

KEYS

Lee had trouble remembering where she had put them. In the upper left bureau drawer? The long narrow shelf in the living room cabinet? She lay on the carefully made bed, trying to recollect.

Today was Colony Five's allotment day. Lee blinked back tears. She studied herself in the wide ceiling mirror: sleek dark hair cut like a close fitting cap, slender body, proportionate, well adjusted. Her left eye twitched as she tried to force a look of contentment onto her pallid face.

There were, of course, procedures relating to lost keys. Claim forms could be filed with the proper authorities. Usually a new set of keys would be issued within a week or two. A person could starve in that amount of time, especially if she had no connections. Lee winced. She wasn't sure if she had a support system or not.

Then, there were the occasions when no set of keys arrived, ever. Either the person was locked in their apartment or locked out, permanently. No reason was given, publicly, concerning the non-renewal of keys.

Perhaps even more fateful was the advent of a skeleton key. Such keys were sent out to the unfortunate member who made any transgression classified as irrevocable. April, on the seventeenth floor, had made that sort of error, something to do with illicit copies of passkeys.

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The thin brittle, useless skeleton key was a sure, immutable, sign of the Pariah. April had never been seen again. It was assumed by the Colony Five members that she had taken the only acceptable way out of such a dilemma.

Shivers rippled under Lee's peach colored skin. Her eyes bulged. If only she hadn't taken off her key chain, if only she hadn't gone totally nude into Sandy's welcoming arms. Somehow they had lost themselves, gotten tangled up: arms interlacing, faces and lips merging forgetfully. Their mirrored images had writhed with abandon.

Naturally, Sandy had slipped away during the night. Now allotment day was here and Lee's storage bins were empty, her vacation spent, and her keys, a hard lump pressed against her throat. Her keys were misplaced.

The high flat mirror made a terrible caricature of her fear. Disagreeable lines creased her face. Sooner or later she would have to actually get up and physically search the apartment for her bundle of keys. She used the fashionable antique facsimile keys as opposed to the more streamlined bar codes favored a decade ago; surely they would be easy to find.

What had possessed her to lift the tinkling chain from her neck? She tried to recapture the moment, to play back the point in time when she so stupidly cast off the keys to her survival.

Groaning, Lee swung feet onto the carpeted floor. She paused by the intercom. Should she call out to Sandy? No, someone might overhear. Who was Sandy anyway? Just someone who had coincidentally carried the same key for the same Holistic Lounge, just someone who chose to unlock the door only moments after she had entered.

Lee grasped at a bureau's edge. Maybe someone stole her keys. It had been known to happen. Sandy had been so slick, so assured. His timing had been perfect . . . a professional?

'If only', Lee thought regretfully, 'I had filmed last night.' But Sandy had prevented her from inserting a reel view disc. He had chosen that moment to pull at her ear lobe with his teeth.

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Lee continued to totter by the bureau. Allotment day was dawning. It was time to return to work and she had none of her keys. None. Not even her interior keys, the small blue keys which mated with the pill cabinet lock, the storage bin, the door.

Dimly, Lee recalled Sandy's broad face smiling up at the ceiling, such boldness. His large blue eyes had roved around the room. His long fingers had drummed over her belly, expertly bringing forth cries of delight. The dirty whore. Now he had her key chain. Lee was positive.

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