

## Home Movies by Mary Rosenblum

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Her broker's call woke Kayla from a dream of endless grass sprinkled with blue and white flowers. A fragment of client memory? Sometimes they seeped into her brain even though they weren't supposed to. She sat up, groggy with sleep, trying to remember if she'd ever visited one of the prairie preserves as herself. "Access," she said, yawned, and focused on the shimmer of the holo-field as it formed over her desktop.

"Usually, you're up by now." Azara, her broker, gave her a severe look from beneath a decorative veil, woven with shimmering fiber lights.

"I'm not working." Kayla stretched. "I can sleep late."

"You're working now." Azara sniffed. "Family wedding, week-long reunion, the client wants the whole affair, price is no object. Please cover yourself."

"Your religion is showing." But Kayla reached for the shift she'd shed last night, pulled it over her head. "A whole week?" She yawned again. "I don't know. I met this cool guy last night and I don't know if I want to be gone a whole week."

"If you want me as a broker you'll do it." Azara glared at her. "This client is the most picky woman I have had dealings with in many years. But she is paying a bonus and you are my only chameleon who matches her physical requirements." She clucked disapproval.

One of those. Kayla sighed and turned to the tiny kitchen wall. "Did you tell her it's not our age or what we look like or even our gender that makes us see what they want us to see?"

"Ah." Azara rolled her eyes. "I gave her the usual explanation. Several times." She stretched her very red lips into a wide smile. "But she was willing to pay for her eccentricities, so we will abide by them."

"She must be rich." Kayla spooned Sumatran green tea into a cup, stuck it under the hot water dispenser. "How nice for her."

"Senior administrator of Mars Colony. Of course, rich, or would she call me?" Azara snapped her fingers. "You have an appointment with her in two hours." She eyed Kayla critically. "Appearance matters to her."

"Don't worry." Kayla ran a hand through her tousled mop as she sipped her tea. "I'll look good."

"Do so." And Azara's image winked out.

Kayla shook her head, but the client was always right ... well, usually right ... and they were willing to pay a lot to visit Earth vicariously from Mars or Europa or one of the micro-gravity habitats. She drank her tea, showered, and dressed in a green spider-silk shift she had bought on a visit to the orbital platforms. The color matched her eyes and brought out the red in her hair. It did indeed make her look good.

Precisely two hours later, her desktop chimed with a link from Bradbury, the main city of Mars Colony. Kayla accepted, curious. She had rented a couple of virtual tours of Mars Colony, had found the mostly

underground cities to be as claustrophobic as the platforms, even though the domed space aboveground offered water and plants. The holo-field shimmered and a woman's torso appeared. Old. Euro-celtic phenotype, not gene-selected. Kayla appraised the woman's weathered face, wrinkles, determined eyes. Considering the current level of bio-science, *very* old to look like this. And very used to control. "Kayla O'Connor, at your service," she said and put a polite, welcoming smile onto her face.

The woman peered at her for a moment without speaking, nodded finally. "I am Jeruna Nesmith, First Administrator of Bradbury City. I would like to enjoy my nephew's son's wedding. It will take place on a small, private island, and include a week long family reunion." She seemed to lean forward, as if to stare into Kayla's eyes. "The broker I contacted assured me that you would know what I want to look at."

Ah, yes, she was indeed used to control. Kayla smiled. "Only after we have talked and I have gotten to know you." Although she could guess right now what the old bitch would want to look at. "I am usually quite accurate about what interests my clients."

"So the broker says. I hope she is correct." Nesmith straightened. "I have little time to waste, so let us begin."

So much for that cute young executive from Shanghai she'd met at the club last night. "As you wish." Kayla kept her smile in place, started to record. "I would like you to tell me about this wedding."

"Tell you what?"

"Everything." Kayla leaned back, her smart-chair stretching and conforming to cradle her. "Who is getting married? Why? Are they a good match? What do their parents think about it? What do you think about it? Who would you be happy to see and who would you avoid at the wedding? What do you think about each of the relatives and guests that will be present?"

"What does all this have to do with recording images for me?" Nesmith's eyebrows rose. "This is not your business."

"And the recording I make of our conversation is destroyed as soon as the contract is completed ... you did sign the contract," Kayla reminded her gently. "If you just want videos, it's much cheaper to hire a cameraman rather than a chameleon. But if you want me to look with *your* eyes, notice the details *you* would notice...." She smiled. "Then I have to think like you."

Again, Nesmith stared at her. "The wedding is of one of my nephew's sons." She waved a long-fingered hand. "A worthless, spoiled boy, who will never make anything of himself, marrying an equally spoiled and self-centered girl from one of the big aquaculture families. It is a spectacle to impress other inside families."

Well, she already knew how to look at the bride and groom. Kayla settled into listening mode as the woman continued. Notice the pointless extravagances, the follies, the proof of her pronouncements. Ah, but that wasn't all.... She let her eyelids droop, listening, paying attention to the emotional nuances of voice and expression as the woman droned on, inserting a leading question here and there. The old bitch *did* have an agenda. Interesting. Kayla absorbed every word, putting on this woman the way you'd put on a costume for a party.

She took the shot at her usual clinic, the morning her plane was scheduled to leave. An Yi, her favorite technician, administered it. "Where do you get to go this time?" she asked as she settled Kayla into the recliner and checked her vitals on the readout. "Somewhere fun?"

"Fancy, anyway." Although something didn't quite add up and that bothered her a little. She went over

the interview again as she told An Yi about the wedding and reunion. Nope. Couldn't put her finger on it. She watched the technician deftly clean the tiny port in her carotid and prepare the dose.

"Ah, it sounds so lovely," An Yi sighed as she began to inject the nano. "Maybe next year I'll do one of the island resorts. This year, I have to spend my vacation in Fouzhou. My father wants us all to be there for his one hundredth birthday." She made a face and laughed. "Maybe I should hire you to go."

"Why not?" Kayla said, and then the nano hit her and the walls warped.

It always unsettled her as the nano-ware invaded her brain. The tiny machines disseminated quickly, forming a network, preempting the neural pathways of memory. It didn't take long, but as they established themselves, all her senses seemed to twist and change briefly, and her stomach heaved with familiar nausea. An Yi had been doing this for a long time and had the pan ready for her, wiping her mouth afterward and placing a cool, wet cloth on her forehead. The headache hit Kayla like a thrown spear and she closed her eyes, concentrating on her breathing, waiting for it to be over.

When it finally faded, An Yi helped her sit up and handed her a glass of apple juice laced with ginseng to drink. The tart sweetness of the juice and the familiar bitterness of the ginseng settled her stomach and the last echo of the headache vanished.

"Do your clients mind getting sick when they get it?" An Yi asked, curious.

"Probably." Kayla nodded. "But they can buy the option to translate the memories into their own long term memory if they choose. So they only have to put up with the side effects once." She stood, okay now. "I'd better get going. I still have to finish packing."

"Have a really fun time," An Yi said, her expression envious.

"I'll do my best."

Kayla left the clinic and caught the monorail across town to pick up her luggage and head for the airport. She probably would enjoy it, she thought, even if the Martian Administrator's very poor opinion of most of her extended family was accurate. And then there was Ethan. Kayla smiled as she thumbed the charge plate and exited the monorail. Her client's hidden agenda. He was cute and clearly the old gal had a crush on him. So the week wouldn't be entirely wasted. She could flirt with him and Jeruna wouldn't mind at all.

Before she left her condo, she made her trip notes in her secret diary. You weren't supposed to record anything, but, hand-written in the little blank-paged paper book she'd found in a dusty junk stall at the market, it was safe enough. Those notes served as steppingstones across the gaping holes in her past. It was fun, sometimes, to compare the client's instructions with her own observations afterward. Client perspectives were rarely objective. If they were, they wouldn't need her.

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The trip to the rent-an-island was tedious. The family had paid for a high level of security. It was necessary in this age of kidnap-as-career. The security checks and delays took time, since she traveled as an invited guest of a family member who had *not* planned the wedding. And, thus, was not paying the security firm. But this was nothing new, and she endured the familiar roadblocks stoically. Kidnap raids were real, and her client would have to suffer the delays, too, when she consumed the nano.

But once she boarded the private shuttle from Miami International, everything changed. Her invitation coin had been declared good, and all the perks were in place. The flight attendant offered fresh, tropical, organic fruit. Wine if she wanted it. Excellent tea, which she enjoyed. She was used to sleeping on planes, and so woke, refreshed, as the shuttle swooped down to land on the wedding island. She was the

only passenger on this run, and, as the door unsealed and the rampway unfurled, she drew in a deep breath of humidity, flowers, rot, and soil. A vestigial memory stirred. Yes, she had been in a place like this ... maybe *this* place ... before. Funny how smell was the strongest link to the fragments of past jobs that had seeped past the nano. She descended the rampway to the small landing, and headed for the pink stucco buildings of the tiny airport terminal, figuring she'd find some kind of shuttle service. Flowering vines covered the walls and spilled out over the tiled entryway and the scent evoked another twinge of *been here* memory. As she paused, a tall figure stepped from the doorway.

"You must be Jeruna's guest." He smiled at her, his posture a bit wary, dressed in a loose-weave linen shirt and shorts. "I'm Ethan." He offered his hand. "I belong to the ne'er-do-well branch of the family so I get to play chauffeur for the occasion. Welcome to the wedding of the decade." He said it lightly, but his hazel eyes were reserved.

"Nice to meet you, Ethan." Kayla returned his firm handshake, decided he was as cute as the vids she'd looked at, and let him take her bag. Tossing her hair back from her face, she smiled as she studied him. Why you? she wondered as she followed him through the tiled courtyard of the private airport, past a shallow, marble fountain full of leaping water and golden fish. "I'm looking forward to being a guest here," she said as they reached the roadway outside.

"Really?" He turned to face her, his hand on the small electric cart parked outside. "This is a job to you, right? Can you really let yourself enjoy something like this? Won't your thoughts about it mess up what you're recording?"

Great. Kayla sighed. "So who leaked it? That I'm a chameleon?"

"Is that what you call yourself?" He stowed her luggage, which had been delivered by a uniformed baggage handler, in the rear cargo space of the cart. "Doesn't it weird you out? That you're going to hand over your thoughts and feelings to somebody ... for pay?"

He wasn't being hostile, as so many were. He was really asking. "The nano can't record thoughts." Kayla smiled as she climbed into the cart's passenger seat, inwardly more than a little ticked off. It made her job harder when they knew. Now she wouldn't get really good reactions until he got used to her, forgot she was recording. And a lot of times, in the really good moments, some family member who had had too much to drink would remember and say something. She sighed. "The nano only records sensory input ... vision, hearing, taste, touch, smell. That's it. We haven't developed telepathy yet. Your great great aunt ... or whatever she is ... gets to experience the event with all of her senses, not just vision and hearing."

"Oh." Ethan climbed in beside her, his face thoughtful. "Isn't it kind of weird, though? Hanging out with strangers all the time?"

"Not really." She lifted her hair off her neck as the cart surged forward, enjoying the breeze of their motion in the heavy, humid afternoon. Well, he had never lived outside, probably couldn't see beyond the luxury of an inside lifestyle. "That's what I do ... learn about the family, get a sense of what the client is really interested in so I can participate the way my client would, if she was here." She smiled at him. "I really do feel like a member of the family or the group while I'm there. That's what makes me good at this."

"A chameleon." But he smiled as he said it. "What about your family? Does it change how you feel about them?"

"I never had one." She shrugged. "I was a London orphan when Irish looks weren't the fad. Did the foster home slash institution thing."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged again, tired of the topic years ago, and not sure how they'd gotten here. She didn't talk about herself on a job. "So how come you rate the job of chauffeur?" She smiled at him. "Just how ne'er do well was your family branch?"

"Oh, they were all off-off-Broadway actors, musicians, failed writers, the usual wastrel thing ... according to our family's creed." He laughed, not at all defensive. "The family bails us out before we disgrace anyone, but they make sure we know our place." He shrugged, gave her a sideways look. "I play jazz, myself. Among other things my family disapproves of. But I don't do illegal drugs, murder, mayhem, or anything else too awful, so I got a genuine invitation to this bash."

"To be a chauffeur."

"Well, yeah." He grinned, his hazel eyes sparkling. "But they have to make sure I know my place."

"Does that bother you?" She asked it because she was curious.

"No."

He meant it. She watched his face for her client. She would resent it, Kayla thought. Which was the better reaction?

They had arrived at the resort complex. More pink stucco. Lots of lanais on the sprawling buildings, carefully coiffed tropical plantings to make the multitude of cottages look private and isolated, pristine blue pools landscaped to look like natural features with waterfalls, and basking areas studded with umbrellas, chaise lounges, and bars. He drove her to the lobby entrance and she checked in, noticing that he hovered at her shoulder.

The staff wouldn't let her do a thing, of course. Two very attractive young men with Polynesian faces, wearing colorful island-print wraps around their waists, snatched up all her luggage and led the way to her own cottage with palms to shade it and a glimpse of white sand and blue-sea horizon. Kayla smiled to herself at the location of the cottage as she offered a tip and received twin, polite refusals. Not a front row seat to the ocean view ... that went to major family guests. But she could still see the water through the palm trunks and frangipani. A little. And the furnishings were high-end. Lacquered bamboo and glass, with flowered cotton upholstery ... the real fiber, not a synthetic.

A knock at the door heralded another attendant pushing a cart with champagne, glasses, and a tray of snacks. *Puu-puu*. The word surfaced, unbidden. Snacks. What language? Kayla tried to snag it, but the connection wasn't there. Two glasses. "Will you join me?" she asked Ethan. She smiled at the young man with the cart, who smiled back, his dark eyes on hers, set out plates and food on the low table in front of the silk-upholstered settee, uncorked the champagne with a flourish, and filled two flutes. Handed her one with a bow, and his fingertips brushed hers.

Full service, she thought, met his eyes, smiled, did the tiny head shake he'd recognize, and handed the other glass to Ethan as the attendant left. "I take one sip," she said. "That's all. Blurs perception. Here's to a lovely place and time."

"What a drag. But you're right about place and time." He touched the rim of his glass to hers and they chimed crystal. Of course. "Tell me what my great great aunt or whatever wants to see."

You, she thought, lifted the glass to him silently, took her sip. "The family. The ceremony. How everyone takes it."

"You're not telling me."

"Nope." She grinned. "Of course not."

"Sorry." He laughed and sipped his own wine. "I shouldn't have asked." He sat on the settee, his expression contemplative. "It's just that she's such a ... I don't know ... renegade. But she got away with it." He grinned. "She just went out and conquered her own planet." He laughed. "She's a successful renegade. Unlike us, who never made it pay. I just can't believe that she really cares about this society wedding, you know?"

She didn't. Not really. Kayla leaned back on the settee next to him, stretching travel-kinks from her muscles, her eyes on Ethan, examining him from head to toe as if he was her new lover. "So have you ever met her?"

"Jeruna?" Ethan shrugged. "Nah. I don't think she ever came back here, after she left for Mars. And that was before I was born."

Interesting. So what did he represent? Kayla took her time, enjoying the view. He was cuter than the vids. And not the spoiled rich kid she'd expected. Too bad. She squelched a brief pang of "what if."

He flinched, fumbled a cell out of his pocket. "Uh oh. Another arrival to ferry." He stood, set his half-full flute down on the table. "I was going to ask you if you wanted to skip out on the big family dinner tonight. Eat down on the beach." His eyes met hers. "But I bet you can't."

"No, I can't." She made her voice regretful, which really wasn't a stretch. "Want to help me out?" Because his tone suggested he planned to skip it. "Sit by me? Give me a few clues? I'd like to give the old gal her money's worth."

He hesitated, then shrugged. Wrinkled his nose. "For you, I'll suffer." He laughed. "And now you owe me."

"Okay, I do." She laughed with him, caught his lean, athletic profile as he turned to leave, promising to meet her there at the appointed dinner hour. So what does he mean to you? she asked her client silently. Something, that was for sure. Her services were not cheap.

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The prenuptial dinner offered excellent food, elegant wine, and the usual boring and self centered conversations. Obviously the leak had made the rounds. But after the open bar, pre-dinner, and the first round of wine with the appetizers, everyone loosened up and forgot about her. This family ran to whiners. Kayla got tired of high-pitched nasal complaints quickly. The assiduous wine-servers didn't help matters, filling glasses the moment the level fell beneath the rim. She had tipped the maitre d' to fill her glass with a non-alcoholic version of the whites and reds but it seemed that everyone else was happy with the real stuff.

Ethan sipped at his glass but didn't drink much, toying with his food. Leaning close to her, he murmured wry summaries of various family members that required her to invoke all her self control in order to keep from sputtering laughter into her glass.

"You're going to get me in trouble," she murmured, giving him a sideways glance.

"Not from great-aunt-whatever, I'll wager." He winked at her. "She never thought much of the whole bunch of us." He drank some of the cabernet the server had just poured to accompany the rack of lamb being dramatically carved and served. "I still wonder that she would do this. You ... chameleons, as you

call yourselves ... are supposed to be highly empathetic to your clients." He arched an eyebrow. "Can't you tell me? Why she wants this?"

"I really don't know." Which was the truth. *That* was what had been bothering her, she realized. "Usually I can figure it out, but not this time." She lifted her glass. Smiled into his eyes, catching a full front view with just the right shadows and highlights. "I suspect your ... commentary ... will really delight her."

"I hope so." He touched the rim of his glass to hers, a smile glimmering in his eyes. "I like her style."

The interminable dinner wound to its appointed end. Ethan wanted to make love to her. She could feel it. She wanted him to, she realized with a twinge of regret that centered between her legs.

Jeruna Nesmith looked over their shoulders.

And ... in a handful of days ... she would relinquish the nano to An Yi's filters, deliver it to her client and ... all memory of Ethan would be gone. Oh, maybe a glimpse of hazel eyes on some sultry summer afternoon would touch a chord, and she'd wonder idly where that memory had come from. She'd have his name in her diary--but only as a big question. *Why him?*

She said good night to him at the door of her cottage and they looked into each other's eyes across a gulf as vast as the damn sea. She turned away first, banging the door closed behind her, not caring that Ms. Nesmith would get to remember this, stalked across the expensive, elegant, lovely room to the wet bar, poured herself a double shot of very expensive brandy, downed it and went to bed.

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The wedding was everything it promised to be. Lots of wealthy people, lots of expensive, designer clothing, lots of show, pomp, circumstance, flowers, fine food, expensive booze.... She had dressed to blend in, in a long sari-styled dress of silk voile, but felt a moment of panic as she entered the huge chapel with the red velvet carpet down the aisle, the ropes of tropical flowers draping the pews. Ethan wasn't here, and her client might well read between the lines ... or glimpses ... and guess that the silent end of last night might have something to do with it.

But then she spotted him way down the aisle on the groom's side. Very formal and erect. Caught a good three-quarter shot of him, oblivious, his expression closed and unreadable. Then, as if he had felt the touch of her eyes, he looked directly at her. He didn't smile, but his eyes caught hers and for a few moments, her client ceased to exist. Kayla shook herself, gave him a small, rueful smile, and seated herself on the bride's side of the aisle, where she'd have a good view of him.

The ceremony was very traditional and she did the high points: the procession, the vows, ring, all that stuff. But she kept cutting back to Ethan's three-quarter profile. He might as well have been carved out of acrylic. But she kept looking over at him, giving the old girl what she'd paid for.

The ceremony ended and everybody milled about, trickling eventually to the reception. She didn't see Ethan, circulated through the crowd, noticing the family details that her client would want to see--the little tiffs, the sniping, the white-knuckled grasp on the martini glass. Oh yes, Kayla thought as she did the glazed-eyes look and really saw. I know what you think of these people and what you would notice if you were really here. Ethan was right. She really didn't think much of any of them. Except him.

Ethan was nowhere to be seen.

She took a table with a good pan-view of the garden where the reception had been laid out. Palms cast thin shade and bowers fragrant with flowering vines offered private nooks. Long buffet tables, decorated with ice sculptures and piles of tropical fruit and flowers, offered fresh seafood, fruit, elegant bites of

elegant food, and an open bar. The towering wedding cake occupied its own flower-roped table flanked by champagne buckets and trays of flutes. The sun stung her face and she turned her back to it, and there was Ethan, seating an elderly guest.

So she was looking right at it when the little jump jet roared in low over the grounds just beyond him. It hovered, landed straight down, engines whining. Figures in camo leaped from it, masked and armed with automatic weapons. One fired a short burst into the palms, shredding the leaves. "*Down.*" An amplified voice bellowed. "*Everybody down, now!*"

Oh, crap. A kidnap raid.

Women shrieked, voices rose, and, for a frozen instant, chaos reigned. One of the camoed figures fired a small handgun and a waiter clapped a hand to his neck as the stun dart hit, and fell. Shredded bits of palm drifted down onto his white-clad sprawl. The first of the guests began to lie down on the grass and it was as if a potent gas had swept the garden as everyone went prone. Kayla had already flattened herself on the grass, her eyes fixed on Ethan, who still stood. Don't be a hero, she thought, willing him to *lie down*, because they wouldn't want him. What had happened to the security force? One of the raiders shoved a waiter and Ethan stepped forward. No, Kayla shrieked silently as the raider swung his rifle butt and flattened Ethan. Kayle tensed, her eyes on his limp body, straining to see movement.

"*Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt,*" the loudspeaker blared. Australian accent, Kayla noticed. A lot of the professional kidnap-for-hire gangs were Aussie. The top ones. From the corner of her eye she saw the figures striding through the guests, snatching a necklace here or a watch there, but not really looting. They were looking for someone specific. That's where the money lay. They'd take that person and leave.

A hand closed on her arm and yanked her to her feet as if she weighed nothing. Breathless, her heart pounding, Kayla stared into cold gray eyes behind a green face mask. "Move," the man said.

"You made a mistake. I'm not..." Kayla broke off with a gasp as he whipped her arm behind her and pain knifed through her. She stumbled along, losing her balance, as he shoved her forward. "I'm not anyone," she gasped, but he only twisted her arm higher, so that tears gathered in her eyes and the pain choked her. More hands grabbed her, someone slapped a drug patch against her throat and blackness began to seep into her vision. The sky wheeled past and a fading part of her mind whispered that they were loading her onto the jet.

Then ... nothing.

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She woke to a headache and thought for a moment she had just gotten a dose. Then the oppressive humidity and the thick scent of tropics brought her back to the island, the kidnapers' assault. She sat up, eyes wide, straining to see in utter darkness. Blind? Had that drug the kidnapers had given her interacted with the nano? Blinded her?

"It's all right. I'm here."

Familiar voice, familiar arms around her. "Ethan?" Her voice shook and she leaned against him as he pulled her close. She could make him out ... just barely. She wasn't blind. "Where are we? What happened?"

"A great big mistake happened." Ethan laughed a harsh note. "It was a kidnap by the Yellow Roo clan. I recognized the uniforms. They've hit the family before. Business as usual when you get to the right income bracket."



"I know, but ... why me?" Kayla swallowed. She felt a mattress beneath her, made out walls, a couple of plastic bins, a porta-potty. "I'm not part of your family."

"And I might as well not be." Ethan let his breath out in a long sigh. "That's the mistake. The fools grabbed maybe the only two individuals in the entire damn reception who can't make a decent ransom. Or can you?"

"Oh, gods, I wouldn't be a chameleon if I had money." Kayla closed her eyes, her head pounding. "They can go look. There's not enough in my account to make it worth their while." She shivered because kidnap was an accepted career choice and the rules were very civilized ... unless you really couldn't pay. Then they were not civilized at all.

Ethan stroked the hair back from her face. "Maybe Jeruna will pay for you," he said.

She shook her head. No, she was a chameleon because she could read people. Jeruna Nesmith was not going to pay ransom on a paid contractor.

"Well, we'd better start making plans." Ethan did that harsh laugh again. "I've got no better ransom prospects than you do."

"You're family. Inside."

"Yeah, and some kidnap clan grabbed my older brother back when I was a baby. I think he was maybe seven. The family didn't pay up. Their attitude was "you want to walk your own path, do it."

Kayla didn't ask him what happened to his brother. She heard that answer in the razored edge of his tone. She scanned the walls. They were in some kind of crude hut. Dawn must be close because she could make out slender poles woven into walls. Sheet plastic made up the roof, stiff stuff ... she tried it. Fastened securely to the top pole of the walls. A door of chain link fit neatly into its metal-rimmed frame and was chained shut. But...

"They really don't expect us to try too hard." Kayla murmured the words like a lover's breath into Ethan's ear. Because they were probably listening.

"Of course not. This is just a place to wait out negotiations. You don't try to escape. It's usually safer to stay put. That's how the game works."

"Look there." Kayla pointed. "See how wide?" she whispered. "We could get through there. Maybe. The poles are thin and we could probably pry them out. Then the gap between those big ones might be just wide enough."

Ethan was at the wall before she finished speaking. She joined him and grabbed one of the slender poles. In unison, they pulled on it. Felt it give. Not much ... just a hair. He changed position, his hands next to hers and they pulled together. Got a centimeter or two of *give* this time. Did it again. And again. By the time they worked the two slender poles free, the pole was slippery with blood from their hands. Kayla helped Ethan lay them on the floor and wiped her hands on her torn dress. The gap was narrow ... a couple of handwidths. But she was skinny. She pulled the long hem of her skirt up between her legs, tied it to form a crude pair of shorts. Then she turned to Ethan, took his face in her hands, kissed him. Hard. "Wish me luck," she said.

"Honey, we're both in on this." He kissed her back, fiercely.

"No." She pushed him away. "You need to stay here."

"I told you..."

"She wanted *you*." Kayla gripped his arms, willing him to understand. "I'm not supposed to tell you this, but there it is. That's why she hired me. To look at you at the wedding."

"Jeruna?" He looked stunned. "Why the hell would she care? She was already on Mars when I was born. I'm barely related to her."

"I have no idea." Kayla turned away. "But she does. She'll pay your ransom. I guarantee it. So you're safe." She let go of him, pushing him away from her, threw one leg over the lower pole. The two thick poles that framed the gap squeezed her, pressing on her spine and breast bone, squeezing her lungs so that she fought suffocation panic as she squirmed her body through the gap, her thin dress shredding, rough bark scraping skin. Fell to the dry ground on the other side, bruising her hip and scraping her knee. Scrambled to her feet.

"Hold it." Ethan leaned through after her. "The bins are full of water and food. I checked while you were out. Wait a minute and I'll hand some stuff through. They don't plant these drop boxes close to anything civilized. Might be a long hike."

He disappeared and a few moments later began to hand bottles of water through the gap. Too many to carry. "That's plenty," Kayla said, and took the bags of something dry and leathery he handed down. As she retied her skirt to hold the food and as much of the water as she could carry, she glanced up to see Ethan squirming through the opening after her. "No," she said, heard him gasp, stuck, and suddenly he popped through, falling hard onto the ground in front of her.

"You idiot," she said, holding out her hand to help him up.

"If you're right about Jeruna, I probably am." He scrambled to his feet and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "I'm not going to sit there and wait to find out if you are or not." He grabbed her hand. "And besides, I'll worry about you out here. Let's go."

The sky had lightened just enough so that she could make out the tall trees and tangle of underbrush. Behind them, their prison seemed to be nothing more than a box built of the woven poles, hidden from the sky by the tall trees. Soaring trunks surrounded them, black against the feeble light. Huge, fern-like leaves brushed her and a million tiny voices creaked, croaked, buzzed, and burbled. Kayla started as something feathery brushed her cheek, her heart sinking. Jungle? The thick air and dense growth woke a slow sense of claustrophobia. "Sweet." She looked up at distant patches of gray sky. "Where are we?" A thunderous howling suddenly split the graying dawn and Kayla whirled, heart pounding, searching the twined branches overhead for something, anything as the sound crescendoed.

"That answers your question. It's okay. Those are howler monkeys." Ethan actually laughed as he wiped hair out of his eyes. "They only live in the Amazon Preserve. I thought that might be where we were. It smelled right."

"How nice. Glad you're enjoying it." Kayla tried to remember details about the preserve. Big. Very big. Something bit her and she flinched, slapped at it. In the trees above them, sinuous black shapes leaped in a torrent from tree to tree. Leaves and twigs showered down in their wake. The howler monkeys? She wanted to cover her ears. "I guess we just walk," she said, "and hope we find a road or something."

"Oh, there are plenty of roads. It's a giant eco-laboratory. It's just not real likely that anyone will be on them. Permits to work here are hard to come by." Ethan took off his shirt, began to tie the sleeves together. "We'd better bring all the water we can."

Something small and brown buzzed down to land on his bare shoulder. He yelped and slapped it, leaving a smear of blood and squashed bug.

"Better wear your shirt." Kayla unknotted her skirt. "I have lots of extra cloth here." It was not easy to tear the fabric without a knife, but they finally managed to fashion a sling for the water and food. By the time Ethan shouldered it, a lot of biting things had dined on them. Jeruna was going to get far more than she paid for, Kayla thought grimly as they started off.

They pushed aside the ferns, clambering over the thick vines and low plants that covered the ground in the dim light. The humid heat wrapped them like a blanket and Kayla struggled with a sense of drowning as she fought her way through the tangle in Ethan's wake. Her dress sandals didn't do much to protect her feet, but they were better than nothing. Before long, however, she was trying not to limp.

It never really got light. In the yellow-green twilight, flying things bit or buzzed. Kayla leaped back as a looped vine turned out to be a brown and copper banded snake.

"Common Lancehead," Ethan said, guiding her warily past it. "Pretty poisonous. We mostly need to watch out for the ground dwellers. They're harder to spot. The South American Coral snake is the worst, but you can see it. Usually. The Bushmaster is hard to spot ... it blends right in." He gave her a crooked smile. "That's why I've been going first. I'm partially desensitized to both. If they bite me, I probably won't die."

"Gods, what do you *do*?" Kayla eyed the ground warily. "I thought you said you played jazz. What are you? A snake charmer?"

"I do play jazz. And I have a Ph.D. in Tropical Ecology." Ethan shrugged. "Totally useless degree, according to the family, but I spend a lot of time here."

They didn't see any more snakes, although Kayla kept nervous eyes on every shadow. The going got easier when they stumbled onto a game trail, a narrow track that wound between the trunks and beneath the thick vines. The damp heat seemed to suck moisture from Kayla's body, and, in spite of frequent sips of precious water, thirst began to torment her. Now and again they stopped and Kayla strained her ears, heard nothing but the constant hum of insects, the occasional shriek of birds or monkeys, and once a deep cough that made Ethan narrow his eyes. "Jaguar," he said. He gave her a strained smile. "They pick the place for their boxes on purpose. Make it worth your while to stay put."

"You should have." She wiped sweat from her face with her filthy skirt. "She really will pay for you."

"You want to hike through here on your own?" He grinned at her, then his smile faded. "Besides ... I just wasn't going to sit there. I think that's partly why my father went off to be an artist and be poor. He could have been an artist and stayed rich and inside the family. But he didn't like the rules. And yeah, there are rules." He looked up as the light dimmed suddenly. "I think it's going to rain."

No kidding. Kayla's eyes widened as the patches of sky visible through the canopy went from blue to charcoal gray in minutes. Without warning, the clouds opened and water fell, straight as a shower. Ethan caught her wrist and pulled her into a natural shelter created by a tree that had partly fallen and had been covered in vines. The thick leaves blocked most of the downpour. Kayla licked the sweet drops of water from her lips, laughed, and stepped out into the downpour again, wet almost instantly to the skin. It felt good as the warm rain sluiced away sweat and dirt. She slid the top of her dress down her shoulders, the water cascading between her breasts. Felt damn near *clean*. The rain stopped, just as suddenly as it had begun.

The sun emerged above the canopy and the air turned instantly into a sauna. Water dripped, flashing like

jewels in the shafts of yellow light that speared down through the leaves, and a bright bird with crimson and blue feathers fluttered between the trees. Kayla laughed softly, her wet hair plastered to her head, her dress still around her waist. "It's beautiful," she said. "It's a hell of a place to hike, but it's beautiful." She turned to look at him and deliberately stepped out of her dress. Jeruna be damned. She was on another planet. Kayla spread the dress over some branches to dry.

Without a word, Ethan stripped palmlike fronds from a low growing clump, spread them on the sheltered space beneath the mat of lianas. A tiny monkey with a clown-face of perpetual surprise chattered at him from a tree trunk, then dashed upward to vanish in the shadows. He turned to face her, still without speaking, took her hands in his and pulled her to him, his hands light on her shoulders.

All of a sudden the cuts, bruises, the steamy heat ... none of it mattered. She leaned forward, let her lips brush his, traced their outline with her tongue. Felt him shudder. He pulled her roughly against him, his mouth on hers, hard, fierce, hungry as her own.

They made love, drowsed, and made love again. He told her about the universe of the very wealthy and what it was like to live on the edge, not really inside, but not really allowed to be entirely independent either. Family was family ... you were a commodity in a way as much as a tribe. But he was still *inside*. She told him about growing up in a crÃ©che. Outside. Finding out that she had a strong empathy rating, that she had the talent to be a chameleon.

"Is that why you do it?" He leaned on his elbow beside her, his fingertips tracing the curve of her cheekbone. "So you can get to live inside?"

"Yes." She gave him truth because she found she didn't want to lie to this man. "I do want it. And it pays well." She yelped as something bit her. "Damn bugs." She sat up, slapped, and glared at the blood on her palm. "Maybe we'd better walk some more? You might be wrong about them coming back." But she winced and nearly fell as she tried to stand.

Ethan sucked in a quick breath as he examined her feet. "Kayla, why didn't you say something? Sit *down* and let me look."

"There wasn't any point in complaining," she said, but she couldn't bite back a cry as he used a torn sleeve from his dress shirt to wipe the mud from her feet. Blood streaked the fabric and the cuts smarted and stung.

"We can tear up my shirt, at least wrap them before we start walking again. I'm sorry. I just didn't think about you wearing sandals." He stroked the tops of her feet gently. "You know, I'm chipped." He laughed, a note of bitterness in his voice. "If they bothered to look."

"Chipped?" She pushed her damp hair back from her face.

"I've got a GPS locator embedded in me. From birth. It's a family rule. If they looked for it, they'd find us."

"Why wouldn't they look?"

"Kidnappers use a masking device. It was probably on top of the box. Everybody plays by the rules, so they'll wait to hear from the kidnappers, give their answer. They won't go *look*." He frowned, looked back the way they had come. "You know, as efficiently as they did the raid, I can't believe they blew the snatch. Those guys do their homework. They should have been able to pick out their targets in the middle of the night, on the run." He shook his head, sighed. "So you might be right and they don't play by the rules either." He gave her a crooked smile. "We'd better go."

He managed to tear the real-cotton fabric of his shirt into rough strips and bandaged her feet so that she could still wear the flimsy sandals. She still limped, the tiny cuts and tears painful now that her first rush of escape adrenaline had faded. Slowly, laboriously, they made their way along the game trail, following it generally toward the setting sun as it wound through the never-ending tangle of leaves, vines, and soaring trunks.

The light faded quickly as the sun sank and they finally stopped for the night, finding another sheltered spot beneath an old, dead tree trunk draped with vines. Sure enough, it rained not long after the last hint of light faded. Shielded from the worst of the brief downpour, they drank some more water and ate what turned out to be dried mango and papaya. And made love again.

Terror stalked the night. It wore no form but made sounds. Grunts, whistles, a coughing roar that had to be a jaguar. Ethan identified each sound, each detail of what was going on in the thick, rot-smelling dark, as if he had a magic flashlight to pierce the night. He banished the terror and Kayla heard the love in his voice as he turned night into day. She almost laughed. Rabbit in a briar patch. It might have been a fun hike, if she'd had a good pair of shoes. At some point she drowsed, woke, felt Ethan's slack, sleeping arms still around her, drowsed again because Ethan knew that nothing would eat them. And that was good enough.

She woke, stiff, her stomach cramping with hunger in spite of last night's dried fruit as the dark tree trunks and fan-shaped leaves of the plants sheltering them took shape from the lightening dark. Ethan slept beside her and she looked down on him, barely visible in the hint of dawn. His face was flushed, and when she touched his skin it was hot. Feverish. I will not remember you, she thought, and a pang of grief pierced her. If a chameleon withheld the nano, that chameleon lost the union seal. You didn't spend a fortune to have your hired pair of eyes and ears walk away with the memory you wanted or hold it for ransom. That union seal that she had paid dearly to obtain meant that she was entirely trustworthy. If she violated that trust only once, she lost it forever.

And it wouldn't help. The nano self-destructed in a measured length of time if not filtered and stabilized. In a handful of days, the memory would evaporate, whether she handed it over to Jeruna or not. Of course, in a handful of days, she might still be here. She smiled mirthlessly into the faint gray of dawn. Maybe she should hope they didn't find their way out of here. At least not soon.

She didn't kid herself about after. The wall between *inside* and *outside* was impenetrable. You could slip through it for awhile. But not for long. Rules. No forever after with Ethan. She let her breath out in a long, slow sigh, wishing she had said no to Jeruna, wishing that her broker had found her another contract. She ran her fingers along the curve of Ethan's cheekbone, watched his eyelids flutter, his golden eyes focus on her, watched his lips curve into a tender smile of recognition.

No, she didn't wish it. She leaned over him, met his lips halfway.

\* \* \* \*

They reached the red-dirt track in the heat of noon, clawing through what seemed to be an impenetrable wall of leaves and vines out into hot sun that made them blink and stumble. For a few moments, they could only stand still, clutching each other, squinting in the sun. Then Ethan whooped, scooped her into his arms and they both tumbled into the dust, weak with hunger and thirst, laughing like idiots.

The little electric jeep came around the curve in the little track a few moments later and the dark-skinned driver in jungle camo hit the brakes. He spoke Central-American Spanish, but so did Ethan and he translated. Their rescuer was a ranger in the Preserve and just happened to be checking this sector this morning. He made it clear that they were lucky, that he only came this way very occasionally, and clucked and shook his head as Ethan explained what had happened. It offended him, he told them, that

the kidnap gangs used the rainforest for their boxes. It made it sometimes dangerous for the rangers. He had water with him and a lunch of bean and corn stew that he shared with them, and then he drove them four hours back to his headquarters.

The family machinery had leaped into action by the time they arrived, never mind that Ethan was a marginal member. A jump jet with medics on board met them and they were examined, treated for their minor injuries, dressed, and loaded before Kayla could catch her breath.

"They're taking us to the family hospital for observation and treatment," Ethan said as he settled into the plush seat beside Kayla. "My uncle sent them to get us." He touched her hand, his hazel eyes dark in the cabin's light. "We'll probably be separated for a bit. Kayla..." He broke off, drew a breath. "I don't want you to forget ... this."

"I can't help it." She struggled to keep her voice calm.

"Yes, you can. Keep it. Assimilate it, like your clients do." He gripped her arms, his face pale. "They can't stop you from doing that."

She shook her head. "I'm immunized," she whispered. "The nano won't release to me. I can't assimilate it."

"How can you *do* this?" He was angry suddenly, his eyes blazing. "How can you just ... walk away from part of your life? How can you just throw away your past?"

The past had teeth. It was something to run away from, not to cherish. Up until now. She turned her head away from the accusation in his eyes.

"If I knock on your door, I'll be a stranger. None of this will have happened. I could be anybody."

"Maybe," she whispered. "I don't know."

*"I want you to remember this."*

She looked at him, met his eyes, realized that besides the anger she saw ... fear. "I can't," she said, because she would only give him the truth.

For a few moments he said nothing, then he looked away. "Will you ... give this to Jeruna?" he asked hoarsely.

She would only give him truth, so she said nothing. If she did not ... what job was she suited for? And inside was inside.

He wrenched himself to his feet, his face averted. "Whore," he said, and stalked to the rear of the plane.

For a long time she sat still, staring down at her scratched and scabbed hands, her bandaged and sanitized feet throbbing beneath the cotton hospital pants the medics had given her to wear.

In a handful of days, she wouldn't remember that he had said that, either.

\* \* \* \*

She hoped she would see him again. They kept her overnight, did enhanced healing to mend the damage to her feet, returned her luggage from the wedding resort, and offered her a ride home in a family jet. Just before she was due to leave, a knock at the door of her very plush private room made her heart leap, but it was simply a family lawyer, who handed her a very large check and a waiver for her to sign, absolving

the family from legal blame.

She signed it. It had not been their fault that the kidnappers were so inexplicably incompetent.

A slow anger had been building in her and she pressed her lips together as the lawyer bowed very slightly to her and retreated. A silent attendant arrived to carry her luggage to the private jet and she followed slowly, her newly healed feet still a bit tender in the flat sandals she wore. She climbed the carpeted stairs to the jet's entry and turned to look back at the private hospital grounds. It had the look of a gated residential community with cottages, walking paths, and gardens. The main building might have been a vacation lodge. The few uniformed staff on the paths ignored her and the old man in a smart-chair out for a breath of air never looked her way.

She boarded and the jet door sealed behind her.

\* \* \* \*

She ignored her broker's insistent emails as long as she could. When she finally lifted the block, Azara's image appeared instantly in the holo-field, her dark eyes snapping with anger, her beaded veil quivering as she faced Kayla. "What in the name of Allah's demons are you doing? The client has threatened me with legal action. As you know, the contract protects me, but *I* am threatening *you*. And not with legal action, you spoiled child. No chameleon of mine has *ever* stolen the product. You had better not be the first, do you hear me?"

A part of Kayla's mind marveled at her rage. She had never seen Azara show even mild annoyance before. "I want to speak with her," she said.

"I will not play games with you. You will go immediately to the clinic," Azara snapped. "I spoke with your technician. She tells me you have only twenty-four hours until the nanos degrade. That is barely enough time to filter them and secure a digital copy for transmission."

Ah, bless you, An Yi, Kayla thought. She had begged, but An Yi had not promised. "It is more than enough time. I will go straight to the clinic." Kayla bowed her head. "As soon as I speak with Jeruna Nesmith."

Azara narrowed her eyes and her image froze. She was multitasking, clearly contacting Jeruna, on Mars. "She is willing to speak to you." She looked slightly puzzled. Apparently Jeruna's response had surprised her. "If you fulfill this contract, I may give you one more chance ... if I never see such childish behavior from you again. But of course ... you had a trying time." She regarded Kayla narrowly. "Our client does not blame you." She raised her eyebrows, as if waiting for Kayla to comment. Shrugged. "I will not hold this lapse against you if she is satisfied."

Timing is everything. Kayla stood up. "I'll email An Yi and make sure she can filter me."

"She is expecting you." Azara's red lips curved into a slight smile. "Do not disappoint me, girl."

The threat behind those words went beyond loss of her union seal. Kayla bowed her head once more and blanked the holo-field.

Ethan had not contacted her.

She had not really expected that he would. His final word hung in the air like the bitter taint of something burned. She waited as the holo-field shimmered, making the distant connection to Bradbury.

Jeruna Nesmith's aged face shimmered to life in the field. Her expression gave nothing away, but a hint of triumph glimmered deep in her eyes. "I was sorry to hear that you were traumatized," she said smoothly.

"Is that not a boon of the science? Even terror can be eliminated by an hour spent with the filters."

"You sent the kidnappers." Kayla sat calmly in her chair, her eyes on the woman's withered face. "You had them take me. And Ethan." Her voice trembled just a hair as she said his name and she watched Jeruna's eyes narrow. The triumph intensified. "Why?" She tilted her head. "Why spend all that money? Why play that game?"

"You are very intelligent." The old woman's thin lips curved into a satisfied smile. "How did you figure it out?"

"Kidnappers aren't that incompetent. Not if they're snatching insiders." She shrugged. "You forget. I read people. They weren't at all unsure about who they had. They knew they had the right people. And that ringer happened by so conveniently. He was tracking us, wasn't he?"

Jeruna was smiling openly now. "Are you pregnant?"

Kayla swallowed, feeling as if she had been punched in the stomach. "No," she said. Pressed her lips together. "Is that what you were after?"

"No." Jeruna sighed. "But it would have been an ... added bonus."

"Why did you do this?" She dared not raise her voice beyond a whisper.

"To atone for my sins." Jeruna shook her head. "Hard as it may be for you to imagine, I was young once. And rather attractive. And smart." She smiled. "One of my distant relatives fell in love with me. He loved my mind as well as my body."

"Ethan's father," Kayla said.

"Oh, no, sweetheart, you flatter me." Jeruna cackled. "His grandfather. But I was hot to leave the planet and he was not and I believed that love was something that would wait until *I* had time for it." She eyed Kayla, her smile thin. "Never make that mistake, child. I now believe that the universe gives you one chance only."

No! Kayla swallowed the syllable before it could erupt. Kept her face expressionless. "So you wanted what? A memory to replace what never happened?"

"Something like that." Jeruna's smile widened slowly, her eyes hungry. "And, I suspect, you have brought me the past I was not smart enough to live. I will be forever in your debt for that. Believe me, I will pay you very very well." Her smile broadened, a hint of satisfied dismissal glazing her eyes. "A very generous bonus. To pay for your trauma."

*Whore*, he had called her.

"Azara was wrong." Kayla waited for Jeruna's gaze to focus.

"Wrong about what?" She was just starting to worry.

"We didn't just make love," Kayla said. "We fell in love. That's what you meant to happen, wasn't it? Throw us together, put us in danger, but do it in Ethan's backyard, so he was comfortable and I was scared." You bitch, she thought. "Well, you didn't need to go to all that trouble." The bitter knot of words nearly choked her. "And that love is not for sale."

"We have a contract." Jeruna's face had gone white. Her image froze. Multitasking.



"Don't bother." Kayla laughed harshly. "My broker was wrong about the degrade deadline. You don't have time to call in the storm troopers."

"You can't keep it. I know how this works." Jeruna clenched her fists. "Don't be stupid. You'll never work as a chameleon again, I'll make damn sure of that."

"Oh, my broker will take care of that. Don't worry." Kayla looked at the numbers flickering at the base of the holo field. "We both lose. Right ... *now*."

She had cut it fine but it happened as if she had pushed a button. She had never done this, had wondered how it would differ from the filter, where she slept, woke up fresh and new.

Ethan, she thought, focusing on his remembered face, his touch on her skin, the feel of him inside her, part of her. I can't just *forget*.

It faded ... faded ... lost meaning ... a face ... name gone ... like water running out of the bathtub. Cup it in your hands, it's still gone....

A shrieking howl split her skull. Kayla blinked.

In her holo field, an aged woman clutched her head with both hands, her short-cropped hair sticking up in tufts between her fingers. The client she had just interviewed with. Jeruna something...

"No, you bitch, you're scamming me," the woman shrieked. "Ethan, give me Ethan."

She had gone for the dose, she remembered that. Nano failure? The woman was still screaming. "You'll have to talk to my broker," she said and blanked the field. The familiar headache clamped steel fingers into her skull and she sucked in a quick breath, groaned. This should be happening at An Yi's clinic, not here. Kayla touched her aching head gingerly and shuffled to her kitchen wall for tea. It had to be a failure. How long ago had she taken the dose? "Date check?" she said and the numbers leaped to life in the now-empty field.

She stared at them numbly, cold fear filling her.

*Not possible.*

She dropped her tea, barely felt the scalding splash as the cup bounced, raced to the futon sofa, pulled her private journal from its place beneath the frame. The book fell open, a dry and wrinkled fern leaf marking the place. A page had been torn out ... the notes about the last dose? The one for the woman who had screamed at her?

*I'm through. The looping letters leaped off the page at her. I know you're going to freak, but this has to stop. I lost something in the past few days. You don't know about it because you never experienced it, but it mattered. Every time I do this, I create a "we" ... the me who lived this, and the you on the other side of the filter. I ... we ... we're a hundred women, and what have we all lost? I don't know. You don't know. I'm not going to tell you any more, because it really is gone forever, and it didn't happen to you. But it's not going to happen again. I kept the dose until it expired. Start looking for a job, honey. We ... all of us ... are done being a whore and we're out of a job.*

Kayla dropped the book, numb. I didn't write this, she thought, but she had. The thoughts weren't all that unfamiliar. They mostly bothered her in the middle of the night, right after she'd shed the dose.

What had happened?

She groped, strained, trying to remember, saw An Yi's office, recalled their casual conversation, the feel of the recliner as An Yi prepared the dose....

...saw the woman's screaming face in her holo-field.

Azara's icon shimmered to life in the holo-field, seeming to pulse with anger. Kayla didn't bother to access it. You only stole one dose. After that, you were blacklisted. "I hope it was good," she said, and for all the bitterness in the words she felt ... a tiny flicker of relief. Which was crazy. She looked around the apartment. "Nice while we had it."

\* \* \* \*

Azara sent her a termination notice and an official citation that her union seal had been rescinded permanently. And a quiet promise of vengeance couched in polite language. Kayla left the city, went east, covering her tracks and hoping Azara wasn't willing to spend too much money to find her. She found a studio in a sprawling suburban slum, part of an ancient single-family home, maybe the living room, she thought. Communal bath and kitchen, but her room had a tiny sink with cold but drinkable water and she had cooked with a microwave and electric grill for years before she became a chameleon, so it wasn't too bad. She found a job, too, working as a waitress in one of the city hotspots. Good tips because she was pretty and the empathy that had made her a good chameleon made customers like her.

Some mornings she remembered her dreams. And then she sifted through them, wondering if they were part of those final, lost, few days.

Fall came with rain, and mud, and long, wet waits for the light rail into the city. And then, one morning, as she watered the little pots of blooming plants she had bought in the night market to brighten the room, someone knocked on her door. "Who's there?" she asked, peering through the tiny peephole in the door that constituted "security" in this place. Her neighbor, Suhara, asking to "borrow" a bit of rice, she thought. Again.

But the man on the far side of the door was a stranger.

"Kayla, you don't remember me. But we were ... friends."

The catch in his voice ... or maybe it was his voice alone ... made her start, like an electric shock. The key, she thought, and thought about ignoring him, calling Dario, the big wrestler in the back unit, to come run this guy off.

I don't want to know, she thought, but she opened the door after all and stepped back to let him in. Cute guy. Her heart began to beat faster. He looked around, his expression ... agonized.

"I'm sorry to bother you," he said. "You don't ... remember me."

It was a statement, but his eyes begged.

She took her time, examining his hair, his slightly haggard face, the casual clothes made of expensive natural fiber, whose labels made him an insider, one of the elite. Well, those had been her clients. As she shook her head, his shoulders drooped.

"I know something happened," she said. "Maybe between us. The memory is simply gone. I'm sorry."

"You didn't find ... any notes to yourself? Letters about ... about what happened?"

*About me*, he had started to say. She shook her head.

"That was my fault. I was angry. And then..." He closed his eyes. "I got sick, really sick, had picked up some kind of drug-resistant tropical epizootic. By the time I was well enough to look ... it was too late. The nano had expired, you had moved, and ... I couldn't find you. And I was angry when you last saw me. I knew you'd think that I..." He balled his fist suddenly, slammed it into his thigh. "You really don't remember, it's all gone, all of it."

His anguish was so strong that it filled the room. Without thought she took a step forward, put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know that I want you to ... tell me." She met his eyes, hazel, but with gold flecks in their depths. "It really is gone." And you're an insider, she thought. And I am not.

He looked past her, his eyes fixed on a middle distance. "Will you come have dinner with me?"

"I told you...."

"I know. I heard you." He looked at her finally and the ghost of a crooked smile quirked the corner of his mouth. "I won't talk about ... that time. I just want to have dinner with you."

She was good at reading people and he didn't feel like a threat. "Sure," she said. Because he *was* cute, whatever had happened in the past. And she liked him. "I'm off tonight."

"Great." His eyes gleamed gold when he smiled. "I play music ... when I'm not rooting around in the jungle for no very lucrative reason." He waited for a heartbeat and sighed. "I have a gig tonight on the other side of the city. After dinner ... would you like to come listen? I play classical jazz. Really old stuff. And..." His gold eyes glinted. "I come from a family branch that breaks rules. Sometimes really big ones."

Whatever that meant. He was actually nervous, as if she might refuse. "Sure." She smiled, took his hand. For an instant, as their hands touched, she saw green leaves, golden light, smelled humidity, flowers, rot, and soil. Funny how smell was the strongest link to the fragments of past jobs that had seeped past the nano. All of a sudden, his hand felt ... familiar. "I'd love to come hear you play."