

HORSE RACING

by Mary Rosenblum

Mary Rosenblum, Hugo nominee and Clarion West instructor, has published more than sixty short stories in SF, mystery, and mainstream, as well as eight novels. Her latest collection, a novel and three novelette prequels, is called *Water Rites*. It is available from Fairwood Press. The author also writes mystery novels as Mary Freeman.

They always hold the auction in Bangkok. I think the reasons are twofold. First, the sex trade there is as easy and open and as glittery as it ever has been and let's face it, more than half of the attendees are still male, never mind that a lot of women run a lot of companies these days. But more importantly, I think, the Thai people have always had a tolerance for trading in flesh that other cultures long ago renounced officially, even if they still pursue it in actuality. Perhaps the Thai are simply more pragmatic? Less inclined to lie to themselves? In any case, that lack of schizophrenic pretension seems to suit the people who arrange this affair—never mind that the Thai government has no idea that we even exist. No government does. We make very sure of that. But maybe my first guess is right and it's simply the stunningly beautiful girls who keep us coming here every year.

I do wish they could do something about the traffic, though. In every other major metropolitan area, even Mumbai, you have GPS-guided traffic control systems and mass transit that make civilized movement possible. I should know. I worked for the firm that designed the early systems, back before I became a broker. I engineered the public and political support to get those systems in place. Believe me, the support side of the project was the bigger engineering hassle, never mind the physical engineers who think it's all their numbers that make things happen.

Maybe traffic is the flip side of that Thai acceptance I was talking about. The yang to that particular ying. Sweating men and women on motorbikes dart through the snarled tangle of traffic like maniacs. Hardly any helmets and the taxi driver doesn't make any visible effort not to hit them. Maybe it's the pervasive Buddhism here ... that fatalistic willingness to perch on the back of a battered little Honda forty years old as it squirts through unpredictable traffic defying at least a couple of laws of physics. You'll just come back as something better, right? Okay, I can say that about the physics, I'm a social engineer. My harder-headed colleagues would choke, but they're not here.

The hotel our organization owns in Sukamvit looks like all the others, with a bar downstairs. In this part of town, the upstairs is for the girls. The

driver whips the taxi over with an inch to spare beside the illegally parked junkers along the curb and hands me a very sophisticated chip reader. No technology lag here, never mind the cars that would be recycle-bait in a northern Chinese village. I wave my hand over it, the security connection buzzes through my forearm, and I approve the charges, verbally adding a fat tip because the driver didn't charge me for the toll on what they call an expressway from the airport. He must be working on his next life, afraid he'll come back as an insect if he doesn't score some karmic points. He says something and clasps his hands in a *wai* as I climb out of the taxi.

The bar is pretty usual for this district—a mirrored turntable with a bunch of girls on it posing in a g-string and a smile as the turntable rotates slowly. All ranges of racial profiles, I notice, as the *mamasan wai*s me in. Today's flavor of girl seems to be Semitic, although the recent Great Islamic Rising still has its effect on morality in that part of the world. Of course, they could be native Thais who simply visited one of the body shops on the strip a few blocks over. They're world class with minimum recovery time, even after extensive sculpting. The bar is dark and some of the patrons are smoking tobacco or dope ... the quiet filters suck it all up before you smell so much as a molecule. A smoking license costs way more than a liquor or drug license in most countries these days. It's one of those emotion-driven issues. I didn't work for the firm that made that happen, it was one of our rivals. But it has been a convenient socio-political distraction when necessary. All the social engineers use it at times. Start threatening to let the smokers loose and nobody pays attention to other issues. It's useful.

The *mamasan* doesn't bother to take me to a table. Like the taxi, the seemingly low technological level here is superficial only. She leases the buildings from our group and has a state of the art scanning and security system in place. She knew who I was before I hit the authentically filthy sidewalk outside, knew what hardware I'm wearing. She ushers me past the glassy-eyed tourists staring at the girls or sitting with one or two or three already. They don't pay me any attention, although the girls give me a quick look. Some of them have pretty extensive software themselves, but my security is way above any hackware they can afford. That marks me as high end and money talks. But they're discreet, just noting my features in case I show up here when they're unencumbered.

The elevator at the end of the bar only opens to the *mamasan* down here. It looks about as scruffy inside as the other elevator, the one that opens to the girls and their customers, but it doesn't open into the same upstairs floors where the rooms are.

He's sitting where he can watch both elevators, and the glassy stare doesn't fool me. He's not watching the girls. I shake my head at mamasan, saunter over, and slide in across the stained but scrupulously clean teak table top. "Mind if I join you?"

He does, but he's out of his element here and not sure what the rules are. So he gives me a strained and slightly disapproving smile. "I'm waiting for someone."

He's waiting for me, but he doesn't know that yet. "That's okay." I look up as the mamasan delivers a tall, dewy glass. The color is just right for a whiskey and soda although it's a Pears Ginger Beer, because my drink preference is of course available to the mamasan's software. You don't do intoxicants until the Auction is over, and I never drink down here. But in this day of socially acceptable drug use, alcohol has an old-fashioned nuance that makes people relax. You're not cutting edge if you're drinking booze. You're second rate, not a threat. It's okay. "Cheers," I say, making sure to use a nice clear, public-school, Mumbai accent. Well, I grew up using it, I look Indian to a white American, and it comes easy.

He mumbles something and pretends to take a sip of his Singha, which is already warm and only down a few centimeters. I nod approval, which he doesn't get, but he has relaxed a bit. I'm pegged as an Indian tourist, business class, here for the girls, and not what he's looking for. So he goes back to watching.

He's in his early twenties, Scotch-Irish-Scandinavian. Child of Vikings crossed with potato farmers. But I know all this, know far more about his ancestors than he does, most likely. He watches the new patrons who come through the door, stoned already, nervous, drooling, or a combination of all three. I watch him watch and sip my ginger beer. He looks tense. A bit angry. Defensive.

"So what made you sure?" I finally say, and I drop the Mumbai accent.

He starts as if I've stuck a pin into him. Stares at me. "What do you mean?"

I turn my hand palm up in a "you know" gesture. "That someone was carefully orchestrating your life."

I wait through the eye-blink of reaction as he reassigns me from "sex hungry tourist" to something else. Smile gently while his eyes narrow and he gathers his anger like a big, black cloak around him. Very theatrical.

“Not orchestrating. Controlling.” His lips thin. “So who the hell are you?”

“You are better than I was.” It is actually hard to admit this. “I wasn’t able to track down the actual location, just inferred that such a location had to exist within the city. So I ended up in Bangkok, but you got closer to the bull’s eye than I did.”

“Who *are* you?” Fear shows behind that cloak of anger.

“Amit Chirasaveenaprapund.” I smile gently. “Would you like to attend the Auction? I invite you as my guest.” I stand as if he has instantly agreed, bow slightly and make an ushering gesture toward the elevator. Mamasan is already on the way, her imperturbable smile in place.

He is thinking about declining, but he doesn’t have a good alternative strategy in place and ... he really wants to *know*. So when I head toward the elevator without looking back, I’m not really in doubt. But still, I’m the tiniest bit relieved when I feel his presence behind me as I step into the battered little car. That relief is revelatory, and I file it with my earlier reaction to my admission. I am a social engineer, after all. A very good one. One of the best, I can say without immodesty.

I can sense his questions, his emotion, but I don’t make eye contact and he isn’t quite sure enough of himself to spill them all out in the elevator. It’s too small, the confrontation will be too confined. The door opens and I step out and yes, I hear the soft sound of his indrawn breath behind me.

Well, it *is* impressive.

The bar and the elevator may be a bit seedy and the girls’ rooms are probably not much better, but this floor is a whole other universe. We all pay our share for the state of the art security, luxury, privacy. Nobody snoops here. Nobody.

Do you know what it takes to be able to say that, these days?

No, I don’t think you do.

I’m the last. But I wanted to give him time to show up. The others are already lounging on sofas, chairs, recliners, cushions, all upholstered in elegant silk brocades, sipping drinks or snacking from plates, platters, bowls of delicacies from a dozen cultures. I recognize everyone, but I’ve

been doing this for a long time. You never know who is going to show up at these yearly events, but the cast of serious pros is relatively small. We—the top independents, the brokers—work for a variety of clients. The smaller organizations train their own people until they realize it's not cost effective. It requires a lot of time and effort to prepare for an Auction. And consistent success requires a certain amount of ... well, talent. A waiter appears with a glass of sparkling water with lime for me (the too-sweet ginger beer was just for show) and a tall glass of cranberry juice for my guest. I watch him try not to react as he's offered his favorite beverage, but he can't quite hide the crease of paranoia around his eyes.

"Let's sit." Everyone is arranging themselves now, scooping up the last delicacy, collecting a fresh drink from the waiters. We seat ourselves in the large, open room surrounding the low, white-wood table, that is actually a holodeck. Two chairs are left vacant, toward the edge of the room at enough distance that we can talk without disturbing anyone's concentration. Everyone has noticed the new face. We settle in and instantly a small opalescent holo field shimmers to life from the interface embedded in each chair arm. He's looking around, not even trying to pretend he's not, and I can see from his reaction that he recognizes a few people. That pleases me. Nobody here is media fodder. He has done some serious homework.

"Welcome to the Auction." A woman shimmers to life above the central holodeck, very Masai, tall and lean, with a sheen of power about her that is hardly imaginary. She has been the Auctioneer for several years now. "This has been a good year and we have an excellent selection to offer you. You all know the terms of payment, you can register your bids through your field. All bids are final and irreversible." Her eye skates around the room, making contact with each of us. I smile and her eyes crinkle in response for a moment. She does not look at my guest, but on her control stage where she sits, in another room, he exists only as a glyph, with no interactive interface at all.

He is looking mildly horrified by now. But his posture is alert and relaxed. He has good control of his body language. But then, he's a highly ranked amateur at poker, which he plays for recreation. My own game is chess, but he ranks slightly higher than I do in social integration so I am not surprised at his attraction to competitive poker.

"We will begin with the Futures," says our Auctioneer. "You have received your catalogs. You have analyzed the genetic sequencing results and the pedigree profiling. We are able to offer you an excellent crop of potential this year, with sound ancestral expression in the creative spectrum as well as high scores in the psychological profiles and malleable families

that can be stabilized.”

“These are the infants.” I lean close to him so that I can keep my voice low, ignoring my guest’s slight and instantly controlled start. He has been staring at the Auctioneer. “They are under one year, healthy, test normal in all infant parameters. Their immediate relatives have expressed the sort of creativity and drive that is desirable and they score highly for compatibility with the program.” I shrug. “But one is reading a pedigree here and gambling on the gene-line. Many of these infants fail to test out. Genetic promise does not guarantee fulfillment, as animal breeders have known for millennia. Quite a few play the game, because if you’re lucky, you get a lot of potential for a relatively small investment. It’s a favorite with the smaller entities and the start-ups, of course.” I lift one shoulder in a polite shrug at his shocked expression. “Well, once the child has tested out and is clearly a prospect, the price goes way up. If the child doesn’t test out, you can void the contract and you’re only out the expenses for a few years.” I give him a mild smile. “A small and select group of specialists have evolved. They buy up Futures on spec, develop them through the initial years, then sell the child as a Started lot for a good profit once that child has tested out.”

“This first lot is particularly prime.” The Auctioneer’s voice carries an edge of excitement, but then she is a pro. “Middle class, Shanghai importer family, four successful entrepreneurs in the primary pedigree, talent on both maternal and paternal lines. First child, female. Parents score highly for family stability—but then the Chinese usually do.” Faint appreciative laughter sounds in the room, mostly from the several brokers of Chinese heritage. Numbers flicker in the field as the various players make their initial offers and the bidding starts. The Auctioneer calls the bids, her cadence increasing as the numbers rise. She likes to start with a strong prospect. It puts brokers in the right mood.

“Buy ... develop.” My guest’s voice is barely above a whisper. “Where are you getting these children? It sounds like some kind of ... livestock auction.”

“Rather like the thoroughbred auctions. Your father is a racing fan so you know what I mean. The yearlings are cheaper than the started horses, but the risk is greater.” The bidding has started and I watch the names and bidding icons flashing through my holo field. I’m not a Futures player this year—my clients are the cream of the crop now, well established and shopping for top Started prospects. I catch the eye of a waiter who replaces our drinks, even though my guest has not touched his, and leaves a plate of shrimp *hargau*, a small steamed dumpling that I am particularly

fond of. I pick up one of the dumplings with the provided chopsticks and poise it in front of my guest. "Have one." I suspect his blood sugar is low as a result of the corticosteroid spike induced by stress. The blood sugar rise will help him process all this.

He glares at the dumpling but he's still not sure of the rules and not yet willing to burn any bridges by a clear act of hostility. So he takes the dumpling awkwardly, with his fingers (I do not frown at him) and eats it. "Who buys these children?" He speaks with food still in his mouth, but his parents were working class urbanites in the city of Pittsburgh and he displays the manners he grew up with when under stress. Well, he will learn otherwise if he needs to. And he may not need to. I shrug.

"Nobody buys anyone. You should know that." I wait for the slight blush to color his cheeks. "Tell me how you guessed."

The carbohydrates in the shrimp dumpling help and he is coming to a decision about how he will deal with all this. He straightens, no longer fixed on the numbers winking in my holo field. The bidding on this first lot is, as I expected, fierce.

"It was my dad's company, first." He picks up his cranberry juice, takes a meditative swallow. "I did a study on the economic profile of the Pittsburgh manufacturing industry as my high school senior project. I had some really good teachers and they gave me a lot of help." He tilts his glass and studies the juice, frowning. "When I ran all the numbers, my dad's company shouldn't have been in business. They were a small department for a manufacturer who had shipped all the rest of the manufacturing overseas. Mostly to northern China." He shrugged. "When I asked my dad how come they hadn't been outsourced he said it was a skill thing. The company decided that it would cost too much to train unskilled workers and kept the unit in the States. But that didn't work. The numbers didn't work. When I looked at the company history, there's no way they would have kept that department. They outsourced manufacturing the moment the costs reached parity with production stateside. I didn't get it for a while. But then I got to thinking about how many good teachers I had in grade school, and in high school. And funny ... most of my grade school teachers were gone when I went back there. They'd all moved on to more upscale districts. I mean, our neighborhood was a pit back then." He shrugged. "Although it was starting to change. They shut down a big housing project and a lot of the dealers moved on." His eyes widen very slightly as he makes a connection but it would be easy to miss his reaction. Yes, I can see that he would enjoy competitive poker.

"I was really ... lucky." He finally looks me in the face. "The chips just kept falling my way. I got chosen for a couple of special programs where I met some great teachers, I aced my tests, I got a full ride to Berkeley." He has clearly made his decision. "So how much of this got made to happen?"

I check my catalogue. Plenty of Futures to go before the Started lots I want to bid on come up. He has forgotten his poker face and I have to turn away, pretend to study the flickering figures of the bidding in my holo field. I remember those feelings, as if it were yesterday, rather than nearly four decades ago. I clear my throat. "The path was made available to you." I choose my words carefully, remembering my own anger at the time. "You chose to walk the path. We merely made sure that the gates were open."

"The teachers I can guess. Bribes?" Bitterness edges his voice now. "A nice gift to Berkeley so they'd let me in? What about the housing project?"

"A little pressure on the mayor from people who had supported him in the past. Of course they were business owners and some of them belonged to our organization. The project was an eyesore, a social ulcer. It cost the city money to remove the project, but the subsequent development paid off in the long run. Urban bureaucrats rarely see beyond the horizon of their own term in office, but with a little persuasion, they can take a wider view." I make my voice quite matter of fact. "You would have been accepted into Berkeley without any interference on our part. We simply ... encouraged you now and again."

I wait him out as he looks back over the close friends, the professors, who have been there when he wavered, when he had one of those emotional crises we all suffer from. I guess we all have to go through this, those of us who figure it out. It's easier for some than for others.

"You are going to ask who we are next." I give him a patient smile.

"I was going to ask what you ... whoever the hell *you* are ... are going to do to me if I don't do whatever it is that you want me to do."

"Same question, really."

"You manipulated me." He spits the words and his face is carved with righteous anger now. "Turned me into what I am."

"Did you ever really want to do anything else?"

That stops him for a moment. "Play jazz." His eyes pierce me. "I walked out of Berkeley, played sax in the clubs for a year. I thought that's what I wanted to really do with my life."

"Why did you go back to school?"

He's honest and he stops to really think about that. He's trying to hold onto his anger, but that honesty prevents him. "I ... it ... I wasn't getting what ... I thought I would. Out of the jazz, I mean. I ... went back to think about it." He manages to recapture some of the anger. "Then I got into that internship." Accusation. "That was your doing, wasn't it?"

I nod.

"Okay. So now, after all this manipulation, what if I tell you to go to hell and go back to playing jazz?"

I shrug. "Nothing."

"Bullshit." But he can't quite hide the uncertainty lurking behind that mask of anger he's clinging to. "Nobody makes the kind of investment you're hinting at and walks away."

I turn to the Auctioneer.

"Our next lot is male, Kurdish, living with mother and two sisters in the UN camp for dispossessed persons in northern Turkey. Very high expression of positive assets in the primary pedigree, but a high level of traumatic death precludes a statistically significant extrapolation. Cooperative coefficient is quite high, both sisters have tested out at the preliminary level."

The bidding starts off briskly. I look at my guest. "Let me translate for you." I nod toward the Auctioneer who is calling the bids in her quiet yet penetrating patter. "Mother and three young kids in a refugee camp. Lots of smart and talented people in the family but they have mostly died by violence. What do you think their future will be?"

"So you're going to buy the kid?"

"I don't think you mean that."

"Okay, yeah, I guess I have figured that much out. I think." He has abandoned his poker mode so he blushes. "You're going to what ... find a

way so that the mom can move out of the camp?”

I nod.

“And make sure this baby lives in a safe neighborhood, gets into good schools, and so on? What about the parents?” He frowns. “I ... don’t think my dad was lying to me.” His eyes plead with me briefly. “When he told me that the company kept their department on because they were good.”

“He wasn’t lying.” I’m running out of time because the Started catalogue is coming up. “The parents matter, of course. A seriously destructive home life is counteractive to the best opportunities in the long run. But outside circumstances are usually the trigger.” I shrug. “We shape events externally whenever possible.”

“This is huge. You’re talking about causing major changes just to make sure some kid has good opportunities. Why are you doing this?”

“What did you initially believe? That you were lucky?” I sigh, because he could add this two and two equation easily if he was not part of it. Well, I couldn’t add it either, at his stage. “Education, internationally, has become an accident of birth ... are your parents wealthy, do you live in a stable society? If the answer is no, you have no real options and not much future. Your potential is wasted. Oh, you may get some education, become a talented member of your community. But your talent is limited by circumstance. This program costs us ... as you can surely determine ... a large amount of money.” I smile, but I’m hurrying now. “In the end, the payoff is greater than the cost. We will never evolve beyond tribes, as a society. Look at wars going on right now in Africa, the Middle East, Indonesia, and Eurasia. When have we not had at least five wars in progress?” He’s listening. “What drives change? The price of oil. International trade agreements. Oh, the governments can impose tariffs, the religious leaders can howl for blood for their gods, but in the end, it’s all about profit. Profit runs the universe, for all that the democratic populations want to believe otherwise.” I smile because he is processing this more quickly even than I had expected. “And here is your change. A few decades ago, the business world was no different than nations in terms of self-interest. But a lot of us replacing the old boys wanted to see our grandkids grow up. That wasn’t going to happen if we kept on squabbling over the pie. Those grandkids are going to have a world to live in now and we’ll have a world to make money in.” He’s getting it, and I nod. “It doesn’t matter which of us you work for. We all win.” He doesn’t believe me, but he’s not ready to say so yet. The Auctioneer is announcing the Started

catalog.

“These are the twelve-year-olds.” I lean back in my chair and sip my water because the lots I’ve flagged for my clients won’t come up for a bit yet. “You can take a look at the catalogue.” I call it up and send it to his field. “All the stats are there ... how they test in all categories with a talent assessment, genetic expression index for three generations, and a family stability assessment. I’m here to bid on two for clients. I’m a very successful professional broker—a freelancer. That means I pick well more often than I pick badly.”

“No images?” He’s scrolling through the masses of numbers.

“Nope.” I smile at him, studying his white skin, blond hair. “We’re human. You see someone, you make an immediate emotional connection with that appearance and that connection is not logical. So we eliminate it.” I watch the stats of the first lot glow to life in my holo field. “Female. She has tested out in the top percentile since kindergarten age. Her family runs a small produce business in Mogadishu. We have quite a few good prospects in Mogadishu right now. But her talents aren’t quite what my clients are looking for.”

“Are you going to tell me that your organization leveraged the recent democratic movement in Somalia?”

“Actually, it was the combined pressure of China—who has been Somalia’s largest trade partner—and several international companies who have been primary markets for cotton, carbon offsets, and IT products that finally brought about the peace talks. It’s a fertile source for us.” I’m watching the bidding numbers flash on the screen. “MS-International is going to take her. I figured they would. She’s just what they look for in a prospect. That’s why they leaned so hard on Somalia’s stubborn president to crack down on the militias. With China threatening to drop their lucrative trade subsidies—yes, they were pressured by some of our members—the president-for-life caved.” Yep. MS-International got her. I sneak a look at my guest but he’s staring into space, looking thoughtful.

“Yes, we do run the world,” I answer him. “Quite an improvement on thirty years ago, eh? Better equity worldwide, less pollution, we’ve slowed down global warming, and we have fewer wars.”

“What happens to people who get in your way?” He says it very quietly.

I shrug. “Nobody alone is big enough to get in our way.” I watch the bidding end and the stats for the next lot shimmer to life on the screen. “No government is big enough to really get in our way. Not any more. I’m buying this one.” Unless my main rival is willing to overspend. She’s bidding for a Venezuelan financial firm. I doubt she’ll overspend. We’ve both calculated this lot’s value to the last Euro.

“What happens when you buy her?” He’s watching the numbers flash in the field as the Auctioneer patters the bids.

“Her company makes sure she gets the scholarships she needs and keeps the father’s business solvent so that his job as a machinist doesn’t go away. Her mother is a ceramic artist and they’ll make sure that her popularity is great enough to keep her selling and happy, but not so great that it breaks up the family structure. My client is a carbon-trader and this prospect has the drive and split-second decision making ability—plus a very strong intuition—to make her a powerhouse on the carbon trading floor.”

“You manipulate the hell out of these families.”

“You sound horrified.” I smile. “Is it worse for us to do it than let chance manipulate their lives?” I don’t take my eyes off the field. My rival is serious about this lot and one of the small ITs is bidding, too. Not a good choice for them, but they’re not large and they’re new to the Network so they haven’t hired the best broker. They queried me, but they were offering about fifty thousand less than I currently earn. They won’t get anybody really good for that price.

“What if the mother is really talented and you keep her from becoming a big hit?”

“Her husband’s job wasn’t going to survive outsourcing.” The new IT company is faltering and then bows out. Wisely. I’m going to get her. My rival is not one to lose her head and bid out of competitive spite. The girl will have more value to my client than to hers. “If he’d lost it, he would have been stuck with a service job and she would have had to take another service job to pay the bills. Our assessment is that the marriage would not have survived.”

“What if the girl doesn’t go to work for your client’s company?”

“She probably will. They’ll offer her exactly the job that she’s perfect for, the one she’s worked toward all her life.”

“Because they made her work toward it.”

He’s starting to get angry again. I make the final bid, take the lot, and text a polite apology to my rival.

“But what if she doesn’t want to work for you? What if she decides she ... oh ... wants to be a potter like her mother?”

Or a jazz musician like his uncle who died when he was twelve? “Happens. It’s like those Thoroughbreds. You buy a nice started two-year-old with a couple of race wins on the local circuit, they may never make it on the big tracks.” I shrug. “Cost of doing business.”

“What if she’s really good and goes to work for someone else?”

I shrug again. “Her purchaser gets royalties from the company that hires her.”

“Oh come on.” He snorts and a couple of bidders send a look his way—which he does not miss.

I suppress a smile. “You want to belong, you play by the rules.” I shrug. “You don’t play by the rules—you don’t get talented help.” I meet his eyes. “People quit their jobs for lots of reasons. Without threats.” He is thinking now, and nods. “As I said, we all win. The company that might hire her didn’t have to pay to develop her, so they’ll pay royalties to the company that did develop her. She’s talented enough that she’ll earn out and make them money anyway.”

“Most of these kids come from pretty low income families.” He’s studying the catalogue again. “A little social welfare here?”

“That’s just the way the genes show up. Natural selection?” I shrug. “You’d have to ask the geneticists.”

My other lot has come up. This time, my rival is going to outbid me, I’m afraid. The boy is slightly more suited to her client’s use than to mine. I’m right. I reach my limit and send my opponent a virtual bow. She texts me back that she’ll buy me a drink, after.

“What would I be like ... if you people hadn’t ... auctioned me off ?”

“Yourself.” I meet his eyes and his anger and he finally looks away.

“Who bid on me?”

He had to ask that, sooner or later. I did, too. I have my eye on a couple of other lots just in case I can grab a bargain as an investment, but the bidding is very keen so I shut down my field and stand. He rises with me, recognizing dismissal. Well, he is sharp. Very high empathic rating. He'll make a top negotiator for one of the major companies.

“Okay, so you can't tell me.” He doesn't look at me as we cross the carpeted floor to the elevator. The windows are actually high-end flatscreens and offer us a clean and sparkling Bangkok cityscape.

“Illusion.” He follows my gaze and his voice is bitter. “The illusion of a real city. Just as my life has been an illusion of free will.”

“It's not an illusion,” I tell him mildly. “You can walk out of here and go be a jazz musician. Nobody is going to come by your flat and break your knees.”

“I'm going to do that.” He meets my eyes, stiff with rebellion and challenge. “You watch.”

I smile as the elevator door opens and he flinches at the cheap, warped paneling and the faint smell of incense and sweat that wafts out. He has forgotten about the shabby sex bar downstairs. I don't think he's going to like his life as a musician for long even if he wins enough on the poker circuit to live well. Which he may. He has tested out in the top percentile and wants to be the best, have the best, even if he's feeling a bit of adolescent rebellion right now. I watch him straighten his shoulders a hair before he steps onto the elevator. I'll do my best to make sure that he doesn't get killed in some dive as he figures out what he really wants from life, but you can't hedge all your bets. That two-year-old who starts winning the big races can still break a leg on the home stretch one day.

I nod and a waiter comes up with a fresh glass of sparkling water and lime and I go sit back down to watch for bargains.

He was my first. I borrowed the money to buy the Future lot at my first Auction. I'm good at what I do—one of the best. I've personally purchased several excellent Starteds since. They're all close to earning out already and they're my retirement investment. But that first purchase, that first successful Future that you pick up at a bargain rate—it's always going to be special. And I was young.

I wanted to tell him. Even I, who play this game better than nearly anyone, even I wanted to tell him. But then I would have given him a face, a person to rebel against. Right now, he really doesn't have anything except an ephemeral Big Brother that doesn't exist unless you're sharp enough and talented enough to find the threads woven through everything. Even that is not one person, no one Big Brother. No, there are thousands and thousands of pieces to that mosaic—some huge, many small. It'll be hard for him to stay angry, and if he survives his rebellious musician phase, he'll be back.

He may be my replacement, one day, when I get ready to retire. He has the raw talent. I wish he wasn't quite so white. There's that tribalism thing again. I drink my lime-flavored water and watch two of the big ag companies bid against each other for a highly talented bioscience prospect from a high-scoring middle-class Ethiopian family. Low overhead on that one, most likely, so they're willing to bid high.

You know, you never really lose those tribal reactions and even though I can read his genetic profile like your average person reads a menu, that white skin and blond hair still grate on me.

The woman who bought me as a Future didn't tell me either when she walked up to me at the embassy cocktail party I'd crashed on my own anger-driven search and invited me to the Auction. I was at the same stage as my guest, outraged and fascinated by the hints of a vast network of subtle manipulation I'd been uncovering. She told me she owned me years later, at the Auction where I bid on my guest.

I'll probably tell him then, too.

When he buys his first Future.

You get over the shock pretty fast, that shock when you find out that luck doesn't exist. You accept that the world you believed in is simply misperception. Some never figure it out. They spend their lives making discoveries, crunching numbers, inventing powerful new sewage systems or engineering DNA and bask in the warmth of their lucky lives. If you want to congratulate your luck for your success, by all means do so.

No bargains today, and I'm not in the mood to sit through the rest of the catalogue until the post-Auction cocktails. I'll come back later for my drink with my rival. I take the shabby elevator down and tip the mamasan enough that she gives me her best smile. He's gone, of course. I don't

keep close track of him. The chip that the clinic doctor implanted while he was being treated for an ear infection back when he was two will let me find him any time I need to. We don't control. We simply create a path, and you follow it on your own. Because that's what you really want to do. The mamasan has air-conditioned taxis standing by and I think I'll take a drive through the real, grubby version of that flawless city you see from the upper room.

Full circle, coming here. The irony of it is never lost on me. My mother worked in one of these sex bars, six decades ago, a runaway youngest daughter from Mumbai without much going for her. She got pregnant by a talented young CEO on vacation from Hong Kong who never acknowledged the baby.

We look for talent where we find it. And when a path opens up in front of your feet, you walk it. Go ahead. Call it luck, if it makes you feel better.