

Excerpt from *Division*, a near-future novel by Karen A. Wyle

[NOTE: The following takes place when conjoined twins
Gordon and Johnny are seventeen years old.]

Chapter Eight

Dinner finished and cleanup concluded, Gordon and the rest of the family moved to the living room. Frank spoke the command that activated the wall screen, and put on a news program; Mom curled up in her armchair and tapped out notes on the work she had brought home. Gordon and Johnny pulled out the checker board and began a game. Johnny still seemed distracted, which might improve Gordon's chances of winning

Something in the news must have caught Frank's interest: he turned up the volume and leaned forward. Gordon tried to figure out, mid-story, just what was going on. It sounded as if some guy who'd gone blind as a child was trying to get court approval for a special procedure. They kept talking about "TTC." Finally someone explained the acronym: "Transplant To Clone," a brain transplant into a clone of the subject, grown in accelerated fashion from his or her own cells.

Gordon turned toward Frank, puzzled. "Why can't he just get new eyes?"

Johnny snorted. "Because it's not about his eyes, genius. He was in some big-deal accident, maybe ten years ago, and most of his visual cortex got trashed. New eyes wouldn't do a thing for him."

Frank frowned a bit in mild disapproval of Johnny's flippant tone. He paused the news show. "If that man could get a body cloned from his own cells, a body with an undamaged brain, the doctors could try to move most of his own brain—not including the visual cortex—into the clone. It'd be trickier than the usual transplant, and no one really knows just how it would work—but it's his only chance of seeing again."

"Oh." Gordon pondered that information, then asked, "So if he's grown up now, and he's willing to take the risk, why does he have to go to court?"

Mom looked up from her report. "Well, dear, cloning makes lots of people uneasy. Human cloning, anyway. So it's only allowed when there's no other way to save someone's life—say, if their body has been crushed in an accident—or if their quality of life is very poor in their original body, and a clone body could fix it. And a judge has the job of deciding whether that test has been met."

Frank added, "What they're saying about this fellow is, seeing isn't important enough to pass the test, especially with the heightened risks of this version of the procedure. The young man can get around all right without vision—his car can drive itself, his phone can tell him where it's safe to walk, and so on. And books and reports can be set to audio. Sure, it's a shame, but he doesn't really *need* to see again. So he may lose."

"But that's not fair!" Gordon sputtered. "The judge, and the people on the news—they're telling this man that what *they* have, he can't have, because it isn't important enough? It's important to him, or he wouldn't be asking! And I bet it's pretty important to them, too—they wouldn't be so happy about living without their sight!" He paused, searching for eloquence. "There's so much they can—*experience*—that he can't! What business do they have deciding he shouldn't live as full a life as anyone?"

No one answered him. Gordon realized that Johnny was staring at him, Johnny's head and the left side of their body holding very still, almost frozen. Their parents, meanwhile, were staring at Johnny.

Gordon looked at Johnny, at Mom, at Frank, at Johnny again. "What is it?"

No one answered him.

"What's going on?"

Johnny finally stirred, taking a deep breath and shaking his head. "Never mind. It's nothing important."

Mom turned off the wall unit, walked over to Frank, and whispered in his ear for a moment. Then she took him by the hand, and they left the room.

Gordon, nonplussed, looked at the hallway down which his mother and stepfather had disappeared, then turned to Johnny. "What just happened?"

Johnny did not seem to want to meet his gaze. "Who knows? Parent stuff. Let's get back to the game."

Just as Gordon captured the last of Johnny's pieces, Frank came back into the room. "Boys—I'd like to talk to Gordon for a minute."

Johnny got an odd, suspicious look, but he obeyed, putting their left index finger in his ear and shutting his eyes. Gordon plugged Johnny's other ear and asked, "What's up?"

Frank sat down on the other end of the couch. "Gordon, when you responded to the news just now, and made your little speech—were you just thinking about the blind man?"

"Uh—I'm not sure what you mean." Frank was usually more direct, even blunt.

Frank swallowed. "All of that about living a full life and having what most people have. Were you by any chance talking about yourself and Johnny? About what most people, separate people, have that you and Johnny don't?"

Gordon still wasn't sure what Frank was getting at—and then it struck him like a punch in the chest, and he gasped as if the blow had taken their breath away. "You thought—you and Mom—and oh, my God, Johnny!—thought I was saying I wanted what that man wanted? A transplant? To have Johnny taken away from me? No!"

Frank nodded slowly. "I see."

Gordon swiveled his head to look at his brother. Johnny's eyes were squeezed tight, his chin thrust out, his neck muscles tense.

"No wonder Johnny looked upset! I'm so sorry!"

Frank waved off the apology. "You said what you thought, and it made perfect sense. It's not your fault if any of us read something else into it."

Gordon swallowed hard. "I'll explain to Johnny right away, and apologize for hurting his feelings."

Frank pursed his lips. "Well, of course, that's between you boys. But for what it's worth, I'm thinking it might be better if you leave it alone. Just make a point of being the best friend and brother you can be. Walk the walk, as it were. It'll sort itself out."