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# The Latest Model

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# The Latest Model

by *Gwenyth E. Hood*

Though it was only superficial, the lesion on the three-year old's arm looked sinister. Oddly symmetrical and oval, it looked like a pinkish field of delicate needlepricks on the pudgy arm and elbow, oozing a little and forming a crust the color of lemon yogurt on the edges. The child sniffled as Sandra gently explored his injury. His cheeks were still red from bawling.

"Well, well! What happened to you, young man?" asked Sandra when she had finished.

"I fell down!" declared Michael.

"What did you fall on, Michael?"

"The wellwet wallay," said Michael.

"The wellwet wahlay?" Sandra looked questioningly at the grim-faced nanny.

"He means the carpet, Dr. Plummer," she offered. "The Velvet Valet."

"I see! A rogue Model 5. I've heard of Model 5 burns, but this is the first I've actually seen. They tend," and she gave the nanny, Peggy Terril, a questioning look, "to be treated at home."

A smile teased the corners of Peggy Terril's mouth. "Yes, Dr. Plummer, I could have treated Michael's burn at home. I brought him in for another reason. You see, Michael really hates the carpet."

"Hates it?" Sandra glanced quizzically at the three year old who had such firm views on interior decoration.

"I mean, hates it as if it were something alive."

Sandra shook her head; she did not get the drift. "Well, the burn will give no trouble anyway. It's superficial; it will heal in no time." Carefully she ran the tap water until it was lukewarm and began dressing the wound. "Do you hate the carpet, Michael?" she asked as she proceeded. When in doubt, verify.

"I do! I want to eat it up!" the child declared with passion.

The nanny grimaced. "He actually did try to eat it once, Dr. Plummer. His mouth was swollen for a week. His sister Cheryl also attacks the carpet every now and then. One time she must have been at it a good fifteen minutes before we caught her."

Michael chortled. "She looked like a mummy, she had so many bandages!"

"Was she treated here?" Sandra asked.

"No, I took care of it. They teach nannies first aid, you know. But this time I wanted to consult you. Since you are in family practice, I thought you might know about problems involving the Model 5. I mean, psychological problems."

"I see," said Sandra. The dark-haired, ruddy-cheeked

nanny had neatly laid a ticking time-bomb on Sandra's lap. Did Peggy realize that if her suspicions were correct, keeping a rogue Model 5 in a house with children might be considered a form of child abuse? Of course she knew. They taught nannies things like that.

"Well," said Sandra, "the Rogue phenomenon is very new and I don't think there have been formal studies on it. But I'll ask around and find out what my colleagues know." Then she added in a softer voice, "I was tempted to get a Model 5 myself back ten years ago when Roger and I set up housekeeping. You can't beat those jewel-tones with the velvet texture. Like fresh-mown turf, it just begs you to sink your toes into it."

Model 5 had proved to be a trap for many upwardly mobile families. It had been advertised as a lifelong investment, for its luscious jewel-tones could be readjusted in a wide variety of patterns to satisfy its owner's changing tastes. But that was not the best of it; similar features, after all, had long been available in the old Model 3, even if the velvet was not as lush. No, the Model 5's unique attraction was the glamor of the most advanced nano-engineering. Only Model 5 had that embedded meta-archetectonic layer, inorganic yet modeled on biological DNA. Only it had the carefully articulated venous strata designed to monitor every part of its surface for cleaning and self-repair. The Model 3 still had a mechanical engine unobtrusively installed below the floor, and you had to remember to set it to run at a time when it would not bother the household. During operation, the tiny hollow carpet shafts alternately vibrated and suctioned to break up the dust and stains and draw the fragments into the pores. Then, through a network of veins, the debris would be drawn into a receptacle below the floor. And you had to remember to empty the receptacle, or the suction would not work. Every now and then a vein would become clogged with an odd-sized particle, so you had to call the trouble-shooter. In addition to this, every two years or so the carpet shafts would start to lose their luster, and you had to spread a "Model 3 refurbish" fluid over it and stay off for as much as two hours while it recoated, restored and smoothed any worn or threadbare patches.

Yes, Model 3 took some maintenance, averaging about fifteen minutes a month. To be sure, most of the nuisance was remembering what needed to be done. Maintenance was finished as soon as remembered. The worst thing about the machine was its old fashioned simplicity. When all was said and done it was just a glorified vacuum cleaner.

Model 5 took care of itself. Its meta-archetectonic layer detected foreign particles which impinged upon its surfaces and sent out its microscopic bars and lathes to crush them and absorb the debris within its pores. From this residue

it took whatever it needed to repair its own structure, excreting the rest into a receptacle below the floor. In the later versions the receptacle, when filled, would call your answering machine to tell you it needed to be emptied.)

Yes, the Model 5 was hardy and enduring, like the living organisms whose structure it aped. It was likewise vulnerable. Its meta-archetectonic base was subject to mutations. And despite the Environmental Reconstruction Act (ERA) of 2031, ultraviolet light and cosmic rays were still penetrating the as-yet-unreplenished ozone layer at a morbidly high level. This, of course, worsened the problem. Furthermore, mutations in the meta-archetectonic base would quickly spread throughout the whole Model 5 because of its ongoing regenerative processes. Then the carpet would do unexpected things. The programming which checked it from attacking warm-blooded animals or smooth surfaces larger than a centimeter in diameter would be overridden.

There would have been greater outcry had the digestion process been swift or dramatic. But no; it worked in tiny increments, molecule by molecule, and damage took a while to show. Many pet owners were at first pleased when their cats and dogs developed a sudden aversion for the indoors. When holes appeared in the soles of owners' shoes, they only decided to change designers. But when they suddenly came home from a month at the seashore to discover that the legs of the baby-grand piano were an inch shorter than they should be, the secret was out.

Of course, had they been in the habit of wriggling their bare toes in the lush velvet of the carpet, they would have noticed something right away.

Troubleshooters were called and they would lock the owner out of the house for an average of four hours and then explain that the problem was fixed. Usually it was only temporarily restrained. Mutations in the meta-archetectonic structure were like dandelions on a lawn--they have deep roots and they replenish quickly. People soon resigned themselves to living with carnivorous carpets. Children were encouraged to play outdoors whenever possible and stay upright when inside. A superficial scrape or so did not seem reason enough to get rid of a carpet which cost as much as a luxury glider. The Model 5 still looked delicious, and surely the experts would crack the mutation problem soon.

But sibling rivalry and its attendant stresses was another thing the inventors of the Model 5 had not allowed for.

"Where, exactly, did you say you lived?" Sandra asked. "The Thistlegrove Center."

That was only 5 kilometers or so away. "If I learn anything today, perhaps I'll drop in on the way home. Would Michael's parents be there at any particular hour?"

"Usually. Mrs. Beck runs a boutique which she closes at five-thirty. Mr. Beck is a lawyer and his hours vary. But when he can, he joins his wife for dinner."

"Thank you. I'll come by and talk to you when I know something. I hope I will meet the Becks."

After the nanny had left with her charge, Sandra called

Dr. Lars Jensen in Psychiatry and Dr. Patricia Cox in Pediatrics and left messages with their secretaries. Then she forgot about the child with the Model 5 burn until Dr. Jensen called her at twelve-thirty.

"So, Sandy," his voice boomed cheerfully, "you want a consult? Are you about ready for lunch?"

"Yes, I take my hour now," she said.

"Come to my office. I'll show you something to turn your stomach, and then we'll go eat." He hung up the phone. Sandra snorted; Dr. Jensen used melodrama regularly as part of his ergotherapy, and it spilled over into his daily life. He was the only psychiatrist at the Thistledown Medical Center who adhered to the new twenty-first century school which held that therapists achieved their effects by showering their patients with bursts of psychic energy. As the old-fashioned practitioners scoffed, it was a scientific way of scaring people sane. However, it drew patients and seemed to have as much success as older methods.

Sandra took the elevator to the fourth floor and found Lars Jensen crouching before his little desk. "Ah, there you are, Sandy," he said, idly twirling his blond mustache. His knees, bent double, could not quite fit beneath his desk. Surely, Sandy reflected, he had kept the undersize furnishings deliberately to enhance the impression of his massive frame on unwary patients; otherwise, in the three years he had been at the center, he could have found furniture his own size.

"So," continued Dr. Jensen, "you're wondering if long-term exposure to rogue Model 5's can cause stress disorders?"

"That's the basic idea."

"Want to try an experiment?"

"What sort of experiment, Lars?"

"I'll show you a holograph of a certain scene. My professional judgment is that if I can recover from being there in person, you can recover from seeing the holograph."

"I'm willing to test the hypothesis," said Sandra.

Lars flipped the switch of the holo projector and the image took shape in a half-meter cube upon his desk. It showed a luxurious interior with plush sofa and a wall design which looked something like interlocking horseshoes of turquoise and maroon. Personally, I prefer landscape decor, thought Sandra. The carpet was a lush acqumarine velvet, clearly Model 5. But at the center, the pure color was marred by an uneven blotch ranging from crimson to dull brown. It was blood, some fresh, some dried. At the edge of it there was a body, long-haired, round of buttock, wrapped in a loose dress, some sort of silk-polyester evening gown with glittering sequins of pale blue. It was marred with rust colored stains. The body lay face down. At least it would have lain face down if there were a face left; in profile the skull seemed too short and in a moment Sandra realized the carpet had eaten away some inches in the front. Grey brains had seeped out, mingling with partially digested hair. The fingers had been half-absorbed and both hands tapered off near the knuckles.

"I get the picture, Lars," said Sandy. "You can turn it off." He threw the switch and the holograph vanished. "But the digestion process is so slow," she protested. "How could anyone lie still that long? Did she have a seizure?"

"She took an overdose of barbiturates. But that probably wouldn't have finished her if it weren't for the Model 5. She lay unconscious until the radial artery and branches of the femoral artery were opened, and then she bled to death. Of course, the carpet went on digesting after that. It's hard to say whether that was an accident or whether she worked the rogue carpet into her calculations from the first. Now, may I ask you a question? It's part of the experiment."

"All right."

"Do you feel like eating lunch?"

"Not really, but I'd better because this is the only time of day I can fit it in."

"Right. Now tell me this: do you honestly believe it is not stressful to live with a rogue Model 5?"

"I can't expect the Becks to accept my subjective judgment."

"All human emotions are subjective, Sandy, but in many cases our subjectivities are quite similar. Do you have a gut feeling that there will be legal action against the Velvet Valet before there are too many more scenes like this one?"

"Must I really exercise the gift of prophecy as well, Lars?" asked Sandra.

"Of course, Sandy. You're in Family Practice. Family Practice includes all the general skills none of the specialties will touch."

Sandy nodded ironically. "All right, Lars. Do you have any other anecdotes to bolster my case?"

"Do you really need anecdotes, Sandy? How about logic? Take the case I have of a successful businessman who can't sleep because of recurrent fantasies that his carpet will eat him if he gives it half a chance. Once upon a time that would have been a phobia, but in this case, it was simple realism. I did point out, though, that he could easily end this stressful situation."

Sandy shrugged. "Wasn't he masochistic?"

"Ah, there's always been a double standard about masochism. We all put up with trouble to get what we want. All through history people have knowingly destroyed their health to achieve social standards. Remember the high-heeled shoes which ruined backs and ankles for more than three centuries. Then there were the anabolic steroids which increased muscle-mass in athletes while driving them to psychosis. And there's the sun-tanning craze which fueled the skin-cancer epidemic at the end of the last century. Rating glamor and status above sanity is perfectly normal. Ridiculous, of course, but normal."

"So how do I deal with it, Lars?"

"Inspire them to strive for excellence!" Before he spoke, Dr. Jensen had leaned back in his chair and self-consciously relaxed the grip of his hands on his chair-arms;

Sandra sensed that if he had followed his natural impulse, he would have leaped to his feet and pounded his fists his desk, very likely splintering it in the process. But instead he assumed a serene expression and fixed his eyes on hers. In ergotherapy it was important to send whirls of psychic energy in gentle bursts so that the patient could absorb them instead of merely being shattered.

"In Family Practice, we aren't trained to tell them how to live," said Sandra. "I can't say to them what you're saying to me."

"Of course you can't. You must use the art of diplomacy. That comes with Family Practice too," he said.

"Too bad they didn't offer me a class on it," said Sandra. They adjourned their discussion to the cafeteria. No sooner had they set their trays on a convenient table than Dr. Patricia Cox joined them. "Got your message, Sandra. I've reviewed a handful of cases for you. There's nothing we can lay just on the Model 5; there are always complicating factors. For example, there's a child on the fourth floor who won't touch anything velvety, smooth or jewel-toned because she's lived with a rogue Model 5 for a year. But her mother also tied her to the bed at nap-time. There are some children with severe disorders and delusions about carpets that are going to eat them, but their families were also going through nasty divorces. But it seems to me there's a nasty syndrome developing where chronic problems with rogue Model 5's are one factor."

"I guess I'll have to go on that," said Sandy. "It's all the information I have."

# # #

That evening, before the high fences of the Medical Center, Sandra watched the sausage-shaped shuttle lift off the ground, left side first, with a crooked wobble. It quivered in the air, then rose straight up with the action of the invisible propellers with the pores of its helium-impregnated walls. Lightly, with a rolling motion, it cleared the fence and spun on its usual route southward toward the residential centers. Awkward though they looked, these buoyant gliders rode very smoothly within and were amazingly safe. No one died in traffic accidents any more. The worst thing that happened was an occasional internal power failure which left passengers in the dark for moments or hours, and Sandra was armed against that. In her black bag she carried not only a standard battery powered flashlight but also a miniature kerosene lantern with matches. Doctors still needed low-tech lighting sometimes; you never knew.

Sandra caught the next public glider and after a ten minute ride she found herself coming down over the Thistledown Grove fences. The young ranger was in his watchtower, scanning the wilderness with his binoculars. He waved as they passed. Reintroduced wildlife was thriving in the new forests where the unneeded concrete of the ancient highways gradually dissolved into luxuriant vegetation. White-tailed deer were multiplying and there were excited whispers that moose and elk were migrating down from the north, followed by wolves and cougars. Otters,

muskrats and beavers were coming back to the rivers and lakes. It was fine sport for nature buffs to encounter them, but no one wanted them eating the roses or creating unplanned hazards on the golf courses. Hence the stun-gun on the wall behind the ranger.

In a moment the glider passed over the wall and alighted on the greensward. Sandra dismounted and found herself standing between a recreation field on the left and the housing which stood in rows on the right. The Becks, she knew, were somewhere within the handsome but standardized townhouses which gave the community its front. (More eccentric dwellings designed by nonconformists, such as the one Roger had built for the two of them, were tucked in the back.) Sandra glanced down on the paper where she had scrawled the address and let out an impatient sigh. She could not quite make out the number she had written. Did this mean a call to central data?

Four other passengers had alighted at Thistledown groves. Two were children, girls, neatly but casually dressed in tan skorts which were now favored as play-clothes. The third, a young woman in a grey skirt-suit, she immediately sized up as a nanny of the Emerson school. The fourth was not so easy to place. She was an older woman, perhaps in her sixties, with grey hair piled severely in a bun upon her head. Gold earrings and a gold-drop pendant added a touch of elegance to what was still an austere, not to say fierce, ensemble of black and white. "May I help you?" asked the older woman. The brisk tone suggested that Sandra was an obvious stranger; since the Environmental Reconstruction Act, nosy neighbors were in and everyone admitted that the crime rate was down. Sandra smiled ingratiatingly. "Do you perhaps know whether the Becks live in Townhouse 203 or 205? I'm Dr. Alexandra Plummer--"

"Oh yes!" The nanny spoke up. "Peggy said you might come. I'm Grace Phillips. I live two centers over with the Fosters, and these are Julie and Claudia Foster. And this," she said indicating the older lady, "is Louise Fortmain."

Sandra cried out in surprise. "Oh! You're the founder of the Emerson School of Domestic Education!"

Louise Fortmain's face relaxed and she actually chuckled. "You've heard of me, then? It's good not to be forgotten, though things aren't turning out the way I planned them. Nannies can only supplement parents' love. They can't replace it. They shouldn't be the only ones worried about rogue Model 5's." She caught herself. "But I run on too long. I live next door to the Becks. They're in 203 and I'm in 204. Good luck."

Thanking them quickly, Sandra approached Townhouse 203 and rang the bell. It was immediately opened by a woman with an oval face, her hair sculpted in the inexplicably fashionable high-tower style with jeweled pins. She was wearing a simple but startling chartreuse gown with gold accessories. "Good evening," said Sandra, "Is this Mrs. Beck?"

"Oh, you must be Dr. Plummer. Peggy said you would be dropping in," she said, throwing wide the door. "It's so

kind of you to be concerned about Michael." As Mrs. Beck stepped back, Sandra noticed that her shoes were gold to match the necklace and earrings. Was she wearing a transparent shoe-shield? Then Sandra remembered she had done nothing to shield her own two-year-old loafers. About time I replaced them anyway, she thought resignedly. Gingerly she stepped into the aqua-toned foyer. She fancied she felt the voracious fibers savoring her soles beneath her although consciously she knew the digestive action could not happen so fast. In the living room, the color changed to sea-green, offsetting a lime-green wall. Sandra tried briefly to decide whether she thought the combination tasteful, then gave it up. Roger was much better at these things.

On a matching sea-green couch Mr. Beck was half-reclined, his feet stretched out before him, drink in hand. "Walt, this is Dr. Sandra Plummer," said his wife.

Walt stood up. He was a large-framed man, more than six feet tall. His black hair tapered toward the back of his head. His eyes evaded hers as he reached out to shake her hand. "How good of you to come, Dr. Plummer. Michael's fine. Would you like a drink?"

"Good evening, Mr. Beck. I knew Michael's burn was not serious. No, I don't need a drink; I can't stay long."

At this Mr. Beck looked serious and put his drink on a side-table. "Well, please sit down," he said.

Sandra sank into the sofa, but Mr. Beck remained towering over her. Whew, thought Sandra, I already flunked the art of diplomacy. What can the gift of prophecy do, I wonder? With both Becks staring down at her, she began. "When Ms. Terril brought Michael, she asked me to investigate something. Did she tell you about that?" "No," said the Becks, quickly in unison.

Immediately Sandra thought she felt something move under her feet. She looked down, but nothing was obviously wrong. She should not let the Model 5 get so much on her nerves. The Becks were fidgeting and she turned to them again. "Ms. Terril feared that the long term stress of living with a rogue Model 5 might cause psychological damage. I have spoken with my colleagues and I find that there is indeed some basis for concern. My colleague in Pediatrics thinks there is a syndrome developing."

Mr. Beck snorted. "Listen, Dr. Plummer, you medical people have your viewpoint and I have mine. Mine is that I'm not going to live every moment of my life cringing in terror over every possible danger, however remote. The burns caused by the Model 5 are so superficial you hardly see them unless you look; the children have gotten worse scrapes climbing trees outside. Unless you have hard evidence that the Model 5 causes serious damage, I'm going to keep it, and furthermore, I don't want you harrasing me about it."

"Ah, yes, hard evidence." Sandra began to warm up. Though the number of malpractice suits had diminished since the Euthanasia Ruling of 2013, the old animus between doctors and lawyers had not completely died away. She folded her hands, and as she did so, her mind finally



registered something she had been noticing tangentially for some time. It was a ripple in the carpet, like an ocean wave, about an inch high and traveling toward Mr. Beck. She focused on it then and stared almost hypnotically. Only peripherally was she aware that both of the Becks had leaned away, looking at the ceiling, as if her behavior embarrassed them, like someone staring monomaniacally at a stain on a the hostess' gown at a dinner party. She spoke, and her voice sounded overloud, like the child calling attention to the Emperor's lack of clothes: Does your carpet do this often?"

"Do what?" demanded Mr. Beck.

"Wave and ripple. Like that." She pointed, but the ripple had disappeared. Mr. Beck only stared, but Mrs. Beck said brightly, "Oh, no, Dr. Plummer, not often. It's only been doing that for about a week." Mr. Beck gave her a surprised look. Perhaps, then, he had not observed it himself.

"I'd be concerned about it if I were you," said Sandra. "When I read through the Model 5 specs, I noticed that the only time the carpet is designed to make a visible motion is when it encounters an offensive smell. In that case the carpet would actually surround the offensive object and speed up its digestive process, with special attention to neutralizing odors first. Dog, cat, and parakeet messes were the target. But if that carpet is rippling for any other trigger, there's been a mutation. Perhaps it's become hypersensitive to some smell we produce. The carpet might actually attack you or one of the children and cause more damage than it's done yet."

Mr. Beck raised his voice. "Look, Dr. Plummer, I told

you I didn't want harrassment. Name your hard evidence if you have it." As he spoke, an inch-high ripple rose slowly in the carpet behind him. How could he be so oblivious to it? Deliberately, Sandy spoke in a low voice. "I see that you are laying most stress on the legal issues here, Mr. Beck. But if you'll permit me, I'd like to put the biological perspective before you."

"All right. But get on with it," said Mr. Beck. The ripple behind him began to flow toward his feet, but his eyes were locked on the ceiling.

"All right. Biologically speaking, the human brain is a marvel. It's capable of making surprisingly sound judgments, sometimes on the basis of very skimpy evidence. This is vital to our survival, because throughout our history the environment has seldom troubled to make itself as intelligible to us as human law would require. With the environment, you know, might is right and possession is nearly all of the law. So, you see, when the environment presents us with early warnings, ambiguous though they may be, there is a certain natural penalty for not judging them soundly. Human law cannot protect us from this penalty."

"Yes? And your point is?" growled Mr. Beck. Another ripple rose before him, two inches high this time.

"Well, the point, Mr. Beck, is that I think you should look down at your carpet. I think it is beginning to dislike the way our feet smell. Perhaps we are sweating too much."

Involuntarily Mr. Beck looked down and let out a startled yelp, for behind him, the carpet was subtly coming alive like the surface of a windy lake. "I think," said Sandra.

"it would be wise to evacuate the house and call the trouble-shooter to remove the carpet right away. Permanently."

But Mr. Beck was no longer interested in the biological perspective. Seeing the carnivorous ripples straining after him, Mr. Beck leaped into the air, and came down --splat-- on the unstable surface. Over he went on his face, exuding more sweat and a thin stream of nosebleed. Freshly offended, the carpet raised a three inch-high ripple-wave around him and flowed inward.

"Keep calm, Mrs. Beck," warned Sandy. "Why don't you get Peggy and the children out, and I'll do what I can for--"

But in emergency situations, fortitude is less catching than panic. Mrs. Beck screamed, "Walter! Oh no!" and raced toward him. Then as he reached for her hand from the midst of the devouring velvet, she involuntarily lurched and stumbled against the opposite wall. Walter once more fell prostrate in the writhing surface. In retaliation, a meter-wide length of carpet near the window raised itself in the air and came down on Walter like a manta-ray. He let out a terrified bellow which was quickly muffled as the tenacious membrane swallowed him.

"Oh, Walter, Walter! My God!" Mrs. Beck saturated the air with her wails.

Just then the door from the opposite hall opened and Peggy stood with a child on either side, staring at the amorphous hump before them, hardly distinguishable as a human frame, struggling with the Model 5. She let out a shriek, and the children, slower to understand, pressed against her. Acting on a desperate hunch, Sandra opened her black bag, extracted the matches and lit her kerosene lamp. Then she dropped the lit match upon the carpet.

Suddenly the Model 5 ceased its thrashing. It lay limp like a dead animal and exuded a thick misty sweat. As the match guttered and went out, Sandra set the lamp on the carpet and wedged it carefully between her feet. Meanwhile, Mr. Beck freed himself from his encasement and crawled out into daylight, like a half-developed moth from

its crysalis. His forehead and cheeks were blotched with puffy burns, and a thin stream of blood ran from his nose. His suit was noticeably pilled and frayed. Sandra reached forward and pulled his arm. "Go on out ahead of me, all of you," she said. "I must bring the lantern last." Peggy regained self-possession first and marched to the door, children in tow. Mrs. Beck seemed drawn by magnetism to join the little procession as it passed her. Sandra cautiously propelled Mr. Beck after them. He followed like a sleepwalker. Then carefully she lifted up the lantern and carried it out with them.

Outside the door they immediately encountered Louise Fortmain standing. Michael and Cheryl were already behind her chattering excitedly with the two Foster children. "It was like a giant squid!" Michael was saying.

"An amoeba!" insisted Cheryl.

"We heard screams," remarked Fortmain, looking blandly at the adults. Mr. Beck was still in a daze and Mrs. Beck was shaking too hard to speak. Sandra said, "The Model 5 isn't a rogue any more. Now it's a terrorist."

"How did you stop it? What did you do?" asked Peggy Terril. "According to the specs I read, the Model 5 has a built-in fire-protection feature which overrides all others," said Sandra. "Luckily, the mutations hadn't destroyed it. When I lit the match, all other functions ceased."

Louise Fortmain spoke. "You are all welcome to use my apartment until you settle the matter."

"Can they stay over at our house?" one of the Foster girls asked Grace. As Grace nodded, the children began to hop, skip and jump toward Townhouse 204.

"I'll serve coffee. And hot chocolate," said Louise, with a bemused smile.

But Mr. Beck followed Sandra in a half-daze like a bull being led by a ring in his nose. "Don't worry," Sandra told him comfortingly. "Model 5 burns are only superficial. They'll go away in no time."

"I'll sue the bastards," muttered Mr. Beck. "I'll sue."