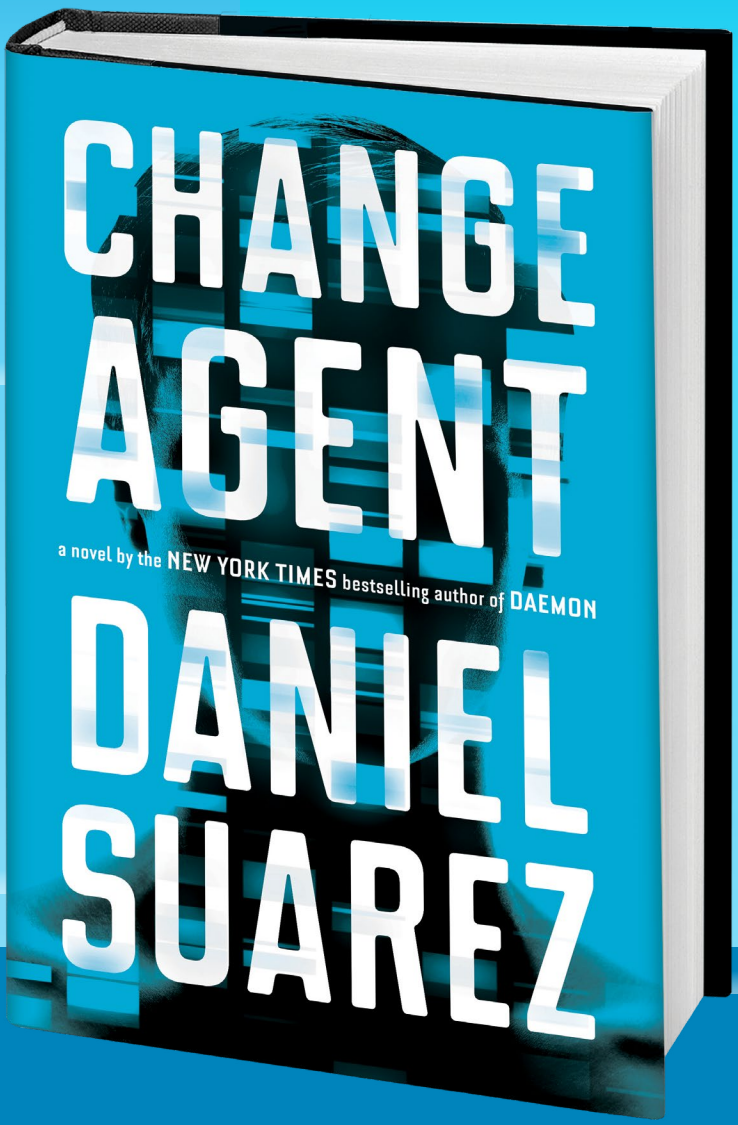
DANIEL SUAREZ

CHANGE AGENT



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4.18.2017

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Chapter 1

Before we begin, have you any questions about genetic editing, Mr. and Mrs. Cherian?" The counselor took a whopping bite from a vada pav sandwich as he clicked through their file.

The young Mumbai couple exchanged uncertain looks. In their late twenties, well-groomed, and dressed in crisp business casual clothes, they appeared a step above the cramped, dingy, and windowless office around them. Nonetheless here they were. The wife appeared especially ill at ease.

The husband shook his head. "No questions at the moment, no." He looked to his wife reassuringly. Patted her on the knee.

She spoke up. "How does the procedure work?"

The counselor answered with his mouth full. "Ah, an inquiring mind."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

The husband cut in. "My wife and I are *both* attorneys. Given the legal status of this enterprise, we were understandably reluctant to research the topic on our own devices."

"Well then . . ." The counselor finished chewing and wiped his fingers on a crumpled napkin. "I have something that should address your questions." He noisily rooted around in his desk drawer and in a moment produced a device the size and shape of a paperback book, which he placed on the cluttered desktop between them. When he pressed down on the device it unfolded into a pylon shape—sporting several lenses facing forward and back. It booted up, white light glowing within.

The wife drew stylish mirror glasses from her purse and donned

them to shield her eyes. "A *glim*? You think we'd allow you access to our retinas? This is out—"

"No retinal scanning, I assure you, Mrs. Cherian. Merely a brief in-eye presentation."

The husband looked to his wife. "They have our DNA, love. Retinas are the least of it."

"Neelo, I want our embryo transferred back to the clinic."

"My love, we—"

"This place is a rat hole. A defunct export office by the look of it."

"All part of the disguise, Mrs. Cherian. We must not attract undue attention from the authorities. But rest assured, our labs are well funded—run by the largest genediting syndicate in the world, Trefoil. None are more sophisticated."

"My love, remember: they came highly recommended."

She grabbed her bag as if to go. "Neelo, we are law-abiding people."

"We've discussed this, cherub. Principled positions are admirable, but other parents are doing this. We as well must do everything we can to prepare our son for the world in which he will live." He gestured to the glim on the table. "Why don't we watch the presentation and see how we feel afterward?"

She sighed—and reluctantly removed her mirror glasses.

The counselor beamed. "Very good. Please look forward. It will find your retinas in a jiffy."

In a moment, from their perspective, the air above the desk filled with a highly detailed 3D model of the double helix of DNA. It rotated there, an utterly convincing virtual object—seemingly as real as the desk. Yet the floating DNA existed only as a rich, plenoptic light field projected directly onto their retinas and unseen by anyone not targeted by the glim.

Light field projectors like these had largely replaced physical televisions, computer screens, and mobile OLED displays in the last decade or so. Beaming imagery directly onto a viewer's retinas instead of spraying photons all over the place had many advantages—authentic augmented reality being one. Environmental sustainability another. Privacy another still.

A female narrator's voice came to them via a focused acoustic beam. *"Initially developed in 2012, CRISPR technology is a search-and-replace tool for modifying DNA—the blueprint of all living things."*

The word "CRISPR" appeared with the letters expanding into full words in turn.

"Shorthand for 'clustered regularly interspaced short palindromic repeats,' CRISPR derives from a naturally occurring process in bacterial immune systems—and it has been adapted by modern science to permit targeted genetic edits of plant, animal, and human embryos."

The 3D animation showed a labeled RNA molecule enter the scene.

"The process begins by seeding a 'guide RNA' with both a target and a payload genetic sequence . . ."

Labels identified them in turn as they were inserted into the RNA molecule.

"This guide RNA is then injected into an embryonic cell's nucleus . . ."

The RNA clamped onto the double helix of DNA, unzipping it.

". . . where it reads the embryo's DNA. Wherever a match for the target sequence is found . . ."

The 3D image highlighted a match between the RNA target sequence and a segment of the cell's DNA.

". . . a natural cutting protein acts as a molecular scalpel, severing the DNA chain . . ."

The animation showed the double helix of DNA cut.

". . . removing the matching segment . . ."

The animation showed it being removed.

". . . and inserting a copy of the payload DNA in its place."

The RNA's payload sequence copied itself into the gap, and the DNA quickly rejoined.

"In this way human embryos may be safely and reliably 'edited' in vitro to correct deadly heritable genetic disorders."

Moving music swelled as the scene dissolved to a life-sized 3D projection of a beautiful but despondent little African girl with cloudy blind eyes. She looked as real as if she sat in the room with them.

"CRISPR-developed cures for cystic fibrosis, muscular dystrophy, sickle-cell anemia, Huntington's disease, hemophilia, and more have

already saved or improved the lives of hundreds of millions of people worldwide . . ."

The scene dissolved into a new image—one of the now smiling girl with clear brown eyes, reaching up to smudge flour onto her mother's nose. They both laughed and embraced as they made cookies together.

"*Ending a legacy of suffering and for the first time putting humanity in control of its own genetics.*"

The image tilted skyward to show a brightly lit horizon. A new dawn.

"*Theoretically there is no limit to the desirable edits CRISPR can perform.*"

Dark clouds moved in, obscuring this glowing horizon. Ominous music rumbled.

"*However, international law currently prohibits edits beyond those designed to correct a short UN-approved list of genetic disorders. Despite this, our expert researchers have perfected hundreds of highly beneficial CRISPR edits. Edits that increase both the quality and the quantity of human life.*"

The music rose as the image ascended, finally bursting through the gray cloud layer into an endless expanse of sunlight beyond. No horizon in sight.

"*And unlike other gene therapies, CRISPR edits are heritable—meaning they will be passed down to all future generations of your family line—what's known as 'germ line engineering.' This means your investment today will pay rich dividends for all your child's descendants.*"

The scene transitioned to a life-sized and utterly realistic projection of a healthy five-year-old South Asian boy, who rotated slowly before them.

"*For example, a minor edit to a human embryo's DAF2 gene could add thirty healthy years to a child's life. A change to BCAT1 could add even more.*"

The image of the boy aged to an adult and then beyond until he had a full shock of gray hair—but an otherwise healthy frame. He lifted up a laughing grandchild with ease as they ran toward a zoo exhibit.

The imagery then dissolved to show a young man, studious and attentive in a classroom.

"A change to gene DLG3 can improve memory, while a series of edits within the M1 and M3 gene clusters can substantially increase intelligence."

The image morphed to the teen wearing a valedictorian cap and gown. He smiled as he took the podium amid applause, ostensibly to address his graduating class.

The imagery shifted to an athletic young woman running on a track against several close competitors.

"A tweak to the MEF2 gene can bestow type II 'fast-twitch' muscle fibers . . ."

The young woman outpaced the other sprinters, raising her arms as she burst through the finish tape to cheers.

". . . increasing physical prowess."

The imagery resolved again to a double helix of DNA, with segments snipped and replaced here, there, and elsewhere.

"Other even more exciting edits are being developed to meet the demands of our increasingly competitive world. Be sure to ask your genetic counselor for a full list of edits in your price range. No matter which you choose, you'll be giving your child a timeless gift, one that they will be able to pass down to their own children—the first truly priceless family heirloom."

The DNA looped as the image zoomed out to soft, inspiring music, transforming into a three-cornered continuous shape.

Text appeared above and below the logo as it pulsed with life:

TREFOIL LABS

Evolution by design.

Moments later the virtual logo blinked out of existence as the counselor pressed down on the glim to fold it. He scooped the glim back into his desk drawer. "I trust that answered your questions."

The husband and wife both looked somewhat dazed at the sudden disappearance of the alternate reality.

The wife was first to recover. "Could such edits be done on an adult person?"

The counselor laughed, putting his sandwich down and clasping his hands. "Now that would be valuable indeed! But alas, no, Mrs. Cherian. Editing the DNA of one cell out of thirty-five trillion would not accomplish much. That's why these changes need to be made while your child is but a zygote—a single fertilized cell."

She nodded to herself. "I see."

"You and I will remain as we are, but your child has no such limitation." He studied her expression, pausing with the experienced cadence of a true salesman. "Shall we discuss the desired edits for your future son?"

The husband took his wife's hand. "Are you ready to proceed, my love?"

She visibly struggled with powerful emotions.

The counselor had seen it before. "Mrs. Cherian, all creatures select genetic preferences when they choose a mate. But science now gives you and your husband the ability to adjust your child's genetics just a bit further—*together*."

The husband again placed his hand on her knee.

She shook her head. "It seems against Nature."

The counselor spoke softly. "This is the very same process Nature follows to eliminate viral DNA in bacteria. The same process used under the UN's Treaty on Genetic Modification."

"Yes, but to cure deadly genetic defects, not to tailor-make a child."

The husband shook his head. "We are not tailoring our child. We are correcting genetic weaknesses. Is not a weak memory fatal to a future doctor or attorney?"

"Where does this sort of thinking lead us, Neelo—eugenics?"

The counselor shook his head slowly. "No, no, Mrs. Cherian. There are three billion letters in the human genome. Most people edit six to twelve—minor edits indeed."

"Remember, love, what did you say when you saw the Persauds' little boy? Is that not why we are here?"

She fell silent.

The husband turned to the counselor. "We don't want many edits, of course."

"Nor would you need them, Mr. Cherian." He started tapping at an unseen screen. "But even minor edits can go a long way to help your child in a rapidly evolving world. Some edits are more costly than others, of course, but who can put a price on parental love?"

The husband studied his wife, who was literally wringing her hands, but he spoke to the counselor. "Which edits would you recommend?"

"I always suggest the DAF2 edit. Why not start your child out with up to three decades more of healthy living? So they can be there in your twilight years." The counselor made some entries on the invisible screen. "How could such a thing be wrong?"

The Cherians exchanged appraising looks.

"Longer life, of course, suggests related edits—LRP5 for extra strong bones, PCSK9 for a greatly reduced risk of heart disease . . ." He clicked unseen UIs.

"The next question is whether you prize intellectual excellence over physical prowess. Heightened intellect requires more complex edits—and is, thus, more costly. You can choose both, of course, budget permitting." He looked up at the parents.

They stared, frozen by the magnitude of the decision.

"Well, let us see what the Greek ideal—body and mind—would require." The counselor displayed the price to them.

"That's more than a year of university, Neelo."

"But with these edits our boy could very well win a full scholarship."

"I am uncomfortable with this."

"Why? Because some government bureaucrat says it's not allowed? Do you really think the wealthiest families are not doing this, my love?"

She sighed and looked away.

He took her hand again. "We must do it. For our son's sake—no matter how uncomfortable it makes us."

Just then they heard a *BOOM* that caused them all to jump in their seats.

The wife turned. "What was that?"

The counselor was already clicking away at invisible screens. "Oh, my . . . Mr. and Mrs. Cherian, please . . . a moment."

The wife grabbed her husband's arm. "What was that, Neelo?"

The husband stood as the counselor did. The sound of running feet and muffled shouts came from the hall. "Speak up, man!"

The counselor motioned for calm. "It would appear that the Brihanmumbai are raiding this facility."

"The police?"

"Do not be alarmed. We have made contributions to the appropriate authorities. This is clearly a mix-up. In any event, we have numerous concealed exits for just such a contingency." He gestured to his office doorway. "If you would please follow me . . ."

The counselor moved quickly out his office door and into a narrow corridor, which was quickly crowding with other couples and their counselors. Some clients shielded their faces from one another with handbags and scarves.

The husband clasped his wife's hand and followed closely. "This is outrageous."

"What about our embryo, Neelo?"

The counselor glanced backward. "Not to worry, folks. As I said, we'll get this mix-up sorted."

Someone shouted in alarm behind them. The Cherians looked back to see the door at the far end of the hallway kicked in. Police in black body armor poured through, shouting, *"Zameen par sab log!"*

Someone screamed and the crowd of clients stampeded.

A lab security guard emerged from a side door—pistol in hand.

The police shouted it in unison, *"Bandook! Bandook!"*—red laser dots clustering on the guard's chest as he stood slack-jawed. Deafening *POPS* filled the corridor. Screaming as everyone scattered. The security guard dropped like a bag of cement.

The husband pulled his wife down to the floor alongside him. "Down, love! Get down!"

People ran past them in a panic toward an unseen rear exit—some trampling the husband and wife as he shielded her. "Watch it, damn you!"

The police shouted again, *"Zameen par sab log!"*

Their counselor was nowhere to be seen. The husband spoke into his wife's ear. "We must say nothing until we've seen counsel, love. I need to phone Anish."

His wife was silent.

The husband noticed blood on his hand. Panicked, he padded his sides down. "My love, I . . ." And then, finding nothing, he looked to his wife.

A small bullet hole pierced her temple.

"No . . ." He cupped her head. Blood pooled beneath them both, expanding quickly across the cheap, dirty carpet.

He tried to form words—then finally screamed in horror as police approached behind him, guns raised. "No! No!"

He hugged her body close, shrieking in anguish.

The helmeted and armored police tried to pull him from her, but he would not let go.

"My love. No, my love!"

Chapter 2

Change comes. Inexorable. Most times it arrives gradually—but sometimes change is an earthquake. Cherished assumptions crack. Rocks of stability crumble. Chasms of experience open between adjacent generations.

Thinking back on his childhood, Kenneth Durand remembered his millennial parents enduring their own technological earthquake—the disruption of every industry. Their college degrees useless and their student debt insurmountable, they fell, like many others, out of the middle class. His father's ready smile was replaced by a mask of worry that remained until the day he died. Automation and disintermediation rocked their world.

And everyone thought that was big change.

It was nothing—just a tremor.

Two even larger shock waves came for Durand's generation.

The first was mass adoption of light fields. Suddenly what you saw with your own eyes wasn't necessarily reality. Most of the consumer electronics industry disappeared.

The second and *far* more disruptive shock wave was the fourth industrial revolution: synthetic biology. What was once manufactured was now increasingly grown by custom-designed organisms—algae, yeasts, bacteria. Automobile bodies grown from chitin. Biofuels from custom *E. coli* bacteria. Deathless meat and cultured dairy products from sustainable cellular agriculture. *Biofacturing* instead of manufacturing. Life itself harnessed to the human will.

Societies that incorporated these advances moved on. Those that could not did not. Instead, they languished in the debt, political paralysis, and recriminations of the previous age.

Durand had made his own choice, and the memory of those he'd left behind still ached. No doubt migrants of prior eras had always suffered the same anguish. They saw a brighter future somewhere and someway else and walked the difficult path that led them there. He'd disappointed so many people. Violated beloved traditions of service and loyalty. But life was all about difficult choices.

Durand contemplated headlights from eighty stories above as the first light of dawn crested the Johor Strait. Singapore's robot rush hour was already under way far below. Autonomous electric cars packed the expressways, their LED headlights coursing over the landscape like rivers of white-hot lava.

He barely paid attention to the voice of a female newscaster in his ear, *". . . Korea prepares to celebrate the anniversary of its reunification, Seoul officials are rolling out the red carpet for Chinese dignitaries—honoring Beijing's pivotal role in the nearly bloodless coup and invasion that deposed the Pyongyang regime . . ."*

From the traffic patterns below, it was clear humans were no longer behind the wheel. No stopping and starting, but traffic flowing smoothly, closely coordinated, optimized.

"Mathematics on parade," his father had called it. Each vehicle informed by its neighbors, and by the whole. These days you couldn't drive yourself to work even if you wanted to. Manual driving was prohibited on the expressways. Humans could not keep pace.

That was something his father well knew.

Mathematics on parade. An experienced and talented civil engineer, his father spent the last ten years of his life getting downsized from entry-level retail jobs. He died of a heart attack while Durand was still in high school—leaving them in poverty.

The anchorwoman's voice continued in his ear: *"The Australian Coast Guard rescued passengers of a so-called zombie ship adrift off the Port Arthur coastline on Tuesday. Packed with hundreds of desperate migrants, the vessel had been abandoned without food or water after*

traffickers reportedly received payment to ferry the refugees to Indonesia, where they were told jobs awaited."

Durand turned away from the skyline and back to the high-rise jogging path. A glance at stats glowing in the corner of his vision showed he still had a chance to maintain a seven-minute mile.

He resumed jogging as the news continued.

"Fleeing climate-change-related crop failures, civil war, and rising ocean levels, tens of millions of desperate migrants are on the move in what has become the largest sustained migration in human history . . ."

Durand's LFP glasses tinted against the glare of dawn. The tropical humidity was already bearing down. He jogged through fogs of atomized water that cooled him at intervals. The track arced rightward on a five-kilometer loop traversing the top of the Hanging Gardens residential complex. Lush jungle plants lined the inner edge.

Durand pushed himself harder, curving along the path. Fashioned of spongy metamaterial, the surface reduced the impact on his joints. An infinity pool ran along the outer edge, and he jogged past a swimmer in goggles and a water cap. A lush garden path ran below and beyond that—near the outer railing. Everything in sight had been meticulously designed—what urban planners had taken to calling "the built environment."

"The International Olympic Committee gathers in Tokyo this week to debate the coming generation of genetically altered athletes. At issue is whether CRISPR edits should disqualify competitors for participation in Olympic and professional sport. At present, no reliable test exists to reveal embryonic genetic edits, potentially putting in peril long-standing records of human physical achievement."

As he ran, Durand focused on the ubiquitous construction cranes studding the Singapore skyline. Two-hundred-story buildings were going up all over the CBD. Mute testimony that the boom was on.

It was difficult to pinpoint the year Singapore became the technology capital of the world. Economists usually placed that somewhere between ratification of the UN Treaty on Genetic Modification and the second wave of moon landings. But certainly by the dawn of the Gene Revolution, the technological crown had shifted from America.

Silicon Valley did not go quietly.

Palo Alto, Mountain View, Cupertino, and San Francisco ran through all the Kübler-Ross stages of economic grief. Applied billions in defibrillating tax breaks to jump-start investment. Held embarrassing VR publicity stunts. In the end the US government was practically giving away H-1B visas.

But nothing could stop the exodus. The Valley was done. Synthetic biology finished it—though, to be fair, that wasn't the Valley's fault.

Synthetic biology was the transistor of the twenty-first century. Yet political realities in America made it increasingly unfeasible for entrepreneurs there to tinker with the building blocks of life. Every cluster of human cells was viewed as a baby in America. A quarter of the population wasn't vaccinated. A majority of Americans didn't believe in evolution. Social-media-powered opinions carried more influence than peer-reviewed scientific research. In this virulently anti-science atmosphere, synbio research was hounded offshore before it had really begun. Activists crowed over their victory.

The rest of the world did not let the opportunity pass it by.

By then, Silicon Valley's forte—circuitry and software—had become cheap global commodities, created everywhere. Network-centric economic disruption was largely complete. Every nook and cranny of modern life had already been disintermediated. The gig economy and time-share rentals had cannibalized the US consumer base, low-bidding the middle class out of existence. It was what had done Durand's parents in. He still remembered them huddled in one room of their home, while debt-collection software rented out the rest of their house over the Internet.

The world moved on, hungering for answers to the pressing problems of a rapidly heating world. Looking for ways to feed the hundreds of millions of people rendered jobless by automation, skyrocketing global debt, climate shifts, and war.

Synthetic biology delivered—engineering yeasts, algae, and bacteria as the machinery of sustainable production. Growing and evolving integrated biofactory systems. Serving as a foundry for new pharmaceuticals and CRISPR-edited climate-change-resistant crops—like C4 photosynthesis

rice—to feed earth's ten billion people. Built environments where cyanobacteria converted light into sugar and custom *E. coli* converted sugar into biofuel—organisms altered to feed into each other's processing loops. Bespoke *E. coli* that scrubbed the oceans of pollutants or sequestered carbon.

Innovations in xenobiology allowed for the wholesale expansion of the biological alphabet itself: xenonucleic acids (XNA) such as HNA, TNA, GNA, LNA, and PNA—sugars not utilized in the natural world that could create entirely new cellular machinery and compounds that did not interact with natural biological systems—launched entire industries in biological computing and bio blockchain tech.

Life itself had become the next systems architecture. And it was hard to argue with its accumulated uptime.

And so the Valley moved overseas, as did many of the people and firms in it, reconvening in a locale more receptive to science—if not quite liberal democracy. By the mid-2030s most synbio start-ups were Changi-bound. Within a decade, new trillion-dollar companies called Singapore home, replacing oil and finance as the main industries in the tiny island republic. And it had yet again transformed the city-state's skyline.

Durand noticed a line of urban farming towers in the distance. A hundred stories each and draped in vines, the dozen towers resembled overgrown postapocalyptic ruins—except for their glittering organometallic lights. Acre for acre, the towers produced ten times the food of a traditional farm on just a fraction of the water. Zero pesticides. Almost entirely automated.

Nearby stood "pharm" towers, whose crops had been genetically modified to produce pharmaceutical compounds.

Beyond the towers clouds of commercial drone traffic surged past on the aerial logistics highway wrapping the northern and eastern shores—headed toward Changi and the aerial interchange that fed into the CBD. Silhouetted against the glowing eastern horizon, the delivery drones resembled flocks of birds.

Durand's newsfeed went to commercial—an American man talking fast: "*. . . the premier IGEA-certified provider for all custom cell-cloning*

services, gene synthesis, subcloning, mutagenesis, bespoke promutagens, variant libraries, and vector-shuttling services. cDNA clones available in your preferred vector . . ."

No skipping or muting commercials; they'd be there waiting for you next time. Better to let them play. Besides, his lap was nearly finished.

Durand ran between rows of bioluminescent trees on the rooftop approach to Tower Six. The soft glow from the trees had begun to dim as the first rays of sunlight touched their broad leaves. Engineered like everything else around him, the plants were as beautiful as they were functional, illuminating roads and sidewalks throughout Singapore.

He sprinted the last twenty meters, pushing with everything he had. The building security system recognized him, and glass doors silently opened, as he knew they would. Durand slowed to a stop as he entered the blessed cool of the rooftop lobby.

The tower's synthetic female voice spoke in Asian-accented English: "*Good morning, Mr. Durand. I trust you had a pleasant exercise.*"

Durand ignored the voice. He knew it was just a narrow AI. Any input he granted it would be stored for later use or misuse, nothing more. It did not "care" about him any more than his soap dish did. Instead he checked his running time while he caught his breath and stretched.

The newsfeed resumed in his ear: "*Attorney and internationally acclaimed human rights activist Kamala Cherian was slain Tuesday evening in a botched police raid on a black market CRISPR lab in the Kurla district of Mumbai . . .*"

Durand stopped cold.

"*Indian authorities claim Ms. Cherian, a client of the facility, was caught in the cross fire between police and lab security. Cherian's death will likely only increase public opposition to armed raids on illicit genetic-editing labs under a mandate by the UN Treaty on Genetic Modification. Ratified in 2038, the agreement was intended to halt the global spread of unregulated genetic editing of human embryos.*"

Durand spoke to the newscaster. "Britney. Pause news."

The synthetic anchorwoman answered. "*Pausing news.*"

He pondered the information for several moments. "Britney, phone Michael Yi Ji-chang."

The synthetic anchorwoman, now his assistant, replied, *"I'm ringing Detective Sergeant Michael Yi Ji-chang. One moment . . ."* A pause. *"I have Sergeant Yi Ji-chang on an encrypted line."*

A man's voice answered. He had a slight Korean accent. *"A call this early can't be good."*

"Tell me about the Mumbai raid."

"What's to tell? Trigger-happy cop killed a VIP."

"Does Claire know yet?"

"Yes, and I'll tell you what I told her: we shouldn't overreact."

"The Brihanmumbai were supposed to raid the lab—not the clinic. There wouldn't be civilians in the lab. Now an innocent woman is dead."

"Not entirely innocent."

"Come on, Mike."

"If she had obeyed the law, Ms. Cherian would still be alive. Would you rather a cop died?"

"Of course not, but that's not the choice."

"Look, we just provide the intel. National police conduct the raids. It's not on us."

"Bullshit. We have leverage over the NCBs. We should only share lab locations with them."

"If we expect full reciprocity, Interpol needs to provide national police with the ability to follow the money into these syndicates—to get to the kingpins. That means your whole link analysis."

Durand felt a familiar fear. "Do you remember what we said after Djibouti?"

"This isn't misuse of intelligence, Ken."

"Do you remember?"

"This was a mistake—and not even our mistake."

"The media is making these raids out as murdering hopeful parents. You and I both know what happens if the public turns against the Genetic Crime Division."

"Twenty years from now, when kids have hands growing out of their foreheads, the public will want to know why the hell we didn't do something to shut these illegal labs down."

"Agreed, so let's defuse opposition by making sure human rights activists don't turn up dead in the morning news."

A weary sigh came over the line. *"Ken, I know you don't want to hear this, but innocent people are going to get caught in the cross fire. No black market on earth right now is more profitable than baby labs, and the syndicates that run them are ruthless. They've killed journalists, police, politicians, civilians. Their bad press will far exceed ours. Mark my words: the public will stay the course with us, even if, like this morning, we have some bad news days."*

Durand drummed his fingers on a nearby railing. "It's more than a bad news day to me."

"Ken. You didn't kill Ms. Cherian."

Durand stared at nothing. "I wrote the algorithms that found that lab. She is dead because—"

"A cop with bad aim killed Ms. Cherian. She was just at the wrong place at the wrong time."

Durand paced in silence.

"We save lives every day by shutting down these labs. You know it's true."

Durand remained silent.

"Hang in there, buddy. Listen, I'll see you at the eight o'clock. Okay?"

"Right."

"Haeng-syo."

Durand closed the line.

The building's AI asked, *"Shall I summon an elevator, Mr. Durand?"*

Durand nodded, mopping sweat from his face with his Annapolis T-shirt. He resisted the innate human urge to thank the digital assistant and walked toward the elevator bank.

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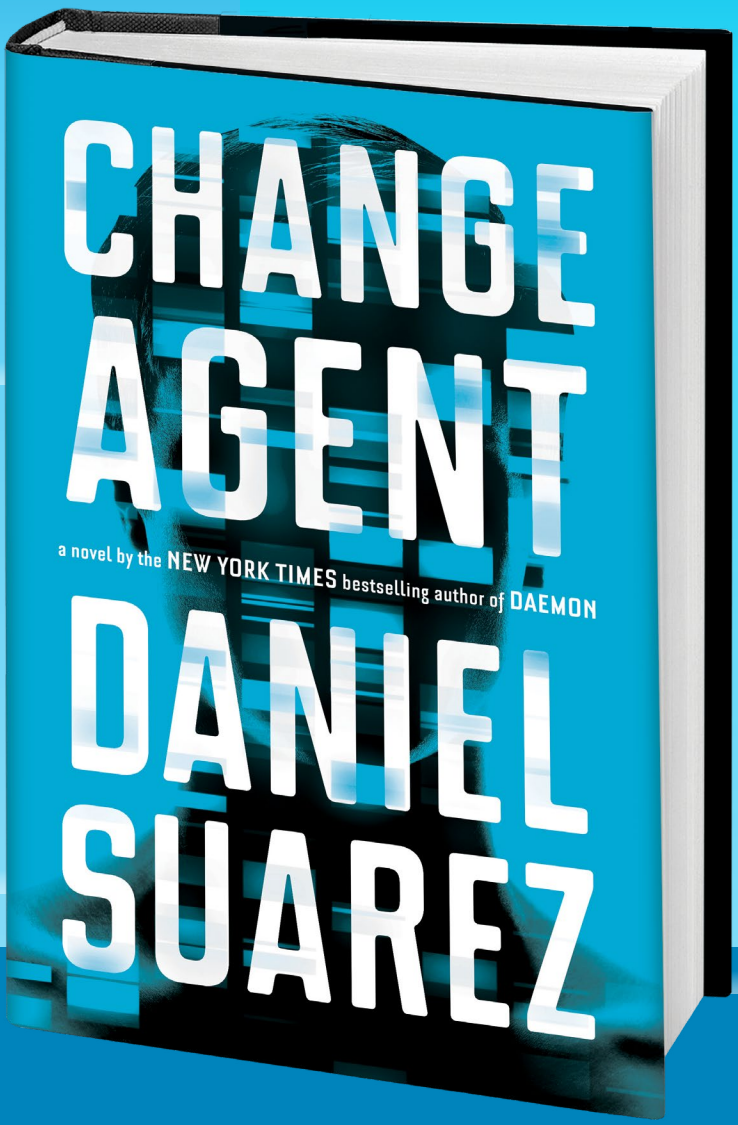

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