how much Cara could stomach. Later when Cara had trouble sleeping, the faces of those people floated through her thoughts like apparitions. Cara knew all of them. Not well, but she knew their names and what projects they worked on. Some she greeted every day in the hall. All were honest, hard working people, the kind that every employer would want to have.

They were the people who made a business successful, the glue that held it together, and so the damage caused by the abuses Gwen described would cut a wide swath out of a productivity pie chart and impair the health of an untold number of environments. If only a third of Gwen's stories were even half true, the effects over time of this kind of humiliation and oppression would be devastating, not just to those individuals, but to their families and every community they touched, especially the Corporation.

Cara remembered saying to Gwen, "It would be suicide for HR to allow something like this to go on. It's one thing when 'bad' people damage other 'bad' people, but the social psychology around 'bad' people harming *clearly* innocent people is hard hitting in any community, and would be *foolish* for an employer to ignore. People literally require communal catharsis to get over 'bad' people hurting 'good' people. That's why, in movies, everyone *cheers* when the bad guys kill each other off!"

"Yes," Gwen replied, "but in real life, bad people are only afraid of other bad people and pick on the good ones who are too nice, or don't have the means, to retaliate. Institutions are *supposed* to protect good people, but what happens when they don't? And *then*, what happens when bad people are allowed to abuse the good ones over a long period of time? I'll tell you, because I'm witnessing it: the environment becomes unbalanced in every way; the abusers, *and* the people who keep the abuse a secret, become deeply disturbed. History is populated with so many examples of these scenarios that we'd call them trivial, *if they weren't so dangerous*."

Cara understood what she meant. Abuse was a contagion. If Gwen's depiction were true, Roger's perverse actions would erode the confidence and capabilities of the people who were targeted, that part was obvious. Not so obvious was the damage to the people who *knew* but did nothing to intervene on behalf of the innocent. That population of people, the entertained gawkers and the fear-filled silent, would gradually become impotent in their work and personal lives. Their decline could be rapid, or it could be slow and imperceptible, but inevitably, the lives of both victims and witnesses would wither like shade plants in the sun.

As if this one situation weren't ugly enough, Gwen believed there were fiefdoms with people like Roger and the RM all throughout the Corporation.

"The C is riddled with them," she said. "Businesses are being eaten alive by these corrupt microenvironments and it's only a matter of time before the Corporation descends into a state of abject incompetence. We're a giant walking the edge of a cliff, a Cyclops on a tightrope."

"So, why haven't I seen Roger and the RM committing these abuses?" Cara asked.

"Camouflage. People like the RM disguise themselves and hide from people like you, because they're afraid you'd expose them. In that way, you're a danger to them, but you're also a necessity. You're one of the highly trained workhorses, one of the cogs in the machine that spits out their paychecks. But one day, soon, they'll work their best horses to death and then you'll see it; everyone will.

Companies are like houses. The owner can say that he's kept the place up but when the roof leaks and the furnace breaks down, people will know he's lied. Lying is the currency of corruption; anywhere you spot chronic lying, the rot of crime is there. Once there's rot in every beam, in every business... the C will collapse."

"The scientists I work with are honest," Cara contended, "and have been doing *verifiably*, exceptional work for years. You can't put out consistently excellent work if you're a liar. It's not possible."

"Agreed," upheld Gwen, "and *you* have that experience because you seek out and collaborate with people like yourself. Start looking at the other people, the people you instinctively avoid, and listen to the things they say. Listen for their lies. Then look at the *influence* they have. They are thieves and they're in charge."

Cara frowned. "Anyone involved in stealing is—"

"Oh," Gwen interrupted with a laugh, "you won't catch them at *that*. Liars know what *cash register honesty* is; that's why they're able to conceal their cheating from honest people. But they're not good at being honest with themselves and that's how you catch them! I don't think they're capable of the subtle areas of honesty that gradually come to those of us who care about others.

Someone who tells bold-faced, bone-chilling lies, for example, has no idea about emotional honesty. They either don't know they sound coldblooded or don't know it's not a good thing. Similarly, a liar who spins delusional tales lacks psychological honesty and the disparaging gossip who laughs at misfortune has no spiritual honesty. Listen to people. Listen for these forms of personal honesty and pay attention to who is capable of them, and who is not."

"I know lots of sincere, hard working people in the Corporation," Cara insisted.

"Yes, there are honest people here," Gwen owned, "but they keep quiet. They don't speak the truth aloud if it opposes management. Many think that if they keep their mouths shut and do a good job they'll be safe; they hide behind this hope like it's a magic shield. Terrified people hiding in plain sight, accepting the unacceptable because there's nothing they can do about it. I don't know what you call that, but I call it oppression.

They do what Roger asks *even when they know it's wrong* because they think they have no choice... and so, Roger goes on collecting more and more facts about people in this division. Whatever information he doesn't need today, he hoards for tomorrow."

"What if someone has nothing to hide?" asked Cara.

"He's just collecting facts; any fact will do," said Gwen.

"What do you mean? For what?"

"To create believable lies," Gwen answered. "They know a lie works best if it's tied to a known, provable fact. Rule number one in the manipulator's guidebook: if you want people to swallow a lie, disguise it in common knowledge and dress it up so that people can gawk.

With me, Roger used the support I show my boss and whispered around that it was intimacy.

They took simple appreciation and glued a lie to it. Before Roger started that rumor, every person who works with us would have sworn that my boss wasn't someone who'd cheat on his wife and that I'd never have it. But where are those people now? Gone. The purpose of Roger's game of 'lie and subvert' is not to turn people against you, it's to give them an excuse to stay far away."

"Your friends will stand by you," Cara rejoined.

In that moment, Gwen had looked very tired in the light of the street lamp. "In life, a person just has a handful of real friends, the kind that would never turn against you... but they're rarely in your workplace. That's especially true for people in the middle tiers in the Corporation. None of us work in the town where we grew up; so we're separated from our familial identity, we work long hours, we're held to the highest standards and the only club we can hope to join is management." She pointed at Cara. "Take you, for example. People at work know very little about you outside your cv. You've only been here a few years, you're not from this state, and you don't share on a personal level because for women that's unprofessional. When men share personally, it's cute or endearing; they can even disclose inappropriately and call it joking. Not so, with middle tier women... and we're at a disadvantage because people don't know us. My point is, if Roger started a rumor about you, the people you work with would have very little with which to challenge it. And, if anyone's envious of you... well, scuttle travels farthest when *prejudice* or *jealousy's* driving it; anyone eager to judge will gobble it up. Many people, it seems, will believe whatever you tell them if it's what they want to hear."

"Then start a countercurrent conversation and gossip about the truth," proposed Cara. "I think people want to know when they're being fed a lie."

"That's probably true in healthy environments, where people get bored with dishonesty because it doesn't take you anywhere real," Gwen allowed. "But that's not what we have. Our coworkers believe Roger has the power to take away their jobs and he exploits that fear."

"If you just report it-" Cara began.

"No!" Gwen burst out in frustration. "I can't. I don't have *anyone* to back me up! Everyone's too afraid to talk. Or is in denial... the lie that defends a person from the truth they can't face... Mental comfort is more important than being fully alive, apparently.

Maybe they can't help it. Maybe denial is a continuous state of being frozen in fear, so locked in fright, that you can't even turn your head for fear of seeing something you don't want to see...

That's what we have here. Everyone fears losing their job but it's not a *conscious* thing, and because it's not conscious it's a blind spot... a weakness, that Roger exploits." Gwen looked at Cara. "You think I'm exaggerating, I can see it in your face."

"Well..." Cara faltered.

“Have you ever heard the RM say in a meeting that the Corporation is a competitive place but we’re safe in this Division with him as our leader?”

“Yes,” Cara admitted. “I’ve heard him say things like that.”

“First he shovels *that crap*,” Gwen said, “and implies we’re losers who can’t make it in the C without him. Next, he gives a recent example of how close we came to losing our jobs until he saved us, and then Roger goes from lab to lab repeating it.” Gwen leaned forward. “Didn’t you ever wonder why it’s ok for Roger to walk around all day and not get any work done?”

“It’s none of my bus-”

“If I behaved like that,” Gwen cut in, “I’d be out on the street in a *month*. How come he gets away with it?”

“I don’t know,” Cara conceded.

“It’s because Roger *is* working when he’s wandering around chatting people up; he’s forwarding the RM’s private aspirations. The C may give him his paycheck, but Roger works for the RM.”

“What kind of work?”

Gwen shrugged. “Something that’s making the RM extra cash, you can be sure of it. *Many* people in management operate this way, not just our RM. I would guess-estimate that thirty percent of the people in all four tiers of management only devote fifty percent of their time to their job description, and that they each have someone like Roger to cover for them.”

“They all have good salaries,” Cara murmured. “They don’t need a second job.”

Gwen laughed. “No. None of them are worried about paying this month’s rent. Some of them are like the RM and are after status. They fancy themselves with business cards that say CEO or COB and imagine handing them out in conferences at the extravagant resorts we all see advertised on NetTV. After all, if the leaders of Congress and the superintendents of the schools are CEOs, why can’t they be one too? They’ve no interest in the responsibilities of a real CEO; they just want the title, the vacations and the personal assistant. Pretty soon the local police precinct will have a CEO and my church’s pastor will be the CEO of St. Jude’s. Once all the firehouses have CEOs, the country’ll burn down.”

“No company can survive if thirty percent of management works on other business for half the day,” Cara declared. “Not even the Corporation could survive that!”

“That’s right. It won’t.”

As she lay in bed later that night, Cara tried to remember all the times she’d encountered the tabloid news about Gwen. Cara’s norm was to tune gossip out, so there must have been something about one of the encounters that was persuasive. Something that grabbed her attention...

The last few times she’d heard the chatter was in the restroom, but nothing convincing was said there. Then in the cafeteria, but that was just silly. When did she hear it for the first time? *Then she remembered*. It was Roger.

One afternoon, Cara was carefully removing heavy trays of hot liquids from an autoclave when Roger appeared, and began telling a sordid version of the story to someone nearby. Though Roger had never convinced Cara of anything but his need to impress, on that day, Roger’s story somehow bypassed her inclination to question new information... and the bias against an unknown woman was born.

Cara knew it was possible to make people believe practically anything if you bombarded them with it enough. But it was the first time she'd heard it, she was sure of that now, so repetition had played no part in how Roger's story was filed away unchallenged.

Cara recalled a study she'd read on the psychology of manipulation. The article said that the most effective way to incorporate a lie into the human psyche was to tell an *astounding* narrative about a *stranger* and tell it to a person *engaged in an attention-requiring task*. Ninety percent of the time, the study claimed, a person preoccupied in this way would fully absorb the *shock-line* of the story without even realizing it.

Roger had recounted the scandal as Cara was focused on securing hot liquids without scalding herself.

And, now that she thought about it, Roger *routinely* imposed his rumors on people while they were mid-experiment. People didn't like it but he didn't care. One woman who reported to Cara had said,

"I wonder if men have to listen to him at the urinal."

Shutting her eyes, Cara tried to dredge her memory for relevant information from other articles. One book she'd read said that gossip was most influential in 'closed societies'. If the leader of a closed society was benevolent, the gossip tended to be benign, but if instead the leader was oppressive, the gossip was often cruel and manipulative. This was partly because corrupt leaders assigned people the job of pressuring members of the society to accept the leader's word as truth. In such societies, lies were routinely concocted to vilify anyone the leader saw as a threat and the lies were disseminated primarily through gossip channels.

The people considered threats to the leader were encircled in lies, making it impossible for them to have genuine exchanges with people. Every interaction was tainted with false impressions. This isolated them and if they suspected the isolation was intentional, they became afraid. After that, it was simple to intensify the fear with events that startled, unnerved and alarmed.

Eventually the person would overreact to the abuse and appear deranged or despicable in public thereby adding the final brush stroke to the portrait painted by the rumor mill.

The author wrote:

In a closed society, all a leader needs to subdue an opponent is one, good lie. That's because, once the first lie is in place, it's easy to add a related lie, then another, and another...until the 'threat' is seen as deviant. Then, in time, one can begin to tack on *unrelated* lies without raising suspicion. Whole, new realities can be created in this way where devils are saints and angels demons. The only other required ingredient is a society too afraid to speak up or too complacent to care.

Cara thought about Roger's habit of cornering people in the hallway to pass on the rumor du jour, or tell a joke he'd heard from some 'so and so' who's name was meant to impress, and inevitably talk on and on about his inseparable bond with the RM. He seemed to have no idea that people were there to work or had to go home at the end of the day. Since his impositions were time consuming, Cara was baffled that people allowed him so much latitude. She'd even wondered if Roger had suffered a tragic event that she didn't know about and people were being patient out of kindness. Since Roger's ego needed endless praise, another explanation was that people pitied him. When Cara mentioned this at dinner, Gwen had laughed.

“You’re right about Roger’s ego, but people put up with his garbage because they’re afraid and not just because he’s the RM’s mouthpiece. Roger will turn on you over the *tiniest* things, then go to the RM and lie about you. The only people who are somewhat safe from his vindictive mind are the people who do his bidding. But if they refuse him or rebel, they end up *cannibalized* like my boss. The outer part of him is there, but the inner part’s eaten *clean away*. By fear.”

“I don’t understand how he got sucked in so deeply,” Cara said.

Gwen pulled in a long breath and let it out with a grunt. “Uh! How to explain... First of all, my boss is a shy person. The fact that he became the ‘chosen one’ shows how desperate the RM was for fresh meat, because you can’t shove someone who’s shy into the spotlight and expect them to hold up for long, at least not without a follow-up act! But there was none. The RM himself has no technical depth and the other researchers in his lab are doing sham science. My boss is the best they have, and because of that (or so we thought), he became the pivotal figure in the RM’s core group soon after he was hired.

They made a big fuss over of him and right away started promising things. The RM paraded him around at upper-echelon parties then claimed my boss had impressed people at those events. The RM acted like he wanted to groom him, assist his climb into management.”

“And it went to his head...” Cara guessed.

“It did, but that’s not the point. The problem was, it was just a hoax. The RM roped my boss in by wooing his ego, but didn’t actually think highly of him at all. He just wanted to use him. There were things that didn’t sit right with me from the very beginning. I didn’t like that the RM puffed him up with disingenuous praise but then he began extolling *fictitious* qualities far and wide, instead of real ones! Next thing we knew, the RM assigned us to projects that required expertise we didn’t have. We were assured everything would be fine, that the RM would take the fall if things didn’t work out. He told us we just had to do our best.

That’s when I realized that my boss’s true capabilities weren’t being ignored; they’d been purposely obscured. No one in management seemed to be aware of his actual professional experience. They only seemed to know what the RM told them. This left my boss standing not on his own merit, but on whomever the RM said he was.” Gwen paused. “Do you see the problem?”

“Yes,” Cara acknowledged quietly.

“The manager giveth, and the manager taketh away. He gave my boss a grandiose, false reputation, *so he could threaten to take it away*, and that’s what he did. My boss fell from shining star to toilet scrubber overnight.”

“*Something* had to precipitate the fall,” Cara reasoned.

“Nothing legitimate!” Gwen maintained. “I may not know the argument but I know there’s nothing to argue about. We’ve done everything we’ve been asked to do. This is a game the RM plays to get people like my boss to jump through a hoop at his command.”

“And if they don’t, what does the RM do?”

“He sets them up to fail,” Gwen answered. “It’s easy to do with an inexperienced person, someone new to the division like my boss. The first part of the setup was when the RM gave us the ‘extremely important project’ that we weren’t qualified to do and told my boss it could ‘only be entrusted to him.’ The RM appealed to ego once again, telling him he was the only one in his lab who could do it. Along with the ‘important work’ came special privileges, which included ‘bending the rules’ as necessary to meet the deadlines.

The second part of the setup was to make it so my boss *had* to bend the rules. The RM gave him additional responsibilities on top of the project, forcing him to work late every night to keep up with everything. Eventually he became so exhausted that he started oversleeping and once he missed a division-wide meeting. He didn't worry about it because he was prioritizing the project as he'd been told to do.

Then came the day when the RM shamed my boss in front of the team. He was accused of *acting privileged* and *irresponsible* for shirking his organizational duties. You see, we'd been given permission, but the agreement was unwritten and without witnesses. A handshake's only as good as the person who offers it..."

Gwen's eyes narrowed. "That was just the beginning. Since then, it's happened over and over. It turns out, once you openly discredit someone, you can punish them publically because they look like they deserve it. My boss is in *that* phase... merciless, public bashing and now I've found out there were others before him who received the same treatment! The RM has a history of subjugating people, of making them so dependent and so vulnerable that he has both the means to save and destroy. Some say he first damages their social and professional reputations so they can't leave and then destroys their self-esteem so they don't want to."

"That's ridiculous," Cara stated. "You can leave. You and your manager can transfer somewhere else in the Corporation."

Gwen shook her head sadly. "He ruins people to the point where no one wants you. The best way to damage a person of talent and integrity is to misrepresent them... hide their goodness from other good people so you have no allies and no place to go. People don't want to deal with you if it's going to be a hassle. Some might even be afraid of the RM."

"What if your boss isn't as good as you think?" Cara proposed. "Maybe he did something that you don't know about, something that threatened the RM's career."

Gwen shuddered. "This is the kind of doubt the RM loves to hear. The answer is, no, he didn't and couldn't have. To even try something big like ruining the career of a regional manager, a person would have to have access to influential people above division level. But my boss has no connections like that, he's too new. He's practically right out of grad school." She paused.

"He's like *you*."

Cara felt a snag in her breath. The personal reference had been packed with innuendo as if Gwen had come to Cara for a reason she'd not yet disclosed. Feeling reticent to expose this sudden suspicion, Cara let Gwen continue on uninterrupted.

"I was confused by it all at first," Gwen recounted. "But not any more. My boss didn't do anything wrong. He threw his heart and soul into doing a great job. And for what? I'll tell you! So that a sicko could play a cruel game with him... a game, as it turns out, they've played on people many times before."

"These other people... What did he do to them?" Cara asked.

Gwen put her hand to her forehead as if the thought of answering gave her a headache. "The same thing he's doing to my boss. The back and forth, the 'in favor' then 'out of favor'. Never knowing what you've done wrong because what's right today could be wrong tomorrow. And you can never trust what the RM says, because he'll deny he said it when it suits him." Gwen let out a long, shaky breath. "I did hear a little bit about what happened during one of the meetings *I'm not invited to*, because I overheard Roger talking about it. My boss was told he was a failure because he fell short of a project goal. The accusation wasn't just unfair; it was completely inaccurate. I'm witness to the experiments and the data that was collected, as are others. The work is solid; the problem is the *project*."

The goals of the project are unrealistic... no, that's an understatement. The whole project is a *joke*. It's high risk for *many* reasons, so no one wanted to take it on. Upper management must have had some political, PR, or a legal liability reason to put the project on the books, because there's no reasonable scientific or financial rationale. My boss accepted it partly as a favor to the RM *who he believed* had taken him under his wing as his protégé, but mainly because the RM *promised us* that we would suffer no negative consequences if the project went south.

Oh, and more! The RM *assured* my boss that, *no matter what*, he would *reward* him for his 'courage' in taking on a project no one else would touch. We were told the project timeline was just a 'guide', that all the deadlines were flexible, so we accepted it on *those terms*. But then, only a month later, my boss was shamed for not meeting a project goal *on time*. He was so shocked the RM would turn on him like that, that he walked around in a daze for a week. Small group disgrace is bad enough, but what happened after that was a nightmare. The RM began humiliating him, randomly, in large venues."

"Where?"

"Anywhere there was an audience: in division-wide meetings, project discussions with management, science forums...and always without warning. The attacks were unpredictable in both time and topic. Sometimes the RM condemned his work; other times he criticized his character. Plus, who *knew* what all he was saying behind our backs! We were dealing with the mad hatter. You never knew when or where he'd strike, so to protect ourselves we had to expect it all the time."

"What accusations did he make?"

"How many do you want to hear? He's called my boss 'stupid', 'worthless,' 'technically incompetent'... The RM publically claimed certain projects of ours were 'failures' that we'd been *congratulated for* in private! Then he started blaming my boss for anything that went wrong: the RM's mistakes, other people's mistakes and things that were the fault of *no one*. These random attacks went on for many months and then everything switched! Suddenly, he was being praised again! So, my boss thought it was over. He decided it had been some kind of deranged hazing process, but it didn't feel like that to me. I suspected something else was coming and, sure enough, we were handed *another* project that was worse than the one before. The goals were impossible. That's when my boss finally realized he was in big trouble. There was no way to meet the demands of this new project and there was no way to refuse it."

"That's not true," Cara protested. "If other people refused these projects, they'll understand that he wants to. He needs to go to someone above the RM's tier and request a transfer."

"He tried, but they'd burnt all his bridges."

"Who did?" Cara quizzed. "How?"

Gwen winced as if pained by a memory. "Before the public humiliations even began, Roger had spread rumors that my boss was a failure to people in the other divisions. Gossip, you see. That's Roger's *real* job. He sets lies like animal traps. When the project fails, snap! You're the failure he said you were."

Cara slowly shook her head. "I don't see..."

"Roger smeared my boss's reputation with gossip long before the project failed. The public humiliations were just nails in the coffin." Then Gwen snorted sarcastically. "We could make this into a HoloGame and call it 'Kill the Golden Boy!'" Then she eyed Cara carefully. "You still don't get it, do you?"

"No. Because I don't see the point of--"

“Control,” Gwen interrupted. “My boss has two choices now, to leave the Corporation or do everything the RM tells him. Everything.”

Cara leaned back on the park bench. “I can believe this happened to one person... two, tops.”

“At least a dozen people have had their careers derailed in this way,” said Gwen. “Mostly men, but there’ve been a couple of women too. This is a well-oiled machine.”

“Where are they now?” Cara asked. “All these ‘derailed’ people?”

“Gone.”

“What! Where?” Cara demanded.

Gwen didn’t answer right away. Instead, she sat frowning as if preoccupied with stormy thoughts. In the ensuing silence, Cara found herself studying Gwen’s face.

She didn’t sense anything phony about Gwen. The distress she displayed and the anger she voiced at the injustice she claimed to have witnessed...all came without affectation. It was possible that this was all an act but then there would have to be a selfish agenda and, so far, none had been revealed. Gwen hadn’t asked for anything, not even sympathy. She did veer twice on the subject line as if she was hinting at something... but Cara sensed no self-seeking design. Finally, Gwen responded. “It was hard for me to understand but I’ve got it straight now, but only because I’ve gone around talking to people. The RM attained his position by taking on projects that management desperately needed someone to handle, but no one would touch, either because they knew the projects would fail or because they weren’t quite...on the up and up. The RM takes them on, gets brownie points for his willingness to handle messes, then he puts unsuspecting people in charge. If the project crashes, the RM pins the failure on the *victim-in-charge* and never has to take the fall. If the fall-guy bucks the system, they find a way to prove he’s insubordinate, or worse.”

“Who told you all this?”

“People who hate what’s going on. They’ve watched it happen again and again; they’re repulsed by it, but too terrified to do anything. They’ll talk to me because they know me, and know I’ll never betray their names but they won’t talk openly about it. Would you? They’re afraid they’ll be next. *Ha! After me.*”

“What’s your manager going to do now?” Cara asked.

“My boss is doing what any normal, person in his situation would do; he’s falling into a deep depression and, my guess is, that’s part of the plan. Depression, freezing in place, an inability to defend oneself... these are the desired end-products of the well-oiled machine. But it’ll get worse, because guess what happens to people who are persecuted with false accusations for an extended period of time?”

Cara thought a moment and then replied, “I don’t know.”

“It actually starts happening,” said Gwen.

“*What* does?”

Gwen answered, “When this kind of constant attack is done to you, the shock of it on your system causes you to start displaying behaviors... mannerisms that aren’t yours, but instead are like echoes... reverberations of the false words uttered against you.”

“I don’t...” Cara began to say, but then she felt herself go weak, as if her body grasped what her mind could not.

“The strain and pressure of misrepresentation about your ability and person... it changes you...” murmured Gwen. “It changes you to know that someone would be willing to mistreat you this way, and you can sense that the people around you are wondering if the rumors they’re hearing about you are true. It isolates you and, I tell you, that isolation is *planned*. People who’ve

practiced cruelty know that, when you're stuck like this... accused of things you didn't do but have no means to defend yourself... most people become anxious and depressed and begin to behave oddly. Then the perpetrators can point you out to others and claim you're unstable. There's no magic in this world, just cause and effect. You don't have a fully functioning, well-adjusted person suddenly turn into an anxious mess without an equally sudden cause. Depression and anxiety always come from somewhere but sometimes the cause is hidden."

"Have you suggested he see a counselor?" Cara asked.

"Yes, and I keep an eye on him because ...well," Gwen wavered. "This will be hard for you to hear, but some of the RM's previous victims claimed that a chemical was put into their drinking water, a neurotoxin that caused nervous ticks, trembling hands and other neurological disturbances. Since the dose was dilute they didn't realize it at first, but over time they began to look and act peculiar."

"What was the chemical?"

"The active ingredient of a pesticide," Gwen answered. "Something they could pass off as an accidental, over-exposure to a common chemical if it was discovered in a blood test. But he hasn't developed a palsy or anything like that."

Cara felt rattled by this grim twist in the tale but she managed to ask, "How's his state of mind?"

"Right where the RM wants it," Gwen growled. "My boss has been in a constant state of internal panic for months and it *shows*."

"If the RM is as irresponsible as you claim," Cara said, "the leadership above him needs to be told."

Gwen sighed. "The people in the upper tiers know all about it, just like HR. That's the only way something like this could go on for all these years."

Cara let out a whistle. "If *that's* true, then there's something very big at stake here!"

Gwen's shoulders sank dejectedly. "I've no idea what that would be. I just want to find a way to counteract how badly they've damaged my boss's reputation."

"I hope you're not thinking that *I* can," Cara warned.

"No. I realize you're not in a position to help any more than I am," Gwen said, and dropped into a preoccupied silence.

A moment later, Cara said, "What if you were able to get, say... ten other people to come forward and expose this with you?"

"Roger's gossip committee creates a cover story that's so... *convoluted* that no one has the time or resources to get at the truth, even if they dared. Without proof of what's going on, people have no choice but to leave it alone." Suddenly Gwen smiled. "There is *one* person who speaks her mind. Rachel Zeff. Do you know her?"

"I know who she is."

Gwen chuckled. "She told the RM that he's *ugly inside*."

"What!"

"Yes, after a meeting, I heard her say it to him. I know what she means, too. People who spend their time thinking about how to dominate others and how to abuse the ones they *can't*, are repulsive no matter how pretty they appear on the outside." Gwen grinned. "And behind his back Rachel calls him *the ogre* or *he who scares small children*."

They laughed.

"Calling him an ogre doesn't seem so silly when you look at how the RM's oppression is eating away the sense of purpose in this division. Maybe all the grotesque creatures in fairytales are based on real people."

“Human Resources may be protecting the RM in the conflict he has with your boss, but *you* can go to them. The disagreement has nothing to do with you,” Cara reminded.

Gwen laughed sarcastically. “You’ve *got* to be kidding! Have you forgotten about the *rumor* about me?”

“Gossip? HR won’t even have heard it,” Cara asserted.

“You underestimate Roger. By now he has personally delivered the rumor to them.”

“HR can’t discount what you have to say because of a rumor,” Cara argued.

“Not to my face, not legitimately, but it gives them a socially acceptable excuse to find a bogus reason to blow me off, and they’ll appear judicious to their superiors for doing so. My coming forward would be a problem to *keep quiet*, not solve, and the arranged rumor is their escape hatch. Think about it; HR’s job is to guard stockholder dividends by protecting the C from liability which, when translated, means *they protect management*. Human Resources in the Corporation is a joke, a disguise; it’s *Manager Recourses* in a frilly frock.”

Gwen looked up at the night sky. “They did to me what they’ve done to many before me: used rumor to turn a hardworking, strong minded woman into a weirdo, a bitch or a slut.”

“But why do they care about you, if it’s your manager they’re trying to rein in?” Cara asked.

Gwen shrugged. “Maybe I’m slowing down his demise by helping him produce quality work, and I’m the crutch that has to be kicked out from under him. Maybe it’s because they know I’m against what they’re doing and they’re afraid I’ll speak out, so they’re trying to discredit me to the extent that no one will believe a word I say. I’m in the way or I’m a risk, take your pick.”

Suddenly feeling exhausted, Cara leaned her elbows on her knees and rested her chin in her palms. “There’s *got* to be a angle they haven’t covered,” she muttered.

Gwen snorted. “Let me know if you spot one. The RM uses tried and true scare tactics to keep people under his thumb. The gossip about me is a good example of the tricks they pull. They know that if a woman is pitted against a man, people will believe the unproven gossip about her before they’ll believe proof about him, even when people think the man’s a jerk. That’s how it is and they use it like a weapon.

Social rules box women in more tightly than men, and you just have to recognize when and where the rules will be used against you. In a situation like mine, smart women never go to HR because they know HR thinks nothing of inflicting social embarrassment. Any woman who goes to HR over a conflict with a man *in management* will be welcomed with shame, condescension and a coordinated effort to shock them into emotional paralysis.

If they see you as naïve, they’ll use (and I do mean *use*) an HR woman to meet with you. She’ll make you feel safe so you’ll spill your guts and then they’ll twist all the information you give them to their advantage.

Or, they’ll give you an HR guy who’ll make slimy comments of appreciation about your looks. You know, the kind of flattery that’s like the piece of candy a creeper gives to little girls. Eating the candy, accepting the flattery... they’re the same. *It’s magic candy*, the creeper says. *If you accept it, it turns bad little girls into good little girls who regain big HR daddy’s approval*. All you have to do is take the candy you’re being offered, go back to work and keep your mouth shut. If you do that, we’ll forgive you. Never mind that you never did anything wrong, that actually you did something very right and brave but because of HR’s greed and cowardice, destructive agents like the RM are still at large.”

“If you think HR will treat you like that,” Cara said, “record the conversation and report them.”

“Oh, HR would never expose themselves in a way that would allow you to challenge them. You forget, this is *their* game; they’re practiced. The rumor about me doesn’t have to be true; it just

has to *exist* for HR to say I'm a questionable informant, an unreliable source. But they'll never say that to *me*. Social norms give them the pretext to brush me off, and social delicacy allows them to never discuss their reasons aloud. Secrecy is their power; it's the glue that holds liars together, allowing them to smother reality so they can feel good about themselves."

"The people in HR can't *all* discount you because of a rumor," Cara disagreed. "Go to another facility, another state. There's got to be someone you can talk to."

Gwen groaned in frustration. "Cara! Try to envision a *woman* with a tarnished reputation standing up against a *man who is a regional manager*. No chance in hell! And all the RM had to do was manufacture a story and pass it around."

Cara folded her arms across her chest but couldn't find the words to argue in protest.

"Remember," Gwen said, "it's HR's job to bury a situation like this. Once the problem is bound, gagged and stuffed in a closet, justifying their treatment of the person is just a rationalization away. Roger will provide his friends in HR with all the 'evidence' they need to whitewash the past and fake a conscience." Then Gwen gave a dry chuckle. "I understand your incredulity because it was my state of mind only a few months ago. At first, I completely ignored the rumor about me because I couldn't imagine anyone would believe it. I said to myself, *a thing that isn't real can't harm me*, but I was wrong. It turns out that if some of the people around you want to believe something bad about you and the rest begin to wonder if it's true, that's *their* reality, and it becomes *your* reality every time you pass them in the hall.

I understand now, but it had to happen to me before I could believe it was possible for the machine to create a false persona about *me* and make it stick. Maybe they could do that with some other guy, I thought, but not *me*."

Gwen stared at the moon for a while and then spoke again. "An important thing happens when you're accused of things that're literally the *exact opposite* of who you've been your whole life... and then experience ill-treatment from people who decide the lies are true. You learn the power of a lie. A person hasn't really matured until they learn that one lie can destroy what took a lifetime to build.

Most people think of a lie as something that's started by one person. You think, *that can't hurt me*, and you're probably right. But a lie told by a group of people operating in a systematic way certainly can. They can't destroy the truth forever, but it can feel like it." Gwen closed her eyes. "You just have to ignore the fact that people are insulting you, trying to harm you... because it's irrelevant and so are they. The only thing that matters is the truth. Focus *just on that*, and you'll feel much better."

"That's not enough," Cara declared. "You have to combat lies with the truth." She squinted at Gwen in the dim light. "How long have you worked for the Corporation?"

"Fifteen years," she replied, "but in this division I'm about as new as you."

"You'd think people would realize they don't have enough information about you to judge whether or not a rumor is true, and that would be reason enough put it out of their minds," Cara remarked.

"That's what you would do," said Gwen, "but, in a fear-filled community, people only cut you break if you're *just like them*. 'Just like me' means you grew up where I did or you like the things I like, know the things I know, but most importantly, *you think like I think*. But *strangers* are people filled with countless unknown experiences, any one of which could provoke them into doing unimaginable and *horrifying* things at any moment. Isn't that what the fright-flicks tell us? And so it goes, that again and again people get fooled by the scummy conman who *pretends* to be *just like them*, instead of believing the honest person who's different.

That's how Roger fools people. He makes them think he's like them. He lets them think they can trust him until he doesn't need them anymore."

"You know... if you let enough time pass, the gossips will eventually get bored and pick on someone else," Cara said.

"That's what my boss thought. He believed *if he just hung in there*, he'd prove his value and the RM would let his false grievances go. But that's not what happened. Instead, he's trapped in a revolving door where the fear of public humiliation is chasing him and the promise of success is forever out of reach."

Outside Cara's apartment window, a row of evergreens stood in black silhouette against the morning sky, like soldiers defending the rising sun. She watched as the objects of the world gradually appeared and took on color as the everyday miracle of light dissolved the darkness. She wondered whether Gwen had any idea that, in the previous evening's conversation, she'd described a closed society run by a narcissist. Cara had read that a narcissist was a person so highly motivated to disguise their poor self-image, that they'd sacrifice everything to surround themselves with a comfortable illusion. Fantasies are often innocent... but if people spend too much time with them, as narcissists tend to do, they run the risk of entering into delusion. Once delusion has taken hold, if a narcissist is confronted with facts that contradict their preferred reality, they can become destructive to themselves and others. The amount of damage that a delusional narcissist can cause depends on the amount of power they manage to obtain.

The sounds of early morning traffic told her she should already be on her way to work, but Cara didn't move. Instead, she lay there trying to remember if she knew anything about Roger besides his preference for talking rather than working. She did come upon him once in the hallway handing money to a coworker. Cara only remembered it because he'd made a point of seeking her out to explain the interaction.

Cara knew who Gwen's supervising manager was as well. She'd attended two of his seminars, the first being soon after he'd joined the Corporation but the second had been very recent. In the first presentation, it was plain to see that he was a bright scientist who loved his work. But the second seminar was very different; he didn't even look the same. He'd changed from a confident, intelligent presenter to a sleep-deprived man who was scattered in thought and clumsy in manner. Cara had just assumed he was going through a rough patch in life and hadn't thought anything of it.

Seized by a sudden memory, Cara sat straight up in bed.

"Angelique!"

How had she forgotten? The encounter had been brief, certainly, but it stunned her to think she'd spent an entire evening listening to Gwen's predicament without recalling Angelique!

Cara had only been in the Corporation for two months when she'd met her. Angelique worked in a lab that contained some shared, specialized equipment and Cara had signed up to use one of them. When the instrument Cara failed upon startup, Angelique was the one who came to her aid. Roger was in the lab as well but he was busy talking to someone about himself.

Angelique nodded in his direction and whispered, "When he ambushes a woman, he recites his fictional, female conquest stories. I've heard him tell them a hundred times. If he waylays a man, he'll rattle on about his close ties with management." She affected a snoring sound and rolled her eyes.

“He must not realize how he sounds,” Cara replied.

“You’re probably right,” Angelique concurred. “Because *if he knew*, he’d crawl into a hole and never come out.”

Now, with a pang of anguish, Cara realized she’d tried to explain away Roger to Gwen the same way she had to Angelique. The difference was, Gwen did not agree.

“You’re *wrong*, Cara. Roger knows exactly what he’s doing,” Gwen said, her face crimson with unspent anger. “He uses social norms to exploit the polite fools who follow them. He may not be as sophisticated as HR but he understands the game and he plays it everyday. You’ve seen what he does.

He knows he can interrupt you while you’re working as long as he acts jovial and friendly for everyone to see. That way, *you* look discourteous if you react impatiently. Once you’re trapped like that with others watching, he’s free to drop his couched insults, intimidate you or humiliate as he chooses.

He also takes advantage of the fact that some social rules are different for men than they are for women. Like... because only men are allowed to talk about sex with impunity in the workplace, Roger purposely brings up sex in conversations with women to put them at a disadvantage. They can’t say what they’re really thinking, that men who talk about sex all the time aren’t getting any, because they’d be labeled *bitch*, then shunned, and locked out of career opportunities.

When Roger talks to *men*,” Gwen continued, “he rubs their misfortunes in their faces in front of their coworkers. He seems to have a particular dislike for men with quiet dignity, but he only picks on *them* when they’re down. The other day, Roger talked for fifteen minutes about his ‘wife of forty years’ to a guy who Roger knows *damn well* is going through a devastating divorce. Why? Because the guy’s well-liked, does great work and Roger’s envious. That’s Roger. Always has to have the upper hand.”

Cara’s mind flicked back to Angelique, to a time a few months after they’d met.

“We were wrong about Roger,” she told Cara. “He’s a jerk on purpose.”

“Why do you think that?” Cara quizzed.

“Some people behave badly and don’t realize what they’re doing. Other people behave badly and then watch closely in the hope of catching a glimpse of the discomfort they caused. Roger’s the latter. I’ve noticed he particularly dislikes women with self-confidence so *you* better watch out. I wonder how a guy gets like that. I’ve seen it before... Maybe some woman shamed them or abandoned them, and they take it out on any woman that reminds them of her.”

Cara could feel her heart pounding. She threw off the sheets and planted her feet on the floor. There was no stopping the comparison now; her mind flipped from one woman to the other. At first, the memories trickled in, but soon her mind was filled with the conversations with both women running in parallel, flowing together in a river of realizations.

“Roger feels threatened by me,” Angelique said.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” Angelique picked anxiously at her nails. “But I don’t think there’s anything I can do about it. I’ve already tried everything. I listened to his incessant prattle, I tried explaining who I am... just, you know, through casual conversation. I thought if he understood who I was he’d know he had nothing to fear. But he didn’t respond to those approaches at all. I tried flattery too, to build him up, but his ego’s like a black hole that can never be filled. There isn’t enough praise in the universe to stop it up.”

“If he’s afraid, maybe there’s something specific that he fears,” Cara suggested.

"I thought about that," Angelique replied. "I remembered that my boss teased him once that I did more work in a day than Roger pulled off in a week. So I thought maybe Roger feared I'd get the promotion he wants."

"Sounds like he's jealous," Cara said with a shrug. "So what?"

Angelique looked apprehensive. "I don't know how to explain it, but Roger's dangerous. People know not to get on his bad side."

Angelique's concern had made no sense to Cara. She and Roger worked in the same lab and on some of the same projects. For their work to be successful, they'd need to cooperate. Plus, Roger seemed like someone who would protect his turf, including the people in it, especially someone like Angelique who was helpful to everyone.

Gwen's voice wafted into her thoughts.

"Sometimes the only thing you're doing wrong is that you're doing everything right," she said.

"If you're doing a good job" Cara responded, "you have nothing to fear!"

"Not true. I have to fear the people who *aren't* doing their job, and who don't want to look 'less-than' when compared to me come review time. People like Roger."

"He doesn't pay you. He's not your reporting manager."

"When Roger feels threatened by you, he'll get you on the RM's blacklist, even if he has to make something up," Gwen said. "Roger may just be the court jester, but the court jester is well placed to feed lies to the king."

Cara's mind swapped time and place again.

"You're a good contributor," she assured Angelique. "You don't have anything to worry about."

Angelique studied Cara for a moment as if judging how to reply. "*They don't care about good work or good workers.* It isn't about producing a good product anymore... and hasn't been for a long time. All the new technology I've seen has been sabotaged for political reasons or sold off to the highest bidder before it was tested."

"Come on," Cara reasoned. "How could the Corporation still be functioning if that were true?"

"They make all their money on the vaccine but the rest is... well... The whole place is coming apart."

Cara had only known Angelique six months when she left without warning. She quit, or so Cara was told. When Cara asked about her, hoping to know how to contact her, one of Angelique's coworkers had said,

"Nobody knows where she went."

Cara now vividly recalled the strange social pressure she'd felt to stop inquiring about Angelique. An eerie sensation crawled up the back of her neck. She'd given in to that pressure. She stopped asking. Why? Cara had no answer for herself.

She jumped from the bed and crossed the room to her computer. "Urie," she told it, "Find Angelique Fabron in the corporate catalog."

"There are zero results."

"Find Angelique Fabron in 'past employees'."

"There are zero results."

Cara sat down and stared at the keyboard. She wanted to write down her thoughts but the Corporation had access to all of her electronics. How could she do it privately? A memory struck out of nowhere.

Cara called into work claiming to have a fever with the flu and then went straight to an almost forgotten place in the back of her closet. There it was, her mother's old suitcase, and among the items inside was a booklet with blank sheets of paper and a box of pens and pencils.

She hesitated. She'd done it in kindergarten, she reminded herself. How hard could it be? The pens hadn't worked in at least a decade, but the pencils surely would. After sharpening one of the pencils with a potato peeler, she steered her hand in the awkward art of drawing letters on a page, and wrote down everything she knew about Angelique, Gwen and Roger.