



# Unnatural Selection

a novel

R. A. Finlayson

**Gene Pool: Unnatural Selection**

**Book One**

**By**

**R. A. Finlayson**

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This book is dedicated to  
My extraordinary daughter  
Sara ReAnna Finlayson  
Through whose eyes  
I see the world  
Anew

## PROLOGUE

345NV-18A-CA21-0353E knew that when the soft, overhead light faded it was time for her and her teammates to crawl out of their vine-bunks and quickly move down the long, chalk-white hallway and out to the orchards. 345 relished the soft light because it warmed her deep-green skin and made her body feel strong, while the work in the orchards made her tired and weak. She knew, in some deep part of her being, that this work was supposed to make her feel happy and useful. It didn't. She yearned for something else, something more, but she had no idea what.

A bell rang. 345 and her teammates started moving towards the doors. Each day as they filed out, she would look into their eyes to see if they shared the yearning and confusion she felt. And each day she saw only the same muted expression on their faces and quiet resignation in their eyes. Whenever she tried to communicate with any of them, they looked away.

Watching them, always watching them, were the Handlers. Whenever 345 risked a glance at the Handlers, she saw in their eyes a muddled mixture of boredom, benign contempt and impatient anger. The Handlers were cruel. They treated her and her teammates badly. She hated them and knew that her teammates feared them as much as she did. But when she tried to talk to them, no sound would come out of her mouth.

The thick leaf doors rolled up as the team approached, allowing the outside air, cool and sweet, to drift in against the steamy heat of the Plant. The orchards were heavy with fruit and a pungent bouquet of ripe citrus filled the air.

345 drew a deep breath. Oranges, lemons, grapefruit, limes, tangerines, clementines, raspberries, avocados; each had its own intensely distinctive scent. The aromas mingled in her nostrils. A smile spread across her face, loosening the persistent tightness around her mouth. This was the only aspect of her work she enjoyed -- the scent of the groves.

As her team moved through the leaf door and outside the Plant, she was greeted as she was every night by the huge, vaulted dome of unending blackness and the tiny, wondrous dots of light. There were so many! It unsettled her, but also made her feel connected to an unboundedness that was so much larger than her team, the Handlers, the work and the groves.

As 345 followed her teammates through the vine-fences down the long path towards the groves, they unexpectedly slowed to a shuffle. Something was different. The gated path into the groves was closed. Her teammates stopped, uncertain what to do.

“Move, move, move,” the Handlers shouted, their voices sharp and hateful to her ears. The Handlers were pointing at another opening in the fence she had not noticed before. It did not open into the groves, but took them sideways along the hard, clay-colored walls of the Plant.

345 turned instinctively, her eyes downcast as she caught a quick glance of the nearest Handler. They were odd looking things, she thought. Their skin wasn't deep leafy-green as was hers and her teammates'; it was white or brown or sometimes black like the night. Handlers wore cloth over their bodies and had hairs growing from their heads and sometimes their faces. Their eyes were different too, much smaller than hers, with different colors inside. She had observed they did not seem to be able to see in the darkness, as could she and her teammates. They had legs and feet as she did, but they were much taller, by perhaps a third. They had two appendages at their shoulders, which unlike her four tentacles, could only pivot in the middle, and terminated in what she heard the Handlers call “hands” and “fingers” that could be used to hold and pick up things.

There was another difference between the Handlers and 345; one that gripped her heart and threatened always to swallow up any fleck of gladness nestled there. The Handlers all had names. Names they called each other. Like Dillon or Alisa or Lieutenant or Buzz. She and her teammates had no names, at least as far as she knew. Only numbers. She was three-forty-five. That's what the Handlers called her when they

wanted her to do something. Her teammates were three-four-zero to three-six-zero. But usually the Handlers said only “team NV move out.” That she and her teammates had no names troubled 345 in a way she could not understand. Why did she ache so for such a small thing as a name?

345 followed her teammates down the vine-fenced path, an uneasiness rising up from somewhere deep inside. Everything about this felt wrong. For as long as she could remember every night had been the same, excruciatingly so. She would wake as the light faded from the panels above them. Then the Handlers would order her and her team to file out into the groves. As they moved they were each required to pick and swallow one hard, round seed from a low, vigorous shrub that grew along the wide path that led to the groves. Each night, the Handlers would tell them which grove they would work and which path to take. And each night they would pick the fruit from the trees, placing it in large bins, and then sort it by size and ripeness. The work was always the same; only the type of fruit varied. When they were finished, the Handlers would order them back into the plant and their vine-bunks. As they passed inside the walls to the Plant, they would each, in turn, place their lips on a hard tube and water would shoot into their mouths for a few moments. Sleep always came quickly to 345’s weary body as the soft, warm light filled the panels above them. Nothing had ever been different, until today.

This day the Handlers looked different too. They seemed... tense. Their eyes darted back and forth, never looking directly at her or her teammates. They were unusually quiet too; their mouths drawn in thin, tight lines. The Handlers lead her team along the side of the Plant until the vine-fence opened into a part of the grove unfamiliar to 345. There were no trees here, only soft, dry planting peat.

“Back, back, back,” the Handlers barked, motioning sharply with their hands.

Team NV moved back slowly, step by step. 345 noticed a long hole in the ground. She wanted to tell the Handlers they could not move back any further or they would fall into the hole. Instinctively her mouth opened, but she could produce no sound.

Without warning an unfamiliar tightness seized her chest. Her legs began to tremble. She had to concentrate to keep from collapsing on the ground. In the eyes of her teammates she saw the same fear that was squeezing her heart and burning in her mind. In one smooth motion a group of Handlers stepped forward. They were new. She didn't recognize their faces. They were holding something she had never seen before; black rods that shimmered menacingly in the biofloods. Jets of white-hot light shot out of the black rods accompanied by a sharp crack that thundered in her ears and exploded inside her head. All around her, her teammates were flailing about as if hit by an invisible force. Hot, green liquid shot out of their bodies, squirting into her eyes. 345 tumbled backwards into the trench, the bodies of her teammates raining down on her.

The terrifying crack, crack, crack of the black rods continued for what to 345 seemed an eternity. When the noise finally stopped, she heard movement above and the sound of voices.

"We'll cover them up in the morning," she heard one of the Handlers say.

"Poor bastards. They never knew what hit 'em," another one said with a noise she had heard the Handlers call a "laugh."

"It's weird," said a third Handler. "They've got no vocal cords, so they can't even scream."

At last she heard the Handlers walking away. Then there was only the soft chirping of crickets.

345 tried to move, but the motionless bodies of her teammates were crushing down on her. She tried to rouse three-five-three, who was next to her, but she didn't move. No one moved. She saw no spark in their eyes, only a frightening emptiness. She tried to breathe, but the warm green liquid filled her mouth, choking her.

345 pushed upwards with all her strength. Her body shuddered uncontrollably and her heart hammered wildly against her ribs. Still she kept pushing upwards, driven by a need whose source she could not fathom. At last she reached the surface, gasping and sputtering as she urgently pulled air into her lungs.

She lay on the lifeless bodies of her teammates for a long time, unsure what to do, where to go. Gradually her breathing slowed and her heart ceased to crash against her insides. But the fear that shook her body with involuntary spasms would not subside. She knew she needed to get away. Must get away. Away from the Handlers and the terrifying black rods. Away from the lifeless bodies of her teammates. She climbed out of the trench and looked around warily. No Handlers. The outside biofloods were out, but she could see perfectly in the darkness that swirled around and engulfed the orchards. A warm breeze teased the rigid, oval leaves of the nearby orange trees, their reassuring whispers calling to her.

Her mind must have gone blank as if she were asleep, for she found herself running through the citrus grove. On she ran, propelled forward by the horrific images of the Handlers with their black rods and the unseeing eyes of her teammates. At last she reached the vine-fence at the edge of the grove. She knew she needed to go over the fence, but she could not will herself to do it. Quite tentatively she laid one tentacle on the vine-fence and tried to think about climbing it. The thought burned inside her mind, sending ribbons of hot, white light from the back of her eyes through her skull. Instinctively her mind rejected the idea of leaving this place and began to drift back to thoughts of her work in the groves, where she knew her place, knew her purpose, knew what was expected.

The snap of a twig caused the breath to catch in 345's throat. She spun around. A bright light stabbed at her eyes. It was a Handler holding something in his hand. Her body began to tremble uncontrollably. Images of white light shooting out of the black rods blazed before her eyes. 345 backed up against the crisscrossed canes of the vine-fence. She tried to breathe but couldn't pull any air into her mouth. The Handler lifted up the short, black rod in his hand and pointed it at her. In that moment, driven by fears and desires she never knew she had, something changed in her mind. It was a kind of clarity, as if an unimaginable truth had been revealed to her.

"No," she shouted in her mind. "NO!"

The Handler recoiled in fear, dropping the black thing. The pistol went off as it hit the dirt.

He must have heard her! But no sound had come out of her mouth. 345 studied him for a moment. She could see fear in his eyes and something else. It gave her an unexpected sense of lucidity. She cocked her head and puzzled for a moment, then turned, climbed the fence and jumped off the other side onto the soft earth.

345 ran as fast as she could into the welcoming arms of the velvety, black night.

## Chapter One: Business as Usual

Amadé Bertrand could scarcely believe her luck. Yesterday the 25-year-old journalist had received an anonymous emessage that “some bad business was going down” at GeneTech, and if she wanted to get the story she’d better get her “pretty little backside” out to the company’s Fresno campus “pronto.” The emessage had employed the image and voice of Humphrey Bogart as hard-boiled detective Sam Spade, which made the “pretty little backside” comment less offensive, but still – how had the tipster known she was a huge fan of detective fiction and in particular of Dashiell Hammett? And why choose a fictional detective as the avatar to deliver this message?

No matter, the tip had saved her from the drudgery of writing yet another financial news story. It was earnings season for the nation’s largest private health insurance companies, and as the health insurance beat reporter in the *New York Times*’ west coast bureau, it was her job to cover all private insurance carriers headquartered west of the Mississippi. Fortunately an anonymous tip about a company as important as GeneTech took precedence.

Amadé knew GeneTech was the largest company in the world. That was common knowledge, at least among business reporters. But before preparing for today’s meeting with GeneTech representatives, she had never realized just how enormous the company was. Not just in terms of revenue, which at nearly \$1-trillion annually made it the largest corporation on planet earth, but in terms of its reach into people’s lives. GeneTech was everywhere. Construction. Agriculture. Cosmetics. Manufacturing. Pharmaceuticals. Transportation. Energy. Its offices and manufacturing facilities were spread across the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia. It held more patents in genetics than any other company. Its thousands of products were sold around the globe.

Typically skeptical of corporate hyperbola, the young news reporter's research seem to confirm GeneTech claims that the company had changed the very nature of modern society.

Amadé ran her hand through her chestnut brown hair and assembled in her mind a list of companies that had also changed society and the course of history. "Let's see, AT&T, Standard Oil, RJ Reynolds Tobacco, General Electric, Westinghouse, CBS, Ford, Microsoft," Amadé said aloud.

This was not unique to GeneTech. Throughout history many other companies in their day had had as great or greater social impact. But so many of the changes GeneTech had brought about were unexpected. 2059 was not the future people envisioned at the end of the prior millennium. Computers and robots had certainly altered the economic and social landscape, but it was genetics that became the master science. Not through a single invention or discovery, but gradually, although many commentators considered the founding of GeneTech in 2046 as marking the beginning of the Age of Genetics.

"I'll have to remember to include that in the story."

Saying things out loud helped Amadé to organize her thoughts. But it often got her in to trouble, particularly when she voiced unedited thoughts about people in her presence. "Honesty is most definitely over rated," she chuckled. People didn't really want honesty. They wanted convenient deceptions that confirmed their perception of reality, or at least of themselves.

"Well, that's a great view for a journalist," Amadé admonished herself.

Tangents. Another problem she had. She was easily distracted by ideas and observations that would randomly skip across her mind. Like an interesting person wandering unexpectedly into a room, they would momentarily divert her from the conversation or task at hand.

"Okay, focus," she told herself. "GeneTech."

It was GeneTech's first innovation that had kicked off a revolution in genetic engineering – a hybrid organism designed and engineered cell by cell at the genetic

level, exactly as one might design an automobile or a computer. Engineered for a specific purpose and manufactured biologically.

Of course compatible species had been combined beneficially for thousands of years – the horse and the donkey to create the mule, the pomelo and tangerine to create the orange. But putting together different species – an elephant and an owl – was impossible. Different species could not naturally produce viable offspring, even if they could be made to mate.

As early as the 2000s, genetic engineers had managed to insert individual genes and even groups of genes from one species into another to create pest-resistant plants or to make a salmon that matured faster than in nature. But creating multi-species organisms with combined body plans or combined organ systems had proven elusive until GeneTech did it in 2046.

GeneTech co-founder Cory Grouf had made this breakthrough at Stanford University. She was a 22-year-old grad student in the university's department of genetics and genetic engineering. It was not well understood by the public at the time, but Cory's actual invention was a sort of biologic transcribing engine that could be used to create specific pieces of genetic code, DNA and RNA strands, and complex proteins in such a way as to exercise complete control over the design of the organism arising from the engineered genetic material.

Amadé did not remotely grasp the science behind Cory's gene-transcribing engine, but she did understand the practical effect. The transcribing engine gave GeneTech the power to manipulate genetic coding in such a way as to control the basic biochemistry of life and in so doing allowed the company to create hybrid life forms from existing species. For more than 15 years GeneTech had employed various iterations of the genetic transcription engine to create wondrous, if not improbable, products from drugs to building materials and everything in between.

Cory never did get her doctoral degree. Instead, she founded GeneTech and became a legend.

Most of Amadé's college classmates admired Cory. Why shouldn't they? She was arguably the most brilliant mind since Einstein, and she was certainly the most successful person of all time. Hell, she probably saved the damn planet with GeneTech's Large Scale Carbon Dioxide Absorption Platform – a hybrid algae-and-bacteria-based structure designed to be positioned in the oceans and absorb huge amounts of carbon dioxide.

Secretly Amadé hated Cory. Her accomplishments mocked Amadé's life. She wanted desperately to contribute something important to the world, to do something of significance. But how could she ever do anything that would seem significant in comparison to what Cory had accomplished, or even a tenth of what she had accomplished? Her mother said her expectations were unrealistic.

"Boy is that true," Amadé admitted to herself. Just the same, she had always dreamed of doing great things; she just didn't know what exactly.

"Another tangent."

Amadé shook her head and tried to refocus on GeneTech. Someone wanted her, or rather the *New York Times*, to know something improper was going on at GeneTech. It was common in 2059 to use a fictional character to deliver a message in a holomail, but sending an anonymous message from an untraceable account was no easy trick. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to keep their identity secret. Most likely an inside source. That thought thrilled her.

"What is GeneTech doing that would make someone go to such lengths?"

The tipster – she really liked that word – had instructed her to go to GeneTech's manufacturing plant in Fresno, which produced most of the farm product for North America.

"Product." Amadé rolled the word around in her mouth. "How easily we've adopted that label for the living beings GeneTech grows at its Fresno plant."

Really they were quite remarkable. GeneTech called them XenoMats for Xenogenetically Engineered Material. Farmers called them Maddies or sometimes scabs,

as they were first described when they destroyed the farm workers' union and the decades old guest-worker program.

The exact genetic composition was a trade secret, but they were widely known to contain genetic material from several species, including Bonobo, Octopus and fern. She had never seen one in the flesh, but she found riveting the holovids of XenoMats working. Ten of them could pick a 100-hectare orchard of apples in less than a day. And, unlike human workers, they did not take breaks, complain, unionize, require health insurance or need to be paid. Amadé had also just learned through her research that XenoMats required almost no food, just a single protein and mineral tablet per day. This was because they are photoautotrophs. Their skin incorporated chlorophyll, so they got much of their energy from sunlight. Farmers bought them just like machines, but unlike machines or robots, which must be manufactured by human workers or other robots, GeneTech grew XenoMats in pods. Cost was one of the reasons why GeneTech's genetically engineered products triumphed over robots throughout the agricultural sector. Even in 2059 the technology to make a robot that could quickly harvest and sort any type of fruit or vegetable – without damaging it – was complex and expensive. Building a silicon-based artificial brain with even the rudimentary capabilities of a biologic brain was simply uneconomical. Once GeneTech figured out how to efficiently and economically steal the structure from nature, with a few adaptations, a living, biological brain could do just about anything you wanted it to do.

Amadé's bioelectric Roadster whizzed along the freeway with little need for her attention. The vehicle's internal computer system, working in conjunction with NESTCS, the National Environmental and Safety Traffic Control System, safely and efficiently guided the Roadster to her destination. Every vehicle on the road was required to be linked to NESTCS, which helped to control traffic flow on all highways and major roadways for safety, energy efficiency and greenhouse gas reduction. This left Amadé free to spend the one-and-a-half hour drive reviewing all the background materials she had collected on GeneTech.

“Incoming call,” the Roadster’s computer informed her in a voice that to her ears was a bit more insistent than any computer had a right to be.

Unlike a living brain, computers were inherently annoying, thought Amadé. In spite of decades of trying, a silicon-based brain just couldn’t be made to have feelings or to understand the subtleties of human speech and behavior. But a genetically engineered life form could learn how to tell when someone didn’t want to be disturbed. It was as easy as training a dog. Maria Fernandez, the lead reporter covering GeneTech for the *Times*, had told her the company was rumored to be secretly beta testing a new kind of XenoMat designed to work as a domestic servant; a tantalizing prospect from a practical, economic and social point of view. Even more significant from an economic standpoint was the rumor that GeneTech would soon be launching a new industrial XenoMat designed to work in a wide range of manufacturing environments. The company denied both rumors.

“Maybe that’s what this is about.” But then that made no sense to her. The development of XenoMats to do non-farm work was more of a natural evolution than a surprise. Although, she thought, when it did happen it would be highly controversial in that such products would likely put millions of people out of work and pit the now-faltering developed nations against the newly dominant developing world. “Now that would be a story,” she enthused.

The Roadster’s computer again informed her of the call. A quick glance at the vehicle’s heads-up display told Amadé it was Roland Kidwell, the west coast business editor at the *Times*.

Amadé knew it wasn’t a good idea to get involved with a colleague, especially one more senior, but how could she help it, she rationalized. She didn’t have time to meet men, although she knew men wanted to meet her. She wasn’t sure why. Roland said she was beautiful. She considered herself attractive, but in an age of genetic cosmetics, everyone was beautiful – everyone with money. She had been told it was her charisma, something in her personality that drew people to her. That thought made her laugh for she had absolutely no idea what about her would give anyone the impression

she was charismatic. She certainly did not see it or feel it. Quite the contrary, she often felt like an imposter in her own life, afraid her early success was a fluke and at any moment she would be discovered as a fraud.

At least her physical appearance was natural, a fact of which she was proud. The product of some old fashioned genetic engineering. Her father was French African, her mother, Indonesian. The combination gave her almond-shaped eyes, full lips, high cheekbones and tawny, smooth skin. She had long legs and an athletic build. She had considered changing her ass, making it smaller, but Roland told her it was perfect. Okay, so she had changed her hair, which had been coarse, straight and jet black, like her mother's. It was amazingly simple: one injection and within a few days her hair started to grow in soft, wavy and the exact color she had selected. GeneTech's line of gene-based cosmetics worked like magic. And now she had heard from Maria that GeneTech was coming out with a new line of products that would make it possible for people to grow fur or feathers on any part of their bodies.

Is that what this is all about, she wondered. No. It couldn't be. At least she hoped not. "I mean, sure, it's probably bad taste, but it's no worse than changing your skin, eye or hair color," she told herself, "and certainly not worth all this trouble."

That thought brought her back to Roland. Dating him was the only reason she was on this story. The tip couldn't have come at a worse time. Earning season meant she was swamped with quarterly corporate earnings reports and the accompanying financial data to analyze. Her immediate boss, Assistant Business Editor Heidi Larimore, already thought Amadé was "a bit too big for her britches," as she once told Roland. Larimore wasn't concerned with Amadé's career. To her the situation was simple. It was Amadé's responsibility to write the earnings stories, and that was that. Larimore had no intention of allowing her to follow some "bullshit tip that will probably lead nowhere" while she passed off her beat responsibilities to one of her colleagues. But Amadé wanted the story badly; needed it, really. She hadn't written a major investigative piece since the one she wrote when she first joined the *Times* four years ago. If she didn't write something significant soon, her career would stall. Besides, she was dying of boredom.

The possibility of a new investigative piece involving a company as important as GeneTech positively thrilled her.

Roland had come to her rescue. Even though, as associate editor of the business section and head of the *Times'* San Francisco office, he could have simply ordered Heidi to let Amadé follow up on the tip, he didn't. Instead he appealed to her pride. "If there is something to this tip, I'm sure you want the *Times* to get the story, and Amadé has the best chance of doing that given the tip was sent to her." He also reassigned two reporters to cover Amadé's beat while she was busy working on the GeneTech story, and he promised to personally oversee Amadé to make sure the tip was real. The latter item was no real concession since it allowed Roland to spend more time with her, but Heidi didn't know that. No one at the *Times* knew they had been dating and they both planned to keep it that way. Amadé had laughed when Roland told her of the arrangement. "You really are a little charmer, aren't you," she had said teasingly. "I guess I better watch myself."

"Incoming call," the computer said again.

"Okay, okay, put it through."

Roland's angular face filled the heads-up display. He wasn't classically handsome, but he was "nice to look at," as she had once described him to one of her college friends. Roland had an apparent age of thirty-one or two. Amadé knew his real age was 55, but their age difference was of no concern to her. Over the past two decades advances in genetic engineering had eliminated most major diseases and allowed for rejuvenation of skin, hair, organs, glands, joints, bones; just about everything that aged a person internally and externally. As a consequence, people in their fifties were able to have the health, vigor and looks of a thirty-year-old, while those in their sixties and even seventies were more like forty in appearance and health.

Amadé had heard GeneTech was working on a new line of genetic health treatments that would allow the elderly to significantly roll back the clock. What impact this would have on society she could not fathom. The age-reversal treatments now available had dramatically changed relationships in the 2050s. Age had become largely

irrelevant in terms of romantic liaisons, at least for those who could afford GeneTech's restorative treatments. Fifty-somethings were dating and marrying twenty-somethings; sixty-somethings were wedding thirty-somethings. What had once been the province of the wealthy and famous was now commonplace among the professional class. The change was especially significant for woman who now had the option of having a family later in life, and with a much younger man if they so chose.

Amadé rarely thought about Roland's real age, except when he made some cultural reference with which she was unfamiliar. In fact, she preferred older men. They were more sure of themselves, and she respected their experience, emotionally, intellectually and sexually.

Yet it wasn't really Roland's age or experience that captured her attention, it was his penetrating green eyes and beautifully curved lips; lips that easily lent themselves to a smile. Still, Amadé didn't really understand why she agreed to go out with Roland in the first place. When you got right down to it, they were very different in many ways. She considered herself to be intense and thoughtful, almost to the point of brooding; a defining characteristic, at least according to her mother. Roland was glib and carefree, which seemed to her rather odd qualities for a business journalist. It could just be the sex. Wow. Just the thought of him penetrating her gave her a tingle between her thighs, which brought her back to the image of Roland on the Roadster's HUD.

Amadé tapped her comm.

"What, you're not taking my calls?" he said playfully. "I am your boss on this story, you know."

"Can't you see I'm busy here?" she responded, smiling back at him, her eyes set in mock rebuke. She tipped her head forward and looked at him through long lashes. That always distracted him when he was pestering her.

"Oh, I can see your mind's on GeneTech."

"Well, it was until you called," she volleyed back with a laugh.

“Just checking up on my best reporter.” At once his smile faded and the resonance of his voice shifted. “Seriously, Amadé, I know I agreed to your pursuing this story, but the way in which you got this tip has me... a bit concerned... about... you.”

Amadé studied Roland’s face. His regard for her was clearly genuine. It was sweet, if unnecessary and slightly annoying.

“Hey, it’s not like I’m going to bust into the place in search of secret laboratories,” she laughed, although the thought had crossed her mind. “I’m an invited guest. Just another reporter looking for a fresh angle on GeneTech. I’ll spend a few hours with some PR flack and that’ll be it.”

“Don’t think I don’t know that’s total crap,” Roland said flatly. “You’re going to spend as little time with the flack as possible, then try to take a, what should we call it, a self-guided tour.”

“Roland, you worry way too much. How about this? I’ll call you in,” Amadé checked her wrist display, “two hours. If you haven’t heard from me by then, send in the Marines,” she added with a wink.

“Seriously, baby, don’t take this too lightly. No company gets to be as successful and powerful as GeneTech by playing by the rules. If there’s anything behind this tip, you’re going to be in a lot of trouble.”

Amadé considered for a moment. She had heard Roland had been a fearless investigative reporter in his day, so he wasn’t normally an alarmist, although she had noticed getting older did seem to make people more timid. “Okay. I get your point. I’ll be careful,” she responded, trying to be serious. “And I will call you as soon as I’m finished.”

“I want you to call me in exactly two hours,” he insisted, leveling the full weight of his most authoritative look upon her. “If I haven’t heard from you by,” he glanced at the chronometer on one of the virtual screens surrounding him, “three o’clock, I *will* call in the Marines. And don’t think I won’t.” Roland’s image dissolved and was replaced by the road before her.

Amadé reflected on Roland's concerns. For most of her four-year career as a business journalist her job was to figure out if the rosy revenue and profit predictions company executives pitched to the public were anything close to reality and to determine if new products really did what a company claimed. She had been called bad names by angry executives after a particularly hard-hitting story, but the idea that anyone would actually cause her physical harm seemed absurd. After all, the corporate types she'd met were usually excessively solicitous of her or, if they had something to hide, ill at ease. Even the executives she interviewed during the course of her two major investigative pieces – one she'd written for her college news site and the other for the *Times* when she first joined the celebrated news organization – were more intimidated than threatening.

Still, this was different. Most of the tips or inside information she'd gotten in the past came from sources she'd cultivated – disgruntled employees, competitors anxious to bring down a rival, public officials looking to use the media to expose wrong-doing. Clearly the sender of this tip was extremely sophisticated and very concerned about secrecy. The message raised way more questions than it answered. Why wasn't the tipster more specific? And why send her a tip about GeneTech? She didn't cover the company, or even the biotech industry, except as it related to private health insurance issues.

"I don't really know any more than the average person about GeneTech. Maybe less," she admitted to herself. This couldn't be about NAHIS – the North American Health Insurance System – coverage for GeneTech's line of beauty products, she thought, desperately hoping for something much more interesting.

"Search the *Times*' database for coverage of GeneTech's beauty and health products and NAHIS." The Roadster's display immediately returned: 'No results.'

"Hmm. How strange." No question, GeneTech's beauty and health products were creating a two-class society. Those with money could afford to make themselves healthy, young and beautiful, while the working class and the poor had no such access because NAHIS didn't cover "non-essential procedures or drugs."

“I can’t believe there are no stories about this issue,” she said, incredulous.

Before Amadé could give this revelation much thought, her car exited the freeway and cruised down the ramp to a broad, four-lane surface street lined with *Salix sepulcralis rosa floribunda*, weeping-willow rose trees, one of the products of GeneTech’s horticultural business. They were magnificent. Their wispy, flowing branches were heavy with a rainbow of rose blooms. Amadé inhaled deeply and found their perfume intoxicating.

After a few minutes she reached a series of high, iridescent arches, one across each of the four lanes. Created by GeneTech’s construction company, Thallon Corp, the arches were grown from a substrate of mantle tissue derive from *Pinctada maxima*, the white-lipped pearl oyster. The surface of the arches was entirely nacre, mother of pearl. The bright, Fresno sunshine glinted off the nacre, creating a silky luster so dazzling the arches appeared to glow with a sort of living energy. The effect was at once pleasing to the eye and awe inspiring. Amadé felt as if she were entering an enchanted land of unlimited possibilities. That, no doubt, was the effect GeneTech was going for, she concluded. In the distance she could see a collection of low-rise buildings she presumed constituted the Fresno campus of GeneTech. There was nothing that to her eye looked like a traditional manufacturing facility.

As her car approached the arches she could see no fences, no gates and no visible signs of security, only beds of radiant flowers, bright green hedges and more hybrid trees, all beautifully crafted combinations of two or more species. A data feed from GeneTech made it possible for her to look at any of the trees or plants and instantly call up its name on the Roadster’s heads-up display. She particularly favored *Abies vejari hamamelis japonica*, the Vejar Fir Japanese Witch Hazel tree, which combined the elegant, conic shape and tight needles of the rare fir with the vivid yellow coloring of the Japanese Witch Hazel’s leaves and spidery, yellow flowers. The combination made the trees look to Amadé like giant, luminous popsicles. If ever there was a living brochure for GeneTech’s horticultural wonders, this was it. Even firmly

rooted in her journalistic cynicism it was difficult not to be overwhelmed by the wonder and the majesty of GeneTech's handiwork.

Still, the apparent the lack of security troubled Amadé. In an age when industrial espionage was big business and the threat of terrorism was ever present, every major corporation with which she was familiar had layers of security measures. She was half tempted to slam on the accelerator and zip by the arches just to see what would happen. As she was giving this thought serious consideration her car slowed on its own and stopped next to one of the arches. Perhaps the security measures were merely subtle, such as automatically tying into her vehicle's control systems. The Roadster's heads-up display came to life with the words: "GeneTech Corporation, Fresno Campus – West." A hologram of a smiling young woman with a warm but business-like face said in a pleasant voice, "Welcome Ms. Bertrand. You have a meeting scheduled today with Mr. Whitfield Gray. You may proceed to building 34. Mr. Gray will meet you directly. Would you like directions downloaded to your vehicle?"

"Yes," Amadé answered. Her car pulled away from the entrance and headed deep into the complex. "For a company that's been among the most creative in the world, they couldn't come up with more interesting names than 'Building 34'?" she said with a sardonic laugh.

The buildings were attractive, but not flashy. After the beauty and promise of the mother of pearl arches, she was a bit disappointed to see that the structures of the Fresno campus appeared to have been built using conventional materials rather than GeneTech's new, biologic construction techniques. The farm products division was among the company's first; probably built before the construction division was launched, she reasoned.

Amadé quickly checked the *Times'* roster of GeneTech's PR team. Whitfield Gray was Executive Vice President of Corporate Communications and Government Relations for GeneTech North American. She had been expecting to meet with someone relatively senior, but Gray was GeneTech's top flack.

“Now that’s a little suspicious.” Why bring out the big gun for an introductory meeting, especially given Gray worked out of GeneTech’s corporate headquarters in San Francisco? Yet more questions.

In many large companies the public relations executives were pretty low on the management totem pole, in spite of their impressive sounding titles, but according to information in the *Times’* database Whitfield Gray reported directly to Cory, was part of the management team and, according to public records, owned a large amount of GeneTech stock. “Hmm.” That probably made sense, Amadé thought. Public acceptance of GeneTech’s products was critical to the company’s ongoing success.

Years ago, even the words “genetically modified organism” and “genetic engineering” were enough to put people on edge. Early experiments attempting to eliminate several insects that were damaging to food crops went seriously awry in the early 2020s. Instead of producing infertile variants of the pests, the result was super-aggressive strains that nearly decimated the global soybean, rice and corn crops. Worse yet, early work to harness the cellular structure of rice and soybeans to manufacture new drugs had contaminated the food supply in several poor nations. Millions became ill and thousands died from ingesting these drug-producing strains.

Somehow GeneTech had turned the public around. Today no one even talked about those early catastrophes. “Odd.” She wondered why this thought had not occurred to her before. Perhaps she should suggest a series on the subject. That idea brought a smile to her lips. A successful series on GeneTech would make a nice book and maybe get her off the health insurance beat for good. If her success came at GeneTech’s and –more important -- Cory’s expense, it would be that much sweeter.

In a few minutes she was walking up the sidewalk to Building 34. The door slid open and out walked a rather attractive man who matched the hologifs of Whitfield Gray in the *Times’* database. “A personal greeting. Nice touch,” she murmured. Whitfield sported a big smile and outstretched hand, the hallmarks of any good flack. He looked to be in his early 30s.

“Ms. Bertrand, so nice to meet you,” Whitfield said, shaking Amadé’s hand.

Amadé met his eyes. They were blue, as blue as a deep, mountain lake, with unfathomable flecks of shadows in their depths. A girl could get lost in those depths. Want to get lost.

“Ms. Bertrand.” His voice was far off. Amadé closed her eyes and drew a deep breath in a futile attempt to slow her racing heart. She could feel the blood rising up her neck and face. “I hope you had a pleasant ride over.” She opened her eyes to his smiling face; a smile that was at once disquietingly intense and warmly reassuring.

“Uneventful, Mr. Gray,” she replied coolly, astonished at the physical effect he was having on her. She never mixed business with pleasure. Well, except for Roland, but certainly not with a source. She worked to suppress a return smile and replaced it with a look that she desperately hoped said, ‘I’m all business.’

“‘Whitfield.’ Please call me ‘Whitfield,’ Ms. Bertrand.”

“Okay, Whitfield, then. Um, as I said in my email to your department, I’ve just been assigned to cover GeneTech and thought someone... or you... might be able to get me up to speed on... things.” That sounded so stupid, she admonished herself. Try to act coolly casual, but professional.

“Not a problem. We can go up to my office and have a chat or we can start out with a little tour of the facility here. Your choice.” Again the smile.

Amadé hesitated. If she asked for a tour that might seem too obvious. God, I’m so out of practice with this cloak and dagger stuff, she thought. She tried to remember how the undercover FBI agents she embedded with on her second investigative piece always appeared so casual and non-threatening.

“How about you give me an overview of some of your recent announcements and the management team to start with.” Ugh. How lame was that, she thought, trying not to allow her doubts and disquiet to seep into her face.

“Sure, that would be my pleasure,” Whitfield responded, motioning her forward. He seemed not to notice her discomfort.

They walked toward a bank of elevators across the lobby, which was rather plain, almost non-descript. Amadé hadn’t expected to see GeneTech’s product walking

around, but the lobby was empty and very quiet. No workers. Not even a security guard or receptionist. No one. Maybe Roland was right to worry.

The elevator doors opened and Whitfield motioned for her to enter, which she did in spite of the odd excitement and growing fear that were eating into her typically boundless bravado.

“Off we go,” he said as the elevator doors closed.

\* \* \*

Cory Grouf sat ramrod straight on a comfortable black leather couch as several assistants stood nearby. Tonight was the unveiling of “Feathers and Fur,” a new line of genetic enhancements for men and woman by Mercurial, GeneTech’s genetic fashion company. As befitting the occasion, Cory was impeccably dressed in an exquisite Chanel suit designed exclusively for her. Her raven-black hair was pulled back with a clip that accented the suit. Cory’s dark eyes were intelligent, demanding. There was an air of total confidence and control about her, born of her powerful intellect and immense wealth. She appeared oblivious to the swirling chaos around her as final preparations were made for Mercurial’s most important show of the spring fashion season.

With a thought, Cory activated her Virtual Network Interface. An intraocular implant projected a beam onto her retina creating a three-dimensional display of her start page before her eyes, along with a virtual keyboard. A medallion that hung around her neck housed the main transmitter/receiver and tracked the movement of her fingers over the virtual keyboard and screen as she typed and moved icons around and accessed various files. A wireless microphone and speakers implanted in the temporal bone behind her ears facilitated voice communications. Cory’s set up was rather sophisticated, as befitting a billionaire, but the comm medallion and intra-temporal implant were as common in 2059 as mobile phones were the early 2000s. The intraocular implant was relatively new, but rapidly gaining in popularity, though many people still used an external ocular projector mounted in an eyeglass-style frame. The

neural interface was experimental, so few people yet had this feature. A close friend on the board of the company that had designed the neural interface had arranged for Cory to be part of a private beta the company was currently conducting.

Cory tapped her virtual display and dictated an email. "Su, the Hunan sales figures are unacceptable. If the marketing isn't working, find some alternatives. If it's a government issue I want to know about it by tomorrow."

A production assistant entered the room, a heavy-set man with deep bags under his red-rimmed eyes. Clearly he did not use GeneTech's line of health and beauty products.

"You're on in one minute, Ms. Grouf," he said, waiting at the door to escort her behind the temporary stage that had been constructed for the event.

"Henry, how is it you always convince me to do these dog-and-pony shows?" Cory said to a tall, attractive man with an apparent age of early 30s.

Henry Hernandez was Cory's executive assistant. He had taken full advantage of GeneTech's line of genetic health enhancement products. Hernandez was nearly 60, but had the appearance, health and vigor of a man in his early 30s. There was a casual camaraderie to their relationship, borne out of years of working together and Henry's fierce loyalty to the GeneTech founder. Their relationship was a departure from the formality with which she treated most of her associates, even her top executives.

"Why can't Arroyo handle this? He's president of the damn division."

Henry was already moving Cory to the door in that deferential but firm manner he had perfected over the years. "Cory, you know the public just loves you, and you know how important this new line is to Mercurial. Arroyo just thought it would be a much better launch if you kicked it off."

Henry smiled obsequiously as he moved Cory down a long hallway from the waiting room to the stage. Seeing Henry had things well in hand, the production assistant quietly disappeared.

"I bitch and you complement. No wonder we work so well together, Henry," Cory responded with a conspiratorial wink.

The founder of GeneTech took the stage without hesitation and strode across to the podium. Arroyo, whose showmanship abilities Cory secretly admired, had selected the location for the event: the Chateau de Villiers le Mahieu, a magnificent 17<sup>th</sup> Century castle just outside Paris. Even Cory, who had more than a dozen homes each of which would put a Sultan to shame, was impressed by the chateau's stately elegance. She nodded to Arroyo as she surveyed the reception room. It was packed with fashion writers and photographers, wealthy potential customers, and distributors and retailers all wanting a first look at what Mercurial promised would be a revolution in fashion accessories. As the spotlight hit Cory her face instantly shifted from pragmatic businesswoman to beguiling saleswoman. Her broad smile could melt the hardest heart. Her eyes sparkled with intrigue, passion and mystery.

"More than a decade ago," she began, "Mercurial created the first genetic beauty line with products that allowed people to easily and safely enhance their appearance by altering their hair color and texture, skin tone, eye color, even their body shape. This family of products fundamentally changed the beauty industry and has enriched the lives of millions. Today, we are here to announce the next leap forward in beauty and fashion: a new product line that will allow people to accessorize their bodies in ways never before possible. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you 'Feathers and Fur.'"

The stage went dark for a moment and then spotlights illuminated three strikingly beautiful women. The first wore a leopard-skin leotard that hugged her curvaceous form. At once there was a collective gasp as the audience realized it *was* her body. Her skin had been transformed into fur from her full, round breasts to her pubic mound. The rich, amber shades and charcoal-black spots of the fur were made all the more dramatic by the milky white skin of her shoulders and legs. Next to the spotted beauty stood a woman with golden, mocha skin. Her head was covered not in hair, but in feathers of vivid emerald green and deep ruby red. Like the other model, she was naked so that it was possible to see the same feathers covered her pubic mound. The third member of the group was a woman whose entire body was covered with the black

and white stripped fur of a zebra; her head was crowned in long, coarse hair, iridescent rust-red in color.

The audience was transfixed, caught on the jagged edge of disbelief and astonishment. It was as if these three women had been transformed into dangerously alluring wild beasts, mythological creatures of another age. They vibrated with orgiastic sensuality and screamed rapacious sex from every pore. As the three women broke rank and strode down the runway, the audience exploded into unrestrained applause.

Behind them came men and woman with every imaginable type of fur and feathers on arms, legs, and faces. Some in unnatural combinations that alternately fascinated and repelled the audience, others so striking and animalistically magnificent they precipitated a collective gasp of shared, instinctual desire. Finally, with all the models on stage, Cory and Arroyo joined them and were greeted with a standing ovation.

Posts written at the event by the world's fashion editors declared "Feathers and Fur" a sensation.

\* \* \*

Amadé's bioelectric Roadster sped along Route 580 towards San Francisco as the young reporter stared blankly out the window. She felt relaxed and deeply calm, more so than she had in as long as she could remember. Outside the air was unusually clear, the recent rain having cleansed it of dust and pollution. Across the twin Bay bridges, the afternoon sun painted the cityscape in warm shades of languid gold and burnt orange. Amadé marveled at the forest of gleaming towers stretching skyward, sunlight glinting off the many whirling wind turbines integrated into the upper floors.

Having moved to San Francisco just three years ago, Amadé had only ever known the city in its current configuration of vertical density. The massive Hayward quake of 2022 devastated nearly all of the City's older, low-rise brick and masonry buildings. Many lay in ruins for years until the phenomenal success of, first, Cybercon, and then

GeneTech, powered sequential economic booms bringing with them a tremendous influx of money, people and businesses. With limited land, high transportation costs and the lure of urban living, vertical development was the only option for the City by the Bay. Paradoxically, it was GeneTech's construction subsidiary that had saved the few remaining brick buildings from the wrecking ball, including the condo building in which Amadé lived. Their biological retrofitting products economically stabilized and strengthened masonry walls and joints against future temblors, while photosynthetic resurfacing both insulated and provided energy for the biologic joints.

San Francisco had also been among the first cities to build an Urban Air Transport system. Amadé watched as passenger and freight bubbles zipped through a series of pneumatic tubes that linked the network of downtown skyscrapers. She'd heard some of the residents of those towers rarely went outside, traveling exclusively on the UAT between the various buildings sixty stories above the city streets.

How sad, she thought, realizing she'd barely been outside the confines of her condo and office in months. "I really should go with Roland on one of those hikes he's always going on about."

"Incoming call." The announcement startled her. "Incoming call." The computer repeated the message in exactly the same tone, but to her ears it seemed more urgent the second time. It was Roland. She tapped her comm.

"Hi," she said casually.

"'Hi,' is all I get after four-and-a-half hours?" Roland hissed, trying to control his temper. "You were supposed to call me hours ago. What happened? Are you all right? What did you find out?"

Amadé blinked rapidly in startled response to Roland's verbal fusillade. She averted her eyes from the accusatory intensity of his stare and thought for a moment. She remembered having a pleasant conversation with Whitfield Gray, the PR guy for GeneTech.

Amadé tried to focus her mind on the conversation she'd had with Whitfield. She remembered asking him questions. He told her all about GeneTech's operating divisions,

the management team, everything she wanted to know. He seemed so straightforward. Amadé closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. She had gone to GeneTech for a reason, but it didn't seem important now. She felt she could trust Whitfield and GeneTech.

"I'm fine," she said. "Everything went fine." She hesitated for a moment. "I think."

"'Fine.' 'Fine!' What do you mean 'fine,'" Roland fired back, switching from boyfriend to editor. "Christ, you were with them for hours. What the hell did you find out? What's going on over there?"

"Nothing. I mean, just business as usual."

As the words tumbled out of her mouth, Amadé felt an odd tingling sensation behind her eyes. "Just business as usual," she repeated slowly to herself. That didn't sound like her. Business was never usual. Boring, bad, crooked, effed up, or sometimes even great, but never usual.

"Amadé, what's wrong with you. You look like, well..." Roland struggled to find the right words as concern, anger and fear tangled up his mind. "... I don't know, like something's not right."

"I feel that way too, but I don't know why," she said softly, her voice trailing off. "It's like I remember speaking with Whitfield, the PR guy; I remember asking him questions. I remember all the information about GeneTech, but all I really got out of it is that everything is just business as usual." Amadé pursed her lips. "There it is again, 'business as usual.' When have you ever known me to say that?"

"Never," Roland replied with certainty. "Amadé, they must have done something to you. Oh my god, maybe they drugged you!"

"Roland. Nobody drugged me," Amadé protested, her tone a bit more condescending than she had intended.

"How do you know? We've got to get you to a doctor," he commanded, struggling to regain his composure.

“I don’t need a doctor, Roland. I just need to remember what happened.” She could see her words were not reassuring him. “Don’t worry, baby. I’m fine,” she cooed. But in truth she wasn’t really sure she was. Something strange had happened to her, but what?

“I really trust that guy.” As she spoke these words she felt as if they were not her own. “Where the hell did that come from?” Amadé said softly. Trusting people did not come easily to her, certainly not PR people whom she believed were more often than not instructed by their corporate masters to deflect the media, if not outright lie to them.

“I just need to think.” She bit at her lower lip. “I mean, what could they have to hide? GeneTech has never even been accused of inflating quarterly estimates, which practically every company does at one time or another.”

Roland cocked his head, bewildered. He tried to interject, but she waved him off. Something occurred to Amadé that she hadn’t realized before that moment. GeneTech had never been accused of any wrong doing. It had never been investigated or questioned, other than years ago when the entire genetics industry was under scrutiny. Amadé licked her lips reflexively. That’s just not possible, she thought. Any company of any size, if they’re around long enough, gets accused of something, true or not. Why hadn’t she seen that before? Why hadn’t anyone seen that before?

“Shit,” she exclaimed involuntarily, her mind reeling. This could be huge. My god, it was unbelievable. She looked at Roland. His concern for her was etched in the furrows of his brow. She’d better not tell him, not just yet. Damn, maybe this boyfriend thing was going to be a problem. If he was just her editor, he’d be more concerned about the story, but she could see Roland wasn’t even thinking about that. Again she tried to focus on her meeting with Gray. The entire episode seemed to her more dream than reality. She squeezed her eyes tight and tried to pull the details of the meeting from memory, but they just wouldn’t come to her. Rather she got the feeling... yes, it was more emotional than intellectual... the feeling that nothing out of the ordinary was happening

at GeneTech. Reluctantly she concluded she was going to need some help figuring out exactly what had happened to her at that meeting. What *had* Gray done to her?

“Okay,” she finally said, “let’s go see a doctor, but it has to be someone you trust, really trust.”

\* \* \*

“So how the hell was that?” Cory Grouf exclaimed as she strode off the stage, Arroyo and Henry in tow.

“You were wonderful,” Henry enthused. Cory was pleased with herself, and Henry couldn’t resist the urge to milk her self-satisfaction. “Now aren’t you glad you did it?” But before she could answer, her comm chimed softly in her ear. Cory tapped her comm medallion instinctively before she thought to use the neural interface. She listened carefully for a moment. “You’re sure,” she finally said.

Henry didn’t like the sound of this. Something was up. Worse, he didn’t know what, and he knew everything.

“No, goddamn it. He never told me.” Cory turned away from the group of assistants and production people and lowered her voice. “Are you saying this reporter knows something?” Everyone was trying to pretend they couldn’t hear Cory, but the tension in her voice seemed to fill the hallway. “Then don’t be an alarmist,” Cory snapped as she clicked off. She moved to tap the medallion again, then paused and thought: Whitfield.

Everyone in her entourage had stopped moving. “Let’s go people. We’ve got lots more to do today,” she barked as she strode down the hallway.

Cory heard a brief tone then Whitfield’s face snapped up before her in a virtual window. “Hello, Cory,” he said casually. She cut him off before he could continue.

“I heard about your little meeting with Ms. Bertrand,” she said sternly.

Whitfield smiled coyly. “Just a routine meeting with a reporter who’s been assigned to cover us.”

Cory was an avid reader of the *Times*. She knew Bertrand covered the business of private health insurance, had never written about GeneTech and, more importantly, a few years ago had written an award-winning investigate piece for the celebrated news organization. That raised the question of why she would be assigned to cover GeneTech now. This was troubling in and of itself, but what was more disturbing was why Whitfield was downplaying such an obviously significant development. It didn't make any sense.

"Look," she said, softening her tone, "we've got way too much going on right now to deal with this kind of little bullshit, so find out why this investigative reporter is suddenly showing up on our door, and make the whole thing go away."

"Don't I always?" Whitfield answered reassuringly. "Seriously, Cory, I'm on top of it. There's no need for you to worry. It's all under control, which is why I saw no need to trouble you." He grinned at her.

"Good," Cory said, clicking off. She felt calm and reassured. "Okay, Henry, what's next?"

"Procedure," Henry said to her quietly.

Henry had no idea what it meant, only that Cory had instructed him to say the word "procedure" to her after every meeting or call with Whitfield. He had tried to ask her about it once, but she just stared at him with the look she usually reserved for people she was about to fire. That look was more than enough to let him know the subject was closed. Still, he wondered.

Cory eyed Henry quizzically for a moment and then nodded. "Procedure," she repeated as she reactivated her ocular implant and tapped the 'Whitfield' icon on her virtual start page. She read the note she had written to herself and reviewed the transcript of her last comm call. While reading, she absentmindedly fiddled with a ring on her left index finger. The ring featured a golden honey bee with diamond eyes. The bee flew from the ring to the white camellia Cory wore on her lapel. The set was part of GeneTech's biologic jewelry line designed exclusively for Chanel.

"Set up a meeting with Sutherland for 8 a.m. tomorrow."

General Victor Sutherland was GeneTech's chief of security and a senior advisor to Bioenyo, the company's military products division. He was also a highly respected and well connected retired U.S. Army Major General and former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Thus, he was an important figure within the company's pantheon of leading executives. But Henry knew Cory rarely met with him face-to-face outside of regularly scheduled senior staff meetings.

"Trouble?" Henry said with as much innocence as he could muster.

Cory shook her head. "Nothing we can't handle. Now, what's next for today?"

Henry searched his bosses' eyes for a moment and then stroked the air with his index finger to bring up Cory's daily planner. "A quick status convo with the EMEA GMs – nothing big happening there – and then a lovely dinner with the President of France. Word is she's thrilled you debuted 'Feathers and Fur' in Paris – well, outside Paris – instead of New York or London. "

Cory smiled. "Maybe it's a good time to tell her about our next product launch."

The French President was a well-known labor advocate. Henry couldn't wait to watch his boss drop that little bomb on her well coiffed head. "Indeed," he replied with a wink.

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## **About the Author**

R.A. Finlayson is a futurist and marketer who has spent the last 10 years helping startups and major brands launch a range of new products, from TiVo to Xbox, working alongside some of the most innovative minds of our age. Finlayson also worked as a journalist covering the U.S. Congress for two daily newspapers. He brings to his writing a passion for technology and a keen eye for the trends and developments that are changing the fabric of our society. He lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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