

CHAPTER 1

Ana's new hair shone as thick and black as an android's blood. Under the blazing spotlights, long lengths of it fell from her head, cascading around her shoulders and halfway down her back.

The head hair wasn't the worst of it. There was hair on her face, too--an arched, narrow piece over each eye, and a dark fringe that weighted down each eyelid. As she held out her arms, the null-gravity camera floated closer. On the mammoth screen behind the stage, the stadium audience got a close-up of the fine down on each of Ana's slender arms.

The crowd shouted their approval as she slid one hand up her head, making a graceful movement that lifted strands of hair toward the camera. No, Sibs, it's not a wig, she thought. And if you think this is unusual, wait until you see my other modifications.

The Master of Ceremonies strolled through the audience, stopping near a tall young man. "What do you think?" he asked.

"She looks so primitive now," Ao answered. Ana waved at him, happy to have her crèche-group close in the front row for this momentous occasion.

"I hardly recognize her as Ana," Ob said.

"I couldn't endure it," Syv announced, running his hand up and down his own marble-smooth arm.

Ana wasn't surprised to hear Syv speak out--he had always been the bold one of their crèche-group. Across the audience, their eyes met and she smiled at him. He grinned back, adding, "But I'll bet the prize will be worth it."

The three judges, seated on a raised dais to the right of the stage, nodded as Ana turned slowly.

"You look precisely like a twenty-first century woman," Judge Woo said, her voice warm with approval.

"What's the hardest bod-mod to get used to?" Judge El asked.

Ana frowned, thinking it over. "The hair's difficult." Reaching up, she pushed a heavy hank of it back over her shoulder. "But I think these are the worst." She twitched off the filmy golden wrap that covered her torso, exposing two protruding globes.

She had never seen breasts like these, outside of old-time artwork. Only the few paintings that had escaped the twenty-third century Art Cleansing revealed such features. Breasts weren't part of human design nowadays, and Ana could certainly understand why. She could feel them--they were heavy and awkward. If she tried to run, she was certain they would bounce.

She was the first player who had been given bod-mods as part of the Game. The others had gone into the pod unchanged, aside from wearing clothes that would fit the target period. Most of the players donned wigs now, ever since a woman sent to the seventeenth century had narrowly escaped being hanged as a witch.

With her first twinge of nerves, Ana wondered why the Game designers had seen fit to give her so many bod-mods. Most of the other players had been dropped in for less than a week. They had retrieved their objects, returned to their check points, and triumphantly claimed their prizes, while the audience followed the play with unwavering attention. No one had told Ana why she needed real breasts and hair for a quick visit to the twenty-first century.

Leaving the dais, Judge Si approached Ana and touched her forehead in greeting. Ana responded in kind. People said he was an android, but she wasn't sure of that, and she certainly didn't want to seem impolite on a system-wide broadcast.

"Very convincing," Judge Si drawled. "Too bad we must bow to our ancestors' antiquated notions of gender, but you know what I always say. When in the past, do as the primitives do." Raising his palm to reveal a portable medical scanner, the judge waved it back and forth in front of her, then announced, "Your heart rate and pulse rate are elevated, dear Sibling. It isn't too late to back out of the Game."

"No fear!" she shot back. "I'm raring to go!" Her voice rang out strongly. No matter how she felt inside, she wasn't going to be like the player who had turned back, screaming, just before getting in the travel-pod. Or like that other one, so paralyzed at the actual reality of the eighteenth century that he'd spent his week cowering within a few feet of his check point, not even attempting to look for his object.

Judge Si smirked, an expression familiar to the many aficionados of the Game. "Perhaps you won't be so confident when I explain your mission." He waved at the enormous screen behind them, which began to flash scenes from previous play. Ana swung around to watch. Irritatingly, her hair swung with her. She twitched it back as she saw the often-shown footage of Ru making off with the Hope diamond.

"*Your* task, dear Sibling, is going to be...rather harder."

The screen shifted to show Ryo, clad in a kilt and wooden shoes, running across a field just ahead of an angry bull.

Ana waited, hoping the judge would describe the terms of her Game. Instead he asked, "How long ago did you enter the lottery?"

For as long as Ana could remember, she had been fascinated by the Game. It had started when Oxvard University began licensing the century-old process that allowed a corporeal body to visit the past.

Realizing he was asking for the audience's benefit, Ana answered at length. "I signed up the day the lottery began five years ago. My crèche-mate and I waited in line for hours to take the registration tests. But I never thought I'd be chosen. I couldn't believe it when I heard my number called last month!" Ana grinned, remembering the excitement of that moment. Her crèche-group had gathered around, hugging her, patting her shoulders, exclaiming. She had seen the sadness in Ao's eyes at the thought of her absence from the group, and the envy on Syv's face.

"Did you do anything special to celebrate?"

"Naturally." She giggled. "We all took a hit off the Joy Machine. Then later on, I had the worst time getting to sleep. Poor old Ev--I woke her up and made her talk to me for the rest of the night." Until finally a yawning Ev had led her to her cubicle, found her orgasm wand in the drawer, and handed it to her, saying, "Here. Use this until you feel sleepy." Which had been good advice.

"You'll have stories to tell for the rest of your life, once you make it back from the past," the judge said. "Assuming you make it back, of course."

“I’ll make it back!” she declared. Apparently the audience liked the ring of confidence in her voice, because they cheered.

The judge smiled an enigmatic smile. “Are you ready to hear about your task?”

“Hit me.”

He put his arm around her shoulders, turning her toward the big screen. His flesh was hot to the touch--maybe he really was an android.

Ana tipped her head back, trying to take in the entire gigantic screen. The audience gasped and murmured as the camera zoomed in on a twenty-first century room.

“Do you see the hairy savage?” Judge Si asked. Ana nodded.

The savage was sitting on a primitive piece of furniture. Ana knew from her recent embedded brain-chip that the item was called a “bed.”

He was a male human. Only males had hair along the jaw line and around the lips. His upper body was dressed in a white garment, open, with his pale skin showing for several inches. There was hair on his chest, too, the same ripe-wheat color as the hair on his head and face.

Outside of ancient “flattie” movies, Ana had never seen such a light-skinned human. That odd pinky-beige color was no longer part of human genetic design. Modern-day Siblings ranged from pale golden to a medium brown, colors that had proved to be more resistant to various skin diseases.

The savage’s legs were totally encased in long gray tubes. Another fact Ana knew from flatties was that past cultures had covered their bodies substantially. As she watched, the savage stood and brought the front of his upper garment together, his hands moving swiftly from his neck to his waist until none of his chest was showing. He strode over to a door from which hung a rack holding many multi-colored lengths of fabric. Yanking one away from the rest, he placed it around his neck and tied an intricate knot. Then he picked up a gold bar and pinned it through the colored fabric.

“You’ve just witnessed an important ritual,” Judge Si announced. The audience murmured their appreciation. “Professor Ar at Cambridge-Paris believes the garment has religious significance, while Professor Ti at OSU-Stanford argues that the color of the fabric reveals a political alliance. Perhaps, Sibling, you’ll be able to settle this debate when you return.”

Watching the savage shrug himself into a final, upper-body layer, Ana wished Judge Si would get on with it. She was eager to learn what her task was to be, and what it had to do with the savage they were viewing. Did he own some item that she was to bring back with her?

All the quick activity on the screen suddenly slowed. The man raised his eyes to a mirror and looked at himself for a long moment. His eyes were light gray, almost the same color as the sky. Ana had actually seen the real sky, when she and Syv had traveled illegally Out-Dome.

His brows were a darker color than his hair. They drew together at the same time as the corners of his mouth went down.

It wasn’t hard to recognize sadness, even in such a strange, hairy face. Was he unhappy with the way he looked? Ana tried to imagine him without the facial hair. She liked his long nose, his wide, pale eyes, and the high planes of his cheekbones. Her conclusion surprised her. Why, if his skull was at all elegant, he’d be almost as beautiful as Fo, the handsomest man in the entire crèche.

He put his hand to his forehead for a long moment, as though he were in pain. Surprised at herself, Ana felt an odd impulse to touch his shoulder and offer comfort.

“Your task, dear Sibling,” Judge Si spoke in impressive, ringing tones, “your task is the

hardest any human has faced in the Game.

“But you will have help. During the week you spent in the hospital, you received two embedded chips.” Part of the screen behind Ana split to reveal a schematic of her skull, diagramming where the chips had been added. “One chip supplies you with the savage’s language: twenty-first century English. The other provides a secondary active memory, acting as a teacher-translator for historical concepts. It will activate whenever you touch the left side of your neck.”

Ana frowned. Since the day she had heard her name called out on planet-wide broadcasting, announcing her as a player, she had felt joyous excitement, triumph, and confidence that she was going to win her Game. Now it occurred to her that although other players had used language chips, none of them had been given secondary memories. A frisson of fear danced along her nerves.

Drawing herself up to her full height of five and a half feet, she stared into Judge Si’s large, black eyes. “Tell me what I have to do.”

The look he returned told her that nothing she said would alter the measured pace of his presentation. He gestured to the audience, and a group of Security cyborgs joined Ana’s crèche-group, escorting them to the stage.

The audience took advantage of the short pause, laughing and chattering among themselves, munching handfuls of People-Chow. The mood was joyous--today was one of the year’s four Festival Days. Humanity’s ReBirthday had always been Ana’s favorite holiday. She hoped it was a good omen for her Game.

The day had started early with a morning gift exchange. Ana had made a sculpture for each of her seven crèche-mates. In return, she had been presented with a song from La, a poem from Oal, a dance from Lu, Ev and Ao, and a necklace from Ob.

Syv did not excel at anything artistic. He often said lightly that he was “jack of all trades, master of none.” But Ana knew how much his lack of a special skill bothered him, in this society that valued artistic expression above all else. He’d taken her aside that morning. “When you return, we’ll sneak Out-dome again. I found a new place to go. That’ll be my present.”

“As soon as I get back, we’ll go,” she’d promised.

“Make sure you come back to us,” he’d said, giving her a quick hug.

As her crèche-mates came up on stage, Ana said her goodbyes, enjoying having them all around her. Ao clapped her on the shoulder, Ob and Oal hugged her, and Syv, looking deep into her eyes, gave her a private smile. Ev giggled and stroked her hair. “It would almost be pretty, if it weren’t so strange,” she commented. La and Lu, holding hands as always, touched her forehead formally.

These were the people she had spent her life with. All decanted on the same day, they had been raised together as a crèche-group. She knew the grief they would feel if she failed to return from the Game.

Sometimes the worst happened. The past held strange dangers, unpredictable hazards. Players died in accidents, from violent, savage attacks, from diseases. Sometimes they didn’t make it back to their check points. Ana remembered a run of misfortune when one player had failed to return and two others had been dispatched to find him. None had ever returned and only the second one had been traced. The Game had been halted for six months while groups at three major universities studied ways to make it safer for the players.

She’d heard whispered rumors that certain players chose to stay in the past. Ana didn’t believe that speculation--it was too outrageous.

“Look!” Syv exclaimed, gesturing at the screen. The man had walked into another room, and a much smaller person ran up to him.

The audience craned their necks forward at the unusual sight of a child. Ana held her breath, watching to see what the older person would do to the younger one. She had learned all about the toxic behavior of “families” in hypno-school.

Tears streamed from the child’s eyes. The man went down on one knee and took the child in his arms, holding its head to his chest and patting its black hair.

Why, the man was *comforting* the child, just the way one of the floor androids might comfort a child in the crèche who had hurt herself. Ana let out her breath, happy that she wasn’t witnessing some act of cruelty. The audience seemed to realize it at the same moment, because a relieved murmur rippled through the crowd.

The Master of Ceremonies came forward, holding a control in his hand. “Siblings, for the first time ever, the Game has audio!” he announced. He waved the control and the sound of the child’s sobbing filled the stadium. The audience members turned to each other, gasping, discussing this new development. “So if you plan to follow the Game extensively, you may want to download a chip like Ana’s. Otherwise, many of the strange, primitive idioms and colloquialisms of ancient English may confuse you.”

Judge Si raised his arms and the audience fell silent. “Sibling! Because the task is more difficult than usual, the prize will be greater. The normal award of one year of extended life will be increased to five years, and it will apply to your entire crèche-group...*if* you succeed.”

The audience cheered. Ev clapped her hands and Ob hugged her again. Ana drew a deep breath of appreciation at this wonderful news. Her group, thirty-five years old, had been slated for dissolution in a few months. Adding another five years to that was an incredible gift. Any Sibling who made it to forty years of age was eligible for all kinds of perks and benefits: university classes, a seat on the Council, and, it was rumored, Out-Dome privileges.

There was no doubt about it--she had to succeed. Had to win this prize. Not just for herself, but for all of them. She saw the way they looked at her, the confidence and the hope.

I can do it. She lifted her chin and gazed directly at Judge Si. “Go on.”

“All you have to do,” Judge Si told her, “is go to the year 2004, meet the hairy savage shown on the screen, and induce him to propose marriage to you.”

Syv watched as Ana slid an odd purple-and-gold garment over her head and lay in the travel pod. He couldn’t imagine how even someone as smart and brave as Ana could win this Game, especially in the short period of eight weeks.

He already knew what “marriage” was from his studies of the past, so he ignored the explanation being flashed on the screen.

The technician murmured into a microphone and pressed several different buttons. At a signal from the technician, Judge El went to the travel chamber and opened it. The pod was gone. The crowd cheered.

“One more thing,” Judge Si said, and the audience members, who had been preparing to leave, stopped in their tracks as they noticed his tone.

“When Ana reaches the past, she will forget she’s from the twenty-fifth century. Only in this way will she be able to fully interact with pre-ReBirth humans, believing herself to be one of them.”

Ana’s crèche-group turned to each other in consternation. Shocked at Judge Si’s words, Syv demanded, “What about her Shield?”

Judge Si smirked. “Why, Sibling, obviously she won’t be able to use it if she doesn’t know she has it.”

Syv’s hands clenched into fists. His favorite crèche-mate had been sent to a primitive era where crime and violence were common...and where she had no protection.

The five extra years of life, dangled so enticingly before them just little while ago, seemed to recede in the face of this impossible, unsafe mission.

CHAPTER 2

Carson Wheeler glanced into the rear-view mirror. Jackie sat in the back of the car, safely belted in, his Indians baseball cap shading his eyes. Dinner had gone on a long time for a nine-year-old. His head drooped to one side, which probably meant he was asleep.

“What a lovely meal,” Hilda Cooper said. “Such a pleasant atmosphere. And the food was delicious. I’ve never had flaming cheese before.”

“Glad you enjoyed your first encounter with Greek food,” Carson responded. They were traveling along the residential part of Cedar Road. He liked the old houses in this part of Cleveland Heights. Someday, if he ever stopped paying the Hillcrest Detective Agency, he might be able to afford a house in this neighborhood.

Hilda took out a lipstick and applied it to lips which were already perfectly outlined in dark red. “I love your idea of starting an Art Club for the students. And you’d really be willing to act as the faculty mentor?”

“Sure. It would give me a chance to put on my teaching hat again.”

“So you miss teaching?”

Every single damned day. “I wouldn’t mind having more interaction with the kids.” Seeing her frown, he added, “Not that I’m complaining.” He didn’t want his boss to get the idea that he was unhappy in his position as assistant principal at Princeton Heights High School.

“I want my staff to be satisfied in their own particular slots.”

“I like what I’m doing just fine.” He tried to sound upbeat and positive. After a moment, she smiled. Carson relaxed--the dangerous moment had passed.

“You’re such an excellent driver,” Hilda murmured, putting her gloved hand on his arm for a moment. “I’m impressed.”

“Thanks. It’s nice of you to let me drive your baby.”

She pushed her long blonde hair behind her ears. “I’ll tell you a secret. Whenever I go on a first date, I let the guy drive the Jag. It’s how I decide whether there’ll be a second date.”

He looked away from the road long enough to give her a quick glance. “But this isn’t a date.”

“No, of course not. I was just saying...” She looked down, fussing with something in her purse. Lowering her voice, she went on, “I keep thinking about your poor little daughter. Such a tragedy!”

Talking about Elizabeth never got any easier, but Carson hadn’t been able to avoid a short discussion when his boss raised the topic. “I wouldn’t say ‘tragedy.’” He kept his tone steady. “It will be a tragedy if I never see her again, but I don’t believe that.” He looked in the rear-view mirror, compelled to check once again that Jackie was safely in the car.

“I miss my daughter, too,” Hilda murmured.

Carson gave her a quick, startled glance. “I didn’t know you had a kid.”

“I don’t talk about her much...she’s with my ex in California. I’ll see her for a month this

summer.”

It just showed how people could surprise you. Carson had never thought of Hilda as the maternal type. An excellent administrator, a stern but fair superintendent of schools--but it was difficult to picture her as a mother.

From the back came a sleepy murmur. “Dad, Omar Vizquel hit a home run!”

Carson chuckled. “Jackie, you’re dreaming.”

“He’s certainly a fan, isn’t he?” Hilda asked with a smile. “Maybe the three of us should go to a game sometime.”

Jackie sat up straighter. “Great idea! Could we, Dad? Please?”

“I’ll think about it.” In the rear-view mirror, Carson gave his son a quelling look. Jackie knew his views on that very well. Baseball on television was free. They needed to save their money for necessities.

“Carson!” Hilda shrieked.

He saw it just after Hilda--a flash of purple and gold. A person had appeared out of nowhere, right in front of the car. Carson stomped on the brake. The car squealed to a halt, but everyone felt the jolt as they were thrown against their seatbelts.

“Everyone okay?” Carson twisted around to check on Jackie. He was still securely belted in, and Carson breathed a sigh of relief. Hilda looked fine too, just frightened.

“Dad! You hit someone!”

Carson looked over the hood of the Jag but couldn’t see anything. He reached out to open the door, but Hilda clutched his arm. “Keep going! I don’t want to be involved in this!”

“Calm down. We can’t just leave.” He opened the door.

She took a deep breath. “No, I’m sorry. Of course not.”

Gently he loosened her hand. “Call 911,” he told her, getting out.

My God--it’s a woman. Carson’s stomach lurched. He hurried to where she lay, partially in the street, partially on the curb. Dropping to his knees, he said, “Miss, I’m so sorry! Are you all right?”

Her black lashes fluttered and then her eyes opened. “The...vehicle...hit me.”

“Yes--I don’t know how it could have happened--I swear I was watching the road.”

Beneath the streetlight’s glow, he saw her clearly. No signs of trauma, no blood, thank God. He wiped his clammy brow, relieved. “Can you move your legs?”

She drew them up without visible hesitation. Her long legs were bare, her feet sandaled. Odd way to dress for a chilly spring evening, he couldn’t help thinking.

“I believe I am unhurt,” she murmured. “Just...shaken.” She stared up into his face. “You look...I have seen you...before. Do I know you?”

She was lovely, with her large black eyes and waterfall of midnight hair. Carson was sure he would have remembered meeting her. “I don’t think so. My name’s Carson Wheeler. Sound familiar?”

She shook her head, her expression puzzled.

“Are you bleeding anywhere?”

“I think...I think my body is intact.” Putting her palms down flat, she brought herself into a sitting position.

“Stay still!” he told her, alarmed. “If you’re hurt, you don’t want to make it worse.”

Her hair blew in the wind as cars whipped by them. One motorist, impatient at having to go around the Jag, blared the horn. The woman jerked as though she’d never heard such a sound in her life.

“We’ll get you down to University Hospital in a few minutes,” Carson said.

The temperature was barely above freezing, but she seemed unaware of the chill. Why wasn’t she shivering in that short purple and gold dress? Carson shrugged off his overcoat and placed it around her shoulders. He wondered what she’d been doing outside without a coat.

Crossing the street to visit a neighbor?

“What’s your name?” he asked. “Can I call someone?”

Panic leapt into her eyes. “I . . . I do not recall that information.”

Carson stared at her. This was worse than he’d imagined. He’d hoped the bumper had just tapped her, but now it seemed like she might have some sort of head injury.

In the distance, sirens wailed.

Jackie peered out of his window. “Dad? Is everything okay?”

Holding up a warning hand, Carson said, “Sit tight, son. Stay in the car where you’ll be safe.”

Hilda emerged from the car. Carson filled her in quickly. “I don’t see any injuries, but she seems confused. I think she hit her head when the car knocked her down.”

“I cannot remember my identity,” the woman murmured, biting her lip.

“You poor girl,” Hilda said. She pointed to something lying by the curb. “Is that your purse?”

“Purse?” the woman repeated, moving her head to look.

“It must be yours.” Carson picked it up. The small purple velvet bag matched the woman’s dress. He handed it to her. She gazed at the bag as though she’d never seen it before.

“For goodness sake, open it,” Hilda said. “You must have some sort of identification.”

Carson knelt down again, saying gently, “Need some help?”

She handed him the purse. He unzipped the top while she watched. Inside were two credit cards, a Blue Cross card, a state identification card, a mirror, and a key ring with four keys. That was odd, Carson thought, remembering all the junk his ex-wife used to carry around with her . . . make-up bag, sunglasses, two different wallets. . .

“Here’s your state I.D.” He looked at it before he handed it to her. “Your name’s Anastasia Valdez. You live in my apartment complex--that must be why I look familiar. There, that should make you feel better, now that you know your name, Anastasia.”

She put the identification card in her lap, then her hand stole into his. Her fingers were cold. “Now I recall. My name is Ana.” She pronounced it *Ah-na*.

“Nice nickname.” He took her hand in both of his to warm it, trying not to think about how long it had been since he had felt a woman’s slender fingers in his. “Hang on, now. The ambulance is coming. You’ll be at University Hospital in five minutes.”

“It is very close, then?”

He gave her a pitying look. Any Cleveland eastsider would know the location of UH. Perhaps she’d recover her memory once the shock subsided. “Right down the hill. They’ll take good care of you there.”

“You will come with me, yes?” She spoke so quietly that at first he wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. She added, “You have been so kind . . .”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can. The police will be asking me to make a report.”

“Police,” she repeated, looking puzzled again. Her hand went to her neck and she rubbed the side of it as though to soothe an ache. Then she glanced from the car back to him. “Enforcers of the traffic laws. Like Security . . . they will blame you for this accident?”

“Probably.”

“It was not your fault. I will tell them that.”

“Do you remember what happened?” Carson asked eagerly.

“No . . . but I am sure it was not your fault. I must have been careless.”

Hilda, clutching her coat closed as the wind blew around them, said, “I believe you were careless, Miss. I was watching the road and I didn’t see you until suddenly the accident was happening. Are you sure you didn’t jump in front of the car?”

“Hilda!” Carson exclaimed.

She shook her head. “I had to say it, Carson. If she was trying to commit suicide, it gives a whole different meaning to this supposed accident.”

“Suicide,” the woman repeated, rubbing her neck again. Carson watched her, increasingly worried about her possible injuries. “To kill oneself,” she murmured. “Why would a person wish to end her life early? Life is short enough, yes?”

Carson suppressed a sigh. Sometimes it seemed entirely too long to him.

The ambulance drew up behind them, followed by two Cleveland Heights police cruisers. Carson watched as the attendants loaded Ana onto a stretcher, his heart twisting at her frightened expression when they fastened a surgical collar around her neck.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be fine,” he told her. The mute, suffering expression on her face made him think of a rabbit caught in a trap.

After the police were through with them, Hilda took the wheel. Her cold expression was not lost on Carson. Oh hell, she gets mad too damn fast, Carson thought. The chill silences of those last few months with his ex-wife came to mind. He would have much preferred a screaming fight to the silent treatment.

“I should never have let you drive,” Hilda said at last.

“The best driver in the world couldn’t have avoided that accident,” he snapped.

Hilda’s eyes narrowed. “If this gets into the papers, I’ll never forgive you.”

“What if it did? We weren’t doing anything wrong.”

She huffed out an impatient breath. “The papers can make anything look scandalous. Can you imagine how they’d write this up? They’d make you look like a reckless driver and they’d say I was careless for allowing you to drive.”

“Don’t borrow trouble.”

They didn’t speak again until she drove up to his apartment complex. He gave clipped directions through the maze of flat-roofed boxes until they reached K building.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said, unsmiling, as Carson got out of the car.

Promise--or threat? he wondered, putting his hand on his son’s shoulder as they walked up the path together to 3-K.

“Dad, is your boss mad at you?” Jackie asked, peering up at his father with a worried expression.

“She’ll get over it.” But Carson couldn’t help remembering a comment from one of his colleagues concerning Hilda: “She’s got a mind like a computer database. She remembers *everything*.”

Omar, a fat marmalade tabby, was on his favorite windowsill perch as they entered the apartment. He gave them a slit-eyed glance and then returned to his self-appointed task of watching out the window. Robby came to the door to meet them and rolled on the floor at their feet. Picking him up, Jackie smiled as the lean gray Siamese purred against his cheek.

Carson shrugged out of his suit jacket, thinking how good it was to be home. He gave his old leather lounge chair a longing glance, but knew he didn’t dare sit down yet. There was still

plenty to do before he could relax for the evening.

“It’s nice to be home, isn’t it, Dad?” Jackie said. Carson smiled at the boy. It was amazing how often the child seemed to echo his own thoughts.

Jackie flopped down on the big overstuffed couch, grabbing his Nintendo controller, and turned the television on.

“Just one game, Jackie,” Carson warned him. “It’s getting late.”

As Jackie played virtual baseball, Carson straightened up the apartment, put away the breakfast dishes, and listened to the phone messages. Nothing of much interest except a call from his sister, inviting Jackie to his cousin’s tenth birthday party.

Carson hoped his son’s concentration on the Indians against the Red Sox had kept him from noticing the invitation, but later, as he tucked the covers around him, Jackie said, “Dad? Can I go to Andy’s party?”

“We’ll see.”

“That means no,” Jackie pouted. “Dad, *please*. I want to go.”

Carson sighed. “Let me think about it. And don’t pester.”

“No one’s going to kidnap me from Aunt Connie’s house.”

Carson kissed his forehead. “Go to sleep, Slugger. Tomorrow’s a school day.”

The lounge chair beckoned. Carson sank down gratefully and put his feet up, switching the news on.

I’m not opening that drawer tonight. He tried not to think about it, tried to concentrate on the day’s events instead. A missing child had been found, alive, at the house of a relative. The president had campaigned in Akron. The inanely smiling newscaster teased an in-depth report about a new sex-stimulant for women.

Not of general interest. Carson turned off the television and headed into his bedroom. He avoided looking at the bottom drawer as he removed the change from his pockets and tossed it into the jar on the top of his dresser.

As he undressed and brushed his teeth, he wondered if he should be worried about Hilda. She could make work uncomfortable for him, if she wished. He never should have gone out to dinner with her . . . but she had been so insistent. Well, he’d just have to wait and see how she acted when he saw her at school the next day.

He felt a little uneasy at how often she had seemed to be flirting with him earlier in the evening, but reminded himself that Hilda often acted that way with male subordinates. It didn’t mean anything--it was just her way of dealing with men. Although she had a face any man would look at twice and a sexy figure, she wasn’t the type of woman he favored. And in any case, after what he’d gone through with Gillian, he’d made up his mind to concentrate on his job, his hobby, and most importantly, his son. Getting into a relationship was like entering a maze. Most of the time it led you to nothing but a dead end, and if you made it through, the treasure at the center could turn out to be fool’s gold.

Turning back the bedcovers, he paused. He shook his head at himself, then reluctantly opened the bottom drawer of his dresser.

Pain centered on his chest, an ache of longing and regret. So little remained. A plastic doll. A teddy bear with one eye missing. And a dainty pink t-shirt that he’d found mixed in with Jackie’s laundry. He held it up to his face, inhaling deeply. It still held the scent of Elizabeth’s baby powder.

Gillian had made a clean sweep when she disappeared that Monday morning, two years ago. She’d taken everything--the old shoes she’d worn when gardening, the soap she’d been

using in the shower--as if she'd wanted to obliterate every trace of herself from his life.

He took deep breaths to calm himself, trying to dispel the rage that filled him whenever his ex-wife came to mind.

"If you find her, I don't want to know right away," he'd told his contact at the Hillcrest Detective Agency. "Let me know as soon as she's in police custody." He feared what he might do if he ever came across her, if he happened to find her before the detective.

Not that he blamed Gillian for leaving him. He had been no bargain as a husband, that was for sure. A math teacher with an old car and a drawerful of medical bills, still distraught over the death of his first wife, panicked at the thought of being left with two children to raise...he'd hardly been able to believe it when she'd said she was willing to marry him.

No, he didn't blame her for leaving him.

But she shouldn't have taken my daughter.

"Dad?" Jackie's voice came softly from his bedroom. Since this happened several nights a week, Carson had been waiting for it. Laying the shirt down carefully, he closed the drawer and stood up.

"Are you thirsty?" he called back.

"Yeah, can I have some water? Please?"

Carson filled Jackie's bathroom cup and took it into his bedroom. Jackie gulped the water, but didn't lie down again.

"Want another?"

Jackie shook his head. His large, dark eyes seemed huge in the dim light streaming in from the hall. "Dad? Where did that lady come from? The lady you hit with the car, I mean."

"I don't know. She must have been trying to cross the street."

Jackie shook his head vehemently. "No. I saw her come down from the sky."

CHAPTER 2

Ana kept her eyes shut tight, her senses overwhelmed by the strangeness of this place.

She knew what a hospital was supposed to be like...although she didn't know how she knew. When you were in a hospital, you were supposed to float, deliciously weightless, in an anti-gravity stasis field. Soothing music played while you twisted slowly, bathed in the soft glow of the healing lamps. Time-altering medications made weeks go by in what seemed like hours.

But in this place, time seemed to stretch, making every hour interminably long. The night had lasted a year. Every time she drifted into an uneasy sleep, the loud snoring of her roommate woke her. Around five-thirty in the morning, she had finally fallen into a more natural, deeper sleep--only to be awakened at six by a white-clad nurse who wrapped a rubber cuff around her upper arm and tightened it until the pain was almost unbearable.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Ana whispered at last.

"Just checkin' your pressure, sweetheart. Hold still now." The slender dark woman smiled at her. "One-ten over seventy. Nothing wrong with your blood pressure, that's for sure. Now, hold this under your tongue." Without waiting for an answer, she'd stuck a piece of plastic into Ana's mouth.

They had done these odd things last night when she had first been admitted into the emergency area. She wondered why they all had to be repeated.

She couldn't get used to the odors in this place. She made out a faint, pervasive smell that seemed to be a combination of sweat, fear, and poorly washed bodies. Overlaying that was a sharp scent from the materials that were used to clean the place. She had seen them last night, swabbing the halls, and the odor had filled her room, almost choking her.

Hospital personnel had questioned her the night before, trying to ascertain the extent of her memory loss. She knew her name, her address, and the date. When they asked her the name of the president of the United States, she'd answered, "Betsy Stanton," momentarily mixing up 2004 with 2040. But other details, especially her past, eluded her. "Hopefully your memory will return soon," they'd reassured her.

She hoped so.

Her roommate stretched and yawned noisily. She was a heavy-set woman with flyaway sandy-blonde hair. "Scuse me," she muttered, sitting up in bed. She yawned again, scratching her scalp vigorously. "Hey, I wonder what time they're going to feed us today. I could eat a horse. You hungry?"

Ana wondered what 'horse' would taste like. "No," she answered. She was too agitated to think about the state of her appetite. She sighed with relief as the woman shuffled into the bathroom and closed the door.

Using the remote control at the side of her bed, as the nurse had shown her earlier, Ana managed to raise the back until she was in a sitting position. Across the room the curtains were closed, but a thin wedge of sunlight streaked through.

Something seemed very wrong about that.

"Anastasia Valdez," she murmured. It was her name--the identification card in the purse she'd been carrying proved that--but there was something wrong about that as well. Such a long name, so many syllables.

If only she could remember...but it was all gone, like the dream that had popped like a soap bubble when she opened her eyes. She remembered water and sky and a bald man with a big grin--nothing more. The memories of her past were someplace where she couldn't access

them. The more she tried to capture them, the more they eluded her.

Nothing seemed familiar, not even her own body. Last evening, after the ambulance had brought her to this place, after kindly nurses had helped her undress and don a hospital gown, after they had questioned and examined her, they had finally left her alone for awhile. She had gone through her purse and found a mirror. Staring into it for over an hour, she had been frightened to realize she didn't recognize the face that looked back at her.

Fear rose in her and she heard her own ragged breathing loud in her ears. She imagined burrowing back under the sheets, closing her eyes again and staying there, ignoring her roommate and the nurses and anyone else who came to speak with her.

Setting her lips, she moved down to the end of the bed, to the area where the rails couldn't restrain her, and swung her legs over the side. The tile floor was cold against her bare feet as she rose and went to the window.

Thrusting the curtains back, she looked out and up. Buildings surrounded her, both low and tall. Behind them, where she expected to see the faint silver criss-cross of the dome grid, there was nothing except clear light blue.

Her mouth opened and she breathed deeply, staring out at the colored sky. Which was the reality and which was the dream--the blue sky or the metallic dome?

The bathroom door opened and her roommate reentered the room. "Well, well. We're finally having some sunshine, I see. Although the weatherman says it's going up to ninety later in the week. That's the trouble with Cleveland--when it's not snowing or raining it's a scorcher."

Cleveland? Scorcher?

The big woman settled herself back on her bed with much rearranging of the sheets. "Name's Geri. Nurse told me last night your name's Anastasia. That's a mouthful. Is it Russian or what?"

Turning away from the window, Ana said, "I'm Ana." Russian?

"Okay, that's a lot easier. Nurse said you got hit by a car. That's a bitch, huh? Hey, I'll bet they'll be sending out some asshole from the insurance company, try to get you to sign your rights away. Now don't you do it! Get yourself a lawyer and take 'em to court. My sister got hit by a car about three years ago--no, four--and she got herself a sharp lawyer and a nice cash settlement."

Lawyer? Settlement? Ana put her hand to her forehead as she sat back down on her bed. "Please--it is hard for me to understand. The accident--I hurt my head. I cannot remember..."

Geri nodded. "That's right, nurse mentioned that too. Don't you worry, doll, it'll all come back to you. Amnesia, they call it. Happens all the time on the soaps. They always remember, sooner or later, and I bet you will, too."

Soaps? Ana rubbed the side of her neck with her hand. A voice whispered inside her head, <Soaps. A type of melodramatic fictional broadcasting show, popular from the days of radio all the way until the twenty-second century, when they were outlawed by the Second North American Dictator.>

Her eyes opened wide. Where was this voice coming from? It seemed to be inside her head, but distinct from her own thoughts.

"Who are you?" she murmured.

"Geri Lawson," her roommate said, speaking slowly. "I've been here two days, trying to get my diabetes under control."

Ana wondered what a diabetes was. The side of her neck twitched and she reached up to rub it.

<Diabetes is an auto-immune disorder in which the body does not properly regulate its own insulin and blood sugar. Would you like a more detailed explanation?>

Ana thought back, Who are you? Why are you in my head?

-<I am your secondary active memory. You may call me SAM. I will answer your questions when you activate me by touching the left side of your neck.>

Ana wondered, Why can I not remember anything?

<There is a rather long explanation for that. Suppose you deal with your refueling problem now and we can talk later.>

Ana looked up to see a large, redheaded man entering the room with a tray. Wonderful odors assailed her as he put it down on her bedside table with a smile. "Enjoy!" he said.

Geri looked from her tray to Ana's as she lifted the lid from her own breakfast. "Being a diabetic sucks," she complained. "Look at that--you got two pieces of toast, and a lot more eggs than they gave me. They gave you juice, too."

Ana stared at the food on her plate, enthralled. She knew what first-meal was supposed to be: a hot drink and a big bowl of nutritious People-Chow. The main thing on this plate was a yellowy mass--were those the 'eggs'? And two slices of toast. Ana knew what that was; she had had 'toast' on a few special occasions.

She took small bites, savoring each taste separately, and then sipping the orange liquid that had come with the food. That was wonderful also--tart and cold and sweet, all at the same time.

"How do you like your breakfast?" Geri asked her.

"I have never had food like this in my life."

Geri grimaced. "I know! Why do they even bother to serve eggs here? They taste like old shoe leather."

Ana struggled to open the little packets that had come with the meal. She finally got the small gold square open and found a creamy yellow substance within. She scooped it out with her spoon and swallowed it in one gulp. Not bad, but not as tasty as the rest of the meal. She opened the other packet and found a sticky red mass. It was sweet and tangy, and much tastier than the yellow substance.

"Oh, well," Geri said, covering a burp with her hand. "I suppose that'll have to hold me 'til lunch. You can have the first shower, if you want. I'm going to close my eyes for five minutes." She lowered the back of her bed, lay down, and began snoring almost immediately.

Ana put her head back too.

Why can I not remember anything? When nothing answered, she remembered to rub her neck and repeated the question.

<Do not worry about it. Everything is the way it is supposed to be. It is all part of the Game.>

What game?

<You are the player in a very important Game. You have a mission to fulfill in order to win the Game.>

What is it?

<All will be revealed, in good time. For now, watch and learn.>

I do not understand why you cannot tell me now.

<At some point, you will remember on your own. For now, be patient. Become accustomed to your surroundings. That is your task at this time.>

It is not enough. Tell me whatever I can understand, right now!

<Very well. I will tell you your background story. Listen quietly, and I will elaborate whenever you do not understand.

<You are the child of a Colombian father and a Russian mother.>

Ana saw them in her mind as the voice spoke. Her father had dark hair, gray at the temples, and a broad smile. Her mother had waves of black hair, much like her own, and a quiet, serene look.

<You grew up in Colombia. Spanish is your native language, but you learned English from your governess. Three months ago, you came to Cleveland, rented an apartment, and opened an art studio.>

Pictures seemed to blossom in her mind's eye--the plane trip from Colombia--the cheerful apartment--the two-room art studio, the front room orderly and neat, where she sold her work, and the messy back room where she created her sculptures.

I can see it as you tell it, but I cannot really believe it is my life, she complained inwardly. It doesn't feel real.

<When you leave this place, you will see it is all just as I have said.>

When will I get out?

For the first time, SAM didn't answer her immediately. <That is difficult to predict. Do what they say. Cooperate. Say nothing about me.>

Ana frowned, unsatisfied. SAM seemed to know everything. Why would it not tell her what she needed to know? Was there any way she could trick it into revealing more than it wanted to tell?

#

Carson threw his pen down, frowning. As usual, the work on his desk was piled high, but today he couldn't seem to concentrate.

He had called the hospital earlier in the morning, hoping to hear some news about Ana Valdez. Because of the medical privacy laws, they had refused to tell him anything.

He remembered how fragile she had seemed, lying there across the curb, that frightened, bewildered look in her eyes. He'd had to restrain an urge to pick her up and cradle her in his arms, caress her back, whisper reassuringly to her until the look of fear left her face.

Smiling a little, he remembered how Jackie had insisted that Ana had floated down from the sky.

"You were asleep, Slugger," he'd told his son. "Remember how you thought you were watching a ballgame? You must have been dreaming."

A stubborn look coming into his eyes, Jackie had shaken his head. "No. I saw her. Dad! Maybe she's a ghost. Or an angel!"

But there had been nothing insubstantial, nothing phantom-like, about Ana. He could still feel her soft hand clinging to his. She was one hundred percent human woman, he was sure of it.

And does that have to knock you on your ass, just because a woman held your hand for a moment? he derided himself. The only question here is, will she sue you? That's the problem, and maybe you'd better start thinking about running interference.

A knock at the door, and Hilda stepped into his office. "All recovered from last night?" she asked, dropping into the chair across from his desk.

Carson figured her cheerful tone meant that she'd forgiven him for getting them into an accident. "I'm fine, but I'm not sure about the young woman I hit," he said. "They wouldn't tell me anything when I called the hospital."

The smile left her face as she repeated, “You called the hospital?”

He nodded. “This morning. I hope she’s okay.”

“I hope so, too.” Taking a notebook out of her purse, Hilda went on, “What are we going to do about the Sullivan kid?”

“Not sure yet. I was just writing a note to his mother.”

“I’d recommend a ten-day suspension.”

Carson frowned. “I hate suspensions. Poor students just get farther behind. There’s no point.”

Scribbling something in the notebook, Hilda said, “It’s no use coddling Kenny Sullivan. He’ll drop out the instant he turns sixteen, no matter what we do.”

“Not if I can help it.”

“I commend your dedication. But Kenny Sullivan is one we’re going to lose. I just know it.”

Carson picked up his pen and tapped it against his desk. “It’s his older brother who’s the problem. Kenny was doing so much better until his brother came home from prison.”

Hilda nodded in agreement, then changed the subject. “What about that Indians game we were talking about last night? I don’t want to disappoint Jackie.” She offered a tentative smile. “The Indians are playing at home this weekend. Should I get tickets?”

“Very nice of you, but no, thanks. Jackie and I go out of town every weekend.”

“Every weekend?”

Carson nodded. “Absolutely. We have a lot of ground to cover.” He met her green eyes directly, hoping she would get the message.

“Maybe this summer, then,” she suggested.

“Maybe.” He kept his tone unencouraging.

With a little wave, she exited his office. Carson breathed a sigh of relief.

Even if he did start dating again--which he certainly had no intention of doing--he wouldn’t choose to go out with his boss.

#

“Terrible things happen in this city every damned day.” Geri shook her head. “Just terrible.”

Ana couldn’t drag her eyes away from the television. A man had murdered his wife, called nine-one-one to report it, then killed himself. The local station had played the harrowing call. A house had caught fire on Cleveland’s west side and four people had died. A woman had been raped in a downtown parking garage.

Rape? she questioned SAM, rubbing her neck. The explanation made her gasp out loud.

She wondered why everything felt so strange and wrong. Her amnesia seemed to have given her an odd perspective on life, made everything seem new and unusual. Why were buildings constructed of flammable materials? Why was a violent, murderous man walking around untreated, until finally he killed his wife and himself? As for the rape...how could either victim or perpetrator go on living after such an occurrence?

“A woman has to be careful nowadays,” Geri went on. “Those parking garages are so dangerous. Some of them have security cameras, but half the time they don’t work. Every time I park in one, I’m afraid someone’ll jump out at me from between the cars.”

Ana had some difficulty following this. She rubbed her neck and helpfully, SAM pictured for her the sequence of events Geri had described...the dark garage full of vehicles, the man leaping out from the shadows. She bit her lip and shivered.

I am afraid to leave this place, she thought to SAM.

<You are not without defenses.>

A gray-haired black man appeared in the doorway with a wheelchair. “Geri Lawson? I’m takin’ you for your x-ray.”

Geri made a face. “How long is this gonna be? I don’t want to miss my dinner.”

He grinned. “Don’t you worry, ma’am, they’ll be sure to leave it for you.”

“Sure, sure, but it’ll get cold,” Geri grumbled as he lowered the rail of the bed and helped her into the wheelchair.

Ana’s hand hovered over the remote control for the television as Geri left the room. She had had about as much news as she could stand, for now.

<Keep watching, if you can,> SAM urged her. <You need to learn everything you can about twenty-first century society.>

Something about that wording made her cock her head alertly. Twenty-first century society? she questioned. How oddly you put that.

<Watch and learn.>

She settled back against the pillows. Tears filled her eyes as she listened to the next story about foster children who had been abused. But she forced herself to continue until they began to talk about the weather.

She was inside, so weather didn’t matter. Letting her mind drift, she thought about how the day had gone. A nurse had given her a sponge bath that morning. Lunch had followed...hot chicken and mashed potatoes, even more wonderful than the delicious breakfast. After that, a CT-scan. A frightening procedure, but a kindly nurse had assured her it was necessary. Later a genial older man had come by, explained he was her physician, listened to her chest and back with a stethoscope, and told her that the CT-scan had revealed no cranial damage. “And that’s good news,” he’d told her. “We may be able to get you out of here in the next few days.”

That was a terrifying thought.

A young man walked into the room and stood by the doorway. “Hey there, pretty lady. I hear you have amnesia.”

He was wearing blue pants, a black shirt, and a stethoscope around his neck. Another doctor, no doubt.

“Yes,” she said, lowering the sound on the television remote. “Although I have started remembering a few things.”

“Cool.” Closing the door behind him, he came farther into the room and stood by Ana’s bed, drawing the curtains. “Hey, I need to listen to your chest. I’ll help you with that gown.” He leaned over her. She turned her face away from the unpleasant odor of his breath.

Fumbling with the strings of her gown, he muttered something, sounding annoyed.

“The other doctor listened to my chest without bothering my gown,” Ana said. She didn’t like his hot fingers touching her skin.

“That’s not the way I do it.” He jerked the neck of the gown away from her shoulder. “Relax, okay?”

She tried to lie still as he put the cold stethoscope against her bare breast. He touched it to her twice while she frowned. Something wasn’t right about this. She tried to picture how the other doctor had done it. He hadn’t stared at her chest the way this man was.

“Ever had a breast exam?”

“I do not think so.”

“It’s real important.” His right hand cupped her breast, rubbing and pinching. “It’s the

way we check to see if you got a lump, know what I mean?"

Something was wrong here. All the other doctors and nurses had touched her carefully, gently, but this man was rough. His red face frightened her.

"I do not like this! Please--get away from me!" She sat up, trying to push his hand away.

"Hey, relax! I'm your doctor!" He tried to push her down again. As she struggled to sit up, he clamped a hand over her mouth. Panicking, she bit him. He snatched his hand back.

"Get out!" she shouted. She twisted around, looking for the nurse's call button, but he grabbed it and threw it to the floor.

"Shut up!" Baring his teeth at her, he lunged forward, pinning her shoulders to the bed.

#

Mrs. Greeley was dependable, Carson assured himself as he exited the elevator and looked for a sign that would direct him through the maze of hospital hallways. He hated leaving his son behind, but children weren't allowed to visit here. Anyway, Jackie would be fine with the middle-aged apartment superintendent. She'd been babysitting him since he was a year old.

"It'll just be for an hour or two," Carson had assured Mrs. Greeley. "But I think I'd better go see the lady, make sure she's doing okay."

"Take her some flowers," Mrs. Greeley had suggested. "Here, you can have this bud vase. Don't worry about it, I've got a dozen of them. There's some lovely daffs on the north side of the building. Women love getting flowers."

Not such a bad idea, Carson had thought as he followed instructions and picked the five prettiest yellow and white daffodils he found. After all, it was the least he could do after putting the poor woman in the hospital.

The hospital corridor smelled of strong disinfectant. Spotting a sign for rooms 320-330, Carson headed down the hallway. By the time he reached the middle of the corridor, his forehead was damp with perspiration. Fumbling in his pocket, he pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his brow.

Don't be such a damned wuss, he told himself. It's a hospital--so what? Deal with it.

But his steps slowed as he forced himself to keep walking toward 329. Come on! he urged himself. What if Jackie were in the hospital? You'd go every day. You can manage one damned visit.

But each step was harder than the last. He pictured himself turning and heading swiftly back to the elevator. What a relief it would be to leave this place immediately.

Go on! he ordered himself. He was outside of 329 now. The door was shut. Ana's chart was open on a small shelf to the right of the door. Putting the bud vase down on the shelf, Carson pushed his damp hair back from his forehead. Perhaps someone was treating her right now. He couldn't be expected to stick around for hours while they treated her, could he? Maybe he should leave.

He thought he heard something from within the room.

"Get away from me!"

Frowning, he moved closer.

"Hey, relax! I'm your doctor!"

"Get out!"

Carson pushed through the door. "Everything okay in here?"

The tableau inside the room froze him in shock. He took in Ana's terrified face and the young man kneeling on the bed, pinning her shoulders down.

"What the hell!" Springing forward, Carson grabbed the man by the neck of his t-shirt

and hauled him off the bed. The attacker reacted with frightening speed, turning so fast that the neck of his shirt tore in Carson's grasp. His right fist flashed forward, getting Carson in the gut. Startled, Carson let go. The man tried to dodge past him. Carson ignored the pain of the blow and tackled him.

The attacker fought like a rabid dog, scratching and biting. They rolled on the floor. Carson punched the man in the face.

Jumping down off the bed, Ana stood holding her gown around her waist, staring at them.

Carson struggled to hold the man in a headlock. Looking up, he gasped to Ana, "Use the call button!"

She bent down, fumbling under the bed, while Carson tried to keep his writhing opponent subdued. "Hold still, damn it!" he snarled, cuffing the man across the mouth.

One hand on her neck, Ana retrieved the call button. Tears rolled down on her face as she faltered, "Please--I need help."

#

"I can't watch this," Oal whispered. She ran out of the room, her hand to her mouth.

Syv's fists clenched as he heard Ana say, "Get out!"

A nano-camera, concealed in Ana's left pupil, revealed all the events of the Game to any Sibling who cared to watch. And now a savage was hurting Ana, and she was helpless to stop it, due to her blocked memory.

For the first time ever in his life, Syv felt a primitive urge to use physical violence against another human being. Leaning forward, he stared into the huge view screen. "Use your Shield, Ana!" he urged her, knowing she couldn't hear him, but unable to stop himself.

Ob, beside him, clutched his arm. "This isn't fair," Ob declared, eyes glued to the screen. "No other player has been this defenseless."

Syv nodded agreement, holding his breath as Ana's door opened. When Carson subdued Ana's attacker, Syv and Ob turned to each other, grinning.

"I never thought I would say this," Syv said, "but I could grow to like that hairy savage."

#

"You were most gracious to help me, sir." Tears still trembled on Ana's long lashes. She sat cross-legged on her hospital bed, now clad in a fresh, untorn gown.

The man who had attacked Ana was a hospital cafeteria worker who had overheard two doctors discussing Ana's case and decided to take advantage of her amnesia. The police arrived shortly after Ana's call to the nurse. Following their interviews of Ana and Carson, the officers led the cafeteria worker away in handcuffs.

"Glad I was in time to stop that guy," Carson responded, suppressing an impulse to comfort Ana by putting his arm around her shoulders. The way she was sitting, her arms wrapped around herself, her head down, revealed that she felt vulnerable and frightened still. She seemed to be trying to make herself as small as possible.

He was relieved she was well-covered again. He couldn't stop thinking about that moment when he'd looked up and seen her standing by the bed, holding her gown at her waist, her breasts exposed. She had two of the most beautiful breasts he had ever seen, perfectly round, unflawed, tipped with tiny, impertinent nipples.

He was disgusted with himself for thinking about her breasts at a time like this. What the

hell's wrong with you, Wheeler? His cheek throbbed where the attacker had gotten in a good punch. You need to go home and put some ice on that. But he made no move to leave.

"I heard you tell the cops you were starting to remember some things about your life," he said. "Happy to hear it. Must be terrifying, not to know who you are." Perhaps if he kept her talking, some of the fright would leave her face.

"I have remembered my parents," she told him. "I grew up in Colombia. My mother was Russian and my father, Colombian."

"You speak English remarkably well." Still, this didn't surprise him. He had noticed last night that there was a foreign lilt to her speech.

Ana's nurse came into the room holding a cup with a pill in it. "Your doctor ordered a tranquilizer for you. It should help you calm down."

#

Syv explained to Ob, "This was the era when doctors thought chemical means were the cure for everything. Really very primitive."

"Ana doesn't need to calm down," Ob said. "She needs to further her communications with her Game object."

Syv nodded, thinking about those five extra years of life.

#

Ana rubbed her neck, looking doubtfully at the little pink pill.

<Try to delay,> SAM urged her. <You must make the most of this opportunity.>

What opportunity? she asked SAM.

<This man is at the heart of your mission. You must try to gain his friendship.>

"I will take it later," she told the nurse. "Right now I would like to talk to my visitor."

The nurse nodded, saying, "I'll return in fifteen minutes." Coming over to Carson, she asked, "Sure you don't want to go to Emergency, Mr. Wheeler?"

"I'm fine." He waved a dismissive hand in her direction.

Ana turned her attention back to Carson, continuing their conversation. "I am glad you understand my English. My governess taught me to speak it since I was very young."

"When did you come to Ohio?"

"Three months ago. I have come here to work as an artist."

Carson leaned forward, an eager light in his eyes. "You're an artist? What kind of work do you do?"

"Small sculptures. Is it not strange?--so much is still lost to my memory, but I remember my artwork."

"I do a little art myself," Carson admitted. "For me it's just a hobby, but a very satisfying one."

"Please tell me what art you practice."

The smile on Carson's face made Ana realize her syntax hadn't been quite correct.

"I work in watercolors," he said. "Less messy than oils, and they're portable. I like to

landscapes, old barns, trees--nothing unusual. I'm just a weekend dabbler."

Ana answered, "Oh, I am sure not! Do you know, you are the first artist I have met since coming to America. Do you think we could be friends?"

Taking on a cautious expression, Carson said, "Well...you seem like a very nice young woman, but my job keeps me busy. Afraid I don't have much time for socializing."

<Do not let him leave it there,> SAM warned, and told her something to say.

"I understand," Ana said. "I have found many Americans do not like foreigners coming into their country."

Carson looked down, fiddling with his tie which was still rumpled from the fight. "No, you don't understand. I have no problem with foreigners."

"Then the situation is not clear. We are two artists and might have much in common."

Sitting up straighter, this time she spoke from the heart. "I have seen you before."

"So you said last night."

"Yes. I cannot remember where and when--but I remember you were so very sad. Perhaps you need a friend more than you know."

Carson seemed to be struck by this. Ana held her breath, waiting for his answer.

The nurse came back into the room and handed Carson an ice pack. "Here you go, sir. Hold this against your cheek." Turning to Ana, she asked, "Are you feeling well enough to see another visitor?"

Ana nodded. She couldn't imagine who else could be coming to see her in the hospital. Was this something that involved the Game?

A tall blonde woman appeared in the doorway, holding something in her hands. Her hair was pinned into a knot at the back of her head, so it took Ana a minute to recognize her as the woman who had been present at the accident scene the night before.

"Hello, I'm Hilda Cooper. How are you doing today?" Looking around the room, her gaze alighted on the earlier visitor. "Carson! What are you doing here?"

"I came to check on Miss Valdez as well."

Hilda set the plate she was holding on Ana's bedside table. The plate was heaped with irregularly shaped, brownish items, partially obscured by a transparent substance. "Here, I brought these for you. I hope you like them."

Ana examined them, unsure if the objects were to be eaten or worn. "I am honored by your graciousness."

Hilda looked startled. Carson said, "Ana just recently came here from Colombia. You may notice she has an unusual turn of phrase here and there." He stood up. "About time I got back home."

Hilda came closer to him, her fingers barely touching his rapidly discoloring cheek. "Goodness, what happened here? You look like you were in a prize fight!"

Carson frowned as though he didn't want to talk about it. "A young man who works here got fresh with Ana. I pulled him off and we got into a scuffle. No big deal."

Ana's mouth dropped open in surprise. She questioned SAM, What does he mean, no big deal? I might have been raped, if not for his action! Does he not he know that?

<I believe he knows but does not wish to boast about what he did,> SAM answered.

"Oh, Carson!" Hilda breathed, gazing into his eyes. "You mean you fought off some sort of criminal? That's so brave! You might have been hurt--I mean, stabbed or even shot!"

The fight had happened so fast that it hadn't occurred to Ana that something worse than a bruise could have happened to Carson. She rubbed her neck, thinking, He risked being hurt so that he could help me.

<Oh yes.> SAM pictured a quick scenario for her where the young man pulled a bright, pointed object out of his pocket and stabbed Carson with it.

“Look, Hilda, it’s nothing,” Carson said. “Any man would have done the same thing.”

Something about the way Hilda was staring at Carson made Ana unhappy and uncomfortable. So she spoke. “Sir, I am honored by your graciousness in coming to visit me. Perhaps I will see you again sometime.”

He came to her bedside, looking down at her with an expression she couldn’t read. “The nurse mentioned you might be released tomorrow. Got any way to get home?”

“I had not thought about it.”

He pulled a leather object out of his pants pocket. From somewhere inside he removed a white card and laid it on the bedside table. “Here you go. Call me if you need a ride.”

She smiled at him. His answering smile brought a softer, more open expression to his face. He was a handsome man, Ana decided. Handsomer than any of the workers she had seen at the hospital.

Just as Carson turned to go, Geri and a transportation aide appeared in the doorway. “Ana, are you okay?” Geri cried. “Everyone’s been gabbing about what happened! Did that mugger hurt you?”

“It was most frightening,” Ana told her. “But this man, Carson Wheeler, pulled the mugger off from me. The police took him away.”

Geri began to lament about the lax security in the hospital. Carson, slipping past the wheelchair, gave Ana a brief wave and left the room.

Hilda pulled a chair close to Ana’s bed. “You won’t mind if I talk to Ana for a few minutes alone, do you?” she asked Geri with a bright smile. Without awaiting a reply, she pulled the curtain that separated the two beds.

“I’m afraid all this is a rather poor introduction to the United States,” Hilda said, her tone sympathetic.

“My home was not like this.” Ana couldn’t remember what her home had been like, but she was quite sure this was different.

“I’ll bet. Listen, Carson and I both filled out police reports about the accident. I wanted to give you the name of my insurance company. I called them today and they said that my company and Carson’s would be equally liable, so you’ll probably need to get his company’s name, too.” She pulled a piece of paper out of her purse and laid it on the tray table next to Carson’s card. “I’m hoping you won’t go to court over this accident. Poor Carson’s had enough trouble in his life.”

“What trouble do you speak of?” Ana asked.

“Trouble with women, mostly. His first wife died of cancer. Such a tragedy. She was only thirty years old when she got sick. He married again within a few months of her death. ‘Marry in haste, repent at leisure,’ you know. There were serious problems with his second marriage.” The woman shook her head.

“Problems?” Ana asked.

“I don’t want to spread gossip,” Hilda said. “Suffice it to say that it would be a very bad idea for any young woman to get mixed up with Carson. He has--issues. Baggage.”

Baggage? Ana questioned SAM.

-<The answer is unclear. I must do more research.>

“Just keep my words in mind,” Hilda went on. “Well, Miss Valdez, I certainly hope you feel better soon.”

After Hilda left, Ana opened the curtains.

“Who were those people?” Geri asked her. “Relatives?”

“I do not believe so,” said Ana. “Carson Wheeler was driving the vehicle that hit me. That woman was with him.”

Geri nodded, making an “o” out of her mouth. “Well, if you have to get hit by a car, at least a good-looking guy was driving it. Mmm, I always was partial to blond men. Don’t tell my hubby!”

“I thought him handsome, too,” Ana admitted.

“He was a sweetie-pie to visit you.”

“That woman who came to see me--she said no young woman should get mixed up with Carson Wheeler. She said something about ‘baggage.’” Ana hoped Geri would explain.

Geri snorted. “I heard her. She probably wants him for herself.” Geri’s glance fell on the plate the woman had brought. “Cookies! Open ‘em up!”

Ana rubbed the side of her neck before she unwrapped the cookies. Geri thinks the blonde woman wants Carson Wheeler for herself, she told SAM.

<There was increased pheromone output from her when she approached Carson,> SAM reported. <Geri is correct.>

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, a psychologist came to interview Ana. SAM warned her that the session would be important. This professional and Ana’s medical doctor would meet to

determine whether Ana was fit to be released.

<You must go out into the world as soon as possible,> SAM told her. <Staying in the hospital will only delay your mission.>

So when the gray-haired woman psychologist talked with her, Ana claimed she was remembering more each day. She described her childhood in Colombia, her reasons for coming to the United States, and answered numerous questions, with SAM providing much of the information.

They spent some time discussing Ana's close call of the previous day. At last the woman told her, "I'm going to recommend that you be released from the hospital. But I'm a little concerned about your extreme naiveté."

"What do you mean?" Ana asked. "Are you saying that I must be cautious about rapists?"

"Well, all women must be cautious about rapists, since rape is a crime of violence and any woman can be a victim. I'm concerned about your sheltered upbringing. A woman with your face and figure will be approached by men frequently. You must be on your guard. Many young people from more protective cultures are confused and misled when exposed to our free-and-easy American ways."

After the psychologist left, Ana questioned SAM about her warnings.

<She meant that many men, and some women who see you, will be attracted to you and wish to engage in sexual relations.>

Ana was confused. SAM pictured various sexual positions for her.

Truly, they do that in bed? she asked. A bed like this?

<Not invariably. But a bed is used perhaps eighty percent of the time.>

I do not understand, she thought. Is it not easier and more natural to bring yourself to orgasm in solitude? Whoever heard of doing it with another person like that?

<Sexual intercourse is a major part of relating to another person in this time period, SAM explained. People choose partners who are attractive to them. Your face and figure will make you attractive to many people, just as your psychologist said.>

This time period? Ana questioned eagerly.

<Throughout much of recorded time,> SAM amended. <But you must be careful. Sexual intercourse is ringed with taboos. You must not engage in it with a person too much older or younger than yourself, or a person who is already married, or a person who is closely related to you. If you break these taboos, it could be disastrous.>

I do not see why I have to involve myself in sexual relations at all, Ana thought.

<You will find this is a vital part of your mission.>

Ana shrugged. She considered each person she had met.

<Your doctor is married. Your psychologist is outside your age range. Geri's husband is married.>

Geri's husband is very attractive to me, Ana thought back. She had met him last night when he came to visit Geri. He was the first man she'd seen here who had a totally bald head. Something about that was greatly appealing to her.

<If you wish to remain friendly with Geri, you must not show that you find her husband attractive.>

Then what about Carson Wheeler? Would it be wrong to have sexual relations with him, when another woman wants him?

<No. In fact, if you could convince him to have sexual relations with you, it would greatly help your mission.>

Ana decided not to think about it anymore. She needed to get out of the hospital, establish a daily routine, and perhaps convince SAM to tell her more about her mysterious mission before she engaged in anything as outlandish as sexual relations with another person.

And yet the subject came up again late that afternoon, when the nurse brought Geri's mail. She ripped open a pink envelope, giggled, and passed the card to Ana. "Look at the darling card my hubby sent!"

The front of the card showed a sad-looking man sitting up in bed. A white cloud over his head contained the following words:

SWEETHEART!

When you're not here, I'm lonely and sad

Inside the card, the man looked happy now, sitting up in bed with a woman beside him, embracing him. The wording had changed in the white cloud:

So get well soon and make me glad!

Geri smiled. "Fred's always been good at picking cards."

Ana scrutinized the card. "Does this mean Fred wishes to have sexual intercourse with you?"

Geri's brows snapped together. "What kind of a question is that?"

"Please forgive me," Ana said. "I did not mean to bring up a taboo subject. I am simply trying to understand the ways of America."

"Well...I can see you didn't mean any harm." Geri took the card back from Ana. "I guess they are in bed, aren't they? So maybe you're right--Fred's got sex on the brain."

"This is all very confusing to me," Ana told her. "How did you and Fred decide that you wanted--" she hesitated, fearful of offending again.

"How did we decide that we wanted to be together?"

Ana nodded.

Geri put her head back against the pillow, smiling to herself. "Me and Fred met in high school. He asked me to a dance and when he brought me home, he gave me the nicest kiss! I couldn't stop thinking about it all night."

Ana kept her hand on her neck and SAM tried to keep up with this as Geri talked. The images went by so quickly that it was hard for Ana to understand exactly what Geri was saying. At the end, SAM showed her an intense, mouth-to-mouth connection.

"Kissing is pleasurable, then?"

"You've never been kissed?" Geri sounded astonished.

"On the cheek."

"My goodness! Were the men blind where you come from?"

"I was never allowed to meet many people, outside my own family. Will you tell me more about you and Fred?"

"Well, we were together all that summer, then in senior year we decided to go steady. Fred and me, we went to senior prom together, and afterwards he got us a motel room. It was so romantic I gave in. But then I felt so guilty about it--that's the way I was raised, you know--so I cut him off. Poor Fred, he was just wild to do it again. So finally we got engaged and then it was okay. We got married that fall."

Ana's head was in a whirl as she strained to follow this. "So you and Fred got married because you wanted to have sexual relations?"

Geri laughed uncomfortably. "Isn't that why most people get married?"

"I do not know."

"We were young and in love and horny," Geri told her. "Thank goodness I didn't get knocked up! My dad would have killed me."

Ana digested this in silence. What is she talking about, 'knocked up'? she questioned SAM.

SAM answered with a three-minute lecture on how eggs were fertilized, embryos formed, and babies were born. Bewildered, Ana tried to assimilate this strange information. Somehow she had been quite sure that babies grew in neat rows in artificial uteri, where they were assured of a stress-free environment and perfect nutrition.

Does this mean I could get "knocked up"? she asked, horrified at the thought of another creature growing inside her body.

<No. Although you are in other ways a fully functioning twenty-first century woman, your fertility has been permanently halted.>

Ana sighed with relief.

#

Carson didn't know whether to be happy or annoyed when the call came in the late afternoon, before he'd had a chance to start dinner.

"Get your jacket," he told Jackie. "We're going to drive down to the hospital. I told the lady I hit that I'd give her a ride home."

"Okay. Hey, Dad? Can we stop at the drugstore later? I saved some of my allowance for baseball cards."

"Sure. Maybe I'll buy you a pack myself," Carson told him.

"Cool!"

As he drove his old Ford Escort down Mayfield Hill to University Hospital, Carson was surprised at his own good mood as he whistled along with the radio. Jackie stared at him. "Wow, Dad, you're good!" He pursed his lips in imitation of Carson and tried to whistle too, but all that came out was a thin, wavery sound.

Carson grinned as Jackie frowned in frustration. "Don't worry, Jackie. I couldn't whistle when I was your age, either."

As they had arranged when she telephoned him, Carson called Ana's room on his cell phone and told her he'd arrived at the hospital. Pulling up at the hospital entrance on Cornell Road, he settled back to wait.

"Dad? How long are we going to be here? I'm hungry."

Carson felt in his pockets, wishing he'd thought to bring a snack for Jackie. "Want some gum?"

"No, I want real food. Can we get McDonalds?"

"I'll make you a hamburger when we get home."

"I want a Happy Meal. With a toy."

It was no use yelling at a hungry, whining child. Carson tried to think of something to distract him. "Come up to the front seat, Slugger, and we'll talk about the Indians until Miss Valdez gets here."

“Okay!” Jackie said, brightening.

A good twenty minutes passed before Ana appeared in a wheelchair, accompanied by a perky transportation aide. Ana was clad in the same purple and gold sundress she had been wearing when the car hit her. The low-cut bodice revealed quite a bit of enticing cleavage, but all Carson could think about was that she had to be freezing. Why hadn't one of the nurses thought to lend her a sweater? Getting out of the car, he grabbed his jacket from the back seat.

Jackie returned to the back seat and belted himself in. “Aren't you cold?” he asked, looking wide-eyed at Ana.

“Jackie! Manners!” Carson offered his hand to help Ana out of the wheelchair. “Here you go,” he added, giving her the jacket. “I'm sure this will be too big for you, but you can hang it around your shoulders if you're chilly.”

“Thank you,” she responded. Carson felt a pang of disappointment. Since he'd seen her last, she'd picked up the American term; he rather missed the way she'd said, “I am honored by your graciousness,” with its foreign lilt.

“This is my son, Jackie,” Carson said. “Jackie, this is Miss Valdez. She lives over in B building.”

“Hi,” Jackie said, waving his hand to her. “You're lucky 'cause you live next door to the pool. But it doesn't open for twenty-six days.”

Carson fastened his seat belt, then turned to Ana with a smile. “Sorry, but the car doesn't move until you belt up. That's one of my rules.”

Ana looked confused, so Carson reached over and showed her how to bring the belt down from the right. That brought him close enough to get an intoxicating whiff of her floral scent.

He drove up the hill, determined not to pay attention to the woman beside him. He still wasn't sure why he had offered her the ride after side-stepping her offer of friendship. It had something to do with showing Hilda she didn't own him. If there was another reason, he didn't want to admit it, even to himself.

When he glanced at Ana from the corner of his eye, he could hardly believe how lovely she was. If she'd been programmed for that particular purpose, she couldn't look more like his ideal woman. She bore a faint resemblance to Elena, although his first wife's hair had been dark brown instead of Ana's lustrous black. And Elena had been much more slender, especially on top. The way the seatbelt bisected Ana's chest emphasized her abundant breasts. “Lift and separate,” as the old brassiere commercial used to say. He could just imagine the weight and warmth of them, filling his hands...resolutely, he told himself to keep his eyes on the road.

“Miss Valdez, what do you think of the Indians this year?” Jackie asked.

Rubbing her neck, she said, “Were the Indians not moved to reservations in the west? I thought there were no tribes left in Ohio.”

Jackie giggled. “Not those Indians! I mean the Cleveland Indians. The ones that play baseball. Do you think they can win the World Series?”

“Oh! The Cleveland Indians! No. They will not win the World Series until 2025.” As Carson turned to look at her, startled, she added, “Probably. I mean, no one can say for certain.”

Jackie said, “Oh, I'll bet they'll win it before that. That's too long to wait.” As they drove through Cleveland Heights, Jackie went on, “Hey, Dad! I'll bet Miss Valdez would like to go to McDonalds. Aren't you hungry, Miss Valdez?”

“Yes, I am. I was hoping you would allow me to take you to dinner.” She touched Carson's arm. “I am greatly in your debt, not only for the transportation, but for what you did yesterday. Would you let me treat you to a meal?”

Carson was about to refuse. At this inopportune moment, his stomach rumbled. Jackie bounced up and down on his seat. “Dad, I heard that! You’re hungry, too!”

“I guess my stomach answered for me,” Carson admitted. “Where would you like to take us?”

“I am unfamiliar with restaurants,” Ana said. “You and your offspring may decide our destination.”

#

They chose the Denny’s on Wilson Mills Road, because, Carson said, it was kid-friendly and reasonably priced.

<Everything is going quite well,> SAM told Ana as the small group walked through the parking lot. <Remember, it is essential that you win the child’s affection. Carson Wheeler will never remain friendly with a person whom his child dislikes.>

All very well for you to say, Ana responded silently. I know nothing about children.

<Watch and learn.>

I am so tired of hearing you say that! she told SAM.

The noise level was high as they entered Denny’s. People were talking and laughing, the cash register gave forth an electronic trill, and two little girls chattered as they played at a machine filled with stuffed animals. For just a moment, Ana felt frightened by the number of closely packed people. Then she took a long whiff of the delicious aromas permeating the restaurant. From her days in the hospital, she was able to identify some of them...rich dark coffee, fried eggs, and a deeper, almost intoxicating smell of cooked meats.

The hostess led them to a table with four chairs. Ana looked carefully at the items on the table. There were glass containers, one holding white grains and the other holding black grains. A bottle of something called “Ketchup.” Pink and blue paper packets. And long plastic pamphlets.

<Those are menus,> SAM explained. <They indicate the food available, and their prices.>

Carson handed them each a menu. Ana read through it and examined the many pictures, momentarily overwhelmed. How could anyone choose from this vast array?

The waitress came to take their order. “I have not finished reading the menu yet,” Ana said. “Please go ahead.”

Jackie ordered a hot dog and Carson chose a cheeseburger.

Finally, on the back of the menu, Ana spotted something that had been her favorite thing to eat in the hospital. “I will have the ice cream sampler,” she said, then was dismayed when Carson looked surprised. “Have I chosen wrongly?” she asked.

“If you want ice cream, that’s fine. But most people eat an entrée first.”

“Thank you for enlightening me.” She turned back to the waitress. “I will have a cheeseburger first, and then the ice cream sampler.”

“Sure,” the blonde teenager answered. “I’ll bring your water in a minute.”

As soon as she was gone, Jackie pushed off from the floor with his foot and spun the chair around. “Look at me go!” he exclaimed. “This is great!”

“Jackie!” Carson warned, but as he was speaking, Ana spun her chair too. Jackie burst into delighted laughter and Carson smiled.

“What an unusual sensation,” Ana said. The room was still spinning although her chair had stopped.

<Try to get Carson Wheeler to talk about himself,> SAM urged her. <All primitive humans enjoy that more than anything else.>

Ana frowned, thinking over SAM's advice. Something about it seemed deeply wrong to her. I will not violate taboos by asking about his life? she wondered. It seemed to her that wherever she had come from, it was considered wrong to ask about people's private lives.

<Avoid topics pertaining to sexual intercourse,> SAM said. <Other topics are fine.>

You are telling me to have sexual intercourse with him but not to talk about it?

<I will tell you when the time is right to speak of it.>

"Okay, you two, no more chair-spinning," said Carson. "Jackie, put your napkin on your lap." He had already done that with his own. Hastily, Ana did the same.

"Tell me all about yourself, sir." Ana looked into his gray eyes.

"Please, just call me Carson. And I'll call you Ana, if that's okay?"

"That is my name, yes?"

He nodded. "Much more friendly that way." He drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "Okay, so you want to hear about me. Well, there isn't much to say. I grew up around here with my parents and my older sister. Went to Bowling Green, met my wife there--Elena, Jackie's mother--and we both became teachers."

The teenage waitress returned with water for each of them. "Here you go!" she said, handing it out. As she leaned over Carson, she put her hand on his shoulder. "Is there anything else I can get you, sir?"

"No, we're good," Carson answered. "Unless--Ana, do you need anything?"

Ana did not like the way the waitress was breathing down Carson's neck. Silently, she told SAM, The waitress is leaning on Carson. Her secondary sex characteristics are touching his back. Does she want to have sexual intercourse with him?

<I do not sense heightened pheromones from her,> SAM answered.

"I would like to drink coffee," Ana answered.

"Regular or decaf?" the waitress asked.

"Regular. May I ask, why are you touching Carson like that?"

"Sorry." Giving Ana a strange look, the waitress whisked herself away.

Carson had a slight smile on his face. "They do that to get a bigger tip."

"I do not understand."

"A pretty young girl thinks if she touches a male customer, he will give her more money at the end of the meal."

"But I am paying for the meal."

"Yes." Carson's smile widened. "So she miscalculated. She's being nice to the wrong person." He took a sip of water. "Anyway, I taught high-school math and my wife taught second grade, at least until she got sick. She died three years ago. Jackie and I had to learn to do a lot of things that Elena had always taken care of, like the cooking--"

Jackie tugged at Carson's sleeve. "Dad, you forgot about Elizabeth!"

Carson looked at his son with an expression that puzzled Ana. He blinked a few times and then went on, his voice strained, "No, Jackie, I never forget Elizabeth. Before she got sick, Elena was pregnant. We found out while she was carrying Elizabeth that she had breast cancer. Elizabeth was born healthy, but Elena died two months after giving birth to her.

"Anyway, then I got married again, but it didn't work out." Looking down at the table, Carson picked up his knife and moved it away from his fork.

Ana waited for him to continue, but his lips were tightly closed. "Why did it not work

out?" she asked.

Pulling his wallet out of his pocket, Carson handed Jackie a dollar. "Why don't you try that machine over by the cash register? Don't go outside for any reason--and I want to be able to see you at all times."

"Thanks!" Jackie grabbed the bill and hurried off. Turning his chair slightly to face the front of the restaurant, Carson continued, "It's hard for one person to say why a marriage doesn't work out. I could say one thing and my second wife, Gillian, could tell you a whole other story...anyway, one day she left. And she took my daughter with her." His brows drew together. "I've told this story hundreds of times. I tell it to everyone, just in case someone's seen Gillian and Elizabeth. But it never gets any easier to talk about."

"She took your offspring," Ana repeated. "Why?"

"She'd taken care of her since she was born. She was attached to her." Carson frowned. "At least I hope that was the reason."

"What do you mean?"

"There are people who buy children. People who can't have their own. That's my worst nightmare--that she took her and sold her to some other family. So even if Gillian is found, maybe Elizabeth won't be with her."

"Do you really believe that?"

He shook his head. "No, it's just a bad thought that comes sometimes...no, Gillian wouldn't stoop that low. She was a nurse--took care of Elena while she was dying, which is how I met her. A nurse wouldn't sell a child. I have to believe that."

The distress in his voice gave Ana a strange feeling. She wanted to do or say something to make him feel better. "It seems most logical to me that she would take Elizabeth only because she liked her."

Carson's voice was gruff as he asked, "Want to see Elizabeth's picture?"

"Yes, you will please show it to me."

Flipping open his wallet, Carson went through the pictures and then held out the wallet to Ana. She looked down to see a photograph of a pretty, dark-haired child with huge black eyes and a big smile. "She resembles your offspring Jackie," Ana commented.

"Yes. They both look like Elena." Returning his wallet to his pocket, Carson went on, "After Gillian left, I hired a detective agency to search for her. So far they haven't had any luck."

"How do they search?"

Sounding discouraged, Carson said, "Since Gillian was a nurse, they keep track of the nurses who renew their registration in Ohio and certain other states. I don't know if it will ever pan out. They've put out missing children flyers, too, but I don't hold out much hope for that. There are so many missing children. People don't pay much attention to their pictures anymore." He raked a hand through his hair. "You know, grieving for Elena was tough...but at least I'm not worried about her. She's dead, she's in heaven--I truly believe that. But I worry about Elizabeth. I think about her all the time, wondering if she's happy. Is she getting enough to eat? Is she healthy?"

For the first time, it dawned on Ana that when people raised their offspring, the way Carson did, they loved them. It was the same kind of feeling she herself might feel for...she couldn't think of their names, but she knew there had been people in the past. She remembered a dark-eyed man with a big grin and a trio of pretty, flat-chested women, whom she loved very much.

Who am I thinking of? she asked SAM. These are not my Colombian family.

<Do not think about them now. Say something soothing to Carson. He is becoming too agitated.>

“You told me that Gillian was a nurse. In the hospital, the nurses were wonderful. They took very good care of me,” Ana offered.

Carson’s expression lightened. “Yes. Gillian was great with Elizabeth. That was one of the reasons I remarried so soon, after Elena died.” He sighed. “I’ve got to keep telling myself that, so I don’t go crazy.”

“You must miss Elizabeth very much,” Ana said quietly.

He nodded. “Jackie and I do everything we can, but it never seems like enough.”

“What do you do?” she asked.

“We think that Gillian and Elizabeth went east. The detectives were able to track them as far as the Pennsylvania border. So now we visit playgrounds on the weekends. I talk to the parents and Jackie talks to the kids. We show them computer-generated pictures of Elizabeth as a three-year-old and ask if anyone’s seen her.”

Ana thought about the many thousands of people who lived in every city in this crowded country. “But that must be like looking for one particular grain of wheat in a huge silo.” She heard the distress in her own voice and gazed down at the table. How could Carson hope to find his own child among so many?

“I know it’s a long shot, but it’s better than sitting around doing nothing.” He stroked his short beard thoughtfully. “I’ll never forget the day when I came home and found they were gone. Worst day of my life.” He seemed to think about that for a moment, then nodded.

“Yeah--even worse than when my wife died, because that was expected.”

“How I wish I could help,” Ana said.

He looked deeply into her eyes, as though measuring her sincerity. “You’ve listened very patiently. That’s something.”

The waitress walked by with a tray full of food. To Ana’s disappointment, it was not for their table, but she mentioned as she walked by, “Yours will be up in a jiffy!”

Ana rubbed her neck. SAM told her, <Jiffy is a brand of peanut extract known as “peanut butter,”> which didn’t seem to fit the context.

“What is a ‘jiffy’?” she asked Carson.

“Slang term for ‘very soon now,’” he told her. “I’d better go fetch my ‘offspring,’ if you don’t mind waiting alone for a minute.”

“I will get him,” Ana said, curious to see what Jackie was doing at the front of the restaurant.

Carson gave her a close look and for a moment Ana thought he was about to refuse. “Okay, go ahead,” he answered, waving a hand in Jackie’s direction.

Ana walked up to the front of the restaurant. She glanced back once. Carson was watching from his seat fifteen feet away.

Jackie stood at the toy machine, his hand on a big red lever that controlled a metal claw. As Ana observed his movements, the metal claw lowered, attempted to grasp one of the stuffed animals, and closed on air. The hum of the machine ceased.

“Darn it!” Jackie said. He kicked the machine, then glanced at the cashier, who paid no attention. “Stupid old thing!”

“The waitress said that dinner will come very soon now,” Ana told him.

“They always say that.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out four more quarters. “See that bobblehead? I want that.”

Ana watched as he put the money in the machine. Lights lit, music played, and Jackie put his hand on the lever again.

Is it even possible to obtain the toy? Ana asked SAM doubtfully.

<Children's reflexes are not often good enough to achieve the objective,> SAM said.

<An adult could do it with the proper guidance.>

This time the machine's claw closed on the bobblehead, but when the claw tried to go upward, the figure fell back and once again the claw returned empty.

"Let me make the attempt," Ana said.

"These are my last quarters," Jackie said, taking them out of his pocket.

With one hand on her neck and the other on the lever, Ana pored all of her concentration onto the metal claw. Time seemed to slow, then stop, as she moved the lever and guided the claw down. SAM whispered in her mind, telling her the exact second to make tiny adjustments to the lever. Smoothly, the claw grasped the figure, lifted it up, and put it into the chute.

"Good one!" Jackie cried. "You got it! You got it!" Opening the chute, he grabbed the little bobblehead figure. "Thanks, Miss Valdez!"

As they returned to the table, Jackie showed his father the figure. "Look, Dad, it's Michael Jordan! Miss Valdez got him for me! Man, she's got super reflexes!"

Ana saw their food had arrived. Carson's cheeseburger was as untouched as her own. "Why did you not start eating?" she asked. "Is there something incorrect with the food?"

"Just waiting for you two," he said.

She nodded, filing away the remark in the back of her mind. So, one did not start eating until all were present.

Carson took the bottle labeled "Ketchup." Removing the top bun from his cheeseburger, he poured some onto the meat patty. "Want some?" he asked, offering the bottle to Ana.

She tried to mimic his exact movements as she added ketchup to her own cheeseburger. Observing that Jackie also put ketchup on his hot dog, Ana saw that every table in the restaurant held such a container.

The cheeseburger was better than anything she had eaten in the hospital. The bun was soft and warm, the meat patty tender and juicy, and the ketchup somehow added a tangy, satisfying taste to the meal. She had never been given ketchup at the hospital. Perhaps it was something that was available only in this restaurant.

After they finished their entrees, Carson ordered apple pie and Jackie wanted chocolate ice cream. The waitress brought their desserts, including the ice cream sampler that Ana had ordered earlier.

Picking up the bottle, Ana applied ketchup liberally to the ice cream, looking up only when she noticed Jackie and Carson staring at her.

"Have I committed a wrongdoing?" Ana asked.

"Ketchup on ice cream? Yuck!" Jackie answered.

Carson raised his eyebrows. "Most Americans wouldn't care for the combination. But you go right ahead if you enjoy it."

How can I possibly keep track of so many rules and taboos? Ana silently questioned SAM. What is wrong with ketchup on ice cream? It tastes wonderful!

<You are doing very well,> SAM assured her. <If anyone questions you, just tell them that is how it is done in Colombia. Most Americans are wholly ignorant about other countries.>

When the waitress brought the bill, Ana filled out the credit slip carefully, with SAM's silent help. It felt strange to write out her long two-word name. Somehow that last name,

“Valdez,” never seemed to be part of her. She supposed it was the amnesia that made it feel so unfamiliar.

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As they drove back to their apartment complex, Carson was struck by how much the evening had seemed like a normal family outing. Even though it had been painful to talk about Elena and Elizabeth, somehow he felt better for doing so. At school he couldn't maintain friendships with the teachers, since he supervised them. He rarely saw his sister, since she always nagged him. Really, his only adult friend was Mrs. Greeley--a nice older lady, but not someone he could have any kind of intellectual friendship with.

This young woman needed a friend, that was clear. Between her foreignness and her amnesia, she was like a kitten wandering through a jungle. Fate had brought them together. Perhaps it was a sign to him that he needed to reach out and help her. Just for a few weeks, until she got her bearings. Perhaps it was his duty to be her friend.

He smiled as he remembered how she had spun her chair, just to make Jackie laugh. He could imagine Elena doing something like that. She'd had just that kind of playfulness about her.

There was something about this young woman that drew him, something that went far beyond the physical. She'd seemed concerned as he'd talked about Elizabeth. He'd heard the sympathy in her voice, as though she truly understood his pain when he spoke of the kidnapping.

He looked into the rear-view mirror, compelled as always to make sure Jackie was safe. His son leaned forward, staring at Ana, his dark brows drawn together.

“What's the matter, Slugger?” Carson asked him. “You look like you're trying to figure out a story problem in math.”

“Miss Valdez, I think I know about you,” Jackie said, his tone accusing. He began to count off the points on his fingers. “One, I saw you come down from the sky. Two, you don't remember anything. Three, you have super reflexes. You must be an alien!”