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## **Imaginary Children**

By Janet Stilson

There was no way I could reveal my state of sinking distress as I sailed toward Victory Star, the second largest media corporation in the world. Tiny paparazzi drones zinged around me like mosquitoes, taking in my skirt, which shimmered with an ocean video in gray and green. They all knew I was Petra Cardinale, President of Entertainment and Information at Victory.

I was one of the key people in charge of the corporation's vast holdings. It was home to nearly 400 studios for holographic productions and distributed thousands of series and games. The whole content portfolio was served up in 300 different languages all over the world and some outposts in space.

As my elevator soared up some 200 floors to my office suite, I maintained a façade of calm authority for all the tiny surveillance cameras in the elevator's walls. And that's the way I started my first meeting of the day, with Rico Reingold, before turning into a mess.

Rico's long nose gave an imperial twist to an otherwise rubbery face. And his thinning hair was swooped up in front like a naked hope that no one would notice he was well over 50. As Executive Vice President of Creative Technology, he was always dreaming up new ways for Victory to make money.

Over the years, Rico and I had pulled so many all-nighters together, working on one Victory project or another. We'd drunk each other under the table in earlier years and squared off on the racquetball court at least once a week. He was a pal, and a source of seemingly endless inventions.

I'd maintained my cool when Rico showed me a holograph of a little robot that looked like a Koala bear from the chest up, and a silver-winged bird down below.

"I call it a Lamadoo, a pet bot for kids," he said, in that hickory smoked voice of his. He pulled out another, half giraffe and half silver fish. "This is my fave. I call him Corky."

"Hmmm. I wish there was something more to them," I said.

A flicker of resentment came and went on Rico's face. "It took a long time to develop those pets." He talked excitedly about all the Lamadoo animal mashups. There were 60 altogether, and we played with an idea for a gameshow spinoff.

It was so easy to imagine a little boy or girl playing for hours with a bot like Corky. My sight grew all swimmy, thinking about it. "Kids will love them."

"Hey, hey. Why the tears?" Rico said.

It took a little more prodding on his part before I blurted everything out in a helpless torrent. Earlier that day, I'd visited my doctor, Emma Ludson, and learned that the scans she'd taken of my body the week before had predicted that my reproductive system was shutting down. I was aging out, and there were only two months for me to conceive a child, if I wanted to carry one in my own womb.

"Didn't she order some sperm for you?" Rico asked.

"Yes, but apparently there's a huge wait list. She doesn't know when she'll get some in."

"Shit. Why don't you have her freeze up some eggs. She can find a mule."

"No. I really want to carry a baby myself."

"Can't you just go old school?"

I let out a laugh. None of my male friends had sperm that would conceive healthy children the old-fashioned way, including Rico. He'd let out that little fact a few months before. Most men produced irregular sperm these days, which was why so many people relied on the sperm banks. And as for the ultimate prize – a passionate romance with someone who had the right little squiggles – that just hadn't worked out.

Every prospect had dried up.

Sure, there were online mating services. They were all so sleazy. Couldn't trust the potential sperm suppliers to tell the truth about their "goods" at all.

Rico knew better than to suggest that I adopt children from the lower class. It was frowned upon in my world of Elites. And as much as I despised the way my peers in the

upper ranks looked down on the poverty-stricken masses, claiming their genes were inferior, I couldn't oppose them. Adoption was out of the question if I wanted to maintain my standing in one of the most powerful companies on the planet. People got fired for actions like that. Someday I wanted to help change the public perception. But I needed to climb even higher up the corporate ladder for that.

An odd light washed over Rico's face, almost as if I'd told him something cheery.

"Am I amusing you?" I asked.

"No, no. It's just—well, the funny thing is, I've been working on a little project from home. A personal experiment for women that are in just your situation."

"What kind of experiment?"

"Too early to talk about."

"Can't hurt to just tell me."

"Well, it has to do with all the data hovering around us—the basic background stuff like our university grades, personal passions, what we ate for breakfast last Saturday." He paused, as if he was having second thoughts.

"And?"

"Promise you won't laugh."

"Not in front of you."

"Guess that's something. Women insert a little computer chip under the skin of their arm, and the chip compares their personal information with data about the men around them. It even picks up medical records about the state of their sperm. Bottom line, it helps women identify men that they could fall in love with, ones with the goods to make babies without any physical or mental challenges."

"Hmm. Like a wireless love Geiger counter."

"Now don't make fun. It gets better than that. The women see holograms of children they could conceive with the right guy."

"Little ghost kids?"

"Yeah."

"That's so creepy."

"Maybe so. But if this thing works out, it's going to explode open the possibilities, for so many people." He looked so boyish with hope.

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Two days after my chat with Rico, Victory's news department started blasting out reports of a virus that was infecting sperm banks in several major cities around the world. It was shocking. So many Middle Class and Elite people were dependent on them. Almost an entire generation of would-be children might be wiped out. It was a deliberate attack. Security forces all over the globe were bent on finding out what rebel group was behind it all. But nothing seemed to emerge.

I left Dr. Ludson several messages, urging her to rush her sperm search. I'd pay almost anything. But there was no reply. In a frantic state, I drove to her business, Life Creation Services, intent on making a face-to-face entreaty. But the office door was locked, and there was a near riot of people outside it, desperate to get whatever sperm was still okay.

Over the following days, journalists reported an increasing number of suicides. So many of them were women who had given up all hope of ever conceiving. A lot of people couldn't understand why someone's whole reason for living could be focused on the hope of raising some delicious little child, someone who would love them beyond all reason. There was that hope, anyway.

When Rico showed up a few days later for our regular Monday morning briefing, I said: "Tell me more about that experiment. The one with those funny children."

He smiled like he knew that was coming. Couldn't blame him. "Petra, I don't think this is for somebody like you."

"Why?"

"It's an *experiment*. It could throw your emotions way out of whack, mess with your ability to reason."

"Or not?"

"Yes, maybe there would be no problem at all. But things could go south, and I don't want to be held responsible."

As the sperm bank virus spread to the far recesses of the world, a fantasy grew inside me, that I could help myself and countless other people by taking part in Rico's experiment. And a faint hope bloomed up from the near dead: maybe I'd actually find someone that I could fall deeply in love with.

Call it desperation, madness or wild bravery. It didn't matter. I had to do this. This was my decision; Rico wasn't responsible. I made that clear to him.

He came to my apartment early one Saturday and inserted the chip with a little device that reminded me of an old-fashioned staple gun. There was a sharp click, and a little sting, like a spider bite. The cut was hardly more than an inch long.

“When am I going to start seeing the children?” I asked.

“They’ll come when they come. Stiff upper lip and all that,” he said and strode out the door.

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It took two weeks for the children to emerge. At the time, I was in my office talking with a guy from the finance department, Andiko, about my least favorite thing, the budget.

His second chin jiggled like a turkey as he warned me: “You are already six percent over budget, and —” That’s when he saw my gob-smacked face. It was clear he couldn’t see the kids, otherwise he probably would have fainted.

Controlling my excitement, I motioned at my mobile’s air screen, which was composed of nothing more than air and colored lights. I pretended that was in private mode, with a message that only I could see. “So sorry. Just picked up something that’s really urgent,” I told him. “Can we reschedule for Thursday?”

“If we must.”

“Let’s fly over to Paris for lunch. It’s so much more civilized.”

“That is not the kind of T&E we permit.”

“Oh, shut up. I’ll pay for it my—” I jumped as a second set of children appeared right in front of us, just as vivid as the first group.

“Petra? Are you alright?”

I motioned at my screen. “Another emergency. Got to bounce.”

Andiko walked right through the second set of holographs on his way out the door, making me wince. As soon as he disappeared, I called Rico.

His hello had an “I’m really busy so this better be good” tone to it. At least he didn’t bother to talk about the damned weather like he usually did.

“It’s happening,” I said.

“What?”

“You have to ask?”

“Oh right, right. On my way.”

As I waited for Rico, I studied the children near the door, scratching at the underside of my right arm where he had implanted the chip. The red cut mark was so small, and the itch was nothing, really. At least that's what I kept telling myself.

There was a boy who was so arresting. He had sunny blonde hair. My biological father, Geoffrey, had hair just like that, so long ago. The kid looked like he might be 12. Those deep-chocolate eyes seemed to say: "I know all the secret pass codes to your financial accounts, and I only stole a little."

I gasped as a stream of statistics popped into view near his left ear. Looked like he would have the aptitude to pick up foreign languages with great ease, even without learning enhancers. He also had the kind of left-brain attributes that could make him a brilliant mathematician. On the other hand, he was likely to develop leukemia.

I moved to the group of children by the conference table. There was a girl that couldn't have been more than 10 with wispy white-blond hair that was so much like my own at that age. But her eyes looked startled. They were the light bluish gray of dove wings.

Seven children over, there was an auburn-haired toddler in bunny rabbit pajamas with a sleepy sweetness. His data showed he'd be smart enough, but there was a pesky little marker indicating he might develop obsessive-compulsive disorder.

I went back over to the startle-eyed girl to read her stats. She had very high IQ and emotional intelligence as well as a great aptitude for visual artistry and communication. There were no physical problems of any kind. Correction: The girl *would* be like that, if she were conceived.

Rico rushed in my office door, suit jacket askew. He could have been a doctor on a mission to some hellhole. "How many?" he barked.

"Enough to start my own children's choir."

"Well, I'll be. You got options!"

He wanted a description of everything he couldn't see. No detail about the would-be kids was too small. He consumed my words with such a lively elation.

"Where are these men behind the visions? *Who* are they?" I asked.

Rico's face wrinkled up. "I don't know. They could be in the next room over or further away. The chip can detect possible mates in a 1,000-foot radius."

He took my pulse and checked out my eyes through a little metal device that looked like a cross between a pistol and a bent pipe as he asked me various health questions. There were no side effects at all, just an inflammation around the cut where he'd inserted the chip.

“It’ll go away,” he said, putting the instrument away.

“I just love being your personal guinea pig,” I breathed.

He laughed. “It won’t take long. You’ll see. That ol’ love lightning is gonna strike in no time at all.”

As soon as he left, I went on the hunt for the Prince Charmings who were triggering the imaginary children. Down the corridor from my office there were various middle-management types in cubicles, all glued to their work on invisible screens. No romantic buzzers were going off in my head, and no children were visible either.

On the next floor down, A-list talent tended to hang out with program producers, several of whom weren’t hard to look at. But again, there weren’t any children. Traveling up a floor above my own gave me similar results.

When I returned to my office, the startled girl was still there, so riveting to look at. Her hair was like dried grass, bleached to a silvery gold—like the fields around my childhood home in southern California. Now that the light from the windows was fading, her astonished eyes looked even more blue-toned. That’s the way mine must have looked on that day long ago when my bio dad, Geoffrey, took off.

I could still remember lying in the dried yellow grass, looking up into his face as he kissed me good-bye. My other father, Dab, looked on, devastated. “Such a little bird,” Geoffrey had said in a lilting voice. And then he hopped in a car, and his new boyfriend drove him off. That was over 40 years ago.

“I’ll never leave you. Never,” I told the scrawny girl holo. She didn’t move, but I sensed her burning back a trusting love.

“Good God. You’re going ’round the bend,” I told myself.

Just the thought of Dab made me want to call him. The painful loss of Geoffrey had bonded us deeply when I was growing up. He was still my closest confidant.

When he emerged on my air screen, he looked kind of goofy, with a big lens on his forehead. “Well, I’ll be. There’s my girl,” he said in surprise. Usually we scheduled calls in advance; he wasn’t used to me doing things on the fly.

Dab ran a bot repair shop in Temecula, CA, that was second to none, and he was in the middle of adjusting the tiny computer within a nurse bot that looked like a real battleax. He pulled off the lens and rubbed the sweat off his forehead as I described what was going on.

“Please don’t get upset,” I said.

“Kind of hard not to. What if this test goes haywire and damages you physically? It could wreck your career.”

A little spike of fear and anger shot up. “No! That will never happen. I’ll call the whole thing off if things start to go south.”

Dab shook his head. “You always run headlong into stuff.”

I was so grateful, that he loved me so much. “I’ll be careful, Dabby. I promise.”

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It felt like I was leading a double life in the weeks that followed. There was so much work at Victory, and through it all the variety of would-be daughters and sons kept growing. All told, I saw visions of around 25 sets of children in a three-week period. But the men who were triggering them remained a mystery, which was maddening. This experiment clearly needed some adjustments. But it didn’t seem like Rico had any solutions.

By then the cut in my arm was so inflamed; the kids were so distracting, and I only had two weeks left to conceive. I’d started to lose sleep, and I didn’t always handle situations in the best way. There was one meeting that was particularly embarrassing. I was with my longtime mentor, Victory’s CEO, Whit Whitman, discussing the launch of nine major esports brands and a new season of “Blast,” Victory’s top-rated space-dancing competition series.

I stifled a gasp as a row of children emerged. A plump little girl near the door was dazzlingly bright. She had such a devilish smile. But then I saw it: her intestines were hanging out of her middle. And one hand looked like a miniature cauliflower.

A cry of horror shot out of me before I could control myself.

“Petra?” Whit rumbled. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes. Absolutely,” I said brightly. I rattled on about the new marketing campaign for “Blast.” Whit seemed to like it, but there was a cool sense of observation on his face that didn’t go away.

Later that day, I explained what had happened to Rico. “I feel like an ice skater that just fell on her bum.”

“I’d better give you a checkup.”

“Yes, please. Why did I see a deformed child? I thought the chip was supposed to eliminate that sort of thing.”

He pulled out his little pipe device and looked through it into my eyes and ears. “I don’t know what happened. Probably just a one-time aberration.”

“I just can’t wrap my head around all this. I’ve seen more than two dozen lines of children since we started. How could I fall in love with so many men?”

“Most people don’t know how the ol’ love game works.”

“Do clue me in,” I said sarcastically.

“It’s kind of like shooting pool. People just happen to put one ball in the pocket rather than another because it’s more convenient. But a lot of them would be good.”

“Yes, well my proverbial balls certainly are elusive.”

Rico’s smile disappeared when he saw my wound from the chip. It was now raging with redness. “Jeez Louise! None of the medications I’ve given you are working?”

“No. Listen, this may seem mildly insane, but there’s this one little girl I’m seeing that I feel really connected to. She’d got these rather astonished eyes. I really want to know what man is triggering her.”

“Where do you see her?”

“Always in the same place. Over there.” I pointed to my steel conference table. Rico walked over to it. An odd look shadowed his face, as if someone had just splashed soup on his shirt. He pivoted back toward me and took in my questioning expression. “I just remembered. There is another salve I could give you. I’ll have one of my bots drop it off later today.” He put his little pipe device in his satchel and headed for the door.

Whit called me into his office the next day. “I see you’re sporting a new look.”

A quick glance in my mobile’s mirror showed a frazzled version of my regular self. “Oh dear. I’ve been so distracted.” I gave him an enthusiastic description of Rico’s latest pet bots, the Lamadoos, and how my team was in the middle of producing a pilot for a Lamadoo gameshow. “I’m so pumped about this.”

“Is that all that’s going on? Because you seemed, well, disturbed in that meeting the other day.”

It was awful, to realize my squeal had lingered in his mind. I tried to laugh it off, but there wasn’t a good way for me to answer the lingering “why?” in his eyes. If I told him about Rico’s experiment on me—a Victory Star president—it wouldn’t land well. Rico and I would probably both get canned.

Whit accepted my promise to pull myself together with his trademark, ever-gracious charm. But there wouldn’t be another warning. If I didn’t start acting like my normal polished self, my career trajectory could easily take a dive.

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Rico and I had just finished a game of racquetball about a week later when I dropped a bomb on him. “I’ve decided to change things up with my little man hunt.”

He bounced a ball good-humoredly, ready to be entertained by some crazy notion. “Oh, did you now?” He looked vaguely like a man in love—that tan, that relaxed way of being present and yet filled with memories too private to divulge. All of this had to do with his recent vacation, undoubtedly. He had messaged my mobile several times to make sure I was okay while he was away, never revealing what he was doing.

“Oh cripes,” I said. “There I go again. Immediately talking about my life instead of asking about you. Did you enjoy your holiday?”

“Nothing to write home about. Just chillin’ with my sister and her chillen in St. Tropez.”

I mustered a smile. “Sounds lovely.”

“Tell me about this man hunt idea.” A little spring of nervousness was tightening his face.

I glanced around to make sure we were alone, then added more honey to my voice. “Now I know you probably want to keep this experiment pure, without any other technology involved accept the chip. But I only have about a week left to get pregnant, and none of my possible mates have been identified. So I’m going to use Trilat.”

“Not if you want me to help you!”

Before I get into the battle royale that followed, here’s a little background. More formally known as Advanced Trilateration, the Trilat was a surveillance tool that could pinpoint the identity of certain unknown people. Then, if the user was inclined, the Trilat could track the targeted person by accessing government and corporate security monitoring systems. It could pull up info about past movements and—once the person’s behavior was analyzed—the system used a combination of algorithms and predictive analytics to figure out where they were likely to be at a particular moment in the future.

It was damned expensive technology. Wiped a few zeros off the end of my bank account. Learning how to use it was a bitch. But I was determined.

I smiled sweetly at Rico. “Here’s my thinking. If we use Trilat and discover that a certain man is always in close proximity when a certain imaginary child emerges, I could arrange an ‘accidental’ encounter. It could speed everything up.”

“I said no!”

I rubbed my wound. “What are you so —”

“DON’T DO THAT!”

“Jesus, Rico. Get a grip!”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But you’ve got to understand. I have to keep this experiment clean. No other tech.”

“Yes, that is undoubtedly true. But I’m down to *one week*—one week to conceive.”

“I don’t care.” He headed off the court.

Christ! The egos I had to deal with at Victory made me want to bash in my skull sometimes. “I really want your support with this,” I said meaningfully, reminding him that I was his boss. Didn’t matter that this was a private experiment.

“Let me see your arm,” he said. Nice calm voice with hot coals underneath.

“Sure.” I’d make him lighten up. Conflicts like this were so uncomfortable. He removed the bandage. The raw inflammation was about six times the size of the original half-inch cut mark.

Rico looked stunned. “It’s time to call it quits. This experiment is obviously not working.”

“But if we just used the Trilat—”

“I’d like to humor you. But that’s not going to happen.”

“*Humor me?*” My anger collected into a sharp little stinger. “I wish you’d stop lying, Rico. It’s so disrespectful.”

“What makes you think I’m doing that?”

“You couldn’t even tell me you went to some town upstate called Pompey Hollow instead of St. Tropez?” He must have some lover he didn’t want me to know about. And it embarrassed him.

Now he was beyond furious. “Did you Trilat me?”

“I was trying to learn the system. I just used you as a test case.”

His rubbery face was uglier to gaze upon than I’d ever seen. “Who the hell do you think you are, dogging my movements?”

“Who do you think you are, lying to me?” I blazed back, then lowered my voice. “We are so close to figuring out who’s triggering visions of that child, if we just use that Trilat.”

“*That* child? Oh, I get it. That girl you told me about with the funny eyes. Well, good luck with that. Because I won’t help you.” And then he was gone.

It was shocking. He was my friend. We'd never fought that way. I worked on a presentation for Victory's board of directors well into the evening. I waited for Rico to come through my door to declare a truce, call me, something!

I was in the middle of composing a little "olive branch" note to him when there was a slight movement over by the steel table. The startle-eyed girl was staring at me. Thank God! There was some speck of happiness in this day.

"Hello, little bird. Hello!" I whispered, walking across the hushed room. The child was even more haunting to look at, and I couldn't place why. I felt her trying to speak, silently telling me, "*Just wait. We'll be together soon.*"

Something out the window caught my attention: the looming façade of Nuhope Entertainment, the largest media company in the world, and Victory's ferocious rival. The memory of Rico staring out the window came back. When? *When?*

It came to me. The first time I mentioned the startle-eyed girl. That look on his face, like someone had thrown soup on him. A sudden possibility prickled up. It had never occurred to me to track the men in another building. The distances had seemed too far for the Luceel system's range. But maybe Nuhope was close enough.

Rico must have had the same revelation. He probably didn't think it was wise for me to fall in love with someone who worked for the competition. I put my mobile screen into telescope mode and surveyed the Nuhope building. In a high window opposite my own, I saw the silhouette of a man. There was a bounce to his movement, a playfulness. Then he walked away. I couldn't see him anymore.

The vision of the startle-eyed girl snuffed out like a candle. The man must be walking out of Luceel's range. I screamed in delight. Bloody hell!

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Three days later I parked my car on a desolate street in the Bronx and glided into a little dive called the Black Candy Bar. It was 2:15 AM, and I was the only customer there as the minutes ticked by. My thoughts kept pinging around: "He won't come. This is a total waste. Stop it! Relax a little. Trust a little."

I was on my second scotch at the bar when a hubbub of people pushed through the door, laughing and shouting. I felt as if someone had shot me with adrenaline. Through the muddle of conversations, a certain voice stood out, and I knew it was his. "Listen, listen, listen. That cat don' dance. He can't even ..."

Shouts for booze and laughter blocked out the rest of his words. And then I saw him through the mirror above the bar—Dove Brown. His silhouette was often visible in the Nuhope window in the late day, and the startle-eyed girl's appearance always told me when that was. I finally got the hang of the Trilat system, after a lot of impatient trial and error. And it had determined his identity quickly.

It was such a thrill. Trilat had predicted that Dove would arrive at the Black Candy Bar around 3 AM. And here he was, caught in some internal syncopation as he almost danced across the room. His loose black shirt and pants rippled around the edges, revealing a hard-toned chest and legs through long slices in the silky fabric.

“I wouldn’t throw her out of bed for eating crackers,” he was saying now. Two lovelies flanking him seemed to be caught in a dream. They had a post-teenage trash look. Their hair was caught up in high bouffant styles, apricot yellow and lime green, clothes barely covering their erogenous zones. They had to be a good 15 years younger than me.

I felt so old, suddenly, but it wasn’t surprising to see him with young things like that. He was Nuhope’s most popular news correspondent and a womanizer of the highest order, according to what I’d been able to discover.

Whenever he appeared on a newscast the viewership numbers shot up. Dove’s dashing swagger and sense of fun were incredibly magnetic. There was no doubt that he was one of the key reasons why Nuhope’s audience for news had spiked, and Victory’s had weakened. A week ago, that had rankled me to no end. Now here I was, enchanted by the root cause.

Then I saw her. The startle-eyed girl was hovering close by, looking the same as ever, but more defined. It easier now to see that her eyes were surrounded with faint shadows, like Dove’s. She had his wide mouth, but her silvery blonde hair and deep golden skin were echoes of me.

Conversations washed around Dove. “But darlin’, you should never fry fish in the nude,” he said to an artfully dressed thing.

A man shoved into a seat beside me at the bar, accidentally brushing my inflamed wound. The stabbing pain was overwhelming. I moved away discreetly, and it subsided somewhat.

The room went hush, as if some distant sound had caught everyone’s attention, then a new blast of guests rushed in the door. As Dove turned to look at them, he saw me in the mirror’s reflection. It almost seemed like he was a dog focused on a distant, irresistible sound as he walked toward me, laugh lines crinkled up.

The astonished girl was so luminous now, staring at the two of us from a distance of three spread-out hands. Maybe the pain in my arm was still shouting, but I couldn’t sense it anymore.

“Hello,” he said, drawing me into his stormy blue gaze.

“Hello.” My voice was lower than usual, so relaxed. “So tell me something.”

“Anything.”

“Have you ever fried fish in the nude?” I lingered over his every available glimpse of skin. “I don’t see any burn marks.”

He drew closer. His play-with-me mouth filled the air with the scent of bourbon. “I’ll tell you what. There’s very little I don’t do in the nude, behind closed doors. But I sure learned not to do that.”

He held me in a trance. I couldn’t breathe.

Someone at a table shouted at him. “C’mon, mate! Let’s get to it.”

Dove peeled away from me and walked over to a piano, spinning around on the stool, dribbling back and forth between two keys.

It was as if a skeleton was tickling the piano; the music was so dry and haunted. Dove’s baritone lapped out waves of delicious lonely. He diddled over the notes, building the tune in circles, opening a heavy heart as he described a bedroom pungent with the scent of sex and stale emptiness.

“*Look at me again,*” I demanded silently. But he was deep in the belly of the tune. Everyone in the room was riveted by his swaying movements—by the smallest quiver of his face.

Finally, he ripped away from the piano. His friends drained out of the club hurling funny insults at each other, and he was about to follow.

I sank over my stool, forlorn. It would be too forward to throw myself at him. “I’m sorry,” I whispered to the girl. Her frozen face seemed to say, “*I could be here, in the world. You’ve found him.*”

Okay. One more try. Dove was in the doorway when I came up to him. “How about one last smoke?” I offered him a smoking stick.

His eyes seemed bottomless. I could do breast strokes in them. “What’s your name?”

“Rachelle.” My middle name.

“Rachelle.” In his mouth the word sounded like a rare flower picked out of prickly vines. “You were letting off such a siren song all night long.”

He touched the edge of the long sleeve covering my right arm, only a few inches from my wound. A thrill surged through me. No one had ever made me feel so electric. He massaged my palm so lightly, hardly touching it at all. It was so easy to imagine what was to come. My whole being would rearrange as he kissed me with a drowsy obsession. It was going to be worth it, every second of pain and doubt, all the anger between Rico and me.

“PETRA! PETRA!” Dab’s voice barked. It was my mobile’s wake-up alarm. The recording always made me rip out of bed. Why the hell hadn’t I deactivated that?

“Petra?” Dove looked so startled, just like the girl.

“Yes. Petra Rachelle Cardinale.”

He stepped back, like he was dizzy. “Wow. The Victory prez.”

“I didn’t want you to think of me as someone in the enemy camp right away, so I used my middle name. Forgive me?”

He stumbled away. “I gotta git.”

“Wait a minute. Wait.” I trailed after him out the door into the morning glare, trying to control my panic. He swung a leg over his bike. “What are you afraid of?”

He turned back toward me. In the merciless sunlight, all the chemical enhancements that had carefully masked my age seemed to fall away under his deprecating stare. “Honey, ain’t no way I’d ever make it with you.”

I grabbed his sleeve. “Please, please,” I cried. He jerked away angrily. “Stop! We need to talk this through! I insist!” I regretted the demand as soon as it came out of my mouth.

“Insist?” His sneer was horrifying.

“No, no, no. I’m sorry. I didn’t m—”

“I’m not on your payroll, lady.” He blasted away.

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I screamed all the way home. And then, finally in bed, I tried to subdue my humiliation and get some sleep, but a niggling little thought emerged. What if Dove and Rico knew each other? Maybe that’s why Dove reacted the way he did. It seemed like pure paranoia at first, but the thought wouldn’t go away.

Pulling out my Trilat, I discovered what I’d missed. When I had tracked Rico on his upstate vacation, I was still learning the system. But now, a larger truth was in plain sight: there was a recording of Dove with Rico. They not only knew each other; they’d been on holiday together! Had Rico been bad-mouthing me?

A message from Rico pinged up on my mobile air screen. He was resigning. It didn’t seem possible to be angrier than I already was. But this was a personal record.

I made it to Victory in record time. Rico was packing up his belongings when I sailed into his office. He looked so startled, like I was a ghoul. A glance in the mirror by

his door revealed that I'd completely forgotten to fix myself up. My cosmetics from last night were faded and smeared, and my hair might qualify me for a witch's coven.

"What's on your mind?" he asked.

"Aren't you the funny one. What's on my mind? For starters, why did you tell Dove Brown to stay away from me?"

Something shifted on his face. I'd guessed right. "Okay. I mentioned you once, and he seemed interested. So maybe I told him a few things to make him think meeting you wasn't such a hot idea. But I was doing you a favor. He'd only break your heart. Dove Brown's a rake, and there's no changing that."

The sting of that nearly crippled me. But I rallied enough to say, "Let me make one thing clear. No matter where you go, I'll be tracking you and all you do."

"*All I do?*"

A black void in his eyes cleared away just long enough for me to grasp the ugliness I'd never seen before. Tears distorted my view of him. "Why do you hate me?" I asked.

"Jesus."

"Poor little Rico. Not brave enough to tell the truth."

That made him snap. "You should never have been my boss. What the hell was Whit Williams thinking, to put me under your thumb? You were in charge of talent. You didn't know jack shit about what I was doing! But he could never see that. He could never see how I should have been in charge."

"You? In charge? What a novel idea."

"I tried to be your friend. I tried to listen to your bitching and moaning about how you couldn't get pregnant."

"So you decided to make me your test rat."

"It wasn't like that."

"Then what was it like?"

"You wanted in on that experiment. *Demanded* it," he sneered. "The chip is flawed. Badly. And now you're on your own. Get it out of your arm." Rico strode to the door.

Somehow, I made it to my office. Everyone along the way stared at me. Security cameras, all over the building, were capturing my bedraggled appearance and insane grief. I'd lost any chance to build a relationship with Dove, lost the startled girl, lost my

impression that Rico and I were actually friends. And if I didn't watch out, I'd lose my job.

Whit could not be pleased about the resignation of his key scientific executive. Rico had informed Whit of his eminent departure in the same message he sent me. How long would it take Whit to see the camera feeds of my disheveled, tragic state?

If I was ever going to get through this day, I had to get some rest. There was a big press conference at 4 PM, and I couldn't miss it. I sent a note to my assistant and asked her to pick up a few things for me, then tried to nod off. My arm's inflammation was now so intense, and my mind so troubled. Sleep proved impossible.

\* \* \*

There were enough wardrobe and makeup supplies in the office to make me look presentable. I was in the middle of all that when Whit called.

"I'll get someone else to front the press conference. You're in no shape," he said, erasing any doubt that he knew about my bizarre behavior earlier that day.

"I can do this. There won't be any embarrassments."

He didn't respond right away. "Alright. But then we need to consider your future options."

"Right." A demotion? Forced resignation? Leave of absence? Nothing positive, I was sure. The possibilities kept rotating through my head as I made my way down to the auditorium for the press event. It was tied to the launch of "Lama-Who?" the gameshow Rico and I had developed, in which celebrities became "Lamadoo" holographs – half woman/half shark, half man/half leopard, that sort of thing. Then they faced off in contests to see who fought the hardest or raced the fastest or ... the list of competitive "est's" went on and on.

The event's producer gave me the high sign, and I slipped into the stage light with a smile for the crowd, then for the paparazzi drones hovering in the air above them.

Some of Victory's most popular stars followed me onto the stage and traded witticisms about how much fun it was to be half an antelope, or half a cheetah, and square off against each other. Things really couldn't have been better, until the Q&A began. We were only three questions in when I spotted the children. Standing behind the final row of seats were about 20 holographs. I looked at all the men in the audience with a feverish hope. I wanted to walk out into the crowd and find them, whomever they were. Somehow, I managed not to.

After the event, I went back to my office in a state of exhausted relief. I had managed not to embarrass myself.

A news report was playing on one of my monitors. The rebel group that had infected all the sperm banks with that awful virus had been arrested by UN forces in Antarctica. In a few months, the sperm banks would be restocked, and more women would become pregnant with healthy offspring. I was happy for them. Truly.

I left a message for Dr. Ludson, asking if there was still time enough to freeze up some of my eggs, then went over to the window. Dove must have been there, somewhere beyond what I could see in Nuhope's windows, because the startle-eyed girl suddenly emerged.

It was easy to imagine a host of scenes: Dove as my husband, making me intensely happy, but then betraying me with one woman after another. There would be terrible fights between us, with the astonished girl listening beyond our closed door.

That's when it came to me: how beloved and perfect children could be, even when the people who made them were totally unfit to live with each other. The children were all so worth loving.

On the steel table, my assistant had placed a small bag of items I'd asked her to pick up. I sterilized a surgical knife in a tiny torch flame and applied a numbing spray to my arm. It didn't hurt at all to slice open the wound. The chip came out so easily with some tweezers.

I bandaged my arm and looked at the girl one last time. My sorrowful love expanded toward her. "Go to sleep, little bird. Go to sleep," I lilted.

And with that, the imaginary child vanished forever.

THE END