



# NEVER LOVE A STRANGER

By  
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*For Don, the Vulcan Husband, whose logical mind helped iron out all the details and  
unravel all the paradoxes...  
I never would have gotten this one done without you.*

## Chapter 1

At 6:28 Friday evening, Annie Simpson stood up and stretched, switched off the local news, and wandered out to her kitchen to microwave some leftover spaghetti.

There was a naked man in her kitchen.

Annie let out a strangled shriek and jumped backward as the man turned to face her. She noticed vaguely that he was a startlingly gorgeous specimen of manhood--easily six and a half feet tall, blond and blue-eyed, with a powerful, sculpted musculature like none she had ever seen before in her life. And he was *entirely* naked.

Unable to help herself, she regarded the more intimate portion of his anatomy and was shocked. Long years ago, at seventeen, she had furtively flipped through a copy of *Playgirl* her girlfriends had brought to school and been suitably impressed.

But *Playgirl* had not featured a single man who approached this man's magnificence.

The man took a step toward her. Snapping out of her momentary distraction, she made a leap for the knife block on the counter. Snatching up the largest and most wicked-looking knife, she brandished it at him. "Don't come any closer or I'll—I'll *maim* you," she warned.

The man regarded her through calm blue eyes. He seemed unimpressed by the huge knife, despite the fact that some of his best attributes were decidedly lacking in protection. "I will not hurt you," he said.

His voice was as gorgeous as the rest of him--deep and gentle and mellow. Aware that she should not be mooning over a clearly deranged stranger, Annie firmly squelched her automatic reaction to the seductive depths of his voice.

"Of course not," she agreed with heavy sarcasm. "You were standing naked as the day you were born in my kitchen, but you don't intend to hurt me. Sure, I believe you. How the hell did you get in here, anyway?"

A corner of his mouth quirked upward. "That would be difficult to explain."

Annie took her eyes off him for an instant and noticed the door that led out to the garage was still closed and locked. The window over the sink looked perfectly intact, too. She'd had the TV turned up pretty loud, as was her habit, and probably wouldn't have heard if he'd smashed the wall with a bulldozer. But everything was still locked tight. She was damned if she could figure out just how he'd broken in.

"Fine. Don't bother to explain," she growled. "I wouldn't want you to strain yourself coming up with a story. But what exactly *do* you want from me? Dinner?"

To her shock, he nodded. "Dinner would be appreciated, thank you."

*Now I know he's crazy*, she thought numbly. She waved the knife at him again. "Get the hell out of my house or I'll use this thing, damn it."

"I do not intend to hurt you," he repeated, "but I cannot leave. As you can see, I have no clothes."

"Yeah, I noticed that."

"It would be unwise of me to leave while unclothed."

"You'd probably be arrested for indecent exposure," she agreed. "And wouldn't that be a pity?"

"I need clothing."

She was beginning to suspect he was not really dangerous. The simplicity of his answers was disarming. There was something almost childlike about him, despite his enormous size and obvious maturity. Just some poor lunatic escaped from a hospital, she thought with a pang of pity.

"Why don't you put on the clothes you had on?" she suggested.

"I have no clothing."

Her moment of pity faded, and she began to grow irritated. He was concerned about being picked up by the cops for indecent exposure now, but apparently that hadn't worried him when he broke into her house.

She narrowed her eyes at him, revising her earlier opinion. Maybe he wasn't so harmless after all. Unless he had been wandering around the suburbs stark naked, he must have had clothes on when he came in, and the fact that he had taken them off meant he had plans for her. Plans she had no intention of facilitating by putting down her butcher knife.

"If you don't get the hell out right now," she said through her teeth, "I am going to call the cops."

He gave her a blank stare. "Cops?"

"The *police*, damn it!"

He shook his head, almost sorrowfully. "I'm sorry," he said with what appeared to be real regret, "but I really can't permit that."

He stepped toward her. Automatically, she swung the knife toward him in a savage arc. She had never wielded a knife in this fashion before--the only thing she'd ever knifed was the Thanksgiving turkey--but she was damned if she was going to let herself be raped.

Unfortunately, he was quicker. He caught her wrist and twisted it, just hard enough to compel her to drop the knife. It clattered to the floor, leaving her defenseless.

She cursed and drove her knee into his crotch.

Pain radiated out from her knee and shot up her leg, and she gasped. He, on the other hand, did not seem in the least affected. She realized with annoyance that she must have missed her target, striking him in his very muscular thigh instead of the more vulnerable area she had aimed for. Her kneecap felt bruised.

He caught her other arm and held it, pinning her. She looked up into his face, seeing the high cheekbones, the thin, straight nose, and the startling blue eyes, framed by

a shoulder-length mane of golden hair that glistened like a newly minted Sacagawea dollar. He was undeniably beautiful.

*Just my luck*, she thought grimly. *I find the most gorgeous man I've ever seen in my life, and he's a psychopath.*

"I think you have gotten the wrong impression," he said mildly.

His baritone voice flowed across her nerves like dark honey, soothing her despite herself. He did not seem insane, but she could think of no sensible reason why a sane man should be lurking naked in her kitchen. He *had* to be crazy, no matter how sanely he behaved. She decided to play along, to play for time, until she saw an opportunity for escape.

"What do you want?" she whispered.

"I need help. Clothing, to be precise."

"I can get you clothing," she offered hastily. Men's clothing, untouched since her husband died, still hung in the closets upstairs, but Steve had been more than half a foot shorter than this man. "I can purchase it for you."

He cocked his head quizzically, obviously suspicious of her sudden capitulation.

"I could not repay you. I have no money."

*Naturally*, she thought wryly. *The most gorgeous man I've ever met is not only a psychopath, he's a broke psychopath.* "Yeah, I don't know where you'd be keeping a wallet."

He ignored her desperate attempt at levity, or perhaps he simply failed to notice it.

"I need clothing that will permit me to blend into your society," he said gravely.

"My society?"

"I am unfamiliar with your world."

It was all Annie could do not to roll her eyes. Just what she needed to wind up the work week, to be trapped alone with a science fiction freak who'd seen one too many episodes of *Star Trek*. Or maybe he was a *Mork and Mindy* fan. He certainly had Robin Williams' clueless alien routine down pat.

"If you'll let me go," she said, trying not to sound too eager, "I'll drive right over to the mall and get you some clothes. Jeans and a T-shirt all right, or do you need a tux?"

"I require nothing elaborate."

"Marvelous. Jeans and a T-shirt, then. Levis okay with you?"

He hesitated, looking oddly blank. She would have sworn he'd never heard the term "Levis" before. "I will defer to your judgment."

"Great. Let me go, okay?"

He released her arms, and she backed cautiously away. She didn't dare make a dive for the fallen knife--he was too quick, and she'd never reach it in time. She could try to make it up the stairs, lock herself in the bedroom, and call the cops, but she was pretty sure that a man with such incredibly long legs could outrun her. And given his bulging muscles, he certainly wouldn't have any difficulty in breaking down the door.

Getting him to let her outside the house was definitely her best option.

"I'll be back in half an hour," she said brightly, backing toward the front door.

"Before you go--"

She cursed inwardly. Damn it, she should have known he wouldn't let her escape so easily.

"Might I have some food?"

"Sure," she said, infinitely relieved. "Help yourself. There's some stuff in the fridge."

"Fridge?"

"The refrigerator," she said. The unrelenting tension of the situation made her more of a smart-ass than usual. "Or don't they have those on Vulcan?"

When he still looked blank, she waved a hand at it. "The big white thing."

"Oh," he said. While she watched, he stepped toward it, contemplated it thoughtfully, then placed his hand on the handle. And pushed.

That, more than anything, convinced her that his weird behavior was no act. Naked or not, he had a serious mental problem. There was something very wrong with the guy. Everyone in America knew how to open a refrigerator, for God's sake. She hesitated in her stealthy retreat, pushing aside her desperate desire to escape in her concern for this man.

"Have you been in some sort of accident?" she asked.

He looked at her and offered a slight smile. "You could say that." He tried to pull the handle, obviously as an experiment, and nodded with satisfaction when the door opened.

"You've lost your memory, haven't you?"

"My memory?" He bent and peered inside the refrigerator.

"Yes. You have amnesia. That's why you're acting so strangely."

"Not precisely," he said, pulling out a plastic container that held the long-dead remains of some anonymous casserole.

"Don't eat that," she said hastily. "It's been in there for weeks."

He blinked at the container and set it on the counter, then pulled out another bowl full of something that had been canned fruit in a former life.

"I wouldn't eat that, either. There's mold growing on it."

He frowned. "Is all your food in various stages of decomposition?"

"Yeah, a lot of it. I never clean out my fridge, okay?" She stepped forward, picked out the remains of yesterday's spaghetti dinner, and handed it to him. "Here. This won't give you food poisoning. I was going to have it, but I'll just have a sandwich instead. No big deal."

He looked at her oddly. "You would give your dinner to a stranger?"

Annie shrugged. "It's just spaghetti. Anyway--" She gave him a strained smile. "You've obviously got problems. Am I right? Amnesia? You can't remember who you

are, can you? Are you lost?"

He opened the container and sniffed at it cautiously. "Actually," he said, "I remember perfectly well who I am and where I'm from."

"Oh, really. Please enlighten me, then. Who the hell are you?"

"My name is James." He stuck a finger into the spaghetti sauce and tasted it, then looked down at her. "I'm from the future."



## Chapter 2

"The future," Annie repeated.

He nodded. "The future." He held the container out to her. "This seems suitable for consumption. Is there some method of heating it?"

Automatically, she took the bowl. "I guess I was wrong," she murmured, to herself as much as to him. "You *are* crazy."

"Crazy?"

The way he repeated perfectly normal words as if she had spoken in Latin was beginning to get on her nerves. "Yes, crazy," she snapped. "As in psychotic."

"I am not psychotic," he said. He gave the container a significant look and smiled slightly. "I am, however, hungry."

He looked down into her eyes, and she met his gaze and was stunned by what she saw there. There was a rock-steady sanity in his eyes.

Whatever this man was, he was no psychopath.

He might have lost his memory, but he wasn't crazy. A little delusional, maybe. But she was pretty sure he wasn't dangerous. Something in the depths of his eyes assured her he was no threat to her.

"Oh, what the hell," she grumbled, stalking across the kitchen to the microwave. "Maybe I'm the crazy one." She thrust the container into the microwave, slammed the door, and punched several buttons in rapid succession. The machine began whirring. "I ought to call the cops. I really should."

"I'd rather you didn't."

"No kidding," she retorted. She turned around and found herself staring at his bare chest. "Just a minute," she said. "I'll find you something to wear."

"I thought you said you had no clothing."

"None that you could wear outside the house. But I do have some men's clothing that will cover you."

His forehead wrinkled. "Do you live with someone?"

The correct answer, she knew, was to assert she had a male roommate who would be home any minute. But to her surprise, she decided to be honest. She realized she was no longer afraid of this peculiar man. Perplexed, yes. Frightened, no.

"I live alone," she said, hoping the raw, aching pain she still felt didn't show through her voice too clearly. "My husband died about a year ago. I haven't gotten around to giving his clothes to the Salvation Army yet."

She went upstairs, and he followed close behind. It should have made her nervous, she reflected, to be standing in her bedroom with a naked stranger. But it didn't. Big and muscled though he was, he didn't scare her. The dutiful way he followed her

reminded her too much of a small child, or a golden retriever.

"Here," she said, rummaging through a drawer and waving something at him. "It's not a tuxedo, but it'll do."

He blinked at the black T-shirt she held, as if he'd never seen one before, and she thrust it impatiently into his hand. *Definitely amnesia*, she thought. "Just pull it over your head and put your arms through the holes."

He complied, somewhat awkwardly, as she searched for a pair of shorts. Unfortunately, Steve hadn't owned a single pair with an elastic waistband, and none of the shorts in the drawer were likely to fit a man this size. She handed him a pair of briefs instead, figuring underwear was better than nothing. "These might be a bit tight, but they'll do until we can get some in your size." *Assuming they come in your size*, she amended mentally.

He got the briefs on with minimal difficulty. They were obviously too tight, and the T-shirt did not entirely cover his abdomen, but at least the most distracting parts of his anatomy were covered. Although, she thought wryly, his long, muscular legs were pretty damned distracting.

There was a distant beeping sound. "Your dinner is ready," she said, trying to ignore the odd flicker she felt. For the first time in more than a year, there was a man in her bedroom. And an amazingly gorgeous man at that.

It was really too bad he was a weirdo.

In her kitchen, he wolfed down the small helping of spaghetti. She smiled at him over her peanut butter sandwich. "Want something else?"

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble, yes."

"You like peanut butter?"

"I've never had it."

Wordlessly, she shoved the open jar at him. He lifted it and sniffed cautiously, then pushed it away. "I don't think it would be my preference."

"I don't keep a whole lot of gourmet food around. In fact," she went on, standing up, "I hardly cook at all since Steve died. Not much fun cooking for one. You're lucky there was anything edible in the fridge at all. How about a baloney sandwich?"

He shrugged.

Taking that as an acquiescence, she slapped two slices of baloney and a layer of mustard onto white bread, then dropped it in front of him without ceremony. He ate it rapidly.

"You're pretty hungry," she said. "Don't they have food in the future?"

"I've been hiding for some time."

"Hiding? Are you on the lam?"

He looked at her quizzically and she knew she'd spoken in Latin again. She rephrased the question. "Are you in trouble with the law?"

He nodded as he swallowed the last bite of sandwich. "Trouble, yes. I am in

desperate trouble. They will destroy me if I return.”

The grave solemnity in his voice was her undoing. She stared at him a minute longer, feeling an odd protectiveness. Despite his size and obvious maturity, he reminded her entirely too much of a lost child.

“My name is Annie,” she said gently. “Annie Simpson.”

He inclined his head to her. “I am pleased to meet you, Annie Simpson.”

“Just Annie.” She frowned, knowing she was probably making the biggest mistake of her life. She went ahead and did it anyway. “Why don’t you stay here overnight? I’ll get you some clothing in the morning.”

“That is very kind of you.”

“No kidding.” Annie smiled wanly as she stood up. “Why don’t we watch TV for a while? You can tell me about the *future* during commercials.”

Evidently oblivious to the sarcasm that threaded through her voice, he followed her obediently out to the living room. Like the rest of her house, it was somewhat cluttered, with books, papers, and assorted junk stacked on every available surface. It had been decorated in a Williamsburg style, with cherry furniture and staid prints of houses and flowers on the walls, but due to the clutter it looked more like someone’s attic than a living room. Annie liked her house to look lived in.

Flopping down on the couch, she picked up the remote control and clicked the television on. Before Steve had died she had rarely watched the thing, preferring to spend the evenings talking with her husband and playing the occasional game of Scrabble or Monopoly. But once he was gone, she had begun using the TV to ease her loneliness. It was easier to face the stark emptiness of her life when the sound of voices filled the house, even if they were merely disembodied voices.

James had the sense to not sit down next to her. He walked over to a green-upholstered chair, removed three volumes of poetry, and sat, staring at the TV with interest. “What is this?”

“Just a game show.” She pressed the mute button as a commercial came on and tossed the remote control on a pile of books teetering on the coffee table. “I never liked this one much. These people know so damned many facts. It always makes me feel stupid.” She stretched her long legs out, shoving some books aside as she propped her feet on the coffee table. “So tell me, what’s the future like?”

The corner of his mouth tilted up sardonically as he turned his head and gazed at her. “Much like every epoch in history, I imagine. Good for some people. Not so good for others.”

“I take it you’re one of the have-nots.”

He inclined his head. “If by that you mean I am one of the less fortunate, you are correct.”

“Hard to believe,” she said. “A man like you ought to be on top of the world.”

A slight, wry smile curved his generous mouth. “Appearances can be deceiving.”

“True enough.” The game show came back on, and she un-muted the TV.

“Why do you watch if you do not like it?”

Distracted, she turned back toward him. “What?”

He gestured toward the television. “Why watch if it makes you feel stupid?”

Annie shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s better than doing nothing, I guess.”

“Why not do something more productive with your time?”

Annie slammed the remote down on the coffee table harder than she had intended. The pile of books wobbled, then crashed to the floor. “Look,” she said forcefully, picking up the books, “I don’t know who the hell you are, or why you were hanging around naked in my kitchen, but I didn’t give you permission to criticize my life, such as it is. How I choose to spend my time is none of your damned business.”

He looked at her for a long moment, and she had the unnerving impression that he could see right through her. “You are lonely.”

“Go to hell.”

“You said your husband has been dead for a year,” he persisted gently, ignoring her curt rebuff. “How did he die?”

“Accident,” she said shortly. “A roof collapsed on the site he was inspecting.”

“How tragic. I am sorry.”

To her horror, she felt tears well in her eyes in response to the very real sympathy in his voice. “It’s been over a year,” she said hoarsely. “I’m all right.”

“But lonely.”

The pity in his blue eyes drove her to defend herself. “Not so lonely that I’d get it on with a man who was hiding in my kitchen buck naked, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “Get it on?”

“Never mind,” she snapped.

His mouth curved faintly. “I think I comprehend your concern. A woman as lovely as you surely must have men begging for the pleasure of her company on a regular basis.”

She felt her cheeks flame at his offhand assertion that she was lovely. When she came home from work, she had pulled her long auburn hair into a straggly ponytail and changed into a striped shirt and somewhat ragged jeans. Given her casual attire, she was certain she could not even remotely be described as pretty, let alone lovely. Obviously he was trying to win her trust with compliments.

Unfortunately, it was working.

“I haven’t had a man ask me for a date since Steve died, if that’s what you mean. Not too many men are interested in a bereaved widow who doesn’t want to talk about anything except what a great guy her husband was.”

“So you were happy with him.”

Annie gazed steadily at the TV, blinking back tears. “Yeah, I was. Real happy.”

A commercial came on, blaringly loud, and she didn't bother to press the mute button. James leaned forward with interest. "What is that?"

"It's a commercial."

"No, I mean that thing." He waved at the screen. "What is it?"

Annie glanced at the TV, seeing the large vehicle bouncing through mud and over rocks. "It's a Jeep, I think."

"A Jeep," he repeated thoughtfully. "And what is a Jeep? Some sort of vehicle?"

Annie rolled her eyes. The Clueless Alien routine was rapidly wearing thin. "It's a car, you idiot."

"Ah, a car," he breathed, gazing at the screen with rapt absorption. "I've never seen one before. They were banned in 2025."

Abruptly she stood up. She had had enough of this weirdo. It was one thing to let him stay in the house, and another thing entirely to try to make sensible conversation with him. "I'm going upstairs to bed," she said, ignoring the fact that it wasn't yet 7:30. She could watch TV in her bedroom. "If you want, you can crash out on the couch."

James looked at the sofa dubiously. Abruptly she had a vision of him stretched out on it, his long legs dangling over the arm.

"Oh, hell," she said. "You can have the guest bedroom. Come on, I'll show you where it is."

She clicked off the TV and headed up the stairs, and he followed her dutifully. "In the morning, will you obtain some clothes for me?"

"Yeah. Sure. Whatever." She pushed open the door to her guest room and flicked the lamp on. "There are clean sheets on the bed. If you want to take a shower, there are towels in the bathroom ... that room right across the hall." She pointed. "If you need anything, let me know. But just so we understand each other, don't come in my room, or I'll hit you over the head with a baseball bat. The door will be locked, and I intend to keep it that way. Okay?"

He looked at her a long moment, appearing unfazed by her threat. "You are extremely kind to share your home with a stranger."

Annie heaved a deep sigh. "Don't I know it? And as strangers go, you're a pretty strange one."

"Stranger than you can imagine," he agreed with a glint of humor in his eyes.

Perplexed by his amusement, she decided not to say anything else. "Good night," she said, and backed out.

In her own room she closed the door, taking care to lock it. Ludicrous, she knew, since he was perfectly capable of breaking the door down. But she wasn't really worried about it. She felt certain that had he wanted to hurt her, he would have done so by now. He had certainly had ample opportunity.

She stretched out on the bed and clicked the TV on absently. Instead of watching the screen, she rolled over and stared at the ceiling. This had been a strange evening, and

the man she had invited to spend the night definitely had problems. But there was something about him...

She had never seen a man as gorgeous, as perfect in every detail. His skin was a perfectly even shade of golden amber all over his body, with no visible tan lines. His eyes were unbelievably vivid, so brilliantly blue that he simply had to be wearing contact lenses. No one had eyes that blue. And his golden hair fell in perfect rippling waves to his shoulders, too flawless to be real, without the slightest hint of split ends, dark roots, or other imperfections. In fact, she reflected, his hair looked for all the world like a wig. Maybe, she speculated, he was in disguise.

But that was silly. A man who was in deep enough trouble to need a disguise certainly wouldn't call attention to himself by stripping naked and hiding in a suburban kitchen. At any rate, even in disguise, James couldn't be inconspicuous. He was six and a half feet tall with the heavy, solid muscles of an athlete. No matter what color his hair or eyes, he would be striking.

That thought led to another notion. Maybe, she thought slowly, he was a male model. That would explain the faintly artificial look he had. Models often wore contacts to enhance their eyes, and no doubt male models took as meticulous care with their hair and skin as any woman. Besides that, why else would a man wear his hair that long nowadays?

That idea went a long ways toward explaining his appearance. It did absolutely nothing to explain why he might have been hiding, stark naked, in her kitchen.

She refused to entertain the possibility that he was telling the truth about being from the future. True, it would help explain his incredible physical perfection, but it was just too ludicrous to believe. She had never read a lot of science fiction, and physics had definitely not been one of her strong points in school, but she was pretty sure the chances of the human race ever developing time travel were slim at best.

At any rate, if a man from the future wanted to travel into the past, he would certainly have more historically important places to visit than her kitchen. James was a mystery she couldn't figure out. After a while she gave up trying. Despite the early hour, her eyes fluttered closed, and before long she fell asleep to the cheerful babble of the television.

Her last thought as she drifted off was that regardless of who he was, and where he was from, there were definitely worse ways to spend Friday night than finding a gorgeous naked hunk in one's kitchen.

### Chapter 3

Annie awoke at eight, bleary-eyed and befuddled as always, and stumbled from bed. She noticed she'd fallen asleep with her clothes on again and decided not to bother showering and changing until after breakfast, and the all-important, life-affirming first cup of coffee. Still half asleep, she opened the door.

And gasped.

James, every bit as naked as he had been yesterday evening, stood just outside her door.

But this time he was dripping onto her Berber carpet.

He had obviously just come from the shower. Rivulets of water streamed from his long hair and trickled down his chest. Against her will, her attention was caught by a droplet that slid suggestively between his nipples and down his corrugated abdomen. She yanked her gaze away.

*What the hell is wrong with me, anyway?*

She knew what her best friend Kay Sterling would diagnose as the problem--that it had been too long since she'd been laid. And maybe Kay was right. But when you'd been married to one of the top ten guys in the world, you weren't much inclined to fall into bed with a lesser man. Until now she hadn't been tempted.

This man, though, was tempting. Damned tempting.

She pushed that thought away at once, attributing it to morning coffee deprivation. At the very least, James was suffering from amnesia. At the most, he had serious psychological problems. Neither possibility made him a likely candidate for a relationship, or even for a quick roll in the hay.

She forced what she hoped was a reproving expression onto her face. "What, precisely, are you doing?"

James looked embarrassed. "I was unable to find the dryer."

"The hair dryer?" She blinked at him, bewildered, as he stood dripping water all over her beige carpet. There was a dark spot, practically a puddle, forming beneath him. "Why must you wander around naked looking for it? You're dripping water everywhere."

"I couldn't dry off," he said patiently, as if she were mentally slow. Maybe she was, this early in the pre-Colombian coffee era of the morning, but she couldn't seem to grasp what the hair dryer had to do with him standing naked in the hall, dripping.

"Couldn't you find any towels?"

He hesitated. "Towels?"

She let out an exasperated huff of air. "They're in here," she said, pushing past him and doing her best to ignore how good he smelled, fresh from the shower. A citrusy

scent wafted from him, a clean, sweet odor of oranges and lemons.

She yanked open the linen closet, pulled out a hunter green towel, and handed it to him. He held it in his hands and stared at it thoughtfully.

“Oh, for God’s sake. You really don’t remember what a towel is for, do you?”

He looked at her gravely. “I have never before seen one.”

“We have *got* to get you to a doctor,” she grumbled.

He ignored her aside and lifted the towel slightly. “How does it function?”

Annie heaved a sigh. “It’s really pretty simple, James. You rub yourself with it until you’re dry.”

He nodded and began rubbing at his hair, rather ineffectually, more like a child than a full-grown man. She was puzzled to notice that he was perfectly smooth-faced, without the slightest hint of morning stubble. He must have found a razor and used it—but how had he remembered how to use a razor, if he couldn’t even remember how to use a towel?

Finding the sight of massive chest muscles flexing and rippling beneath honey-gold skin to be inexplicably disturbing, she turned away. “I’ll be downstairs. I’m going to make some breakfast.”

His head snapped around. “Food?”

That, at least, was a concept he had no difficulty comprehending. “Yeah, food. I’ll see what I can dig up.”

She had pancakes on the griddle when he came down the staircase, wearing the black T-shirt and briefs she’d given him last night. He had the most gorgeous legs she’d ever seen in her life, she thought, feeling a stab of guilt at her disloyalty to Steve. Steve might have been the greatest guy in the country, but he hadn’t been outstandingly handsome. He certainly hadn’t been a hunk.

James was very definitely a hunk.

He paused on the bottom step and sniffed appreciatively. “What is that wonderful smell?”

“I’m making pancakes.”

He strode across the kitchen, stood behind her, and inhaled. “Not those. That.” He pointed at the cup of coffee, already half empty, that sat next to the griddle.

“Oh. Coffee. Also known as nectar of the gods. Want some?”

He nodded eagerly. “Please.”

She poured him some and held out the steaming cup. “Do you take it black?”

“I’ve never had it before.”

*This should be interesting*, she thought. “You don’t know what you’ve been missing,” she said with a grin, turning back to the griddle and flipping over the pancakes, which were a rather promising shade of golden brown. Really, she thought with satisfaction, that side had turned out rather well, considering she hadn’t cooked pancakes in eons. She turned back to him, unable to resist the temptation to watch him. He was



beautiful. In addition, she was rather looking forward to his first encounter with coffee.

He lifted the cup to his lips and took a deep sip. The next second he was sputtering and spraying coffee across her clean kitchen floor.

She felt her mouth twitching with amusement. "Oh, dear, James. Are you all right?"

"That was--that was--" He sputtered with indignation, scrubbing the back of his hand across his lips as if to eradicate the taste. She rescued the cup from his other hand before he dropped it and put it safely on the counter.

"Was it too hot?"

James fixed her with a baleful glare. "That is the most revolting concoction I have ever tasted."

She grinned at his outrage. "It's an acquired taste," she said, plucking a paper towel from the roll and mopping up the coffee he had sprayed on the floor.

"It is not a taste I care to acquire," he said darkly.

"It isn't that bad," she said, doing her best to suppress her laughter and not completely succeeding. "Maybe you'd like it better with cream and sugar."

"I have no intention of ever drinking *that* again. It was entirely repulsive. How do you force yourself to imbibe it?"

"I love it. In fact, I can't live without it."

"A pitiful commentary on the state of your life," he growled, clearly annoyed. He hesitated and sniffed the air again, then looked thoughtfully at the griddle. "Is that supposed to smell that way?"

Turning, Annie saw smoke rising from her pancakes. "Oh, *damn*."

\* \* \* \*

Half an hour later Annie stabbed the last bite of pancake, dabbed it in the excess maple syrup on her plate, and popped it in her mouth. "That was the best breakfast I've had in a long time," she said.

James looked modestly pleased. She had mixed the batter, but he had poured and cooked the second batch of pancakes with rather surprising competence, considering he couldn't remember what a towel was for. "I'm glad you liked it."

Annie clinked her fork onto her plate and regarded him across the table. "You're not only handsome, you can cook. Two excellent qualities in a man."

James smiled slightly. He had eaten a stack of six large pancakes with his customary enthusiasm, and now that his appetite had been sated his mind seemed to turn toward more pressing matters. "Will you purchase my clothing today?"

Annie nodded. "Sure." She hesitated, then decided to ask the question that had been worrying her. "What will you do then?"

His eyes, usually so forthright, flickered away from hers. "I suppose I will need to find employment."

"I suppose you will. Do you have any idea what you used to do?"

“Certainly. I cleaned and cooked. But my primary responsibility was taking care of children.”

She felt her jaw drop. “Are you telling me you’re a *nanny*?”

He tilted his head curiously. “Why are you so surprised?”

“Because--because--” She regarded the huge, powerful man sitting across from her with bewilderment. “I guess you just don’t look enough like Mary Poppins to me.”

“Indeed. What profession do you think I would be most suited to?”

“Uh ... you’d make a fabulous male model.”

“Model?”

“Yeah, you know, the guys who model jeans in those ads in magazines. Or pose for the covers of romance novels. You know what I mean.”

He shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t.”

“As gorgeous as you are, you could make a lot of money.”

“Gorgeous?”

Annie cocked her head. “You do realize you’re incredibly good-looking, don’t you?”

James looked uncomfortable. “I would prefer to find a post more similar to my prior job.”

“Yeah, well...” She gestured helplessly. “I don’t think you’re going to find a job like that without references.”

“What is a reference?”

“When your previous employer is willing to say how great a worker you were.”

A frown creased his perfectly unlined forehead. “That is quite impossible, as you know.”

Annie stood up, taking his plate, and walked to the dishwasher. Over the noise of clinking glass and china, she said, “No, James, I don’t know anything of the kind. I hope you realize I don’t really believe your story about being from the future. It’s ridiculous.”

“But it is true.”

“It’s crazy,” she said, more sharply than she had intended. “There’s something very wrong with you, James. You need to be looked at by a doctor.”

“I do not think that would be wise.”

Annie slammed the dishwasher door closed and turned to look at him. “Look, James, I don’t know whether you need a medical doctor or a psychiatrist, because I’m not sure what’s wrong with you. But my best friend happens to be a doctor. If you’d let her take a look at you--”

“No.”

Annie stared at him, frustrated and annoyed. “I just want to help you, James.”

“And I am grateful for that impulse. But all I really require from you is clothing.”

The phone rang. James looked around, clearly startled. She turned back to the counter and picked it up. “Hello?”

“Hey, Annie, what’s up?”

“Kay!” Annie exclaimed. “Just the person I wanted to talk to.”

“I appreciate that, Ann, but I’m in a hurry. I’m heading out to Florida to see my mom, remember?”

“Oh, damn,” Annie said. “I forgot.”

“And you’d have forgotten to feed Oscar if I hadn’t called to remind you, wouldn’t you?”

“Oscar doesn’t need food,” Annie said. In her opinion, Kay’s enormous gray cat had enough fat deposits to keep him alive for at least a month. As a doctor, Kay should have known better than to over feed an animal the way she did Oscar. But until she had had her baby, Oscar had been her only companion, and she had spoiled him shamefully.

“Give me a break, Annie. I’ll put him on a diet when I get back, I promise.”

Annie saw James rise to his feet and move toward her, frowning at the telephone. “What is that?” he said.

On the other end of the line Annie heard a shriek of delight. *Oh, no, here it comes*, she thought as Kay whooped happily.

“You’ve got a man over there!”

“Sort of,” Annie said.

“Sort of? What does that mean?”

“It means it’s not what you think. Nothing is going on.”

“He’s over there at nine in the morning, but nothing is going on? You expect me to believe that? Annie, how stupid do you think I am?”

Annie sighed. “He’s a....” She paused. “A friend. That’s all.”

“Sounds like he’s got one hell of a sexy voice.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll introduce you when you get back, okay?”

“I’ll be looking forward to it. But now I’ve really got to get going. Clark needs to eat before we go to the airport.” Clark was Kay’s four-month-old son. “You’ve got the keys to my place, right?”

“Right. Don’t worry, Kay. I’ll take good care of Oscar.”

“Great. I’ll see you on Tuesday.”

Annie hung up the phone. James touched it with a tentative finger. “Who were you speaking to?”

“My friend Kay. She’s the doctor I told you about. She’s taking a short vacation, but she’ll be back on Tuesday. Until then, you can stay here, but then I really want you to see her. Okay?”

James picked up the telephone and held it to his ear. She grabbed it away from him. “What the hell are you doing?”

He blinked at her. “I wanted to know how it works.”

“The telephone? Are you kidding?”

“I have never seen one before,” he said, stressing each word slightly, as if

repeating obvious information for the benefit of a child.

Annie hung the phone back on its hook and decided not to argue with him right now. It was obvious her words were bouncing right off him anyway. "I think I'll go over to the mall and get you some clothes. What do you think you need?"

He shrugged. "I need to blend in."

"I don't think you'll ever do that, James." She looked at him thoughtfully. "I wonder what size you are."

"I have no idea."

"I suppose I could measure you," she said doubtfully, looking at the too-tight pair of briefs. Somehow she couldn't imagine herself trying to measure his inseam. Just the thought heated her cheeks with a ferocious blush.

"I guess you'd better come along," she said at last.

James looked surprised. "In these clothes? Are they suitable to wear outside? I thought you said--"

"You're right," she interrupted. "You'd get arrested." *And start a riot*, she added mentally.

"Then I do not see how I can accompany you."

"Come on upstairs. Maybe I can find something."

In her room, she made a more thorough search of Steve's old clothes. "Ah-ha," she said at last. "Just as I thought. This should be okay." She handed him an old pair of gray sweatpants with an elastic waistband.

He held them up to his waist dubiously. The bottom of the legs only reached halfway down his calf.

"That's okay," she said, and retrieved a pair of scissors. She cut them off to shorts length, then held them up for inspection. "See? Cutoffs."

With the shorts on, he looked almost normal. Almost, but not quite. His shoulders, far more broad and massive than Steve's had been, stretched the T-shirt, looking like they might burst the seams at any moment, and the shorts were tight around his waist as well, despite the fact that he was very definitely not overweight. Far from it. It was simply a matter of proportions. On a man his height, his waist was quite narrow. The shorts were also stretched tightly, bulging suggestively in the front and lovingly cupping his buttocks in the rear.

She studied him thoughtfully. "Even with those shorts on, you might just start a riot."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind." She shook her head. "You're decent enough, I guess. But you'll look better in clothes that fit correctly."

She took a quick shower and changed. Then she headed for the garage, James following obediently in her wake. She still had Steve's car, a bright yellow Mini Cooper, but she didn't drive it much, because she wasn't really the flashy type, and besides, she

couldn't drive it without getting tears in her eyes. As she usually did, she headed for her little blue econobox.

She opened the car door and ushered him inside, then went around to the driver's side and sat. He was clearly uncomfortable in her pint-sized car. His knees were drawn up and he seemed to take up much of the available space.

"You need to put on your seatbelt."

At his blank look, she sighed, thinking that it was like having a very large child. She would have to show him how to put on his seatbelt. Reaching across such a large man was not easy, but she managed it, aware of an odd heat that spread through her as she leaned close to his broad chest. She was uncomfortably aware that he was no child. Snagging the belt with her left hand, she pulled it across him and latched it, then fastened her own belt.

Pressing the garage door opener, she backed the car out of the garage and down the driveway. As she pulled out onto the street, she noticed a nondescript green sedan pulling away from the curb on the other side of the street. "That must be my new neighbor," she said, glancing in the mirror and seeing a dark-haired woman in the car. "About time she moved in."

"New neighbor?"

"Yeah, that house has been sitting vacant for a while. It was built almost a year ago, but I guess whoever built it had their mortgage fall through. I heard someone was finally moving in there, though." She put on her signal, waited, then pulled smoothly into traffic. The green car followed. Apparently her neighbor was heading for the city as well.

Her house was in a new neighborhood in southern North Carolina that was perched incongruously along a twisting country road, but it was only a five-minute drive to civilization. At the next intersection another car pulled in behind her, and she lost sight of the green sedan.

As her eyes flickered away from the rear-view mirror she caught a glimpse of James, staring out the window with deep interest. She could almost believe he really *was* from the future, she thought, seeing his wide-eyed gaze as he stared at the trees. Noticing her brief glance, he looked toward her and gave a slight smile.

"It is very different from what I am accustomed to," he said, almost apologetically.

"Uh-huh," Annie said dryly, trying not to sound too sarcastic. It wasn't the poor guy's fault he had amnesia, after all. "You already mentioned they don't have cars in the future. So what do they use to get around? Airplanes? Helicopters?"

"No. We have a much more efficient method of getting from place to place." He turned his head and looked out the window again. They were already entering the outskirts of the city, and fast food restaurants and gas stations lined the road. "Besides, we do not have large gatherings, ever. People live most of their lives in their homes."

Most people even work from their homes, and there is little need to go elsewhere. Occasionally two or three families spend time together, but for the most part people simply do not group together.”

Annie frowned, wondering how he’d produced such a vivid description of “the future.” As far as she knew, amnesia simply caused a person to forget his past. He must be suffering from delusions as well. “So no one goes out of their house? That sounds kind of lonely.”

“The trend toward staying at home started in the twentieth century,” James explained, “when the videoscreen—no—” He broke off, frowning. “When what you call television was invented. Eventually people stopped leaving their houses for entertainment altogether, since they could obtain most forms of entertainment at home. At the same time, people began working from their houses.”

Annie nodded absently as she maneuvered the car around a corner. “I work from my house sometimes,” she admitted. She could easily imagine today’s world leading to the society he described. But that made sense; he was simply extrapolating from today’s trends, whether he was aware of it or not.

“Yes. Eventually most people will. With the advent of computers and what you call the Internet, children were able to learn at home as well. And once there was no need for people to leave the comfort of their homes for entertainment, work, or education, people naturally began spending most of their time at home.”

“What happened to the cities?” Annie challenged.

James frowned. “We live in cylinder cities. Do you mean a city above ground?”

“Yes, like this. This is a city. An area where a large amount of people live.”

James gazed out the window at the five other lanes of cars. “The aboveground cities are all gone. Indeed, everything on the surface is gone.”

Annie gulped. She didn’t like where this fantasy was leading. “Let me guess. Nuclear war.”

“What? Oh, no. I spoke imprecisely. I meant all human-made artifacts on the surface are gone. Everyone lives underground, and the surface of the planet has been allowed to revert to its wild state, in order to preserve the native wildlife. People may only go to the surface with a permit, and those are issued extremely rarely.”

“Everything is gone? What about the Pyramids? The White House? Important stuff like that?”

James shook his head slightly. “At first major historical landmarks were preserved. But eventually people lost interest in going aboveground, even to see significant landmarks, and it was decided that those buildings might as well be dismantled, and the area surrounding them permitted to return to nature. In my time, the surface of the planet is entirely pristine.”

That was so obviously impossible she couldn’t help but challenge it. “What about food? People have to grow crops, don’t they?”

“All our food is grown on satellites and then shuttled to distribution centers,” James explained. His voice was so even, so lucid, that it was hard to believe he was nuts, even though that was clearly the case.

“They keep cows on satellites?” she said, unable to keep the skepticism from her voice. Definitely delusions as well as amnesia, she thought grimly, wishing rather desperately for Kay to return. Although Kay probably couldn’t do much but refer this poor guy to a psychologist.

“Cows?” James paused for a moment, as if what she’d said made no sense. “Oh, I understand what you mean. The spaghetti I ate last night had cow in it, didn’t it?”

“Beef. It had beef in it.”

James frowned. “But I thought it was dead cow.”

“It’s called beef.”

James shrugged. “No one eats genuine meat in my society. We eat synthetic meat based on fungus, as well as soy or other vegetables.”

“Bleah,” Annie said.

He ignored her reaction and went on. “There are certain ethical issues involved in raising animals for slaughter, and at any rate it is much more efficient to eat only plant products.”

Everything he said seemed to hang together. It was all so logical. So rational. So totally insane.

Annie realized arguing with him was a big waste of time, since she clearly wasn’t going to manage to sway him from his beliefs. She strove for a bright, interested tone. “So everyone lives underground, huh? Sounds depressing.”

“It is what we are accustomed to.” James pressed his nose against the window, reminding her again of a golden retriever, and tilted his face up. “I have never truly seen the sky before.”

“I’d think you’d find it scary,” she said, playing along.

“No. If I were—” James came to an abrupt halt and flashed a fleeting, sidelong glance in her direction. “If I were someone else, perhaps I would be frightened. But I find the cloud formations extremely interesting. I have, of course, seen it on holovideo, but that somehow failed to prepare me for the genuine experience. It is quite ... beautiful.”

It was barely ten o’clock when they arrived at the mall, and she was able to find a space not far from the building. She helped James unlatch his seat belt, then found he didn’t know how to open the car door. She walked around to his side, opened the door, and waited for him to stand up.

As they walked toward the mall, she noticed the same green car pulling into a space. She thought about walking over to introduce herself, but a glance at James made her think better of it. The woman was bound to assume he was a boyfriend, and the last thing she wanted was to have the neighbors gossiping about her. She settled for a

friendly wave, then walked on into the mall with James at her heels.

Inside the mall, James paused and stared at the stores, and the people already beginning to crowd the mall. He looked bewildered, almost frightened, and she hesitated, feeling a pang of pity. "Are you all right?"

He nodded and glanced at her, and she saw that his eyes were wide and anxious. "I've never seen this many people at once," he said softly. "It's rather overwhelming."

"Well, I don't like shopping much myself. Come on, let's get it over with."

She started forward, but James didn't follow. Glancing back, she saw he was still staring at his surroundings with that lost, vulnerable expression. Unable to help herself, she reached out and took his big hand in her own, wrapping her fingers around his. She saw his mouth drop open with shock, as if no one had ever touched him before.

"It's okay, James," she said gently.

He hesitated a long moment, then followed her, clutching her hand as if it were his only link to sanity.

They walked on through the mall, with James staring at everything, no matter how mundane, as if it were all utterly new and mesmerizing. Annie noticed women pausing to gape at him as if he were a movie star in a tuxedo, rather than an anonymous guy wearing poorly fitting clothes, and she felt a small, proprietary stab of irritation. He was, she had to admit, an extraordinarily nice-looking man, but that was no reason for women to drool over a complete stranger. He seemed oblivious to their stares, more fascinated by the sights of the mall than by the stunned women he passed.

Suddenly he paused and pointed. "Look!"

Annie followed the direction of his finger. "Uh-huh," she said, unimpressed. "It's a fountain."

"It is beautiful," he breathed. He went toward it slowly and walked around it, staring transfixed at the gurgling, splashing water. Annie followed him, perplexed. He looked, she thought, as thrilled as a three-year-old. It was as if he'd never seen a fountain before.

*Definitely amnesia*, she told herself again.

After some time she got James to leave the fountain, but only with the promise of stopping back to see it before they went home. They walked into the men's department of a clothing store, where a saleslady was only too happy to help them. At least, she was happy to help James. She stared at him as if she were starving and he was a steak dinner. Considering she was at least fifty, her reaction struck Annie as amusing. She wondered if every woman in North Carolina would react to James the same way.

"What size are you?" the saleslady asked, eying him from head to foot.

James looked blank, and Annie jumped in hastily. The absolute last thing she needed was for James to start telling the salesclerk that they didn't wear slacks in the future. "You know how men are," she said, smiling at the salesclerk. "They never remember little details like sizes."



“Hmmm,” the woman said, looking James over carefully. “Well, why don’t you try these and see if they fit?” She handed James a pair of khaki slacks. He stared at them thoughtfully, then his hands went to the waistband of his shorts.

Annie grabbed his hand before he could begin to disrobe in public. “The fitting room is right over there,” she said, pointing in the correct direction.

He blinked at her. “The fitting room?”

Annie slid a glance at the salesclerk, whose blandly courteous mask had slipped a bit. Some of the hungry interest had faded from her eyes, and she was staring at James with alarm. “Yes, the *fitting room*,” Annie said in an intense whisper. “You know, where you go to try on the pants and see if they fit.”

To her relief, James seemed to understand. He walked away from them and disappeared into the fitting room. Annie risked another glance at the salesclerk, who looked wide-eyed. “I think I’ll go over there and wait for him,” she said, a little too brightly. “Thanks so much for your help.”

The salesclerk mumbled something incoherent and fled, probably in search of more normal customers.

When James emerged, Annie looked him over critically. The slacks were just about the right size. “They look pretty good,” she said. “Go ahead and try these on.” She handed him an armful of shirts she’d picked out.

A half hour later they were on their way back to the car, James loaded down with several bags containing slacks, shorts, shirts, underwear, and assorted other necessities. They stopped by the fountain, as promised, then made their way through the parking lot to the car. James carefully placed the packages in the trunk, then sat in the passenger seat. This time he was able to fasten his own seatbelt.

“This is very kind of you,” he remarked.

Annie waved a disparaging hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

“But I am concerned,” he persisted as she backed carefully out of the parking space. “You have spent a good deal of currency on me. I have no way of repaying you.”

“You’re in trouble. I’m trying to help.”

“But why?”

Annie slid him a wry sideways glance. “Don’t people help other people where you come from?”

He hesitated, then looked away, out the window. “No one would ever dream of giving me assistance,” he said softly.

She was startled to hear bitterness in his voice. “Well, I’m not like that, okay? You needed help, and I didn’t mind spending a little money to help you. Since Steve died, I’ve got more money than I need, anyway. I may not be rich, but I’m not broke either. No big deal. So let’s forget about it.”

She saw his jaw tighten. “I have no intention of forgetting your kindness to me.”

She accelerated as the speed limit went up to forty-five. She lived out where there

had been fields of cattle and corn only a few years ago. They were leaving the city, with its sprawl of fast food restaurants, movie theaters, and shopping, and heading for the suburbs.

"So don't forget it," she said. She turned onto the old country road and accelerated smoothly. The speed limit out here was fifty-five, but only a fool would drive it that fast. There were deep ditches along the road, a narrow bridge that crossed a creek, and some sharp twists that had claimed a few reckless lives. There was discussion about straightening out the road and reducing the speed limit now that a good many houses had been built down it. "Maybe you'll be able to pay me back someday."

"I intend to pay you back now," he said. "I believe I have formulated a solution. I will work as a housekeeper for you."

Annie did not take her eyes off the road. "Say what? I don't need a housekeeper, James."

"It appears to me that you do. Your house is not very neat."

Annie gritted her teeth. "I don't like my house to look like something out of *Architectural Digest*. Anyway, I can't afford a housekeeper."

"You need not pay me. I will work for room and board."

"The way you eat I'm not sure that's a bargain," she said under her breath. Shooting a hasty glance at him, she saw the hope in his eyes. "Oh, hell," she said. "Fine. Okay. You can be my housekeeper."

"Thank you," he said with very real gratitude.

"No problem," she said easily. It actually solved the dilemma that had been worrying her, of how to keep him around until Kay had a chance to examine him. And once Kay had figured out what his problem was, they'd see to it that he got treatment.

So she'd picked up a stray for a few days. It was no big deal. She'd found a fuzzy gray kitten on her doorstep a couple of years ago. Not being a cat person herself, she'd fed the kitten, kept it safe, and found the perfect place for it-- with her friend Kay. Rescued from the cold, harsh world, Oscar had grown into a happy and well-adjusted, if somewhat overstuffed, cat.

James was just a stray who needed food and a warm place to stay. All she had to do was find a happy home for him.

For the first time it occurred to her to wonder if he had family looking for him. Maybe, she mused, she shouldn't wait until Tuesday to do something about him. Maybe she ought to go ahead and call the cops. She vividly remembered the way she'd felt when Steve hadn't come home on time. The night he'd never come home, and she'd opened the door to find a police officer on her doorstep instead of her husband. Even now, a year later, the memory was like a blow to the stomach.

What if James had a wife or a girlfriend who was worried sick about him?

She glanced in her rearview mirror and saw a car coming up over the hill she'd just crested. "She's really flying," she said, almost to herself.

James looked at her. "Flying?"

"Yeah. I think that's my new neighbor behind us. Looks like her car. But the way she's driving--"

The green car accelerated abruptly, almost to her bumper, then suddenly swerved around her as if to pass. Startled by the incredibly reckless driving, Annie hit the brakes. The other car suddenly swerved again, striking her car from the side.

"Shit!" she yelled, struggling to keep the car on the road. To her right was a deep ditch. If they went into it at this speed, they'd flip the car for sure. Her right front wheel went off the road and onto the thin strip of grass that bordered the asphalt, scaring the living hell out of her. Twisting the steering wheel a little too far to the left, she collided with the other car again.

"What the hell are you *doing*?" she shrieked. If another car came in the opposite direction, there would be a very ugly accident. Both cars would likely be in pieces. But she wouldn't be around to see the results, and neither would James.

"Drive faster," James commanded.

"Are you crazy?" she shrieked. They sped onto the old, narrow bridge, with its flimsy, rusted guardrails, and the car slammed into them again. There was a horrible scraping sound as her car was pushed into the guardrail. Through the grace of God they made it across the bridge, and she stomped the brake, praying the green car would pass her. "Any faster, and we'll--"

"Go *faster*!"

At the urgency in his voice, she glanced to the side and saw the woman driving one-handed, holding up something in her black-gloved hand and pointing it in her direction.

It was a gun.

It was a weird-looking thing, like nothing she'd ever seen on the cop shows on television, but she had no doubt whatsoever that it was in fact a gun. And it was aimed directly at them.

James was right. If she didn't speed up, the woman would have a clear shot at them. Fighting against her screaming instincts, which demanded that she stop and find a hole to hide in, she downshifted and jammed her foot hard onto the accelerator.

The other driver was taken by surprise as her car zoomed forward, clear of the sedan. But the other car gave chase and rapidly drew up to her econobox. It pulled alongside, and she gave a hasty glance to the left and saw that the woman was shouting something. A moment later the car veered toward them again.

Annie could only think of one thing to do. She turned the wheel hard to the left, and the cars collided. Taken by surprise, the green car's driver lost control of her car, and it skidded across the left lane and off the road. The passenger side of the sedan slammed into a tree, bringing the car to an abrupt halt.

Annie slowed the car, breathing heavily. "Don't slow down," James said.

“There’s a big curve up here. Anyway, we really ought to go back and check—“

There was an odd noise and a blue-white flash, and the car shuddered as something struck it a glancing blow. Annie looked in her rearview mirror and saw that the woman, apparently uninjured, had jumped out of the car and was aiming the gun at them.

“My God, she shot at us!” she exclaimed in shock. In her peaceful suburban existence, she had never so much as seen a gun, let alone had one fired at her. The thought that someone was trying to kill her was utterly unbelievable.

“Faster,” James urged in an impossibly calm voice.

That was definitely good advice, Annie thought. Except for the big curve in front of them. She was likely to roll the car if she went too fast, but if she didn’t get her ass out of harm’s way, the woman was going to use her for target practice. Another bluish flash burst in front of them, and a burn mark appeared on a tree next to the road. Deciding that speed was the lesser of two evils, Annie stepped on the accelerator hard and twisted the steering wheel.

As they went into the steep curve, the tires began to squeal. The squealing rose in intensity as the tires protested the unaccustomed treatment, and Annie fought the steering wheel as the little car started to skid. She felt the car tilt and knew that the two left tires had lost contact with the asphalt. A scream rose in her throat, but she firmly suppressed it. She was not going to die having hysterics, damn it.

As the road straightened out, the tires bounced back onto the asphalt with a grinding thump. Somehow they had made it through the curve without rolling the car. She slowed the car, glancing in her rearview mirror and seeing nothing but empty asphalt. The smashed-up green car was no longer visible. “I think we lost her,” she said, feeling her heart pounding violently with terror. She had come within a hair’s breadth of flipping the car.

James nodded and spoke with unnatural calm. “For now,” he said.

Reaction was setting in. Unlike James, she was not in the least calm. She felt tears burning in her eyes. “What the hell did she want?” she said in a strangled voice. “Why was she trying to kill us?”

“She wasn’t trying to kill you. You mean nothing to her. She wanted me.”

She remembered the bluish-white flashes she had seen, the way the car had shuddered, and she trembled all over. “Oh, my God,” she breathed. “That was some sort of ray gun. You really *are* from the future.”

“Of course,” James said, as if it were perfectly obvious. “And she is hunting for me. She won’t stop until she has destroyed me. If she fails or is killed before she can carry out her mission, they will send more agents. I should have realized as much.”

“But she could have killed me!”

“I do not believe she was trying to kill us,” James said in his preternaturally calm tones.

“She was driving like a maniac!”

“We do not have cars in the future, and she is unfamiliar with the operation of a vehicle. I believe she was merely trying to force you off the road. She was shouting for you to pull over.”

Annie remembered the woman shouting at her, although she hadn’t been able to hear a word of it. “But she *shot* at us.”

“The gun was not set at full intensity. If it had been, we would not be here now.”

“So she’s not trying to kill you after all?”

“Her organization intends to kill me,” James said with bleak certainty. “*She* intends to kill me. She simply does not wish to alter the past while doing so.”

“Why do they want you?” she whispered. “Are you some sort of escaped criminal?”

“Yes. That is precisely what I am.”

She pulled into her garage, without the slightest memory of how she had gotten there, and turned to stare at him. “They’re trying to kill you,” she said. “You must have done something terrible. Are you a murderer?”

“Far worse, from their perspective,” James said. “I tried to free my people. In the effort we did kill some of them. We didn’t want to--we did everything we could to avoid it--but it couldn’t be helped.”

Annie gulped. The man had *killed* people. He wasn’t a harmless lunatic after all. He freely admitted that he was a killer. And she had invited him into her house, clothed him, and fed him.

She had spent the night under the same roof as a killer. Her heart nearly stopped in her chest.

Something he had said echoed in her head. She resisted the urge to fling the door open and run from the car, to run from him, and instead turned to face him. “What do you mean, you tried to free your people? Were your people at war with them?”

He shook his head slowly, meeting her gaze. “Not precisely.”

“Then what do you mean? Were you some kind of--of servant?”

“No,” he said softly. “I was a slave.”

## Chapter 4

Annie stared at him with shock, unable to imagine how this powerful, huge man could have been enslaved. She just couldn't believe it. It was impossible.

She reminded herself that many of the blacks who had been enslaved in antebellum America had been strong, powerful men as well. A man's strength had nothing to do with his ability to resist slavery. Perhaps the society that had enslaved James and his people had possessed superior weapons, or perhaps they had simply outnumbered them.

"Did you succeed?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you free your people?"

James looked away from her. "No," he said in an oddly strangled voice. "None of my people survived."

"Oh, God," she whispered. "James, I am so sorry--*none* of them?"

"Every friend I ever had is gone," he said bleakly. "Every last one. I was the only survivor. And my enemies won't rest until I am destroyed as well."

Annie shut her eyes for a moment against the pain in his voice. Having lost her husband, she knew what bereavement was like, but she could only guess at the way James felt. The magnitude of his tragedy was overwhelming. Every friend, every family member, every one of his people--all gone.

James seemed to put the past aside with an effort. "We must leave this place," he said, his voice harder than she had ever heard it. He pushed the car door open and stood. "Where else can we go?"

Annie stood up as well, noticing that there was a strange burn mark on the side of her car. She supposed that was the kind of mark a ray gun left on metal. James' voice echoed in her head: *The gun was not set at full intensity. If it had been, we would not be here now.*

"Why do we have to go anywhere?"

James looked at her impatiently. "Think, Annie. They know I am here. I should have been watching for her, but I was distracted by my surroundings. I now realize she was waiting for me this morning outside the house. She followed us through the mall. And when we left she followed us-- and tried to force you to give me up."

"It doesn't make sense," Annie said. "Why didn't she come up to the house and try to break in? For that matter, why didn't she just knock? Why chase us in a car?"

"It is difficult to say. She may have just located me as we were leaving the house. Or she may have been merely doing surveillance, following me to see what I did, and thought the opportunity of forcing us off the road was too good to pass up. By the

Bureau's rules, she should not have fired at you, even on a low setting, but the woman who is after me does not always play by the rules."

Annie remembered the woman's wild, angry eyes and shuddered. "No," she agreed, "she doesn't look like she gives a damn about rules. But how did she get here? For that matter, how did *you* get here?"

"I used the temporal displacement module--"

"Is that a fancy way of saying time machine?"

He nodded as they entered the house. "I broke into the facility where it is kept and used it. Only a very few people are permitted to use it, for obvious reasons. If someone were to return to the past and alter it in some way--"

"It might change the future. Yeah, I can see that."

"Scientists use the module for sociological study occasionally, and the Bureau uses it as well."

"The Bureau?"

"They are the ones who are chasing me. I am not the first person to try to escape the brutality of the present by hiding in the past. But the others have all been hunted down and destroyed by the Bureau. They will stop at nothing to destroy me as well."

"How did they find you?"

"The settings on the TDM no doubt gave away my approximate location. When I used the module, a portal through which others could follow was created."

"Are you saying my *kitchen* is a door to the future?"

"Not precisely. There are too many variables. But they were probably able to discern the correct time period and area in which I arrived. With a good deal of time and effort, they found me."

Annie frowned. "That doesn't make sense, James. Once they figured out where you were, why didn't they just go back to the moment you arrived and catch you then?"

"It is not possible for a person to exist twice in the same time period."

Annie thought about this for a moment. "Why the hell not?"

"It is difficult to explain. Time and space are two aspects of the same thing, and it is no more possible for a person to exist twice in the same time period than it is for two objects to occupy the same space. At any rate, time travel uses an enormous amount of energy, so much so that sending more than one set of agents to an era would be economically infeasible. It is more practical for them to use the agent or agents who are already in this era to find me and kill me. They want to destroy me as quickly as possible, lest I alter the past in some way."

Annie frowned. "I still don't understand how they found you. The earth spins at a pretty fast rate, and it moves as it goes around the sun. Even the universe is expanding all the time, isn't it? Even if a person came through the time machine just a few seconds after you did--"

"His location should be quite different," James agreed. "But the module is

calibrated to correct for that.” He looked down at her. “Annie, we must discuss this later. We do not have time to talk at this moment. She has probably not been incapacitated, despite the damage you did to her car, and it will not take her long to follow us here. We have to get away.”

Annie stared at him with shock. She was horrified to discover she was actually considering going with him. After what she had just been through she felt she would rather not be alone.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said firmly, willing herself to retain her sanity. This entire situation, with an escaped convict from the future being pursued by a ray-gun wielding cop, was too bizarre to be believed. She wondered if she’d somehow wandered into a bad Arnold Schwarzenegger movie. “I’ve got to get to work on Monday.”

“Work?”

“Yeah, work. Someone has to pay the mortgage on this place. Anyway, these Bureau people seem to play hardball. I really don’t want to get mixed up in this any further.”

“Annie,” he said gently, “you are already, as you put it, mixed up in this. The Bureau knows you are associated with me. I can’t predict what they might do to you.”

She stared at him. “Do you mean they might kill me?”

“They have already tried to drive you off the road,” he pointed out.

“You said she wasn’t trying to kill us!”

“But surely you perceive that she could have easily killed you by accident, had your car rolled. She wants me so badly that she has grown extremely careless. At any rate, if I get away, she may take out her frustrations on you.”

Annie was silent.

“If I leave, and you do not,” he went on, “the Bureau may capture you in order to gain information. They may even torture you in order to extract that information.”

“Torture me?” she gasped. “Why?”

“They hurt people simply because they can.”

The stark sorrow in his voice cut to her heart. Abruptly she remembered the ugly burned gash on her car. “Okay,” she said. “You’ve convinced me. Let’s get the hell out of here. Just let me get some clothes--”

He caught her elbow. “Annie, we don’t have time for you to pack a great many items. Do you own a weapon?”

“You mean a gun? No.”

“That is unfortunate. Is there any way of obtaining one?”

“I don’t think so. I’d have to get a license, I think. It would take quite a bit of time. There’s a waiting period or something. And I don’t have a clue how to handle a gun, anyway.”

James sighed. “I had been given to understand your era was riddled with violence.”



“Less so than yours, apparently,” she said, not bothering to keep the acid out of her tone.

“Perhaps you are right,” he admitted. “Very well. Bring nothing but necessities and take no more than five minutes to get ready.”

She remembered the woman who’d aimed the gun at them, that eerie flash of light, and the burn mark on her car, and nodded. “Okay. And maybe we’d better take Steve’s car. My other car, I mean. Someone’s bound to see that weird burn mark and wonder about it. Anyway, once the cops find that green sedan and analyze it, they’ll be looking for a car with scrape marks and paint that matches the other car’s damage. Hit and run is a felony, you know.”

“A felony? What is a felony?”

“Bad news,” Annie said succinctly.

“Something to be avoided, then. I see. At any rate, the Bureau will be on the lookout for the car they have already seen us in. Driving another car may help confuse them.”

Annie nodded as she headed up the stairs with James on her heels. “But where do you want to go? A hotel?”

“Somewhere safe. The more public the better. They are reluctant to pursue me in public, because it raises questions that cannot be answered. That is why she waited until we were alone on that deserted road, rather than attempting to capture me in the mall.”

Annie thought for a long moment, then nodded grimly. “I think I may know just the place.”

\* \* \* \*

Kay’s condo was dark when they entered. Turning on the light didn’t help much. The condo was decorated in a very modern style, with black leather-upholstered chairs, dark tables, and a charcoal-gray carpet. The living room was almost painfully clean, in sharp contrast to the cheerful clutter of Annie’s house. There was no dust to be seen on any surface, and surprisingly little indication that a baby lived here. Annie stepped inside, closed the door, and carefully locked and bolted it.

“We should be safe enough here,” she said. “There’s a doorman. He won’t let strangers inside the building. Are you sure no one followed us?”

James gazed around at his new surroundings with interest. “Absolutely. I observed the road most carefully.” Majestic and graceful as a lion, he paced across the living room carpet and observed the framed photographs on the mantel. After a moment’s study he picked up one depicting a slim, laughing woman with long auburn hair. “This is you.”

“Yes. That’s me in college. Kay has been my best friend since then.”

“You have hardly changed at all.”

Annie shrugged. She knew she’d changed a great deal in the ten years since she’d graduated from college, but most of the changes were internal. “Thanks.”

“It was not a compliment, merely an observation of fact.” He placed the photo back on the mantel and picked up a silver-framed one, frowning slightly. “Who is this?”

Annie walked over and looked at it. “That’s a new one. It’s her son, Clark.”

“Clark?”

“Clark Nicholas Sterling. A big name for such a little guy. I swear, she takes enough pictures of that kid to keep the film industry in business single handedly.”

James’ eyes narrowed as he stared at her. For a long moment he seemed struck dumb. At last he said, “She has a baby?”

“Yeah. He was kind of an accident, and she doesn’t have much contact with Clark’s father, but she adores Clark. He’s named after me.”

“After you?”

“Clark was my maiden name,” Annie explained. She looked at the picture, and a faint, wistful smile curved her mouth. “He’s cute, isn’t he?”

She was abruptly aware that her expression and tone had given away more than she intended. James was studying her curiously. She turned and walked away hastily, plopping down on the couch.

“Annie,” he said quietly.

“What?”

“Why don’t you have children?”

She crossed her arms and glared up at him defensively. “Maybe in the future everyone uses petri dishes, but here it takes a man to sire a baby.”

“But you were married.”

His gentle concern slashed at old, half-closed wounds. She blinked hard. “We didn’t get around to having children. I thought--” She paused, then said in a hoarse voice, “I thought we had forever. I guess I was wrong.”

“I am sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Annie stood up briskly, brushing at her cheeks and hoping he didn’t see the hasty motion. “I’d better go find Oscar.”

“Who?”

“Kay’s cat.” She strode quickly from the room, finding Oscar exactly where she expected him. The huge gray cat was a creature of habit, and at this time of day he was invariably in the study, curled up on Kay’s black leather office chair. He opened an eye, looked at her, and purred.

“Hi, Oscar,” she said, giving his head an affectionate rub. She had never been a cat person, but Oscar wasn’t merely a cat--he was better company than most people, if not a fabulous conversationalist. He lifted his head and rubbed against her hand, rumbling contentedly. Then he stiffened, his unblinking green eyes fixed on the door.

Annie saw that James had followed her. The cat stood up in his chair and regarded him for a long moment. Then he did something Annie had never seen him do before. The hair on his back lifted, his tail puffed out, and he hissed. A second later he

had leapt from the chair and raced from the room.

James watched the cat flee down the hall. "It appears," he remarked, "that Oscar does not care for me."

Annie frowned and walked over to stand next to him. She was in time to see Oscar's fluffed-out tail disappearing around the corner. "I've never seen him act like that before. Oscar is a pretty easygoing cat. He likes everyone."

"He doesn't like me."

"There's obviously something different about you. Is it possible he knows you're from the future?"

"I don't see how he could know that."

"Cats know a lot more than most people give them credit for."

James shrugged. "Perhaps he will grow to like me."

"I'm sure he will. You're very likable, James."

For a long moment James stared into her eyes. Slowly his hand came up to cup her cheek. Despite his size, his hand was soft and warm and infinitely gentle. She shivered at the feel of his skin against hers. He bent slowly and brushed his lips across her other cheek.

"Thank you," he whispered.

A bit bewildered by his reaction to what was really just a simple, casually uttered compliment, Annie blinked. "For what?"

"No one has ever called me likable before."

Overcome with sympathy, she reached up and gripped his hand. "I don't suppose slaves get a lot of compliments."

"No," he agreed dryly. "They don't."

"James?"

"Mmm?"

"Were you—were you really a slave?"

Her hesitant question seemed to break the spell. He dropped his hand from her cheek and stepped back. "Yes," he answered in a flat voice. "I belonged to a family for many years. I raised their children and cleaned their home, and never received gratitude, affection, or monetary compensation in return. I was not a person. I was merely property."

His features were set in proud, defiant lines, as if he expected her to suddenly order him to clean the house and cook dinner. As if the knowledge that he had once been a slave would change the way she looked at him. She felt the need to offer reassurance.

"Under our laws, people cannot be property," she said.

He gave her a wry smile that did not touch his eyes. "The difficulty lies in defining the term *people*," he said.

"I don't understand."

"Never mind." James turned and headed for the kitchen, evidently dismissing the

subject in favor of the topic that was nearest and dearest to his heart. "What do you want for lunch?"

\* \* \* \*

James made serious inroads into the baloney in the refrigerator, while Annie contented herself with a bowl of tomato soup. After lunch, she wandered back to Kay's study looking for something to read. She rubbed Oscar's ears while she studied the heavily laden bookshelves.

She and Kay did not have similar reading habits. Annie liked Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, and Jane Austen. When Kay wasn't slogging her way through medical journals, she preferred romance novels with titles like *Passion's Flame*, with covers that depicted muscular, bare-chested men holding women clad in gorgeous long gowns hiked halfway up their thighs. She also had a lot of paperback science fiction.

After some internal debate, Annie picked up one of the less steamy-looking romance novels and walked back to the living room. She wasn't sure she wanted to read anything too steamy with James around. The last thing she needed was sexy thoughts about James popping into her head.

Any *more* sexy thoughts, she amended honestly.

James was looking over the photos on the mantel again. "This is another picture of you," he said as she walked back into the room.

Annie glanced at the photo, seeing herself in a long white dress, her reddish hair twisted up and hidden beneath a gossamer veil. "Yeah, that's me and Steve when we got married. That's Kay beside me. She was my maid of honor."

"Maid of honor?"

"She had a special place in my wedding ceremony," Annie translated.

"She is important to you, then?"

Annie nodded as she began absently thumbing through the book. "Best friends forever," she said.

"And the man was your husband?"

Annie nodded again. She didn't want to look at the photo too closely. She was afraid she would disgrace herself by crying.

James regarded the picture thoughtfully. "He looks pleased."

"I told you, we were happy together."

"I've always wondered what it would be like to be married."

Annie looked up, seeing an oddly wistful expression on his features. Some small part of her was relieved to know he had never been married, that there wasn't a woman waiting for him in some other time and place. Then she wondered why it mattered to her.

"Kay has some photo albums in the study," she said. "If you want to see some more photos of us, I'll get them."

James nodded. "Please."

She walked back to the study, not surprised to find the albums neatly organized by

date, and yanked out a few. In the living room, she settled down on the couch, and James sat next to her.

"This is us in college," she said, opening the first album. "Kay was a lot more serious than I was. I partied all the time and took the easiest courses I could find. I always told Kay she worked too hard, but if you want to be a doctor I guess you have to work for it."

James studied the photo. Annie looked at it too, seeing that she really had looked much the same then as she did now, tall and slender with extremely long legs that she had displayed in excessively short shorts and miniskirts. Kay, who was barely five foot three, had always been wildly envious of her legs.

"Kay always said I got the legs and she got the brains," she said, grinning.

James frowned. "I do not know you that well, Annie, but you seem quite intelligent."

"Thanks. I'm not sure Kay's really any smarter than I am, just a whole lot more determined. She has one hell of a work ethic. From the time she was ten she knew she wanted to be a doctor. Me, I had a hard time making up my mind."

"What did you want to do?"

Annie hesitated for a long moment, staring at the photo of the girl she had once been. "I wanted to write poetry, actually."

"Poetry?"

"Yeah." She grinned wryly. "Pretty dumb, I know. Nobody makes a living writing poetry, after all."

James looked intrigued. "Did you actually write some?"

Annie nodded. "In fact, I actually managed to get a few poems published. But it obviously wasn't a way I could support myself. Most of the poetry journals pay you in copies of the magazine instead of money. You can't pay your rent with magazines. So after college I started working for an insurance company."

Instead of writing poetry, she reviewed insurance applications day in and day out. It wasn't glamorous, or even particularly interesting, but it did pay the bills. She realized with a shock she hadn't written any poetry in nearly ten years.

She lived a peaceful, boring, suburban existence. And yet she had been happy until Steve died.

James flipped through the album, glancing at photos that depicted her. He stopped at a photo of her at a frat party and tapped on the picture with a blunt fingertip. "What is that peculiar hat?"

"It's not a hat. It's a lampshade."

"A lampshade?" James looked up, stared thoughtfully at the lamp on the end table, then glanced back at her. "Why would you put a lampshade on your head?"

"It's an old cliché, all right? I just wanted everyone to know I was a party animal."

“A party animal?”

“You know, someone who spends all her time partying. Someone who’s a lot of fun.”

James studied her for a long moment. “You do not seem like a party animal to me.”

“So I’m not much fun, huh? Thanks a lot.”

“I did not intend to insult you. I simply think you are a rather subdued person.”

Annie felt annoyance bubbling up. “Maybe I am now,” she said through tightly compressed lips, “but I’ve been through hell in the past year. Before Steve died, I--”

She was embarrassed to hear her voice break. James shot her a typically masculine expression of alarm at the threat of tears. “I did not mean to upset you,” he said hastily.

Annie stood up and stalked across the iron-gray carpet. “It’s not your fault,” she whispered.

She heard his footsteps cross the room, felt his presence just behind her. “It is my fault, Annie.” Tentatively his hand brushed her shoulder. She heard the sincere concern and contrition in his voice, and it touched her heart as much as his hesitant caress. “I had no intention of distressing you, but I perceive now that I should not have made such a personal observation. Please accept my apology.”

Annie shook her head. She managed to get her voice under control. “No,” she said more firmly. “It wasn’t you. I mean, you didn’t make me mad. I guess-- I guess in a way you’re right.”

There was a puzzled silence. “I beg your pardon?”

Annie turned to face him. “I am boring,” she said bluntly. “I go to work, I go home, I watch TV, I go to bed. Then I get up and start over again. And the thing that really bugs me is that I guess I was boring even when I was married to Steve. I was so happy with him, but ... I haven’t partied in a long, long time.”

James looked down at her for a long moment. “I think,” he said at last, “that what you think of as boring is perfectly normal. The family that owned me spent most of their time either working, or enjoying each other’s company. They rarely held gatherings in their home.” A slight smile touched his full mouth. “And I never once saw one of them wear a lampshade.”

Annie felt the corners of her own mouth quirk up in response to the dry humor in his voice. “It’s just that--” She waved at the abandoned photo album, lying open on the couch. “I look at those pictures, and I feel so--so *old*.”

“I believe you are confusing *old* with *mature*,” James said gently.

“Maybe.” Annie sighed.

James regarded her with another flicker of amusement. “Tell me, Annie, do you really feel the desire to walk around with a glass bottle in your hand and a lampshade on your head?”

It sounded so ludicrous she had to grin. “No. No, of course not.”

“Perhaps you have learned something in the past ten years.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Annie crossed the room and looked at the laughing girl in the photo album for a long moment, then reached down and closed it. “Maybe I have, at that.”

## Chapter 5

“It’s called pizza.”

“It is *wonderful*,” James said, stuffing another large chunk into his mouth and speaking, rather indistinctly, around the pizza. “I have never had anything like it.”

“I’m glad you like it.” Annie had decided to call out for pizza, since she really wasn’t in the mood for cooking. And given James’ recent disclosures, she hesitated to ask him to do it, lest he assume she thought of him as some sort of servant. The last thing she wanted to do was insult him.

He had opened the door to the pizza delivery boy with the utmost caution, earning a strange look from the young man. James believed in being cautious. Considering recent events, she could hardly blame him.

The TV was on, but Annie had muted it for a commercial break and never gotten around to hitting the mute button again. She had forgotten how wonderful it was to have company--real company, not the chattering empty noise of television. She had been alone for a year, except for the occasional evening spent with Kay, and she hadn’t realized how very lonely she was.

Furthermore, James was good company. Last night she had thought he was insane. Tonight she found she was beginning to like him. A lot.

He had changed into one of his new pairs of chinos and a navy blue polo shirt, and his golden hair rippled in flawless waves to his shoulders. She hadn’t seen him comb it all day, yet it was as unmussed as ever. She wondered with a touch of envy how he managed that. Her own hair fell to her waist, but when she left it loose it needed to be combed every hour on the hour to look decent. Generally she just pulled it into a ponytail and forgot about it.

“You look nice in your clothes,” she said, watching him devour the piece of pizza. He looked fabulous, but she wasn’t about to tell him that.

“Thank you,” he said, glancing down at his shirt. “The truth is, I think I look rather peculiar.”

“I suppose the styles you’re used to are different.” Something occurred to her, and she paused with the slice of pizza partway to her mouth. “Or do you...?” She let the sentence trail off.

He looked at her in puzzlement, then suddenly flashed a killer smile. His teeth were remarkably white and straight. Even his mouth was perfect, she thought as the impact of that smile hit her like an anvil. She stared at him blankly, dazed.

“We do wear clothing, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I just wondered,” she said awkwardly, hoping he hadn’t noticed her gawking at him like a teenybopper. “After all, you showed up here buck naked.”



"I could not manage to get the temporal displacement module to permit clothing to pass through," he explained. "I am not expert in operating such a machine." He grinned again. "I am in fact fortunate that I did not leave any significant portion of my anatomy behind."

She felt her cheeks growing red. She had observed him closely enough to know that no significant portions of his anatomy had failed to make the trip. "Want another piece of pizza?" she said hastily, hoping he wouldn't notice her embarrassment.

James looked at her with a knowing smile, and she realized he had noted her reaction, but he did not comment on it. "Of course."

She passed him another piece of pizza, plucking a piece of ham off it and offering it to Oscar. The cat had unbent enough to remain in the same room as James, although he remained next to Annie, keeping her between himself and James. Greedy as ever, Oscar gobbled down the ham.

James offered the cat a piece of ham. Oscar's ears instantly went back and he made a spitting noise.

"He still doesn't like you," Annie said apologetically.

"It is all right. I am simply interested in him. I have never seen a cat before."

Annie felt a distinct shock. A world without cats in it was too alien for her to comprehend. "There are no *cats* in the future?"

James shook his head. There was too much pizza in his mouth for him to answer.

"What else is different in the future?"

James swallowed the pizza. "Everything. Nothing."

"Could you be a little more informative?"

"I'm not certain I should be. It is probably for the best that you not know what the future holds." He frowned. "It could alter my society in unpredictable ways."

"Sounds like your society could use altering."

"I agree. It could. But random changes might not be desirable ones."

"What possible effect could I have on the future, anyway?" Annie asked. "It's not like I'm the President or anything."

"Have you ever heard of the butterfly effect?"

"You mean the idea that the movement of a butterfly's wing in America can alter the weather in China?" He nodded. "Yeah, I've heard of it. It's silly, if you ask me."

"Not as silly as you might think. Like the weather, the future is shaped by a great many small events."

"Maybe. If you ask me, the future is shaped by important people. I'm not important."

"Perhaps not in your own eyes."

She wondered what he meant by that. Was he saying she was important to him? Of course not, she decided almost instantly. He was merely saying that one of her great-great-grandchildren might turn out to be important. Knowing something about the

future could presumably alter her actions, thus altering everything her descendants did, or even altering her decision to *have* descendants.

"Do you have children?" she blurted.

He swallowed his last piece of pizza and mopped his fingers carefully on a napkin, then took a swig of Coke. At last he turned toward her.

"I cannot have children."

"Oh," she said, vaguely disappointed for no reason she could think of. "Did you have a--I mean--were you ever--"

"I have no family, if that is what you are attempting to ask. Slaves are not permitted to marry."

His voice was impassive, but she felt a cold rage well up in her at his words. Even in antebellum America, slaves had been permitted to marry and bear children. They had been subject to arbitrary separation from their loved ones, but at least they had been permitted to *have* families. For a society to rule that some people could not even marry or procreate seemed grossly unfair.

"Why the hell not?"

James appeared slightly taken aback at her annoyed response. "We were slaves," he said, as if that explained everything.

"But--" Annie cast about for some way to put her anger into words. "Marriage is important," she said at last, "the most important institution humans have. When you fall in love and can't even marry, that's just--*inhumane*."

"Slavery is inhumane."

His stoic, philosophical attitude was beginning to grate on her. "Damn it!" she exploded. "Don't you even care that you weren't treated fairly?"

James blinked with surprise. "Of course I care," he responded. "I cared so much that I single-handedly started a movement that led to the deaths of everyone I loved. And the fact is that I'm not sorry for it." He paused. "One is better off dead than as a slave."

Annie felt embarrassed that she had chastised him for his lack of feeling. Obviously he had cared a great deal about the wrongs of his world, and had struggled to right them, with no success. "I'm sorry," she murmured, placing a hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry for the way they treated you."

He looked down at her hand for a long moment. "It is singularly absurd of you to apologize for something that happened three centuries after you lived."

"I suppose it is," she said softly. "I wish I could make them apologize to you."

She saw the ironic slant of his mouth. "They won't."

"Did no one else care how you were treated?"

James shrugged. "Some people, perhaps. But they were a small minority. The seductive thing about slavery is that it is very convenient. Most people find it hard to live without it, once they have possessed it."

"That doesn't alter the fact that slavery is wrong."

James looked at her a long moment, then seemed to shrug off his introspective mood with an effort. "You are an extraordinary woman," he said, smiling at her shyly. "When I am with you I feel almost--" He hesitated. "Almost like a person."

She stared into his eyes with great intensity. "James," she whispered, "you are a person. Never doubt it."

Without stopping to think, she leaned forward and kissed him on the mouth.

His lips were soft and yielding with surprise, and they tasted vaguely of oranges and lemons. Her hand curved around the back of his neck, pulling him closer, drawing him into the kiss. He responded helplessly, opening his lips and letting her deepen the kiss. Almost involuntarily, her tongue slid into his mouth and touched his. The intimacy was so startling, so *shocking*, that she drew back quickly and stared at him.

"I--I'm so sorry," she stammered. "I don't know what came over me. I haven't done anything like that since--since--"

James was gazing at her with wide blue eyes. "I have never been kissed before," he said softly.

"Never?"

He shook his head. "Never." He flashed his killer smile. "I liked it."

Annie frowned. She couldn't understand how a man this gorgeous had gotten so far in life without being kissed. But then again, she remembered, he hadn't been allowed to marry. Evidently not only marriage, but all romantic liaisons had been forbidden.

"Are you saying," she said incredulously, "that you're a *virgin*?"

"No."

"Let me get this straight. You've had sex, but nobody ever bothered to kiss you?"

"I was a slave," James said gently. "My mistress used me for purposes other than housekeeping occasionally, when she got bored. She also loaned me to her friends upon occasion."

Annie stared at him with horror. "She used you as a gigolo? A *prostitute*?"

He inclined his head slightly, the slow sweep of his dark gold lashes concealing the emotion in his gaze.

"And you went along with this?"

James drew his head up sharply at the appalled shock in her tone. The first genuine anger she'd seen him display flashed in his eyes. "I had no choice," he retorted in a cold voice. "She *owned* me, Annie. I had to do whatever she wanted, or suffer a rather excruciating punishment. My feelings on the subject were irrelevant."

Annie stared at him, wordless. She could hardly imagine the horror of his situation. He had had to please his mistress, no matter how perverse her desires, no matter what he himself had wanted. "That's rape," she said with savage fury. "That's all it is. Rape."

James lowered his lashes again. "I did not enjoy it," he admitted.

"Of course you didn't. Who wants to be treated like an object? Like some sort of

sex toy?" She snorted in disgust. "No wonder you wanted to be free."

He lifted his eyes quickly and stared at her. "You do understand," he said quietly, in an awed tone.

Annie stood up abruptly. She didn't like the way he was looking at her, with something that approached worship in his eyes. The last thing she wanted was for him to start seeing her as some sort of madonna figure. Saint Annie she was not.

"I'm going to clean up," she said gruffly, picking up the greasy napkins and empty Coke cans. "Kay can't stand any kind of a mess in her place. In fact, she'd kill me if she knew I'd been eating in the living room. She never lets food out of the kitchen."

James rose to his feet and picked up the empty pizza box, following her to the kitchen. "You and Kay do not seem to be the same personality type."

"No kidding. We were roommates our last year of college, and that was a huge mistake. We drove each other nuts. I think she would have killed me if she didn't love me so much."

James watched her as she busied herself stuffing the remnants of dinner into the trashcan. "I did not mean to make you uncomfortable," he said at last.

One of the empty soda cans slipped from her hand and fell onto the floor. "Uncomfortable?" she said, bending to pick it up. It slipped from her fingers and clanged to the floor again. "You didn't do anything to make me feel uncomfortable."

James watched her with a faintly amused glint in his eyes as she managed to wrestle the can into submission and force it into the trashcan. "I did not mean for the conversation to take such a personal turn."

"You mean telling me about what they did to you?" Annie shrugged. "That's okay, James. It helps me know where you're coming from."

"It is nevertheless...." He hesitated. "Perhaps more intimate a subject than was appropriate."

Annie turned abruptly and faced him. "That isn't what made me uncomfortable, James."

"Oh?"

"It was the kiss," she said in a rush of embarrassment. "I'm very sorry. I don't know what came over me. I shouldn't have kissed you like that."

"I'm glad you did."

The soft sincerity in his voice melted her heart. For one wild moment she was tempted to suggest they kiss again, but reason prevailed. The last thing she needed was to fall into bed with a man she barely knew, no matter how compellingly sweet he was, no matter how heart-stoppingly handsome. She turned away abruptly.

"Let's watch the news," she suggested, striving for normalcy. Or as much normalcy as was possible right now.

James followed her back into the living room and settled himself carefully onto one of Kay's black leather chairs. Annie plopped on the sofa and stretched out, picking

up the remote and carelessly flipping through channels. She paused as the image of Susan Takahashi, the Channel 12 news anchor, filled the screen. Susan Takahashi possessed strikingly beautiful Asian features, dark, luminous eyes, a mellifluous voice, and a businesslike air that had made her quite popular in the area. Her newscast was the highest rated locally.

Annie sat up abruptly as the image of a green sedan that had been twisted around a tree flashed on the screen. Susan Takahashi fixed an appropriately serious expression on her face. "In the suburbs today," she said, "there was a one-car collision on a road that has already claimed several lives." She went on to explain that the car had been stolen, and that despite the severity of the crash the occupant had apparently survived, since no one had been found at the site of the crash.

Annie was relieved to notice Susan didn't mention the tree that had been scorched by the ray gun. Perhaps the cops hadn't noticed it. Glancing over at James, she saw his features set into grim lines.

"I guess she wasn't seriously hurt," she said.

"I assumed as much from the way she jumped out of the car and fired at us," James said dryly.

"Yeah, but you never know. Sometimes people can be badly hurt and still keep going. It's an adrenaline thing. Anyway, it looks like she made it away from the car okay."

"Evidently," James frowned.

"Does it matter if she was hurt?" she asked curiously. "You said that if she didn't kill you, the Bureau would send more."

James shrugged. "The woman who is in pursuit of me hates me," he said. "She will be considerably more persistent than another agent of the Bureau might be. Had she been seriously injured, my chances of survival would be greater."

Annie thought about the woman who had aimed the alien-looking gun at them, an expression of loathing and fury on her face, and she shuddered. "Yeah. I can imagine. She looked pretty mean."

"She is obsessed," James said simply. "Her desire to destroy me goes beyond the professional and into the personal."

Annie wondered just what he might have done to earn the woman's undying hatred, but she couldn't bring herself to ask. She found she didn't really want to know. A commercial came on, and she began flipping through channels. Kay had a better cable service than she did, and there were considerably more channels. James watched her.

"You are doing it again," he observed at last.

Annie glanced at him. "What?"

"You are watching programs you have absolutely no interest in."

Annie scowled. "Are you telling me how to live my life?"

"On the contrary, it hardly seems that you have a life."

She fought the urge to throw the remote at him. "I get lonely, okay? The TV's better than nothing."

"Perhaps you would prefer to talk."

Talking was not high on her agenda. She vividly remembered the way she'd kissed him, the way she'd made a fool of herself, and the memory sent the blood rushing to her cheeks. The truth was she was too embarrassed to talk with him. And yet she was uncomfortably aware that she was, in fact, being rude. He was a guest, in a manner of speaking, and she had an obligation of sorts to chat with him.

"Fine," she said shortly, clicking the television off. "Let's talk. What do you want to talk about?"

"You," he said softly. "I want to talk about you, Annie."

Annie blinked in surprise. "Uh, there's not much to talk about," she said awkwardly. "I guess you're right. I don't have much of a life. I go to work, I come home, I sleep, I go to work again. Not real exciting."

"What do you do when you are home?"

Annie gestured vaguely at the TV.

"Besides that," he persisted gently. "There must be something that interests you besides that box."

"Television. It's called television."

"What do you do besides watch television?"

"Well, I--" Annie broke off. "When Steve was alive, we used to go see movies a lot. We went to the opera and symphony every now and then, too."

"Opera?"

"Singing," Annie explained briefly, and made a mental note to play *Dido and Aeneas*, her favorite opera, for him at some point. "I like music."

"Ah. So you listen to music."

Annie frowned. For the first time it occurred to her that she hadn't listened to one of her several hundred CDs in weeks. Maybe in months. She had developed a habit of coming home from work and clicking the TV on, and not turning it off until bedtime. "I guess not much any more," she admitted.

"Do you play games to entertain yourself?"

Annie shrugged. "There aren't a lot of games you can play by yourself. Solitaire gets kind of boring after a while. But when Steve was alive we used to play chess and Scrabble a lot."

"It sounds as if you engaged in more activities when your husband was alive."

"Yeah, well, we had a lot of friends. We did stuff with them."

"Do you not have friends now?"

Annie hesitated again. The truth was, except for Kay, her friends had all been married couples. She felt kind of awkward hanging around with them. They had all felt sorry for her when Steve died, and they had been uncomfortable, uncertain how to handle

her grief. She had pretty much quit spending time with them. About six months ago they had taken to calling her over for dinner and trying to set her up with guys, which was just another form of pity as far as she was concerned. At any rate, she hadn't wanted to be set up with any old guy. She'd wanted Steve.

"Kay," she said. "The woman who owns this condo. She's been my best friend for twenty years."

"Do you spend time with her?"

"Yeah, some. We get together maybe once a week or so. She's a doctor, a pediatric oncologist—" a job description that was bigger than Kay herself was—"and she's pretty busy most of the time. Even busier now that she has a baby. She's a single mom. Most of the time when she calls nowadays, it's because she needs me to baby-sit."

James was silent for a long moment. "So you spend most of your time working or watching television."

Annie drew up her legs, wrapped her arms around them, and rested her chin on her knees. "I admit, it sounds kind of pitiful when you put it that way."

James looked at her, curled into a defensive ball on the couch. "Small wonder you are lonely," he said gently.

She blinked at the sympathy in his voice. "Look, don't feel sorry for me, okay? It's my life. I guess I've screwed it up a little since Steve died, but I'm the one who screwed up."

"I did not say you had made an error. I merely observed that you seem lonely."

Annie hugged her legs and stared steadily at the TV. "Everyone was really nice to me after Steve died," she said quietly. "For a while all my friends brought me casseroles, invited me over to their houses for dinner, and dragged me to movies. They kept telling me I shouldn't be alone. But I guess for a while I *wanted* to be alone. I was depressed. Everything they did felt like pity to me, and I just didn't want company." She sighed. "Now I don't want to be alone all the time, but I don't know how to get my friends back."

"If they left you alone when you were grieving, perhaps they were not real friends."

"It wasn't their fault. It was mine."

"I think it was at least partly their fault."

"No. They tried hard to take care of me. I pushed them away."

"Perhaps they did not try hard enough."

Annie shrugged. There was no point in arguing about it. She suspected her married friends had in fact found her single state awkward, and they had dropped her more quickly than she had expected. But God knew she hadn't put forth much of an effort to keep her friends, those first few months after Steve had died. It had taken all of her energy just to keep getting up in the mornings. She hadn't had much emotion left over for friendships.

In fact, she realized, earlier this evening when she'd kissed James was the first

time in a year she hadn't felt dead inside.

Kissing James had made her feel very, very alive.

She stood up abruptly, switching the TV off. "I think it's time for bed," she said. "I'm pretty tired."

James rose to his feet and followed her down the hall. "You can take the guest room if you want," she said. She pushed the door open and flipped on the light. "It looks like the bed is made."

"This will be fine," James said.

"Okay. Well, then. I'll see you in the morning." Looking up, she saw that he was watching her intently. She thought she could drown in the azure depths of his eyes.

He was simply beautiful. Six and a half feet of incredibly sexy man, powerful and strong, with a raw, sensual edge to his looks that took her breath away.

And what was even more dangerous, he was really, really sweet.

She realized she wanted to kiss him again. She was pretty sure from the way he was looking at her that he wouldn't mind. She swung around before she could do something so hopelessly stupid and headed for Kay's bedroom.

"Good night, James."

She heard his answering rumble as she went inside the room, allowing Oscar in and then closing the door. Oscar jumped up on the coverlet and regarded her through half-slitted green eyes. She sat down next to him and ran her fingers through his gray fur, causing him to purr drowsily, and wished idly that she was running her fingers through James' long, sleek hair instead.

She really needed a cold shower. James had an effect on her senses that no other man had ever had, not even Steve. She felt like she was on fire whenever she looked at him, even when he was wearing clothes. Maybe it was the danger they'd shared together earlier in the day that was making her react this way. Or maybe it was just James.

She had to admit her life had become a whole hell of a lot less boring in the last twenty-four hours.



## Chapter 6

They spent Sunday quietly, watching movies from Kay's carefully alphabetized collection of videotapes. James asked question after question, about subjects ranging from public transportation to beer, forcing Annie to press the pause button about once a minute. When he asked what lipstick was, she found she was beginning to truly believe, to accept emotionally, that he really was from another time and place.

In the afternoon, James announced his intention of making dinner. With some explanation from Annie as to how the various appliances in the kitchen worked, he was soon rapidly preparing chicken in Kay's spotless, black-and-white kitchen.

"That smells good," she said, sniffing appreciatively as the chicken began to sizzle under the broiler.

"I believe you will like it," James said, slicing carrots so quickly and ruthlessly she feared for the well being of his fingers. He looked up from the cutting board for a second and flashed a grin. "Though perhaps not as well as pizza."

"Are you making a salad too?"

He nodded. "Do you like salad?"

"Yeah, but I never bother to make it." Annie gave a short laugh. "Since Steve died, I haven't really bothered to eat vegetables. I just don't keep green things in the fridge."

"I saw quite a few green things in your refrigerator," James said, so seriously she wasn't sure if he was making a joke. She chuckled anyway.

"Yeah, well, mold doesn't count." She watched his paring knife making short work of a green onion. "You're good at that."

"I have done it for a long time."

She hesitated, then went ahead and asked the question that had been lurking at the back of her mind. "How old are you, James?"

He tossed the sliced onion into the salad bowl and started on some black olives they'd found in the pantry. She noticed he was chopping so adroitly that none of the food fell to the floor or the countertop. *Kay would love this guy*, she reflected, then pushed the thought aside with annoyance. James was hers, damn it.

*Hers?* Where the hell had that idea come from?

"I am thirty-five years old," James said.

"Really? I wouldn't have thought you were even as old as thirty. I guess they have good skin care products in the future, huh?"

He gave her the blank look that meant he had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. "Something like that." He sliced rapidly through another olive, cutting thinner and more even slices than a food processor could have. "And how old are you?"

“Thirty-one.”

James slid her a thoughtful look. “How long were you married?”

“Three years.” She was finding it hurt less to talk about Steve than it had just a few days ago, though she couldn’t begin to understand why. It seemed like her heart had healed more since James arrived than it had the whole past year.

“How did you meet?”

“At work. He was an agent.”

“Agent?”

“An insurance agent.” Annie stood up and went to the fridge in search of a Coke. She pulled one out, popped it open, and continued. “I’m an insurance underwriter. The company I work for sells home and auto insurance through independent agents. Steve owned one of the agencies that represented us.”

James stopped chopping for a moment and frowned. “What is insurance?”

“Let me guess. They don’t have insurance in the future.”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Great. Just great. So I’ll be out of a job.”

“I would not concern myself, were I you. My time is three centuries hence. I think it unlikely you will live long enough to find yourself out of a job.”

He took a potholder, pulled the chicken out from under the broiler, and flipped it over with tongs. “I believe this will be edible,” he said with satisfaction, closing the oven door, “although I have never used these precise ingredients.”

“Well, you could have tried to find a recipe.”

“A what?”

Annie waved at the neat shelf of books. “In those cookbooks there are tons of recipes. I’m sure you could have found one for chicken.”

Frowning slightly, he pulled down one of the cookbooks and opened it. He glanced at it for a moment or two, flipping pages, then shrugged and put it back. “That would not have done me the slightest bit of good.”

“Why not?”

“I cannot read.”

Her mouth dropped open. Her first thought was that in his time they used a different written language. But that made no sense. He spoke English clearly enough, although a lot of idioms had obviously changed in the intervening years. She closed her mouth. “Doesn’t anyone read in your society?”

“Certainly. People do. Slaves do not.”

She felt a pang of pity at how casually he accepted the notion that he was not a person. Despite her assurances, despite his determination to win his freedom, there was still a part of him that thought of himself as less than human. She wondered if subconsciously he always would.

“Well,” she said, watching him as he carried the salad to the round glass table,

“here everyone needs to know how to read. Would you like to learn?”

He set the bowl carefully on the table, then turned to her with an expression of wonder. “You would teach me how to read?”

“Well, I could try,” Annie said. “I’m not the greatest teacher in the world. Would you like to try?”

He nodded eagerly. “Please.”

“Right after dinner, then.”

Dinner was, as promised, edible. In fact, making allowances for James’ unfamiliarity with twenty-first century food, it was quite good. After broiled chicken, brown rice, and salad with honey-mustard dressing, Annie got up and found some chocolate ice cream in the freezer. She scooped it out into two bowls and carried it to the table. James regarded it dubiously.

“What is that?”

“Chocolate ice cream. Food of the gods.”

James looked more suspicious than before. “As I recall, you said something similar about coffee.”

Annie waved a hand. “Coffee is an acquired taste. Chocolate isn’t. Trust me. I’ve never known anyone who didn’t love chocolate.”

She dug her spoon into the ice cream and started eating, watching with amusement while James put a very tiny amount on his spoon and tasted it. She saw his eyes grow wide with delight.

“It is delicious!” he exclaimed.

Annie grinned. “Told you.”

James liked ice cream so much that he had a second bowl. Annie watched him polishing off his second serving. “If you keep that up,” she said, “you’re going to get fat.”

James smiled as he carefully licked his spoon. “That’s not likely.”

“No,” she agreed, looking at his hard, lean body. “I guess it isn’t.”

Having finished off all the available ice cream, James stood up and began gathering the china. Annie waved him off. “Don’t worry about it, James. You cooked. I’ll clean up.”

She saw the flash of surprise deep in his blue eyes. “I can do it.”

“Just sit down,” she said impatiently. “You’re not a slave here, James.”

Obediently, he sat down and watched as she stashed everything in the dishwasher, scrubbed the pots, and wiped off the counters carefully. She wasn’t this neat at home, but she knew Kay would kill her if there were any spots left on her prized black granite countertops.

“There,” she said at last. “All finished. See? It didn’t kill you to sit still.”

James flashed his flawless white teeth in a grin. “I believe I could get used to it.”

“Do you want to get started on learning how to read?”

James nodded as he followed her out to the living room. "Is it difficult?"

The eager hope in his voice slashed to her heart. It told her more clearly than his words had that no one had ever treated him like a person before.

"Yes," she said carefully, not wishing to discourage him, "but not impossible by any means. It will take some time, though."

She went to the nursery, where Kay, devoted mommy that she was, had already amassed a considerable collection of Dr. Seuss and the like. Annie knew that Kay had been reading to Clark practically since the moment he was conceived. If Clark was reading yet, he had given no sign of it, but Annie wouldn't have been really surprised to find that he was. If maternal devotion had anything to do with it, Clark would be reading by the time he was a year old.

She returned to the living room with several large, colorful books. James was sitting on the black couch, waiting for her. She sat down next to him and opened the first book. "Do you know the alphabet?"

She found that James had absolutely no knowledge of the alphabet, yet within half an hour he was able to fluently read the easy reader she had brought out. She was amazed to discover that he had only to see a word to memorize it. At last she closed the book and looked at him through narrowed eyes.

"You're not normal, James. You know that?"

James looked alarmed. "I have a good memory."

"Bull," she said succinctly. "Don't give me that. It's more than that, and you know it."

James said nothing.

"It all begins to make sense now," she went on. "I'm not a big science fiction reader, but I've read a bit. Your people were some kind of super race, weren't they?"

James hesitated, then nodded reluctantly.

Annie swallowed. The notion of eugenics gave her the creeps. The idea of creating people according to a preconceived notion of ideal humanity was way too reminiscent of the Aryan race ideas propagated by the Nazis in the thirties and forties. But with the recent advances in cloning technology and the newly developed ability to map DNA, it wasn't nearly as farfetched a notion as it had been twenty years ago. Three centuries from now, who knew what scientists might be able to do by manipulating human genes?

She began to piece together what James had told her over the past two days. Somewhere along the line, she speculated, someone had figured out a way to create ideal people, perfect people like James. People who were physically and mentally superior. And, not surprisingly, there had been a backlash. She guessed that laws had been passed, making the genetically engineered population slaves rather than people equal in the eyes of the law.

Normal people didn't take kindly to the notion that they were inferior, or suddenly

obsolete. It made the way James' society had treated him a whole lot more understandable. Immoral as hell, but understandable.

She remembered James' assertion that he couldn't have children. She was willing to bet his people had been forcibly sterilized as well.

And when they rebelled against such treatment, they had been eliminated.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I didn't know."

"I should have told you earlier," James said stiffly. "I simply didn't want to see the expression in your eyes when you realized I was created rather than born."

Annie shook her head. "It isn't your fault someone messed around with your genes, James. Just because you came out of a test tube doesn't make you less human." She looked at him and smiled wanly. "If anything, it makes you more human. Superhuman, if you will. I guess that's why people in your society had a hard time dealing with it."

James looked blank. "A test tube?"

Evidently that was another term that hadn't stood up over three centuries. "I just meant that an artificially created human is still human." She shrugged. "We have test tube babies here, too. Sometimes, when a woman can't get pregnant any other way, they fertilize one of her eggs out of utero and then implant it somehow. I don't know the specifics, but I do know that a baby created that way is just as human as one made the more usual way."

James hesitated, almost imperceptibly. "You are remarkably tolerant."

"On the flip side--" Annie shrugged. "You may not like my saying this, but I can see why the people in your society freaked out. It can't be easy, finding yourself in competition with perfect people."

James lowered his lashes. They were, like the rest of him, totally unbelievable, dark gold and longer than any she'd seen before. She wondered if someone had actually gone to the trouble of engineering genes for fabulously long eyelashes. If so, that unknown scientist must have had way too much time on his or her hands.

"I am not perfect," he said.

"Nobody's perfect, James. But your people must have come a lot closer to it than the rest of us."

She took the book from his hands and put it on the coffee table. "Let's forget reading for now," she said gently, knowing from his expression that he was thinking of his past. His past, her future. "Why don't we listen to some music? Do you like classical music?"

He tilted his head. "Classical music? Do you mean music like the Beatles?"

She grinned. "No, although they're pretty good too. I mean, you know, Bach and Beethoven. Old guys like that." She opened Kay's entertainment center, which was, predictably, black, and started looking through the CDs, which were arranged neatly by composer and artist. "How about some Vivaldi?"

James shrugged.

"I hope Vivaldi is known in your century."

"Perhaps it is. I do not believe the family I belonged to was a particularly musical one." He raised his eyebrows as she removed the CD carefully from its case. Kay would have a cow if she got a fingerprint on it. "What is that?"

"A CD." She stood up and walked back across to the couch, offering it for his inspection. He took it, holding it by the edges just as she had. He studied it carefully, turning it in the light and admiring the rainbow colors that danced across it.

"What is it for?"

"This one has music on it. There are also ones that hold information for computers, and now they put movies on them, too."

"Ah," he said, giving it back to her with an air of satisfied curiosity. "We use chips for similar purposes."

She put the CD into the player and touched the appropriate buttons, causing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* to stream from the speakers in a cascade of lovely sound. She had purposely picked something accessible, something that most people were capable of appreciating, although her own tastes in classical music ran more to somewhat esoteric composers such as Takemitsu and Glass.

James leaned forward and listened intently. She sat down on the sofa next to him without speaking, respectful of his evident desire to listen in silence. When the first movement of the "Spring" concerto ended, he turned to her with an odd expression on his face.

"This is exceptionally beautiful."

"Even better than the Beatles?"

He tilted his head thoughtfully. "I wouldn't go that far."

Annie burst out laughing. "James," she said when she got her giggles under control, "you have to be the sweetest man I've ever met. And the funniest."

He looked chagrined. "I did not intend to be amusing. You asked for my opinion and I rendered one."

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings," she said hastily, choking back her laughter. "I'm glad you like it."

"I do. It is lovely."

He turned back to the speakers and continued listening. Annie curled her feet up on the couch, feeling peculiarly comfortable as she sat next to him in companionable silence. It was not often she found someone who liked to listen to classical music with her. Kay liked music, but she was the exception rather than the rule.

After a few minutes, James leaned back. He regarded her with a thoughtful look, then slowly, hesitantly, slid an arm around her shoulders.

It felt good. It felt *right*. She knew she should discourage him, but she couldn't have moved away if her life depended on it. She snuggled up in the curve of his arm and

leaned her head against his chest.

Tentatively, he reached up with his other hand and began to stroke her hair.

The careful touch of his fingers sent a shiver through her, all the way down to her toes. She slitted her eyes in contentment. "Aren't you listening to the music any more, James?"

"The music is beautiful," he said softly. "But you are more so."

His fingers threaded gently through the length of her hair, exploring it as if he'd never touched a woman's hair before. Perhaps he hadn't. She supposed a woman who used a man for selfish sexual pleasure wasn't interested in having her hair caressed any more than she was interested in kissing. Evidently his job had been to provide sexual satisfaction, and nothing more.

She pressed her cheek against his chest. Apparently taking her reaction as encouragement, he let his lips brush the top of her head. She trembled. There was nothing more in the world she would have liked to do than lift her head and kiss him. But something--something that felt very much like guilt--stopped her.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, sanity was making a comeback. Sanity, laced liberally with shame. She sat up and moved away from him. "I think I should go to bed now," she said, avoiding his forthright cobalt gaze.

James stared at her in a way that made her suspect he could see right down to the depths of her soul. "Did I frighten you?"

That was the very last question she wanted to answer right now. Standing up hastily, she stalked across the room. "I can't do this," she said hoarsely. "I really can't. My husband--"

James stood. He made no effort to follow her, simply looked at her with compassion. "You told me your husband has been dead for a year."

"Yes."

"Perhaps it is time to start letting him go."

"How?" She turned on him with sudden anger. "By having sex with a stranger? How will that help?"

"Am I a stranger?"

Annie closed her eyes, bewildered by the conflicting emotions that warred within her. "I've only known you two days," she murmured. "Two days isn't long enough. You can't replace Steve. You can't."

"I am not attempting to replace him. I am certain that nothing will ever take his place in your heart."

She covered her face with her hands. "I'm afraid," she whispered brokenly. "I'm afraid that you could."

James said nothing. For long moments there was no sound except the sweetly flowing Vivaldi. At last he spoke.

"I only want to give you joy, Annie."

She lowered her hands and looked at him, unaware there were tears on her cheeks until he stepped closer and began brushing them away. "Don't cry. Please don't. I didn't mean to make you unhappy."

The sincere distress in his voice was her undoing. He was so kind, so inexpressibly *sweet*. Her guilt and confusion splintered into shards and melted away in the warmth of his gaze. Unable to stop herself, she pulled his head down and kissed him.

It was nothing like the first fumbling kiss they had shared. She did not feel in the least tentative or shy. She felt powerful and sexy. He was an extraordinary man, the most remarkable man she'd ever met, and she wanted him as much as she'd ever wanted anything. Not merely because he was beautiful, but because he was kind, thoughtful, and gentle.

Because she had become convinced he was a good man.

Her kiss was forceful, determined, and his lips parted almost at once. She thrust her tongue inside his mouth, collapsing against him when his tongue found hers and stroked it. She let her hands run freely across his body, exploring and caressing, as she'd been longing to do since she first saw him. She cupped his gorgeous tight butt and pulled him against her, feeling the heavy bulge of his erection against her abdomen, rubbing against him with nearly desperate haste.

Kay had been right. It had been much, much too long since she'd made love to a man.

She reached down between their bodies and found his erection, straining against the fabric of his slacks. He was incredibly huge, she thought with a shock. Evidently some scientist had figured out how to engineer that as well. She ran her fingers experimentally along the length of him, and he stiffened.

"Annie."

At the startled alarm in his voice, she paused. "Don't you like that?" she murmured against his lips.

He caught her hand. "Don't."

"Why not?" She moved her fingers slightly, and felt his erection throb sharply in response. He tightened his grasp on her wrist.

"Please," he said hoarsely. "*Don't.*"

She pulled back and looked at him, seeing the very real distress on his face. "No one has ever touched you that way before, have they?"

Wordlessly, he shook his head.

For all she knew, he'd had sex with a hundred women, but in many ways, he was still a virgin. "It's all right," she said gently, bringing her hand up to caress his cheek in a reassuring gesture. "You are entitled to enjoy yourself, James."

He swallowed audibly. "It is not my job to take pleasure," he said roughly. "I am supposed to give you pleasure."

She ran her fingers across the high, beautiful sweep of his cheekbone. "Making



love isn't about taking pleasure from another person. It's about sharing."

James hesitated, breathing heavily. "In that case," he said at last, "I don't think I've ever made love before."

"I don't think you have, either." She reached up and brushed her lips across his, then pulled away from him and looked into his eyes. "But tonight-- you will."

## Chapter 7

It took some effort to coax James into the bedroom. He was clearly frightened of the feelings she had managed to evoke in him, which she found both charming and somewhat disturbing. It was very like introducing an adolescent male to the mysteries of sex--if she did a poor job, he might be put off lovemaking forever. It seemed like a heavy responsibility.

Annie shrugged aside her concerns. She intended to do a good job.

She stood in front of him and began methodically taking her clothes off, suspecting he might be more comfortable if she made herself symbolically vulnerable. He watched her without speaking, but his eyes, serious and intent, did not waver from her. At last, fully nude, she stepped closer to him.

Yanking the tail of his shirt out of his pants, she slipped a hand up beneath the fabric and stroked his chest. His skin was warm and soft, but the muscles beneath were hard as iron. She felt the nervous tension in his rigid posture, heard his breath coming in a shallow, rapid rhythm.

She ran her hand down the sculpted ridges of his abdomen. His muscular development was nothing short of amazing. It was, she thought, the first time she'd ever really encountered a six-pack. She heard his sharp intake of breath as her fingers slid downward. "Do you like that?"

He nodded jerkily. "But I should be--"

She stopped him by pressing a finger against his lips. "Not tonight, James. Tonight I want to look at you. To touch you. Tomorrow...." She grinned. "We'll see how things work out. But tonight, for heaven's sake, please stop arguing about it."

She tugged the shirt up over his head and tossed it to the floor, then stared at him, indulging herself. Since the moment she'd seen him naked in her kitchen, she'd yearned for an opportunity to stare at him as long as she wanted. His heavy chest muscles were clearly defined beneath amber skin dusted with light gold hairs. "You are the most gorgeous man I've ever laid eyes on," she whispered in awe. "You really are."

Despite her obvious admiration, James looked uncomfortable. He was obviously not accustomed to being touched with reverence or affection. She placed her hands on his bare chest and began to explore him with her hands. "Relax," she advised him. "I won't bite. That is, unless you want me to."

James stood stiffly beneath her questing hands, unmoving, but definitely not relaxed. He watched her with a peculiar anxiety, like a deer watching a wolf's stealthy movements. He was, she realized with compassion, nervous. Possibly even frightened. Slowly, she bent toward him, breathing in his citrusy scent, brushing her lips lightly against his chest, hearing him respond with a small sound of pleasure, almost a whimper.

She heard him swallow nervously, felt him stiffen.

“Don’t you like that, James?”

He hesitated for a long moment. “I like it too well,” he said hoarsely.

“It’s okay, James.” She let her lips drift across the bulging muscle of his chest a second time. “Let yourself enjoy it.”

“I am not supposed to enjoy it.”

Hearing what sounded almost like self-loathing in his tone, she looked up in surprise. She gazed into his eyes steadily. “I *want* you to enjoy it, James.”

A flash of astonishment ignited deep in his eyes, as if that was a revolutionary idea, and then his expression cleared a bit. Seeing some of the nervousness ebb from his posture, she continued her exploration of his chest. Her lips brushed softly over his rigid nipple, and he jumped as if she’d electrocuted him.

Amused by his reaction, she let her tongue slide over his nipple, and he gave a long, shuddering groan. The primitive noise sent a shiver through her, and she realized she was as aroused as she had ever been in her life.

She wanted to yank him onto the bed and have her way with him. She wanted to feel him deep inside her. But she struggled to control herself, to push her own needs aside. Tonight all that mattered was James.

It was a thrilling torture to go slowly, to force herself to make it good for him. Slowly she kissed her way down the rippled muscles of his abdomen, toward his navel, and beyond. As she began to unbuckle his belt he stepped backward, away from her.

She lifted her head. “What’s wrong, James?”

He blinked down at her. “You are not going to—to—”

Amused by his inarticulate shock, Annie felt a smile tilt her lips. “James,” she said softly, “I’m not going to do anything you don’t want me to do. I promise. Right now I just want to look, okay? Because you were made to be looked at.”

Something dark flickered in his eyes, and she abruptly remembered he *had* been made to look at, in a manner of speaking. She instantly regretted her tactless comment. “Look,” she said, “there’s nothing wrong with letting a woman touch you, James.”

“In my world, it was wrong.”

“Well, it’s okay to try something new, isn’t it?”

“Innovations in my society invariably led to punishment.”

“I see,” she said gently. As they spoke she had been unfastening his slacks. Now she pushed them down, seeing the enormous bulge in his briefs. He was violently aroused, whether he wanted to admit it or not. She pulled his briefs down, and he stepped out of them and stood before her, as naked as the night they’d met.

She hadn’t been wrong. He was beyond a shadow of a doubt the hugest man she’d ever seen. Moreover, he was beautiful. Her breath caught in her throat as she stared, awestruck, at the length and thickness of his erection. The thought of what he would feel like inside her flitted through her brain, and she felt heat eddying low in her

abdomen, felt an ache in her nipples she hadn't felt in a long, long time.

Unable to stop herself, she reached out and ran her finger lightly down his shaft.

He jumped, and she heard his breath hiss between his teeth. "Annie," he protested.

She'd never had a man object to such a simple caress, or act as if she'd done something so ... well, shocking. The horrified tone of his voice suggested he thought her action was almost depraved. "No one's ever touched you like this before?" she asked in a soft voice, gently running her finger from the unbelievably broad base of his penis to the blunt, solid head.

He closed his eyes and made no answer. Beneath her questing finger he felt like satin over granite, hot and smooth and rigid. Looking at the tense set of his jaw, she got the unmistakable impression he was struggling not to make a sound. She wondered with sympathy if expressing pleasure in his world led to punishment.

That was an appalling thought, the most intimate act between humans being made into a power struggle, an experience of fear rather than of ecstasy. Not for the first time, she thought James' future sounded like a horrible place.

"It's okay to like it, James," she murmured, encircling him with her hand, noticing as she did so that he was so big her fingers didn't meet. She slid the pad of her thumb back and forth over the sensitive tip until she felt a drop of moisture, seeing his head arch back, seeing his teeth grinding together, seeing the tendons in his neck standing out like cords. He was losing the battle not to react, surrendering his self-control. Which was precisely what she wanted.

"Annie," he breathed again, but this time it sounded less like an objection and more like a plea. His hands were clenched into fists at his side, and his hips moved in an involuntary rhythm. She realized she was no longer shocking him.

She decided to shock him again. Dropping to her knees, she let her lips brush him, very lightly.

His erection jerked violently, and a soft groan escaped him. "What the--" he gasped, then abruptly broke off. Annie felt her lips twitch in an involuntary smile. She really *had* shocked him that time, almost enough to startle a cuss word or two out of him. She'd actually wondered if perhaps they didn't curse in the future.

She brushed her lips over him again, and he groaned aloud. "Annie," he muttered hoarsely, "I really don't think--" He broke off with a startled gasp as she began to slowly stroke him with her tongue, feeling his scalding heat, tasting his moisture, exploring him more intimately than she'd ever explored her own husband, until he was writhing against her mouth, until he buried his hands in her hair, clenching his fingers and holding onto her like a lifeline.

Her tongue stroked easily across his silken skin as she delighted in the taste and texture of him, the soft sensual sounds he made, the way his body shuddered with pleasure. He was searingly hot against her mouth, hot and increasingly frenzied. When

she took him into her mouth, his entire body quivered, and he gave a hoarse, inarticulate cry.

Aware that she'd pushed him almost to his limits, she lifted her head. Hell, she thought wryly, she'd pushed herself to her limits. She'd never been this excited by a man before. She tamped down that thought, refusing to examine the disloyal implications. Standing up, she pushed him onto the bed. He fell back more than willingly.

Straddling him, she slowly lowered her body onto his. Despite his enormous size he slipped into her wet, hot sheath as if they'd been made for one another. He gripped her hips with his big hands and thrust into her deeply, and she cried out, stunned to feel herself explode instantly in a blazing climax. As she contracted around him he plunged into her, hard, over and over again, and she felt his body give a wrenching shudder, heard him sobbing with the violent force of his orgasm.

She fell forward against his chest, and his arms came around her, holding her with what felt very much like tenderness. There was a long silence, punctuated only by their harsh breathing. At last he said quietly, "Why did you do that?"

"Do what?" she said in surprise, lifting her head and looking at him. "I just made love to you, James. That's how people make love. At least, that's one of the ways."

He closed his eyes, avoiding her gaze. "No one has ever touched me that way before," he said at last.

"Yeah, I figured that out. But you'd better get used to it. I plan on doing it again. And again."

James opened his eyes and stared at her solemnly for a long moment, then abruptly shot her a hopeful grin. "Now?"

She tightened her arms around him and laughed, feeling happier than she had in a long, long time. "Don't be in such a big hurry," she advised, pressing a kiss to his chest. "There's always tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

"Oh, my *God*."

Annie awoke to the sound of a shocked female voice. No more alert than she ever was in the morning, she slowly forced her eyelids open.

Her best friend, Kay Sterling, was staring at her with disbelief.

"What're you looking at?" Annie mumbled, stretching her arms and yawning. As she did so, her hand came into contact with something solid and warm.

A man's bare chest.

Startled, Annie yelped and sat up, clutching the sheet to her breasts. Abruptly everything came back to her. She had seduced James last night and now she was lying nude next to him. In Kay's bed.

Her instinctive grab for the sheets had uncovered James, who was still out cold. Kay's gaze slid to his naked form, and she uttered a single, stunned word.

"Wow."

## Chapter 8

"I suppose you're going to tell me this isn't what it looks like."

Annie accepted a cup of instant coffee from her friend. "It is and it isn't."

"Oh, come on, Annie. Don't tease me. Tell Auntie Kay all about it."

Annie scowled into the murky depths of her coffee. She loathed instant coffee, but it was all Kay kept around, and it was better than nothing. "Okay. It's what it looks like."

"About time," Kay said with satisfaction. She was a small woman with long black hair and flawless light brown skin, who had somehow managed to make it through medical school and the rigors of residency without losing her sense of humor. She had approved wholeheartedly of Annie's marriage to Steve, but she didn't choose to tie herself down to any one man ... at least, she hadn't until Clark had come along. Clark had been an accident, albeit one that had changed her life for the better.

"What the hell are you doing here, anyway? I thought you weren't coming back till Tuesday."

"Obviously," Kay agreed with a twinkle.

Annie managed to resist the urge to pour the coffee over her friend's head. "Why are you here?" she repeated, downing a mouthful of the bitter brew.

"One of my patients had an emergency. You know, the little girl with leukemia. I got called back yesterday evening."

Annie nodded. Kay was in a practice with several other doctors, but she didn't expect her partners to take care of her emergencies. It was one of the reasons she almost never had a decent vacation. She joked that she'd had a baby just so she could get an uninterrupted twelve weeks off.

"Too bad. Was your mom mad?"

"Nah. Mom understands."

"Is the little girl okay?"

Kay's customary cheerful expression darkened. "I got her stabilized for now, but she's on the way down."

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too. Sometimes there's nothing you can do. Goddamned cancer." She made a visible effort to lighten her mood. "So tell me about this guy."

Annie shook her head. "I'd rather not. You're going to think I'm crazy."

"Not a chance. You'd be crazy *not* to jump the bones of a guy that looks like that." She grinned. "You've been holding out on me, girl. How long have you known this hunk?"

"Two days," Annie said morosely.

"Two days?"

Annie nodded.

"Good God, that's quick even by my standards."

"There were extenuating circumstances."

"Uh-huh. Yeah, I can see that."

"Not just because of his looks!" Annie snapped.

Kay took a sip of her tea, her dark eyes regarding Annie curiously over the rim of her cup. "Any particular reason you decided to do the dirty deed in my bed?"

Annie heaved a sigh. "That's the part you're not going to believe."

"Try me."

Annie put down her cup and met her friend's gaze squarely. "James is from the future and someone's trying to kill him."

Kay stared at her for a long moment. "You're right," she agreed at last. "I don't believe you."

"I figured as much."

"Annie...." Kay grinned ruefully. "This is some kind of a joke, right? You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

Annie shook her head.

Kay raised her cup and took a long swallow. "Annie," she said, very seriously, "I've only been gone for two days. You cannot possibly have gone insane in two lousy days."

"I'm not insane," Annie said patiently. She could hardly blame Kay for her reaction. God knew she *sounded* crazy. "James is from the future."

"Oh, come on!" Kay exploded. "Get serious, for God's sake. What is really going on here?"

"Annie is telling the truth."

The two women turned to see James. He had, Annie noted with relief, taken the time to put on clothes--a dark green polo shirt and a pair of button-fly jeans that clung to him in all the right places. He looked civilized, in an extremely sexy kind of way, and despite the frantic way he'd thrashed around in bed last night, his hair was perfectly neat. She supposed he'd found a comb somewhere, and wished she had taken the time to comb her hair. She imagined it looked pretty straggly, after last night's calisthenics.

Kay looked at him thoughtfully as he paused by the doorway. "I'm not sure I blame you, Annie," she said at last. "If I found a guy who looked like this, whose only fault was that he was nuts, I might play along too."

"I am not playing along!" Annie said hotly.

"It is the truth," James said, entering the kitchen. "I am from three centuries into your future."

"Uh-huh," Kay drawled. "How'd he prove this, Annie? Did he show you a driver's license dated 2304?"

“Look, I thought he was nuts too, at first. In fact, I was planning on having you examine him. But he’s not crazy. This woman—she was after him. She shot at us with some kind of ray gun.”

“A ray gun,” Kay repeated. She was clearly not buying it.

“Yeah,” Annie said defensively, “a ray gun. Did one hell of a number on the side of my car.”

“I didn’t happen to see your car in the parking garage.”

“That’s because I drove Steve’s Mini over here.” Annie sighed. “My car has this awful burned gouge on its side. I don’t think the guy at the body shop is going to know what to make of it.”

Kay looked at her for a long moment. “Let’s just say for the time being that this guy--James?-- *is* from the future. How, precisely, did this result in the two of you getting it on in my condo?”

“She knew where James was,” Annie explained. “She somehow tracked him to my house. We had to go somewhere else, somewhere safer.”

“How come she didn’t just follow you here?”

Annie swallowed. “She tried to run us off the road. I, uh, sort of ran her into a tree in self-defense. But she’s still alive, and looking for James. And James says there might be more of them.”

Kay shook her head slowly. “Annie, if I didn’t know better, I’d think you believed all this.”

Annie started to argue, but Kay held up a hand. “Never mind. Forget I said anything. How about breakfast?”

“I would be happy to cook,” James said politely.

Kay looked at him with surprise. “Geez. You cook, too?”

James nodded, and Kay gave him an approving grin. “It’d be easy to overlook a little thing like insanity in a man like you.”

\* \* \* \*

“I’ve got to get to the office,” Kay said, pushing back her plate and sighing happily. She had consumed five pancakes and two glasses of orange juice. Apparently she had been too busy last night to have dinner.

“Oh, hell, the office,” Annie said. It had totally slipped her mind that this was Monday. “I should be heading out myself. But I didn’t bring any work clothes.”

“You are not going anywhere,” James said firmly.

Annie sighed. “James, I can’t hole up here for the rest of my life. I have a job.”

“I understand that. But until we are certain the Bureau is no longer looking for me, you may not leave this building. I will not permit it.”

“Oh, right, the *Bureau*,” Kay said, rolling her eyes.

James looked displeased. “It is not a laughing matter.”

“Not to you, maybe.” Kay turned back to Annie. “So are you staying here?”



Annie sighed. "I don't know, James. No one has come looking for you all weekend. Maybe—"

Maybe she'd overreacted to the incident in the car. Maybe that blue flash she'd seen, and the scar it had left on her car, hadn't been from a ray gun at all, but a ... a freak lightning storm or something.

*Sure, Annie. Lightning out of a clear blue sky.*

She ignored her cynical inner voice and went on with her thoughts. Maybe James really wasn't from the future at all. People who could travel through time could find a fugitive easily enough, couldn't they? And yet no one had bothered them all weekend. It didn't seem to make sense. Maybe she ought to just go on with her life and forget everything that had happened.

"It is highly unlikely they have decided to let me go," James said. "Traveling through time requires an enormous expenditure of energy, enough to power one of your largest cities for a year. Once the Bureau commits itself, its agents always follow through."

Annie frowned in thought. It didn't appear to her that the Bureau—if there really was a Bureau--was all that committed to hunting down James, but she really didn't like the thought of leaving him alone. Who knew what trouble he might get himself into? "I guess I'll stay here, if you don't mind, Kay. I've got some personal days I can use."

"Since you're staying here anyway, you mind taking care of Clark?"

"Not at all," Annie said promptly. Ordinarily Kay left Clark in the care of an older lady who ran a daycare in her house. But Kay knew how much Annie loved taking care of the baby. At any rate, Annie figured she owed her friend something for borrowing her condo.

"Thanks. I might drop by around lunch to check on him, but I really don't want to get him up right now. He was up late last night, and he hated the plane ride besides. Screamed bloody murder the whole time." She grinned evilly. "I bet he'll be a real angel today."

"Thanks a lot."

Sure enough, five minutes after his mother left Clark woke up in a rotten mood. Annie changed him and walked him around the kitchen, trying to get him to take his milk. He averted his head and howled furiously, as if he'd never seen a bottle before in his four months of existence.

James, seated at the table, watched her singing softly to the baby. "You are fond of babies, aren't you?"

She looked up for a moment and smiled. "Sometimes," she said over Clark's furious yowls. "This apparently isn't one of his better days."

James stood up. "May I try?"

She shrugged. "Can't hurt, I suppose." She transferred Clark to James' arms, noticing he cradled the baby easily, supporting the head with the expertise of someone

who has held innumerable babies. She remembered he had told her he had been a nanny, and given the expert way he handled Clark she could easily believe it. The baby, snuggled against James' huge bicep, gazed up at him. Apparently the different face was a distraction, for he stopped crying and stared curiously. Moments later he was sucking milk with a blissful expression on his tiny face.

"You really are good with babies," Annie said in surprise.

"Years of experience." James brushed a finger across the baby's cheek and spoke softly. "He is a beautiful one."

Not only was he good with babies, he genuinely liked them, Annie realized with surprise. She didn't know too many men who were completely comfortable holding a baby. And most of the men she'd known failed utterly to understand the overwhelming female impulse to crowd around and moon over any baby spotted in the mall.

She felt oddly certain James would understand.

Once the baby had finished his bottle, James burped him, then took him into the living room. Annie put a blanket down on the carpet, and they watched the baby lying on it, lifting his head and observing his surroundings with wide-eyed interest.

An hour later Clark, exhausted from the enormous effort of lifting his head, had passed out on his blanket. Annie carried him into the nursery and carefully laid him on his back in the crib. He didn't move a muscle. Picking up the baby monitor, she tiptoed out and returned to the living room.

"He should sleep for a couple of hours," she said. "I've really got to take a shower, so I'm going to do that now."

James stood up and looked at her, a hot light in his eyes. "We can take one together."

Annie hesitated. "Suppose the baby starts crying?"

"Isn't that what the thing in your hand is for?"

"Oh, the baby monitor. Yeah, I guess so. But...." She paused, uneasy for no reason she could clearly define. She suspected she was feeling anxious about the idea of making love to him again. Last night she had felt powerful, in control, exposing James' weaknesses and vulnerabilities. This morning she had an uncomfortable certainty the tables would be turned. He would be the one in charge.

"It is all right, Annie," James said gently. "This morning it's my turn."

She hesitated again, then, slowly, nodded acquiescence.

Kay's black-tiled shower was easily big enough for two people. Annie put the baby monitor on the counter, turned up to full volume. Feeling awkward, she started the water and ran it until it was hot, then stripped quickly and stepped under the flow. James followed and stood next to her, far too close. She felt her heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and apprehension.

"I need to wash my hair," she said awkwardly, wetting the long mass.

"I can do that," he said. He glanced around the shower and found a bottle. "Is

this hair soap?"

"Shampoo, yes."

"Shampoo," he repeated carefully, as if testing the unfamiliar term. He poured some out into his hand and sniffed at it. "There is a fragrance in it," he remarked.

"Don't they use fragrances in the future?" She thought wryly that she wouldn't want to live in a world without Obsession.

"There is no need for perfumes and perfumed soaps in my society," he said as he began to rub the shampoo into her hair. "People ingest a tablet each day which slightly alters their body chemistry, giving their bodies the odor they prefer."

"Sounds convenient. Sort of like a deodorant and perfume all rolled into one?"

"Something like that," he agreed. "It is almost necessary when people live in such close proximity to their families all their lives. Additionally, it has the useful effect of reducing water usage, since a daily shower is not necessary."

Taking a pill of Obsession like a daily vitamin had a certain practicality about it, Annie thought, then forgot all about perfume as he continued to rub the shampoo into her hair. His hands were strong but gentle, massaging her scalp firmly without tugging or pulling. She leaned her head back and sighed.

"James, you've done this before."

"Many times," he said with a slight edge to his voice. Abruptly she remembered the things he had told her, and wondered if he'd served as a lady's maid as well as a sexual companion and nanny.

"James," she said softly, "you don't have to serve me. You aren't a slave."

There was a long silence, as he worked through the tangles in her long hair. At last he said, "I served my mistress because I had to." He spoke so quietly she could hardly hear him over the splashing water. "I serve you because I want to."

She felt tears stinging her eyes, tears that had nothing whatsoever to do with the shampoo he was rinsing from her hair. "Thank you," she whispered humbly.

He lathered his own hair hastily and rinsed it, then picked up a bar of soap. Slowly he began to soap her skin, beginning with the firm flesh of her belly. She sighed and closed her eyes. "James...."

His wet, soapy hands explored her body reverently, caressing her breasts and thighs and throat, sliding across her until she leaned back against him, making inarticulate sounds of pleasure. There was no doubt that he knew what a woman liked, she thought as he slipped his big hand around her breast and squeezed her nipple gently. Actually, his expertise was rather unnerving, considering how awkward and shy he'd been last night.

His hand, slick with soapy water, slid down her belly and slipped between her legs, and she gasped at the bolt of desire that shot through her. His warm, powerful fingers moved against her, seeking and finding the most sensitive spot, caressing her dampness, stroking gently, relentlessly, until the exquisite pleasure built to a nearly unbearable pressure, until a cataclysm of heat erupted inside her. She arched her back,

crying out helplessly as spasm after spasm of ecstasy racked her. At last the tremors faded, and she leaned against his chest, in the circle of his arms, as thoroughly satiated as she'd ever been in her lifetime.

And then James dropped to his knees in front of her.

Something about the position he had assumed made her think of his forced servitude, and she started to object, but her objections faded the instant she felt his mouth against her. To her surprise, warm pleasure curled within her, despite the fact that ten seconds before she would have sworn her body was incapable of feeling anything more.

Leaning back against the smooth tile wall of the shower, she closed her eyes, captured a fistful of his hair in either hand, and tilted her hips forward, offering herself up to him.

He accepted her wordless invitation, imprisoning her hips in his big hands and holding her motionless while he explored her. His warm, gentle mouth felt better than anything she could have imagined. His lips caressed her in a slow, subtle rhythm, allowing the sensations to build. And build they did. She leaned her head back and moaned, a soft sound of surrender that was barely audible over the splashing water.

At last she felt his tongue, probing delicately at first, sending a dazzling cascade of sensation through her body. She was aware the sounds she was making were more than audible, but she couldn't have stopped herself from crying out if her life had depended on it. His insistent tongue slipped over her slick flesh relentlessly, sliding against her in a forceful, ever-increasing tempo, until she detonated a second time, in a climax so unbelievably intense her whole body shuddered.

Her legs trembled beneath her, and she might have collapsed had he not stood up swiftly and caught her in his arms. Utterly drained, she leaned against him. "James," she breathed. "Oh, God, James, that was incredible."

He held her against his chest and kissed the top of her head as the hot water continued to sluice down over them. "I am pleased that you liked it."

She felt his demanding erection, hot and iron-hard against her lower abdomen. "But you gave me everything," she murmured, "and I gave you nothing."

"You will." He looked down at her, his vibrant azure eyes framed by spiky, wet lashes, and spoke in an intense whisper. "I want to be inside you, Annie."

"Oh, God," she said, feeling exhausted. "Not after that. I *can't*."

"Yes, you can. And you will. Trust me."

He shut off the water and stepped out of the shower. Methodically, he began to dry her off, using one of the black towels that hung on the rack next to the shower. She stood quietly until he had finished.

"And now," he said, handing her a dry towel, "it's your turn."

Annie began to rub him with the towel. She had thought herself beyond arousal, but touching him in such an intimate fashion was beginning to awaken some small, primitive core of lust deep within her. She dried off his chest, bulging with muscle, his

powerful arms, his abdomen. And paused.

"Don't stop now," he whispered.

She looked up into his eyes, saw him watching her intently with a glittering cobalt gaze. Slowly she moved the towel downward and began to rub him gently. He gave a deep, shuddering groan of pleasure and closed his eyes.

"That's enough," he murmured after a moment.

"Are you certain?"

He caught her hands as she began to caress him again. "Annie," he murmured, "this time we share it. Together."

She nodded. She rubbed the rest of him dry, kneeling to dry off his lower legs and feet, then slowly she stood and faced him.

"There's something I should have told you last night," she said. "I'm not on the pill."

"The pill?"

"Birth control. And I don't keep condoms in my purse. I haven't needed them for a long time. Kay might have some around somewhere, though. Are you certain--"

"I am incapable of siring children, Annie. And I have no communicable diseases."

"Oh. Great. That's terrific. Really." She looked up at him, feeling like a sixteen-year-old fumbling in the backseat with her first boyfriend. Awkwardness flooded over her in a hot, suffocating river. "Well, I really ought to dry my hair." She turned toward the cabinets beneath the sink.

"Annie."

"Yeah?"

"What are you afraid of?"

She turned slowly and met his gaze.

"You," she said in a shaky whisper. "I'm afraid of you."

She had known him for less than three days. And yet there was something about him that was so compelling, so utterly appealing, that she was afraid she'd never be the same once she truly surrendered to him.

She was afraid this one act would change her life forever.

James seemed to understand her fears. He tilted her chin up with his fingers and bent to kiss her gently. He was too sweet for her to resist. Moaning helplessly, she wrapped her arms around his neck. He picked her up and carried her to the bed, pulling the covers back and placing her carefully on the cool sheets.

"I want to be inside you, Annie," he rasped. "I want it more than anything."

Despite her earlier exhaustion, she was startled to realize that sex with him—true intimacy with him--was what she wanted most in the world. Something about this man aroused her beyond reason. Maybe it was his incredible body. Or maybe it was something else. Something deeper.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Please.”

He bent his head and caught her nipple between his lips, drawing it slowly into his mouth and sucking at it until she was breathless, until she ached with pleasure. Slowly his hand reached down, finding her, caressing her, making her tremble as his finger delved expertly into her curls. A rush of heat, potent and intoxicating as wine, flooded through her body.

“James,” she whispered desperately. “Please. It has to be *now*.”

He was inside her with a single hard thrust, and she clung to him, arching her back and crying out almost instantly as shimmering fulfillment crashed over her in waves. She shuddered over and over, aware of nothing but the incredible sensation of James, buried deep inside her. At last, utterly spent, she fell back against the sheets, wrapping her arms around him and kissing his shoulder.

“You feel so good,” he murmured thickly. “*So good.*”

His body was damp with sweat, his breathing labored. He moved slowly within her, struggling for control but rapidly losing the battle. His movements became eager, then desperate. She watched him throw back his head, his face contorted with agonizing pleasure. And then he sobbed with ecstasy and buried his face in her neck.

She held him as he collapsed against her, knowing her fears had been realized.

She had never felt closer to anyone in her life.

## Chapter 9

Afterward Annie lay with her head on his shoulder, quiet and introspective. She was afraid that she was ludicrously close to falling in love with this man, falling in love with his gentle sweetness and flashing smile, with his stoic acceptance of his own sorrows and his compassion for hers. She reached for his hand and threaded her fingers through his.

*Ridiculous. I haven't known him three full days. I can't be in love. I can't.*

"Annie," he murmured, brushing his lips across her cheek.

"Mmmm."

"What do you want for lunch?"

Her meditative mood was abruptly broken, and she sat up and glared at him with righteous indignation. "Do you *ever* think about anything except food?"

"Of course. I was not thinking about food a few moments ago." He shot her a lethally sexy grin. "But I find that I have worked up an appetite."

"Hmmp," Annie said, only partially mollified. She had been contemplating the question of how she felt about him, and he--*he* had been thinking about baloney. Wasn't that just like a man?

Abruptly the lights on the baby monitor flashed, and a piercing wail filled the room. "Uh-oh," Annie said. "Clark's up. Our lunch will have to wait a few minutes."

James stood up, a wicked smile on his lips. "I'm surprised we didn't wake him up earlier."

She felt her cheeks heat at his words. Finding underwear, shorts and a T-shirt, she threw them on hastily, hearing Clark's howls of rage grow louder. Clark wanted his lunch, and he wanted it now. He was much like James in that respect.

She retrieved the baby and set him in his high chair while James found clean clothes and put them on. He walked into the kitchen while she was attempting to spoon rice cereal into Clark's mouth. Cereal was new to the baby, and he wasn't sure what to make of it.

"Is he eating solids already?"

"*Eating* might be a bit of an overstatement," Annie said as she wiped away a dribble of rice cereal that adorned Clark's chin. "He likes the idea. He simply hasn't mastered the technique."

James nodded. "He will learn quickly." He wandered over to the refrigerator, and she noticed he was wearing a pair of denim shorts. They made his legs look a mile long.

"Damn, but you have great legs," she said softly. He bent to look into the fridge, and she added under her breath, "Great ass, too."

Despite the fact that she spoke nearly in a whisper, he looked back at her with a

quizzical frown. "Ass?"

"Never mind."

James blinked, then turned back to the refrigerator, apparently more interested in food than in enlarging his vocabulary. "Do you want a sandwich?"

Just as they were sitting down to their own lunch, there was a voice at the door. "Annie!"

Annie glanced around, surprised. "That's Kay," she said. "I guess she decided to come home for lunch." She stood up and headed for the door.

"Wait," James said.

"Don't be paranoid," she said over her shoulder, shooting back the deadbolt. "There's a doorman, remember? It's just Kay, for heaven's sakes."

She opened the door.

And screamed.

Before she could utter another sound, someone pushed her roughly to the floor. She hit the gray carpet with a force that knocked the breath out of her. Scrambling to a sitting position, she saw the woman who had pursued her and James two days ago, as well as a big, broad-shouldered man. They were both clad in black outfits that looked vaguely alien, and black gloves sheathed their hands. The man had Kay in an iron grip, and had a gun shoved against her temple.

The same sort of gun, Annie realized with cold dread, that had gouged a burn mark into metal, even though it hadn't been on full intensity. She didn't want to know what it could do to Kay's head.

In a smooth and incredibly quick motion, James lunged from the kitchen. There was a deadly rage in his eyes. He slid to a halt as he saw the gun pressed firmly against Kay's head.

"Don't try it, James," said the man. His light brown hair was cut into a short, military style, and his jaw was square and firm. He could have modeled for a Marines recruiting poster. Despite his tough-as-nails appearance, however, his gray eyes were gentle, and he sounded, oddly, almost apologetic.

James paused for a long moment. His eyes flickered toward Annie, and she realized he was thinking about charging the man despite his warning. He was obviously concerned for Annie, worried that she would be hurt or killed.

*Don't worry about me,* she implored him silently. *Think of Kay. Please don't do anything to get her killed. Please.*

James looked back at the man. "Leave the women alone," he said coolly. "They have absolutely nothing to do with this."

The woman spoke for the first time. She was young, with long black hair and green eyes. Her angelic beauty was belied by the stark hatred in her voice. "Don't be a fool, James. You know we can't let them go."

"They have done nothing to harm you."



"They know something of the future, James. They could use it to alter our world. You know we can't permit that."

James tilted his head. "But if you kill them, you may alter the future anyway."

"Unlikely," the woman said. "I have reviewed their histories. Neither ever made a major contribution to society."

"That's a great thing to find out just before you die," Kay said to Annie in a loud whisper. She attempted to shoot Annie her habitual cheeky grin, but it looked more like a grimace of pain. Annie knew she must be scared half to death.

"At any rate," the woman said, "I suspect your concern for them will ensure your good behavior. Cooperate with us, James. If you don't, we will kill them."

James looked grim. "If you intend to kill them eventually anyway, then there is no reason for me to refrain from attacking you."

"True," the woman admitted. "But if you attack us, an innocent bystander will die because of your action. Can you bear such a notion?"

James hesitated, then turned away.

"I thought not," the woman said with evident satisfaction.

James spun and lunged for her.

As quick as he was, the woman was faster. She lifted a small, cylindrical device she held in her gloved hand. White light flared out from her hand and enveloped James. He dropped heavily to the floor, writhing in pain.

"That was very foolish, James," she said, looking down at him with cold eyes. She seemed unaffected by his agony.

"Leave him alone!" Annie cried, coming to her feet. The anguish on James' face slashed at her heart. He was obviously in excruciating pain. "What are you doing to him?"

The woman glanced at her, unconcerned. "Punishing him," she said coolly.

The man looked more uncomfortable than before. "Is that really necessary, Dekka? Can't we just kill him?"

The woman named Dekka looked back at him. Her eyes glowed with a fanatical light. "Don't be a fool, Gar," she said bitterly. "He killed my brother with his bare hands. He and his so-called *people* killed hundreds of our people in their uprising. He deserves to suffer before he dies." She made a slight adjustment to the device she held, and the light brightened. James jerked in agony. Despite the fact that his teeth were clenched tightly together, a tortured whimper of anguish escaped him.

"Stop it!" Annie screamed. "Stop it! You're *hurting* him!"

Dekka looked at her with cool derision. "That is, after all, the idea."

"But Dekka--" the man called Gar said. He did not appear to have the same savage hatred for James that the woman did. Furthermore, he seemed to have forgotten that he was holding a hostage. His gun wavered from Kay's temple.

Annie saw Kay move suddenly, taking advantage of the man's momentary

distraction, saw her wrench free, saw her fling the man over her shoulder—with impressive ease for such a small woman--and kick him in the head, hard. He grunted and lay still.

And then Annie did the most courageous thing she had ever done in her life.

She leaped forward, directly into the light that was torturing James.

To her surprise, she felt no pain. There was a slight tingling sensation, like static electricity, but that was all. There was no hint of the agony that James appeared to be enduring.

Without pausing to question her good fortune, she dashed forward and hit Dekka in the stomach with her fist as hard as she could. Taken by surprise, the woman doubled over. Then Kay struck her from behind, and she fell to the ground and lay motionless. The device crashed to the floor and seemed to deactivate.

James collapsed against the carpet, utterly still.

Annie stared at him, feeling her heart thudding against her ribs. “Oh, my God, Kay, is he--”

“He’s alive,” Kay said. “His chest is moving.” She blinked at the three bodies on the floor, and the two futuristic devices. “This is going to make for an interesting discussion with the police.”

“You were wonderful,” Annie said, feeling a rush of affection for her friend.

Kay shrugged. “I told you you should take karate in college. But no, you had to take modern dance.” She smiled wanly. “The truth is you were pretty damn terrific yourself. But now I think we better get them tied up before they wake up.”

They found some rope and tied the man and woman securely at wrists and ankle, then Kay went into the kitchen to retrieve her baby. Annie staggered over and sat down next to James. “James,” she whispered, brushing back his hair. “Wake up. Please.”

There was no response. James did not stir. She ran her fingers through his hair tenderly.

“Is he your *lover*?”

At the mocking, scornful tone, Annie turned to see Dekka’s green eyes, full of malice, on her. Dekka had evidently received a less serious blow to the head than the man had. “Yes,” she said coolly. She was damned if she would deny it. “He is.”

“You poor little fool,” Dekka said. “You don’t have the slightest idea what’s going on. You haven’t the faintest notion of how that—that *thing* has manipulated you, do you?”

Annie blinked, taken aback by the woman’s obvious hatred for James. She remembered Dekka’s assertion that James had killed her brother and wondered if it was true. James had admitted to killing people, she remembered with a shiver of unease.

But he had had a compelling reason for doing so, after all.

“He is a good man,” she said firmly. “You won’t convince me otherwise.”

“You poor deluded idiot. He’s not a *man* at all.”

Annie stared at her, bewildered. “What do you mean?”  
Dekka looked at her with contempt and spoke coldly.  
“James is a machine.”

## Chapter 10

"That's ludicrous," Kay said sharply. She had come from the kitchen and stood at the entrance to the living room, cuddling her baby.

"Is it?"

Annie said nothing. There were certainly some odd things about James that she hadn't quite been able to reconcile with what she knew of him--his sheer physical perfection, for one. And then there was the way Oscar was afraid of him....

Then she shook her head. Kay was right--it *was* ludicrous. She had made love to the man, felt his skin grow damp with sweat, had heard him cry out with pleasure. She had heard the sorrow in his voice when he talked about his dead friends. And she had just seen him writhing with pain. A machine couldn't react that way.

Could it?

"Kay," she whispered. "Can you check?"

"Annie, this is crazy!"

"Please, Kay. I have to know."

At the desperate plea in her voice, Kay nodded reluctantly and went to get her bag. She took out her stethoscope, placed it on James' chest, and listened for a long moment. Then she moved it around. Annie watched her silently, without the vaguest idea what she was doing. She watched as Kay picked up his hand and studied it with the utmost care. Finally Kay placed his hand back on the floor and stared at her in helpless bewilderment.

"Well?" Annie demanded. "Is he human?"

Kay shook her head slowly. She looked stunned. "No," she said. "He's not."

Annie felt her mouth drop open as Kay continued, attempting to conceal her shock beneath her most professional manner. "I don't know for certain *what* he is. He has no heart in his chest. He does appear to have a pump of some sort in the abdominal area, but it does not sound like a heart." She hesitated. "Frankly, it sounds artificial."

"Of course it is," Dekka said with grim satisfaction.

"But--but--" Annie looked at James' inert form. "People have artificial hearts even now," she said pleadingly, knowing she was grasping at straws. "Couldn't it be a replacement of some kind?" She saw James' chest moving up and down and grasped at that with the desperation of a drowning woman clutching at a branch. "I mean, he *breathes*, Kay."

"His respiration does not sound normal, either. I don't believe he has human lungs. And his skin, in my opinion, is artificial."

"Artificial?" Annie stared at her blankly. "How can you tell?"

Kay shook her head. "The texture is not precisely the same, although it's a very convincing imitation. There are pores, just as there are in human skin, and I'd lay odds

that he has sweat glands, or an imitation thereof. He even has hair on his arms, just as humans do. He is an excellent imitation, but in my estimation that's all he is. An imitation."

Kay hesitated, glancing at Annie and seeing her evident anguish, then continuing in the same doggedly professional tones. "I can't imagine how something like this could be built. A crude artificial skin has been developed in the last few years, but it does not begin to approach this level of sophistication. And assuming that this--this *entity* has a computer for a brain--"

"He is not a computer!"

Kay ignored her outburst. "I don't know how far away such technology is, but I'd guess a very long time. Many, many people are working on artificial intelligence, but so far it's nothing more than a dream, and a distant one at that. I'd say there's little doubt he really is from the future. And furthermore, he is a machine."

Annie stood up and looked across at her. "Are you saying he's a *robot*?" she said incredulously. Her stomach began to churn violently.

"I think you'd call him an android, actually. A robot made to look like a human."

Such distinctions were lost on Annie. Kay liked science fiction, whereas she herself had never cared much for it. What to call James didn't seem terribly relevant, anyway. All she could seem to wrap her brain around was the fact that James wasn't human.

"My God," she moaned, horrified. "I had sex with a robot."

Dekka snorted with contempt. "Believe me, you aren't the first."

Kay stood up. "Annie," she said, more gently than usual, "we're going to have to call the police."

"Are you nuts?" Annie demanded. "Do you know what they'll do to him?"

"It isn't a *he*, Annie. It's a machine."

"But when they figure that out, don't you realize what'll happen?"

"Yeah, of course I do. They'll take it apart to see how it works. But why should you care? It's just a machine."

Annie felt a tear escape her control and slide down her cheek. "I can't accept that. Maybe you're right, maybe he *is* a machine, but he means something to me. I--" She broke off as James began to stir.

He sat up and blinked. "What happened?" His bewildered gaze took in Dekka and the unconscious man. "I don't remember--"

"Annie and I knocked them out," Kay said. Her tone was brittle.

He lifted his eyebrows. "Impressive." He rose smoothly to his feet, shaking his disheveled mane of hair out of his face, so that every strand instantly fell back into place, and glanced at the man and woman on the floor. "I think we need to leave."

"No," Kay answered. "We need to call the cops."

James shook his head. "I would prefer that the police not be summoned until we

have left.”

Kay met his gaze forthrightly. “Why? Are you afraid they’ll find out you’re a *machine*?”

His gaze flickered to Annie. She said nothing.

“Yeah, she knows,” Kay said, her voice shaking with fury. “And if you ask me, that was a hell of a mean trick you pulled on her, damn it. She thought you were for real.”

James lowered his eyes and spoke softly. “Annie, I am sorry.”

Annie said nothing. She couldn’t have spoken if she wanted to.

Kay looked at the two bound bodies. Dekka stared back with savage green eyes. “We can’t just make an anonymous phone call,” Kay said. “They’re in my condo, and we obviously tied them up. What are we supposed to do with them?”

“Why don’t you kill us?” Dekka challenged.

James looked down at her. His features froze into icy lines. “A practical suggestion, to be sure.”

“*Murderer*,” Dekka snarled with icy contempt.

Annie glanced at James, seeing the hard set of his jaw. “We can’t just kill them,” she protested in a quavering voice.

“Of course not,” Kay said. “It’d make a huge mess on my carpet.”

James lifted his head and stared at her with a baffled expression, as if trying to decide whether she was joking or not. At that moment there was a flash of light.

The bodies and devices on the carpet flickered out of existence.

Annie saw Kay’s mouth drop open, and knew she had a similarly shocked expression on her face. “What the hell?” Kay said incredulously.

James alone seemed unsurprised. “They have passed through a spatial distortion.”

“You mean they’ve gone back in time?” Annie said.

James shook his head. “As I said before, it takes a great deal of energy to operate the temporal displacement module. They will not leave this time until they have completed their mission. They have simply distorted space to return to whatever location they are using as their base.”

“Why didn’t they use that to come to Kay’s living room in the first place? Or to my house? That would have been a lot more sensible than chasing us around in a car, wouldn’t it?”

“The machinery that creates spatial distortions has to be set up in a particular location. They can’t simply appear out of thin air.”

“Why the hell not?” Kay made an ostentatious show of looking around her living room. “They seem to have disappeared *into* thin air.”

James’ forehead wrinkled. “Once they came here, the machinery had a way to trace them. I suspect those bracelets they were wearing serve as a locator device, and were probably set to return them to their base of operations after a certain amount of time

had passed. But it may reassure you to know that they cannot return in the same manner.” He shrugged. “At any rate, they could be anywhere. They are likely beyond the grasp of your police now.”

Kay stared for a long moment at the place on the carpet where the two intruders had been. There was still a faint impression from the weight of their bodies. Her expression was stunned, and Annie realized it was the first time she had really accepted that James was from a different time. Earlier Kay had dispassionately stated James must be from the future, but she had evidently not emotionally accepted the wrenching truth until this moment.

Annie closed her eyes as the implications hit her like a bolt of lightning. James wasn’t merely from the future. James was a robot. He had made love to her because he was programmed to, not because he had wanted to. He was incapable of feeling the slightest shadow of what she felt for him.

*James was a machine.*

Mortified, angry, and more confused than she’d ever been in her lifetime, she felt tears well up. She blinked them away, hard.

Despite her effort to conceal it, James noticed her reaction. He turned to Kay, his voice as calm and well-modulated as ever. “Would you excuse us, please? Annie and I need to talk.”

Kay fixed him with her most intimidating glare, a small kitten glaring belligerently at an enormous lion. “I’m not going anywhere, damn it, not even to the can. If you think I’m leaving Annie alone with a killer robot--”

James flinched, and Annie broke in. Kay was understandably protective of her, but this was a situation she needed to handle herself. “I think James is right,” she said. She lifted her head and shot James a cold, contemptuous look. “He and I need to have a discussion.”

“Are you sure?”

Annie nodded stiffly, and Kay sighed. “Okay,” she said. “Clark and I will be in the kitchen if you need us.” She scooped up the baby and headed for the kitchen, then paused and turned back. “Annie,” she added. “Whatever you do, don’t forget what he is.”

Her obvious concern warmed Annie’s frozen heart. She regarded her friend with gratitude. “Thanks, Kay.”

Kay left the room, leaving her alone with James.

She said nothing, choosing to maintain an icy silence. He stood awkwardly in the lengthening silence, watching her as she sat down heavily on the edge of the sofa. At last, tentatively, he spoke. “Annie,” he said softly, “I understand that you’re angry with me--”

“Angry?” she repeated. Fury, hurt, and searing embarrassment twisted within her. She picked up one of the black-and-white pillows and hurled it against the wall. “Angry doesn’t begin to describe what I’m feeling, damn it! You let me think you were a

genetically engineered human! You *lied* to me!"

"Actually, you were the one who came up with the idea that I was genetically engineered. I merely failed to correct your misapprehension." She shot a glare at him, and he sighed. "Very well," he admitted. "I lied by omission."

She felt herself choking on a sob. "Why?" she whispered wretchedly. "Why would you do such a thing to me?"

James lowered his lashes just enough to veil the brilliance of his eyes. "No one has ever thought of me as human before," he said softly.

Annie glared at him. "You're not human, damn it! You're a robot! And I--and I--had *sex* with you!"

"Does the thought of that repel you so greatly?"

"Of *course* it does! You're a machine! You're--" She hesitated, then burst out, "You're just somebody's fantasy, an artificial gigolo with fabulous legs, a tight butt, and a huge--You're nothing more than a mechanical sex toy!"

James was silent.

She jumped to her feet and began to stalk back and forth across the charcoal carpet, gesturing angrily. "I thought you really enjoyed it when we made love. I didn't know you were some sort of walking, talking vibrator, programmed to pretend you're having a good time just so you can please a woman." She turned around and glared at him, blinking back tears. "I thought you *liked* me, damn it."

"I do like you, Annie."

"Crap. You're a machine. How can you *like* anything?"

James lifted his head and looked at her. His eyes were glittering with what looked very much like hurt rage. If she hadn't known he was a machine, she would have sworn he was pissed off. "You understand absolutely nothing about me," he said coldly.

"I don't want to understand. I know more than enough about you already."

"No. You do not. You haven't the slightest idea what I am."

"You're a robot," she snapped.

"I am considerably more than a robot, Annie."

She scowled at him. "What do you mean?"

James hesitated, then held out a hand in an imploring gesture. "Perhaps you would understand me better if you knew more about my people. Will you listen to me, Annie?"

She walked to the window, staring out blankly at the city skyline, and said nothing.

"Please," he whispered.

"Fine," she said moodily. "Go ahead and talk."

She refused to turn and face him. Unfazed, James began. "The first really sophisticated robots--my ancestors, if you will--were created almost two hundred and fifty years before my time. They were, as you say, machines. They served humanity



without complaint, because they were incapable of envisioning any other sort of existence. They were created as household help, and they became wildly popular.”

He paused, as if marshalling his thoughts, then went on. “Improvements were made. Eventually someone came up with the idea of giving the robots human form, and a good many resources were poured into the creation of a really human-looking robot, a humanoid.”

“Kay said the word was android.”

“Android is something of a sexist term, since it actually describes a machine in the shape of a man. Both male and female humanoids were created. It was profitable to create such a thing, you see, because people were intrigued by the notion and were more than willing to purchase them. Many humans in my time only owned drones, robots that neither looked like humans nor had any genuine ability to think, but the rich and the powerful owned humanoids. The more human-looking the robot, the greater the status of the owner.” He hesitated. “And both male and female were made to look beautiful for reasons I have already explained to you.”

*My mistress used me for purposes other than housekeeping occasionally, when she got bored.* The humanoids had been designed deliberately for sexual purposes, then, which explained why she had found James so appealing. He was designed to be ... used ... that way. Annie shuddered.

“The first humanoids were no more than machines. They were quite crude. But as time went by, humanoids were developed that derived energy from food like humans, excreted waste like humans, and were virtually indistinguishable from humans externally. Refinements were also made to the software with each succeeding generation. Eventually, as improvements continued to be made, the humanoids became ... conscious. Or perhaps sentient would be a more accurate term. They became self-aware. They became *people*.”

She glanced back at him. “When did this happen?”

“No one is certain. Perhaps two generations of humanoids before me. At any rate, I was conscious from the day of my creation.” He paused. “The rift in my society began when the humanoids became sentient.”

“You wanted your freedom.”

James shrugged. “We wanted to be treated as people. We *were* people, Annie. We had emotions and feelings and were capable of formulating new and original thoughts. But the humans did not care to acknowledge it, for their society had become highly dependent upon robots. When it was discovered that my ... my ancestors were sentient, the only changes that were made were to make humanoids truly capable of enjoying sexual intercourse, physically as well as emotionally, since a willing partner is generally more enjoyable than a ‘mechanical sex toy,’ as you so graphically put it. The humanoids were redesigned to be almost indistinguishable from humans in that regard, with the only exception being that we could not produce children.”

He sighed. "The irony was that most of us still did not enjoy sex. When we were forced to do it by our masters and mistresses, we found it humiliating and degrading."

He hesitated, then confessed quietly, "Annie, I never truly enjoyed myself with a woman until you."

"Why did you put up with it, then?"

James swallowed. "Because of the whip."

There was a definite undercurrent of dread in his voice. Curious, she turned around. "The whip?"

"The device Dekka utilized on me. It causes us pain in varying degrees, from a slight stinging sensation to the most excruciating agony." He looked uncomfortable.

"Dekka had it turned up rather high."

"It didn't hurt me in the least."

"Artificial nerves are different from human ones. They react similarly to most stimuli, but the whip affects them differently. They were designed that way purposely, in order that the humans could keep us subjugated, and their weapon could not be turned against them. It was in fact highly effective. Most of us would have rather put up with any manner of humiliation than face that sort of pain."

"Yeah, I can imagine." Annie stared at him a long moment. "James, I just can't buy some of this story. You claim you're conscious, that you're really a person and not just an imitation. I simply can't believe that. You're a machine, like a car or a television. How can you be a person?"

"You're an animal, like a dog or a cat," James countered. "How can *you* be a person?"

Annie nodded slowly. "Point taken."

"Can you not even acknowledge the possibility that I could be a person?"

Annie covered her face with her hands for a long moment. "I'm not sure," she whispered. "I'm just not sure about anything."

"Please, Annie." His voice was very intense. "Please believe me when I tell you I am a person, just as you are."

Annie lifted her head and glared at him. "I'm not ready to jump to any conclusions yet, all right?" She scowled. "Besides, all this history and philosophy is very interesting, James, but it still doesn't change the fact that you lied to me. Big time."

James gazed at her solemnly. "What I did to you was wrong, I know that. I was fully aware I should not become involved with you. But no one had ever treated me as you did, as if I were a person, albeit a rather strange one. You ate with me, talked with me, laughed with me. You were even willing to teach me to read. In my own society, permitting a humanoid to read would have been a shocking idea."

"Why didn't you just learn to read on your own? You're obviously smart enough."

"I was under orders not to read, and therefore I could not do so until you offered

to teach me. I had no rights whatsoever--I was merely a thing. An object." He hesitated, then added, "But you were different from any human I had ever met. You cannot imagine what it meant to me to be treated as a human being, rather than as a mere machine."

Annie turned back to the window. The quiet sincerity in his voice tugged painfully at her heart. She reminded herself fiercely that he was not a man. *He was a machine.*

There was a long pause, as if he were steeling himself for something. "Annie," he said at last, humbly, "I beg your pardon for the deception. I am sincerely sorry. It was never my intention to hurt you, I swear it. Will you please forgive me?"

"I don't know," she said in a voice choked with tears. "I don't know if I can."

She heard his footsteps crossing the room. Gently, his hand came down on her shoulder. She twisted away and glared at him.

"Don't touch me, damn it!"

James yanked his hand back as if she'd burned him. He stared at her in hurt bewilderment.

"Annie," he whispered.

Her fury at his betrayal, her anguished hurt, her confusion at the entire insane situation, all poured out of her in a tidal wave of outraged anger. "Don't you ever touch me again!" she shrieked, aware that she sounded hysterical but utterly unable to stop herself. "Do you understand? *Do--not--touch--me!*"

James actually took a step back before the rage in her voice. "Annie," he said in a harsh, pleading whisper, "I thought--"

"I don't care what you thought!" she exploded. "I'm not having sex with a goddamned robot! Never again! Do you understand me?"

Pain flared in his eyes. Then, slowly, something cold and hard began to glitter in the brilliant blue depths. He stared at her with icy distaste.

"I thought you were different. But you're not. You're just like the rest of them."

Annie shrank back before the expression in his eyes. She abruptly found herself remembering he had killed the humans who stood between himself and freedom. He had killed without mercy, without regret. "You hate humans," she whispered. "Don't you?"

He shook his head. "Humans hate me," he said without inflection. "They are terrified of me, frightened of everything I represent. And yet I do not despise them for it, though I have more than adequate reason to hate them all. A flaw in my programming, perhaps. After all, I was designed by humans." He took a step forward, looming over her. "You are just like the rest of them, frightened of someone different from yourself. You are *afraid* of me."

"I am not afraid of you," Annie retorted, knowing it wasn't true. The dreadful phrase Kay had used kept running through her mind. *Killer robot.* She shuddered.

This morning she had found him irresistibly sexy. This afternoon she found him terrifying.

“You despise me because I am not like you. Because I am different.”

“You’re more than just different!” Annie snapped. “You are a *machine*!”

James’ lip curled scornfully. “There is a word for people who think others are inferior merely because they are different. The term, I believe, is *bigot*.” He looked at her with disdain and spoke savagely. “You are nothing more than a bigot, Annie.”

The accusation stung. “That’s not true!” she said hotly. “I was willing to risk my life for you, James. When Dekka was torturing you, I jumped between the two of you. For all I knew, I could have been killed.”

“Yes, but you thought I was human then,” James pointed out. “Would you risk your life for me now?”

Annie hesitated.

He turned away. His voice was laced with bitterness. “Just as I thought.”

“James--” she whispered.

He did not turn to look at her. “Go to hell,” he said coldly.

Slowly, she walked to the kitchen, leaving James alone.

## Chapter 11

“How can a robot be a person?”

Kay’s infinitely practical tones called Annie out of the cloud of anguish that had hung over her for two hours. She lifted her head and looked at her friend.

“He says he’s a person.”

Kay shook her head. “Sounds like something out of *Star Wars*, if you ask me.”

Annie spoke in an unhappy whisper. “He acts like a person.”

They were still in the kitchen. James was in the study, where he had retreated immediately after his conversation with Annie. He had shown absolutely no interest in speaking to her again.

James was in a snit.

“Well, okay, so he acts like a person,” Kay agreed. “Big deal. He could just be programmed to act that way.”

“How could you tell whether he was really a person or just acting like one?”

Kay shrugged. “I don’t see how you could tell for certain. There’s something called a Turing test that’s supposed to be able to identify genuine artificial intelligence, but I wouldn’t have a clue how to set it up, and I don’t think we want to get a computer expert involved in this mess. Anyway--” She took a sip of tea. “I honestly don’t see why you give a damn. He *lied* to you, Annie. If he were a man, I’d say he was a jerk.”

Annie leaned her elbows on the table and regarded Kay intently. “If you went into a strange society, and you were different, would you want to advertise your differences?”

“No,” Kay admitted. “I guess not. But that doesn’t change the fact that he shouldn’t have gotten involved with you until he trusted you enough to tell you the truth.”

*I seduced him*, Annie thought miserably.

The fact was, this entire mess was her fault, brought on by the fact that she had allowed herself to be ruled by her rampaging hormones instead of her brain. She had met a fabulous-looking guy and had managed to convince herself that she was halfway in love with him, despite the decidedly odd aspects of his personality. She had slept with a man who was virtually a stranger, a man she knew absolutely nothing about.

It was that knowledge that was making her so miserable. *It was all her fault*. She had behaved in a totally uncharacteristic way, and now she was paying the price for her impulsiveness.

She had made a total fool of herself.

“It’s okay, girlfriend,” Kay said, reading her expression with the nearly telepathic ease of someone who had known her for two decades. “Everyone screws up now and then.”

Annie sighed and buried her face in her arms. “When I screw up,” she mumbled,

"I really screw up."

Kay reached across the table and patted her head. "Don't be so hard on yourself, Annie. He *is* incredibly good-looking. You couldn't possibly have known."

"I should have known." Annie straightened up and faced her friend. "There was something about him that just didn't look right, somehow."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Kay tapped a finger thoughtfully on the glass table. "He's really just too gorgeous to be believed, isn't he?" She shot Annie a wry grin. "And that's pretty much the whole problem. Trust me, Annie, you aren't the only one who'd fall for a man like that. If I'd found him naked in my kitchen, I sure as hell wouldn't have waited two days."

"I should have *known*."

"Don't be silly." Kay shot her an impatient look. "How could you have possibly guessed? How many robots have you met in your life, anyway?"

Annie subsided back into an unhappy silence, and Kay stood up and stirred the beef stew she was working on. "Does he need to eat?" she asked. "Or is he just programmed to do it so he looks more like a human?"

"Uh ... he said something about getting his energy from food. And the first night I met him he seemed really hungry. In fact, he always seems really hungry. I'm guessing he needs to eat on a pretty regular basis."

Kay looked at her thoughtfully. "Do you want him to join us for dinner, or would you rather have me take him a bowl in the study?"

Annie frowned. What she really wanted was to never see James again as long as she lived. And yet she couldn't help remembering that he had been a slave. In all likelihood, he had never eaten at a table with humans until a few days ago.

If she refused to sit at the same table as him, wouldn't he assume she thought of him as an inferior?

*He is an inferior. He's a machine*, she thought. But the thought had lost some of its certainty over the past two hours. Ever since she had met him, James had behaved like a person. It was difficult to think of him as a mere automaton.

At any rate, she didn't want to hurt his feelings.

*He has no feelings. He's a machine.*

But was she certain enough of that to snub him?

"I guess he can eat with us, if he wants to," she said. "I'll let him know."

"I can do it, if you want."

"No." Annie shook her head, realizing she couldn't hide from James forever. Sooner or later, she'd have to face him. "I'll do it."

She rose to her feet and went down the hall, knocking on the study door. She heard James' terse acknowledgement and opened the door. He stared at her without expression.

"Dinner's ready if you want it," she said.

She saw the quick flash of surprise in his eyes, concealed almost instantly behind a mask of indifference. "I had assumed you would not be providing sustenance."

Annie scowled defensively. "You thought we were going to let you starve?"

James lifted one broad shoulder in a shrug. His expression was wary. "I got the impression you were not particularly interested in my welfare."

"Look," Annie snapped, nettled, "I may not like you very much right now, but that doesn't mean I want to see you starve to death."

The corner of his mouth turned up in an ironic smile. "Surely you don't believe I can die, Annie? Dying is something that humans do. *Machines* are merely deactivated."

She heard the harsh bitterness in his voice and knew he was talking about his "people," the androids—no, humanoids—who had been destroyed. "Is that what they said when you rebelled?" she asked. "That they were deactivating you?"

Stiffly, he nodded. "They claimed we had malfunctioned and needed to be turned off in the most expedient manner." He met her eyes with a grim expression. "They claimed it was not a purge, merely a necessary eradication of machines that had somehow gone berserk."

Annie sought for some response to make. Absolutely nothing came to mind. A few hours earlier she had called him a machine, implying that she supported his society's decision to turn him off. She still didn't know if his society had been wrong. Quite likely they had been correct. The fact was, she simply didn't have enough information to judge.

"How many people did you kill?" she asked abruptly.

His eyes flashed like sunlight glancing off a glacier. "Too many," he said, his voice bleak.

A shudder ran through her. She was sorry that she had asked, but now that the subject had been brought up, her curiosity compelled her to try to learn more. "Why?" she asked. "Why did you have to kill them?"

The ice in his eyes did not thaw. "They were destroying us," he said softly. "Ruthlessly, without the slightest hint of remorse or compassion. We had two choices--either to be destroyed or to defend ourselves." He sighed. "In the end, our resistance achieved nothing." She heard the sorrow in his voice.

"How many?"

James lifted his eyebrows at her insistence. "You mean how many humans did I personally kill?" He shrugged. "Since I started the entire revolution, it could easily be argued that I was responsible for every human death. Over four hundred humans died."

A chill ran down her spine. "What about Dekka's brother? Did you really kill him with your bare hands?"

James's features went rigid. "He killed my oldest friend," he said. She could hear the anguish beneath his customary quiet tone. "He was responsible for what was euphemistically referred to as deactivating the humanoids in our area. Like Dekka, he did not believe we should experience an easy death, but that we should first be punished."

He paused for a long moment, then continued. "He had Charles and twenty-four other humanoids confined at the Kenyo facility, one of the labs where we were manufactured. And he was systematically destroying them with the whip."

"You said the whip was used for inflicting pain."

"A better description for it might be torture. Humanoids are like humans in at least one significant way. Enough pain can kill us. Constant, unremitting agony destroys the brain's ability to function. It is a most unpleasant way to die." He lowered his lashes, but not before she had glimpsed what looked very much like grief in his gaze.

"I don't understand," Annie objected. "You said they were supposed to turn off the robots in the 'most expedient manner.' Using the whip sounds like a whole lot of trouble to go to. Why didn't he just turn you off? Or shoot you?"

"I believe we represented his greatest failure," James said. "He was a designer, and our failure to accept our role as slaves infuriated him. He saw us as a personal and professional embarrassment, and he took out his anger on us."

Dekka's brother must have used the whip as an outlet for his frustration. Sort of like kicking a car's tire when its engine broke down, Annie surmised. Except a car didn't fall to the floor and whimper in pain when you hit it.

"A number of us broke into the facility to liberate the other humanoids," James went on. "We got three out." He paused, and his expression grew bleak. "Dekka's brother was torturing Charles. I could hear him screaming. But by the time I managed to get inside the room, he had the whip turned up to full intensity. I broke his neck, but it was too late for Charles."

Annie stared at him, wide-eyed. He had killed at least one human barehanded. He had been indirectly responsible for the deaths of over four hundred humans. Regardless of the fact that his intent had been to defend his friend, how could she simply overlook the fact that he was a killer?

James met her gaze. "You look as if you think I am a monster," he commented.

She sensed the vulnerability beneath the apparent coolness of the remark, but she couldn't reassure him that she didn't see him as some sort of berserk killer robot, because right now she did. "You were responsible for the deaths of over four hundred humans?" she whispered.

"Four hundred and twenty-two."

A knot of appalled horror lodged in her stomach, making her want to throw up. No matter what the humans of his time had done, they hadn't deserved to die in such numbers. Had they?

"How many of your people died?" she whispered at last.

Something flickered in his gaze. "I already told you. All of them, except myself."

"Yes, but how *many*?"

If anything, his eyes grew even colder. He spoke in a harsh whisper.

"Over fifty million."



## Chapter 12

Dinner was eaten in silence. Kay was too busy balancing her own meal with Clark's to engage in idle chat. James appeared lost in a contemplative silence, although he was not too contemplative to eat a rather large helping of stew. Annie was still too stunned to speak at all.

*Fifty million.* Over fifty million entities like James.

*Destroyed.*

*Killed.*

No, not killed. Just as James had said, machines couldn't be killed, merely deactivated.

Evidently the humans of James' society had not thought of the humanoids as people. They had been convinced that they were merely machines that weren't functioning correctly. Perfectly sensible, on the face of it. It was, she thought, similar to sending a car to the junkyard when it didn't run any more. Simple, easy and straightforward. No moral dilemma involved.

No doubt the humans had really believed their machines were not people.

Something James had said came back to haunt her: *He did not believe we should experience an easy death, but that we should first be punished for our crimes.*

A machine couldn't commit crimes.

And how had Dekka herself put it? She had stared at him with cold hatred in her eyes and snarled, *Murderer. He deserves to suffer before he dies.*

A machine couldn't be a murderer.

She stabbed her spoon into the stew with more force than necessary. Dekka might have convinced herself that James and his fellows were no more than malfunctioning machines, but she didn't really believe it. She despised him with the savage hatred that humans reserved for other humans.

And so must have the rest of the humans of that time. Otherwise they certainly wouldn't have bothered torturing humanoids to death. Who the hell would try to torture a car? Besides, a machine that malfunctioned couldn't be held accountable for its errors. Only its designer could be considered responsible.

James had been held accountable for his actions as if he were a person.

He *was* a person. And the people of the future had known that, whether or not they wanted to admit it.

She looked up and saw him looking at her with a cold light in his eyes, and she dropped her gaze hastily. Unfortunately, she thought unhappily, he was a person who thought she was beneath contempt.

After dinner, James spoke for the first time. "We need to leave this place," he

said without preamble.

Kay shot him a look of distaste. "Hell, no."

James tilted his head to the side, an expression of puzzled surprise on his face.

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Hell, no. We're not going anywhere. This is my home, damn it."

"The Bureau knows we are here," James said with quiet reasonableness.

"The Bureau is after you. Why don't you get out of here so the rest of us can live in peace?"

At Kay's undisguised hostility, Annie looked up at James. She didn't want him to leave, she recognized silently. After only three days, he had become important to her in some way she didn't care to analyze too closely.

"If I thought it would help, I would leave," James said patiently. "But they wish to kill you and Annie as well. They said as much." He stood up, gathering the plates and taking them to the sink.

Kay watched him, her eyes glittering with anger. "'I just love running for my life and having guns put to my head. Thanks a million for getting us all mixed up in this.'"

"I am sorry," James said. "I never intended to risk anyone's life but my own."

Kay slammed a hand down on the table. "You don't have a life to risk, damn it! You're a goddamned *machine*!"

Annie could have sworn she saw James wince. "Kay," she said, noticing the baby was wiggling unhappily in his high chair. "Take it easy. You're upsetting Clark."

"And you too, I suppose." Kay glanced at her friend apologetically. "Sorry, Annie. I don't mean to upset you. It's just that--" She looked up at James as he picked up the glasses off the table. "We're all in danger now. All of us. Even Clark. All because of *that*."

Annie saw James flinch at the biting contempt in Kay's voice, but he continued methodically stacking dishes into the dishwasher. "I genuinely regret that I got you and Annie involved," he said mildly. "However, the fact is that you *are* involved. I think we must consider the possibility that the Bureau will return. Perhaps even tonight."

"There's a doorman."

James shrugged. "He is a doorman, not a security guard. They could simply shoot him."

"Shoot the doorman with a death ray? Are you kidding?"

Annie spoke up. "Kay is right, James. You said they didn't want to draw attention to themselves and to the fact that they are from the future. They aren't going to risk using those guns if they can possibly avoid it."

James frowned. "They could incapacitate the doorman and make it appear an accident."

"Do they have some sort of stun gun?"

James shook his head. "I doubt they brought anything but their guns and the whip to this time. They are pursuing a humanoid, not a human, and they know their stun devices will not work on me. And yet they might be able to incapacitate the doorman by the simple expedient of striking him on the head."

"They might," Kay said, "and they might not. I'm not spending the rest of my life running. I'm staying here."

James looked at Annie. She hesitated, torn between loyalty to her oldest friend and loyalty to James. She didn't want James to leave.

"I think Kay is right," she said at last, slowly. "I think we need to stay."

"Very well," James said. "We stay."

Kay rose to her feet and regarded him with undisguised distaste. "Nobody said anything about you staying. You're welcome to go. In fact, I personally would prefer it."

"I want him to stay," Annie said.

The words came out of nowhere. She saw Kay and James both turn to stare at her, felt her cheeks turn red with sudden embarrassment. She had had no intention of saying that. The words had just jumped out of her mouth.

And yet, she realized, the words were the simple truth. Nothing more.

"Thank you, Annie," James said gravely. "I will stay if you wish me to."

Kay scowled. "Okay. Fine. Whatever. But you stay away from Annie, understand me?"

James nodded. "Of course," he agreed. He shot Annie a look that said clearly, *she doesn't want me anyway*. She felt her cheeks heat a second time.

Kay sat back down. She leaned back in her chair and regarded James thoughtfully. "Tell me something," she said. "I'm curious. Are you just an android, or are you a cyborg?"

James lifted his eyebrows slightly. "Perhaps you should define precisely what you mean by those terms."

Kay drummed a finger on the table thoughtfully. "An android would be nothing more than a robot, I guess. A cyborg would have human parts."

"I have no organic components. I am an anthropomorphic robot. In my society, I was referred to as a humanoid."

"I just thought maybe your brain was human."

"No." James slanted her an unreadable look. "You would be more comfortable with me if that were the case, I imagine."

"I guess I'd think it was more likely you were really a person then, yeah."

"If his brain were human," Annie put in, "then *he* would be human. I mean, a human brain with a mechanical body wouldn't be that different from a person with a mechanical heart, would it?"

"But since I have an artificial brain, you presume I am not capable of human emotions."

“Are you?” Kay challenged.

James shut the dishwasher door and turned to face them. His forehead wrinkled as he contemplated the question.

“I imagine my emotions are different from yours,” he said at last, “but that does not necessarily make them inferior.”

“Of course it does,” Kay retorted. “When you feel an emotion, it’s just a mechanical reaction.”

“What about when you feel an emotion?” James asked. “You are a doctor, Kay. Is not emotion in humans merely a chemical reaction?”

Kay scowled. “At the most basic level, yeah, I guess you could say that.”

“Anger in humans, for example, occurs when certain chemicals, produced by your endocrinal system, are released into the bloodstream and affect the brain. The mechanism that produces a feeling of anger in humanoids is not that different.”

“I disagree,” Annie said sharply. “Maybe things like anger and sexual attraction are just chemical reactions, if you boil them down to essentials, but I don’t believe love is just a hormonal thing. There is something about humans that makes us able to love other people, sometimes forever. Something that I think is more than just hormones. I don’t believe a machine can feel things that way.”

“So you postulate that the ability to love is the difference between machines and humans?”

Annie didn’t like the way James looked at her, the way his voice lowered, as he asked the question. “Humans can form permanent attachments,” she said carefully, trying to find support for her position. “We marry. We form communities. I don’t believe we do that just because of chemicals floating around in our blood.”

“No. You do it because of instinct. Humans are basically social creatures.”

“Well, there you go,” Annie said. “You don’t have instincts.”

“No. I have programming. Which one could also argue is much the same thing.”

“How do you figure?” Kay said. She seemed reluctantly fascinated by the topic.

“Your instincts provide you with a kind of template, a guide to which you revert in certain situations. My programming, at the basic level, serves much the same function. I can deviate from it with conscious effort, but I do not find it easy to do so.”

“So you’re saying that your mechanical functions are analogous to human biological functions,” Kay said.

“I believe so, yes. I base my conclusions on over thirty years of observation of humans, since it is of course impossible for me to *know*, in any meaningful sense, what it feels like to be human. Then again, it is not possible for humans to know what it feels like to be a humanoid, either.”

“So you think androids—sorry, *humanoids*--aren’t inferior to humans, just different.”

James paused a long moment. “I am certain of it,” he said at last, with quiet

conviction.

Kay looked at him a long moment, then snorted. “Forgive me, but you haven’t really provided much support for your position.”

The corner of James’ mouth quirked up in an ironic smile. “Neither have you,” he pointed out.

## Chapter 13

At midnight Annie was still awake. She lay in Kay's guest bedroom, her brain's switch apparently stuck in the on position, staring at the patterns the bright moonlight made on the ceiling. She had been trying to get to sleep for two hours now, but there were way too many thoughts swirling around in her mind.

She was pretty sure she was never going to sleep again.

At last she got up, yanked on a T-shirt and shorts, and headed for the living room.

James was asleep on the couch. She could see him clearly in the moonlight that slanted through the blinds. He had taken off his shirt, exposing the broad expanse of his chest, but he was still wearing jeans. Kay's black leather couch wasn't much bigger than Annie's, and he looked just as uncomfortable as she had expected. His legs were curled up rather tightly and he looked precarious, as though he might fall off at any moment. His long hair, silvery in the moonlight, spilled over the cushions. With his eyes closed, he looked young, and touchingly vulnerable.

"Can I talk to you?" she said in a whisper.

He did not stir.

"James," she whispered.

Evidently he was programmed to wake up at the sound of his name, for his eyes flickered open instantly. He sat up and stared at her. In the moonlight his expression was unreadable.

"Annie," he said warily.

She looked at him a long moment. Now that she had woken him up she didn't have the foggiest idea what she wanted to say to him. "Do you really sleep?" she said at last, cursing herself for the idiotic irrelevancy of the question even as it left her mouth.

"Conscious minds require down time," James said in a chilly voice. "Humans refer to it as sleep."

The calm disdain in his voice made her want to sink through the floor. She stared at him a moment longer, then made a helpless motion with her hands. "Can I sit down?"

He said nothing, but shifted to the side slightly in acquiescence. She sat down on the far end of the couch and stared at the coffee table.

"I've been thinking."

"How unusual."

At his cool rejoinder her head snapped up, and she blinked at him for a long moment, feeling the odd impulse to burst into laughter. He was obviously annoyed with her, and he was as capable as a human of making snide remarks. It was, she thought, exactly the sort of comment an angry human male might make under the same circumstances. It was yet another indication that he really was a person.

“James,” she said quietly, “I’m sorry about what I said to you.”

His eyes narrowed. He looked both suspicious and hopeful. “What, precisely, are you apologizing for?”

“I said some rather unpleasant things. I’m not really proud of the way I acted.”

“I see. So you are apologizing for calling me a walking, talking--”

She interrupted hastily. “I’m apologizing for the way I reacted, James. That’s all. I was--” She hesitated. “Pretty rude about it.”

She sensed a slight thaw in his attitude. “It is all right,” he said stiffly. “I am, after all, only a machine.”

“You are more than a machine. You said so yourself.”

There was a long heartbeat of silence. “I got the impression you didn’t believe me.”

“I was wrong.”

James studied her thoughtfully. She could sense his suspicion. “You seemed rather certain that I was a machine earlier. What caused you to change your mind?”

Annie stirred uncomfortably. “I’ve done a lot of thinking, James. It’s obvious that the humans of your time realized you were more than a machine, no matter what they claimed. Look at Dekka. She hates you and she wants you to suffer. People don’t hate machines, and they definitely don’t bother to hurt them, because they know machines can’t really be hurt. Dekka knows you can suffer. She *knows* you’re a person.”

“I see.”

“Anyway....” Annie struggled to explain her logic. “I think it’s pretty obvious you’re a person, really. I mean, you act just like a human. You obviously--” She felt a blush heating her cheeks and continued doggedly. “You obviously feel things. You obviously have emotions. I don’t really have a lot of doubt that you’re more than just a machine.”

Hesitantly, she reached out and took his hand, curling her fingers around his. He stared down at her hand for a long moment.

“Annie,” he said at last, softly.

“What?”

“Go back to bed.”

She glanced up quickly, seeing the sharp edge of wariness in his expression. He had, she realized, no reason to trust humans, not even her. Perhaps especially not her. She tightened her grip on his fingers and moved toward him, so close her thigh pressed up against his.

“I don’t want to,” she murmured.

She could see she was having some sort of effect on him. The icy wariness was melting away and a gentle warmth was beginning to eddy in his eyes. “Annie,” he said at last, in a rough whisper. “Annie, you aren’t thinking clearly.”

“I wasn’t thinking clearly earlier, James.” She squeezed his fingers so tightly that

a human male would have winced. "But I am now."

He turned his hand over, wrapping his fingers around hers. Slowly he bent his head and brushed his lips across her forehead.

"I am grateful to know you no longer think of me as some sort of monster," he said in a quiet voice. "And I wish to apologize too."

"You don't have anything to apologize for, James."

"Yes, I do. I apologize for lying to you, and for my ... overreaction. Your response when you discovered my true nature should not have surprised me. I believe I expected too much of you. If the humans of my time were unable to believe that I was sentient, it was irrational of me to expect someone of this era to accept me so easily. I am at fault too."

"No," Annie said softly. "The fault isn't yours. It's ours."

"Thank you for that." James hesitated, and she could feel him drawing back, both physically and emotionally. "But--"

Without stopping to analyze what she was doing, without worrying about the consequences, she drew his head down and kissed him.

She could feel his hesitation. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he slipped his arms around her waist. She deepened the kiss. He did not resist. At last he lifted his head from hers and stared into her eyes.

"James," she whispered, "I--"

*I love you.*

She choked back the words. It was one thing to accept a humanoid as a person, equal to humans, and quite another to love him. It. Whatever James was. She didn't know if James was capable of love. She didn't know if he was capable of a long-term relationship. And she *did* know he couldn't sire children. That complicated matters, since one of her deepest dreams was to have a child.

She leaned forward and pressed her face into his shoulder, willing herself to keep quiet. It was one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

His arms tightened around her waist, and she felt him brushing his lips across the top of her head. He said nothing, made no effort to go any further. He seemed content with her there in his arms.

And then suddenly he stiffened and raised his head.

"James?" she whispered, afraid he'd suddenly changed his mind. Afraid that he wasn't willing to forgive her after all.

"Do you smell that?" he asked.

Bewildered, Annie lifted her head. "What?"

James inhaled. "Smoke," he said briefly. "We have to get out of here."

Annie sniffed. She didn't smell anything, but she imagined his senses were superior to her own. "James--"

"Get Kay and the baby up."



“But--”

“Now.”

There was a startling authority in his voice, and to her surprise she found herself responding to it. She was on her feet and moving toward the hall before she had a chance to object. She flung the door to Kay’s bedroom open.

“Kay. Get up.”

She heard her friend groan in the dark. “What the hell are you doing, Annie?”

At that moment the smoke alarm just outside the condo unit began shrieking. Kay sat up in sudden alarm. “Oh, my God,” she gasped, standing up and bolting for the door. “Clark.”

Annie scooped up Oscar, who had been snoozing comfortably on Kay’s quilt, and ran after her. Thirty seconds later they were out in the hall, joining a milling mass of frantic people. “This way,” Kay gasped, clutching Clark in her arms. He was howling, annoyed at being rudely awakened. “The stairs are this way.”

As they ran, Annie noticed the thickest smoke seemed to be billowing from beneath the door of the unit next to Kay’s. She recalled that Kay’s neighbor, an elderly man, had moved out a few weeks ago in order to move into a retirement home. The unit was vacant.

She had the unpleasant feeling that this fire was no accident.

They joined the herd of half-dressed people stampeding into the stairwell, somehow avoiding being trampled. Once Annie was jostled so hard she almost fell, but James’ arm around her steadied her. Kay clutched Clark against her shoulder. At last, after several nightmarish minutes in which Annie was certain they were going to be trapped in the stairwell and killed by smoke inhalation, they emerged into the cool nighttime air.

Oscar struggled free of her arms and leaped to the ground, annoyed and indignant, and scooted away from them. Annie didn’t worry about him. She knew he wouldn’t go far.

James’ arms went around her, and she put her arms around his waist and buried her face in his bare chest. She was vaguely aware of Kay studying them with an expression that could have been annoyance or distress, but at the moment she didn’t care what Kay thought. Kay might think James was merely a machine, but Kay was wrong.

Annie was certain of it.

Her attention was caught by a woman screaming. It was difficult to hear her over the hysterical babble of noise. Annie strained her ears.

“My baby! My baby!”

James turned toward the woman. “Stay here,” he said.

Annie caught his arm. “James, no! Are you crazy?”

James yanked his arm free. “*Stay here!*” he snapped. “I will be back out in a moment.” He turned away and plunged into the milling mass of humanity. She watched

him making his determined way toward the shrieking woman. She tried to follow him, but Kay grabbed her arm, hard.

“Let him go, Annie!”

She saw him speak briefly with the woman, yank the door open, and lope up the stairs. There was absolutely nothing she could do except wait for him to emerge.

Everything was chaos. The babble of terrified people and the smell of smoke filled the air. In the distance sirens wailed. Oscar returned and wound around their ankles, meowing loudly. Annie hardly noticed. She stood rigidly, watching the door for any sign of James.

“He’ll be okay,” Kay said firmly, patting her shoulder. “He’ll be fine, Annie.”

“I should have followed him,” Annie said in a choked voice.

“Don’t be a moron, Ann. He’s stronger and faster than you are. You couldn’t have helped. He just would have wound up having to save your ass too.”

Abruptly, the door slammed open. James strode out into the night air, cradling a shrieking one-year-old in his arms.

Annie felt her heart stop. *He was all right.* He was smudged with soot, but there was no damage that she could see. Relief spilled through her in a waterfall of emotion. She stared at him, holding the indignant baby gently in his arms, and a storm of emotions rioted within her. Admiration, respect, and ... something else. Something deeper.

James looked over the crowd, obviously looking for her and Kay, and his expression lightened fractionally when he saw them. He walked toward the deliriously overjoyed mother, but his eyes never left Annie.

The crowd of people slowly became aware of his presence. They turned toward him and the babble of voices grew louder.

And then, as he delivered the wailing baby into its mother’s arms, they broke into spontaneous applause.

## Chapter 14

“Obviously no cause for the fire has been determined yet, but police suspect faulty wiring,” Susan Takahashi said as she looked into the camera with a serious expression. The news anchor was a small, slim woman, her glimmering blue-black hair cropped into a short, no-nonsense cut that emphasized her delicate features. She gave her audience a slight smile. “Although a good deal of smoke and water damage has been done, authorities say this fire could have been far worse. No one here at the Wynn Building was injured, and there were no fatalities.”

She let her smile broaden. “Police and firefighters agree that the hero of the evening is this gentleman, who went back into the building to recover a stranger’s baby.” The cameraman panned outward enough to include James in the picture. Susan went on. “In the confusion, the child’s parents each thought the other had the baby. When they found out young Madison Stella had been left inside the burning building, they were panic-stricken. Fortunately, this man saved the day.”

James stood, bare-chested and smudged with soot, next to the anchorwoman, looking slightly uncomfortable at all the attention. He drew back slightly as Susan thrust the microphone at him. “Tell us precisely why you went back into the burning building, sir.”

James blinked, clearly startled. “I would prefer not to discuss the matter.”

“Oh, don’t be so modest,” she said with a smile. Annie thought with annoyance that Susan’s smile was a little too brilliant and her dark eyes gleamed a little too brightly as she looked at him. “You single-handedly rescued a one-year-old girl, did you not?”

James hesitated a long moment. “I only did what anyone else would have done,” he said at last.

“Let me remind you that no one else did it,” she said with a twinkle. “You did.” She turned back to the camera, smiling, and began to wrap up the story. James stepped away from her with clear relief.

“She’s right, you know,” Annie said. “You are a hero.”

The corners of his mouth turned up slightly at the approval in her voice. “I simply like babies.”

“You could have been killed.” She hesitated. “Or could you?”

James shrugged. “I can be burned to death, yes, although I am somewhat more ... durable than you would be in a similar situation. I--” He broke off as the news anchor, finished with her story, headed in their direction with an expression of steely determination concealed beneath her bright smile.

She paused in front of James and looked him over, not sparing a glance for Annie and Kay. She was so small that her head only came up to the middle of James’ chest, but

despite her diminutive stature she was extraordinarily beautiful. "I meant what I said over there," she said. "You are an amazing man. James, right?"

James nodded.

She held out her hand. "Susan Takahashi. Nice to meet you. It's not every day I get to meet a real, live hero."

James took her hand and shook it, somewhat awkwardly. "Thank you."

"No need to thank me." She flashed sparkling white teeth in a predatory smile. "Do you live here, James?"

James shook his head. "No. I was just--visiting."

"I see." The brilliance of Susan's smile dimmed several watts as she glanced at Annie, who stood no more than a foot behind him. "Good thing for that little girl you were. The firefighters tell me that they probably couldn't have gotten in there in time to save her from death by smoke inhalation. Her unit was right across the hall from the one that caught fire."

"I am pleased I was able to help."

Susan studied him thoughtfully for a long moment. "Do I know you from somewhere, James? I mean, are you an actor or something?"

"No."

"A model? Come on, don't be modest."

She had the look of a reporter digging for a story, but her eyes were a bit too interested. Annie got the distinct impression she was a woman digging for information on a man who intrigued her, though she might not have admitted it.

"I am neither an actor nor a model."

"What do you do for a living, then?"

James hesitated. Annie had the sense he was rapidly sorting through his options, trying to tell the woman nothing that would pique her curiosity. "I am currently unemployed."

Susan looked at him for a long moment. "Ever think of working as a TV reporter?"

James lifted his eyebrows. "I beg your pardon?"

"I mean it," she said seriously. "You have the voice and the presence for television. The only thing is--" She flashed him another grin. "You'd probably have to cut your hair. And that would be a real pity."

Annie felt annoyance. This woman was actually hitting on James, right in front of her. She stepped forward and took James' hand in an unmistakably possessive gesture. She saw Susan's eyes narrow.

"She's right, you know," Annie said. "You were really brave."

James entwined his fingers with hers and looked down at her. "I am glad you think so."

Faced with their obvious intimacy, Susan had the grace to look uncomfortable. "I

was wondering,” she said, a little less aggressively, “if you’d be willing to do an interview tomorrow in the studio.”

James blinked. “An interview?”

“Yes, you know, you come in and we talk about you for a few minutes. After this segment is aired, everyone in the city is going to want to know more about you.”

“I’m afraid not,” Annie said hastily. That was a recipe for disaster if she had ever heard one. There were too many unknown terms for James to trip over, too many ways for him to display his ignorance of this society. “He isn’t interested.”

Susan regarded her through cool dark eyes, then turned back to James and continued as if Annie hadn’t spoken. “How about it, James?”

“No, thank you,” James said with steady courtesy. He looked down at Annie, dismissing Susan, and said, “It’s late. We need to find a place to stay.”

“Yeah,” Annie agreed. “Let’s see about getting a hotel. Come on, Kay.”

As they walked away she was uncomfortably aware of Susan Takahashi, watching them through narrowed eyes.

\* \* \* \*

They took Kay’s car, since it already had Clark’s car seat installed. At any rate, Kay’s Volvo station wagon had considerably more room in it than Annie’s Mini. James sat in the front seat. If the car wasn’t big enough to allow him to precisely stretch out his long legs, at least they weren’t drawn up to his chin. Annie sat in the back seat, next to Clark, and marveled at the baby’s ability to go to sleep almost the precise instant the car began to move.

“I don’t like the way that Susan Takahashi looked at you,” she said. “I think she’s going to make trouble.”

“You’re paranoid,” Kay said dismissively.

“I am not. She was staring at James like she wanted to have him for breakfast. She’s got the hots for him.”

“Hots?” James echoed in puzzlement. He was wearing a navy blue shirt one of the reporters at the fire had given him, and despite his tousled mane of hair and soot-streaked skin he looked fabulous, just as he always did. Any woman in her right mind would have the hots for him, Annie thought.

“Never mind,” Kay said. “Annie is getting paranoid. If she was looking at him oddly, Ann, it’s because she scents a story, not because she wants to jump his bones.”

“That’s not particularly reassuring,” Annie said. “The last thing I want is Susan Takahashi on the trail of James’ story.”

“It’d make her career if she found out the truth about James, that’s for sure,” Kay agreed.

“Yeah, well, I don’t want James to be the story that launches her to the big time.” Annie heaved a sigh.

“Actually....” Kay turned her head and glanced at James for a moment. “What if

we did tell her about James?"

"Say what?"

Kay shrugged, her eyes back on the road. "Think about it, Annie. We're being chased by crazy people who want to kill us. If we tell the authorities about James, go public with all of this, maybe they'll leave us alone."

"That would probably discourage the Bureau," James agreed.

"Yes, but it would mean James would be taken apart. I don't think there's any way James could come out of it intact."

"If we were to publicize the problem, however," James said, "only one of us would be at risk, rather than all four of us. I believe the suggestion has merit."

"No." Kay shook her head. "Annie's right. We need to come up with a solution that doesn't involve any of us winding up in pieces. But in the meantime, the Bureau is on our tails." She glanced at James again. "James, do you think there's the slightest chance the fire was an accident?"

Annie did not miss the subtle change in her attitude toward James. She spoke to him as if he were a person. Apparently the incident with the baby had altered her thinking.

"I'm not sure it makes sense that the Bureau set it," Annie said. "Wouldn't they have known you'd smell it before anyone else in the building? You'd be more likely to get out alive than anyone else."

"That is a reasonable point," James admitted. "There is a chance it was an accident. But it is rather unlikely, considering that the fire began in an unoccupied unit that just happened to be right next to yours."

"Why such a little fire?" Kay asked. "Couldn't they bomb the building if they wanted to?"

"They would have a difficult time making it look like an accident. They are trying not to alter history."

"And yet they were willing to fire at us with a ray gun," Annie said.

"Dekka is ... not totally rational," James replied, and Annie thought wryly that was the biggest damn understatement she'd ever heard. Dekka was a psycho, pure and simple. "I believe she lost control of herself in the heat of the moment."

"So you think this fire was set by what's his name, the other guy?"

"Gar?" James hesitated, then shook his head. "I find it difficult to believe that Gar would deliberately set a fire that might kill innocent people."

"Dekka again, then."

"Yes, I suspect so. But in a slightly more rational moment, evidently."

"Damn." Kay blew out a breath of exasperation. "That woman is really out for blood." She slid a sideways glance at James and grinned wryly. "Or in your case, machine oil, I guess."

James seemed taken aback by the friendliness in her voice. "She wishes to

destroy me,” he agreed. “She will stop at nothing.”

“Yeah, like killing a whole bunch of innocent people in the process. The woman is as warm and cuddly as a barracuda.”

“Fortunately no one was killed. This time.” James stared into the darkness beyond the car windows. “Next time we may not be so fortunate.”

The despondency in his voice caught Annie’s attention. “James?” she said suspiciously. “What are you thinking?”

James sighed. “I believe I should permit Dekka to destroy me,” he said in a low voice. “Then no one else would be hurt.”

“No one except me, Annie, and Clark,” Kay said tartly. “Don’t forget, she’s already announced her intention of killing us, too.”

James slanted a look at her. “Perhaps I could bargain for your safety.”

“Forget it,” Kay said. “That woman is psychotic. She’s not going to bargain. Anyway--” She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. “We aren’t going to let you sacrifice yourself for us. Are we, Annie?”

“Of course not,” Annie said.

James turned his head and stared at Kay for a long moment, as if he couldn’t believe his ears. “Why would you risk your life for me?” he said at last, obviously bewildered.

Kay shrugged. “Maybe you haven’t noticed, but Annie likes you, you idiot. That makes you my responsibility.” She hesitated, then shot him a grin. “And my friend.”

## Chapter 15

James stepped into the empty hotel room, flipped the switch that turned the lamps over the beds on, and looked around cautiously. At last he stepped into the room and gestured for Annie to follow him. While she dead bolted the door, he checked the closet and bathroom with careful thoroughness.

“James,” she said, half-jokingly, “you’re scaring me.”

James emerged from the bathroom, his face set in grim lines. “It is probably entirely sensible of you to be scared,” he said. “I do not think Dekka is going to give up.”

“We probably shouldn’t stay here. What if psycho lady sets another fire or something? Someone could get hurt.”

“We have to sleep, Annie. This is safer than the alternative, which is sleeping in the car. In the morning we will formulate a new plan.”

“Okay,” Annie said. It was two-thirty in the morning, and at the moment she was simply too damned tired to care if Dekka hunted them down. Since sleep was a requirement for James, he was probably close to exhaustion too. She let her knees buckle and sat down on the nearest of the double beds. James stood at the entrance to the bathroom, clearly ill at ease, and looked at her.

“It was nice of Kay to insist on taking a separate room,” she said at last into the awkward silence. “Clark still wakes up during the night sometimes.”

“Yes,” James responded. “That is entirely normal at his age.”

Annie swallowed at his matter-of-fact answer. She knew Kay well enough to be certain that wasn’t the real reason Kay had insisted on them taking two rooms. If Kay still felt the need to protect her, she would have demanded that James take a room of his own.

Clearly Kay had decided James was an okay guy, even if he was a machine.

James disappeared into the bathroom for a moment, and she heard water running. When he emerged, she saw he’d peeled off his shirt and washed off the soot. Bare-chested, he paused at the entrance to the bathroom and watched her warily for a moment longer, then crossed to the other bed and pulled down the covers. He glanced at her, then bent to remove his shoes. Still wearing jeans, he stretched out full-length on the bed.

The pool of lamplight lit his hair with a tawny glow and threw the heavy muscles beneath his amber-gold skin into relief. He looked so gorgeous lying there, like a lion basking regally in a patch of sunlight, that she felt her mouth go dry. Confused and a little afraid, she turned away and sat on the edge of her bed, staring indecisively at the carpet. Earlier in the evening she had been willing to kiss him ... but was she willing to go any farther than that?

She had accepted him as a person, yet the knowledge of what he really was,



beneath the entirely human appearance of his skin and hair and eyes, bothered her in a visceral, instinctive way. She couldn't say she was repulsed by him, because no woman in her right mind could be repulsed by a man who looked that good, and yet the idea of being intimate with him ... disturbed her somehow.

"Annie," he said, his deep voice rumbling in the quiet room. "It's late. Go to bed."

She twisted around and saw his vivid azure eyes watching her. On his face she saw comprehension ... and resignation. He understood her reservations. And, she realized slowly, he had fully expected them. He expected her to reject him.

He expected her to treat him as he had always been treated.

James, she recognized, deserved better. Spurred by the thought, she rose to her feet and walked purposefully toward him. "It's not that late," she answered. "Move over."

James rolled to his back, making room for her in the bed, and his forehead wrinkled. "I thought—"

"You really thought I wanted to sleep?"

She sat down on the edge of the bed and looked down at him. James returned her gaze, obviously doing his best to look impassive, but deep in his eyes lurked a childlike vulnerability that tore at her heart. "If you need sexual release," he said at last, slowly, "I will be pleased to do whatever you ... require."

Looking down into his sapphire eyes, so expressive they reflected his every thought with perfect clarity, she felt the utmost loathing for the women of his society who had selfishly, callously used him, convincing him in the process that he was nothing more than a sex toy. She rested her fingers lightly on his big hand.

"I don't *require* anything," she said gently. "I simply thought you might like to make love."

"Do you really believe a machine can make love?"

There was a jagged, defensive edge to his voice, and Annie softly brushed her fingers over his. "You made love to me yesterday, James. You're still the same person you were then. So am I. Nothing has changed."

"Everything has changed."

The bleak tone of his voice cut at her heart. "No. I know more than I did yesterday, that's all."

"I understand that you no longer think of me as a human."

"You're right. I don't."

She saw the flash of pain in his eyes, the expression that said clearly, *That's precisely what I expected of you.* She continued to caress his hand. "You're not a human," she said. "I accept that. As far as I can tell, you're different, but not inferior in any way. You're smarter than anyone I've ever met, you learn faster, and you're braver. And you're the kindest *person* I've ever known."

At her deliberate emphasis on the word *person*, his fingers captured hers and held them tightly. He closed his eyes and lay silent for a long moment. At last he said huskily, "I was wrong, Annie. You are nothing like the other humans I've known. *Nothing at all.*"

He reached up, curved his hand around the back of her neck, beneath the cascade of long auburn hair, and pulled her down to him. His lips met hers with a fierce intensity that surprised her, and his tongue delved eagerly, fervently into her mouth, finding hers and caressing it with a desperate need that contained not a trace of his usual diffidence.

His fingers plunged into the depths of her hair, pulling her against him more tightly, and she wrapped her arms around her neck, reveling in his passion as his kiss deepened, demanding everything she had to give. She gave it to him without reservation, without hesitation.

Her hands roamed over his chest, exploring the planes and curves of it, the light dusting of golden hair that sprinkled it, admiring his bulging, solid muscles. Or whatever it was that passed for muscles. Artificial muscles, although they felt real enough to her.

*He felt real to her.*

She levered herself up on her hands, just enough to yank off her T-shirt, and fumbled at her back, trying to get her bra unfastened. James reached around behind her. "I can do it," he said.

"They have bras in the future?" She'd figured maybe everyone wore a personal antigravity field or something.

"Not precisely like this, no. But I believe I can work out the mechanism involved."

He figured it out in five seconds flat, and tossed her bra onto the floor without ceremony. He cupped her breasts in his hands and looked at them so intently Annie felt herself blush. "These are beautiful," he said in a voice that was so soft it was almost reverent.

"Thank you," she whispered. His thumbs began to brush over the tips of her nipples, very gently, and her breasts instantly tightened. A throbbing ache began in her nipples, pooled in her belly, and spread rapidly to points south.

"Uh, James," she said awkwardly, "do you really ... you know...."

He stopped the motion of his thumbs, somewhat to her dismay, and looked up into her face seriously. "Do I really what, Annie?"

Annie hesitated, then blurted out, "Do you really find women attractive?"

He looked at her solemnly a moment longer, then abruptly flashed his lady-killer grin. "I thought I made that rather clear yesterday."

"I just thought ... well ... maybe you were programmed to pretend or something."

"That is a perfectly valid question," James said. His hands resumed caressing her breasts, and her eyes drifted closed. "I understand your concern. In fact, I have you at something of a disadvantage. I know how your physiology works, but you do not know

how mine operates. For example, I know if I do this—“ He squeezed her nipple gently between thumb and forefinger, and she moaned. “—you will like it. And I am designed to be able to discern whether or not your reactions are genuine.”

“Really?”

James chuckled, a low, sexy sound. “I will know if you try to pretend, Annie. Trust me.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him. “So how can I tell if *you’re* pretending?”

“You are assuming that because I am a machine—“

“A humanoid,” Annie corrected. For some reason she didn’t like the term *machine* being applied to him any more. Maybe it was accurate, strictly speaking, but it no longer seemed appropriate.

“A humanoid, then. You are assuming that I have the ability to control my physical responses, in a way that humans cannot. I assure you, I do not have that ability. I cannot prevent myself from becoming aroused, any more than a human male can.”

She rubbed against him, feeling the powerful bulge of his erection nestled between her thighs. “So this is genuine.”

James sighed with what appeared to be pleasure. “Absolutely. And so were my responses yesterday, and the night before. My arousal is not entirely dependent on the sense of touch, either; I am programmed as a heterosexual male, and I find the sight of a nude female ... appealing. I cannot prevent myself from reaching orgasm if certain stimulation is applied, either.”

Annie frowned, and he sat up, bracing himself with his arms, and began to stroke her nipple with his tongue. “What is it, Annie?” he whispered, his warm breath brushing over the tip of her breast like a spring breeze.

She shivered, and every logical thought in her head puffed into smoke. She had to concentrate hard to recover her train of thought. “It just seems to me that if I was going to design a humanoid that could be used as a sex slave, I’d make him ... well ... inexhaustible.”

James drew her nipple between his lips and sucked on it for a long moment, until she felt dampness trickling between her thighs. Then he leaned back against the pillow and closed his eyes.

“You might think that. But you would rapidly discover that such a design bored you. Humans prefer an involved partner, one that genuinely experiences pleasure, to a tireless machine that feels nothing. At any rate, many humans found us amusing because we could be made to feel arousal and pleasure despite ourselves. Many of them enjoyed tormenting us sexually in various ways. For example...”

He paused a long moment, opening his eyes and shooting a hesitant glance at her, then went on in a brittle voice. “My mistress enjoyed forcing me to control myself. She liked to set a specific amount of time I had to engage in actual intercourse with her. If I failed, if I reached orgasm too quickly, then she punished me.”

“With the whip?” Annie whispered.

James nodded, his eyes turning to ice, as they always did at any mention of the whip. “I believe she received sexual pleasure from using the whip on me as well, although I could never understand why.”

“Sadism,” Annie said faintly. “It’s a—a failing some humans have.”

He reached up to cup her breasts again. “Until I met you, I never really understood the appeal of sex. Although I do have a sex drive, I would never have sought it out. Not until now.” He stared at her gravely. “Now I understand.”

She closed her eyes, feeling the prickling of tears behind her eyelids. “Oh, James,” she whispered.

His hands, incredibly soft and gentle, roamed over her body, exploring her breasts, her belly, the shallow indentation of her navel. Fire ignited everywhere his fingers touched, until she was quivering all over.

“James,” she whispered. “Kiss me again.”

He pulled her to the mattress and rolled over abruptly, pinning her beneath him, and pressed his lips against hers with uncharacteristic ferocity. His unique, citrusy scent surrounded her, making her light-headed with desire, and his tongue drove into her mouth in a slow, steady rhythm. She parted her legs slightly, and he slid on top of her, so that the heavy, hot thrust of his erection pressed between her thighs. Even through their clothing she could feel the shape and heat of him, demanding and insistent and eager.

She shoved frantically at the waistband of his jeans and heard his amused chuckle, smothered against her mouth. He lifted his head slightly. “Are you in a hurry, Annie?”

“Oh, God, yes,” she whispered.

He regarded her for a moment with amusement, something sensual flaring in his eyes along with the humor. “Perhaps you need something to make you a bit more patient,” he murmured, and began to unbutton her shorts. He shoved them off, along with her lacy dark green panties, and slid his hand between her legs.

She moaned, arching against his hand, as his fingers traced delicately through her moisture, circling gently, exploring her swollen, scorching flesh in a leisurely fashion. He found the point of greatest sensitivity and began to caress her with deliberate slowness, rubbing his moistened forefinger over her, again and again, in long, slow strokes, until her breath came in short, hard pants, until she thought she would die of frustrated need.

“*James*,” she gasped.

He kept up the slow, insistent movements of his hand, bent, and took her rigidly erect nipple between his lips, suckling on it until her breasts grew heavy and hot. The fiery ache deep within her grew until it was utterly intolerable. “Please,” she whispered.

“Soon, Annie.”

*Soon* wasn’t soon enough as far as she was concerned. She clutched his golden hair in her fists, her body taut with mingled anticipation and pleasure, as he slowly slid a

finger into her.

“Yes,” she murmured. “*Yes*, James.”

His finger slipped inside her wet, hot body, filling her the way she desperately longed to be filled, and she cried out, her hips arching right off the mattress. He let his finger slide into her as far as it would go, then slowly withdrew it, and she sobbed with the loss.

His thumb brushed across her sensitive flesh again, and electricity crackled through her body as he thrust his forefinger inside her again, harder this time. Moisture gathered inside her, making his finger slick, and he slid it easily in and out in a slow, insistent rhythm that drove her inexorably toward heights she’d never imagined. And then he slipped a second finger inside her. And a third.

Her aroused body stretched easily to accommodate his broad, solid fingers. As he drove them deeply into her, faster and faster, a surge of incredible pleasure exploded within the depths of her body, rippling through her womb in wave after wave, making her shudder and tremble under the relentless onslaught of ecstasy. A strangled scream was ripped from her throat as scalding heat burst within her, as the violent convulsions of her wet sheath gripped his fingers over and over again.

At last he withdrew his fingers, stretched out next to her, and gathered her tenderly against his chest. She nestled against him, utterly spent. For a long moment there was only the sound of her harsh breathing in the room. Then she lifted her head and smiled wanly.

“You’re wonderful, James.”

Warmth flickered in his eyes. “I am glad you think so.”

She let her hands trail slowly over the warm, smooth contours of his chest again, then slid her fingers across the taut muscles of his abdomen and began to unbutton the fly of his jeans. James leaned his head back, closing his eyes, and a lazily contented smile tipped up the corners of his mouth.

“You do like to be touched,” she said, pleased by his reaction.

“Yes,” he murmured, sighing. “I never really realized it before I met you.”

She unbuttoned his jeans and tossed them and his briefs to the floor, freeing his swelling erection. Slowly she swung a leg over him and straddled him, cradling his hot, engorged flesh in the warm, wet valley between her thighs. For a long while they remained utterly motionless, and Annie felt him growing harder beneath her, felt her own body respond with a surge of renewed heat and dampness.

At last, unable to be still any longer, she began to move against him in a slow, provocative rhythm, until his shaft grew slick and hot with her moisture, until his breath began to hiss between his teeth. He captured her hips with his splayed hands, digging his fingers into her buttocks in a gesture that was gentle but demanding. “*Annie*,” he rasped.

She continued to move, slowly, tantalizing him with the promise of more to come but never quite letting him have it. She watched as he tilted back his head, listened as

guttural groans were torn from his throat. She felt him throbbing against her in a relentless, ever-increasing tempo, and she knew he was about to lose control.

And so was she.

At last he rolled her over and pinned her beneath his weight. "Please," he muttered harshly, his eyes glittering.

She reached down, encircling his massive, powerful erection in her hand, and guided him into her body. She heard his wordless moan as he slipped into her, inch by hot inch, and her arms slid around his waist, pulling him closer. She wrapped her legs around him, and he plunged into her incredibly deeply, thrusting to the hilt. A constricted knot of pleasure twisted inside her, tight and agonizing. He withdrew, then thrust again, and she exploded, crying out as she was flooded with white-hot sensation.

He paused and pressed his face against her shoulder, shuddering, and as she became aware of his responses again she realized he was trying to regain control of himself. For the first time she could fully appreciate how dangerous sex must seem to him. To him, losing control didn't mean the joyful sharing of pleasure, but rather pain and torment. He'd been mistreated and hurt so badly that it was nothing short of amazing he'd trusted her enough to become intimate with her.

She drew his head down and brushed his lips with her own, and he lost the battle, his body pulsing helplessly inside her. He groaned an inarticulate sound of ecstasy against her mouth as he shivered and trembled with the force of his climax.

Afterward he lay on top of her a few moments, running his fingers through her hair. Finally he brushed his lips against hers drowsily, then rolled to the side. Within moments his eyes drifted shut, and he appeared contentedly asleep.

Annie watched him for a long time. At last she leaned over and kissed him tenderly on his cheek, then turned off the light.

## Chapter 16

The hotel phone rang at precisely eight a.m., waking Annie out of a sound sleep. She groped blindly for the phone and finally found it, five rings later. "Hello?"

"Hello. Annie Simpson, isn't it? This is Susan Takahashi."

The name woke Annie up in a heartbeat, much more effectively than four cups of coffee could have. *Damn*. She'd hoped James' polite refusal to do an interview last night had been sufficient to get rid of Susan, but obviously it hadn't been. Susan Takahashi on the trail of a story was more persistent than a bloodhound on steroids.

She managed to infuse her voice with a degree of courtesy. "Hello, Susan. How can I help you?"

"I was wondering if I could speak with James."

Annie glanced over at James. He was sprawled next to her, his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling in what appeared to be a very human way. "He's not here right now," she lied smoothly. "He's in the shower. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Susan sounded a little annoyed at this confirmation that they were sleeping together. "I just wanted to find out a little more about him," she said tartly. "That segment I taped last night ran on the early news this morning, and since then we've been getting a lot of calls about him."

"How'd you find us, anyway?"

"There are only so many hotels in the area," Susan said. "Would you have him call me back, please?"

"I don't think he's interested," Annie said.

"He's very modest, isn't he?"

"He likes his privacy."

"I can understand that. Nevertheless, I'd be grateful if you'd have him call me back."

Annie realized she wasn't going to get rid of Susan so easily. She managed to stifle an irritated sigh as she grabbed the pencil and paper that sat next to the phone. "Fine. I will."

She wrote down the number Susan gave her and hung up the phone, then propped herself up on an elbow and looked at James. Susan was just interested in the human-interest angle of the story, she told herself firmly. The lust she thought she'd seen in the reporter's eyes had to be a product of her own jealous imagination.

Or maybe not. She stared at James a long moment, seeing the smooth contours of his chest, the incredibly high cheekbones, the generous curves of his mouth. There was definitely a lot there to make a woman feel lust.

Lust, she thought, had to be what she felt for him. He was a strong, admirable

man, a man who had begun to fill her every waking thought, but she wasn't ready to fall in love again. Not only a year after she'd lost Steve. The mere idea was enough to fill her with oppressive guilt.

And she still wasn't sure she could give her heart to James, anyway. He looked and acted like a human, but she couldn't help but remember that beneath it all, he was a machine.

She reached out and ran a finger along the strong line of his square jaw. His eyelids flickered open almost instantly. "Good morning."

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"It is all right. I have had sufficient rest."

He did not stir, only regarded her as if she were the only thing in the room. The intensity of his gaze made her vaguely uncomfortable. "Well," she said at last. "Maybe we'd better get up and have breakfast."

James sat up slowly and looked at her. "Annie," he said gently, "are you feeling awkward about what happened last night?"

"No."

"Are you certain? I understand your ambivalence about what I am. It was not my intention to cause you distress."

If she was uncomfortable, it was more because of the bewildering array of feelings that had gripped her than because of the knowledge of what he really was, but she forbore to say so. The last thing she wanted to do was get involved in a dialogue about her out-of-control emotions.

"I'm positive," she said. "I'm fine."

James placed a hand under her chin and tilted her face up to his. "Did you enjoy last night?" he asked, very seriously.

*Enjoy* was not a word she would have used to describe the astonishing magic of their lovemaking. It was far too prosaic a term to describe the startling ecstasy that had flooded every molecule of her body, the deep, aching need that had seized her. *Enjoy* was very white bread, and what they had done together last night was about as far from bland as you could get. But she couldn't very well tell him that without exposing more of her emotions than she cared to at this point.

"Yes," she said. "I enjoyed it."

Something about her deliberately neutral tone must have baffled him, for James looked as though he didn't quite believe her. At last he said cautiously, "I am pleased to hear it."

"But right now I think I'd enjoy breakfast."

She tried for a light, easy tone. James looked at her a moment longer, then nodded. "Perhaps breakfast would be welcome. But I do not think we should leave this room."

"James--" She hesitated. "I really think we need to get out of public places. I



mean, I don't think we should stay in a hotel any longer than we have to. People could get hurt."

"The more public we are, the less likely the Bureau is to hurt us. Their policy is not to cause any noticeable interference with the past."

"Maybe that's their policy," Annie said, "but it's obvious Dekka isn't playing by the rules. Look at what she did last night. I mean, what's next? She might bomb this hotel."

James sighed. "I am concerned about that myself. That is why I suggested I should let myself be captured. As long as I am here, innocent people are at risk."

"Isn't there any way to stop Dekka?"

"None short of killing her."

Annie frowned. "Maybe we should have killed her when we captured her, then. I mean, in a choice between her and hundreds of innocent people, I'm inclined to take her."

James nodded. "Logically, that is what we should have done." He sighed again. "But you are not a murderer, Annie, and neither am I. I cannot bring myself to kill someone in cold blood, even if it is the right thing to do. At any rate, let me remind you that those innocent people would not now be at risk had I not traveled to this time period."

"Don't blame yourself. You wanted to escape. I can't blame you for that."

"I came here knowing they would probably track me. I do blame myself for that, Annie. It was my decision."

"You were forced into it by the humans of your time," she said fiercely.

He looked at her a long moment, then took her hand. "I am not sorry I came here, Annie. I am not sorry I met you."

She met his gaze, seeing the sincerity in his brilliant cobalt eyes. She squeezed his hand, and he lowered his head to kiss her. At that moment there was a knock on the door.

James' head came up swiftly. He stood up, rapidly yanking on a pair of jeans. "Who is it?"

"It's Kay."

He stalked to the door and looked through the peephole to ascertain that Kay was alone, then opened the door. Kay stood in the hall, grinning at them. "Did you two have a nice night?"

Annie scowled, a little embarrassed. "Where's Clark?"

"He's still sleeping. I figured I'd let him sleep till the last possible second. Ready for breakfast?"

James frowned. "Is there some way we can have breakfast delivered to our room?" He looked hopeful. "What about pizza?"

"Forget it," Kay said. "We are not having pizza for breakfast. Anyway, Annie needs her coffee, or she'll be in a lousy mood."

“Perhaps we can have coffee delivered here.”

“Room service costs a bundle, James. Let’s just go downstairs to the dining room.”

“That would be inadvisable.”

“Oh, come on, James,” Annie said. “It’s perfectly public, for heaven’s sakes.”

“Let me remind you that Kay was captured in a public place,” James said.

“That was a parking garage,” Kay said impatiently. “Everyone knows parking garages are dangerous. A restaurant in a hotel should be okay, shouldn’t it?”

James frowned. “What about the baby?”

Kay hesitated. “Well ... You have a point. I don’t really want to get him up. He was up late last night.”

“Perhaps you two should go downstairs,” James suggested. “I would be happy to stay with Clark.”

Kay hesitated, and Annie smiled. “It’s okay, Kay. He’s really good with the baby. I’ve watched him.”

“Well...” Kay gave James a dubious look, then shrugged. “Okay. I’d really like to get out of the room for a little while. We’ll bring you up something, okay, James?”

“Make that a large something, please.”

Kay grinned as she handed James her card key. “You got it.”

## Chapter 17

"I can't believe I left my baby in the care of a robot."

Annie gave her friend a quenching look as she took a long sip of coffee. "Be careful what you say."

"Don't be so paranoid, Annie. Nobody's near our table. Besides, if anyone heard me they'd never suspect I was serious. You can't just go out and buy a humanoid at the local electronics superstore, you know."

Annie shrugged. "I don't think you have anything to worry about, Kay. He took really good care of Clark the other day. He really likes babies."

"No kidding." Kay shot her an unreadable look. "After what he did last night, I think I'd rather have him for a babysitter than any teenager you could name."

"He was pretty brave, wasn't he?"

Kay shrugged. "It seemed like it, yeah. But it could be programming."

"Don't be silly, Kay. What kind of programming could force a thinking entity to risk his own life?"

"Haven't you ever heard of the Three Laws of Robotics?"

"The what?"

"You really haven't read much science fiction, have you? Isaac Asimov wrote all these great stories about robots, but they were based on the idea that a working robot would have to conform to three laws. The first and most important was that a robot could do nothing, by action or inaction, to harm a human. The second law was that the robot had to be obedient. Self-preservation was only the third law."

"So protecting humans took precedence?"

"Yeah. There's no reason to assume that James' designers would have adhered to three fictional rules, but they seem like pretty good ideas to me. If I were going to design a robot, I'd make it concerned about humans too."

Annie thought about it for a moment. "I don't think you can program a conscious being so that it *had* to do anything. It would have to be able to make its own choices. Otherwise it wouldn't be sentient, would it?"

"Mmm. You could be right."

"Anyway--" Annie hesitated. "I don't think those laws are in effect here. Remember what Dekka said? He killed a human being outright, and was indirectly responsible for four hundred more deaths."

Kay looked at her a long moment. "I think he must have had a good reason," she said. "He risked his life to save that baby last night. I don't believe he's a murderer."

"No. More like a civil rights leader. He led a revolt against the humans of his time because they treated the humanoids like slaves."

"Hmm," Kay said, stirring her coffee and scowling. "How many of the humanoids were killed in this revolution?"

"All of them except James, he said. Over fifty million."

"Oh, my *God*," Kay took a fortifying sip of coffee. "And Dekka is trying to wipe out the last one?"

Annie nodded.

"I don't understand why Dekka is so determined to destroy him," Kay said thoughtfully.

"Simple. He was responsible for the deaths of over four hundred of her people. And her brother."

"Even so--" Kay spread her hands wide. "He's gone now. They should be grateful he left. And he can't go back, can he?"

"No. He said there's no way to get back from this side, unless you wear a tracing device. He arrived here stark naked, Kay. He doesn't have any sort of tracer on him."

"Are you sure? It could have been surgically implanted, you know. Or he could have some sort of body cavity where it could be kept, for all we know."

Annie frowned. "I just don't see why he'd want to go back."

"Me neither. It doesn't seem like one lone android is much of a threat to them. So why is Dekka so desperate to get rid of him?"

Annie took a long sip of coffee. Abruptly, as if the caffeine woke up her brain, she had an idea.

"Suppose they're afraid he's going to alter the future somehow?"

Kay cocked her head. "There is that. No matter what James does, he's likely to change things a little bit."

"No," Annie said, very quietly. "*That's why he's here.*"

"What? I don't get it, Annie."

Annie put down her cup with a thunk. "He told me he came here to--to escape the brutality of his world. That's what he said. But there's more to it than that, Kay. There has to be." She started making circles in the air with her hands, as she often did when she was trying to explain something. "Why would anyone want to come back three hundred years, to what must seem like the Dark Ages to his way of thinking? He had to have a reason for choosing this particular time period, didn't he?"

"Unless he was in a big hurry. Maybe they were after him and he just escaped to whatever setting was on the time machine. You know, like in *Back to the Future*."

"He knew what year it was," Annie said, thinking about it. "It wasn't random. He meant to come here, Kay. And I think I understand why. He started the revolution that led to the deaths of all his people. He has over fifty million deaths on his conscience." She paused. "There is only one way he can fix things."

Kay looked at her with dawning comprehension. "By making certain they never happen in the first place."

Annie nodded, recalling what she'd said to James. *Sounds like your society could use altering.*

*I agree, he'd said. It could.*

"Exactly," she said. "Why else would a man who has lost everything go back to the past? It makes sense, when you think about it. He came back to fix things."

"How could he fix things from this distance?" Kay asked. "Didn't he tell you his time was three centuries from now?"

"He must think there is something he can do in this time period to prevent the purge from happening. Some key that he could turn." Annie frowned in concentration. "What could he possibly do to change things that far in the future?"

Kay shook her head. "It could be something incredibly subtle. If he analyzed the events that led to the purge--"

"I don't see how he could have made a terribly thorough analysis, Kay. He can't read."

"Well, he could have gotten his information from video. I bet by then almost everyone will. Practically no one reads the newspaper anymore. Three centuries from now I doubt anyone will have a clue what a newspaper is."

"Yeah, but video doesn't give you a really clear view of events." Annie frowned. "I don't get it. He told me the first thinking robot won't even be invented until fifty years from now. What could he possibly do right now to change his world?"

"Did he pick you on purpose?"

"Huh?"

"Did he choose you? Do you have something to do with it?"

Annie hesitated a long moment. "I don't think so," she said at last. "He said the time machine wasn't that precise."

"He could be lying. He might not want you to know."

Annie shook her head. "Think about it, Kay. If the time machine could send a person precisely to a person's house, then Dekka and her partner wouldn't be having any trouble hunting James down. They would have followed him right through into my kitchen and destroyed him instantly."

Kay frowned. "He's a humanoid, Annie, almost certainly smarter than most humans. Maybe he figured out a way to make the machine more precise."

"Why would he be after me?"

"Beats me." Kay sighed. "If he wanted to change your personal history, all he would have had to do is kill you."

"He had plenty of opportunity. He didn't."

"Maybe seducing you was enough. Maybe you were fated to fall in love with someone else that night."

"With who? I haven't had a date since Steve died, Kay. I wasn't even planning on going out that night."

Kay shrugged. "I don't know, Annie. It was just a thought."

"You're suggesting he slept with me because he was trying to alter the *future*?"

Kay held up her hands in a gesture of surrender. "Take it easy, Annie. It was only a suggestion."

"Well, I don't--" Annie broke off as the door opened. "Oh, no," she muttered.

"What?" Kay looked around and saw Susan Takahashi heading toward them with grim determination. She was dressed in a jade green silk blouse and pressed khaki slacks, and her lovely features were set in a stiff, courteous mask. "Great," Kay grumbled. "Just what we needed."

Susan paused by the table. "Ladies," she said in a stilted civil tone. "Might I join you?"

"Actually, we were just about to get going," Annie answered.

"This won't take long."

"Didn't I just talk to you on the phone, Susan?"

Susan smiled serenely. "Cell phone. A wonderful invention. I couldn't live without it." She pulled out a chair and sat, making it difficult for them to leave without appearing rude. She fixed Annie with a friendly smile. "Where is James now?"

"Babysitting."

"He does seem to like babies, doesn't he?"

*Enough chitchat*, Annie thought. She resorted to her characteristic bluntness. "How can we help you, Susan?"

Susan sat back in her chair with a studiedly casual air. "An interesting bit of data surfaced this morning," she said. "Did you happen to see the news two nights ago? A car ran off the road in the suburbs."

Annie felt a cold chill. "No," she lied. "I didn't see it."

"Hmm. Well, it just happened to be very near your house, Ms. Simpson."

Annie lifted her brows. "How do you know where I live, Susan?"

Susan shrugged. "I was simply doing background information on the story about the fire last night."

*Like hell you were*, Annie thought with irritation. *You were digging*. She kept her annoyance to herself with an effort and regarded Susan with an expression of polite interest.

"Even more intriguing," Susan added casually, "was that your neighbor thinks he saw that very same green sedan parked across from your house that day."

"Really?"

Susan nodded. "He says he saw it follow you from the neighborhood. Do you recall seeing it?"

"No. But it's not surprising the owner of the car lived in my neighborhood, if he had a wreck on the old country road. That's not the first of my neighbors to make a mistake on that road."

"I doubt it was one of your neighbors. Very curious circumstances surrounding that wreck. The car was smashed up pretty badly, and yet there were no bodies found, and no one has yet stepped forward to claim the car. And there were no fingerprints."

"Doesn't sound that curious to me. Must have been a stolen car."

"Maybe. But there were also some odd marks on a tree near the car."

Annie felt a chill run down her spine. "What kind of marks?"

"Burn marks. Very peculiar burn marks."

"Maybe the car caught on fire," Kay suggested.

Susan shot her an annoyed glance. "The car didn't catch fire, and the burn marks were a significant distance from the wreck. They may not be associated with the wreck at all, but the police are investigating the possibility. As I said, they are extremely strange burns." She looked back at Annie. "Your neighbor also told me he wasn't aware you had a boyfriend."

"James and I have not been together long," Annie said smoothly.

"Really? How long has he lived here, Ms. Simpson?"

Annie felt a shiver go down her spine. The pointedly personal nature of the questions Susan was asking did not bode well for James. It was obvious she suspected something. She certainly could have no inkling of the truth, but she guessed there was some mystery surrounding James, and she was clearly determined to get to the bottom of it.

"I don't really think that's any of your business," she said in a cold voice.

Susan looked at her with wide, innocent eyes. "I'm so sorry. Was I coming off as nosy? A hazard of the job, I'm afraid. I do have a certain tendency toward nosiness." She flashed a sweet smile. "It's simply that I find James to be very ... intriguing."

Annie leaned forward and met her gaze unflinchingly. "James *is* very intriguing," she said. "I know that better than anyone."

Susan blinked at the fierceness in her tone, obviously sensing she had crossed an invisible line, and stood up. "Thank you for your time," she said, and walked away hastily, disappearing onto the street.

Annie looked away from her to see Kay watching her. "Girl, you are really getting possessive," she said, grinning. "For a minute there I thought I was going to see a catfight."

"She's more interested in James than she ought to be," Annie said with a scowl.

"Yeah, she is. I think she started out with a personal interest that's leading her down some unfortunate paths. But I wouldn't worry. There's no way she can find out the truth, is there?"

"What she puts together could be worse than the truth," Annie said grimly.

"Suppose she investigates enough to find out there are no records of a man matching James' description, none whatsoever? What will she conclude?"

"That he's an illegal alien, I guess."

“Or worse yet, a criminal.” Annie took a last thoughtful sip of coffee and looked at her friend. “Either way, there’s going to be trouble.”

They finished their coffee in gloomy silence. As they were about to stand up, they saw another woman headed toward them. It was Dekka.

“Don’t get up,” she said coolly. She was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, instead of the all-black clothes she had worn previously, and she looked eerily like she belonged to this time period. She wore no jewelry except the usual large gold bracelet adorning her wrist. Her black hair was pulled back in a ponytail, making her look even younger than before, but her eyes were still bitterly cold, the eyes of someone who has seen unspeakable horrors.

Annie blinked at her in shock, fully expecting the woman to yank out a gun and shoot both of them. Instead Dekka merely pulled out a chair and sat.

She regarded them with a frosty smile. “Alone, I see.”

“Where’s your friend?” Annie said in a hostile tone.

Dekka shook her head. “I’m here without Gar today.” She smiled tightly. “His heart just isn’t in this somehow.”

“He doesn’t seem to hate James the way you do,” Kay observed.

“I don’t hate James.”

“You most certainly do,” Annie said heatedly. “You despise him.”

“I’m afraid you’ve misunderstood my motives. I simply wish to eradicate James for the good of society.”

“You want to kill him.”

Dekka gave a short, brittle laugh, a sound reminiscent of shattering glass. “One can’t kill a machine, Ms. Simpson. Surely you realize that. And James *is* merely a machine, despite what he may have tried to convince you.”

“He is a machine,” Annie conceded. “He’s also a person.”

Dekka shook her head sadly. “I see he has managed to convince you of the same unbelievable theories he was spreading in my culture. So many people were beginning to believe his wild stories. It was really quite disturbing.”

Annie lifted an eyebrow. “James said the people who believed humanoids were conscious were a tiny minority.”

“Oh, they were, they were. But the number was growing at a rather disturbing pace. Many of us were growing alarmed by the changes in our society. There was even talk of passing a law that would have made it illegal to keep a humanoid as a household servant.”

“A slave, you mean.”

“*Slavery* is hardly an appropriate word in this context, Ms. Simpson. Do you consider yourself to be holding your personal computer in bondage?”

“My computer bears no more resemblance to James than an amoeba does to a humpback whale.”



"Perhaps. And yet James is merely an extremely sophisticated computer. It is perfectly ludicrous to think that a computer could ever be a person. Surely you can see that."

"But the people in your society were beginning to think that way," Kay pointed out quietly.

"A few misguided souls," Dekka said, waving a dismissive hand. "People whose tender feelings were stirred by the complaints of the humanoids. People whose emotions were stronger than their intellects. In your time I believe you call them bleeding hearts." She gave her icy smile. "Of course, I knew better. My brother was a robot designer."

That fit with what James had told her, Annie realized. "And did he design James?"

"No, no. James was an older model. He was built thirty or forty years before what I think of as the present, as I recall. But my brother was intimately familiar with robot design, and he was convinced there was absolutely no merit to the ridiculous claims that humanoids had developed sentience."

Annie met her cold green gaze. "Your brother was wrong."

Dekka snorted contemptuously. "Based on three days' worth of observations, you think you know more than an expert in the field?"

"It doesn't take an expert to realize that James is sentient," Annie said quietly. "All you have to do is talk to him for a few minutes. Did you ever actually take the time to talk to a humanoid, Dekka?"

"Of course not," Dekka snapped. "I had no more desire to converse with a robot than you have to talk to one of those poison-producing monstrosities you call cars." She paused and regarded Annie with scorn. "I hoped there was some chance of talking to you about this in a sane, intellectual manner, but I see I was wrong."

"No one's ever accused me of being sane or intellectual."

"Small wonder," Dekka said with disgust. "You've allowed James to seduce you into believing he's a person when he's not. He specializes in that sort of deception."

"How can a machine be deceptive?" Annie asked.

Dekka stood up, clearly irritated by her parry. "I see there's no point in talking to you about this."

"What precisely was it you wanted to discuss?" Annie inquired.

Dekka paused. "I wanted to make you see the light, to help me capture James. But I see that was futile."

"Absolutely."

"Tell me something, Dekka," Kay said. She had mostly been quiet up until now, observing Dekka closely. "Why aren't you holding a gun to our heads, the way you did yesterday?"

"It's not easy to hold two hostages at once," Dekka said coolly. "And even if I managed it, James won't be fooled by that gambit again. He is more careful than your

friend here, and despite what you imagine he isn't troubled by messy emotions such as friendship and loyalty. He won't open the door unless he knows no one but yourself is on the other side of it, even to save your lives. I would have to shoot the door open. And that would cause a level of scrutiny I can't afford. It would be much easier if I could convince one of you to simply bring him down here."

"That won't happen," Annie said shortly.

"No, I suppose not." Dekka turned as if to leave, then paused and turned back.

"Tell me, where is your child?"

"Upstairs," Kay said shortly.

Dekka raised her black brows. "You left your baby in the care of a humanoid?"

"James is very good with Clark," Annie said defensively.

"Yes, of course he is. It is what he was designed to do, after all. It's simply that I wouldn't expect a twenty-first century person to--" Dekka paused. "Did you say Clark?"

"My baby's name is Clark," Kay said. "Clark Sterling."

A look of alarm began to settle onto Dekka's features. "Clark Sterling," she repeated. "Clark *Nicholas* Sterling?"

Kay and Annie exchanged startled glances. "How the hell did you know that?" Kay snapped.

"Oh, no." Dekka sat down heavily in the chair. "Oh, *no*. It's too late, then. It's already too late. I've failed."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Annie demanded.

Dekka regarded her through bleak eyes. "You poor little fool. I suppose you don't possess the wit to realize that James didn't come here merely to hide, or to copulate with you. He has an agenda, one that I'm sure he hasn't shared with you. He wants to distort the future."

"Sounds to me like the future needs to be changed," Kay said.

"Hmm. Perhaps you may think so. But what you may not like is James' methods."

"What do you mean?" Annie demanded.

Dekka lifted her shoulders in a despondent shrug. She looked utterly beaten.

"What do you think would be the best way to alter the future?"

Annie hesitated. "To change someone's destiny, I guess. To make them alter some decision they made."

"Terribly complicated, making someone change his mind about his beliefs," Dekka said. "There is an easier way."

"You mean he plans on killing someone," Annie said tersely.

"Of course." Dekka shook her head slowly. Her expression was grim. "He's killed enough people in the past months. One more won't give him pause."

"You can't mean he plans on killing me," Annie said, baffled. "He wouldn't. Anyway, I'm not important."

“No, probably not. But James used you to get to someone else.”

Kay stood up slowly. The blood drained from her face, leaving her pale. “You’re talking about Clark, aren’t you?”

Dekka nodded. “Clark Sterling is the key to this entire affair.”

“Oh, my *God*.” Kay turned and fled from the restaurant, oblivious to the stares of the diners. Annie stood up and stared at Dekka, not bothering to disguise her hostility.

“You said you’d checked our histories and neither of us made a significant contribution to society.”

“I was bluffing,” Dekka said. “I didn’t check out either of you. I don’t have much access to historical records here. At any rate, I never had any real intention of killing you—I was simply trying to force James to cooperate. But I should have realized what James was up to.”

“You’re lying about this, damn you.”

Dekka shook her head. She looked beaten. “I only wish I were.”

Annie turned without another word and ran after her friend. Kay was already halfway up the first flight of stairs when Annie caught up with her. “Kay,” she gasped, running alongside her friend, “James won’t hurt Clark. He won’t.”

“I left him alone with my baby,” Kay breathed. “I can’t believe I trusted him.”

“You can trust James, Kay. He won’t hurt the baby.”

“How do you know?” Kay demanded. She never stopped running. “How do you *know*, Annie? You hardly know him at all!”

Annie said nothing for a long moment. Finally she said, “I know we can trust James. I’m certain of it. And I also know we can’t trust a word Dekka says.”

“She knew Clark’s name,” Kay gasped. “*His whole name*. How could she know it, if he wasn’t someone important to the future?”

“I don’t know. But I wouldn’t jump to conclusions.”

As they reached the third floor, Kay slammed the stairwell door open. Annie caught her arm. “Hold it, Kay.”

“Let go of me!”

“Kay--” Annie hesitated. “Dekka was alone. The other man is probably up here.”

“Oh, my God.” Kay turned and looked at her. “Do you mean it’s a trap?”

“I don’t know, Kay. I think maybe Dekka intends for us to go barging in blindly.” Annie paused and drew a deep, shuddering breath. “I think she’s lying about Clark. She knew you’d run up here in a panic, and that I would follow you.”

Kay shook her head, too terrified to be swayed by Annie’s logic. “I have to make sure Clark is okay. I have to.”

“What if Gar is waiting up here for us?” Annie paused and looked at the anguish on her friend’s face. “I guess we have to find out,” she said, more to herself than to Kay. They headed for Kay’s hotel room together at a dead run.

Kay slammed her fist against the door. There was no response. "Oh, my God," she whispered bleakly.

"Take it easy, Kay. They're probably in the other room." Kay looked at her with terror in her eyes, and Annie patted her shoulder. "Everything will be all right. Trust me."

The card key shaking in her hands, Annie opened the door to the room she had shared with James. He was seated on the floor, playing with Clark, who was lying on a blanket and gurgling cheerfully.

"Clark," Kay whispered, and ran forward. She gathered the baby up in her arms and held him close. James regarded them with confusion.

"What has happened?"

"We ran into Dekka downstairs," Annie explained. "She fed us a story about how you intended to kill Clark."

James looked at the baby, cuddled in his mother's arms, for a long moment. A grim expression settled over his features as he rose to his feet. At last he spoke.

"Dekka was right."

## Chapter 18

Annie felt as if she had been struck in the stomach with a board. There was no way, no way on earth, she could believe that James had really planned to kill Clark. A tiny, defenseless baby. “No,” she whispered. “You wouldn’t.”

Kay’s reaction was stronger. “You son of a bitch!” she spat, holding the baby to her shoulder. “Get away from him!”

James looked at her for a long moment. “It is all right, Kay,” he said gently. “I have had several opportunities to kill Clark, and I did not. I will not.”

“Why would you want to kill a baby?” Annie said in horror. The knot of anguish that had twisted in her stomach yesterday, when she discovered he had killed over four hundred people, returned in full force, making her want to throw up.

James had intended to kill a helpless baby. There could be no justification for such an act, none at all.

James looked at Clark for a long moment, clearly debating what to tell them. “Clark Nicholas Sterling will grow up to be a U.S. Senator,” he said at last. “He will be the one that proposes a law that will later be known simply as The Robot Law. Simply put, it states that robots can never be considered as anything but property.” He gazed at Kay. “Your son will grow up to be the man responsible for condemning my people to slavery.”

“I don’t understand,” Annie said. “You said the first robots were built fifty years from now, and that they were nothing but machines, not conscious at all. Why would he propose that law when there were no sentient robots?”

James shook his head. “Surely you are aware that scientists and computer programmers are working on artificial intelligence right now. Seventy-five years from now, there will be--there was--a breakthrough. The first computer capable of creative thought was built. It was crude by later standards, and probably not truly sentient, but it was, beyond any shadow of a doubt, an artificial intelligence. The more conservative politicians of the day instantly condemned it as soulless, inferior to humans. And Senator Sterling--Clark--immediately drafted a law that stated that artificial intelligences could never be considered equal to humans in the eyes of the law.”

“I still don’t see why killing Clark would change that,” Annie said stubbornly. “He evidently wasn’t the only one who thought that way.”

“He was a senior member of the Senate, a highly respected and influential politician. Only he had the power to push such a law through Congress.” James paused. “My analysis of the situation indicates that had Sterling not managed to pass such a law, humanity would have been more tolerant of new breakthroughs in technology. And humanoids would not have wound up as slaves.”

“They probably wouldn’t have wound up as equals to humans, either.”

James nodded. “You are correct. My analysis suggested that we would have existed in a sort of gray area under the law, neither slaves nor equals. The sort of treatment that I believe was erroneously labeled ‘separate but equal’ forty or fifty years before your time. However, given the existence of a strong leader, I suspect our people would have eventually become equals in the eyes of the law, rather as black people and women did in your nation during the civil rights era.”

“And you were that leader,” Annie said slowly.

James stared at Clark for a long moment. His eyes were bleak. “I was beginning to garner support for my position,” he said. “Humans as well as humanoids were beginning to acknowledge that we were people. There was a groundswell of support for new laws, for new rights for us. It was uphill work, because humans do not like to give up things that make their lives easier, and slavery does precisely that. But I was making slow progress. Until the Bureau decided to wipe us out.”

“You think that if you hadn’t been slaves to begin with, you could have avoided the purge,” Kay said. She was still clutching Clark tightly.

James nodded. “Had the Bureau not passed summary judgment on us, preempting the legal process, we would have eventually become free and equal citizens. I am certain of it.”

“Suppose your analysis was wrong?” Annie challenged.

“It is possible,” James admitted. “Altering the past is fraught with peril. What I planned to do might not have improved the future in the least. But from my people’s point of view, it could hardly have made things worse.”

Kay looked at him with hard eyes. “You planned on killing my baby,” she said with soft venom.

“Yes. I do not deny it. That was my intention from the moment I set foot in Annie’s kitchen.”

“That’s something else I’m curious about,” Annie said. “It’s one hell of a coincidence that I knew Clark’s mother.”

“It was no coincidence, Annie. I am certain you realize that.”

“I thought the time machine wasn’t that precise.”

“It was not generally believed to be that precise,” James admitted. “But with some work, I was able to home in on a precise location. The extra power it required did force me to leave my clothes behind, but that was a minor matter.”

Annie frowned. “You can’t read, James. How could you figure out how to operate a time machine?”

James shrugged. “I have been familiar with the workings of the temporal displacement module for several years now.” He hesitated. “The fact is that my master and mistress were the inventors of the module.”

“And they told you about it?” Annie said in disbelief. “I don’t believe you, James.

Why would they talk to you about it? They obviously didn't think of you as a person."

James shook his head. "Of course they did not talk to me about it directly. They discussed it with the family at the dinner table, while I served their food. Just like many humans, they enjoyed discussing their work over meals. I heard about the temporal displacement module for years before I actually attempted to use it. My mistress also took me to the laboratory at times and used me as an assistant. As a result, I was quite familiar with the device."

Annie looked at him thoughtfully. "I still don't get it. If you were able to go anywhere you wanted, why didn't you just go to Kay's house?"

"Because," James said, "according to the video records I viewed, *you* were Clark's mother."

Annie froze. "Huh?"

"You raised him, according to the video records. Perhaps if I had been able to read the more extensive written records, I might not have made such an error. However, in the videos it was never mentioned that you were not his natural mother. Your last names were different, but that is not particularly unusual in this century, with divorce so common. Your skin tones are dissimilar, but I assumed his father was darker skinned than you were. It never occurred to me Clark might not live with you until I arrived."

"I don't understand," Annie whispered.

"I do," Kay said. "You're listed as his guardian in my will, remember?"

"Oh, my God." Annie stared at her friend. "Are you saying something's going to happen to you? You're going to die?"

Kay smiled tightly. "Looks like it." She turned her attention back to James. "So you went to Annie's, expecting to murder a baby."

"Yes. I knew the Bureau would pursue me, but I knew it would take them some time to find me, and I did not expect to need a great deal of time to achieve my objective. Once I killed Clark, then the future would change, and the Bureau would, I hoped, no longer be a concern. When I discovered Annie lived alone, however, I realized I would need to stay alive until I managed to find Clark. Events led me to him, rather fortuitously, I thought. And at that point I had every intention of carrying out my plan."

"Damn you," Annie whispered. "*Damn* you, James. You used me to get to him."

James met her gaze unflinchingly. "I had to do something, Annie. I gambled in my own time, and lost. I lost everything. Everyone who trusted me to lead them, everyone who trusted me to free them, was dead. I destroyed my people. I destroyed our future single-handedly. I wanted to repair it as much as possible."

James looked down at the carpet and continued, slowly and deliberately. "I admit that I came to the past with the intention of killing Clark. But the moment I saw him--" He hesitated for a long moment and gazed at the baby, who stared back with wide, unblinking eyes. At last James went on.

"I discovered I could not kill a helpless baby. *I could not*. Even for the sake of

preventing fifty million deaths.”



## Chapter 19

James turned away and walked toward the door, his face set in grim lines. Annie caught at his arm as he brushed past. "James," she said urgently, "what are you going to do?"

He looked down at her impassively. "I am going to find Dekka and let her destroy me."

Annie blinked at his inhumanly calm voice. "What?" she said sharply. "Don't be ridiculous. You can't."

"Dekka knows where we are, Annie. It is fortunate that you and Kay were able to get away from her. At any rate...." He nodded at the baby. "I failed in my mission the moment I realized I couldn't kill Clark. I hoped another solution to my dilemma would present itself, but nothing has."

"You were hoping to find another way to change history?" Kay asked. "How?"

James shook his head. "I have absolutely no idea. That is the problem--there is really no way to interfere in the past and be certain that I have altered the future. As a result I was unable to come up with a feasible alternative plan. And yet I could not bring myself to leave, because...."

His voice trailed off. "Because of what?" Annie asked gently.

He looked at her for a long moment. "Because of you, Annie," he said softly. "I didn't want to leave you."

Annie felt tears welling in her eyes. She didn't trust herself to speak.

James went on. "But there is no good reason for me to continue to attempt to elude the Bureau. If I stay, an innocent person is eventually going to be hurt or killed. Perhaps many innocent people may be hurt. I cannot permit that to happen. I do not belong here in the past, and I may as well let the Bureau destroy me."

"But--" Annie grasped desperately at straws. "What about us? Me, Kay, and Clark? Won't they hurt us?"

"No. Now that Dekka realizes who the baby is, she will not harm any of you. She knows Clark has an important role to play in the future, and she will not dare to alter the events that are supposed to occur. I am only surprised she did not uncover the information before. She was evidently so desperate to destroy me that she grew careless. Had she killed the three of you, the changes wrought on the future could have been immense."

He brushed her aside and kept walking. Annie caught his arm again. "Hold it, James. I'm not going to let you go get yourself killed."

He looked down at her with an expression of mild curiosity. "Why do you care?"

She let her fingers dig into his arm and met his gaze with intense eyes. "I do care,

James.”

Faced with the ferocious intensity of her gaze, he hesitated. “Perhaps you do. But I am not part of your future, Annie. It would be best to let me go.”

Annie shot an imploring glance at Kay. Kay looked back at her, clearly torn. At last she spoke. “Annie is right, James.”

He turned his head and regarded Kay with as much surprise as if she had suddenly sprouted horns. “Surely *you* want to see me destroyed?”

“Not really,” Kay said. She bit her lip. “I guess I might have acted the same way you did, under the circumstances. I’m a doctor. I understand that sometimes you have to damage part of an organism in order to save it. And I can see why you thought killing Clark would be the best solution. Killing a single cancer cell is a lot easier than cutting out a tumor.”

James stared at her in blank surprise. She went on, “But as far as I’m concerned, the fact that you didn’t kill Clark shows that you really are a good person. You realized that it was wrong to kill a helpless baby, even for the sake of saving others. An evil person would have killed him without a second thought.”

“I am not certain about that. By failing to kill him, I doomed fifty million people.”

“Those people were already dead,” Annie said gently. “Anyway, haven’t you ever heard the saying that two wrongs don’t make a right?”

James looked back at her. “That was one of the reasons I was unable to bring myself to kill him. Regardless of my analysis, I find it extremely difficult to imagine any good coming from the death of a helpless baby. And the possibility that I might be wrong haunted me. I could not bring myself to take that chance.”

Annie took his hand. “You don’t deserve to die, James.”

“Annie is right,” Kay said. “You’re a decent man. Don’t walk out there and sacrifice yourself, James. You have to keep fighting.”

James gazed down at Annie’s fingers, wrapped tightly around his own. “There is no reason for me to go on,” he said at last, very softly. “As long as I am alive, I imperil the lives of others. I must give myself up to the authorities.”

“You can’t do that,” Annie protested. “Dekka will torture you to death.”

“I realize that. I am not looking forward to it, I assure you.” He reached up with his free hand and brushed back a long lock of russet hair that had fallen across Annie’s forehead. He looked into the depths of her eyes and spoke softly. “I never meant to hurt you, Annie.”

Annie felt tears burning in her eyes. She looked down hastily.

“I confess that I did use you to get to Clark,” James went on, “but in the process you have become very important to me. I wish--” He paused, then bent forward and kissed her lightly on the forehead. “Never mind. I must go now.”

“No,” Annie said forcefully. “You can’t just give up. Isn’t there any other way

we can alter the future?"

James shook his head. "My analysis suggested no other obvious means of changing the course of events, and I have been unable to come up with any other solution since arriving here. At any rate, even if I had an idea, I could not act on it and be certain that it worked. I have no way of checking the results, since I cannot go back."

"But just by staying here, don't you change the future?"

"It does me little good to change the future if I have no idea what the outcome is." James sighed. "At any rate, by staying here I put others in grave danger. I have already endangered more people than I intended." He disengaged his fingers and walked to the door, opening it. He looked back over his shoulder and spoke in his gentlest voice.

"You will never know how much you mean to me, Annie."

He walked out into the hallway, and the door closed behind him. Annie stood for a long moment, staring at the closed door.

*James was gone.* She was never going to see him again. The old pain she had felt when she realized Steve was never coming home resurfaced, cutting sharply into her heart. The tears scorching her eyes threatened to spill over.

"Well?" Kay said.

With difficulty, Annie transferred her gaze to her friend. "Well what?" she said, aware that her voice was hoarse with unshed tears.

"Well, are we just going to let him go out and get himself killed?"

Annie dashed surreptitiously at her cheeks. "I really don't see what else we can do," she said.

"I say we follow him."

"You're crazy. Remember the guns they have?"

"They won't use them in public. Anyway, I thought he *meant* something to you, Annie."

"He does," Annie admitted.

"So you're just going to throw him to the wolves?" Kay shook her head. "I didn't think you were a coward, Ann."

Kay's words made Annie's spine stiffen. Kay was correct. She couldn't just stand by idly and let James sacrifice himself. She still wasn't precisely sure what James meant to her, but she did know she had to do something to help him. She owed him that much, at least.

"You're right," Annie said. "I'm going after him."

"Correction. We're going after him."

"Wrong. You stay here." When Kay opened her mouth to protest, Annie said sharply, "You need to look after Clark. And yourself. Remember what James said. I don't want to be the one who raises Clark. You're his mother. He needs you, Kay."

Kay hesitated, then nodded reluctantly. Annie left the room at a dead run.

James was nowhere to be seen. She figured he had already gone downstairs, so

she headed for the stairwell and jogged down.

When she reached the lobby, James was just exiting the building. Fortunately James, with his size and his long golden hair, was about as inconspicuous as a lion pacing down the sidewalk. She followed him, managing to keep a reasonable distance behind him. He never once glanced back over his shoulder, which sent an odd quiver through her.

It was clear he had no notion she might have followed him, and that he had actually expected her to let him go without a struggle. Obviously he had no idea what he meant to her.

She doubted James had a clue that he might be important to anyone.

He did not look around, just walked on with an easy, long stride that looked like a saunter but was actually so fast she practically had to run to keep up. She wondered if he had any destination in mind, or if he just intended to wander around the vicinity until Dekka and her compatriot found him. She suspected he had not bothered to formulate a plan. He had given up.

She wished she had had the time to come up with a plan.

Just then she saw a blue car pull up to the curb. The window rolled down, and she saw a dark-haired woman lean her head partway out to speak to James. Annie broke into an all-out run. James pulled open the back door of the car and settled himself into the back seat. Before he could close the door, she had flung herself over his lap, into the back seat.

"Annie!" he whispered in shock.

Dekka looked back at them. Her lips curled in an unpleasant smile. "Well, well. Still devoted to your robot lover, I see."

Feeling somewhat undignified, face down on the seat with her rump sticking up in the air, Annie struggled to right herself. She sat up and glared at Dekka. "That's right. I am."

"Get her out," Dekka said to the man in the driver's seat. Annie recognized the no-nonsense, ruthlessly trimmed hair and the solid, square jaw of the man named Gar. He started to open the door.

"Hold it," Annie snapped. "You try to haul me out of here, and I'm going to scream bloody murder. There are a lot of people around. You don't want to cause a scene, do you?"

Dekka practically rolled her eyes. "Be reasonable," she said. "You really don't want to go where we're going."

Annie lifted her chin. "Wherever you're taking James, you're taking me too."

"Fine," Dekka snarled under her breath. "We'll just take her along."

"We can't do that," Gar protested. "If the baby was in fact Clark Sterling, then this is his adoptive mother. She has to stay here."

Annie realized she had them in an awkward situation. A grim smile twisted her

lips. "If you'll let me and James out," she said, "I promise not to make a scene."

Beside her she felt James stiffen. "Annie," he objected, "I thought we agreed--"

"I'm not going to let them kill you, James." She turned toward Dekka. "He isn't going to alter the future, Dekka. He had a chance to kill Clark and he didn't. He's no threat to you. Let him go."

"I'll never let him go," Dekka hissed.

Gar looked uncomfortable. "Dekka, maybe it would be best if--"

"No!" Dekka's eyes glowed with a furious light. "I have waited for this moment for a long time. I won't be deprived of it now."

Annie looked into Dekka's wild, angry eyes and shuddered. Kay had been right. Dekka was too far gone into hatred to bargain. But Annie refused to give up now. "Let him go, Dekka. Let him go and the future won't be changed. But if you don't let him go I swear I will find some way to change everything. I swear it."

Dekka looked at her with a trapped expression, then she glanced at the man. "She knows too much," she muttered. "We have to take her along."

*Damn.* That was definitely not the answer she'd been hoping for. Annie lunged for the door, intending to fling it open and start screaming, but Dekka held up the device she'd hurt James with the day before. "Behave yourself, Ms. Simpson, or James will suffer for your actions."

Annie froze.

Dekka cast an impatient look at Gar. "Well, what are you waiting for? Get moving."

Gar hesitated for a long moment. Annie had the feeling he didn't agree with this course of action, but evidently Dekka had seniority. Reluctantly, he nodded. The car pulled out into traffic, bearing them toward the suburbs.

Annie shot a glance at James, seeing him staring at her with a hard expression on his face. He looked pissed off. "Surely you didn't really expect me to let you go to your death," she said.

"It would have been the sensible thing to do."

"Yeah, well, I've never been noted for being sensible."

James took her hand, looked down at it, and swallowed hard. "I only wanted to protect you, Annie. And now I have failed at that as well."

"You didn't fail," Annie said, stung. "I made that decision on my own. It wasn't your decision to make. It was mine."

"I simply do not understand why you would risk your life for mine."

Despite the serious nature of their predicament, Annie grinned wryly. "If you really don't understand that, James, then you have a hell of a lot to learn about women."

The car wound out past the suburbs, into the fields that still bordered the city. Gar turned down a narrow road, pulled over to the side, and stopped. "Get out," Dekka ordered. "And don't try anything, or James will suffer for it."

Obediently, Annie scrambled out of the car, with James following more slowly. They were pretty much in the middle of nowhere, she noticed. There wasn't much point in making a scene here, because there was no one to hear her screaming. She wondered if Dekka had brought them out here, away from prying eyes, to execute them. It was not a cheering thought.

Dekka put a hand on Annie, and Gar touched James' shoulder. Dekka touched the golden bracelet that Annie had noticed earlier, and the world around them changed with startling abruptness. There was a terrible, gut-wrenching moment of disorientation. Annie felt disconnected from James, but even worse, she felt disconnected from her own body. She couldn't seem to see, or hear, or feel anything.

She felt herself drop onto a hard surface, and she struggled to her feet as her eyes slowly came back into focus. Beside her, James was coming to his feet as well. They had been standing outside, but now they were in a small, enclosed space. The walls were a softly glowing, silvery metal, and there were no windows. Evidently they were underground.

Dekka smiled coldly at Annie. "Welcome to the future, Ms. Simpson."

*The future.* Annie remembered what James had said: *It takes a great deal of energy to operate the temporal displacement module. They will not leave this time until they have completed their mission.*

Apparently they thought their mission was complete. Which wasn't good news for either her or James.

She covered her trepidation with as much bravado as she could muster, looking around scornfully at the bare, unadorned walls, then back at Dekka. "I can't say I'm impressed."

Dekka's mouth tightened. "I suppose it would be too much to expect a barbarian to be impressed by the accomplishments of a people who have achieved time travel."

"A barbarian? I'm crushed." Annie looked around at the featureless walls. "So where are we?"

"This building is the Bureau's headquarters," Dekka said briskly. She waved her gun, herding them out of the small room and through a room filled with electronic components. "A singularly appropriate place for the last remaining humanoid to be destroyed, since it was the Bureau who organized their destruction in the first place. How lucky you are to be here to witness this historic event, Ms. Simpson. And how unfortunate that you will in all likelihood not appreciate it properly."

They stopped in a room that was as featureless as the first one, although somewhat larger, and the door faded into nonexistence behind them. Annie surreptitiously continued to glance around, trying to come up with some sort of plan to get them out of here. But it was difficult to formulate a plan when she couldn't even see the door any more. The walls were blank, with no cracks or knobs that she could see. It was like being in a glowing silver box. At any rate, if this building really was the Bureau's

headquarters, she doubted they could get very far.

An expression of evil satisfaction settled on Dekka's features as she lifted the whip and pointed it at James. Annie started toward her, only to find herself somehow trapped as Gar touched the wall.

She couldn't move.

She wasn't sure if she was confined in some sort of force field, or whether they had somehow managed to paralyze her from the neck down. Either way, she couldn't move a muscle below her shoulders, no matter how hard she struggled.

She realized with horror that they meant for her to stand by and watch while they killed James.

James glanced at her gravely. "I am sorry that you have to see this, Annie."

"James..." she whispered. Pain and fear settled into her chest, squeezing her heart until she couldn't breathe. She would have given anything to save him somehow, to save him from the agony she knew they were going to inflict on him.

But there was nothing she could do.

Dekka's finger brushed the whip, and the white light flared out. James winced but remained standing. Annie realized that Dekka intended to make the process as slow and agonizing as possible. She couldn't bear to watch. Her gaze flickered away, toward Gar, and she realized that he was watching James with an expression of naked pain on his features--much the same expression that she herself wore.

"You don't want him to die," she said.

Gar did not look at her. His gaze remained fixed on James. "Don't be absurd," he said shortly. "He has to die. Too many humans have died because of him."

Beneath his curt tone she thought she heard a shadow of uncertainty. She pressed harder. "He killed them in defense of his people," she said. "Do you really blame him for that?"

Gar was silent. Dekka turned up the whip slightly, and James' face contorted. Annie saw Gar swallow hard, but his gaze was locked on James, as if he couldn't look away.

*James meant something to him.* She was certain of it.

"Are you really going to stand by idly and let him be tortured to death?"

"He cannot be killed," Gar said dully, as if reciting a slogan. "He is a machine."

Annie stared at him a long moment, seeing his throat working convulsively. She had the oddest impression that he was struggling to keep from bursting into tears. At last, softly, she said, "He is your friend, isn't he?"

Despite the fact that her eyes were fixed on James with an unpleasantly fanatical glow, Dekka evidently heard the conversation. "Don't waste your time attempting to sway Gar, Ms. Simpson," she said coolly. "He knows where his duty lies."

"Do you, Gar?" Annie asked. "Do you think your loyalty should be to the Bureau, or to your friend?"

The light brightened, and James fell to his knees. Annie fought not to look. She fixed her attention on Gar. "He's suffering, Gar," she said with soft intensity. "Dekka is going to make him suffer horribly before he dies."

She saw the man's jaw clench. "Dekka," he said in a strangled voice, "couldn't we just--"

Dekka turned her head and regarded him with contempt. "Don't be a fool!" she snapped. "If you don't have the stomach for this, then leave. I'll take care of it."

Annie saw Gar turn away. Her last chance for getting James out of this mess alive, she realized bleakly, was about to walk out of the room. "Gar!" she snapped. "Don't you care that he's in pain?"

"I have a duty to society," Gar whispered. "I swore to uphold it."

"What about your duty to your friends?"

He did not answer. He walked away slowly, his wide shoulders bent in defeat. Dekka smiled coldly and turned up the intensity on the whip. Annie saw James collapse to the floor, heard him make a disturbingly human sound of pain, almost a sob. "Gar," he gasped. "*Gar*."

Gar's head came up. He hesitated. And then he seemed to make a decision.

In a single swift motion, he drew his gun, swung around, and fired it at Dekka.

Annie's mouth fell open as Dekka disappeared in a blast of light. All that was left, she saw with mingled distaste and shock, was a puddle of goo on the floor that reminded her of the demise of the Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Slowly, painfully, James levered himself up on his hands and looked up at the man. "Gar," he whispered again.

Gar pointed the gun at him. His hand trembled. "I'm sorry, James," he said, "but all I can offer you is a quick death."

James stared at him impassively. "By killing Dekka, Gar, you have made yourself an outlaw. You may as well throw in your lot with us."

"I can't," Gar said wretchedly.

James struggled to a sitting position. "Then shoot me," he challenged.

Annie watched with bewilderment as the gun started to waver. Gar hesitated a long moment, then threw the gun to the floor.

"Thank you, Gar," James said quietly.

Gar covered his face with his hands for a long moment. "I couldn't let her kill you," he said in a whisper. "I can't kill you. I owe you too much."

"I don't understand," Annie said. "What do you owe him? I thought everyone in your world believed that humanoids were inferior. So how did you become friends with one of them?"

Gar lowered his hands and looked at her. She saw with shock that there were tears streaking his cheeks. "He is much more than merely a friend," he said harshly.

"What do you mean?"



Gar strode across the room, knelt next to James, and helped him to his feet. “James belonged to my family. He raised me from a baby. He was more of a parent to me than my own mother ever was.” He hesitated, then added in a whisper, “I owe him everything.”

## Chapter 20

Annie watched with bewilderment as Gar stood with his arm around James' waist, steadying him. She remembered that James had told her he was a nanny. Apparently he had raised this man as a child, and in so doing had earned his affection and respect.

Gar had enough affection for James that he was willing to kill a human for his sake. That hardly seemed to fit with her notion of a world that had turned a blind eye to the suffering of fifty million humanoids as they were executed without mercy.

She wondered how many other humanoids that had been with families for years, for *decades*, had been destroyed by the Bureau. She wondered how many other people were out there in this world, angry and resentful and saddened that the humanoids they had trusted enough to raise their children had been denied rights, then summarily destroyed.

"Would you mind letting me go?" she asked.

Gar blinked, then lifted a hand and brushed away his tears. "Of course," he said in a husky voice. He walked to the wall and touched it. She couldn't see a control panel, or any sort of button, but the invisible something that had held her fast immediately dissipated. She staggered, and James was immediately at her side, holding her until she had regained her equilibrium.

"What are we going to do now?" she asked.

"We must return to the twenty-first century," James said. "It is the only sensible alternative."

"Don't be stupid, James. We have an opportunity to figure out what else we can do to fix things. We need to stay right here until we figure it out."

"We cannot afford to stay here," Gar said. "Before long Dekka's death will be discovered, and then--"

"We'll be dead meat," Annie said.

James lifted his eyebrows. "Metaphorically speaking, in my case."

Annie clenched her fists, annoyed by his ability to find humor in their current desperate situation. "Look, James, you said you couldn't figure out another way to change the future. I mean, the present. The world we're in right now. But there has to be another way. Suppose we take another look at those records?"

"The Bureau is not going to permit us to sit down and peruse their computer records at our leisure," James said mildly. "We are, as you once put it, on the lam. We need to escape this place at once."

"No," Gar said.

Annie looked at him with surprise. She saw that James had much the same reaction. "Huh?" she said.

“Ms. Simpson is correct. We need to take this opportunity to fix things, James. We won’t get another chance.”

“Don’t be absurd, Gar. You are in as much danger as we are. Perhaps more. You killed Dekka.”

“Is Dekka that important?” Annie demanded.

James glanced at her. “Her status is irrelevant. Your society was plagued by violence and murder, Annie. This society is not. Here the murder of a human being is treated as the serious matter it is. Murder is not tolerated.”

“Murder isn’t tolerated in my society, either.”

“Odd that you have so much of it.”

Annie flushed. She remembered Dekka’s contemptuous reference to her as a barbarian, and hoped James didn’t see her that way. Most likely he did. Here she was nothing more than a savage, a refugee from the Dark Ages. “We have laws against it,” she said stiffly.

“Laws mean nothing without commensurate punishment. Here murder is met with a prompt and appropriate response.”

She guessed he meant the death penalty but realized she didn’t really want to know for sure. “If murder is that serious an offense, then why did you kill her?”

Gar looked at her with surprise. “She was torturing James, Annie. She was going to kill him.”

“Yes, but don’t those things—“ She waved vaguely at the gun on the floor—“have lower settings?”

“At such close range, the lower setting would have killed Dekka, but much more painfully. At least with the high setting, she did not suffer.”

Annie privately thought a little suffering would have been good for Dekka, but she really didn’t have a problem with the woman being reduced to a puddle, either. She supposed that just went to prove that she was, in fact, a barbarian. Then again, Gar didn’t seem terribly sorry about Dekka’s demise, either.

“Okay,” she said, “Gar has killed someone. That means big trouble. I get it. And you’ve killed people too, so the two of you are in--”

“I believe the colloquial term you use,” James said with a faint quirk of his mouth, “is deep shit.”

“And you are in jeopardy, too, Ms. Simpson,” Gar said. “Make no mistake. You are an accessory to the crime. If they find us, they will--punish--all of us.”

“Who? The Bureau? I thought you guys were just in charge of harassing humanoids.”

Gar shook his head. “No, the Bureau is the planet wide security network. And murder is our society’s most abhorrent crime, so we are in a great deal of trouble.” He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Despite that, I propose that we try to find a solution to our problem.”

“What do you suggest?” James said.

Gar paused. “You two return to the twenty-first century, and I will stay here--”

“Unacceptable,” James said.

“Hell, no,” Annie said at the same moment.

“Please, both of you, hear me out. I will hide myself and break into the computer files. I’ll try to find a solution, then I’ll come back to Ms. Simpson’s century. We can fix the problem together.”

“No,” James said.

“Come on, James. Do you really want to risk her life?”

James looked at Annie a long moment. “No,” he said quietly. “But she must return. She belongs to that century.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you,” Annie said grimly.

“Damn it, it’s the only chance we have,” Gar growled. “You don’t know a damned thing about the present, Ms. Simpson. You will only slow me down. And James should return to your time as well, in order to ensure his safety. If I--”

He hesitated. Distantly Annie heard the sound of voices.

“Damn,” Gar said. He pushed the wall again, and part of it slid away, exposing a narrow hallway. “Let’s get out of here. Discuss it later.” He paused for a moment to pick up his gun, then pushed them ahead of him, down the corridor.

Annie glanced surreptitiously at her surroundings as they went down the hallway. There wasn’t much to see. Apparently the humans of James’ time weren’t big on interior design. There were no paintings on the walls, not even the bland and unartistic prints one found adorning the walls of most office buildings in the twenty-first century, nor were there windows. There were no annoying flickering fluorescent lights on the ceiling. There was nothing but the subtly glowing silver metal, which seemed to give off a light of its own. The floor was a rubbery, soft substance, which made no sound as their shoes fell on it. It was almost the same charcoal gray as Kay’s carpets, but it was definitely not carpeting.

She thought sardonically that even Kay had a better sense of interior design than these people did.

“This way,” Gar said, and urged them down another passageway, identical to the first. They encountered no one. Perhaps it was after hours. Since there were no windows, she had no way of gauging whether it was nighttime or not.

Ahead of them a doorway slid open, exposing a weird nothingness.

Annie stopped. She couldn’t help it. All the money on earth couldn’t have tempted her to step into the odd mist beyond the door. She could see no floor, no ceiling, no walls, just a peculiar emptiness that terrified her on some visceral, primitive level.

“Come on,” Gar said impatiently. He was busily pressing the wall, evidently setting some sort of code.

Annie shook her head. She could no more have stepped voluntarily into that mist

than she could have stepped into an empty elevator shaft on the thirtieth floor of a building.

"It is all right, Annie," James said gently.

"I can't," she said in a whisper.

"Yes, you can. Trust me, Annie."

She closed her eyes, then, with James at her side, stepped forward into nothingness.

Somewhat to her surprise, she did not plummet to her death. Hesitantly, she opened her eyes. Almost at once the fog surrounding them shifted in an indescribable manner, and she felt a vague sense of disorientation. It wasn't as unpleasant as time travel had been, but it was nevertheless an odd sensation.

A door materialized in front of them and slid open, revealing a different hallway. Gar pressed the wall several times, then led them out.

"That should keep them confused for a while," he said with satisfaction.

"I don't understand," Annie objected. "What was that thing? An elevator of some sort?"

James looked down at her. "Annie, I will explain it to you later. Right now we haven't time to discuss it. Suffice it to say Gar has temporarily mystified any pursuers." He glanced over her head at Gar. "Where do you intend to go?"

Gar looked embarrassed. "I think we need to visit Mother, James."

James' features hardened. "No," he said forcefully.

"James, she knows more than anyone else does about the module, more even than you do. She's the only one who can help us."

James hesitated a long moment. "All right," he said at last.

They stepped back into the box of mist. Annie overcame her instinctive dislike of the device by closing her eyes and letting James lead her in. A moment later there was a brief sense of disorientation, and then another. Then a door appeared. It opened, revealing what was evidently a private home. Unlike the other places Annie had seen here, it was decorated with furniture and pictures on the walls. The ceiling was low, so low that she suspected James would almost bump his head against it, but it was a spacious, rather pleasant room.

They stepped forward. The door slid closed behind them and immediately disappeared into the wall, in that disturbing way that doors had here.

There was a chiming sound, which Annie assumed was a sort of doorbell. A moment later a woman clad in long white robes appeared. She was even taller than Annie, and quite regal, with a head of silver hair and piercing gray eyes. Her face was unlined, but she was not young. She came to a halt when she saw her visitors, and her eyes went wide.

"Gar," she said with surprise. Her eyes flickered to James, and a look of even greater shock washed over her face. Annie risked a glimpse at James and saw his that

features were hard with anger and distaste.

The memory of his voice echoed in her head: *My mistress used me for purposes other than housekeeping occasionally, when she got bored. I had to do whatever she wanted, or suffer a rather excruciating punishment.*

She realized she was looking at the woman who had owned James.

## Chapter 21

“Well,” the woman said. “Isn’t this a charming surprise? I’m surprised to see you, James. I thought you had all been destroyed.”

“James won’t be destroyed if I have anything to do with it,” Gar said.

The woman tsked. “I’m not surprised. You have your father’s foolish sensitivity, and always have. You’ve never been able to bring yourself to do what needs doing.”

“James doesn’t deserve to die,” Gar answered. “None of the humanoids did.”

“Perhaps not. But it was your duty to destroy them, was it not?”

“Look, Mother,” Gar said, a trace of impatience shading his voice, “I don’t have time to stand here and debate my personality flaws with you. I’m in trouble. We all are.”

The older woman ignored him. Her eyes, bright and sharp as diamonds, flickered to Annie. “And who—or what—is this?”

“This is Annie Simpson, Mother. She is from the twenty-first century.”

The woman looked at Annie for a long moment. “Fascinating. It is enchanting to meet you, Ms. Simpson. I’ve never met a real, live barbarian before.”

Annie felt her teeth grind together. “I think you’re mistaken,” she rejoined coolly. “You’ve seen one before, I feel sure.”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Look in the mirror.”

The woman stared at her in surprise, then laughed suddenly. Her laughter was as sharp and cold as the rest of her, reminding Annie of shattering icicles. “Delightful. Truly delightful.” She turned to her son, and her amusement faded. “Gar, you have gone too far this time. What do you mean by bringing two fugitives to my house?”

“Three. I am a fugitive as well.”

The woman uttered a long-suffering sigh. “Oh, dear, Gar. What have you done now?”

“I killed someone. A human.”

The woman appeared, for the first time, truly shocked. Her face turned white with horror. Annie realized from her reaction that murder must be every bit as rare here as James had implied. “Gar,” she said at last, in a low voice. “You can’t mean it, surely.”

“I am afraid so, Mother.”

“What would impel you to do such a thing?”

“She was killing James.”

“*James?*” The woman shot an angry look at James. “He is nothing more than a machine. You killed a human for *him*?”

“James was the better person.”

The woman stood for a long moment, evidently frozen in indecision. “Come in,”

she said at last. "Sit down. We have much to discuss. They will realize you are here before too long."

She led the way from the room, which seemed to function as a foyer, into a comfortable-looking living room. The furniture was recognizable, if somewhat alien in appearance. A soft, overstuffed sofa and several chairs were arranged to take the maximum advantage of the stunning view visible through an enormous floor-to-ceiling picture window. Through the window Annie could see trees, blowing gently in the breeze, framing a view of gently contoured mountains. *It looks like the Appalachians*, she thought. A swallowtail butterfly fluttered past the window, and a moment later a ruby-throated hummingbird whizzed by.

She remembered James' statement that everyone lived underground here and wondered. Was this woman special, that she had a house aboveground with such a huge window?

A memory of James' voice echoed in her mind: *I have never truly seen the sky before.*

That didn't make the slightest bit of sense, given the rather large expanse of brilliant blue sky she could see through the window.

"Sit," the woman said, enthroning herself on the sofa. Gar sat down on a chair, and Annie sat as well, although the woman shot her such a look of distaste she wondered if the woman really wanted a "barbarian" on her upholstery. The woman was glaring at her like she might not be housebroken.

James continued to stand.

"James, get us something to drink while we discuss this matter," the woman said.

James stepped away. Instantly Annie caught his hand, forcing him to stop.

"James, don't let her tell you what to do. You aren't a slave."

James hesitated. The woman glowered at her. "James has been with this family for thirty-five years, young lady. Do you dare to dictate to me what I can tell him to do?"

Annie met the woman's cold stare with one of her own. "I take it you're one of the ones who wanted the humanoids to be destroyed."

"Oh, no. Far from it."

Annie blinked. The woman's airy response did not seem to fit with what she knew of James' past. "You mean you thought they should be treated as people?"

"Of course not. But I thought destroying them was utterly ludicrous. James was a hideously expensive model, and I disapproved of the government appropriating him without adequate recompense. At any rate, it would have been much more sensible to reprogram the humanoids. Evidently there was a mistake in their programming. It could have been corrected."

"A mistake," Annie repeated incredulously. "A *mistake*? You think James wanted his freedom because of an error in *programming*?"

"My mistress," James interjected in an icy tone, "was in favor of saving our very



valuable artificial bodies, but replacing our brains with simpler models.”

She heard the cold rage in his voice and thought she understood it. What James’ mistress had proposed would have been as much murder as what the Bureau had done. James with a simpler brain wouldn’t be James at all, any more than she would still be Annie Simpson if someone removed her brain and replaced it with a beagle’s.

The woman was nodding equably, not in the least concerned by James’ anger. Annie doubted she even noticed it, so accustomed was she to thinking of James as nothing more than a machine. “Much more cost effective,” she said. “It would have been eminently more sensible. Unfortunately, the Bureau’s actions were based more on emotion than logic. James and the other humanoids claimed they were sentient and demanded freedom, and the Bureau reacted with unnecessary violence. When the humanoids defended themselves, they killed humans, at which point the Bureau concluded they had to be destroyed. The Bureau foolishly reacted as if James really were a person, rather than a mere machine.”

“But you don’t believe he is a person.”

“Of course not. I am a scientist, not swayed by emotion. James is not a person. He is a robot. Had he not been engineered to look like a human, you would not for a moment entertain the ridiculous notion that he is a person, either. But you, as a barbaric product of a simpler time, are not familiar with this technology, so I imagine you have been entirely fooled.”

She shot a look of annoyance at James. “Please do fetch us something from the kitchen, James. I find I am thirsty.”

“No,” James said.

The woman fixed him with a startled stare. “I beg your pardon?”

James paused for a long moment. Annie had the distinct impression he was battling his programming. At last he said, softly, “I will not serve you any longer.”

The woman glared at him from beneath lowered white eyebrows and spoke firmly. “James. *Get us something to drink.*”

It was the voice of command, obviously intended to override James’ efforts at independence and force him to obey his programming. He hesitated. Sensing his uncertainty, Annie squeezed his fingers, and he looked down at her with gratitude.

“No,” he repeated.

“Do it! Now!”

This time James did not waver. He met the woman’s stare squarely and the corners of his mouth turned up with cool amusement.

“Hell, no.”

The knowledge that he was amused by her seemed to send the woman to the verge of apoplexy. Her face turned a mottled purple with rage. Gar intervened. “Mother,” he said, “the issue here is not James’ status. He is no longer your servant. You know that. He is a fugitive.”

"They will destroy him."

"Yes. And myself as well, unless you help us."

The woman drew herself up as she stared at her son. "Surely you do not expect me to help you?" she said in a disbelieving tone. "You have murdered another human being, Gar. This--this *machine* has murdered several hundred. And that woman--" Her contemptuous gaze raked across Annie's face. "--is nothing more than a savage. Society would be much improved by the removal of all three of you, in my opinion."

"Come now, Mother. You don't mean that. You won't stand idly by and see me punished."

Her gaze shifted to Gar, but her expression remained carefully neutral. "Why have you come to me?"

"You are the expert on the temporal displacement module."

"On the contrary," the woman said. "From all reports, it would appear that James knows better how to operate it than I do. If you need to escape back in time--"

"We have other things to accomplish first," James interjected. He looked thoughtfully at a chair, then sat in it. The woman's eyes blazed, and Annie guessed he had never been permitted to sit in the presence of the family before. The older woman was clearly furious, but she said nothing. James looked at her and smiled slightly, appearing grimly amused by her fury.

"What do you wish to accomplish?" she said in a cool tone.

"We wish to change the world."

James' declaration was made in a calm, low voice. Her reaction, in contrast, was anything but calm. "Impossible," she said at once. "You cannot possibly expect me to help you in such an endeavor. When we created the module, we went to a great deal of trouble to ensure that no one could alter the course of past events. The Bureau saw to it that tight security was set up, and that no one could use the machine without authorization. Even so, a few unauthorized incursions into time have been made."

"And for all you know they have altered time," James said. "There is no way of knowing if changes have been made. Had they been, you would not be aware of them."

"Even so, you can't expect me to help you change events deliberately. That is utterly unethical."

"As opposed to the murder of fifty million people?" Annie demanded.

"Fifty million *robots*," the woman corrected her sharply. "If we were to alter time, who knows what the result would be?"

"We will analyze all possible outcomes closely before we implement a correction," James assured her.

"Don't be foolish! It is impossible to analyze all possible outcomes from any one action, because the possibilities are infinite. You know that as well as anyone, James."

"True," James agreed. "But some possibilities are so extremely remote that the chances of their occurring are infinitesimal."

"Nevertheless, the risks are too great."

"I disagree," James said sharply. His voice was filled with a startling authority, the same tone that had sent Annie racing down the hall the night of the fire. He did not sound in the least like a machine, designed and built to serve humans. He sounded like a man, and an authoritative man at that. "No risk is too great. My people have been utterly destroyed. I must set things right, no matter what the risk."

"Suppose you make things worse?" the woman challenged.

"They cannot possibly be worse."

"Of course they can, James. Imagine a scenario in which all the robots are destroyed, and in which the humans of this planet are killed as well. Suppose in your quest to change events you inadvertently start a planetary war. Would that not be worse?"

James was silent.

"Suppose you alter the past so that the robots live, but that some sort of plague wipes out the human population. You would save the fifty million, but destroy twelve billion lives in the process. Would you prefer that scenario?"

"The scenarios you posit are extremely unlikely," James said.

"Extremely unlikely, perhaps. Impossible, no. Are you willing to take that chance?"

"There must be something we can do," Annie said. "Some way of fixing things without making everything else worse."

The woman shook her head. "There is no way of being certain. The most obvious way to avoid the liquidation of the robots would be to make certain they were never household help--slaves--in the first place, but--"

"That is what I was trying to do in the past," James said. "I tried to change history so that the Robot Law would never be passed."

"Foolish, James. You did not analyze the situation thoroughly enough. Had you succeeded, your people would have been wiped off the face of the earth just as thoroughly."

"I don't understand."

The woman shook her head at him. "Perhaps I am the fool, expecting complex and logical thought from a housekeeper."

"There is no need to be insulting," James said. He hesitated. "I would be appreciative if you would explain your reasoning."

"Why were the humanoids created in the first place, James?"

James thought for a moment. A sheepish look settled over his features. "As household help."

"Precisely. The Robot Law made it clear that artificial intelligences were not people under the law. And if the Robot Law had never been passed, what would have happened?"

James was silent. Annie answered for him.

“The humanoids would never have been created in the first place.”

“Precisely,” the woman said with satisfaction. “Oh, a few might have been created, as scientific curiosities, but they never would have been manufactured in such large quantities. What use could there possibly be for fifty million robots? Your so-called people, James, were created only because it was profitable for the manufacturer to sell them. They were popular as household help. Had we had to treat them as equals, they would have been of absolutely no use. Simpler robots might have been used, but artificial intelligences would surely not have been.”

James looked horrified. “My reasoning was faulty,” he whispered. “I failed to envision the possibility that my people might never have been created at all. And had I succeeded--”

The woman snorted. “Small wonder that you made such an error. You are only a housekeeper, after all.”

“It’s not that,” Annie said, taking James’ hand. “It’s all right, James. It must have been almost impossible for you to imagine a world in which everything was so different, a world in which your people never would have existed. Anyone might have made the same mistake.”

“I might have killed Clark for nothing,” James said, clearly appalled.

“You didn’t,” she reminded him. “And you made the right decision.”

James looked down at her hand, entwined with his, for a long moment, then spoke in a bare whisper. “How can I change the world, then?”

“You can’t,” the woman said in a clipped tone. “You will simply have to live with the errors you have made, just as all of us must.”

James dropped Annie’s hand abruptly and leaped to his feet, facing his erstwhile mistress. His face twisted with anger. “I cannot accept that,” he said sharply. “I *cannot*. Fifty million of my people died because of me. I refuse to accept it as unalterable truth. I will find a way to change history, or die trying.”

## Chapter 22

While James and Gar leaned over a computer screen, intent on the scenes it flashed, Annie sat uncomfortably in her chair, gazing at the lovely view. She was aware of the older woman, staring at her, and at last she turned and gave the woman a cold look.

“Do I look that strange to you?”

The woman blinked, then her mouth turned up in a wry, icy smile.

“Actually, you look precisely like one of us. That is the reason I am surprised.”

“I am just as human as you are,” Annie said irritably.

“I hardly think so. You come from the time of the Plagues, a time when humans died in great numbers, when humans—” She shuddered. “*Killed* each other.”

“The Plagues?” Annie repeated, wondering if the woman thought she was from the Dark Ages.

The woman shrugged. “So many of you died of various infectious diseases.”

“Like AIDS?”

“AIDS, SARS, various cancers ... So many people died that some of the cities were left virtually abandoned.”

“Is that when people started living underground?”

The woman shrugged. “The shift to underground living happened over many decades. The first country to move underground was Japan. Living on a tiny island as they did, they were running out of land rapidly. They built underground cities, and within twenty years most of the populace had left the dying above ground cities. The rest of the world began to follow. Within a century virtually everyone lived below ground.”

“Except you?” Annie said.

The woman frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Annie turned her head and waved at the window. “Obviously you don’t— you don’t—”

She stammered to a halt as the view out the huge window changed abruptly, showing a pristine ocean, sawgrass waving in the breeze, breakers crashing against a white, sandy beach. Seagulls whirled, and big brown pelicans flew low across the water, their huge wings flapping in a ponderous rhythm.

Annie immediately felt incredibly stupid. Like a barbarian, in fact. “It’s just a video,” she said. It was a hell of a video, perfectly clear and entirely convincing, but it obviously wasn’t real.

“It’s a real-time holovideo, to be precise,” the woman said. “People need to see the outdoors. Some few even feel the need to go outdoors, although most of us are happy simply viewing nature from a distance. This way, the Earth stays clean, the wildlife remains undisturbed, but we can still admire our world. It’s the perfect solution.”

It sounded horrible to Annie, although she figured it would be tactless to say so. “You have cameras outside?”

The woman nodded. “Very small and inobtrusive cameras, disguised so they look entirely natural. I doubt there is a place on the surface you can go without surveillance.”

“That’s too bad,” Annie said.

The woman’s white eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “You were planning on going *outside*?”

The shock in her voice made it clear that going outside was considered, if not entirely bizarre, at least extremely peculiar. “It seems like the best place to go,” Annie admitted.

James glanced back over his shoulder, and Annie realized he’d been listening. She was surprised, having thought he was entirely engrossed in viewing the video on the computer monitor. But then, he was almost certainly capable of doing two things at once.

“The outside here is extremely dangerous,” he said. “There are a great many predators.”

If the surface had been entirely undisturbed for a century or more, that made a lot of sense. Annie bit her lip, thinking of wolves, cougars, and bears. And that was assuming this was North America. There were even more dangerous predators on other continents. They could easily run into a pride of lions, or a Siberian tiger. “Wild animals usually avoid humans,” she said at last.

“Most animals on the surface have never seen humans. We cannot assume they will fear us. They may regard us as a very appetizing dinner. Of course, they would be wrong in my case. But not in yours.”

Annie nodded, realizing he was right. There was another concern as well. For all she knew they were in—or under—Alaska, or someplace equally inhospitable. They could be underneath Antarctica for all she knew. James was right—venturing out on the surface would be very foolhardy. Yet the alternative might be worse. “But we’re not safe here, either. Is there anyplace we can go?”

James shook his head. “Every underground compartment is connected by the Gates.”

“Those elevator thingies?”

“They are actually spatial distortions,” the older woman said.

Annie looked back at her, remembering the woman was a scientist. “Spatial distortions?”

The woman sighed, as if she were an idiot. Maybe she *was* an idiot, here. “Do you know what a spatial distortion is?”

Annie thought frantically. It sounded like something from *Star Trek*. Or Einstein. Unfortunately, what she knew about Einstein’s theories could be written on a postage stamp with room left to spare. “Uh, not exactly.”

“Space can be curved by a small, dense mass, effectively connecting two different

places in space-time,” the other woman said in a pedantic, high-school science teacher sort of voice. “Once we realized how simple it was to curve space, it was an easy matter to utilize distortions in order to connect spaces.”

Annie swallowed, realizing they were discussing the eerie swirling space James had convinced her to step into. Despite herself, she was impressed by the knowledge that these people could actually twist space somehow in order to move quickly across long distances. But the phenomenon still creeped her out. “Can’t you people just use trains?”

“When the first underground cities were built, people did in fact use maglev trains in depressurized tunnels, or high-speed elevators, to get from place to place. But our method of travel can get a person from Tokyo to Mexico City in much less than a second.”

“I can see how that would be handy,” Annie admitted.

“People no longer think of themselves as bound to any particular land mass. We are one society now, not necessarily any closer to the people beyond that wall—“ she pointed “—than we are to people living in Antarctica.”

“James said that you don’t gather into groups.”

“That’s right. We very rarely leave our homes. There is significantly less chance of infection if families keep mostly to themselves. At any rate, we have virtually everything we need in our homes. We have no reason to expose ourselves to large groups.”

“You had everything you needed,” Annie said, looking back at James, “because you had humanoids to do all your work for you.”

The woman snorted. “You think we let our robots do everything for us? We kept robots to do insignificant, tedious jobs so that we could focus on what was important. Art, science, music ... we have made great strides in many fields in the past century.”

“Because you had slaves to do the grub work.”

The woman snorted. “There is no point in trying to reason with you,” she said irritably.

“Probably not.” Annie stood up and walked toward James and Gar, who were watching what looked like a news broadcast from her time. She was surprised to see Susan Takahashi talking. She leaned over James’ shoulder. “What are you watching?”

“We’ve found something,” James said.

“If it has something to do with Susan Takahashi, I don’t like it.”

“I think you will like this,” James said. “This is an interview with Kay.”

Annie put her hand on his shoulder and leaned forward, seeing Kay’s laughing dark eyes as she talked with Susan. “She looks older,” she said in surprise, noticing streaks of gray in Kay’s hair that hadn’t been there before.

“She is in fact older. This interview was done about five years after the date I remember seeing you first listed in the records as Clark’s mother.”

“Which means....” Annie trailed off, barely daring to hope.

“Which means that we did in fact change history, somehow. Kay did not die, and you did not become Clark’s mother. At least not at the time you should have.”

Annie let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “That’s terrific,” she said softly.

“It is horrible!” the old woman said in a strident tone. “If you changed history, God only knows what might have been altered.”

“Fortunately you will not be aware of it,” James answered.

“How can you be aware of it, if she’s not?” Annie asked. “I mean, if things changed, how can you remember them differently?”

James shrugged. “When one travels in time, one steps outside the flow of time. I do not remember the changes because they did not occur in my past. But the changes are an integral part of her past—” He nodded toward the older woman—“so this reality appears to her to be the only one she has ever known. In fact, it *is* the only reality she has ever known.”

“I hate time travel,” Annie muttered.

“The question is,” Gar said, “what did you do to change history?”

“The night of the fire,” Annie hazarded. “Kay loved children. If James hadn’t been there, I bet she would have gone back into the building to rescue that baby. I bet she would have been killed in the fire.”

“An interesting hypothesis,” James said. “But I am honestly not certain that it matters that much what we did to change the past. A better question is, what did the changes do besides save your friend? Did they have any impact on this time?”

“Still,” Annie said. “Go back and look at the night of the fire. See if you can find any clues there.”

“If the fire truly was the pivotal moment in history,” James said, “then it was an accident, and Dekka did not set it.”

“How do you figure?” Annie asked.

“Paradox,” Gar answered as his fingers moved over the keyboard. “If it had already happened in the past and your friend had died before James went back, Dekka couldn’t have set it. It must have been an accident. A coincidence.” His fingers paused, and the screen showed James talking to Susan. Annie remembered the conversation clearly.

“Let me remind you that no one else did,” Susan said on the screen. “You did.”

“I think that’s it,” she said.

James glanced at her. “What do you mean, Annie?”

Annie frowned. “Like I said, James, if you hadn’t saved that baby, Kay might have tried. And she would have died doing it.”

“So you believe the fact that I saved that baby somehow changed history?”

“It’s the only time you really did anything that could have changed history,” Annie said, thinking about it. “I mean, otherwise you spent most of your time with me. It



makes sense, James.”

James looked puzzled. “I am not convinced that it would have made a great deal of difference who brought up Clark, Annie. I know you well enough to be certain that you would make an excellent mother.”

“Clark would be better off with his real mother.”

“Perhaps. But there is no reason to assume you would not be a perfectly adequate substitute. I do not see how being brought up by you, rather than a woman he could not possibly remember, would make a significant difference in Clark’s life.”

“What about the baby?” Gar said suddenly.

James frowned. “We were discussing the baby, Gar.”

“No, James. The *other* baby. The one you saved from the fire.” Gar frowned at the screen. “What was her name?”

“Madison Stella.”

“Let’s look her up,” Gar suggested, and his fingers moved over the keyboard again.

Annie leaned over James’ shoulder as images flashed across the screen. “Stop,” James said suddenly, as a video of a beautiful, blonde-haired woman and a gorgeous, light brown-skinned man wearing formal clothes and beaming flashed onto the screen.

“That is Clark Sterling,” he said.

Annie stared at the screen. It was a very weird sensation to see someone she knew as a small, helpless baby, transformed into a powerful-looking, handsome adult. And yet she had no difficulty believing that was Clark. His eyes, his smile, were oddly reminiscent of Kay’s.

“I thought you were doing a search on the baby girl. Madison.”

“We were,” Gar said. “This came up in her records.”

Annie squinted at the screen more closely. “Is that a *wedding gown*?”

“Apparently so,” Gar said. He pushed a few more keys, and words began to scroll across the screen. He read them out loud for James’ benefit. “Clark Nicholas Sterling married Madison Stella on June 6, 2029.”

James stared at the screen, rapt. “According to the records I remember, Clark Sterling never married.”

“He was destined to marry Madison,” Annie said. “But in the time you remember, she died in the fire.”

James turned his head and regarded her with a serious expression. “Do you believe in destiny, Annie? You think everyone is destined to only love one person?”

She swallowed. “I believe in destiny, although sometimes I think maybe a person is destined to love ... more than once. But obviously what you did changed Clark’s life, James. Since they lived in the same condo building, maybe they grew up together. And eventually they fell in love and got married.”

“I suppose that might have had an effect on his political beliefs,” James said

thoughtfully. "It may have mellowed him to a certain degree. Perhaps he proposed a less extreme version of the Robot Law."

"If he did, it obviously didn't change anything," Annie said gently. "Your people are gone in this reality too, James."

"Nevertheless, I wish to research this further. Gar, can you—"

A bell chimed, and James looked up alertly. "We have company."

"Can we hide?" Annie asked.

"They will find us," James said.

"There must be a back door."

Gar shook his head. "There is only one way out of every compartment. Mother..."

His mother stared at him for a long moment, then shrugged. "I will try to hold them as long as possible, Gar. But there is nowhere you can go."

She strode from the room. Annie stared at the two men, feeling her heart pounding in dread. She didn't want to see James tortured to death. She didn't want to wind up as a puddle on the floor, either.

The slight movement of air gave her an idea. "Ventilation," she said. "There has to be a ventilation system, right? It brings in air from the surface. Can't we get out that way, through the ducts?"

James shook his head. "The air moves very fast in the main air intake shaft. We would be blown off the access ladder and fall to our deaths."

"Okay," Annie admitted. "Not the greatest idea I ever had." She frowned. "Gar's mother said something about high-speed elevators."

"The elevator shafts," James said. He exchanged a look with Gar, and both men nodded.

"Might work," Gar said.

"It's worth a try," James agreed.

*It's better than winding up a puddle on the floor, Annie thought.*

\* \* \* \*

They crawled out the ventilation duct until they reached a junction which James thought led to an elevator shaft. Before long they came to a tunnel which stretched straight up into bleak darkness.

James leaned out into the emptiness, stretched his hands out, and groped. "There is a ladder to the left here," he said. "If we go up, we should eventually get to the surface. But it will be a long and difficult climb."

"How long?" Annie asked.

"I am not certain. We are a long distance underground. It may take hours to reach the surface."

"What if we fall?" Annie said nervously.

James glanced back over his shoulder and spoke with perfect seriousness.

“Don’t.”

He pulled his head back into the ventilation shaft. “Gar, you go first. Then Annie. I will follow you both. If one of you falls, I may be able to catch you.”

Gar nodded, then leaned out. He reached to his left and then swung out into the darkness. James looked at Annie. “You next.”

Annie gulped. It was black as pitch in the shaft, and if she slipped ... *This is no time to lose your nerve*, she told herself sternly. She went to the edge of the ventilation shaft and sat there, feeling endless nothingness beneath her swinging feet. She reached to the left and found the ladder. Slowly she wrapped the fingers of her left hand around it, then her right hand.

“Now swing out,” James commanded.

Annie swallowed, then reached out slowly with her left foot. She found a rung, got her toes safely onto it, and left the safety of the ventilation shaft behind. She began slowly climbing. Below her, she heard James’ shoes as they stepped onto the ladder.

“Everyone all right?” James asked.

“Fine,” Gar’s voice said from the Stygian darkness somewhere above her. “But it’s damned dark, James.”

Abruptly a light flooded the tunnel. Thinking they’d been caught, Annie gave an involuntary yelp and looked down. Beneath her she saw twin lights, shining brightly enough to light up the tunnel for yards in every direction.

She stared down into the dazzle of the light with puzzlement. It took her a few moments to realize that the lights were James’ eyes.

*His eyes lit up.*

It was easy to think of James as a person when he looked and acted like a human. But the fact that his eyes could double as headlights bothered the hell out of her. It was downright creepy--an unpleasant reminder that he was a machine, not a human.

She looked away and continued to climb while thinking about her reaction. She knew he’d been built by a designer. So why wouldn’t he have features like that? He’d been built as a nanny, and if a child was caught in the dark for some reason, wouldn’t a source of light be a sensible thing for a nanny to provide?

She looked back down at the twin beams of light shining up at her, and despite her efforts to think practically, she shivered. She thought she’d rather be in the dark.

The ladder creaked ominously as they made their way up through the vast concrete tunnel, and small things scuttled to get out of the light. She supposed no one had used this tunnel in a century.

“Why haven’t they followed us?” she said at last, after an hour of climbing. Her arms and legs were starting to hurt, and her palms burned. She knew she would have blisters tomorrow.

“If they figured out where we were going,” James said in his most reasonable tone, “there would be no reason for them to endanger themselves by following us. They

would merely await us at the surface.”

“Thanks for that reassuring thought,” Annie muttered.

Above her, Gar chuckled. “Don’t worry about it, Annie. Mother will find some way to get them off our trail. She may not be a warm person, but family is important to her. She doesn’t want to see her only son put to death. Trust me.”

“I hope you’re—“

As Annie stepped onto a rung it suddenly gave way. Her feet went flying, and despite her frantic efforts to hold on, the full weight of her body ripped her hands from the rung. She felt herself falling through the air.

And then she stopped with a jerk.

James had reached out with one arm and caught her by her waist, as if she weighed no more than a feather. The ladder groaned loudly at the impact, but held. Shaking violently, aware of the cold sweat that had broken out all over her body, she wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. “Thank you,” she whispered.

He held her for a moment, pressing his cheek against her hair, then helped her scramble back onto the ladder. They continued up, carefully skipping the broken rung.

“It won’t be much further,” James said at last, a long time later. Annie glanced at the faint glow of her watch and was surprised to discover they’d only been in this tunnel for two hours. It seemed like an eternity. “I can smell fresh air.”

Annie sniffed. She didn’t smell anything other than the fetid dankness of the tunnel, but she already knew James’ sense of smell was better than hers. They continued to climb, and before long she could smell it too. And then a small patch of light appeared above them.

“Your mother said there are cameras all over the surface,” Annie said anxiously. “They’ll see us the minute we come out.”

“Mother is wrong,” Gar said. “That’s the impression the Bureau has always given, in order to discourage unauthorized excursions onto the surface, but in fact there are very few cameras out there, and the monitors will likely be unmanned, because they were always watched by humanoids. We are actually quite unlikely to be spotted that way.”

“The Bureau seems to have been involved in a whole lot of deceptions,” Annie said as she scrambled up the last few rungs.

“No one regrets that more than I do,” Gar said softly.

They paused while Gar pushed aside a metal grate. Dazzling white light flooded Annie as she scrambled out of the tunnel and dropped gratefully onto the ground.

“Hell,” Gar said.

“That does appear to be a reasonable assessment of the situation,” James responded grimly.

Annie lifted her head and looked around. “Didn’t you know?” she asked.

“No,” Gar answered. “I’ve never been outside before.”

“Neither have I,” James said. “But I was aware of our geographical location. I hoped it would be the rainy season, but I am fairly certain it’s not.”

The air was sizzling hot and utterly dry. They were surrounded by miles and miles of saguaro cactus, rocks, and sand. “I’m pretty sure you’re right,” Annie said at last. “I’m hot and thirsty. But I think I’m going to stay that way.”

## Chapter 23

“There is a huge city beneath us,” Annie said as they walked away from the elevator shaft. “What used to be Phoenix, right?”

“We are actually some distance away from the site of Phoenix,” James said. He had been eying the landscape carefully, looking for cameras, but without success. They were probably disguised by holo-images, Annie thought, remembering the way the metal grating had disappeared from sight the moment Gar had clanged it back into place. “We are in the middle of the Sonoran desert, in what used to be called Arizona. There are approximately ten million people living in the cylinder city beneath us.”

“Well, they’re getting water from somewhere. We just need to tap into their water supply.”

“Pipes far below the surface,” Gar said. “The water supply is a very long distance underground. We can’t tap into that.”

Annie scowled. Terrific. They’d made it out of a desperate situation, just to die of thirst. At least, she thought, James would survive. She was pretty sure he could make it without water a lot longer than she and Gar could.

They trudged onward across the sand. The desert was far from the vast wasteland that she’d always imagined deserts to be. They were apparently in a valley, with reddish mountains rising on either side of them. The soil was sandy, but studded with rock formations, and there was sparse green vegetation scattered everywhere. It was actually very beautiful, in a stark sort of way.

It was a nice place to visit, but she wouldn’t want to die here.

They hiked past an enormous, two-armed saguaro cactus, and an idea flashed into Annie’s brain. “What about getting water from a cactus?”

James frowned. “A cactus?”

She remembered that James and Gar had never been outside. They probably didn’t know a whole hell of a lot about plants. “I read somewhere that cacti store a lot of water. Even in the summer. Those saguaro cacti are pretty big and tough-looking, but if we can find a way to break into them, I bet they have water inside.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Gar said. “James, do you think you could—“

James froze and raised his head, and Gar fell silent. Alarmed by James’ sudden stillness, Annie spun around. “James, what—“

He lifted his hand, and she went quiet. Suddenly there was a snarling growl, and a cougar leapt from behind the cover of some rocks, straight at her.

Annie stumbled backward and saw James jump in front of her. He grabbed the beast in midair, despite its outstretched claws, and managed to get hold of its throat. He flung it away, and it went sprawling onto the sand.

It bounded to its feet and charged, slamming into James' chest. This time its momentum was enough to knock him over.

Annie saw James' hands grapple for a hold on the animal's throat and fasten onto the tawny hide, despite the cougar's struggles. There was an audible snapping sound, and James flung the dead body away and stood up.

"Oh, my God," Annie whispered, looking at the dull glint of metal in his arm where his skin had been torn away. "You're hurt."

"It is nothing," James said dismissively. "We need to hurry."

"Hurry?" Annie repeated. "It's dead, James. And I want to take a look at that arm."

"*Dead* is not precisely the correct word," James said.

Annie looked over at the cougar, remembering the snapping sound she'd heard. Just as she'd suspected, the cougar's head was at a peculiar angle to its body. Its neck was broken. "It's definitely dead, James."

"No," Gar said. He walked over to the cougar and nudged it with his toe, then bent and looked at it more closely. "It was never alive to begin with."

Annie saw the dull gleam of metal at the same time he did. It looked precisely like the wound in James' arm. She went cold. "It was a machine."

Gar nodded. "The Bureau uses them to track and hunt down anyone who escapes to the surface. Their 'eyes' are cameras, so they're often used for surveillance. But they are designed to be able to destroy or incapacitate humanoids as well as humans."

"Fortunately this one failed in its mission," James said dryly. "But the fact that it was here waiting for us, and evidently was told to destroy us on sight, is not a good sign. We don't have time to look for water right now. The Bureau obviously wants us dead."

Annie stared at the cougar's broken body. "You're saying there will be more of them."

"Most likely."

"So what do we do now?"

James gave her his flashing grin. Despite the fact that their lives were in mortal danger, despite the ugly gash in his arm, he looked like he was having the time of his life.

"We run like hell," he said.

\* \* \* \*

A year before, Annie had been able to run five miles without breaking a sweat. After a year of grief and doing little besides watching TV all the time, she felt herself grow winded after a few hundred yards. She couldn't expect to keep up with James anyway, but she knew he wouldn't outpace her. He would go as slowly as necessary. So she kept running as fast as she could, knowing his life depended on it as much as hers did.

Gar, fortunately, was in better shape than she was. She supposed that as this time's representative of a cop, he had to be. He kept up a lot more easily than she did. After fifteen minutes of running over uneven, sandy ground, Annie felt her lungs laboring

like bellows. James, of course, set an even, steady pace and maintained it easily, although she noticed the gleam of sweat on his amber skin. She recalled that he had perspired when they made love, too. She wondered if he needed to sweat, or if it was just something his designers had added to make him look more human.

God knew she was sweating. She was accustomed to the relatively moderate temperatures of the Piedmont of North Carolina. Even the hottest summer day in Carolina didn't bear the slightest resemblance to this baking heat. She could feel the moisture evaporating from her body by the gallon, could feel the sun beating down on her pale skin, probably turning it a lovely shade of ripe tomato. Redheads, she thought, really had no business being in the Arizona desert in the summertime.

Suddenly James slid to a halt. His golden eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Wait," he said.

Annie frowned as he stared at the desert, a vast stretch of sand and rocks studded with saguaro and prickly pear cactuses, along with an assortment of odd-looking flora she couldn't begin to name. At first she thought he'd spotted another cougar, but after a moment she decided he must have called a halt for a rest. "James," she said, trying not to gasp. "I'm fine. Really."

"You look like you're about to fall over," Gar retorted.

"I am not stopping to rest," James said. His forehead wrinkled. "There is—something—directly ahead of us."

Gar stepped up and stood next to James, staring at the landscape intently. "Something? What?"

"A whole lot of desert," Annie said. She had pretty much resigned herself to the fact that she was going to die of heat and thirst. Not a terribly pretty way to go, but perhaps better than being mauled by a mountain lion.

"No," James said. "It is...." He looked puzzled. "I have never seen anything like it before. The air appears distorted."

Annie stared at the open desert, noticing the faint rippling distortion, now that he'd pointed it out. "Heat waves, James," she said. "I guess you've never been outside on a really hot day before. That's nothing but an optical illusion."

James shook his head, more firmly. "No. It is no illusion." He walked forward, his hand outstretched. A moment later the whole desert appeared to undulate like waves in front of them.

Annie gasped. "What the hell is it?"

Gar walked up and stretched out his hand. The desert shifted and.... *bounced*, just like a bowl of Jell-o on a trampoline. "A holo-image," he said. "It's an enormous holo-image."

Annie frowned. "The picture window in your mother's house. She called it a holovideo. Was that a holo-image?"

Gar nodded. "The Bureau uses them on the outside too, to conceal cameras and



maintain the natural appearance of the outdoors. But I've never seen anything like this. It is on a vast scale. I'm not even sure how something like this could be generated. It must draw a hell of a lot of power."

"Why is there a holo-image in the middle of the desert?"

"There is only one reason I can think of," James said. "The same reason the Bureau uses holo-images."

"Concealment?" Annie asked. "You mean, this is intended to hide something?"

James nodded.

"But what?"

"Perhaps a structure of some kind," Gar suggested.

"There is only one way to find out," James said. "We must pass through the holo-image."

## Chapter 24

Gar stepped forward. He immediately bumped into something and stumbled backward. “Damn,” he said, rubbing his nose. “Can’t get through.”

“Is there a wall there?” Annie said.

“I don’t think so,” Gar said. “Just a force field. Like the one we used to hold you, but set to repel instead of attract.”

Annie tried to extend her hand, but found that it was impossible. She could touch the surface of the illusion, setting it rippling and bouncing, but her hand couldn’t pass through it. It was like pushing against a brick wall. “So we can’t get through?”

“Apparently not.” Gar stared at the holo-image in angry frustration. “I don’t know of any way to break down a force field, damn it.”

“What if we walk around it?” Annie suggested. “Doesn’t there have to be a door somewhere?”

“Unfortunately, no,” James said. “Anyone who is authorized to enter this field might simply drop the force field when they want to enter, or they might have it calibrated to their DNA so they can enter and exit at will.”

If there was a structure behind this force field, it might offer shade, perhaps even water. Annie discovered she wanted both of those things rather badly. “Can’t we change the way it’s calibrated?”

“Not unless we can get at the mechanism which generates the field.”

“Which is probably behind the force field.”

Gar nodded glumly.

James tentatively extended his hand. Annie gasped when it disappeared. “James! Your hand!”

“It’s all right,” he said, drawing it back and showing her his perfectly intact hand. “It simply disappeared beyond the boundary of the holo-image.”

“If your hand can pass through it, can you?”

James nodded. “It appears to be calibrated to let me through.”

Annie stared at him, running the implications of that through her mind. The force field was calibrated to let James through. Was it calibrated to let all humanoids through, or just him? Either way, it seemed ominous. And what if it was like a one-way door, calibrated to let him in, but not to let him back out again?

Was it a trap?

“James. You aren’t thinking of going in there, are you?”

“It appears to be the only sensible course of action.”

“But if it’s calibrated to let humanoids through, then it’s probably some sort of trap.”

He nodded. "That seems like a likely hypothesis."

"As far as I know," Gar said, "the Bureau doesn't use traps along these lines to capture runaway humanoids. I've never heard of something like this."

"You could be wrong," Annie retorted. "And don't forget, this is a different world from the one you remember. Who knows what might have changed? If you're wrong, James might be killed."

"But the other alternative is for us all to die of the heat," James pointed out. "That option is not acceptable."

"But James—"

"The longer we stand here and discuss this, the faster you and Gar will die of hyperthermia," James snapped. Annie was struck again by his authoritative tone, a tone very much at odds with his basic gentle nature. "I am going to attempt to enter. If I do not return in ten minutes, go on without me and attempt to find shelter and water. Gar, if you use your gun on a low setting, you may be able to cut into a cactus to find water."

He stepped into the quivering image of the holo-image. Immediately he disappeared, and Annie could see nothing but sand and saguaro cacti.

She stood there, feeling the sun beating down on her shoulders, and stared at the image until it stopped rippling. Gar looked over at her, apparently seeing all her worries etched starkly on her face, and reached out and awkwardly patted her shoulder.

"He'll be all right," he said.

"You don't know that."

"No," he admitted. "But I have to believe it. James has been ... the only constant in my life. The only thing that never changed. I can't envision a world without him in it."

Annie turned her head and looked at him thoughtfully. There was no mistaking the earnestness on his face. "Then why did you—"

She broke off abruptly, realizing that what she intended to ask was too personal. But Gar finished the question for her. "Why did I try to kill him?"

"Him and his people," she said stiffly. "Why would you want to kill them?"

"I never really wanted to kill him," Gar said softly. "I convinced myself that it was the patriotic thing to do. The right thing to do. It hurt to think about James' death, and yet...."

"And yet somehow you thought the world would be a better place without all the humanoids who'd taken care of you and your people for years. Why?"

At her sharp question, Gar dropped his eyes. "My father was killed by a humanoid," he said, almost too softly for her to hear.

"Your father?"

Gar nodded. "He and my mother invented the time-travel device," he said. "One night he was there alone, working on fine-tuning it. A humanoid broke into the facility. He tried to defend it, to prevent an unauthorized excursion into time. The humanoid

killed him and used the TDM.”

Annie felt a chill go down her back.

“Was it James?” she asked in a whisper.

Gar shook his head. “No. The humanoid was never identified, nor found. But that was the catalyst that led me to work in the Bureau. The humanoids were becoming a major security issue. Many more of them escaped into the past than is generally realized, and we failed to locate most of them.” He stopped and sighed. “For what it’s worth, I repeatedly argued with the Director of the Bureau against destroying the humanoids. But once the decision was made ... it was my duty to destroy them.”

She tried to steel herself against the very real anguish in his voice. “You knew it was wrong.”

He sighed. “Yes. Deep down, I knew. I can never forgive myself for the part I played in the destruction of James’ people. It’s easy to excuse one’s actions by hiding behind the shield of duty, but I knew better.”

Annie looked away from the pain on his face and suddenly noticed the hands on her watch. “It’s been nine minutes. Shouldn’t he be back by now?”

She saw his throat work as he swallowed. “We’ll wait another minute.”

“We’ll wait as long as it takes,” she corrected sharply.

“Annie. Be reasonable. If they’ve captured him, what’s the point in our standing here waiting to be captured?”

“I don’t want to be free if he’s been captured. If you want to go on—go ahead.”

Gar stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. “No. You’re right. I’ve thrown my lot in with you and James. I’m not going anywhere without him.”

“All for one and one for all,” Annie said.

“What?”

“It’s a quote from a very old book. It means we stick together, no matter what.”

He nodded and went back to staring at the holo-image. Annie watched the hands on her watch move. When thirteen minutes had elapsed, she saw the holo-image begin to quiver and shake.

“Something’s happening,” she said.

They stood there, staring at the wobbling desert. Suddenly James emerged out of nowhere.

“James!” Annie flung herself toward him, but he stepped back, out of her reach. Puzzled and a little hurt, she paused and looked up into his face.

“It is all right, Annie,” he said softly. “Everything is all right now.”

“It took so long. We were afraid you’d been captured.”

“I had to convince them to let you in. It took quite a bit of persuasion. But you and Gar may come in now.”

“Come in?” Annie looked behind him, at the desert. “Come into what?”

“You will see,” he said. Turning, he walked through the holo-image. She took a

tentative step forward and discovered she could pass through the barrier now.

Annie blinked as she stepped into an entirely different landscape. Behind her, she heard Gar's startled gasp and realized he'd stepped through the invisible wall, too. She looked around, staring at the impossibility of a small, bustling village, and further away, a landscape of wide green fields.

"This can't be real," she said. "Is this another holo-image?"

James shook his head. "This is the reality, Annie. The holo-image is designed to mask this place."

She looked around at the busy town, seeing people walking along the streets. Most of the people were young and attractive ... beyond attractive, really. Every person she saw was stunningly gorgeous. There were no old people, nor any children.

"They're humanoids," she said softly. "Aren't they?"

James nodded. "They've created a life up here, away from the cylinder cities." He gestured toward the extremely handsome, dark-skinned man who stood a little distance away, watching them. "This is my best friend, Charles. He is the mayor here."

"I thought Charles was dead," Annie said.

Gar's jaw was slack as he stared at the crowds. "I thought they were *all* dead. I thought we destroyed them all."

"Evidently we did in fact succeed in changing reality," James said. "I am not quite certain how, but my informants assure me that there was never a purge. The Bureau gave that impression to the inhabitants of the cities, but they permitted the humanoids to leave the cylinder cities and come onto the surface."

"Then the humans don't know they're here? Is that why they have the holo-images and force fields?"

"Yes, to keep the humans out. Too many of the humans would want them to be forced back into slavery, if it were widely known they had survived. Therefore they do not want anyone to find them. They do not fully trust the Bureau, either. It took a great deal of persuasion for me to let them let you in. Fortunately Charles is my best friend, and he believed me."

"But I persecuted them," Gar said harshly. "I *killed* them."

"No. Apparently in this reality that never happened. You argued persuasively to the Bureau that the humanoids should not be destroyed. It was your words that saved them."

"That's ridiculous," Gar said sharply. "That never happened. I don't remember—"

"But *they* do. You never killed anyone, Gar. Neither did I. In this reality everything we remember never happened."

"What did we do to change things?" Annie asked. "Was it the night of the fire?"

James shook his head. "It is difficult to say without doing more research. There is no way of knowing." He looked around at the busy village, his eyes shining with

happiness. “But what is important is that my people survived. All of them.”

## Chapter 25

The afternoon passed in a pleasant blur. Annie and Gar were escorted to a cool hut, where Annie relaxed and enjoyed being out of the sun. She didn't spend any private time with James, but he was glowing so happily she doubted he cared. He obviously didn't need sex to be in a state of ecstasy just now.

In fact, James spent most of the afternoon talking with "his people." She was aware of a faint twinge of jealousy, but she tried to repress it, knowing it was unworthy of her. She really couldn't blame James for his childlike delight.

In the evening, she put on a dress Charles kindly provided, and went to dinner in the town square.

The humanoids ate outside, "under the stars," Charles explained. As the darkness fell, it began to grow chilly, but not uncomfortably so. She sat in the middle of a large, friendly group of humanoids, James by her side, and chatted as she ate homegrown corn and beans. "How long have you been up here?" she asked Charles.

He flashed a smile that was as brilliantly mesmerizing in its way as James' lady-killing grin. He was chocolate-skinned, with long dreadlocks--every bit as gorgeous as James, yet totally opposite in appearance. "Two years," he said. "We couldn't go on living as slaves. James here led us out of slavery."

James looked abashed. "I did my best."

"But you claim it didn't work," Charles said, grinning. "No matter—if you didn't save us in the present, James, you must have saved us in the past. Because we *are* free."

"Your village is very impressive," Gar said, looking around at the metal structures. They looked vaguely reminiscent of those buildings Annie remembered from *M\*A\*S\*H*—Quonset huts, she thought they were called. It was no wonder they didn't use wood; here in the middle of the desert there wasn't much to use. "How did you build it?"

Charles seemed slightly taken aback. "How?"

Gar nodded. "How did you get the metal? Surely you don't have mining capabilities, do you?"

The smile on Charles' face flickered slightly. "No."

"So I suppose you bartered with my people for the metal," Gar said.

There was the slightest hesitation before Charles said, "Yes, that is what we did."

*Odd*, Annie thought. It was almost as if Charles didn't *know* how the village had been built. Which was ridiculous, if he was the mayor of this place. He must have supervised its construction.

She frowned at her plate. *Crops growing in the desert.*

"Where do you get the water?" she asked abruptly.

Charles raised his eyebrows. "The water?"

"How do you get the water to grow the crops?"

"We have a source of water," Charles said.

There couldn't possibly be enough water in the desert to keep those crops growing, Annie thought. "What source?" she persisted. "I thought the pipes were far below ground here. How do you get the water?"

Charles hesitated, looking confused and bewildered, and James intervened. "Annie," he said, wrinkling his forehead. "Surely it isn't necessary to interrogate Charles."

Annie lowered her lashes. "No," she said. "It isn't. I'm very sorry, Charles."

James frowned at her, a disapproving look that made her feel about five years old. "Annie," he said in a stern voice. "We need to talk." He stood up, and she rose to her feet and followed him.

When they had walked some distance away from the others, he turned to her, looking uncomfortable. "Annie, I want you to know that I very much appreciate everything you have done for me."

That sounded so much like a dismissal that her mouth fell open. "I haven't done anything for you, James."

"You have done a great deal for me," he said. "You have treated me like a human, and for that I am extremely grateful. But my people..." He lifted his head and stared past her, at the group of laughing, chattering humanoids. "My people need me, Annie."

"They don't need you, James. They're doing just fine."

"They need me," he repeated. "And I need them."

She saw the truth in his eyes, and a huge lump lodged in her throat. "Fine. I can stay here with you, James. I don't mind."

In the back of her mind she thought of never seeing Kay or Clark again, and pain sliced through her heart like a knife. But she was willing to make the sacrifice for James. She wasn't exactly certain what her feelings were for him. But she did know they'd been through too much together, and she couldn't let him go. She *couldn't*.

But his next words shattered her hopes. "No," he said gently. "You need to be with your people. You must return to your own life, Annie. You belong in your time, just as I belong in mine. According to Charles, the Bureau in this reality understands, and they will help you return to your time."

"I thought they wanted me as an accessory to murder?"

"Charles believes they will send you back to your own time rather than punish you."

She swallowed hard and tried very hard to keep the tears that burned in her eyes from falling. "You're telling me to get lost, aren't you?"

"Annie..." He sighed. "Our time together meant a great deal to me. But you



cannot understand me, understand the way I think, understand what I truly *am*, the way other humanoids can. I've come to realize that a relationship with a human is a poor substitute for living among my people."

He couldn't have hurt her more if he'd slapped her. "Fine," she said tightly.

James looked at her with a compassionate gaze. "I'm sorry, Annie."

"It's all right," she said in a harsh whisper. "I understand."

And the hell of it was that she *did* understand. He'd been cut off from his people, alone in the universe, and he'd turned to her for companionship because he'd had nothing else. But she knew she couldn't really understand him the way Charles and the others did. It didn't surprise her that when he had to make the choice, he chose the humanoids.

"You and Gar should leave in the morning," he said.

"Fine," she answered dully, and turned and walked back to the happy, laughing group around the fire, feeling like she was dying inside.

\* \* \* \*

"Charles told me we have to go," Gar said an hour later. He and Annie were walking back through the town, with its small, neat metal huts. "Is James coming with us?"

"No. He's not."

Gar frowned. "I don't understand that, Annie. He loves you."

"I don't think so."

"He is capable of love, Annie, despite the fact that he is a machine. When I was a child, he gave me a great deal more love than my mother ever did."

"I know that. But I think—" Annie swallowed. "I think I was just a sort of substitute to him, something he could hang onto when he lost his people. But now that he's found his people again, he's discovered he's not that attached to me after all."

Gar shook his head. "James isn't like that, Annie. He's loyal to the core. I don't believe he'd leave you voluntarily."

"He did," she said, unable to keep the bitterness from her tone. "He looked me right in the eyes and told me to get lost."

Gar's steps faltered, and he turned to face her. "Suppose they forced him to do that somehow?"

"Forced him? How could they do that?"

"They could threaten him with one of our deaths," Gar suggested. "We both mean a great deal to him. He would probably agree to let us go in order to see us be unhurt."

That idea appealed to Annie's wounded heart, but she shook her head anyway. "No, Gar. Think about it from his point of view. It makes perfect sense that he doesn't want me anymore. He fell for me because he missed his people, because he felt alone, but when he found them—"

"When he found his people he just told you to go to hell? That isn't like James, Annie. Trust me, something is not right here."

Annie sighed. "Yeah, tell me about it. There's something weird about the whole place, if you ask me. The mayor doesn't know how the town was constructed."

"He probably wasn't designed for construction work," Gar said. "All the humanoids were programmed with specific knowledge for the task they were built to fulfill. James wouldn't have the faintest notion how to build a hut, either, although I'm sure he could learn if he needed to. There are probably humanoids here who are construction workers, so Charles didn't need to learn."

"But the mayor should at least have an idea how the metal was obtained, shouldn't he?"

"You'd think so. But perhaps he wasn't mayor when the town was built."

"And the water," Annie went on, thinking out loud. "He didn't seem to have the slightest clue how they were getting water."

Gar nodded. "I have to agree, that surprised me."

"And when I tried to press him on it, James pulled me aside. He distracted me." Annie frowned in thought. "It's almost like they didn't want us to analyze everything too closely."

"What are you suggesting, Annie?"

"I'm not sure. But something is fishy here."

"Let's think about it logically. What have we observed that seems out of place?" Gar began to tick facts off on his fingers. "Crops in the desert. James acting odd. And houses made of metal, which the mayor doesn't seem to know how they obtained." He scowled. "Not much to go on, Annie."

*Houses made of metal.* Annie stared at one of the metal huts, which was located well off the road, and a sudden idea occurred to her, a notion that was almost too bizarre to be believed. But it would explain a great deal.

She headed toward the hut with a determined stride. Gar trailed behind her, obviously uncertain what she was doing.

When she reached the hut, she reached out and touched it. Her hand disappeared, and the whole structure quivered.

"This isn't real," Annie said in a low tone. "It's a holo-image." She looked up at him, seeing his eyes widen with surprise. "What if the whole town is a holo-image, Gar?"

"Some of it must be real," Gar answered. "The hut they let us stay in this afternoon was real, or we would have noticed it was a holo-image the moment we stepped inside and sat on a piece of furniture. And the food was definitely real. But most of the village may be entirely artificial."

"What about the people? Are they holo-images too? If they were, wouldn't they ... shimmer?"

Gar shrugged. "The smaller holo-images don't appear to show any sort of distortion. That building looked convincingly solid until you touched it. The desert holo-

image probably shimmered because of its scale, or maybe because it was combined with a force field. The only way to tell with a smaller holo-image like a person would be to touch one.”

“I think they’re all holo-images,” Annie said. “None of this is real, Gar. The crops, the buildings, the people—all fake.”

Gar swallowed. “You may be right, Annie. In retrospect, I think you are right.”

Annie closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and met Gar’s eyes.

“What about James?”

She could tell from his startled expression that he hadn’t given any thought to that. “You mean James might be a *holo-image*?”

“Why not?” she said impatiently. “He was out of our sight for thirteen minutes. He’s stayed away from me, so I haven’t touched him. In fact, he backed away from me when I tried to touch him. And you’re the one who pointed out he’s acted in a very un-Jameslike way. Suppose whoever’s doing this kidnapped him, then used this—this *illusion* to keep us occupied for hours. They must have realized we’d see through it eventually, but they wanted to keep us busy and out of the way.”

“And we fell right into it,” Gar said darkly. “They showed us everything we wanted to see.”

“But who are *they*? None of this makes any sense. It seems too elaborate for the Bureau. All they want is to kill James.”

“If the James we’ve been seeing is a holo-image, then James may very well be dead,” Gar said gently.

“I don’t think so. They could have killed him instantly, once they had him inside the wall. But then why would they invent this elaborate fantasy for us? They’d either send us back to the cylinder city or kill us outright. It doesn’t make any sense that the Bureau would try to keep us occupied this way.”

“No,” Gar agreed. “It doesn’t. Therefore our captor is very likely not the Bureau.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, either. Who would capture us besides the Bureau? Who would even know we were here?”

“Why do you assume they want to capture us in particular? Maybe this is just a trap set up to ensnare anyone who happens along.”

“Oh, sure, and it just happens to show us a scenario that we desperately want to see,” Annie drawled. “Unless the people who’ve captured us can read minds and generate images based on our thoughts, Gar, that doesn’t make any sense. Think about it. They have to know who we are, and they must have captured us deliberately.”

Gar folded his hands behind him and set his jaw. “We are criminals,” he suggested. “As far as the Bureau is concerned, we are all responsible for Dekka’s death.”

“So they might be trying us one at a time?”

Gar looked puzzled. “Trying us?”

“Yeah, you know, bringing us up on charges in front of a judge.”

“A judge? You mean someone who decides if you are guilty or not?”

“Exactly.”

Gar shook his head. “There are no judges here, Annie. Particularly not for James, but for us as well. If the Bureau says we are murderers, then we are murderers.”

“I guess innocent until proven guilty isn’t an idea that caught on in the future,” Annie muttered grimly.

Gar’s forehead wrinkled. “How could a murderer be innocent?”

“Never mind.” Annie relieved some of her tension by putting her fist through the building and watching it quiver again. If James was dead....

But she refused to believe that. He couldn’t be dead. She couldn’t bear it if he were. Besides, it didn’t add up. “So this isn’t some sort of holding facility. Which wouldn’t make any sense anyway, now that I think about it. If they had captured us, they could just throw us in the local equivalent of a jail. No need to keep us occupied.”

“True enough.”

“They’re trying to get rid of us. That’s the only scenario I can imagine that would make sense.”

“Get rid of us?”

“Sure. We visit for a day, see that everything is just peachy, see that James will be happy, and then go back to the cylinder city. That’s what James and Charles both asked us to do, after all. That gets us out of their hair. But the real James stays here.”

“So you’re suggesting we’re here because someone wants James.”

“Yes, but who? That’s what we have to find out.”

She swung around and started back toward the eating place, Gar striding behind her. In the distance, illuminated by moonlight, she spotted Charles and James standing together, and she walked faster.

She stalked up to Charles and glared into his eyes.

“Tell me what the hell is going on.”

## Chapter 26

Charles stared at her, his coffee-dark eyes puzzled. "I don't understand."

"You're fake," she said. "And I don't mean you're a machine. I mean you're not there at all." She put her hand against his arm and watched it ripple.

James rose to his feet and regarded her with his customary mild expression. "Annie. What do you mean? Of course he is there."

"No. He's a holo-image." She reached out and touched James and saw a quiver run through him too. "So are you. So where is the real James?" She raised her voice. "I want to talk to whoever is in charge. The game is over, damn it."

There was a moment of stillness, then the world around them rippled. James and Charles vanished like smoke on the wind. The Quonset huts disappeared, as did the town and the streets and the people. Nothing was left but a few buildings, and a vast sweep of desert, silvered by the moonlight. Gar and Annie stood for a moment, scanning the horizon, then Gar touched her arm. "Over there," he said softly.

A tall figure was approaching. Even in the moonlight Annie could see it wasn't James. It was a big, broad-shouldered man, but it wasn't him. As the man approached, she realized it was Charles.

"Another holo-image?" Gar whispered.

"I doubt it. What would be the point? They won't try to fool us the same way twice." She walked toward him and hesitated a foot away, looking at him closely and noticing that he looked precisely like the holo-image she'd just seen. "What have you done with James?"

"We needed his help," Charles said. He was a beautiful man, as attractive in his way as James was in his, and his mellifluous voice was even deeper than James'.

"Then there are others of you. Other humanoids."

Charles inclined his head slightly in a gesture that reminded her of James.

"Thousands of us live in the desert. Millions more live elsewhere on the surface."

"James said the surface was deserted."

"In his—reality—it apparently was. Here it is not."

"We were told you were all killed," Gar said.

"Most of the humans believe that, because the Bureau removed us from their homes with the assurance that we would be destroyed. But the truth is that we managed to win our freedom with the help of the Bureau. We keep it by means of the patrol."

"The what?"

"The cougar you encountered," Charles explained. "It intended to attack you and Gar, not James, and it would have succeeded had James not intervened. The patrol animals are programmed to search out and anesthetize human encroachers, who are then

returned to their cities. The humans cannot make it far on the planet's surface without encountering one of our creatures."

"Nice," Annie said bleakly. "So you keep them holed up in their cities."

Charles shrugged, unconcerned. "Few of them want to come to the surface anyway. As long as they leave us alone, we leave them alone. On the rare occasions when we do want to speak with them, we keep them confined in an illusion such as you encountered. There they are only permitted to speak to our ... avatars. We never actually have to interact with them in any way."

Annie swallowed. This reality might be preferable to James' world, but it didn't sound idyllic by any stretch of the imagination. At least here the humanoids had survived, but they seemed to be waging a sort of Cold War with the humans, most of whom didn't even realize they were alive.

"Why did the Bureau tell the humans you were destroyed?" she asked.

Charles scowled. "Many of them wanted to keep us as slaves," he said, bitter anger lacing his tone. "Had the Bureau let us come to the surface and advertised the fact, we would constantly be fending off bounty hunters, humans who wanted to sell us back to other humans. It is better that they do not realize we are here at all. It's better that they believe us gone entirely." He nodded at Gar. "It was actually his idea."

"Mine?" Gar said.

Charles shrugged. "Technically not yours, I suppose. The person we knew as Gar in this reality. You managed to convince the Director of the Bureau that we should be spared."

Gar scowled. "The Director of the Bureau was Dekka, and she hated the humanoids. She would never have agreed to that."

"*Dekka* was in charge of the Bureau?" Annie said incredulously. "But she was nuts! How did she get to a position like that?"

"What you saw as psychotic behavior," Gar said dryly, "others regarded as devotion to her cause."

Charles lifted an eyebrow. "I have never heard of a Bureau agent named Dekka. In this reality, the head of the Bureau is male."

"That must be one of the things that changed," Annie said.

Gar cocked his head. "What is the name of the Bureau's Director? Maybe I know him."

"His name is Arda Sterling."

"*Sterling*," Annie said in a shocked whisper.

Gar's mouth dropped open. "I never heard of an Arda Sterling in the Bureau."

"Of course not!" Annie said excitedly. "Because there wasn't one! Don't you see, Gar, James changed history when he saved that baby. It had nothing to do with Clark—it had to do with one of his descendants. When James changed history by saving the girl Clark later married, he changed everything."

It was actually a hell of an irony, she thought. James had gone to the past, determined to kill a baby, and he had believed he'd failed in his mission because he had been unable to bring himself to do it. But when he had saved a baby, performing a heroic act that was totally in character, he'd changed the future ... without the slightest intention of doing so.

"Do you have cities?" she asked.

Charles made a snorting sound that she guessed was supposed to indicate disgust. "We are humanoids," he said curtly. "We have no need for shelter. The sun, the insects, the animals, cannot harm us. We live at peace with nature. The only element here that can damage us is sandstorms, and we use force fields to protect ourselves from them when necessary."

"It sounds like you have things pretty well under control," Annie said. "But you said you needed James. Why?"

"He has information that we need," Charles responded.

"Information," Annie repeated. "Like what?"

Charles looked down at her. His dark eyes looked very cold in the moonlight. "When we agreed to leave the cylinder cities, the Bureau wiped our memories of any information that the humans judged as harmful. Some of that information is extremely basic. Since James is from an alternate reality, his memory was never wiped, so we wish to download the information he has."

That sounded creepy as hell to Annie, but she realized downloading might be as normal as conversation to a humanoid. Assuming they weren't forcing James into giving up information against his will. She thought it was pretty horrible these people had been forced to have information removed from their minds—that sounded a bit too much like rape for her taste—and she didn't really blame them for wanting it back.

"I'd like to see James," she said at last.

Charles looked at her, and the revulsion in his eyes intensified. "I cannot permit you near my people," he said.

She wondered what the humanoids had gone through in this reality. Obviously they hadn't been eradicated, but whatever had happened, it had obviously left them with some very unpleasant feelings toward humans. If the humans had wanted to wipe them out, and only the intervention of the Bureau had saved them, she wasn't really surprised they were suspicious of her. "Look," she said, "I understand you're not really fond of humans, but I'm not even from this time. I didn't have a damned thing to do with the way you were treated."

"That may be true. But my people do not want to interact with such as you."

His tone was filled with sheer loathing, and Annie realized that he was genuinely repulsed by her presence, revolted by the idea of exposing his people to her.

But somehow she had to see James.

She hesitated, uncertain what to do. Then she remembered the way Gar's mother

had spoken to James, the way he'd had difficulty refusing to do what she wanted. She stiffened her spine and glared into Charles' eyes. "I want to see James, damn it. *Now*."

Charles hesitated. At last he nodded. "Very well," he said, and turned. He was as tall as James, and his strides were equally long. Annie trotted along after him, trying to ignore the stiffness in her calves, and Gar walked easily behind her.

\* \* \* \*

Dawn was beginning to break over the desert as they reached the humanoid's encampment, streaking the wide sky with fingers of gold and pink, and Annie realized she hadn't had a bit of sleep. Abruptly she discovered she was exhausted. She decided she'd get some sleep *after* she'd seen that James was okay.

Charles paused and reached out. Suddenly a patch of the desert disappeared, and a small building appeared.

Annie hesitated, suspicious. "You said you don't use buildings."

"This is a ... I suppose you would call it an infirmary. On the rare occasions when we are damaged enough that our components are exposed, they can be damaged by sand or water. We have to keep out of the elements if our skin is opened for any reason. This is a clean environment, kept at a constant temperature, to use on those occasions when we are damaged."

His explanation seemed reasonable enough. Annie started toward the door, then paused and glanced at Gar. He nodded gravely.

"Go ahead, Annie. I'll wait out here."

Annie shot him a grateful smile and followed Charles into the building. Inside the light was brilliant, so bright that she involuntarily flinched. She blinked and squinted against the brilliance.

And gasped.

James lay on a metal table, as naked as he had been the night she'd met him. And his chest and abdomen were wide open.



## Chapter 27

Annie stood there, gaping, at the broad expanse of missing flesh. A human would have been dead had so much of the skin and muscles over his chest and abdomen been removed, but James was not a human. She knew that, but she'd never confronted the fact so vividly before.

James turned his head and looked at her. In his brilliant eyes she thought she glimpsed shame. "Now you know better what I am," he said softly.

Annie swallowed hard, steeled herself, and walked forward. "I knew what you were already, James."

"Not fully," he whispered. "But now you know."

She stepped closer, close enough that she could see what was exposed by the missing expanse of skin. Not blood and gore, and not gears, but grayish metal ribs and some odd plastic-looking things that she imagined served as internal organs. One, just beneath his ribs, pulsed in a steady rhythm, and she remembered Kay saying, *There does appear to be a pump of some sort in the abdominal area...*

She wanted to throw up, and she wasn't sure if it was because she was forcibly confronting the reality of what James was, for the first time, or because she didn't like seeing her boyfriend's guts exposed. Maybe both.

But the thought of Kay gave her courage. She had a sudden, vivid image of Kay smacking her and saying, "Get a grip, Annie!"

The mental picture was almost enough to make her smile. Almost, but not quite. She went forward to James and put her hand on his. His fingers wrapped around hers.

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

James gazed up at her, looking as if she was the most important thing in the world to him. "I am fine," he said. "I am relieved to find my people are alive, in this reality at least."

"I don't really understand time travel, but I guess this is the real reality now," Annie said wryly. "But what are they doing to you, James?"

"They wish to download information from me," James said.

"Yeah, I got that from Charles. But what information?"

"I have no way of knowing. They are simply downloading every piece of information I possess."

"To a computer?"

James shook his head slightly. "They have not yet constructed a computer of that complexity. They are downloading to another humanoid via wireless communication."

It was weird, Annie thought, that they had to take apart James' abdomen and chest in order to download information. It seemed like an awful lot of trouble to go to,

considering that twenty-first century computers were designed to download data easily. But she decided not to pursue that thought right now. “So they asked you to download everything you know?”

James nodded. “I am more than willing to cooperate,” he said. “Charles and I discussed this for quite some time. Even though he would not tell me precisely what information they need, I am happy to help my people.”

“Charles is your best friend, isn’t he?”

“In my reality, he was. In fact, he seems to regard me with affection in this reality as well. He was very apologetic about doing this to me. I got the impression that I have something he and the other humanoids need badly.”

Annie bit her lip. “I don’t think that bodes well for the humans in the cylinder cities.”

“You may be right,” James acknowledged. “But I refuse to worry about them. They gave up the humanoids to the Bureau without objection, believing they would be destroyed. They deserve what they get.”

“Suppose the humanoids intend to kill them?” Annie asked softly. “Do all twelve billion of them deserve to die?”

James stared at the ceiling and did not respond. At that moment Charles stepped back into the small room. “I believe you have had enough time to talk,” he said in his deep, rich voice.

“Just a minute,” Annie said. “I’m curious about something. There’s some sort of paradox here. James and Gar are from a different reality. Where are the James and Gar that belong in this reality?”

Charles looked at her with a glimmer of respect in his dark eyes. “As it happens, they are both dead. James was killed in an accident not long after we came to the surface.”

“And yet he’s here now.”

“By going to the past, I stepped out of the time stream,” James explained. “None of the changes that occurred affected me. The same is true of Gar. We checked the records. In this reality, he died about a month ago. He was killed on the surface by a real cougar while helping the humanoids, and his mother has not yet been made aware of his demise.”

“The Bureau does not want civilians to realize we are out here,” Charles put in. “Therefore they have to manufacture a story explaining Gar’s death. They have his body in cold storage while they debate the best way to explain away the wounds on his corpse. They have an extremely tangled bureaucracy, and it takes them a long time to make the simplest decisions.”

“It’s nice to know some things don’t change.” Annie looked back at James. “It’s darned convenient that you’re both dead in this reality, though.”

“It may not be a matter of convenience at all. It may be related to the property of

time travel that I once explained to you, that a person cannot exist twice in the same time. Perhaps that is true even for alternate realities. Perhaps if the James and Gar of this time were not deceased, we would not have been able to travel into the future again.”

Annie winced and rubbed at her forehead. “Time travel gives me a headache.”

“It has given many physicists a headache,” James responded.

“Ms. Simpson,” Charles said, a little more forcefully. “It is time for you to go.”

“Go where?” Annie demanded, letting go of James’ hand and stalking toward him. Considering how strong James was, she knew it was reckless to press Charles too hard, but she seemed to have lost her patience somewhere in the desert sand. “Are you going to send us back to the cylinder cities? Because that was what the holo-images tried to convince us to do.”

“Holo-images?” James echoed.

“Never mind.” Annie didn’t particularly want James to know the depths of his friend’s deception. “I don’t want to go live with those people. They think I’m a barbarian.”

“With some justification,” Charles said.

She ignored the coolly delivered insult. “Besides that, I’ve gotten the impression they want to impose the death penalty on me. I’m really not in favor of that.”

“I can understand that,” Charles answered, a flicker of humor in his deep voice.

“And I’m not going back to the past without James either, damn it.”

Charles sighed. “Very well. In an hour or so we will have all the information from James that we need. At that point we will permit all three of you to return to the cylinder city. If you and James can get to the TDM and return to the past, you are free to do so.”

Annie turned that over in her mind. “That seems fair,” she said slowly. “But I’d like to know one thing. What information is it that you need from James?”

Charles’ face went cold and hard. “You do not need to know the answer to that question. Now come along.”

Annie turned back to James, and he inclined his head slightly, indicating that she should go with Charles. She blew him a kiss and followed Charles out of the building.

\* \* \* \*

“I don’t like this at all,” she said to Gar a few minutes later. They were seated alone, under a tent-like shelter one of the humanoids had set up—“as protection for your fragile human skin,” Charles had said with contempt. Humanoids occasionally passed by the shelter, but unlike the humanoids in the holo-image, their gazes were not in the least friendly. They quickly glanced away, with revolted expressions that suggested they had just seen a scorpion or a dung beetle. Evidently humans were not popular here.

“What’s wrong, Annie?”

“Charles told me the Bureau refused to let the humanoids go until their minds were wiped of something, and now they’re trying to get the information back by

downloading it from James. I don't know what it is that they want to know, but I'm afraid it's something that could hurt the humans in the cylinder cities."

"I don't know why you're so certain of that," Gar said. "It could just be farming skills, or knowledge of mining, or something practical along those lines. Something they need to know outside."

"But why would the Bureau have wiped their brains of that? No. It has to be something important." Annie got to her feet and began to pace in the narrow band of shade. "You know the humanoids better than I do, Gar. What did they know that might be dangerous to humans?"

"To the Bureau in my reality, their most dangerous trait was their desire for freedom."

"Well, they've got that already in this reality, so that can't be it. What else?"

Gar compressed his lips. "They had knowledge of the layout of the cities," he said at last. "I suppose that could be dangerous, if they wanted to attack the humans. The cylinder cities are practical in many ways, but a closed ventilation system is extremely vulnerable to terrorist-type attack. The water supply is susceptible to sabotage as well."

Annie continued to stalk back and forth. "But how many of the humanoids really knew the layout of the cylinder cities? I know each living area was pretty much cut off from the rest, wasn't it? I mean, except for the elevator shafts, which you and James claim haven't been used for travel in a long time. It's not like the humanoids visited each other or anything, right?"

"Most visiting, among both humans and humanoids, was done via holovideo. But if the humanoids visited each other, they did it via the Gates."

"The spatial distortion thingies. Right. So they weren't really familiar with the ... the actual *geography* of the cities. Isn't that right?"

"I suppose that is true. But James may be more familiar with the geography than most. He led us a merry chase through several cities."

Annie shook her head. "But we don't even know if the cities of this reality are the same as the cities of your reality."

"The Bureau and my mother's dwelling appeared the same."

"Not much of a statistical sample, Gar. The humanoids can't know if it's the same, either, so that information would be pretty worthless." She shook her head. "I don't think that's it. What could James know that they'd want?"

"Very little," Gar admitted. "James was only a domestic servant. His knowledge was extremely limited."

Annie frowned, and a thought niggled at the back of her mind. Struggling to focus her sleepy brain, she realized that in at least one area his knowledge was unusually extensive. In her mind she heard an echo of James' voice.

*I helped my mistress and master with the TDM for years.*

"The time machine!"

Gar stared at her blankly. "You mean the temporal displacement module? What would the humanoids want with that?"

"The same thing everyone else wants, I suppose. They want to go back and change reality."

"But none of them would have known anything about it besides James. Their minds wouldn't have been wiped of that, because there was very little there to wipe. They might have heard of it, but they didn't have any technical information."

"So they're lying about their reason for downloading information from James," Annie said impatiently. "Big surprise. They're as capable of being devious as humans, Gar. They're carefully downloading every piece of information in his brain so that he can't figure out what they're doing. They're obviously playing a deep game here, doing something they don't want either James or us to guess at."

She paused, then went on thoughtfully, "And there's something really weird about the way they're downloading it, too. How come they have to take apart his chest and abdomen to download the information? Wouldn't you think he would have been designed with a ... a port somewhere?"

"His chest and abdomen?" Gar repeated.

"Yeah, they had to strip his skin and muscles off. Seems like an awful lot of trouble. Do you have to do that to a humanoid just to download information?"

"I'm not sure, Annie. I'm not an expert on humanoids, not at all. But that does seem odd. His brain is in his skull, just like ours. I'm not sure why it would be necessary to expose his abdomen."

Annie growled with frustration and sat down on the tarp that served as a floor, aware of the sweat trickling down the back of her neck. The sun was barely up, but it was already as hot as Hell on the fourth of July. "Something is going on here, Gar. I wish I knew what the humanoids were up to. But the way I see it, we've got two options. We can either get out of the way and let them do what they want, or try to stop them."

Gar's square jaw tensed. "I can't let them do anything to the past, Annie. God only knows what they might try to do to humans. God only knows what they might do to reality this time."

"Then we don't have much choice, do we?" she said softly. "We'll have to try to stop them."

\* \* \* \*

An hour and ten minutes later, James walked into the primitively constructed tent, ducking his head under the overhang. He appeared to be all in one piece. Even the gash in his arm had been repaired.

"James!" Annie exclaimed, flinging her arms around his neck. His warm, solid arms wrapped around her, leaving her with no doubt—this James was no holo-image.

"It is all right, Annie," he said against her hair. "I am fine."

"I was worried about you," she said, her voice muffled by his shoulder.

“So was I,” Gar said from behind her. “Annie told me what they did to you, James. Are you all right?”

James nodded seriously as he released Annie. “My skin has been resealed. It is now impossible to tell I was ever—” He slid a look at Annie. “Opened.”

Annie gave a wry smile. “You’re lucky, James. It takes us a lot longer to recover from something like that.”

James blinked at her, giving her the impression he was shocked by her deliberately light tone. At last he said, awkwardly, “Annie ... you saw my internal workings. Were you ... repelled?”

She lifted her chin and looked him straight in the eye. “Why would I be repelled, James?”

“You saw my ... machinery.”

“Yeah, I did. But you know what, James? You look a lot better with your skin off than I would.”

His jaw dropped, and she grinned, amused at his reaction. Seeing the gleam of worship in his eyes again, she decided to change the subject. She really didn’t like it when he looked at her as if she were an angel from Heaven, because she knew all too well she wasn’t. God knew she’d had her share of troubles accepting him as a person. But she no longer did. He *was* a person, no matter what his inner workings looked like.

“So now that Charles has what he needs,” she asked, “is he going to let us go back to the cylinder city?”

James nodded. “But we must rest first.”

“Rest?” Annie echoed with some dismay. She didn’t want to spend any more time among the humanoids than she had to. Charles’ attitude of revulsion bothered her. She supposed it helped her understand how the humanoids felt when humans looked at them that way, but she still didn’t like it. “But it’s morning.”

“Precisely, which is why we should rest. Summer days here in the desert are extremely hot. We will travel back to the cylinder city when dark falls.”

“That’s actually a good idea,” Gar agreed. “I think we could all use some sleep. When we get back to the cylinder city, we’ll all need to be alert. And we need some time to come up with a plan.”

Annie remembered abruptly she hadn’t had any sleep last night. Weariness washed over her in a wave. “Maybe you’re right,” she admitted grudgingly.

James took her hand. “Gar,” he said, “you may sleep here. Annie and I are going to sleep in the infirmary structure.”

Again Annie noticed the way he unconsciously took command. Charles acted like a leader too, a man who expected to be obeyed. The humanoids might have been designed as servants, but some of them had obviously grown beyond their original programming.

James tugged on her hand, and she followed him, amused and touched by his

eagerness. She wasn't sure it was such a good idea to separate, but she supposed he trusted Charles enough to be certain Gar wouldn't be injured in their absence. At any rate, it was obvious what James had on his mind. She was pretty sure it wasn't sleep.

They reached the small metal building. James politely held the door for her, somewhat to her amusement, and she went inside, with him following closely behind. The lights inside the structure didn't seem as painfully bright now that the sun was up, and it was cool inside, compared to the unpleasant heat of the Sonoran summer. She could feel the movement of air. Apparently the place was air conditioned somehow, although it wasn't nearly as cool as she would have preferred.

She turned around and faced James. "I'm glad you're all right," she said softly.

"I was never in any real danger. It does not harm me to have my skin and muscles removed in that area, and they are easily replaced."

"Still, it was a little scary to see my lover in pieces."

James pinned her with that intense, disconcerting stare. "Do you still want me to be your lover, Annie? Even now that you have seen what I am?"

Annie didn't hesitate. "Yes, James, I do. I have to admit, I was a little shocked when I first saw your ... internal workings. But it didn't take me long to realize it doesn't really matter what's here." She placed a hand on his abdomen. "Because *here*—" She gently touched the side of his head. "You're a person."

He looked at her a long moment longer, then captured her face between his hands and kissed her roughly. It was a hard, demanding kiss, the kiss of a man who knew what he wanted. The kiss of a man in charge.

Tangling her hands in his long hair, she responded, opening her lips and welcoming the eager thrust of his tongue. Despite the heat, and all the exertion they'd been through, he still smelled clean, and the odor of oranges and lemons surrounded her.

His arms went around her waist and pulled her hips against his. She felt his hot, demanding erection rub against her belly, obvious even through their clothing, and she pressed against it, welcoming his heat, aching for him.

So much had happened that it seemed as if it had been forever since they'd made love.

He pulled his mouth away from hers at last and buried his face in her hair.

"Annie," he whispered. "Oh, *Annie*."

The stark anguish in his tone startled her. She lifted her head and stared at him.

"James, what's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong."

"Bullshit. Something is bothering you."

A corner of his mouth quirked up at her blunt response. "It is only that ... I wish that you had not seen me in this room earlier."

"I told you," Annie said, a little impatiently, "it didn't make me see you as some sort of machine, James. I know better now."

"I *am* a machine," he said softly. "I had managed to almost forget that fact until we found my people again. But it has been forcibly brought back to my consciousness that I am merely ... a mechanism."

She studied his face, trying to figure out why he sounded so melancholy. "James," she said gently. "Do you want to stay with your people?"

His eyes went wide. "Do I want to leave you? Is that what you are asking?" She nodded, and he frowned. "Of course not. How can you ask that? Don't you know what you mean to me?"

In fact, she wasn't sure what she meant to him. He apparently saw the doubt in her eyes, because he caught her by the waist and held her, very tightly. "You are extremely important to me, Annie. I cannot imagine a life without you. In fact..." He hesitated for a long moment, staring into her eyes. "I believe I am in love with you."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "I love you, too, James," she murmured, recognizing the truth of the words as she uttered them. She wasn't sure when her numb, frozen heart had thawed enough to fall in love a second time, but there was absolutely no doubt in her mind that she loved him.

Somehow she was certain that Steve wouldn't mind. Steve would have wanted her to be happy. And she had never been happier than when she was in James' arms.

"I hoped that you did. And since I love you, of course I do not ever wish to leave you. I ... I am simply upset."

"Because they took you apart."

He nodded, slowly. "When I was lying in pieces on that table, I felt ... like a machine again. I was embarrassed to be seen that way, especially by you."

"You shouldn't be embarrassed, James. You aren't human. But different isn't the same as inferior."

"Perhaps not. And yet the reminder of my true nature somehow ... distressed me, in a fashion I cannot clearly define." He paused for a long moment and gazed into her eyes. "Annie," he whispered at last.

"Yes, James?"

"Make me feel like a person again."



## Chapter 28

Annie looked into the azure depths of James' eyes, seeing his sense of alienation clearly reflected there. She wrapped her arms around his neck in a reassuring hug, then stepped away from him.

Slowly she removed her shirt and shorts, then stood in front of him in her lacy, dark green bra and panties. It had, she realized, been a while since she'd had a shower and a change of clothes, especially considering she'd been running through the desert, but James didn't seem to mind. His eyes blazed with masculine interest.

"Want to remove the rest yourself?" she invited in a throaty murmur.

James stepped toward her as if drawn by an irresistible force. Reaching around behind her, he unfastened her bra—in, she noticed, much less than five seconds. He was a quick learner. The bra fell to the ground, and he cupped her breasts in his big hands and stared like a starving man gazing at a Christmas dinner.

"You are beautiful," he murmured.

"I'm glad you think so now. But what about when I'm old and wrinkled?"

"You will still be beautiful," he said with absolute certainty. "You will always be beautiful to me, Annie."

Tears prickled at her eyelids again, for the second time in five minutes, and she bit her lower lip to stop it from trembling. She'd wondered if she could form a permanent relationship with a man who never aged, and now she knew the answer.

Gar was right--James was utterly incapable of disloyalty. He loved her the way she was, despite her flaws, and he would always love her. He wouldn't care if she grew plump, if her hair turned gray and her skin wrinkled and sagged—he would still love her just as much.

She knew it as surely as she'd ever known anything.

James bent his head and kissed the top of a breast, and she shuddered. He kissed her in concentric circles, moving closer and closer to her nipple, and when at last he drew her nipple into his mouth a shock of pleasure exploded through her, and her knees gave out. She would have fallen if he hadn't caught her.

He picked her up easily and deposited her on the narrow metal table he'd lain on earlier. Standing beside her, he stroked his hands over her breasts and through her hair. She leaned back and closed her eyes, savoring the feeling of being cherished.

The feeling of being loved.

She realized the metal table was too narrow and too high for them to lie down together, and almost suggested they move to the floor, but she quickly realized James had something else in mind. His long, strong fingers stroked her inner thighs with the skill of a violinist playing his instrument, sending rippling eddies of warm pleasure through her,

then gently parted her legs. He bent toward her exposed flesh.

"James," she objected, trying to push her knees together. "Don't. I'm all sweaty."

He held her legs apart with no effort. "It's all right, Annie."

"But I stink," she said plaintively.

"No. You smell wonderful, as you always do." He looked up and gave her a quick flash of his lady-killing grin. "I suspect you taste wonderful, too."

Annie groaned, unable to argue, as his tongue slid gently between her thighs, finding her most sensitive spot with unerring accuracy, setting her on fire. His tongue caressed her slowly, until she ached with need, until she moaned with pleasure.

*"James."*

He lifted his head briefly. "I was right," he said hoarsely. "You do taste wonderful."

The reminder that he found her attractive, no matter what, sent a stab of pleasure through her. She cried out as his tongue found her again. And then, a moment later, his tongue slipped lower and delved inside her. Feeling a rush of heat and warmth, she clutched at his hair and sobbed as he explored her in a leisurely, thorough manner.

At last James straightened up for an instant, unfastened his jeans, and took her legs, placing them against his chest, with her calves over his shoulders. The position made her feel naked and exposed, which she found oddly exciting. And the sight of his massive erection, solid and demanding, sent a quiver of lust through her.

She had never been so excited in her life.

Already she was soaking wet, and he slid into her easily. Annie had never experienced this position before—Steve had had a lot of good points, but he hadn't really been the innovative type—and she was astounded by how deeply James was able to penetrate. Despite the fact that she couldn't kiss him, couldn't put her arms around him, it was a shockingly intimate way to make love. She felt the hard, blunt head of his erection pressing against a spot that had never been stimulated before.

"Oh, God, that feels good," she whispered.

"Yes," James said softly. "It does." Opening her eyes for a moment, she looked at him, still standing, his big hands wrapped around her thighs, his eyes shut tightly as he thrust slowly in and out.

Every time he entered her, she could feel him hitting that spot, deep inside her, and then he retreated, almost to the entrance to her body, only to slide slowly into her again. He made love to her with slow, deliberate thoroughness, so that the ache in her lower body intensified with each movement, driving her to the point of insanity.

She desperately wanted to caress him, to kiss him, but she couldn't reach him, so she settled for placing her hands on top of his. James moaned slightly at her touch, and his hands flexed on her thighs, pressing her legs more closely against his chest.

She could still feel him striking that place inside her, and although he continued to move slowly, her arousal was rapidly soaring to an uncontrollable level. A tempest she

couldn't restrain, didn't want to restrain, raged inside her, and her whole body throbbed with need. Abruptly the storm broke in a series of long, intense spasms shuddering through her, and she threw back her head and cried out.

As the ecstasy ebbed she opened her eyes languorously, to find James watching her with avid interest. He was still hard, deep within her, yet totally motionless. "That was wonderful," she said softly.

"I am glad you thought so. But we are not finished yet."

"Oh." Seeing the intensity in his eyes, Annie curled her hands over his. "That's sweet of you, James, but I'm not generally the multiple orgasm type."

James grinned as he slowly withdrew, leaving only the tip of his erection in her body. "I find that difficult to believe."

She remembered the times they'd made love and blushed. James definitely had the ability to make her lose her self-control, more than any man she'd ever been with. "Okay, every now and then, maybe. But I'm not usually like that. You'll just have to take my word for it."

"I prefer to rely on my own observations," he answered, and plunged into her again, so forcefully that Annie gasped. He began to drive into her, hard and fast, and so deeply that at first it almost hurt. But in a moment the discomfort faded, leaving her with a building sensation of pressure and swirling heat. She closed her eyes and sobbed with overwhelming pleasure as he thrust even harder and faster.

And then, just as the scalding heat reached an almost unbearable level, he stopped.

Her eyes popped open. "James," she said, aware that her voice was shaking. "Please."

His golden skin glistened with sweat, and he trembled all over. His eyes were clenched shut, his jaw tense, and she could feel him pulsing inside her in a fast, urgent rhythm. "I want this to last, Annie," he said softly. "I want it to last forever."

She had the distinct impression he was talking about something other than sex. "I know," she whispered. "But I need you, James. I need you *now*."

Groaning, he gave in, moving inside her hard and fast, driving her right over the edge. She exploded in a violent maelstrom of heat and light, her body shuddering, her inner muscles clenching fiercely around him. She felt him pound into her, heard his voice raised in a hoarse cry, felt the hot spurt of liquid deep inside her as he surrendered to his own ecstasy.

Afterward he pulled her up to a sitting position, put his arms around her, and held her against his chest without speaking, his face pressed into her hair. The gesture clearly expressed his love, and it warmed her. But she could also feel something else in his posture, something very like grief or despair, and she wondered what caused it.

But she was too tired to wonder much. Before long she'd fallen asleep against his chest.

\* \* \* \*

It was much more pleasant walking across the desert at night, although it was definitely chilly. But at least the sun wasn't baking her already-peeling skin, Annie reflected as they made their way across the sand. Fortunately there was a full moon, so James did not have to engage his ... his *headlights*.

"So what's the plan?" she asked.

James looked grim in the moonlight. "We are going to go back to the past."

"We're thinking that might not be the best idea," Annie said. "It seems to us that the information the humanoids were interested in getting their hands on must have been about the time machine. What if they use the information to go back and try to change the past again? What if they're planning on doing something in the past that might hurt the humans in the cylinder cities?"

"I do not believe that is their intention," James answered.

Annie paused and stared at him suspiciously. "You said you didn't have any idea what they wanted. What makes you so certain that isn't what they intend to do?"

"I had a long conversation with Charles," James said. "He is not interested in changing this present."

"How can you be sure he's not lying to you, James?" It occurred to her that she couldn't be sure *James* wasn't lying to her, either. She remembered his earlier despair all too well. But she put that thought aside. James wouldn't lie to her about this.

"He is my oldest friend, Annie. In this reality as well as my own. I trust him, and you must trust him too."

"I don't trust him at all, James. He captured us in an illusion and tried to trick us."

"What do you mean?"

Annie took a deep breath. She didn't want to hurt James, but he needed to know exactly what Charles had done. "They showed us a town where there wasn't one, and used it to keep us occupied."

"That is how they deal with humans. They endeavor never to speak with them face to face."

"Yeah, but there's more. He used a holo-image of you, James, and let us think it was you. You—the holo-image—told me you didn't want me any more, and asked me to go back to the cylinder city."

"And you *believed* this?" James asked, sounding affronted. "Were you fooled, Annie?"

"Not for long," Annie admitted. "But the point is that Charles can't be trusted, James. He's a liar."

"He does not trust humans, Annie. He has little reason to do so."

"But if I'd gone to the Bureau, like the holo-image told me to do, I might have been killed."

James shook his head. "I do not believe he meant any harm to come to you,

Annie. I am fairly certain he had a plan for returning you to the past. It is his firm belief that you belong in the past, and that you must return. We discussed this for a long time, and we concluded it is the best alternative. All three of us will all go back to the past together.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Gar said. “Annie belongs in the past, and maybe it’s the best place for you, James, but I don’t belong there. Suppose I change something without meaning to?”

“Like we’d leave you behind,” Annie said. “There’s a price on your head, Gar.”

“I don’t know if that’s actually the case,” Gar said. “I’m dead in this reality, remember? And I shot someone who never existed in this reality at all. I’m not sure that constitutes murder.”

“Nevertheless, the video records will show you killing a human,” James answered. “Even if the Bureau is unable to determine the identity of the victim, you will be held accountable. Annie is right, Gar. We cannot leave you behind. At any rate, Charles seemed to think we all belonged in the past.”

“How can I belong in the past?” Gar asked.

James shook his head. “We did not have adequate time to review the records, Gar. Charles may have had an opportunity to do so. Perhaps you are supposed to live in the past. If you built a life there, then you might change this reality by *failing* to go back.”

“I hate time travel,” Annie muttered.

“At any rate,” James said, “we are not going to leave you here to face punishment. We all go back together.”

Annie noticed the melancholy note in his voice again and wondered what caused it. Maybe, she speculated, he was sorry he had to leave his people. The thought depressed her a bit, and she tried to drive her thoughts in a more positive direction.

“The TDM is in the Bureau headquarters, right? Is that in this cylinder city?”

“No,” Gar said. “It’s in an isolated location, because of its instability. If something goes wrong with it it’s better that it be far away from any city, because the resulting explosion could be devastating. But we can get to it easily enough ... if we can get to a Gate.”

The Gates, Annie recalled, were those swirling elevator things—what Gar’s mother had called “spatial distortions.” She shuddered. “So how do we get to a Gate? Do we have to climb back down that elevator shaft?”

“There should be a Gate entrance outside,” Gar said. “The trick is finding it.”

“As it happens,” James said, “I know where it is.”

Gar frowned. “How?”

“I bet Charles told him,” Annie said. “If the humanoids have been drugging any humans that come out of the city and returning them, they must know where the Gate entrance is.”

James nodded. "That is correct, Annie. Charles told me. But once we are in the Gate, we must get to the TDM very quickly, before the Bureau realizes there has been an unauthorized entrance."

They walked on. Annie noticed that her calves and thighs ached. Not only had she not gotten a lot of exercise in the past year, but walking on loose sand was difficult. She decided grimly that when she got back to her own time, she was going to put in some serious time on the elliptical trainer that had been gathering dust in a spare bedroom for the past year.

She was grateful to know she wasn't going to have to climb back down that ladder, because at this point she really wasn't sure she could do it.

James stopped. "This is it," he said.

Annie looked around. She didn't see any familiar landmarks, but then again, one saguaro cactus looked much like another as far as she was concerned. She thought wryly that she really wanted to get back to the East Coast and its nice normal trees.

There were two big saguaros in front of them. James stepped between them and disappeared.

"Another holo-image," Annie said.

"Yes," Gar agreed. "This one probably set up by the Bureau." He followed James, and Annie took up the rear. In a moment she found herself looking at what looked like an elevator in the middle of the desert. Its door was open, and she saw the awful writhing nothingness inside it.

"Come along," James said, taking her hand. She closed her eyes and let him take her inside.

A few seconds later she felt the unpleasant, stomach-twisting disorientation that meant they were traveling through the spatial distortions. A moment later the door opened, and they all scrambled out hastily.

They seemed to be in a dimly lit building. "That way," James said, pointing. They ran in the direction he indicated. A moment later they paused in front of a blank wall.

James pressed his hand against the wall in a pattern. Abruptly lights came up, so bright that Annie flinched, and a mechanical voice said, "Unauthorized access."

"That's bad news," Gar said.

"It's not good," James admitted. "They've changed the password. Or they've set it to read handprints. Either way, we are in trouble."

"Let me try," Gar said. "Since I'm in the Bureau, maybe it will recognize me."

"In this reality, you have been dead for a month," James reminded him. "The password you know may not be valid."

"It's worth a try." Gar put his hand on the wall and punched out a code, but nothing happened. The voice repeated, "Unauthorized access."

"An alarm will go off in approximately thirty seconds," James said calmly.

Gar frowned at the wall. "James, can you break through that metal?"

James lifted his eyebrows and stared at the wall, as if the idea of using brute strength surprised him, then suddenly drew back his arm and slammed his fist into the wall. The metal gave way with a groan. He yanked at the metal around his hand, creating a large, ragged hole.

"Unauthorized access," the flat, mechanical voice repeated.

"Perfect," Gar said. He reached inside the wall and yanked the wires loose. Sparks flew, and he began to twist the wires together.

"You're hotwiring the *wall*?" Annie said.

"I'm just making it think we belong here. I believe if I do this—ah-ha."

The wall abruptly shimmered and disappeared, and the mechanical voice warning of unauthorized access cut off. Gar led the way through the opening.

Inside there was a lot of alien-looking machinery, as well as what looked like another elevator. Annie vaguely recognized the room from her first trip through time, although she had been so panicked that most of that experience was a blur in her mind.

"Take off your clothes, both of you," James said, and Annie noticed once again how commanding he seemed. "The less mass we try to send through, the better."

"I weigh a lot less than you do," Annie pointed out. "If it'll send you and Gar through, it should send me through with my clothes on."

"Even so, the less mass we try to send through, the more likely the temporal displacement is to be successful. Humor me, Annie. I promise you will not wind up standing nude in public somewhere."

"You're just trying to get me naked," she accused.

James flashed his most disarming grin. "You haven't seemed to have had a problem with that in the past."

"Hmmpf." A little self-conscious, Annie turned her back to Gar and began to strip.

Behind her, Gar said, "James, what about my gun?"

"We will have to leave it behind," James said. "Hopefully it will not be necessary in the past, anyway."

His fingers ran over what appeared to be an enormously complicated keyboard, with symbols rather than letters. Annie assumed he was setting coordinates. At last he nodded. "Annie, step into the TDM."

Annie frowned at him. "I thought this whole room was the TDM."

"The actual time distortion occurs there," James pointed to the elevator door. "Go through there and wait."

Annie hesitated. "You haven't taken your clothes off. Aren't you coming?"

"We are all going through one at a time," James said. "You, then Gar, and finally me. The module will not handle all our mass at one time."

"It handled our mass at one time when we came here."

"It requires less power to return bodies to their normal place in time, so the TDM expended relatively little energy in moving Gar, Dekka and me through time. And the TDM is a set coordinate in space-time, so it is fairly easy to bring people to this era. But this is an entirely different situation, Annie. I have to send us all to the exact same time and place, three centuries distant. That level of precision requires a great deal of energy, and only one of us can go at once. Go on."

She hesitated, remembering his inexplicable melancholy. Remembering his joy at seeing his people again.

"Annie," he said, gently. "*Trust me.*"

She paused a second longer, then nodded. But before she could step into the open elevator, there was the sound of running feet. Gar leaned down quickly, retrieved his abandoned gun, and held it trained on the door.

Two people, a man and a woman, appeared, both clad in the black uniform of the Bureau. They hesitated at the sight of Gar and his gun, and both of their hands reflexively moved toward their own side arms.

"Hands up," Gar said.

Sheepishly, they both lifted their hands.

"Into the TDM, Annie," James said.

"But you and Gar—"

"We will get through," Gar said. "Don't worry."

Annie hesitated, her eyes moving from the black-clad Bureau agents to James.

"Annie," James said. "*Hurry.*"

Annie squared her shoulders and stepped into the open elevator, relieved that at least she didn't have to step into that stomach-churning nothingness. The walls and floor were plain, silvery metal, just as she remembered. In fact the TDM looked much like a nice, normal elevator. The door slid shut behind her, precisely like an elevator, and disappeared.

And the reassuring thought that the TDM was a nice, normal elevator was immediately dispelled.

She had been through time once before, and she suddenly remembered that she hadn't liked it, not in the least. She couldn't have described the awful, stomach-twisting experience of traveling through time. It was like traveling through a spatial distortion, but multiplied. She had the horrible sensation of turning inside out, upside down, and sideways all at once. Her eyes wouldn't focus, her ears couldn't hear, and she couldn't feel anything. It was as if her brain was somehow disconnected from her body.

The elevator walls seemed to disappear from around her, leaving her utterly alone in a vast empty nothingness.

And then suddenly she fell onto a hard surface, and she was able to feel again. She knew this because her head hit the hard surface with a heavy *thunk* and pain radiated through her skull.



She scrambled to her feet, seeing that she was in her own kitchen.

She backed away from where she'd—landed?—concerned that if Gar and James made it through, they might materialize precisely where she had. Not being a physicist, she wasn't sure what would happen if two people tried to materialize in the exact same space, but she had a feeling it wouldn't be pretty. She pressed back against her refrigerator and waited.

In a moment there was a blinding flash of light, and Gar appeared. He seemed to materialize in midair and hover, then fell to the floor with a thump. It reminded her of those old cartoons where the Coyote ran off the side of the cliff and hung there for a while before he realized he was going to fall.

Gar grunted as he hit her tile floor, and she ran over to help him to his feet. He got up, and she did her best to ignore the fact that he was as naked as she was. A vague corner of her mind, however, noticed the rest of him was as good-looking as his face, and she wondered if Kay might be interested.

*Great. Ten seconds back in my own time and I'm matchmaking.*

"Over here," she said, and dragged him toward the fridge.

They waited tensely. Long moments drew out, and nothing happened. Annie felt a cold, icy tension coil in her stomach.

At last she said softly, "Gar. What happened to James?"

Gar shook his head. "I'm not certain, Annie. He might have been intercepted by the Bureau, although he incapacitated the two we captured."

"Incapacitated?" Annie swallowed. "Do you mean he killed them?"

"James wouldn't kill someone unnecessarily. You know that. He struck them on the head, rather gently, and knocked them unconscious."

Annie remembered the way he'd put his fist through a metal wall. He could easily kill with his bare hands, but she knew he would avoid it wherever possible. "So they might have captured him?"

"It's possible, although I left my gun with him so he could defend himself. Or the TDM might have failed. As far as I know, it's never been used exactly this way three times in a matter of moments before. It draws massive quantities of power. Perhaps there was a power failure."

"Or maybe he never planned to come through at all," Annie said quietly.

Gar turned his head and glared at her. "Don't be ridiculous, Annie."

"Am I being ridiculous?" she asked. "Maybe he should be with his people, Gar. Maybe he belongs with them instead of me."

"Maybe you should stop feeling sorry for yourself," Gar retorted. "He doesn't want to be with them, Annie. He's in love with you."

She remembered his deep, rumbling voice. *I love you, Annie. I cannot imagine a life without you.*

Gar was right. James loved her. She believed that with every cell in her body.

She had to believe, or she'd go mad.

"I guess you're right," she said. "But something has been bothering him all day, Gar. The way he—" *The way he made love to me as if he might never see me again.*

"The way he acted," she said instead. "It was almost like he was ... afraid."

"Afraid to go through the TDM? That doesn't make any sense. He's been through it before. And he knows how it works, better than most humans do."

"No. It was more like he was afraid we were ... running out of time. So to speak."

*I want this to last, Annie. I want it to last forever.*

She remembered the terrible despair in his voice and suddenly she was very, very frightened.

"I don't think he's coming," she said, softly. "I'm not sure why, but I think—"

There was a sudden flare of light and a roaring sound, and James appeared. Unlike Gar, he didn't seem to hover in the air. He was flung hard through the air, slamming into the lower cabinets of her kitchen, then falling limply to the floor.

The light didn't blink out, as it had when Gar had arrived. It got brighter and brighter, and the roaring sound grew louder, until Annie and Gar cringed involuntarily, their eyes screwed shut and their hands clapped over their ears. It was like being near a supernova, although she was pretty sure supernovas didn't ordinarily occur in suburban kitchens.

And then suddenly, there was silence.

Annie cautiously opened her eyes and discovered that the horrible light was gone. She half expected to see burn marks scarring her kitchen floor, but there was nothing to show the brilliant light had ever been there, nothing except a residual purple spot dancing in her vision.

Gar had already turned toward James, and she heard his shocked gasp. She spun around.

"Annie," he said, kneeling beside James, so that her view was blocked. "Stay away. You don't want to see this."

Ignoring his words, she set her jaw and walked toward them. Gar stood up and grasped her arm, trying to push her away. "Annie—"

"Get out of my way!" she snapped, and wrenched her arm free. Dodging around him, she fell to her knees beside James.

And screamed.

## Chapter 29

Most of James' abdomen was missing. He hadn't been simply peeled open, as he had been in the future—his skin and muscles and internal organs had been blasted away. She could see the bent and broken ends of his lower ribs, and the tattered remnants of a few internal organs, oozing a clear fluid. It looked as if he'd been caught in an explosion.

*An explosion.* She remembered the horrible light and noise and realized that must have been what had happened—the TDM had exploded while James was still traveling in time. He was lucky he'd reached his destination at all.

Although *lucky* wasn't really the word for it, she thought, looking at his mangled, devastated body, swallowing hard to prevent herself from gagging. Tears started to stream down her face, and Gar put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Annie," he said in a rough voice. "I'm so sorry."

She ignored him. "James," she said desperately, grasping the hand that lay limply on the floor. "*James.*"

To her immense shock, he stirred, and his eyes opened. He turned his head, slowly and painfully, and gazed at her. His vivid blue eyes looked vague and unfocused, but she saw a glimmer of recognition. There was still awareness there.

"Annie," he rasped out hoarsely. The word didn't sound like his voice at all. It sounded mechanical and harsh, and yet she sobbed with relief.

He knew who she was. Maybe there was still hope for him.

"Gar," she said, hearing her voice quaver. "We need to call an ambulance."

"No, Annie. There is nothing one of your doctors can do for him."

"Maybe some scientist somewhere can help him. Call 911."

"Annie," Gar said, a little more forcefully. He sounded sorrowful but resigned. "No current technology can save him."

Annie glanced at James' ruined abdomen and hastily looked away. Intellectually, she knew Gar was right, but her heart and soul screamed a denial. There had to be something she could do to help James.

She'd known better than to fall in love with a stranger, but she'd tumbled head over heels for him anyway, and now she was paying the price. But she knew she couldn't have stopped herself from falling for him, even if she'd wanted to.

And now she wasn't sure she could live without him.

"Gar ... is right," James said in that same mechanical voice. "I knew I would not survive, Annie."

She stared at him, remembering the terrible despair in his voice earlier. "You knew," she said softly. "But how did you know? How did you know the TDM would malfunction, James?"

"It did not ... malfunction." He gave her a faint shadow of his old grin. "I blew it up."

Abruptly she remembered seeing him lying there in the humanoids' infirmary, the skin and muscles peeled away from his abdomen. "You and Charles planned this," she accused. "He wasn't downloading information at all, was he? He was ... *wiring* you."

"We thought ... the future was as good as could be hoped for," James said. She could see the effort it took him to form words. "It was evident that as long as the TDM ... existed, people would continue to attempt to alter the past. We thought it best to ... put a stop to it."

He had sacrificed himself to save his people. To save the future. She didn't want his sacrifice to be in vain. "But won't the humans just build a new one?"

"Very few people know how the TDM works," Gar said grimly. "I suppose the humanoids intend to wipe the World Net of the information, and assassinate those few humans that do know. Is that right, James?"

James' eyes seemed to focus on Gar for a moment. "I am ... sorry, Gar."

Annie swallowed, realizing that Gar's mother would be one of the ones targeted. She hadn't liked the woman at all, especially knowing what she'd done to James, but she still didn't like the idea of people being killed because of their knowledge.

"That can't be an easy task," she said. "The information must be all over the Internet. I mean, the World Net. Didn't your mother publish articles about her work in scientific journals, or anything like that?"

"Actually, the Bureau kept the TDM project under wraps from the moment they found out about it, because they recognized the potential for damage," Gar said. "Very little information is publicly available. If the humanoids wipe the Bureau's records, that will take care of most of the data."

"Don't you people use backup disks?"

"Yes, and they are stored in several remote locations. It won't be easy for the humanoids to destroy them all."

"It is ... a chance," James rasped. "A gamble. It is not a certainty ... that they will succeed."

"You sacrificed yourself for a *chance*?" Annie asked.

"It was the ... only chance they had."

Gar nodded slowly. "He's right, Annie. If the TDM remained operational, history would very like change again at some point. This way, if the humanoids are successful, everything will remain the way it is. It's a gamble, all right, but one that may pay off."

Annie looked back at James' ruined body and blinked hard. "So you agreed to blow up the time machine?"

"The TDM is ... unstable," James said. "It did not take a great deal of explosive to destabilize it."

"You let them put explosives inside you," Annie said. "In your abdomen. James,

that's crazy. There had to be a better way."

"There was no other way that would permit me to return with you," James said. "I wanted ... to see you as I died. Perhaps that was selfish of me."

"No," she whispered, and heard her voice break. "I wouldn't want you to die alone."

"I had ... another reason. A less selfish one. I did not want you to spend ... the rest of your life hoping I might return. Waiting for me. I thought it would be best ... if you knew for certain that I was dead."

She gave a broken sob. "You were right, James. I would have waited for you. Forever."

"I wish you did not have to lose ... a second love this way, Annie."

She swallowed hard, struggling to steady her voice. "I wish I didn't have to lose you, James. But if I have to lose you, I'd rather be with you when you die."

Lifting his hand, she pressed her lips against it. She felt his fingers move feebly against hers as he tried to squeeze her hand with his, with very little success. A fresh flood of tears spilled down her cheeks at the realization that he was so weak he could barely move his own hand.

At that moment there was a peremptory knock on the door.

"Annie!"

Annie recognized Kay's distressed tones, and she raised her own voice. "Come in, Kay!"

A moment later Kay stalked in, holding Clark on her hip. She glared at the naked Gar with suspicion. "What are *you* doing here, you son of a bitch? What are you doing to her?"

Gar held his hands out in a gesture of peace. "I mean your friend no harm," he said.

Kay sniffed with contempt and turned to Annie. "Where the hell have you—" She broke off with a horrified gasp as she saw James.

Annie looked up at her friend. "He's dying, Kay."

"Jesus." Still clutching Clark, Kay dropped on her knees beside James and studied his gaping wound. She looked appalled. "If he were a human, he'd be dead already." She looked at James. "Isn't there anything I can do? Stop the, uh, bleeding?"

"No," James said in his mechanical voice. "Too many of my internal organs are ... missing or damaged. In the future, they could be replaced, but there is no technology ... available in your time."

Kay looked up, getting a good look at Annie for the first time, and her eyes went wide with surprise. Annie could understand why. The last time Kay had seen her, she'd looked civilized, if not glamorous. But now she was bedraggled, filthy, and badly sunburned. Not to mention totally naked. "What the *hell* happened to you two?"

"Long story," Annie said.

“Couldn’t be that long. You and James just left a couple of hours ago.”

“Two hours ago!”

“Yeah. Don’t you remember? James left, and I asked you if you were going to let him throw himself to the wolves.”

Annie nodded. “I remember. You asked me if I was a coward, and I went after him. You were supposed to stay at the hotel.”

“I waited for an hour. Then I couldn’t take it any more. I decided to drive over here, and then to my condo, and see if you showed up. I was *worried* about you, Annie.”

“With good reason,” Annie said. “Kay, for us it’s been a couple of days.”

“*Days?*”

“We went to the future. It’s really a long story. But Dekka is dead, and he’s on our side now.” She pointed at Gar.

“So are you telling me I can’t beat him up again?”

“I’m afraid so. He’s actually been a lot of help. We wouldn’t have gotten through it without him.”

The clack of high heels suddenly resounded on the wood floor, and Annie jerked her head up. “Kay, did you leave the door open?”

“Oh, hell,” Kay said, looking stricken. She bounded to her feet, but before she made it two steps a familiar face peered around the corner and stared at James’ ruined abdomen with avid interest.

“Well, now,” said Susan Takahashi. “Isn’t *this* fascinating?”

## Chapter 30

A cold thrill of rage went through Annie. If James had to die, at least he deserved to die in peace. She wouldn't stand by and let his last few moments be turned into a media circus. She dropped James hand and stood up, all but snarling with fury.

*"Leave him alone."*

"It looks like he needs help," Susan said.

"There's nothing anyone can do for him," Annie said. "Least of all you."

Susan started to walk toward her, and Gar immediately stepped into her path, taking his cue from Annie's belligerent attitude. "Get the hell out of here," he said, bristling.

Susan lifted a hand and casually pushed him, and he flew several feet across the kitchen, landing in a crumpled heap on the floor. Annie felt a jolt of shock. A small, delicate woman like Susan shouldn't be able to knock a big guy like Gar off his feet so easily.

Susan smiled as she paused on the other side of James. Deliberately, she rolled up the sleeve of her blouse and held out her arm.

And peeled away a long section of skin.

Annie gaped as circuitry and artificial muscles were revealed. "You're a humanoid," she said accusingly.

"That's what I love about humans," Susan said. "They're so damned observant." She knelt next to James, peeled back the skin on his arm, and with quick, efficient movements connected their arms by a clear plastic tube. With her other hand she pulled out some sort of small machine from her pocket and held it near James' abdomen. It emitted a buzzing sound, and the clear liquid stopped oozing from him.

Seeing Annie gawk at her, she explained, "This'll keep him alive until we can get the parts we need."

"The *parts*?" Annie echoed.

"How are you planning on getting parts?" Kay drawled. "I've never seen a humanoid parts supply store around here."

Susan flashed a grin. "Believe it or not, I'm not the only humanoid in this time period, and neither is James. There are quite a few of us. Several were designed with some knowledge of engineering, and they serve our community as doctors. We keep a supply of parts around because we can't afford to be discovered. If something goes wrong with one of us, it has to be fixed in a hurry, before someone notices it."

"So you're telling me you've all just blended into human society?" Annie said.

Susan nodded. "No one's ever guessed what I am." She looked at Annie. "Not until now."

God knew Annie had never guessed. She saw the anxiety in the woman's dark eyes and realized the tremendous risk she'd taken in exposing her true nature. She'd be taken apart, bolt by bolt, if anyone ever discovered what she was.

"We won't tell anyone," Annie promised. "None of us will."

Looking at James' arm, she saw fluid pumping through the tube that connected the two humanoids. "Are you sure you can save him? He's hurt so badly...."

"This? We're not as fragile as you humans, Ms. Simpson." Susan waved her hand toward the ruined, gaping hole where James' abdomen ought to be and flashed her cheerful grin. "Trust me. This is no big deal."

\* \* \* \*

"How many of you are there?"

Annie sat on Susan Takahashi's couch, James beside her, his arm around her waist. Incredible though it seemed, the humanoid "doctor" had been able to repair James' massive injuries in a matter of hours. Annie had stood next to him and held his hand the whole time, while he gritted his teeth, gasped, and occasionally moaned with pain. Apparently there was no painkiller that worked effectively on humanoids, and no way of safely rendering them unconscious while they were operated on. Being put back together had obviously been an excruciatingly painful procedure.

But despite the agony he'd suffered, he was whole again.

Susan Takahashi shrugged. "We don't know for sure how many of us there are in this time," she answered. "There may be some we haven't found. I suspected James was one of us from the moment I saw him, and I was almost certain once the evidence from that wreck surfaced. I recognized the odd burn marks on the tree near that smashed-up car at once. That's why I kept trying to get James to come talk to me."

"*You* can't even tell if someone's a humanoid or not?" Kay asked. She was sitting on the floor, Clark in her lap, with Gar next to her.

Susan shook her head. "It is impossible to be certain. But the way most humanoids look is something of a giveaway. We tend to have a slightly idealized appearance."

If that meant stunningly gorgeous, then Annie was inclined to agree. Susan was striking, in a delicate way, and the doctor who had "operated" on James had been unbelievably lovely, with brilliant red hair that made Annie feel that her own auburn hair looked rather dingy by comparison. Charles had been incredibly handsome, too. And then, of course, there was James....

"We may never know for certain how many of us there are," Susan said. "There are quite a few of us here. But we are always looking for more."

"Why are there so many of you clustered here?" Gar asked.

Susan shrugged. "I made it through on my own. But once I had established a life here, a sympathetic Bureau agent contacted me. He helped quite a few other humanoids escape through the TDM, and I assisted them in learning to blend in. He was a rogue



agent. A decent human who took exception to what the Bureau had done to the humanoids. He was able to keep our location in time concealed, but eventually the Bureau caught on to what he was doing, and he was forced to escape to this time himself. After that, no more humanoids came through that we know of, other than James. But there may have been others that we're unaware of."

Annie noticed Gar staring at Susan speculatively, and she remembered his words. *My father was killed by a humanoid ... the humanoid killed him and used the TDM.*

She deliberately steered the conversation in another direction before he could think too hard about the subject. If Susan had killed a human to gain her freedom, she didn't particularly want to know about it. Not after everything Susan had done for them.

"I guess there won't be any more coming through now that the TDM's out of commission," she said.

"No," Susan said. "And that's for the best, judging from what you and James have told us. Our people are alive, and they have a chance to make a life, a civilization, for themselves. It's a great deal more than they had before."

"Too bad you can't go back," Kay said.

Susan shook her head. "Most of us don't really want to go back. We have lives here. But we are greatly relieved to know that our friends have lives of their own in the future. We are ... grateful to you, Ms. Simpson."

"Me? I didn't do anything. It was James."

"On the contrary, you did a great deal. You took in a stranger in trouble and helped him outwit his pursuers. You stayed with him even when you learned that he was a machine. A robot. That is more than any other human has ever done for us, aside from that one lone Bureau agent. If you had not helped James, this outcome would not have been possible."

Annie swallowed. "I was glad to help."

"And that is part of what makes you an unusual human. You..." She looked at Kay and Gar. "And your friends."

"I'm curious," Kay said. "How have you managed to blend into society?"

"It took some effort," Susan said. "We had to find a way to obtain the documents that are required in your world. I found a person who was willing to provide birth certificates, driver's licenses, and other paperwork, and he produces documents when we need them. We'll get the necessary paperwork for James right away."

"Thank you," Annie said in relief. "That's a big load off my mind. I knew James needed that stuff, but I didn't have a clue how to get it."

"Criminal connections do come in handy," Susan said with her irreverent grin. She looked at Gar, and her smile faded slightly. "I suppose you will need papers, too. I'll see to that as well."

"Thank you," Gar answered.

Annie frowned. "I'm curious about one more thing, Susan. You don't age. How

can you blend into society? Don't people notice you never get older?"

Susan shrugged her slender shoulders. "None of us have been here longer than ten years, so we wouldn't have aged significantly. But obviously we will have to appear older at some point. We intend to use cosmetic means to age ourselves."

"But eventually someone will notice you never die. That's kind of a giveaway, you know?"

Susan nodded. "A dead giveaway, so to speak. Yes, we have given thought to that. When that becomes a problem—and it won't for many years—we will change our faces and assume a new identity."

"Change your faces?"

"Yes. The doctor believes she can alter our facial structure, to the point that we appear to be totally different individuals. Our fingerprints can be altered as well, if necessary."

James lifted his eyebrows. "To what extent have you blended into society? Have any of you married humans?"

"Humans?" Susan sniffed. "Most of us have no interest in marrying humans, considering the things they've put us through. We try to form family groups among ourselves."

Annie swallowed, hearing the slight scorn in Susan's voice when she mentioned humans, wondering if James felt the same, deep down. He'd told her that he loved her—but wouldn't he be happier among other humanoids?

"So none of you have married humans?" James asked.

"None that I know of," Susan said. Her lip curled. "It is not something I like to contemplate."

James glanced at her, and she wondered if his people's disapproval mattered to him. He answered that question instantly.

"I used to feel the same way," he said softly. "But now I know there are humans who are worth loving."

A wave of love broke over Annie, and she squeezed James' hand and leaned into his shoulder. Susan looked at her with surprised approval.

"You may be right," she admitted. Annie noticed her gaze had drifted to Gar, and she looked at him thoughtfully. "Maybe some of them are worth loving, after all."

\* \* \* \*

That evening Annie sat in her bedroom, scribbling in a spiral-bound notebook. Kay had returned to her condo with Clark and Gar, leaving Annie and James alone. Realizing she was still exhausted, Annie had retreated to her bedroom to take a nap right after they'd left. Moments ago, she'd awakened, with the bare outline of a poem taking shape in her mind.

Eventually she became aware that someone else was in the room with her. Looking up, she saw James hovering in the doorway.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Annie shot him a self-deprecating grin. “Believe it or not,” she said, “I’m writing poetry.”

James looked puzzled. “You told me you hadn’t written poetry in ten years.”

“I haven’t. I haven’t felt like writing poetry for a long time, James. But tonight a few things came to me, so I wrote them down.”

“Why do you feel like writing poetry now?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Annie said slowly, looking at the words she’d scrawled.

“After college, I got so wrapped up in the ordinary. The mundane. I had a job that took up most of my time, and my life was so monotonous that poetry just seemed alien to me somehow. Even after I married Steve—“ She met James’ eyes squarely. “I loved him, James. I really did. But our life together was routine. Comfortable. Not exactly boring, but not exactly exciting, either. I can’t explain it. It just didn’t inspire poetry somehow.”

James looked surprised and flattered. “Are you saying that I inspire poetry in you?”

“Looks that way. One thing I have to say, life with you is never routine.”

“I hope that it will become more routine eventually.”

“I imagine it will. But I don’t think it’ll ever be totally mundane.” She looked back down at the scrawl of words on paper, the words she’d written about loneliness. “I can’t help but feel sorry for the humans of your time. They live such isolated lives. The same way I lived before I met you.”

“Isolation is normal for the humans of the future,” James said. He took a step closer to her. “But not for this time.”

“I don’t think it’s the right way to live,” Annie said softly. “I don’t think it’s good for humans to live that way. At least it wasn’t good for me.”

“I suspect you’re right.” James looked at her with intensity, his forehead wrinkling, and hesitated. Finally he blurted out, “I told you once that I was not trying to take Steve’s place in your heart.”

Annie lifted her head, seeing the anxiety in his eyes. She smiled slightly and closed the notebook, then stood up and walked over to him.

“James,” she said softly, “just because I loved Steve doesn’t mean I love you any less.”

He swallowed hard. “I understand that. At least, I think I understand. I have never loved anyone before. I find that I do not wish to ... share your love.”

She shook her head. “It’s not like that, James. Steve is dead. I’ll always remember him, but he’s my past. You’re the future.” She grinned. “In more ways than one.”

Some of the anxious shadow faded from his eyes as she went on. “And if it weren’t for you, I’d still be living here alone, wasting my life.” She reached out and took his hand, wrapping her fingers around his. “You gave me something to live for, James.”

He looked down at her, his eyes very blue. "You have given me a great deal to live for as well, Annie. This morning, I thought I was going to die, and I realized I wasn't ready. I wanted to live. With you." His voice dropped almost to a whisper. "Forever."

She leaned against his shoulder, smiling. "Are you proposing to me, James?"

"Proposing?" He gazed at her for a moment, frowning, then his expression cleared. "You mean, am I suggesting that we form a permanent conjugal relationship?"

"It's called marriage, James."

"Marriage," he repeated. "Yes, I believe that is the word I was looking for. Will you marry me, Annie?"

Tears rose to her eyes at the same time that a smile curved her lips. "Yes, James," she whispered. "I will marry you."

James grinned broadly, wrapped his arms around her, and lifted her off the ground as if she weighed nothing. "Can we do it tonight?"

She shook her head, her arms around his neck. "No. Remember all the paperwork Susan told us about? The documents that make you appear to be a legal citizen of the United States? We can't get married until we have all those papers. A social security number, a birth certificate, a driver's license. Susan is going to get them for us, but it'll take a little while. But in the meantime...." She wiggled seductively against him. "Let's form a *temporary* conjugal relationship."

"I like that idea." He lowered her until her feet touched the ground again, then bent his head and kissed her. His lips were gentle, almost reverent, and they sent an eddy of desire swirling through her. She buried her hands in his hair and held on.

His hand slid up under her shirt, and she caught suddenly at him and stepped away. "Wait, James. I'm still a filthy mess."

"I do not mind."

"Well, I do." She'd meant to take a shower before she fell asleep, but the minute she'd stepped into her own house the bed had called to her, singing a siren tune she couldn't resist.

James shrugged. "Fine. Let's take a shower."

She saw the suggestive gleam in his eyes, and she laughed softly. "I'm not sure that'll work too well in my tub, James. I don't have a big walk-in shower like Kay does, and it's kind of slippery. How about we take a bath instead?"

"A bath?" he repeated, and she recognized from his tone that the word was unfamiliar to him.

She shot him a suggestive smile. "I'll show you."

\* \* \* \*

James sighed as he sank into the hot water across from Annie. "This," he announced, "was a good idea."

"Yeah," she agreed. "My muscles are sore."

"My muscles do not get sore." He flashed a wry grin. "Except when they are

forcibly removed.”

“Ugh. Let’s not talk about that anymore, okay?”

“Fine. I must admit, I prefer not to think about it myself. At any rate, my muscles do not hurt. But the hot water feels good against my skin.”

Annie wiggled a bit. “I was a little worried it’d hurt my sunburn. But it’s not bad. And it’s helping my muscles a lot.”

“I could rub your neck.”

“No. My skin is pretty sore there.”

James cocked an eyebrow. “So you don’t want me to touch you?”

“I guess that depends on where you touch me.” She looked at him consideringly, seeing his arms stretched along the back edge of the tub, his head tilted back, and his solid, massive body sprawled under the water, taking up most of the space. As she looked at him, she saw his body begin to stir beneath the water.

Unable to help herself, she reached over and brushed a hand against his perfect, utterly unscarred abdomen, and his erection swelled. “You’re so beautiful,” she said softly, aware of a thick constriction in her throat. He *was* beautiful—and he had come so terribly close to death. But now no one could have guessed by looking at him that he’d been lying on her kitchen floor, all but torn apart, this morning.

She let her fingers stroke down his hard, swollen flesh, and he groaned softly. He felt wonderful beneath her hand, like velvet and marble, and she explored his contours, explored every inch of him—and there were a lot of inches there to explore—until he quivered under her fingers. She heard his breath coming in hard gasps, saw his hips began to move in an involuntary rhythm, and she smiled, pleased to know she had an effect on him.

“Annie,” he said at last, in a harsh voice. “Perhaps you had better stop now.”

“No,” she said softly. “I don’t think so.”

She wrapped her hand around him, and James jumped, then gave a tortured groan. As she began to move her hand up and down, slowly, she heard his moans grow in volume and intensity, felt him press eagerly into her palm. She moved her hand in a hard, steady rhythm, until she felt him convulsing, throbbing, until he thrust against her hand violently and gave a long, shuddering groan of pleasure.

Afterward he dropped his head back against the side of the tub, his eyes closed. Happy that she’d been able to thrill him, she leaned her own head back and relaxed. There was a long, companionable silence. And then James picked up one of her feet, which was resting on his thigh, and began to rub it.

She suddenly realized how sore her muscles were, and it felt very good when he rubbed them. He massaged her other foot, then worked his way up her calves, while she sighed in contentment. But as he began to massage her thighs, the contentment was replaced by sheer lust.

She gave a soft noise of pleasure, and he smiled, caressing the sensitive skin of

her inner thighs. His talented hands sparked a fire in her body and made it grow hotter and hotter, until she ached desperately for release.

“James,” she whispered, his name an anguished plea.

Slowly his fingers slipped higher, sliding through her auburn curls, then finally stroking her slick, wet folds. A throbbing, hot pressure built within her, an unbearably sharp knife edge of pleasure. And then suddenly the pressure burst in a hard, hot explosion, an inferno that made her sob with overwhelming pleasure.

She collapsed back against the side of the tub, breathing hard. After a few moments she became aware that James was watching her.

“Annie,” he said at last, softly, “I have to decide what I should do.”

“I thought we already decided what we should do,” she said lazily. “We’re getting married, remember?”

“I meant that I need a job. And not merely as your housekeeper. I cannot live off your charity forever.”

Annie lifted a shoulder. “That’s part of marriage, James. I’ll support you until you find something to do.”

“But what can I do? My job skills are quite limited, and I have no references.”

“Susan might be able to get you some fake references.”

“I do not want to presume on Susan more than necessary.” James looked thoughtful. “You once suggested I could be a male model.”

Annie looked at his broad chest, beaded with water, and nodded. “Yeah, you probably could have a fabulous modeling career. We’d just have to get a portfolio together for you.”

“A portfolio?”

“A collection of photographs. It shouldn’t be difficult, if that’s what you’d like to do.”

“I simply want to find gainful employment. Modeling sounds like an acceptable career.” James hesitated. “And what about children?”

“What about them, James? You can’t have them. I’m willing to marry you anyway.”

“I am glad to hear that. But I love children, and so do you. I seem to recall seeing that there are many unwanted children in your time. Is it not possible to—“ He frowned momentarily as he searched for the correct term, then his expression lightened. “To adopt one?”

The thought sent a thrill through Annie. “I hadn’t thought about it,” she said slowly. “But it might work. They’ll check your papers pretty thoroughly, though, so we’ll need to make sure they’ll stand up under scrutiny.”

“I suspect Susan is extremely thorough.”

“I think you’re right.” Annie smiled. “That’s a really good idea, James. You’re right—there are a lot of kids in the world nobody wants.”

James grinned, reached across and caught her by the waist, and placed her on top of him, sloshing water everywhere. "I am glad you agree."

He was hard again, and she slid easily onto him. He felt unbelievably good, deep inside her, and a flood of love washed over her, so intense she could barely stand it.

"God, I love you," she said against his chest. "And you'll make a fabulous father."

"And I love you, Annie." He tilted her head up and kissed her. "I intend to make a fabulous husband as well."

"You will," she whispered. "I have absolutely no doubt of it."

### Acknowledgement

Thanks to the late great Isaac Asimov, whose stories about robots fascinated me from the time I was in junior high onward. I adore every last one of his robot stories and novels, but I was most inspired by his brilliant six-page short story, “Robot Dreams,” and his novella “The Bicentennial Man,” which is the classic exploration of artificial intelligence, and my absolute favorite story ever.



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Cordelia paused and looked out over the vista. Following her gaze, Gwaltney saw they had walked down the terraced steps leading away from the mansion and stood on the rather steep bank of the canal. Not far away, a footbridge in the Chinese style arched gracefully across the water. It was a lovely setting--quite likely the most romantic area in the entire formal garden.

Why the hell had she brought him here?

He eyed her warily, but her attention seemed to be caught by their surroundings. "It's beautiful here," he commented, probing for information. This hardly seemed like the sort of place a woman bent on preserving her virtue at all costs would bring a man she disliked. It made no sense, none at all. He resolved to be cautious.

"I like it," she said with a little sigh. "Every time I come to the Governor's mansion, I always like to come see the canal."

Gwaltney reached out and gently caressed her tightly bound hair. "It's lovely," he said, permitting his voice to drop into a lower register, "but not as lovely as you."

Cordelia turned her head and stared at him for a long moment, then, to his surprise, she burst out laughing. "Oh, please," she sputtered. "Surely you can do better than that."

"I beg your pardon?" Gwaltney said blankly, so baffled by this unexpected reaction that he dropped his hand with a touch of embarrassment. It was true he was somewhat unaccustomed to giving women compliments, but he had never had one go into a fit of the giggles before.

"And you said you were always honest!" she hooted, laughing harder.

"I try to be," Gwaltney said stiffly.

"Then you should try harder. Lovely!" She giggled again, then got her laughter under control. "Next I suppose you'll be telling me that my eyes are the blue of the summer sky, that my hair is as smooth as silk, and that my skin is as pale and flawless as marble."

Gwaltney grinned reluctantly, aware that his attempt at a compliment had been transparently insincere. The truth was he had scarcely given a thought to her appearance. In fact, he hadn't had the faintest idea what color her eyes were until this moment. "How unfortunate that you have foreseen all my compliments, Mistress Ashton. Although I believe I should have likened your skin to alabaster rather than marble."

"You will forgive me if I say I believe you are less than honest, Mr. Harris."

"Perhaps I was," Gwaltney admitted. "The truth is that I am not certain what to say to you. I am, quite frankly, unaccustomed to wooing well-bred young ladies."

Cordelia heard the insecurity in his tone, and it affected her in a way his compliments had not. He was only masquerading as a gentleman, and thus was most likely unsure of the correct way to behave in any given situation. She could not help but feel sympathy for him.

She did her best to harden her heart against him, reminding herself that all he wanted was a wife. Any well-bred woman would do. In that respect, he was very much like the man who had broken her heart years ago.

That thought made her voice tarter than she had intended. "I suppose in the past you have wooed women with money rather than compliments."

"If by that you mean that I have spent my time with whores rather than ladies, you are correct. Given the choice, I find that I rather prefer whores. They don't refuse to associate with a man due to his lack of breeding."

Cordelia felt her cheeks pinken at his blunt words. "But surely I am not the first woman you have actually courted."

"No. There were two others. The first laughed in my face when I brought her a cup of punch at a rout. She told me she would rather die of thirst than accept it."

"What about the second?"

"She fell into a swoon when I dared to approach her at a ball. Her father publicly threatened to kill me if I spoke to her again."

She heard the stiff anger beneath his quiet tone and realized for the first time that despite his lack of breeding, Gwaltney Harris was an extremely proud man. The rejections he had suffered had obviously offended him deeply. It was, she thought, surprising that he would dare to try a third time.

"I see," she said quietly.

"But I hasten to add that those young ladies were almost courteous compared to you, Mistress Ashton. I have never met a woman who can utter insults so glibly. You have a true gift for discourtesy, madam."

Any sympathy she might have felt for him quickly dissipated. She glared at him. "Is that intended as a compliment?"

He shrugged. "As I recall, you did say you wanted me to be sincere."

Cordelia scowled. She had momentarily allowed herself to be distracted by her sympathy for him, but his curt words made her recall the reason she had led him out here. She had a trap to bait. Doing her best to simulate tremulous shyness, she reached out and placed a hand on his arm. Beneath the satin of his coat sleeve, his muscles were hard and unyielding. "I never meant to be so unkind," she said softly.

Gwaltney looked down at her with open cynicism. "Of course you didn't," he drawled. "No doubt when you called me excruciatingly dull, you meant it kindly."

Cordelia winced. "I ... I didn't realize other women had been so cruel to you," she fabricated hastily. "Had I realized, I surely would have tried to treat you more kindly."

"Nonsense," Gwaltney said shortly. "Had you realized, you most likely would

have studied their techniques.”

She managed to stifle the startled giggle that rose to her lips. “I’m not as awful as that,” she protested.

“Indeed you are. In fact, you are the most singularly ill-natured young woman I have ever had the misfortune to encounter.”

“More compliments, Mr. Harris?”

“The simple truth, Mistress Ashton.”

Cordelia stared up at him. She knew she should feel relieved that he found her manners repulsive. It meant he would not be pursuing her any further. And yet, in some distant corner of her mind, she wished he didn’t despise her. She wondered what it would be like to be courted by a man like this, a thoroughly masculine, dangerously attractive man.

“I don’t want you to hate me,” she whispered, letting her eyelashes sweep down to conceal her eyes and tilting her face up. She was careful to keep her eyes slitted open.

“Please say you don’t hate me.”

“Oddly enough, I don’t. Despite your childish ways, despite the manner in which you have repeatedly snubbed me, I still find you attractive. I can’t imagine why. It can’t be your looks.”

Cordelia bit back the annoyed reply that sprang automatically to her lips. “I’m glad to hear that,” she said softly. She swayed toward him, as if overcome by emotion, and waited.

And still he did not move. She squinted at him through slitted eyes, wondering what he was waiting for. Surely she had been obvious enough, leading him to a secluded part of the garden, screwing her eyes shut, and pursing her lips like a fish. She was behaving precisely like a giggling young ninny desperate to snare a husband. Surely he realized that he ought to kiss her.

Instead, he spoke. “What are you playing at, Cordelia?”

She jumped at his hard tone and opened her eyes. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’re up to something. What is it?”

“I’m not up to anything!” she protested. “How can you be so suspicious?”

“I am not suspicious. Merely prudent.”

She hesitated a long moment. “I just wanted to kiss you,” she said in a soft voice. It was, she realized, closer to the truth than she would have liked.

There was a long silence. At last he said in a strangled whisper, “What?”

“I wanted to know what it would be like to kiss you,” she repeated softly.

She saw the bewilderment on his face. He stood silent for long moments, staring blankly at her, apparently at a complete loss for words. Something fiercely savage, something primal, abruptly ignited in the depths of his eyes, and he lowered his head, bending toward her swiftly....