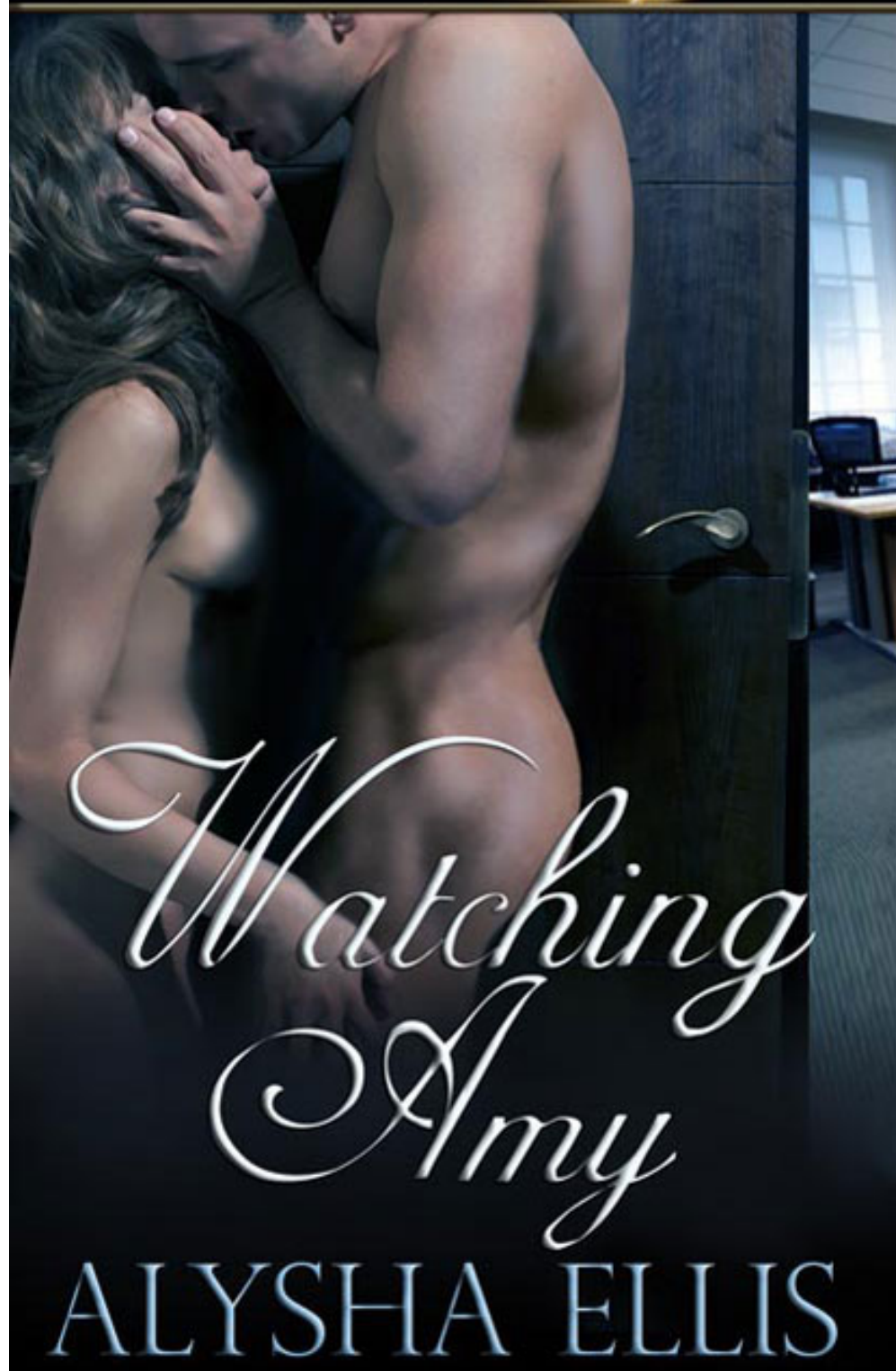


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Watching Amy

Alysha Ellis

Computer expert Dr. Amy Peters has discovered the key to the creation of self-replicating, sentient computers—a discovery that will change her life forever.

Two men arrive on Earth to steal Amy's data. One of them wants to give her the best sexual experience of her life, the other wants to kill her. Both of them watch her every move.

Amy has five days before her findings go public at an international conference. Five days to keep herself and her work safe. Five days with the sexiest man she's ever met...and five days to convince him not to leave.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Watching Amy

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WATCHING AMY

Alysha Ellis

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Chapter One

Scott's firm, muscled frame weighed more than Amy expected. At least half the air rushing from her lungs in rapid pants was pushed out by the downward thrust of his chest on hers. Hadn't his mother ever told him a gentleman rests his weight on his elbows? Mama had obviously never thought to mention he should make sure his partner was fully with him before he dived in. Still, with his GQ-model stubbled jaw, a six-pack a gym junkie would envy and equipment guaranteed to give any man who had the bad luck to be in the bathroom at the same time as him a mega-case of penis envy, it probably never occurred to him to wonder whether his partner enjoyed the sex as much as he did.

Amy *might* have enjoyed it if his foreplay had consisted of more than a quick smirk, a baring of his admittedly magnificent chest and a sharp squeeze in the general area of her groin, followed by a thrusting finger that felt more like he flipped her the bird than a caress.

The promised friction of his cock had fueled her fantasies for the last four hours. Of course, in her fantasies Scott had devoted himself to pleasing her, thrusting his hot, wet tongue against her clit, driving her to a climax long before he sought his own pleasure. None of the erotic images she'd conjured up had him bunching her skirt around her waist, dragging her panties off, throwing her down on the bed in standard missionary position and driving into her like she was a plastic blow-up doll.

She hadn't had sex in so long. Surely it used to be better than this? After months of social isolation, spending every spare moment working on her research, she'd given herself the night off, intending to do something wild and daring to reassure herself she was a human being, not just a passionless academic. She'd worn her one sexy dress, all silver sheen and short enough to show off her long legs—more suited to a fashion model than a computer nerd—and gone to a club. As she peered through the pulsing, light-slashed darkness, her gaze roamed nervously from face to face, then she recognized Scott.

Years ago, when they were both at university, she'd had a crush on him. He'd only gone out with the prettiest girls, hadn't bothered to speak to the shy, studious geek she had been then. He never noticed she existed. Tonight though, his eyes met hers, a predatory smile curled his lips and he moved towards her.

"Well, hello." He grabbed her hips and ground against her in a move more reminiscent of sex than of dancing. Amy wanted the raunchy, wild ride Scott's body language promised, wanted it to release all her built up tension, to satisfy her body's needs. Then maybe her mind would stop creating porn movies in her head and let her get back to the final stages of her work.

It didn't take her long to work out Scott didn't remember her. He called her babe and he made no reference to their time at university or any common classes. Amy didn't care. She didn't want a relationship, she just wanted some fun.

The fun failed to eventuate. No sex at all would be better than being bounced on by this self-indulgent oaf. Someone needed to tell him it took more than a giant penis to be a good lover and the only someone around was her. She arched her hips to buck him off. Unless she got something out of this, neither would he. Again she curved upward and he grunted. Forcing her compressed lungs to lift so she could drag in enough air, she huffed out an order. "Get off."

If he heard he gave no sign, lost in his own rush towards release. She twisted and shoved at his shoulders.

"I suppose you realize that's only going to make him come sooner, although from what I can see, the quicker it's over the better. How on earth did you end up with that miserable specimen?"

The strange voice came from somewhere near the foot of the bed. Amy's heart leapt and pounded frantically in her flattened chest. She screamed and her body stiffened into terrified immobility. Above her, Scott did exactly the same.

Then he rolled off her and dropped onto his back. "Babe! I don't have to ask if it was good for you. Guess that was the *big* big O. You almost deafened me."

Amy ignored him. She blinked and rolled her head from side to side, searching for the intruder. Scott had insisted she leave the light on, probably so he could admire himself in the mirrored doors of her wardrobe. Except for her and Scott, the room was empty. The TV and radio were both turned off.

Her heartbeat slowed down a couple of hundred beats per minute. The strange voice must have been a product of her imagination. A hallucinatory response to the disappointment she felt at Scott's selfish performance made her hear things that weren't there.

"I am here. You heard *me*."

Instantly, her heart rate skyrocketed again. The thumping of blood in her ears didn't drown out the dark, gravelly voice.

"Of course, if it had been *me* having intercourse with you, you wouldn't have noticed if a train smashed into the room next door." The words came out of nowhere.

Another scream tore from her throat. Scott lifted himself up on one elbow. "Damn I'm good. Even the aftershocks are monumental."

This time the voice spoke right into her ear. "Get rid of this moron! He's annoying and when I'm annoyed, people get hurt."

Amy scrambled backward. Once again her head flashed from side to side. "Who are you? Where are you?"

His hand splayed out across his own chest, Scott replied, "I'm still here. Guess I drove you blind with passion. Get with it, babe. If you pull yourself together, the Scottster might do you again. Twice in one night. A treat for you."

Her eyes wide, face pale, Amy whispered, "Are you doing this? Is this some kind of crazy ventriloquist party trick?"

"What are you talking about?" Scott paid attention to her now, the same kind of attention he'd pay to a rattlesnake he'd discovered in bed with him. At least he finally seemed to realize she was alive.

"The voice. Can't you hear it?" Her voice shook, a good match for her trembling hands.

Scott backed out of the bed and snatched his pants off the floor, dragging them on, hopping on one leg as he fumbled to get them pulled up. "You're crazy, lady. Only loonies hear voices. What are you – some sort of psycho bitch who goes nuts after great sex?" With his shirt in one hand and his shoes in the other, Scott headed for the door. "I won't be seeing you around. I like my women sane. Don't call me."

The door slammed. Amy sighed, but halfway out, the air froze in her lungs. No matter how much of a waste of energy Scott had turned out to be, at least he was another human being. Now he'd left her alone with a disembodied voice that could be anything or anyone. Her whole body began to shake. The tremors took over, rattling her teeth in her head, making her knees knock together, holding her frozen in place.

At first she thought her fear created the warped blur in front of her, but as she watched, a dark shape began to form. She opened her mouth to scream, but her lungs wouldn't suck in the air needed to make a sound.

"Try to exercise a little self-control." The voice came from the middle of the amorphous cloud. "Delay the hysterics until I materialize. Human forms are bizarre and unnecessarily complicated. Even I could make an error."

A man stepped out of the quicksilver shimmer. Dark eyes looked out of a classically handsome face, nose straight, chin square, cheekbones high and defined. Black hair brushed wide shoulders that tapered down to a broad chest and narrow hips. Sheer shock made Amy gasp. She pointed a shaking finger.

The stranger's gaze followed in the same direction. A frown creased his perfect forehead. He looked back to the bed where Amy crouched, still naked from her encounter with Scott, then down at himself. Understanding lightened his face. "Humans only have two legs. Six is for insects." Silver light flashed and a pair of long, lean legs, thighs muscular and taut, replaced six scaly appendages. He glared at her. "It's your fault. I told you I had to concentrate." His voice rasped, as if from stiff vocal chords.

His shoulders rolled, sending a ripple of shadow across his skin. "It always takes a bit of time to get used to a new body." He coughed, clearing some of the huskiness. "I like this one, though." He ran his palms down his flanks.

Whoever he was, whatever he was, he seemed at the moment to be more concerned with discovering himself than with her. Amy snatched the sheet up and wrapped it around her, then hid her face in her hands. "I'm hallucinating. I have to be hallucinating. Scott was right. I'm mad."

The man looked up, leaving his long fingers where they had settled, wrapped around his cock. "Do humans really only have one penis?" He sighed. "Oh, well, I suppose if that's how it is, it will have to do. My technique will make up for it." He took two determined steps towards the bed. "You're not mad, you know. Unless you count being crazy enough to think that pathetic human could give you what you need in bed."

"Stay away from me," she whimpered.

"Not going to happen." He took another step closer.

Amy leapt up onto the bed, trying to ignore the shaking of her knees.

He stopped and put his hands on his hips. "Oh come on. Can we have a bit of logic here? You act like you've never seen an extraterrestrial life form before."

Her mouth opened and shut. She cleared her throat and forced out a squeak. "An alien? You're trying to tell me you're an alien?"

One sardonic eyebrow lifted. "I'm an extraterrestrial being, currently manifested in a human body." He rolled his eyes. "They told me in the briefing that Earth people of your time were a bit primitive but I didn't expect you to be unable to process simple information."

"You think appearing in someone's bedroom, telling them you're an alien, when they're in the middle of having sex..." That bit might not have been completely relevant, but it added to her discomfort so it stayed in, "You think being shocked by that means I'm unable to process simple information?" Fear morphed into rage. "Don't you dare come here with your stupid made-up story about being an alien and call Earth people – me – unintelligent. How smart can you aliens be if popping into my bedroom like this is the best you can do?"

A sigh whispered from his lips. "Not only stupid, but lacking in logic. If I am an alien, then my story can't be made up, can it?"

People who pointed out flaws in her thought processes annoyed her. She prided herself on the ordered pattern of her thinking. Right now though, the strangeness of the situation made rationality difficult. She clenched her fists. "There is no such thing as aliens."

"You people really are slow. UFOs? Roswell? There have been alien visits for at least the last fifty years of your time and you think aliens don't exist? Now I'm here talking to you and you're still denying it. What do you want me to do? Turn green? Sprout antennae? Show you some tentacle?" His expression turned wicked. "I can do some very interesting, sexy things with tentacles. Wriggle them into tight places, squirm about..."

With her hands clapped over her ears she grunted, "Ugh. Shut up. Like I would ever want to have sex with an alien."

"Don't be prejudiced," he ordered. "You haven't even tried it. You have no right to be squeamish anyway. I don't think that creature you were trying have sex with was the same species as you. Human beings aren't that slimy."

Damn him, he had a point. "Scott may have been a waste of time. It doesn't mean I want to have sex with you."

"Sure you do. Once you have tried it, you'll never want a human again. Even with only one cock I'm a hundred times better than the sea slug who was here before."

"I'm not having sex with you!" Surely that was clear enough for anyone to understand.

"I think you should," he said. "The sooner the better. You're very tense. Your plan to have sex to release some of that tension had a lot of good science behind it. You just picked the wrong being to try it with. Sex is excellent relaxation and you can get back to your work with renewed energy." He stepped forward again. "I can guarantee you won't be disappointed with my performance."

"There's not going to be any performance," she forced out through gritted teeth.

"Slow to understand, illogical and stubborn. Why do I always get the tough assignments? Rookies get to go to planets like Eroticaria Four and monitor orgies, but I get sent to Earth to..." He broke off. "Look, this assignment will be a lot easier on both of us if you let me relax you a little." He took another step towards the bed.

Tension gripped her and she prepared to fight. "I don't care who you are, or how good you think your technique is. There will be no sex. If you don't go away there will be no you." She jumped out of bed and snatched up the bedside lamp, holding the top end, swinging the heavy base like a bat. "Get out." With her eyebrows drawn together and her lips turned down into a snarl she hoped looked fierce and intimidating, she swished the lamp through the air a couple of times.

Her intruder raised his brows and lifted the fingers of one hand. Light poured out of the lamp. With a squeal, Amy dropped it. "Ouch. That burned." She looked down at the floor. A little curl of smoke rose where the lamp scorched the carpet.

Another swish of his fingers and the lamp went out. Amy felt the blood drain from her face. Her knees shook. She pushed her back against the wall for added support. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice a cracked whisper.

He stood with his hands relaxed by his sides. His nakedness appeared to cause him no discomfort. "You don't need to know."

Amy glared at him. "What the hell do you mean, I don't need to know? I want answers. Now."

With his arms folded across his chest, he said "You won't get any answers that I don't want to give. I don't like questions. All you need to know is I'm here to watch

you. Whatever you do, wherever you go. If I think you need to know anything else, I'll tell you, but for now you've got all the information you're going to get."

His fingers waggled again and the lamp lifted off the floor and clunked back down on the bedside table. Mist formed before Amy's eyes, her legs collapsed and she sagged onto the carpet. Her blood pounded and roared in her ears, drowning out everything else. She put her head on her knees as black closed around her. In the absence of external sound and vision, she gradually calmed. An explanation surfaced from the darkness. This whole scene was some sort of bizarre dream. A nightmare. She'd been working too hard. Between her exhaustion and the dismal sex, she'd fallen asleep mid-fuck.

No matter how strange and frightening, she only had to wake up to end it. In the time-honored method, she pinched herself.

It hurt. She was awake and the nightmare had ended.

She lifted her head, opened her eyes and whimpered.

The intruder huffed out a sound that could have been called a sigh if it weren't so full of exasperation and irritation. "Are all human beings as difficult as this? Or are you just unusually inflexible? I've told you how it is going to be. I see no reason for you to become hysterical."

"I am *not* being difficult," Amy thrust out her chin. "What do you expect me to do? A strange whatever-you-are materializes in my bedroom, refuses to answer any questions, tells me he's here to watch and I'm supposed to just get over it. Of course I'm hysterical. Anyone would be."

His hands tunneled through his hair, leaving it tousled. Amy refused to let the word *sexily* intrude into that sentence, no matter how hard it tried to worm its way into her brain. His deep voice ground out. "The hell they would. The rest of the universe is much more aware of what's going on around them. You people pay no attention to what happens outside your immediate environment." He shrugged. "It's not my job to give you all the details."

"All the details." Amy's voice rose to an outraged shout. "I don't have *any* of the damn details. Why are you here? Why me? What have I done to deserve this?" He opened his mouth to speak but she stopped him. "And if you tell me you're here to watch me, I will go out to the kitchen, find a large knife and slice your cock and balls clean off your body."

The speed with which his arms unfolded and his hands dropped to cradle his equipment would have been funny in a less stressful situation. He looked at her, his lips tight, his face pale. After a moment he relaxed and resumed his confident stance, arms crossed, feet spread apart, still apparently unfazed by his nakedness, now that he had assured himself of the safety of his lone penis. "I am not here to harm you."

Amy shook her head from side to side as she spoke. "No. That's not enough. You have to explain." Instead of the demand she'd intended, the words came out as a whimpering plea.

His face softened, not much, just enough to relax the hard lines around his mouth. "I *can't* tell you any more. I will be with you, watching you, whatever you do, wherever you go. You can't stop that, you can't change it."

"I'll call the police. They'll arrest you. Lock you up."

His expression didn't change. "You couldn't make the phone call. If you did, the police wouldn't respond. I told you. I'm in control here."

A quick movement of her hand snared her purse from the bedside table and before he had time to react she plunged her hand inside and pulled out her phone. "Wanna bet?"

He lifted one shoulder. "Doubt is obviously something innate in the human psyche. You don't believe me. Find out for yourself."

Her thumbs flew over the emergency number, but no dial tone sounded in her ear. A sick feeling of dread spilled bile into her stomach, making it clench and her heart thumped in her chest. His gaze didn't waver, but he made no motion towards her. "Okay. I'll go down to the station myself," she muttered.

His lips twisted into a mocking smile. He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "You really are a slow learner, aren't you?"

She strode to the door, sheet still wrapped around her. One part of her brain told her she ought to get dressed before she left, but another urged to get out of there as fast as she could. Modesty be damned. He said he wouldn't hurt her, but how could she know if he told the truth? Everything he said sounded like an outrageous lie. It had to be a lie.

The doorknob turned smoothly under her hand, but she didn't hear the snick of the latch. A tug on the handle had no effect. Her breath rasped out of her throat, fast and shallow. Adrenaline flooded through her veins. The door shuddered under her frantic kicks but she didn't have the strength to knock it down. A whimper escaped through her parted lips, rising to a terrified moan. Her hands beat more and more desperately against the unyielding wood. Her palms hurt, the door stayed shut. Nausea spilled acid into her mouth. The apartment she loved had become a trap, caging her in with a dangerous stranger. With a thud her head dropped against the frame.

The back of her neck tingled with awareness of his gaze. She turned and stared at him in horror. Whoever, whatever he was, he had taken complete control of her life. She was at his mercy.

"I don't tell lies." He held out his hand. "Go back to bed. You can do nothing else. While you sleep you will move towards acceptance. Tomorrow you will be able to cope with this better."

His fingers wrapped around her cold hand and he led her towards the bed. She stood there stiff and stunned until he unwound the sheet and pushed her down onto the mattress. Her limbs locked into a rigor of dread.

He threw the sheet over her and walked to the other side and slid in next to her. Fear rushed through her, breaking her paralysis, fuelling tremors that shook the bed.

"You must control your fear." The calm tones of voice settled over her. "My home world is far more advanced than your Earth. I do not commit acts of random violence. I am not a liar and I am not a rapist. When I use this body to make love to you, you will be a willing participant. Even with only one cock, I can give you more pleasure than you've ever dreamed of." He yawned. "You have time to adjust to the idea. This body tires easily. It needs rest. I would be unable to perform up to my standards at the moment." He looked at her with an arrogant smile on his face. "You would still be amazed of course, but I would know. I do hope the night restores your equilibrium. Goodnight." His eyes closed, her bedside lamp flicked out and his breath assumed the rhythmic heaviness of slumber.

Lying stiffly beside him, too scared, too horrified to do more than take shallow breaths, Amy stared upward at the darkened ceiling. Gradually her brain began to function again. He'd said he would watch her, but the soft sounds he made assured her he slept. Perhaps he didn't understand what *sleep* meant.

She moved one arm tentatively. His chest continued to rise and fall without a change. She pushed herself up on one elbow. When he showed no reaction, she slipped slowly and silently out of the bed and tiptoed towards the kitchen. The knife she'd threatened to use on him lay right where she expected it to be.

Gripping the weapon firmly in her hand, step by stealthy step she made her way to the apartment door, holding her breath as her fingers closed around the knob and turned it. As before, the handle moved, but the door remained shut.

Fighting the sob of frustration rising in her throat, she turned and headed back to the bedroom. She had never hurt anyone in her life but she intended to go in there and plunge the knife into whatever part of him she could reach.

The hand holding the knife quivered as she raised it above her head ready for the downward plunge. It didn't matter, as long as she drove the knife deep enough to break this inexplicable hold he had on her and on her life.

She took a breath and rammed her fist through the air. A hard, masculine hand clamped around her wrist and held it. The overhead light switched itself on and a pair of dark eyes stared into hers. "I am always watching."

The breath she held rushed out in a sob. "You were asleep. Your breathing didn't change. You snored! You couldn't have been watching."

"This body slept. I tire, but can remain alert if I must. The sooner you accept your powerlessness, the better it will be for you." He rolled over, taking her with him, pushing her beneath him. His body stretched along hers, their naked skin touching from shoulder to knee.

His erection grew and hardened, the heat marking her, melting her. Her breasts, crushed beneath him, tightened and swelled, the nipples contracted and aching. His breath washed across her face, his voice low and gravelly. "You try to resist me, try to fight me but your body tells the truth. You want what I can give you. What strange,

prudish urge exists within you? Why deny yourself something you desire? Let me make love to you."

Amy lay still beneath him, cold horror creeping up her spine as she recognized the signs of her own arousal. How could she be turned on by someone—something...? "You're not human. Oh my god, you're not human." She clamped a hand over her mouth to still the rising nausea.

He rolled his eyes. "Do we have to go back to this?" He slid off her and rolled to lie on his side next to her. He faced her, his head propped up on his elbow, his dark brown eyes serious. "I am human." He gestured to his erect penis, curving red and engorged. He ran his free hand down his chest, pausing to flick his hard nipples. "I look human." He cupped his balls in his hand. "I feel human." A wicked glint appeared in his eye. "Want to see if I taste human? Can I see if you do?"

Amy recoiled and dragged the sheet up to cover herself, clutching it tightly to her chest. "If you were human you'd know we aren't cannibals."

He gave a shout of laughter. "I wasn't thinking of that kind of tasting. When I get my mouth on you, cannibalism will be the last thing on your mind."

Another flash of heat ignited, setting her cheeks on fire, making her squeeze her thighs together. Someone had studied male perfection before they chose his body. Attraction deepened despite her fear. She stared into his eyes, looking for some kind of clue, some answer to the enigma he presented. Dark flames of desire reflected back.

"Here and now, I am human," he said quietly. That's all you need to know."

"Here and now?" Amy repeated. "What were before? What about after? What are you then?"

His finger trailed down her cheek, stroking the sensitive skin between neck and shoulder. "Does it matter? Since the beginning of the universe every atom in your body has been something else, many times over. Trees, rocks, rain. You came from them, you will go back to them. Does that make you any less human now?"

His eyes, locked onto hers, compelled her understanding. She accepted the logic in what he said. Strange, frightening logic, but undeniable.

The soothing motions of his hands on her skin continued. His voice low and velvety, he murmured, "I do not want to hurt you. Trust me."

"How can I? I know you say you are human just like me, but..."

"I never claimed to be just like you. I said I was human and in form I am, but I have abilities, capabilities beyond anything you will ever have." His hand lifted and patted her head as if she were a favored pet. "It's all too complicated for you to understand. You go to sleep. You can be sure nothing will happen to you. I told you I would be watching. Now you know it's true."

He rolled onto his back and his breathing again assumed the rhythmic sounds of sleep that continued, uninterrupted and perfect until the sun began to lighten the sky. Amy knew because she lay quietly beside him. Her staring eyes grew gritty and hot

from the effort of holding them open. She held off blinking for as long as she could, torturing herself, terrified of what might happen in even that tiny moment of blindness.

As daylight strengthened she looked sideways at the creature lying beside her. He still looked human. No strange tentacles had appeared during the night, his skin had not turned into a warty, seething mass of wrinkles.

"I told you, I am a human. That's not going to change." He propped himself on his elbow and grinned down at her. In the clear light of day, he looked—the words inhumanly handsome hovered at the edge of her mind and sent another shudder rippling through her. Her skin roughened with goose bumps and she stared at him. "Can you read my mind?"

"Yes. Of course. Can't you do the same?"

"I couldn't even begin to guess what's going on in whatever you use for a mind."

He raised his eyebrows. "That's why it's been so hard to communicate with you. You're disabled. Is it a common affliction among humans?"

Amy pulled herself up, her back pressed hard against the headboard. "It's not an affliction. It's the way humans are. If you were truly human, you wouldn't be able to do it either."

He sat up, so his eyes were on a level with hers. He grabbed her discarded pillow, pushing it behind him, making himself comfortable. Amy, with hard wooden edges pressing into her back, found his relaxed posture, arms casually linked behind his head, insulting.

"How can you possibly know what's going on if you have to rely on what people say? You'd never get to the truth." His brows drew together. "That's one aspect of being human I won't adopt. I'm not giving up a basic survival skill."

Amy's eyes widened and she looked at him in horrified disgust. "You mean not only can't I get away from you physically, you're going to know every thought I have as well?"

One square shoulder lifted. "I *could* read them, but so far your thoughts have hardly been interesting enough to bother with. Fear, disgust, fear, desire, anger, desire, fear again. I wouldn't call that thinking, just primitive emotional response. Hardly worth developing cerebral matter, if that's all you're going to use it for. It's a shameful waste of the evolutionary process."

Outrage and insult heated Amy's face.

His dark eyes lifted to the ceiling. "See. Just emotion." He lowered his head again, his assessing gaze locked onto hers. "Don't you know how to think at all?"

Amy's mouth opened to roar at him, but she shut it again. He thought she couldn't control her emotions. She wouldn't prove him right.

"Good," he said. "Now show me you can use that heap of gray matter in your head and try to think logically."

Her eyes narrowed. "How am I supposed to think, knowing you're there, inside my head, spying on me?"

He raised a hand in a gesture of surrender. "If it makes you more likely to use some intellect instead of just reacting, I'll stay out. For now."

Amy took a deep breath and forced herself to remain calm, to suppress the emotions surging to the surface and to start applying logic to the most illogical situation she had ever found herself in. "I must be mad or hallucinating. Maybe stupid Scott slipped me some drugs."

"You're still letting emotion drive you," he replied. "Let go of the fear. If I intended to hurt you, I would have done so by now."

The thought swirled around in her head for a moment. Then she nodded slowly. "Okay. That makes sense. You haven't hurt me, even when I tried to..."

His gruff voice interrupted. "Stab me with a kitchen knife. I think that's proof my intentions towards you are not malevolent."

"But," she pointed an accusing finger at him. "You won't tell me why you're here or what you want."

"If you ever reach a point where I believe you might be able to process it, I'll tell you what I think you're capable of handling."

The dismissive flatness of his voice told Amy he didn't expect it would ever happen. Anger burned red at the corners of her vision and she felt the blood heating in her cheeks.

"You're not getting hysterical again, are you?" he groaned. "Anything but that."

Her lips moved as she counted silently to five. Ten would have been better but she couldn't manage it. "I am not hysterical." She took a breath and lowered her voice to something just below glass-shattering level. "I just want some answers to my questions."

He shifted on the pillows. "I *do not* like questions."

Her eyes narrowed into slits. "Tough, because I'm asking them anyway. You say you're an alien. Where do you come from?"

"Last night you didn't believe in aliens," he muttered. "Now you want me to tell you where I come from? A bit pointless, don't you think? If you didn't know aliens exist, you aren't likely to have heard of my galaxy, let alone my planet. Earth astronomy appears to be the equivalent of a goldfish getting excited when it discovers the perimeter of its bowl."

"Instead of sitting there insulting Earth again, why don't you just tell me where you're from? Look, alien man," she snarled at him when he looked askance at her, "I'm a computer programmer. I'm good and I'm very well educated. I've been involved in Carl Sagan's search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Come on. Try me. What's the matter? Afraid you might have to admit Earthlings are not as ignorant as you think?"

His mouth opened and strange, soundless vibration shook the air. She felt a brief ping of pain. When it faded, she tapped her fingers against her upper arm. "I'm waiting."

One brow lifted. "Waiting for what? I just told you the name of my planet." When she said nothing, he shrugged. "I'll tell you again."

The same vibration rippled through the air but this time the pain lasted a little longer and was a little sharper. He looked down his nose at her. "There, not only did I give you my planet's name, I told you the name of the star system it's in. Want the galaxy, too?"

The vibration began again. Amy cringed and yelped. "No. I don't think that's much help." She rubbed her forehead. "Look..." She stopped and stared at him. "I need to call you something, but now I'm afraid to ask you what your actual name is. I think I'll settle for Starman."

He wrinkled his nose. "No, it sounds stupid. If you want to call me after a star..." He glanced out the window and pointed. "That one will do. You Earth people call it Orion."

Nothing but clear blue appeared in the sky. "I can't see anything." Her forehead wrinkled. "I'll just call you—Ryan." She nodded. "Yeah. Ryan. Okay, Ryan, I want to know something else. Did you come here—to *my* apartment—in particular?"

He shook his head—a small, dismissive movement. "It wouldn't have mattered where I appeared."

She bit the sides of her cheek and silently counted to five again. She still didn't have the patience to get to ten. "Is it me, Amy Peters, you have to inflict yourself on, or would any poor Earth person do?"

"I don't know."

"What does *I don't know* mean?" she snapped.

"It means you either are the person I've come to find, or you are not. It means I don't know. My language qualifications are the most advanced there are. I cannot understand why you are having trouble comprehending." He sounded baffled.

"I am having trouble comprehending because you won't give me a straight answer," Amy said. "You're driving me crazy."

"Now you know why I don't answer questions," he replied. "It saves a lot of bother."

She growled in frustration, got out of bed and, dragging the sheet with her, headed to the bathroom. He followed right behind her. She spun back to him, "I'd like a little privacy."

"After I've made sure the room is safe." He stepped inside, pulled the shower curtain back, looked in all the cupboards and drawers. He picked up a box of condoms and read the instructions with his brows lifted. Amy wrapped the sheet tighter and whipped the box out of his hands. "Don't get any ideas."

With a flick of her wrist, she tossed them in the drawer, stepped back into her bedroom, grabbed some clothes and walked into the bathroom. Her hand against his chest, she shoved him out the door and locked it.

She stepped into the shower, turned the water on and stayed there until the hot water ran out. Normally she did some of her best, most creative thinking in the shower. If she hit a knotty problem in a sequence of computer code, the solution often surfaced under the warm, soothing flow.

Not this time though. This problem fell so far out of her normal experience she'd need a year's worth of showers to come up with an answer. Sighing, she toweled herself off and got dressed. She opened the door and stumbled backwards. A firm hand reached out and grabbed her, setting her upright.

"What are you doing standing in the doorway?"

"Making sure you are safe," he said as if it should have been obvious by now.

"I don't need you to protect me in my own apartment. I don't need you to protect me at all." She realized what she was looking at. "And for heaven's sake, put some clothes on."

When he bent over she had a clear view of a taut, high, curved ass that should have had *bite me* written all over it. She groaned. He spun around instantly, every muscle tensed, his eyes alert and wary. "Did something disturb you?" His nostrils flared briefly as if he were testing the air.

Embarrassment made her flinch. She didn't want him to suspect exactly what had made her groan. She searched for something to cover her gaffe. "I—ah—wondered whether you had anything you could wear. Whether you brought anything with you."

No sound emerged through her clamped lips, even though he once more presented her with a hard expanse of delicious looking flesh. When he turned back he held a soft bag in his hand. "I have all I need here."

Odd bumps and bulges distorted the bag's sides. From the corner of her eye she thought she saw one of them move, but when she looked closer the movement stilled. She stepped forward, trying to peer into the opening. "You might not know what's appropriate on Earth. Maybe if I take a look, I can help you decide."

The bag disappeared behind his back. "I can make those decisions myself. There's nothing you need to see in here."

Her brows drew together. "How can I tell if I don't know what you have?"

Amusement sparked in his eyes. "You're asking questions again. You may as well stop. It doesn't work and it upsets you."

"Sort of like teaching a pig to sing," she muttered.

He'd pulled the bag close to his chest and opened it, sticking his arm in up to the elbow. He paused with a pair of jeans pulled halfway out. Wide, baffled eyes looked at her. "Why would anyone want to teach a pig to sing? You Earth people do some very odd things."

Chapter Two

His jeans slid up, covering the rounded muscles of his tight ass. He swung around to face Amy, his dark eyes locked onto hers and a smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Then he winked. She refused to let him embarrass her into looking away. He didn't appear to have any concept of modesty, so why should she pretend she hadn't looked? For a moment she puzzled over why the sight of him putting clothes on should be so sexy when he'd paraded around naked from the moment he arrived. Then she decided she didn't care and just enjoyed the view. He buttoned the jeans and pulled a shirt over his head, letting it slide down to cover that beautiful chest. Amy suppressed a stab of disappointment.

Straightening his shoulders, he stepped forward. A gurgling rumble, coming from the vicinity of his middle, interrupted whatever he intended to say or do next. He looked down, eyes wide, eyebrows raised to his hairline and his mouth opened in a perfect O, which only amplified the sound of the next rumble.

He looked so bemused Amy burst out laughing. "It's your stomach. You haven't eaten for at least the last twelve hours." She rubbed her own stomach. "I'm starving too." She didn't see any reason for unnecessary suffering. He had so far kept his promise not to hurt her. If he intended to stick around for a while, they would both have to eat. She crooked a finger at him.

In the tiny kitchen, Amy opened the fridge and peered inside. She pulled out a bowl of strawberries, a carton of yogurt and some juice then put them down on the counter. As she grabbed bread from the pantry and put it in the toaster, she said, "With a cup of coffee, that ought to be enough to keep us going."

Ryan didn't move so she picked up a strawberry and handed it to him. He held it in his hand, palm up, fingers outstretched, elbow straight and stiff, staring at the fruit as if he expected it to attack him at any moment. After a long pause he cleared his throat and said, "What do I do with this? Is it currency to pay for the nutrient pack? Where is the slot to insert it?"

Amy raised a finger to his mouth. "Here. This is where you insert it. It's food. You eat it. Surely you know..."

His eyes shifted uneasily but his hand remained suspended in midair. Amy sighed and grabbed another strawberry for herself. She bit into it. Only when the taste filled her mouth did she realize how hungry she was.

"Mmm. Yum." The words emerged fuzzy and slurred, as she spoke with her mouth full, but she didn't care. She took the strawberry out of his hand and held it between her thumb and middle finger. She held it up to his mouth, running her index finger along the line of his clamped lips. "Come on, open wide."

After a moment's hesitation he slowly let them fall open. She slipped the food inside then whispered, "Chew." His mouth closed again, slowly. He chewed once, then twice. He shuddered dramatically, his eyelids drooped, his nostrils flared and his tongue flicked out to scoop up the stray drops of juice on his lower lip.

He opened his eyes and looked at her. "That was the most incredible—that is food? Give me more." He scooped up a handful of berries and shoved them into his mouth. The juice ran down his chin, but he ignored it. He groaned deep and low. "I want more." He reached for the plate of buttered toast Amy held in her hand. His breathing was short and choppy. His expression took on the fixed tautness of a man in the throes of sexual ecstasy.

His eyes looked cloudy and dazed. "I never suspected that nutrients could be used to provide such pleasure." He grabbed a strawberry that had rolled off the counter and spoke around the mouthful. "What else can I have?"

She'd turned to open the canister of coffee. The crash of a dish shattering on the floor spun her back around. Ryan stood there, his spine as straight as a broom handle, scraps of toast and shards of plate at his feet. His nostrils quivered. "What..." He cleared his throat to rid it of huskiness. "What is that smell?" He leaned forward, following his nose as it twitched and wrinkled. He reminded Amy of a rabbit—a very sexy rabbit. He groaned. "I have never smelled anything as wonderful as that."

Amy looked at the coffee canister in her hand, then back up at him. A tiny trail of drool started to form in the corner of his mouth. She lifted the tin and his head rose along with it. She waved her hand back and forth and like a spectator at a tennis match he followed it. She turned back to fill the coffeemaker. At the first sign of her withdrawal, Ryan's hand snapped out and clamped around her wrist. "I want that." Still holding her firmly he dug his other hand into the grounds. He scooped up a fistful and raised them to his mouth.

"No!" Amy slapped his hand away. "You don't eat them. You make a drink out of them."

"But they smell so good."

He looked so pathetic and cute Amy's fear receded further and further. She shooed him away to give her time and room to make the coffee.

She poured two cups and he watched her, brows together in concentration while she drank. Her first sip did everything a good cup of coffee should. It eased her tension, warmed her and made the world a better place. She felt her face muscles relax and her lips curl into a smile of satisfaction.

The sound of heavy breathing intruded on the moment. Ryan's pupils had expanded, making his dark eyes even darker. "I liked watching you. I found it exciting." He picked up his cup and held it to his nose. His facial muscles slackened and twin stripes of color burned on his cheeks. He sipped and his eyes rolled. He sagged back against the counter. "I have never experienced anything like this. On Earth, eating must be as important as sex."

"I hadn't looked at it from that perspective. We eat more often and more of us do without sex than without food, so I guess you're right." She grinned. "You think coffee and strawberries are good. Wait 'til you try chocolate." The grin faded. What was she thinking? He wouldn't be sticking around to try chocolate or anything else. She put her cup down with a thump. "I want you to go. You don't belong here. Go and find someone else to haunt or whatever it is you aliens do."

His head swung from side to side, in a strong negative gesture. "I can't do that. I have to watch you. I cannot leave until I have the information I came for."

Amy stamped her foot. "What information. What do you think I know? You don't even know for sure I'm the person you're searching for. Wouldn't it be better if you went out and looked at other people just to make certain?"

He put his cup down too, taking care to avoid splashing coffee over the sides as Amy had. "The evidence I have suggests you are the person I came to find. The only way to verify that is to watch you over the next few days. That is what I will do."

"Watch me do what?" Nothing in her ordinary apartment, in her ordinary life explained it. "What do I have, what do I know that makes me the person you came to find?"

"More questions? You won't like these answers any better." One shoulder lifted in a negligent shrug. "Until I find it, I won't know what makes you the person I have come to find. When I do find it, I'll know you are the right person."

Amy growled in frustration. "Is it my work at the lab? We're working on organic semiconductors. Are you involved in industrial espionage? Is that it?"

"I can't answer. For now I can only observe your normal routine. When I find what I seek, I will know."

"Having an alien in my apartment does not constitute part of my normal routine!" Did the man not get it?

"Ignore me." His voice remained flat and emotionless.

Frustration and anger ate at her control. "I have a better idea. Go away."

His eyes rolled. "Do we have to keep going over the same ground?"

Nothing seemed to penetrate his imperturbable calm. She flopped down on a kitchen chair. "What do you want me to do?"

"Whatever you would do if I were not here," he said with an air of finality.

Her laptop sat unopened on her desk. Most Sundays she worked on her own special project but she'd given herself this weekend off to relax, to recharge her batteries. A sexual adventure was to be part of that process—and look how well that worked out.

The laptop would have to stay closed. Her work involved complicated algorithms and equations. It demanded accuracy and concentration, none of which she had any chance of achieving with an alarmingly attractive, self-described spaceman in the house.

He'd demonstrated his ability to stop her going anywhere he didn't want her to go. If she here staring at him, she'd go mad in no time. She needed to do something to take her mind off his looming presence.

Cleaning.

The idea appealed to her. The apartment needed a good clean anyway and if the alien had any characteristics of human males, he'd find the fuss and disorder unsettling. If she swished and washed, bleached and disinfected enough she might manage to drive him off, right back to where he came from.

She scrubbed the kitchen and wiped and polished everything in the living room. Instead of showing discomfort, her unwanted guest watched her with interest, following her closely, occasionally peering closer and sniffing at the clean surfaces. When he got in her way, she shoved him roughly aside, but he showed no signs of annoyance. His calmness irritated her. She wanted to make him feel as uncomfortable as she was.

In the bathroom, she took out her anger and frustration out on the tiles, attacking them with bleach and a scourer.

"This is very hard work." He wiped a finger across her sweaty forehead. "Why don't you use gamma ray sterilization? I know you have it. I consulted my history books before I came. Do humans like to do unnecessary work?"

She snarled at him. "You don't answer my questions. I don't answer yours." She stomped into the bedroom and started picking up the mess on the floor. She pinched a torn condom wrapper between her thumb and forefinger and grunted in disgust. "What a waste of latex."

"If you are using work to counteract frustration, it is inefficient and unnecessary. You would be much more relaxed and happy if you had experienced sexual release last night." The low, sexy voice came from right behind her. His hot breath tickled her ear. She started to pull back, but his hands slid down her arms, taking the condom wrapper from her fingers and dropping it back on the floor. "Let me show you how much better I can make you feel. You will not have to do any work at all."

The hypnotic cadence of his voice sent flurries of little shivers down the hollow of her neck, skittering over her skin, tingling through her and turning her knees soft and weak. He bit her neck and her toes curled.

With one gentle nudge she toppled face forward onto the bed. The title of an old comedy science-fiction film flashed through her mind. *Earth Girls are Easy*. Who wouldn't be easy if all aliens looked like him, sounded like him and could wreak such devastation with one touch?

He dropped to his knees on the mattress, his thighs straddling hers, the bulge of his penis brushing her bottom, stretching out to nuzzle the nape of her neck. Her brain fried. While it sizzled he removed her clothing and his.

"You shouldn't do that. If you think I'm going to—to—to..." Her words stuttered to a halt as his hands stroked along her flank, from shoulder to hip.

His fingertips slid across her skin like warm oil, soothing, exciting and relaxing in one sweep. A wise woman would get off the bed, put some distance between herself and this dangerous, enchanting stranger. The little she knew about him should have made her run screaming from the room. Instead she melted into a compliant puddle, constrained by the spell he wove. Her eyelids grew heavy, her skin tingled and became more sensitive. The logic she had tried so hard to summon up tried to warn her this was wrong and foolish, but her body refused to listen. Languor stole through her muscles and allowed him to roll her onto her back, her legs relaxing, falling open, arms flopping uselessly by her side. His voice, deep, dark and velvety, muttered words she couldn't distinguish, didn't recognize. Words that stirred her blood and sent it, rich and heated, coursing through her body. His hands moved and cupped her mound.

He pressed the heel of his hand onto the soft flesh. His middle finger reached down and settled on her clit. He flicked it, then pressed down, rotating and rocking it in an elusive, maddening rhythm. Amy's hips arched into it, her breathing became ragged and she clamped her legs around his broad hand, holding it there and driving herself harder against it.

Without interrupting the rhythm, he slid his other hand beneath her to stroke over her butt, lingering along the crease. He circled her anus once then stopped on the band of skin between her ass and her pussy. He pressed inward, at the same time his other hand thrust onto her clit. Amy lifted off the bed as an orgasm rocked through her, taking her breath, stiffening her muscles, making the walls of her pussy clench and release over and over.

He held her there with the power of his fingers hard against her, not penetrating her, but the pressure echoed and increased her awareness of the waves of orgasm pulsing through her.

The ripples still skittered back and forth after he took his hand away. He sat back on his heels and studied her. He ran one finger over her heated cheek, turned her chin so he could look into her eyes. His were cool, slightly narrowed, assessing. She couldn't hold his gaze. She lowered her head, focusing on the barely detectable rise and fall of his chest. She felt like some hapless insect, spread out and sedated, displayed and studied. She struggled to sit up.

His hand splayed out on her stomach and held her down. "Not enough."

He moved down the bed, bending to her, wedging her thighs open with his shoulders. She twisted sideways, but his hand held her still. "You need more."

She winced at the dispassionate control in his voice. He manipulated her response so easily, but gave nothing of himself. Without emotion or affection, she felt used. She shoved her elbows behind her, ready to push herself up and away from him. The first touch of his mouth drove the thought from her head. His lips, hot and moist, kissed their way down to where he'd opened her. She dropped her head backward as electricity sizzled along her nerves, flowing into the tight, swollen knot of her clitoris.

His tongue probed, his teeth nibbled and scraped, his lips flexed and sucked. No human mouth should be able to perform just that set of actions at any one time. The thought flashed across Amy's mind, forming the word *alien* in large letters. She had to stop. He had to stop. "This is wrong."

Her words came out on a breathy squeak.

He lifted his head. "No it's not. I'm doing it right. You lie back and enjoy it. See how it's done properly." He regarded it as a task, Amy realized with the last threads of her rationality. He administered sexual pleasure with professional detachment, relaxing her, keeping her from rejecting him or asking too many questions.

No amateurish fumbling marred his effectiveness. With expert efficiency his fingers stroked and fired her up again, submerging her doubts in a flood of sensation.

His head moved harder and faster, his tongue lashed across her and his fingers thrust inside. Amy went into orbit. She gasped for air, weightless, formless and lost to the rational world. She was a knot of nerve endings, all stimulated at once. With one more hard thrust of his tongue he sent her crashing in a fiery ball. Her vision blurred and she saw nothing but the flash of starbursts as she fell into darkness.

An annoying prodding in her side pulled her back to the world. She blinked, trying to clear the fog of sleep from her brain. She'd had the strangest nightmare—if you could call a dream with such hot, erotic detail a nightmare. She twitched as something connected with her ribs again. She reached down to push it away. Her hand closed over a solid rod of flesh. Her heavy eyes blinked open. She had an index finger held in her clenched fist. Her heart pounded out a tattoo in her chest. She followed the finger down to a strong wrist, up a muscled arm and further until she once again, gazed into a pair of dark brown eyes. He smiled at her. "I did an excellent job of relaxing you. You have slept well. I told you I could do a lot better than the fool you had here before."

Everything came crashing back and she dropped his finger as if it burned her, remembering quite clearly where it had been last time she noticed it. She scrambled up against the head of the bed, sheet clutched tightly around her and winced as he poked her in the side again, this time with his elbow. "It is time to get up. You need to go to work."

"Work?" She looked around her. With the blinds drawn the light in the room gave no hint as to the time of day. "It's Sunday."

"It *was* Sunday. You were exhausted. You did not sleep on Saturday night. Your body needed rest and you have slept as long as you needed." His lips curved smugly. "I ensured that. Now it is Monday and you have work to attend."

"You're going to let me go to work?"

He sat back against the pillows, arms linked behind his head. "You have to go about your normal business, including going to work. I will accompany you, assess the people who work with you. The information I need may be there. I won't know until I

investigate. You will be safe. I will be beside you at all times. Do what you usually do and ignore my presence."

As if she had any chance of doing that. She tossed her head, flicking her sleep-tousled hair out of her eyes. "You really aren't from round here, are you? I'm not some über-celebrity with a round-the-clock body guard. If I turn up at work—or anywhere else—with an unexplained man by my side, people are going to start asking a lot of difficult questions. And you know you hate questions." His lips straightened to a flat line and his chin jutted out stubbornly. She shook her head. "I don't care how determined you are, saying you don't intend to answer any of them isn't going to cut it either."

His forehead wrinkled in bafflement. "Cut what?" The lines straightened out again. "Your quaint vernacular escapes me at times, but no matter." The flattened lips curved again. "Tell them I'm your lover and I'm so good you can't bear to be parted from me."

"I'm not telling them that," Amy gasped.

"Don't tell them anything at all," he replied. "Now, get up."

Amy blinked and looked at him dazedly. "What?"

"Get up. You have to go to work."

"I don't want to go to work." She folded her arms and glared at him.

He ran his hand through his hair. "You are supposed to follow your normal routine. I can't find what I need if you don't." He slumped back against the head of the bed. "What do you want to do?"

Her bottom lip dropped into a pout. "I don't know."

"We could try making love again," he suggested. "You enjoyed that."

Her mouth dropped open. "I—we— If you think I..."

"Has your brain malfunctioned?" he asked. "Why is it so hard to have a logical conversation with you?"

The fog in her head cleared and her tongue untangled. "Last night, having sex was a mistake. A definite mistake. I don't know how it happened."

"If you don't know that, then humans must be even worse lovers than I thought." His hand stroked his cock. "I knew having only one penis couldn't be good."

In the midst of her confusion, one fact stood out. She pointed a finger at him. "You didn't even use your cock. You didn't do anything at all."

"Didn't do anything?" His voice rose in astonishment. "I was the one who did it all. You just had to lie back and enjoy it—which, by the way, you did quite well for a beginner. Your response might have been a bit of an overreaction considering I barely scraped the surface..." He broke off and looked enquiringly at her when she made a choked little sound then waved her hand in a dismissive gesture. He went on, "But we've established that you hadn't experienced a really good lover. It won't take you long to get used to it. If humans are any good at adapting."

Outraged at the comment, considering what she'd had to adjust to in the last twenty-four hours or so, Amy snapped, "We certainly are adaptable. Humans adapt to every environment on the planet."

"You say that like it means something. Earth is one of the most hospitable planets in the universe. You only have to go from the equator to the poles, throw in a storm or a bit of drought now and then and you think you are models of stoic endurance. Most races pin their sense of achievement and worth on great inventions or cultural abilities." He stretched his arms up over his head. Amy told herself not to watch the play of muscles in his chest and arms. He tossed aside the sheet and swung his legs over the opposite side of the bed. "I suppose if the ability to adjust your behavior to encompass the new is all you've got, we'll have to go with it, no matter how paltry it is." He gave her a smug grin. "Let's see this adaptability in action. Get up and go to work."

"You have to stay here," she ordered "You can't come with me."

"I can and I will," he replied. "Now get dressed. You don't want to be late."

"We'll see adaptability," Amy muttered under her breath. She walked to the bathroom on shaky legs and slammed and locked the door. The warm rush of water in the shower calmed her and gave her time to think. He wanted to come with her? Fine. Once they were out of the house, she could get help. Even if he somehow stopped her the way he had prevented her calling the cops, it wouldn't matter. Once they got to her building, the security guards would intercept him and as soon as she was away from his influence she'd call the police and tell them everything.

Everything except the sex, everything except the way she'd spent two nights lying naked by his side. Even under the running water she felt her face heat. She couldn't explain the shattering orgasm—okay, the two shattering orgasms—she'd experienced at his hands and mouth. She squared her shoulders and turned off the water. Who'd know if she omitted twenty-four hours from her account? It was only in court you had to swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. When reporting a crime, it wasn't necessary to go into every irrelevant detail.

* * * * *

Amy stepped into the air-conditioned building where she worked and stabbed the button for the elevator in irritation. The alien—Ryan—had walked beside her every step of the journey, standing close, invading her personal space. In the elevator, she scanned her security pass and pressed the number seventeen. His eyes followed her fingers studying the square of plastic as she pinned the pass to her chest. He nodded just as the door to the lift slid apart to reveal the two security guards stationed in the foyer. Amy strode past them, resisting the temptation to turn back and watch them do what they were employed to do. Development of better, faster, more versatile organic-based computer chips meant big money, big reputations and scientific kudos. That kind of stake meant the best security against industrial espionage money could buy. Human security guards backed up and supported electronic surveillance.

Amy heard the official sounding "Excuse me, sir" and grinned to herself. So much for staying with her every moment. Hard to do that from a prison cell. If he had any alien powers at all he could figure out how to escape and head on back to where he came from. The only thing she'd feel would be relief.

She was halfway down the corridor when the voice of the senior guard called her back. She stopped and turned, eyes narrowed as she noticed all three men had moved away from the elevator towards her.

"Dr. Peters, since Dr. Mandeville is here to liaise with you, surely it would be better if he accompanied you right from the start? We don't need to keep him here."

Amy's mouth opened, then shut, then opened again. Before she'd managed to form a coherent thought, let alone string a sentence together, the sneaky, conniving creep had reached her side, a wide grin spread all over his face. He turned back to the guards. "I'm sure Dr. Peters had her mind on something else. Of course she'll escort me around the facility and make sure I have everything I need." His dark eyes stared into hers. "That was our arrangement."

The guards returned to their posts with a brief salute. "Dr. Peters. Dr. Mandeville."

Amy could have asked a thousand questions. She focused on just one. "Dr. Mandeville? Doctor Mandeville?"

Ryan lifted one shoulder. "I have to have a name. It sounded good enough and the title Doctor seemed appropriate."

"I don't care what you call yourself," she replied. "You can't stay here. I don't know what you did to those guards, but sooner or later they are going to realize they were tricked and they'll come after you."

"No they won't." he said, sounding certain.

"Someone will start asking questions," she insisted. "It won't take my colleagues long to work out you are not a doctor and you know nothing about the work we're doing here."

His lips twisted in a cynical grin. "I know more about organic semiconductors than you would ever believe. They are crucial to my presence here. And no, before you bother to ask, I am not going to explain. It's on a need-to-know basis and not only don't you need to know, I meant it when I said I knew more than you would believe. Explanation would be a waste of time and breath."

"Bastard," she muttered as she stomped off in the direction of her lab, the so-called Dr. Mandeville striding elegantly along by her side.

Seeing none of her colleagues in the outer lab and office, she headed for the production room.

Amy pushed the swinging doors open and entered the air and dust lock. She grabbed a set of sterile overalls. Ryan followed her lead with the confidence borne of familiarity. "Who are you?" she whispered. "What do you want?"

"Nothing that will harm you, I promise."

Above their white masks, the eyes of her three colleagues lifted to inspect the newcomer as they stepped into the main work area. With a sense of inevitability she gestured to the man at her side. "I'd like to introduce you to, uh, Dr. Mandeville from..." She stopped and looked at him.

"The Indeterminate Research Group." Amy waited for the sounds of derision. Instead they nodded and the team leader, Ray Smallwood, emerged from behind a workbench and held out a gloved hand. "Happy to have you with us, Dr. Mandeville. I'm a keen follower of your work."

Amy's eyes widened. "What? You can't have been—he hasn't..."

Ryan's muscled arms folded across his chest. "Hasn't what, Dr. Peters?"

"Isn't..." The words she wanted to say refused to come out of her mouth. "Isn't well known in this country."

The team leader made a tsking sound. "Really Amy. I thought you kept up with your reading better than that. Dr. Mandeville has published frequently in the field of—field of..." He trailed off and confusion flashed momentarily in his eyes. He gave his head a little shake. "It is an honor to have this opportunity to work with you, Doctor."

Amy's alien smiled engagingly. "No need to stand on formality. Call me Ryan. The work you do here is of utmost importance and I have come a long way to observe and assist. I look forward to our collaboration."

Smallwood preened. "If there is anything you need, you have only to ask."

Amy grabbed Ryan's hand and towed him over to her work station. "How do you do that?" Her words were an angry whisper. "How do make everyone do and say what you want?"

"It's a gift, but it only goes so far. I can manipulate inanimate objects as much as I want..."

Amy grimaced. "Yeah, I noticed that last night. My phone. My door."

Ryan waited for her to sit. "I can't force *people* to do things. If I could, I could do what I have to do and be out of here in ten minutes."

"What about the guards?" she asked. "What about the way Ray Smallwood said he'd read your research, claims to be a *fan of your work*?"

"I didn't tell them what to do," he replied. "I just implanted new memories in their minds. The guards believed they'd already checked my security pass, Smallwood remembered reading my work, thought he expected me to arrive today. Simple files, with no indication they were only uploaded a microsecond before they were retrieved."

She stamped her foot. "You knew you could do that. All that nonsense about me telling them you were my lover and couldn't bear to be parted from you was just..."

"A way to keep you diverted. And it wasn't nonsense. I'm stuck here for the duration of this assignment. No reason why you can't have some fun while I wait."

"Wait for what?" She ran her fingers through her hair. "I know. You don't answer questions and you don't explain. Can't you see how frustrating that is?"

"Frustration is not going to be a problem." He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. She tried to dig in her heels but he towed her along behind him. "We have a meeting to go to," he called in answer to Smallwood's inquiring glance.

"Oh, right." Ray sounded vague and he turned again to study the screen of his electron microscope. "I knew that."

In the vestibule airlock, Ryan ripped off their coveralls and, taking hold of her hand again, marched them along the corridor until he came to a door marked utilities, flung it open and dragged her inside. The room was little more than a storage room for cleaning supplies.

Ryan grabbed Amy's shoulders, spun her around and slammed her up against the wall. She raised her clenched fist, ready to fight back, but it fell open by her side when he reached up underneath her skirt and stripped away her panties. He held them up between them. "Warm, wet. Just as they should be." Then he tossed them aside and sent his fingers diving and delving into her, making her warmer and wetter and robbing her legs of strength.

The sound of a zipper drew her eyes downward in time to see him reach in with his free hand, push his pants down and pull his erection out into plain view.

Any blood left in Amy's head shot straight down, making her swell and tighten, causing a rush of heated liquid, lubricating and making her ready for him. He flexed his hips and drove into her, pinning her against the wall, lifting her slightly so she rested on the base of his cock, the angle forcing her forward so gravity made her own weight become a stimulating force. He rocked and a wave of pressure made her squirm and groan.

Slowly, slowly he withdrew then tantalized her with the head of his cock just playing at her entrance, teasing, promising, creating an aching void that longed to be filled.

Amy tried to arch her hips, but he held her up, her toes barely touching the floor, too high to gain the purchase she needed.

"More. Please, more," she whimpered.

He slid a scant inch inside her. "More what? More of this?"

He held steady until she panted, "Yes. Yes. More." Her voice broke on a little exhalation of need. As her breath fanned across his face, a ripple shuddered through his muscles.

His buttocks tightened under the hands Amy had unconsciously slid into his pants, filling her palms with his hot, smooth skin. Her hands grabbed convulsively and she reefed him in. A fierce growl escaped her lips. "Now, damn it."

His lips parted. "Whatever you want." Hips flexed, he set up a hard, driving rhythm, pounding her against the wall, bouncing her clit against the base of his cock, driving her harder and harder to a physical peak.

As if she were climbing a mountain, she gasped for breath, her sight grew misty and her legs turned weak and useless. Then suddenly, she crested the peak and tumbled down the other side, out of control, crashing down to reality.

Ryan stood, his body supporting hers, the feel of his cock still hard and hot inside her. His breathing was even, barely even strained, his face unflushed and his gaze on her steady and assessing. He lowered her feet to the floor, pulled out of her with impersonal efficiency and said. "Frustration is not going to be a problem."

"You didn't— Aren't you going to..."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "I'm not the one who complained. I am on assignment. I can't get involved and risk missing something."

"Missing something?" She clenched her fist. "Miss this." Her swing was interrupted mid-blow by a hard hand clamping around her wrist. "Let me go. How dare you do that and then tell me you were not involved."

She clasped her other hand over her mouth, appalled to hear the words descend into a sob.

Ryan grabbed that hand too, pulled it away. His arm went around her shoulders. "You needed what just happened. Sex relaxes you. Helps you cope." He rested his head on her hair. "I want to have sex with you properly. I would like to come while I'm in your body, let myself enjoy it. But not here. Not now. I am here to watch over you and I can't do that if I am distracted. I can wait."

Her eyes brimmed with tears she refused to let spill over and she looked up at him. He stepped back and, after tidying his clothes, helped her pull herself together, finding her panties, holding them while she stepped into them, propping her up when she wobbled. When she'd remedied her disarray as much as she could in the confined space, Ryan pulled the door open a fraction and looked out into the corridor. Before he led her out into the empty corridor, he bent down and kissed her forehead. Strange how that simple touch of his lips felt more intimate than the fierce bout of sex that had gone before.

Chapter Three

They returned to the lab, Amy quiet and subdued as she donned her dust suit. Ryan resettled her at her desk, then appropriated her computer keyboard. "What are you doing?" Ryan looked at her resignedly. "You won't tell me, I know. Just don't change anything. I have multiple backups of everything but I don't want to have to use them."

"I won't do anything irresponsible."

Amy wanted to tell him not to do anything at all, but he was already scrolling through her files and folders. He seemed able to read them and although she didn't think he would understand it, at least it kept him occupied and quiet. She tuned into her own work, letting the complexity of the task push away disturbing thoughts of the man next to her and her natural, human need to know something, anything, about him other than that he could read and program minds and drive her to the point of sexual frenzy while remaining completely calm himself.

By mutual consent, they skipped lunch. Amy was still too churned up to be hungry and Ryan didn't seem interested in food at all. If he were human, he would have to eat eventually.

By midafternoon, however, he grew restless. He pushed his chair back from the computer and looked around him. After a moment he stood up and began to prowls around the confines of the lab, looking over people's shoulders, opening and closing desk drawers and most peculiarly of all, Amy could have sworn he sniffed her coworkers. She tensed, waiting for the outraged protests or the disgusted recoil, but nobody seemed to notice what he did. She took a second look—nobody seemed to notice him at all.

He circled back to Amy's workstation and grabbed her hand. Amy stiffened. "Oh no. We're not doing that again. No way."

He waved a dismissive hand. "I know that. I want you come over here. Tell me what's wrong with these people. They all smell like machines—petrochemicals, metals, plastics, acids. No one smells organic."

"I am not going around, poking *my* nose into other people's business." She whispered. "I work with these people every day and they all smell perfectly normal to me—except maybe Ray."

He leaned into her and drew a waft of air in through his nose. "You smell like an organism." He breathed even deeper then grinned. "An organism who has recently had satisfying sex. I don't detect a petrochemical smell on you—although your clothing has a definite plastic taint."

Amy's brow cleared. "I've got it. What you smell is deodorant, soap, body lotions, hair products, perfumes. They have a petrochemical base. You can't smell them on me because I have allergies. I use plant-based moisturizer and unperfumed products."

His nose wrinkled and his lips straightened into a thin line. "Why wasn't I told humans use substances to make them smell like machines?" He sighed, the sound equal parts disgust and annoyance. "They tell you their research covers everything then one little unknown fact throws it all into disarray." He paced back and forth in front of her desk. "You can't always detect machines by appearance alone. I'm going to have to find another way to tell, but it isn't going to be easy. There's the obvious way, of course, but I haven't got time to ask everyone we meet to have sex."

"What are you talking about?" Bewilderment and frustration lifted her pitch.

Ryan looked at her pityingly. "When someone is having sex, you *can* tell whether it's a machine or a human, just by looking." He grinned. "Machines have sex..." He paused a beat, then delivered the punch line. "Machines have sex mechanically."

"Oh, you aliens are just so funny." Her hands clenched on her hips. "So how could you tell Scott was human? I'd have described his performance as pretty mechanical."

Ryan's grin faded. "The jerk grinding and pounding on you was self-absorbed, lacking in skill and stamina, therefore definitely human. Machines function perfectly adequately." He spun on his heel and began to pace. "If I can't detect the difference by smell and I can't make them have sex, how am I supposed to tell if they are humans or machines or something else?"

A horrible suspicion formed in Amy's mind. "Something else?" She spun around, casting a worried glance behind her back. She bent down and looked under the desk. She pulled her feet up off the floor. "What kind of something else?"

He caught her arms, stopping her from her frantic swatting of her coveralls. "Calm down. Right now there's nothing here but us humans."

"*Us* humans?" She tried to control her breathing. A panic attack would only confirm his low opinion of her. "*Us*? You're *not* one of *us*, no matter how many times you try to tell me otherwise." A solid mass in her chest restricted her breathing and made her feel sick. "You're an alien."

He gave her a little shake. "Come on. In. Out. It's supposed to be an autonomic reaction. What kind of survival skills do you people have if every time you're confronted with something a bit unusual you stop breathing?"

Her breath let go on a rush of air, then gasped in the next lungful with a whoop. "A bit unusual?" She took three more controlled breaths. "Nothing has been in any way *usual* since you popped into my bedroom. You chased Scott away—"

"You should be thankful—"

Ignoring his interruption, she said. "You held me captive in my apartment then you—then you—oh my god, I had sex with an alien."

"And that has only just sunk in?" he asked. "What did you think you were having sex with? A ghost? A demon? A figment of your imagination? At least I am in human form. Now if it had been tentacle sex, you would have something to screech about."

Amy cast a worried look around. No one was paying them the least attention. She supposed she ought to be grateful for that, but right now she wasn't in the mood to be grateful for anything. Except maybe for the fact that she hadn't had tentacle sex. Whatever it was, it sounded icky.

Ryan's grin got wider. "Don't be shape prejudiced. It's an infinite universe with infinite life forms."

"Stop reading my mind! And speaking of life forms," her face screwed up in distaste. "What is yours like, when you're not pretending to be human?" She shuddered. "Please tell me you don't have tentacles."

"You wouldn't understand if I told you. The closest I can get is to call it shape shifting," he explained. "I have a central energy core that doesn't change, but I can take any bodily form I want."

"Any form?" she asked.

"Any form, any gender, any size, any age."

Her eyes narrowed. "Prove it. Become something else."

"Not now," he replied "Once I choose a form, I'm stuck with it for a while. Besides, I can implant memories to make everyone in the lab think they recognize whatever form I take, but it's extra work and I'm not going to wear myself out just to keep you satisfied."

Her eyebrows lifted. He cleared his throat. "Sex is different. I don't mind that. Good sex is an art."

"Good sex usually requires the involvement of *both* participants." She swung her chair around and returned to her work. "I have work to do. In five days time I have to present my research at a conference in Vanuatu."

"Ah!" The exclamation made her spin back to face Ryan. He stared at her, an unreadable expression on his face.

When he said nothing more, she scowled. "I don't have time to waste trying to figure you out. I may not be able to get rid of you but since you're determined to watch, you can watch me ignoring you."

The sense of satisfaction would have been greater if she believed she had offended him, but he simply immersed himself again in the study of her computer files. His eyes narrowed, his brow furrowed and he didn't speak another word as he followed links that took him deeper and deeper into her research.

She concentrated on her own work and they worked for the next few hours in silence.

At half past five, she had to grab his shoulder and shake him to get his attention. "Much as I want to get rid of you, I don't think leaving you here overnight is a good idea. Who knows what we'd come back to in the morning."

He turned unfocused eyes on her. After a moment he blinked and gestured to the screen. "There is a lot of background information and reports of the teams' work, but there is nothing about *your* research. *The Role of Organic Semiconductors in the Development of Computer Chips*. That's the title of the paper you present at the conference."

She gasped. "How do you know that? I keep it all on encrypted files on my laptop."

"You had to submit the title to the conference," he reminded her. "They accepted you and the program has been drawn up. It's on record, Amy."

She looked around, relieved to see the rest of the staff had already packed up and gone home. "I don't want Smallwood to know about this." Although the lab had emptied, she lowered her voice. "Ray isn't a bad man, but he can be very set in his views. I devised a process that could lead to self-replicating computer chips. When I suggested it to Ray, he ridiculed my ideas, said I'd been reading too many sci-fi novels."

Ryan leaned forward. "So what did you do?"

"I carried on with the research anyway. Mostly in my own time, lunch hours, most nights." She sighed. "The little interlude you saw with Scott was my reward to myself for months of solid work."

"That wasn't a reward. I was there. I saw it."

Amy's face heated. "I know you were there. And any chance I ever had of enjoying myself disappeared once you started a running commentary on the performance."

"We both know I've more than made it up to you," he boasted. "If you have any doubts about that, I can prove it to you again."

Her hands flew up as if to ward him off. "No. I've wasted enough time. One night was all I allowed myself. Now I'm behind. The report has to be perfect before I release my findings. I need to go over everything and make sure there are no holes, nothing I've forgotten. If Ray thinks my premise is laughable, there will be others who are equally ready to criticize. My methodology and my conclusions have to be impeccable."

They walked out the door and headed for the street. "Let me look them over for you, check out your calculations." His words were abrupt, an order more than a request.

"No thanks. My work is confidential. Until I make that presentation, I don't want anyone seeing it. No one is going to steal my ideas, not even some strange creature from outer space. God, I can't believe I'm saying that seriously." She smiled as she strode beside him on the crowded sidewalk. "And you wanted to know if humans were adaptable."

The light on the pedestrian crossing turned green and Amy picked up her pace. The evening heat beat down on her shoulders and the sooner she got to the train station and

home, the happier she'd be. She didn't have to tell Ryan to hurry. As always, he matched her step for step.

The light flashed red as Amy stepped off the curb. Across the intersection, a car revved and took off with a squeal of tires, eager to get going. Suddenly she pitched forward, hands outstretched in front of her, flying through the air like an uncoordinated superman into the path of the oncoming car.

For a surreal moment she felt disembodied, looking down on the incident playing out like a slow-motion scene from a horror movie. Then realization hit and terror swamped her. She screamed, her lips opening around the gush of air but the ominous roar of the oncoming engine drowned out the sound. Her life didn't flash before her; she only saw the dimples of the tar covered road rushing up to meet her. She would have closed her eyes but fear held them wide open.

Instead of the expected impact, she whooshed upward as if she had wings. A hand twisted in the back of her shirt pulled her backwards, her feet trailing behind. One sandal fell off just as Ryan's other arm clamped around her waist. Amy watched in fascinated horror as the oncoming car hit her shoe and sent it hurtling into the air.

Real time came crashing back and the sound of her screams mixed with those of the onlookers, the blare of a car horn and the solid thud of two bodies hitting the pavement. Every muscle in her body went limp with shock.

Reaction set in and she trembled uncontrollably. Bystanders bent over them. "Are you all right? Oh my god, I thought you'd die for sure. You just went flying. Are you hurt?"

When she shook her head and tried to stand, arms reached down to help her to her feet. She put her hands behind her to push up and only then realized she sat on something softer and more yielding than concrete. Ryan stirred beneath her and she leapt up.

The same people turned to Ryan. "I don't know how you got to her in time. You're a hero. So quick."

Ryan ignored them and concentrated on Amy. He turned her around, inspected her carefully and when he found no injuries, spoke to the onlookers still making comments and inquiries. "We're fine. No damage done." He directed his words to the group at large. He studied each one intently then lifted his head and looked beyond them, peering down the street with narrowed eyes and tightened lips.

He took Amy's hand, assured everyone once more they were unhurt and marched Amy across the intersection under the safety of the green light.

Hurrying along at his side, Amy said, "Thank you for saving me. I don't know how I came to fall."

The grim expression on Ryan's face made him look dangerous. "I do. Someone tripped you."

"I tripped over somebody?" Her brow furrowed. "I should have looked where I was going instead of at the lights."

"Someone *deliberately* put a foot out and tripped you," Ryan said through clenched teeth. "I saw it."

Amy's heart pounded in her chest, hard painful beats. "Why would anyone do that?" She spun back to look at the intersection and the people crossing it. "Who?"

"I don't know. I was too busy saving you," he said. "All I saw was a man's shoe. I didn't notice any details. It could have been anyone in the crowd."

Amy stopped so suddenly the flow of commuters walking behind them had to step swiftly to the side to avoid bumping into her. "It must have been an accident. No one would want to do that to me."

Hard eyes glared at her. "Someone *did* do it to you."

"You expected it," Amy said thoughtfully. "Maybe not that exactly, but you expected something to happen to me." Ryan pulled her back into motion, but she kept her gaze on him. "That's why you're watching me. *You're here to protect me.*" She beamed up at him. "Maybe you're not an alien. Maybe you're my guardian angel."

The disgusted grunt he made didn't sound at all angelic. Amy didn't care. She felt safe with Ryan by her side. Who'd have thought she'd feel better because she had an alien to watch over her?

They caught the train home. It was crowded and hot, the air-conditioning broken down yet again. Ryan's eyes roamed over the carriage and his nostrils twitched. Amy watched him, waiting for his finely cut lips to curl in distaste. Even in a city like Sydney, where it was a cultural imperative to wear fresh clothing every day and to make liberal use of deodorants, the heat broke down chemical barriers and allowed the ripe, musky smell of human bodies to waft through the air.

Instead of the reaction she expected, Ryan inhaled deeply, his shoulders dropped and he leaned back against the seat. A small smile played about his lips and his eyes closed lazily. His facial muscles smoothed out. His spine curved into a relaxed arch.

He stayed that way until they reached their stop. As they pushed out of the turnstiles and up the stairs onto the crowded streets his head lifted, swiveling from side to side. The acrid diesel fumes of a passing bus caused his muscles to tense and his spine to snap straight. His eyes followed the plume of black oily smoke as the bus lumbered down the street until he and Amy turned the corner into the quiet, tree-lined back street where she lived.

Ryan hustled her up the steps. His feet shuffled restlessly while she searched for the keys to her apartment and he shoved her inside the moment the door was opened. He slammed it shut again, locking the doors and turning both dead locks.

He followed Amy into the tiny kitchen. She opened the fridge and peered inside, then pulled out a bunch of grapes, some cheese and a bottle of wine and put them down on the counter. As she grabbed a packet of crackers from the pantry she said, "There, that ought to keep us going until we can manage to cook something."

Ryan didn't move, so she cut a slice of cheese, put it on a cracker and handed it to him.

A look of bliss settled once more on his features and he muttered, "None of the archives prepared me for this. The records weren't kept as well as we thought. Perhaps it's not surprising it took us so long to track you down."

"Track me down!" Amy pounced on his words. "You *did* come here specifically to find me? Why? What do you want?"

Her questions dragged him back from the brink of ecstasy. Twin streaks of color flushed his cheeks. "I wasn't supposed to say that. The taste of your food made me forget my training. Pretend I didn't say anything. Wipe it from your memory."

"No." She held up a hand. "And don't you try to plant one of those false memories in me either," she said. "Wait. Why didn't you do that in the first place? All you had to do was to plant the idea that you were my boyfriend and I'd have accepted that, just like Ray Smallwood and the security guards."

"I can't tell you." He reached toward the plate again.

"Uh uh," she said stepping backwards. "No more food until you answer me."

His face twisted into an expression of pained longing. "But I want it, Amy."

"And I want an answer," she insisted.

His stomach rumbled and his eyes grew anxious. "All right. I will tell you this. I can't implant memories in *you* in case they interfere with your thought processes. I can't risk doing anything that will change those." His dark eyes looked at her, honest and unwavering. "But I can't tell you any more than that. Not now. If that means I cannot eat, so be it."

Amy held out the plate. He wasn't lying. She wasn't sure how she knew—maybe she too had developed some ability to read minds—but she knew with absolute certainty that he would indeed refuse to eat rather than tell her any more.

He smiled and took another slice of cheese but stopped with it halfway to his mouth. "I have nutrient packs if I need them. I came equipped to do my job." He shoved the food into his mouth. "But this is better."

She pushed him back into the tiny living room. "Tomorrow I'll teach you how to prepare some for yourself, but for now, go in there while I get a meal on."

He went tamely, pausing only to grab the remains of the cheese platter to take with him.

When she emerged from the kitchen, Ryan was nowhere to be seen. In a small flat, there weren't many places a six-foot-four man could be hiding. She looked in the bedroom—empty. The door to the bathroom was open and it occurred to her that a human body had physical functions that needed attending to. Ryan didn't seem to have any concept of privacy. She waited a few minutes, long enough for him to have done anything that she didn't want to see. She detected no movement, no sound of flushing or running water.

Curiosity finally forced her to take the few steps to the threshold of the bathroom. It appeared empty. Then she saw a shadow cast on the shower curtain. She moved closer,

reached out a hand and drew it aside. Ryan stood in the shower enclosure, still wearing all his clothes, hands by his side and the water turned off.

"What are you doing?"

"I am waiting for your cleaning facility to operate. At first I thought it might be faulty but it has just occurred to me that since you live alone, you might have it programmed to respond only to your DNA."

Amy rubbed her hand across her forehead. "It's like having to explain it all to a child." She pulled him out. "Look." She leaned over and turned on the taps. "This turns the water on. And you have to take your clothes off first."

His eyes lit up and his hands went to the buttons of his shirt. Amy reached out and stilled them. "After dinner."

She shut off the water again and led him back into the kitchen. Ryan stopped in the doorway, his muscles tight, his nostrils quivering. The tip of his tongue emerged to run over his lips. "That smell is divine. What is it?"

Her cheeks heated. Ryan's ecstatic response to food might have made her go a little bit overboard. She had prepared a meal of grilled Atlantic salmon and garlic mashed potatoes drizzled with some of her carefully hoarded truffle oil, followed by not one but three desserts. She hadn't meant to be so extravagant, but the strawberries were particularly succulent this summer, caramelized white peaches and ice cream was one of her favorite dishes and her friends raved about her chocolate mousse recipe.

The move to the table happened so quickly Amy wondered if he'd teleported there. Their first full meal together began, interrupted only by Ryan's frequent moans of delight and his attempts to steal any tempting bit of food off Amy's plate.

Nothing remained, except for a smear around the mousse bowl where his finger had swiped up the last drop of chocolate. He licked his lips and cupped his hands around the container. With mind reading skills of her own, Amy reached out and took it from him. "Oh, no. You are not allowed to lick out the bowl."

Ryan's bottom lip poked out, but he sighed and stood up. "Then I will shower now."

Spots of food dotted his shirt, his chin and hands looked sticky. "Take your time. There's plenty of hot water. Don't forget. Clothes off, taps on."

Ryan looked down his shapely nose at her. "You already told me that. I am not a computer running to an unalterable program. Like you, I am adaptable."

As soon as he disappeared into the bathroom Amy cleaned up the mess on the table, pulled out her laptop and settled into a session of work on her research paper.

She had to check and check again. Her findings *were* radical, on the edge of scientific theory. She understood why Smallwood was skeptical and she needed to make sure she'd thoroughly covered every aspect. She was putting her reputation on the line and she wouldn't give doubters the weapon they needed to destroy it.

Deep in her editing, her brow furrowed as she focused intently on the complex diagrams, equations and notes on the screen in front of her. Like a rough edge on a tooth her tongue couldn't keep away from, her eyes returned again and again to schematic diagrams, equations and page after page of complex code. Something flickered at the back of her brain. Perhaps because she had been away from it for two nights, perhaps because her experience with Ryan had changed her perspective, she saw the equations in a new way. Something there did not fit the pattern, something required investigation.

Her fingers flew over the keyboard, searching backwards, following the faint trail, trying to pin the thought down.

"Got it." Her attention homed in on one set of commands. The algorithm looked wrong. Her fingers dropped to the keyboard to zoom in on the sequence when the skin of her neck tingled. She snapped upright and the back of her head bumped into Ryan's chest. He stood behind her, peering intently at the screen, his body still slightly steamy and damp, wearing nothing but a towel wrapped around his narrow hips.

His arms came down on either side of her and he leaned forward. When she turned her head to speak, her lips brushed his cheek. His forearms tensed but he didn't shift his gaze from the screen. Amy reached out blindly and pressed the shut down button. Ryan's breath let go in a soft hiss.

His warm skin carried the scent of her soap with an underlying base of something deep and rich, unique to him. His arm brushed against her breast, making her nipples furl into tight little knots. The blood began to beat in her veins, a pounding, insistent rhythm, drumming away her awareness of her work, the conference and the fleeting thread she'd found.

Her breath caught and she licked her bottom lip. His heat wrapped around her, cocooning her and she wriggled, trying to get closer to its source.

He turned his head to see what she was doing just as she turned to him. This time her lips did not brush against his cheek. They met his mouth; soft, shapely, open.

Like molten metal, they fused together. Their tongues met and tangled. Amy's hands ran across his naked shoulders, smoothed over the sleek, bunched muscles and down his sides until they were thwarted by the rough texture of his towel. With an impatient tug, she pulled it away, baring him so her hands could explore further.

For a moment he stood still and a muffled sound of protest pushed past his lips. She swallowed it and slid off the seat, turning and tumbling with him onto the sofa, grabbing his hips and pulling him in closer still.

His heartbeat, fast and strong, his breath rasped as he drew in air. His cock was hard, a little bead of moisture winking at the tip. She ran her thumb over it, spreading it, feeling him shudder as she did.

He ripped off her clothing, throwing it down onto the floor. She grew damp and steamy. One leg draped over the edge of the sofa, toes just reaching the floor, the other lodged in the groove between the cushions and the back rest. She waited for him to

touch her again, to slide his mouth down her slick, smooth flesh, to use his knowing, clever fingers.

Instead, he raised himself up and plunged, driving his cock deep inside—without foreplay, without teasing. By his third stroke, she moaned and tensed.

Her body pulsed with her orgasm, but Ryan kept up the same powerful rhythm. She opened her eyes to see his face, pale and taut, lips drawn back in a grimace, his eyelids heavy, the pupils expanded, his eyes dark, like the depths of the night sky. His breath rushed out of his chest in short, choppy puffs.

The pounding, relentless rhythm of his cock sent her spiraling into orgasm again, her body arching. Above her, Ryan stiffened and his hips stuttered convulsively and he came.

Chapter Four

Before she had fully caught her breath, Ryan pulled back, rolled to his feet and moved to the window. He pulled the blind aside and peered out, then walked to the door, twisting the knob, tugging on it, testing the lock, prowling around the apartment, bending to check behind furniture, opening and shutting cupboards.

He came back and sat on the chair Amy had vacated, his back to the computer screen. His shoulders slumped and his clasped hands dropped between his knees. "That should never have happened," he said, looking at the floor, not at her.

Amy scrambled to sit up. Although his back was to her, she pulled a blanket to cover her nakedness. After a moment he spoke again. "I apologize."

Amy pulled the cover tighter. "For what? Finally getting involved? For not making me feel that I've been given some kind of mercy fuck? You don't need to apologize for that."

"For getting involved enough to lose concentration on everything else," he shouted. "I'm here to watch over you, not indulge myself. Anything could have happened."

"Nothing did. You were here, with me." Her hand reached out to soothe him. "Whatever your duty is, you didn't abandon it."

"But I did. For those few moments I wasn't on duty. It must not happen again." He bent and picked up her clothes, threw them to her. "Get dressed. We need to go back to your computer. Show me what you were working on."

Yawning and stretching, she mumbled, "I'm tired. I want to go to sleep."

He stalked into the bedroom, pulled on a pair of jeans and came back, pulling her to her feet. "You have to go back to the computer. Back to what you found."

Grumbling beneath her breath and ignoring her clothes, she moved toward the bathroom.

He headed her off. "After. Right now you have to finish what you started."

She wanted to push him aside but decided if he was in this mood he'd probably stop the shower from working anyway. She grabbed her robe and let him drag her back into the living room.

He shoved her down in front of the computer. With a click of the mouse the screen saver gave way to a page of text and diagrams. She stared at it for a minute or two. Her fingers started tapping lightly against the scratch pad and she shuffled her feet.

"Well?" His tone was sharp. "Show me what you found. Show me where the problem is."

She stopped tapping to look up at his forbidding face. "What problem?"

"The flaw in the system. The programming error in the organic components," he explained impatiently. "The one you've discovered and written a patch for."

"But I haven't written a patch," she protested.

He shook her. "You have. You located the piece of the programming pattern that was responsible. You located it, saw what it meant and rewrote the code."

"No I didn't. I'd just noticed something wrong with the programming sequences, but I hadn't identified the problem, let alone fixed it."

He groaned and ran his hands through his hair. "That's the page you were working on. Look at it again. Find it and fix it."

She stared at the screen until her eyes grew blurry. "I can't. All the code is exactly the way it's meant to be. It all looks fine."

"No!" He shouted. "You saw the problem. I know you did. Look again."

She looked and looked again. She went back several pages and started all over. Hours slipped past. Her eyes grew red and gritty. Yawns stretched her jaw every few minutes but the break in the pattern she'd seen, the piece of code that stood out as odd, had disappeared, melted back into its place, no longer seeming different, no longer ringing alarm bells. She rubbed her eyes and slumped forward. "It's gone. Maybe whatever I saw wasn't there in the first place. Maybe I just imagined it."

"It was there. It *is* there. You have to find it again," he ordered.

She stood up, and snapped at him, "If it means so much to you, you find it. I'm going to bed." She couldn't meet his eyes when she said bed, but it didn't matter. He wasn't looking at her anyway.

His eyes remained fixed on the screen. "I don't know this programming code. I can learn it, but you are already an expert." He frowned. "We don't have time. You were supposed to discover this and fix it before the conference. I have screwed up—literally."

Through gritted teeth Amy said, "I don't know what you're talking about. What am I supposed to have found?"

He looked at her, his expression grave. "You might want to sit down. The programming error you found affects more things than you could imagine."

Amy's head snapped up and all traces of drowsiness left her. "But you aren't going to tell me what, are you?"

His gaze grew distant and somber. "I cannot." He held up his hand to prevent her from speaking. "You have accepted that I come from a different planet, a different galaxy. Now you have to accept that I have experienced things that have not yet happened for you, in this time."

"How can you...?" she asked.

He held out his hands, palm up. "You *know* about the time-space continuum."

"Yes." Doubt and confusion colored her voice. "I don't see how that matters. Time travel isn't possible."

"It is. I'm proof of it. All you have to know is how to fold the fabric of space." His lips twisted. "Computers are very good at that kind of calculation. Ironical really."

There were a million questions she could ask but her mind could not get past the big one. "You came across time and space to *me*? Why?"

"Your research team is one of many working on the development of organic materials to etch circuits for computer chips," he reminded her.

She nodded. "Yes."

"You are working on a private project. One you haven't shared with your team leader or with your coworkers."

Gazing down at her hands, she said, "Ray is a good team leader in lots of ways. He enthuses people, encourages their ideas, but—he thinks my idea is crazy. Besides, I developed this theory on my own and I want the credit."

"You're ambitious. I understand that. You have remarkable programming abilities. You have a master's degree in organic chemistry and a doctorate in molecular biology. You are an exceptionally bright individual."

"Does this mean my idea works?" she asked, and enthusiasm lightened her voice. "It is possible to write a self-reproducing computer chip using organic materials?"

"In only a few years from now your process will revolutionize production, making the chips smaller, lighter, far more powerful and incredibly cheap to produce," he confirmed. "Computers' capacity, speed and quality will increase exponentially."

She glowed with pride. "Then we can relax. I've done all the work already; my paper covers it. It's written and ready to go. I was just checking over it."

He got up and paced back and forth between the window and her desk. "No. There is one flaw in the program. One tiny omission in a long line of code. One condition statement with an inbuilt flaw. You discovered it, put in an addendum to your paper. It's a vital change. No one else ever picked it up."

Her nose wrinkled as she thought it through, then her shoulders dropped. "The mistake must be buried deeply if I haven't picked it up in all my checking. I don't want to rush this and maybe make another error. It might be better if I present my paper at the conference, then come back afterward and work on finding the problem. I'll mention in my presentation that there are some modifications still to be made."

She looked up at him and smiled. He didn't smile back. His ashen face made her breath falter. A hard lump lodged in her throat and she swallowed. "It will be okay. I'll have time. This is all in the future for me. It will be years before these things are in production. There's no hurry."

He raised his hand and stoked her cheek, his fingers lingering on her skin. Then he recoiled as if he had been stung. "Go to bed, Amy."

Although she moved toward the bedroom she turned at the doorway to look back. "You won't come too?"

His face stayed grim, the harsh lines making him look older, forbidding. "There will be time for me to sleep – after. If I can locate the anomaly, there might still be time to fix it."

"Ryan," she whispered, "we have plenty of time."

His mouth flattened into a thin bitter line. "No, Amy. We don't."

Amy lay alone in her bed, her thoughts in turmoil. Her life, which had consisted of long periods of dry scientific research, punctuated by the occasional almost-anonymous sexual encounter, had not prepared her for this. An alien in her life! An alien who came from the future to announce that her discoveries had changed the universe. An alien who drove her to peaks of sexual ecstasy she had never known existed.

Her brain wasn't functioning at anywhere near its maximum capacity. There were too many things she was missing, too many pieces of information he hadn't given her. She needed to make a list, to compile a set of queries and demands. She started to sort them out in her mind, numbering and ordering.

She meant to do it, meant to run over everything she knew, but her body betrayed her and she sank towards sleep, curled up on her side, hand tucked under the side of her face, knees bent. She didn't speak when Ryan walked into the bedroom, barely heard his whispered words as he stood looking down at her. "I'm sorry, Amy. So sorry."

She woke in the morning curled into a warm body. Her eyes blinked open and she stared into Ryan's sleepy eyes. Her mouth curved upward. "Good morning."

His face looked sleepy and sexy, his hair tousled and tumbled over his brow. Blood stirred in her veins, her mind grew blurry with desire, urging her to forget work, to spend the morning in bed exploring the possibilities of sex with Ryan. She leaned over him, set her lips to his and woke him with a kiss. With his eyes still shut, he slid his arms around her and snuggled her into him. His impressive morning erection prodded her in the side. "Someone is interested in waking up and playing."

"Hmmn." His rough and gravelly voice, sexy without effort, made her squirm in delight as it vibrated through her. One thigh hooked over his and his erection slid into her like a homing missile, her slick fluids easing the way, her folds gripping him like a fist.

A rumbling purr sounded in his chest and she hooked her leg tighter, holding him where she wanted him. He sank deeper into her, burying himself to the hilt.

Her fingernails raked lightly along his back and his eyes snapped open. His mouth twisted, hardening the slumberous softness of his face. "I can't do this. I have to watch over you."

Holding him tight with her arms and legs, she whispered, "I don't know what you think you're watching for and I don't care. I want this, you want this. We're safe here. *You're* the only one who has ever appeared into my bedroom from out of nowhere."

His head jerked back, out of range of her questing lips. "The only one so far. I did it. Do you think no one else can?"

Their bodies remained joined, but her mind suddenly disengaged. "Are you saying there are more of you? That there might be another watcher?" She thought it over a moment. "Fine. Let them watch. I don't care. I want you and if someone pops into my bedroom unannounced, they can't complain if they see more than they bargained for."

Her back arched, pushing him deeper, then she pulled away just to enjoy the feeling of him penetrating her again. His breath hitched and he whispered, "The firewall should hold for a while." His words didn't make much sense to her, but passion fogged her brain so she couldn't tell if it was because what he said was irrational or that she was too far gone to think.

Sensation flooded her body—the hard, driving rhythm of Ryan's frenzied thrusts, the wet sounds of flesh on flesh.

Hot puffs of air hit her face, his lungs heaved and worked like a runner's. With each panting breath she caught the whispered chant, "Come on, come on, come on."

Such contagious desperation sent her over the edge and she shuddered into release. As if her spasms gave him permission to follow, he pumped once more and spilled into her.

His cock had barely softened when he pulled out of her and rolled onto his back, hand across his forehead, his eyes alert and wary.

"Was that sex or a race to the finish line?" she panted.

Ryan swung his feet to the floor and stood up. He pulled her to her feet and walked with her to the bathroom. "You'll be late for work if we don't hurry."

"What about the fault in the program?" she asked. "Don't you want me to work on that?"

He kept on walking. "I let my anxiety run away with me. As long as your life is conducted normally, sometime over the next three days, you find and correct the problem. My job is to make sure nothing interferes with that." He opened the door. "I *will* do what I was sent here to do."

Pulling Amy in with him, he turned on the shower. With impersonal efficiency he washed himself, ignoring the warm flow of water, the slippery, fragrant soap and the proximity of a wet, naked woman. Amy watched his brisk movements, sighed and concentrated on getting clean.

They scurried into work slightly late, slightly breathless, but no one noticed. The lab was full of strangers. Ray Smallwood, stood in the middle of the group looking harried. "Amy, did you know we were expecting a visiting consulting group this morning?"

Beside her, Ryan tensed. His nostrils quivered and he cursed quietly. "Why must you people use all these chemicals?"

Ray ran his hands through his thinning hair and whispered to Amy. "They have all the paperwork. A letter of introduction and an itinerary. They say the director arranged it, but he's not in yet. He never bothered to let us know about it. This is *not* convenient."

He turned from Amy to the group then back again, his head swinging from side to side like a mechanical toy. Cheeks flushed with color, he looked flustered and uncertain. "Amy, can you take charge of them? Your current project is the closest to completion and," he stopped and looked down at his shoes. "You're a lot better socially than most of us. Computer nerds, you know?"

Before Amy could consider the idea, Ryan stepped in front of her. "Get someone else to do it."

She tried to shove him aside but he stood with his feet planted squarely, his arms folded across his chest, apparently immovable. Amy leaned to one side to peer around him. "I don't mind."

Ryan barely spared her a glance, his attention remain focused on Ray. Amy grabbed one of his crossed arms and squeezed until he looked at her. "I'm happy to take the group around. Don't you dare plant a memory in Ray's mind that says he doesn't want me to do it. You might think it doesn't matter, but you can't guarantee someone won't figure out something strange is going on."

"You're right," he agreed. "If I implant any memories and someone picks that up..." He looked at the group who stood, looking uncomfortably out of place, in the middle of the room.

"I don't need your permission, you know." Amy moved over to the delegates, a welcoming smile on her face. Ryan moved with her, keeping pace as if he had been welded to her side. In the middle of the introductions, Amy realized she couldn't explain Ryan's presence. In the end she settled for just his name, adding no further information.

The mixed group of men and women, most of them young professorial types, took an interest in the research being undertaken. All except for one man. Tall, almost as good looking as Ryan, but as fair as Ryan was dark, Dr. Mark Juan Bjorge spent more time looking at Amy than reading through the notes or studying the programs. His clear, almost colorless blue eyes locked with hers every time she looked at him.

At eleven o'clock Amy announced it was time for morning tea. She ushered them all out of the lab and into the foyer, standing back while the group, sweeping Ryan along with them, squeezed into the elevator. Dr. Bjorge, waiting beside her, laid a hand on Amy's arm. "Perhaps we should wait for the next one."

The doors slid closed and Amy's last sight was of Ryan, his lips curled in a snarl, pushing delegates aside in a vain attempt to get to the front. As the elevator left, Dr. Bjorge turned and smiled at her. "How nice to have a little time to get to know a pretty woman. Tell me, what do you do with your time when you're not at work?"

The obvious pick-up line made her wince. "Nothing very glamorous, I'm afraid. I spend most of my time working on research projects of my own."

Dr. Bjorge placed one hand beside Amy's head, leaning forward over her. "Fascinating," he murmured. "Do tell me about it."

The scent of the man's cologne thickened the air. He must have doused himself in it and he stood far too close. Amy couldn't breathe. She wondered how offensive it would be if she simply ducked under his arm and left. The sound of a door opening in the wall behind her gave her a perfect excuse to straighten and pull away.

She spun around. Ryan stood in the open entrance to the stairwell, hand resting on his side, breath coming in gasps. He took a step forward, planting himself between Amy and the other man.

Dr. Bjorge's lips twisted into a cynical smirk. "Did you forget something? It must have been important if you couldn't wait for the elevator to return. How many floors have you just run up?"

Ryan fixed him with a hard stare. "Ten."

"My. How very – manly of you," Bjorge sneered. "But then that is your name isn't it? Mandeville, I believe Dr. Peters said?"

Ryan said nothing just continued to regard him steadily.

The moment stretched, charged with the heavy weight of testosterone-induced rivalry. Threat, fueled by male possessiveness, played out below the surface.

Ryan had no reason to be jealous. Amy didn't find Mark Bjorge attractive. With the classically handsome features of a blond Adonis, he should have looked angelic, but he unsettled Amy. Every time she looked at him some primitive part of her brain recoiled in horror. She couldn't explain it, but she couldn't deny it either.

The light flashed, doors slid open arrived and they stepped inside, Bjorge rolling his eyes when it became obvious that Ryan's only purpose in his flight upstairs had been to accompany them down again.

Relief that she didn't have to be alone with the offensive Dr. Bjorge made Amy forgive Ryan's embarrassing behavior and she beamed up at him. Ryan, too intent on watching Bjorge's every move to spare much time to look at Amy, returned her smile briefly and clasped her hand.

Bjorge's gaze settled on the link and his lips pursed. "I don't think I quite grasp your purpose in this establishment, *Doctor Mandeville*." He said doctor with the same intonation he might have said the word *asshole*. "What exactly do you do?"

"I am Dr. Peter's assistant. I do whatever she wants me to do," Ryan replied briefly.

"How convenient." Bjorge said. "Does she want you to do any unusual things? And can you do them well enough to satisfy her?"

The atmosphere in the elevator turned hot and dense, as if the air conditioning had failed. The sexual suggestiveness of Bjorge's comments was unmistakable. It made Amy uncomfortable, but Ryan bristled, leaning forward until he was face to face with Bjorge, pushing the confrontation. "I can do, will do, anything Doctor Peters needs me to do. Anything she wants." He raised a finger and poked the man's chest. "No one and nothing will stop me."

Bjorge smiled, a tight little curl more threatening than the fiercest grimace. "I have no need to stop *you*."

The elevator glided to a halt and the doors opened. Bjorge strode out to join his colleagues. Amy steadied herself with a hand on Ryan's arm, stood on tiptoe and whispered in his ear. "What was that all about?"

Before he could answer, the group crowded around her, asking questions about the rest of the itinerary, where they planned to have lunch and what they should have for morning tea. Ryan only had time to mutter, "Later," any chance of conversation lost in the throng.

For the rest of the day, Bjorge stayed on the edges of the group, keeping a distance from Amy, although she felt his eyes following her. Ryan's tall, dark figure stayed possessively close.

Only at the end of the day, when Amy checked that the group had transportation back to their hotel, did Mark Bjorge speak to her again. "You must allow the group to buy you dinner tonight to say thank you for your time and attention today, Dr. Peters." He glanced at Ryan. "Naturally the invitation includes your bodyguard as well."

"I'm sorry," Amy said with an attempt at regret she hoped sounded more sincere than it felt. "I have a paper to deliver at an upcoming conference and I have more work to do on it. Unfortunately, I'll have to decline, Dr. Bjorge."

"I am very disappointed, Dr. Peters," he said gravely. "I believe you are making an error of judgment. I shall contact you in an hour or two. Perhaps you'll reconsider."

"I won't." She forced herself to sound polite. "Thank you for the invitation. I am sure a fellow scientist will understand the necessity of intense periods of work."

"I understand – more than you do, my dear, that life is brief and pleasures fleeting," he said, shaking his head. "One should never put off pleasure for another day. Who knows how many more days we have?"

Amy laughed. "I know exactly how many days I have until I have to present this paper and at the moment it feels like nowhere near enough. Pleasure will have to wait."

"I'm sure Mandeville will be very sorry to hear that. If you change your mind, I will be waiting." He bobbed his head in a brief salute. "Goodnight."

He walked off and a shiver stole down Amy's spine. "I don't like that man."

Ryan watched Bjorge's departing back. "He's not a man."

Chapter Five

Eyes went wide, Amy asked, "You mean he's an alien? Like you?"

"He's nothing like me," Ryan snapped. "I don't trust him. He may be a machine, but I can't tell for sure. My sense of smell is useless here."

Her jaw dropped as her mouth opened even wider. "Do you try to smell everyone?" Surreptitiously lowering her head, she sniffed and cast him a doubtful look. "How do I smell to you?"

A lazy and sexy smile curved his lips. "You smell good. Just like a person should." His mouth flattened again. "But everyone else has a chemical smell. It's like being surrounded by machinery. I could tell for sure what Bjorge is if I watched him having sex." He clenched his fists. "But since the person he would want to have sex with is you, that's not going to happen."

The seriousness of his expression urged her to try to tease him out of his dark mood. "He is very good looking."

A muscle in Ryan's jaw flexed and twin red lines flushed across his cheeks. "No. You cannot be alone with him. It's dangerous."

Amy's hand stroked soothingly down across his shoulder and down his arm and she confided, "I wouldn't sleep with him even if he asked me. He gives me the creeps." She flashed Ryan a grin. "And besides, I bet he's even worse in bed than Scott. He has that same selfish look about him."

Ryan swallowed and squared his shoulders. "You have to stay away from Bjorge, but if you wanted—needed another partner, I wouldn't stand in your way."

"You wouldn't?" A tiny ache burrowed into her chest. They had only known each other a little over forty-eight hours. She didn't want him to be jealous, did she? It shouldn't matter that he didn't mind sharing. But it did. The thought of sharing him with anyone else bothered her and it hurt that he should feel differently. The ache turned into a yawning cavern. She was falling for an alien. Of all the stupid, pointless, bound-for-disaster things she could do with her life, that would have to be the worst. How could they have a future here when he came from another time, another galaxy, another species?

If her feelings were beginning to be involved, she had to immerse herself in her work until she got over it. Her work was the reason he was here. The sex was just a useful relaxation method, a way to keep her body loose and her mind sharp. She could cope with that. She picked up her gear. "Let's just go home."

"You'll work on the program again, right?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure." She sighed. "I know you want me to find that error again before I go to the conference. I'll do my best. Anything to keep you happy." But when she looked at him again, in spite of her promise he looked grim, his expression somber.

During the walk to the station, Amy tried to initiate a conversation but Ryan did little more than grunt and Amy gave up. The crowds on the train meant they had to stand. Ryan stood at her back, one arm wrapped around her waist, holding her close, his head up, nostrils twitching, the tension in his muscles communicating itself to her, combining with the heat to make her nervous and sweaty.

At the local Chinese takeaway, Amy ordered food for dinner. While they waited, Ryan studied the constantly rising and falling arm of a gold-colored plastic cat sitting next to the cash register. Ryan's head moved up and down in time with the waving hand. He reached one long finger out to prod it, but Amy wrapped her hand around his wrist and pulled it back to his side. "It's just a toy. It doesn't do anything else. Leave it alone."

By the time they arrived at her apartment, she was irritated and edgy. She spread the food out on the table and ate quickly, paying little attention to tastes and textures, too preoccupied with the problems besetting her. Even Ryan's enjoyment of the meal, still strong enough to make him shudder in delight, failed to distract her. She shoved her half-full plate aside, cleared a space for the computer and ran through pages and pages of algorithms.

When he'd finished every scrap of food in the cartons, running his long index finger around the edges and licking off the last of the sticky sauce, Ryan sat beside her, eyes fixed firmly on the screen, occasionally frowning and muttering as he tried to follow what to him must be as ancient and as obscure as hieroglyphics.

He stood up and paced about the room. "Isn't there some way to hurry this up?"

Amy glanced at him. "I don't know how they do it where you come from, but here and now, every part of a program is dependent on all the instructions and code that came before it. Every line of program and all its possible consequences and conditions, has to be plotted out. Nothing can be assumed, nothing taken for granted, nothing left to chance. If there is even one possible set of unforeseen parameters, the program will fail or go into an infinite loop. The results could be catastrophic, at least in computing terms."

As she spoke her body tensed. Ryan took one long step back to her side. "What? You've thought of something?"

Her forehead creased and her eyes screwed shut with the effort of recall. "I think that's what I saw. Somewhere in all of this," she gestured at the computer, "there's a condition that has an error, that doesn't cover all the bases. Last night, it was there, just at the corner of my awareness, but before the idea could coalesce I—we—got distracted." She clutched at her hair. "I can't remember. Can't pin it down."

On his knees beside her, Ryan asked, "But you have an idea of what you're looking for. It has to make the search easier. What kind of code would you use? Show me and we can both look."

The sound of the doorbell interrupted them. Ryan gripped her shoulder. "Ignore it. Whoever it is will go away. We can't afford to let you lose the memory again."

She pushed his hand aside. "I know what I'm looking for now. I'll find it. Besides, I told you, it doesn't matter if I don't find it before the conference. Even if these chips are going to change the world, they won't go into production for years yet in my time and it's all in the past in yours. We have plenty of time." She took a pace toward the door. "I can't just ignore the outside world. I have to see who's there."

"You don't need to know, Amy, believe me, you don't." Ryan's voice cracked on the last words, but Amy already peered through the peephole. She made a disappointed little moan, but opened the door anyway. "Dr. Bjorge. How did you find out where I live?"

The man standing on her threshold gave her an oily smile. "I have to confess I persuaded Dr. Smallwood to furnish me with your address. I have come to lure you out to eat with me." He pushed one foot across the threshold. "Please, call me Mark."

"Dr. Bjorge—Mark—I told you back at the lab, I have important work to do," she said firmly. "I don't have time for social outings right now."

Ryan moved to stand behind her. "Go back to wherever you came from. We don't want you here."

Mark Bjorge scowled at Ryan. "Your assistant even accompanies you home. How convenient for both of you. Tell me, Dr. Mandeville, what exactly are your duties, again? I do hope they provide you with adequate compensation for such long hours." He looked at the remains of their meal and the two pairs of shoes kicked off and lying on the carpet. "And such personal involvement."

Ryan's back stiffened. "Dr. Peters doesn't want to go to dinner with you," he snarled. "I suggest you return to your hotel and fly out in the morning."

Mark Bjorge took two steps further into the room. "Not very friendly, *Doctor* Mandeville. Perhaps you aren't familiar with the correct social behaviors?" he asked with brows raised. "I believe it would be considered polite to ask me to sit and to offer me some refreshment."

A flush heated Amy's cheeks. Ryan believed that Bjorge was an enemy, but he had no proof. Bjorge might be pushy and obnoxious but that didn't make him an alien. If Ryan was wrong, she owed some hospitality to this guest of her employer, the leader of the visiting scientists. Better to err on the side of caution. "I was just about to ask you if you'd like to come in for a drink, Dr. Bjorge," she offered. "A glass of wine, juice, anything at all?"

Bjorge ignored Ryan's disgusted grunt. "Whatever you have would be fine, thank you." If he was offended or aware that he had forced the invitation on her he gave no sign of it. Amy scurried into the kitchen. When she returned, carrying a tray with a

bottle of wine, three glasses and a platter of cheese and crackers, Ryan stood exactly where she had left him, his arms crossed aggressively over his chest, mouth firmly shut, glaring with fixed intensity at Mark Bjorge.

Who ignored him.

Bjorge seated himself on the sofa, leaning back, legs crossed at the knee, one foot swinging slightly. His eyes scanned the room, but with apparently no more than idle curiosity, his glance flicking from object to object, lingering on nothing. When Amy entered he stood and took the tray from her, waiting for her to indicate where to put it. Ryan's scowl deepened at the brush of Bjorge's hands on Amy's.

When Bjorge took the glass of wine Amy offered him, Ryan's focus narrowed. He watched as Bjorge lifted the wine to his mouth. When his lips closed over the rim of the glass, Ryan stiffened. Bjorge swallowed, leaned back and put the glass down on the floor beside his chair, his face impassive. Ryan's breath let go in an audible sigh. Bjorge looked up, his brows raised in query. "Yes, Dr. Mandeville?"

"I wondered what you thought of the wine." Ryan said in an emotionless voice.

"Quite pleasant. Not," he smiled at Amy as if to remove the sting from his words, "one of the world's great wines, but perfectly adequate for an impromptu social occasion between friends."

"Try the cheese." Ryan's tone made it an order.

Bjorge shrugged. "If you insist." He reached out, placed a slice of cheese on a cracker and put it in his mouth. He chewed and swallowed. His eyes met Ryan's. "Satisfied, Dr. Mandeville? Or do you wish me to continue? Perhaps you have some interest in spoiling my dinner?"

Amy's swiveled her head, looking from one to another, trying to understand the byplay. Bjorge put his wineglass, still three-quarters full, on the table. Amy tried to think of something to say, but her mind remained blank. The silence stretched, becoming awkward, yet the longer it went on, the harder it became to break. Amy waited for the small restless movements that would indicate Bjorge's imminent departure, but he remained completely still. Even his swinging foot stopped.

Finally she cleared her throat. "If there's nothing else, Dr. Bjorge? I really have to get on with my work."

"Would you allow me to look at it?" he asked. "I'd be honored to be permitted to read some of your material."

"No." The denial erupted simultaneously from two quite different throats. Amy tempered her refusal with a hasty explanation. "I promised the conference organizers an exclusive..."

"No one else is going to see the work," Ryan said emphatically.

"No one else?" Bjorge asked. "I assume you have seen it, Dr. Mandeville?" He turned an assessing glance on Amy. "If you fear I will somehow compromise your work, I assure you I am not a plagiarist. Even if I were, you have already published the

title and synopsis of your presentation. I would hardly be able to assimilate your work and appropriate your ideas before you present your paper. I merely ask as one colleague to another. A token of respect and interest."

"I appreciate your interest, Doctor—Mark, but I am afraid I cannot oblige you. I am still in the process of final checking and editing and until I am completely satisfied that nothing is left undone, I am not prepared to share my work with anyone." Seeing Bjorge's glance at Ryan, she continued, "Except, of course, my assistant. Now, I really must get back to my work. I won't see you again so I'll wish you good night and a safe journey home." She walked to the door and held it open. Bjorge had little choice but to walk through it. Ryan glared after him so fiercely that Amy had no doubt he was prepared to throw him out if he didn't go voluntarily.

Once he was gone, Amy started to shake. With one swift step, Ryan was by her side, his arms around her. She buried her head in the hollow of his shoulder. Ryan's arms tightened.

"I don't like him," she said into Ryan's shirt. Although her voice was muffled, he seemed to understand.

"You should never have invited him inside," he replied.

Amy raised her head and met his eyes. "You watched him pretty closely. Do you think he is—whatever it is you think he is?"

Ryan bit his lip. "I couldn't tell. He ate the cheese, drank the wine without showing any reaction. That could be because he is just an ordinary human being who really didn't find them anything special." He flinched as she poked him in the ribs. "Hey! I said he didn't, not I didn't. If he'd been like me there's no way he could have hidden his response. But if he is what I am afraid he is then it could have been his very first taste and he didn't react because machines don't take pleasure from things like that."

Snuggled in close again, Amy asked, "Does it matter? He didn't get to see my research and he didn't get close enough to the computer to do any damage. He'll be gone tomorrow and if he comes back here tonight, there's no way I'll let him in." She stopped and her breath hitched. "Unless he does what you did and just materializes wherever he wants to."

"No. Machines can't do that. He would need a connection point, one that would have to be specially set up to allow him to transport in and out. They can't be put just anywhere. Once he's here, he is as subject to the laws of physics as you know them as anyone else. He can only be transferred back to where he comes from via a set portal point."

"Oh. Sort of 'beam me up, Scotty'," she said with a giggle.

"What? Beam you up where?" he asked.

With a pitying look she replied, "Haven't heard of *Star Trek*, huh? You'll never make a genuine computer geek."

He felt so warm, so solid and the thought of going back to stare at a lifeless computer screen didn't appeal. She'd devoted so much of her time to her research. The

one time when she'd tried to break out, she'd ended up with a loser like Scott. Now she had Ryan, sexy, wonderful, alien Ryan, nothing like anyone she'd ever met. She knew he wouldn't stick around, had a suspicion he wouldn't stay any longer than it took her to find the glitch in the program.

So why on earth was she trying to speed that process up?

Her hands, curled in loose fists against Ryan's chest, unfurled. She splayed them out, fingertips rubbing lightly across his nipples. Through the cotton of his shirt she felt them harden. Under her palm his chest rose and fell with the accelerated beat of his heart.

He reached up and grabbed her wrist. "Amy. Don't. You have to get back to the program and I have to watch over you. I can't afford to be distracted again."

"Sure you can." The words emerged, low and husky. "The apartment is locked, the building is secured for the evening. No one will disturb us now." Her hand slid up under his shirt, sliding over the smooth skin, following the groove bisecting the flat planes of his abdomen down to his belt. Ryan's hand, still clasped around her wrist, went with it.

"I shouldn't do this." His breath fanned her cheek, heating it, sending a flurry of delicious shivers down her spine.

"You're not doing it," she whispered. "I am."

She stood on tiptoe, nipping his earlobe, lifting one hand to tunnel her fingers through his hair to hold him close while the other continued to manipulate his buckle. With a final twist, she undid it, flipped open his button, slid down the zipper and slipped her hand inside his pants. When her fingers closed around his erection his muscles tensed. "Amy." Her name on his lips was guttural, desperate and she smiled triumphantly.

Once she had him where she wanted him, with his back against the wall she dropped to her knees, lifted her head, locked eyes with him and licked her lips. His pupils expanded until they merged with the dark of his eyes, forming a deep, fathomless pool, half hidden by drooping eyelids. His resistance was broken, destroyed by her power over him.

Mouth open, she took him in. Her tongue explored, running around the ridge on the bulbous head, finding the slit, probing, tasting, then moving on to circle the thick shaft. Her hand grasped the base sliding and squeezing, the tips of her fingers reaching down to stroke his balls, making them contract and tighten.

With every movement, Ryan's muscles jerked, his cock bobbing in her mouth, begging for more. His hands dropped to her head, helping her find the rhythm, at the same time keeping his sagging knees from collapsing.

The salty sweetness of his pre-cum, the soft wet slurping noises as she sucked and licked, and the hot musk of his skin set her on fire, her own juices flowing, soaking her panties, adding her own unique scent to the sensual mix.

His hands tightened in her hair and he pulled her in tighter. "More. Take more." He thrust as deep as she could take him, her encircling hand massaging and pumping the rest of his shaft. The vein running down the length of his cock pulsed under her tongue and he groaned. "I'm going to come. You have to..." He tried to pull her head back, but she reached one hand behind to grasp his buttocks and used her shoulders to hold him jammed between her and wall.

He stopped fighting her and dragged her in for one more powerful thrust. He came in staccato bursts, hips pumping, gasping for air, his breath rasping in and out of his mouth.

His seed, his passion and his helplessness in the face of his desire; Amy soaked it all up. This was no cold exercise in technical expertise, no cynical manipulation of physical weakness. She swallowed and slowly let him slide out of her mouth. He slid down the wall, until he sat, knees bent dazed eyes level with hers. He reached out and brushed aside a strand of hair caught in the corner of her mouth. "Amy." This time her name was a whisper, full of wonder.

He rolled to his feet, reached down and lifted her to hers. His arms went round her, gently and he dropped his cheek to rest on her hair. After a long moment he put his finger under her chin and lifted it. His lips molded hers, softly, slowly as if he had a thousand years just to devote to learning the shape of them. Every atom in Amy's body centered on the fusion point. Nothing else in the world existed, just the two of them.

Ryan lifted her in his arms and she floated with him into the bedroom. He bent down, nestling her into the soft cloud of bedcovers like some precious, delicate jewel.

The rest of her clothes smoothed away under his hands, and he took the time to look, to touch, to kiss each piece of skin as it was exposed, flexing his body to help her hands ease his shirt and pants away until they were both naked.

Ryan knelt on the bed next to her and took her foot in his hand, holding it as if it were made of crystal and kissed each one of her toes. His fingers stroked her ankle, slid up behind her knees, making the sensitive skin there tingle. Every move was slow, every touch lingered. Amy writhed, torn between begging him faster, stronger, higher and the desire to prolong the sensual assault for as long as possible. The conflict made her whimper and Ryan tightened his hands and scraping her skin with his teeth.

High on her thighs, his lips pressed wet, open-mouthed kisses, little nips soothed by a hot rough tongue.

Her legs fell open, granting him access, but he ignored the invitation, instead pushing himself upward, nestling his mouth in the hollow between her shoulder and her neck and bit lightly there and she curved upward under him, shoulders pressed to the bed under him, spine taut and arched. "Let's see how you like it," he said and slid down toward her breasts. The whirling thrust of his tongue reenacted the movement Amy had made when she had his cock in her mouth. Most men's groping and fumbling at her breast left her unaffected, more off-putting than erotic, but Ryan's clever tongue

charted a route straight to her pussy. Every lick, every movement of his tongue and mouth flew along it, winding her tighter and tighter.

The rubbing of her hips against his became a silent plea for more. One of his hands splayed out on her hips to still her. "Later," he whispered. "For now, just this once I want to ignore time."

For a moment he lay with his head on her chest, his ear over her heart, eyes closed. Squeezed out from between his lashes was one single tear.

"Ryan?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he replied. The drop of moisture disappeared as if it had never been and Ryan gave her a lopsided grin, pressed one farewell kiss on each breast and he pulled himself up on his elbows to settle himself over her. With one long, smooth stroke he seated his penis into her, staying there, holding himself still, while he gazed deep into her eyes.

Her vaginal walls tightened around him and she too lay motionless. Any movement would have broken the magic. The small vibrations of blood in their veins bound them into one experience. The coil continued to wind.

The moment stretched on until Ryan groaned and shattered in a frenzy of movement. One, two, three rapid thrusts and they both exploded, arms wrapped around each other, her ankles hooked over his thighs, holding him close, trying to absorb him into her. His cock pumped on and on, milked by her contractions until he slumped onto her. She held him tight, clinging to him as her vision blurred and darkened and consciousness slipped away.

A rough hand shook her, holding her up off the bed, jolting her from side to side. "Amy, wake up."

Her heavy lids, like stone shutters, refused to lift. Her mind was fuzzy and she couldn't work out where she was or why someone—Ryan—shouted in her ear. On wobbly legs that dragged like leaden weights behind her she let Ryan pull her from the bed and wrap her robe around her. When he opened the bedroom window and pushed her over the sill, primitive survival instinct made her struggle and she grasped his arms, kicking and twisting, trying to escape.

"Be still." His voice was a savage command. "You'll die if you don't."

"Why?" she asked, stunned by his betrayal. "Why are you doing this to me?"

He grabbed her head, twisted it around and shoved it further out the open window. The sill dug into her hips, but the physical pain failed to register compared to the horror of what Ryan was trying to do.

"Breathe, damn it," he commanded. "Breathe."

She took a great lungful of air and relaxed as his hand loosened. "Ryan? What's happening?"

"Poison gas. The flat is full of it. I should have smelled it sooner. This gas was chosen deliberately. It is almost odorless, but I still should have picked it up before it

affected you." His voice shook. "You could have died because, once again, I let myself lose focus, lying here thinking about you instead of paying attention to the environment." He checked her pulse, looked closely at her. "Wait here," he ordered. "Keep your head out the window until I locate the source of the gas. Don't turn around and whatever happens, *don't* come looking for me."

After he released her she clung to the window frame for support. He left the room and she heard him shout. "That bastard." The words were followed by the sound of running water, of windows and doors being thrown open, of the exhaust fan in the bathroom.

In few minutes, Ryan returned. "Can you hold your breath for a minute?" he asked. "Long enough to get to the balcony? It's a warm night, we can sit out there for a while until I'm sure all the gas has cleared."

She followed him quietly through the living room on to the tiny balcony with room for no more than a couple of chairs and a small table. "It was Bjorge, wasn't it?"

Ryan's mouth was a grim line. "I found the residue of a capsule in his wineglass."

"What would that do?" she asked.

"The acid in the wine dissolved the coating and a chemical reaction diffused gas around your apartment. He must have slipped the capsule into his glass when he put it down next to his chair." Ryan slammed his fist into the wall. "I was so busy watching his reaction to eating, I didn't notice him drop anything into the glass."

"He tried to kill me?" Amy's voice rose emerged as a disbelieving squeak. "Why would he do that?"

"To stop you completing your research," he said with grim certainty.

Moving to the door, Amy called over her shoulder "I'm going to get my phone. We have to call the police."

Ryan barred her way. "No. I don't want you to go back inside yet, even if you do think you can hold your breath." He dropped his hands onto her shoulders. "There's no point ringing the police anyway. There's no evidence to show Bjorge tried anything. The gas will be dispersed long before the police get here. I flushed the remains of the capsule down the toilet to get rid of the contamination."

"But we have to report Bjorge," she said. "Tell them what he tried to do."

"What are you going to say, Amy?" he asked. "Are you going to tell them he's not human, because I think that's certain now? How will you explain me?"

"I'll tell them... I'll say..." Her shoulders drooped as she realized he was right. "So we just have to let him get away with it."

"He didn't succeed, Amy," he reminded her. "I don't think his superiors are going to be very happy with him. I suspect he won't get away with anything."

She leaned wearily into him. "Why is it so important? What is it I discover that will change the world enough to make someone want to come from another galaxy to kill me?"

"I can't tell you. You have to find whatever it is on your own," Ryan said. "I can't change your future by telling you what my future is. But even if I were prepared to do that, I really *can't* tell you. If I knew *what* it was you found, I wouldn't have had to come back here in the first place."

"But you must know something," she insisted. "It must have gone on record."

He turned his back, looking out over the darkened city. "The records don't tell me anything I want to know." He spun back to face her. "On Saturday, you fly out to your conference and I'll be back where I came from."

A weight settled around her heart. She walked to the door. "The gas should be dispersed. I'm going to bed."

With one rapid step he caught up to her. "We don't have long together. I'm not wasting it." His words should have made her feel better, but unseen, unheard, the seconds until he left ticked away and nothing could lighten that burden.

* * * * *

In the morning he tried to convince her to stay home from work. "You don't know if there are any aftereffects of the gas. And besides, you could keep trying to find that programming glitch."

Amy's hands went to her hips. "Look I know the most important thing to you is that I find it, but what if I don't?"

"Sometime before the conference began, you emailed through an amendment to your synopsis and your title. You discovered the problem and wrote a presentation on its implications before you left," he told her. "You *must* know about the time travel paradoxes. In your world so far they have only been raised by speculative fiction writers and philosophers, but their logic is right. If I come back here, or someone like Bjorge attacks you and because of that you don't find the problem before the conference, then the entire future will change. We can't risk it."

"Then why did you come here at all? Why did you speak to me, make love to me?" she asked. "Won't that change everything too?"

He ran his hands through his hair. "I don't know. What you call the butterfly effect doesn't always apply to time travel. Lots of everyday things have no effect on the future at all. Whether you have toast or cereal for breakfast on any particular day changes nothing. What we do in bed may have no effect on the future at all. It probably isn't important."

"It feels important to me." Amy replied.

His eyes widened and he asked, "You think it is not important for me? Sex between us wasn't meant to be like this. I just wanted to relax you. Put you in the right frame of mind for work." He lifted one shoulder in a half shrug, "I hadn't intended to do that much but that jerk Scott's performance was so bad, I thought you deserved a little fun."

His grin turned sly. "Maybe I wanted to show off a little too. Let you Earth girls see what you've been missing."

"But that's not why you came here is it?" she demanded. "It's not why Bjorge tried to kill me?"

"No. It's not."

"I'm not stupid, Ryan. It's about my research." She clasped her hands in front of her. "I think Bjorge came here to try to stop me from finding something. Last night he might have intended to sabotage my computer, I don't know. But when that didn't work, he tried to kill me." She thought a bit more. "I'm right. He had to try to stop me finding the problem before the conference because—because without solving the problem, someone will pick up the flaw and use it to invalidate my findings." She beamed at him. "You told me that the first night you were here to watch me. You're here to make sure my reputation doesn't suffer and to keep me safe." She flung her arms around him. "I've worked it all out. You don't have to tell me a thing."

He let her hold him, but he stood stiff and still in her arms. "Yeah. You got it. I don't have to tell you a thing."

After a while she lifted her head. "I don't think you have to worry. You *know* I discovered the problem before I left for the conference, so that's what will happen. You foiled Bjorge's plot. I can go to work and as long as I come home and do some work on the project tonight or tomorrow night, everything will be fine." *Everything except for him leaving that is.* But with a sudden burst of self-confidence she convinced herself she could find a solution to that problem as well.

Her future was set. What happened here should not make any difference. His time with her was a moment *out* of time. "Is there a time limit on your stay here? Will you be sucked back if you don't go? Will you be hurt?"

"No. There is no limit," he said without detectable emotion.

"Then stay. Regardless of what happens about the program. I want you. Please, Ryan, stay," Amy begged.

When he stood there, face serious and sad, she was afraid he'd refuse, to tell her he had to go, but at last he said, "I will stay, Amy. I will stay as long as you want me."

Happiness spread a golden glow over her. It was too soon, but she told him anyway, "I love you, Ryan. For always. I will want you until I take my last breath."

He clasped her to him, burying her face in his chest. "I know, Amy. I know you will."

Chapter Six

The sun shone, a cool breeze kept the temperature down and they opted for breakfast in a nearby cafe. Amy headed for one of the tables set up outside in the shade of a tree, but Ryan hustled her inside. He settled her in a corner table then set himself up so he could see her and the door without turning. Amy turned to him. "What are you watching for now? Bjorge will be gone."

Ryan frowned and said, "If he waited outside the apartment building last night, he would have known we didn't call the ambulance or police. He *could* assume that's because we're dead," He gripped Amy's hand comfortingly. "Or he could have been there this morning and seen we are still alive. It's possible he went back to where he came from, but until I'm certain you're safe, I am taking no chances."

Amy gave the hand holding hers a little squeeze. "I feel safe when I'm with you. I know you won't let anything happen to me."

Ryan dropped her hand and picked up the menu. When he spoke again it was to discuss the options, some of which he didn't recognize. Remembering his first reaction to new food, Amy smiled. "Maybe you better pick something bland. They have a fresh tropical fruit platter but I don't know if the other patrons would be able to handle you having your first taste of mango."

He looked down his nose at her. "I can have self-control when I have to."

She raised one doubtful eyebrow and Ryan winked. "If it's that good, I have to try it."

They placed their orders and the fruit arrived almost at once. As Amy watched, Ryan slipped a piece of the golden fruit into his mouth. His lips pursed and his face went rigid, he blinked once, twice, then leaned back in his seat. After a moment he breathed out and picked up another piece, his face calm and inscrutable. He cast an idle glance at Amy and offered her a piece of the fruit.

Amy stared at him in puzzlement. "That's it? You aren't going to say anything? Do anything? You weren't impressed at all?"

He spoke quietly so no one at nearby tables could hear him. "Amy, if sex were a fruit, it would be a mango. It's warm and slippery, like you. It smells musky and enticing, like you. I want to take this piece of fruit, slip it between your lips, roll it around on your tongue then take it back and swallow it. It will be like having sex with you, right here in public. And I will continue to sit here exercising superhuman control over myself so I do not get up, strip you naked, rub the mango all over you and then lick it off again." He raised his voice to normal levels. "Yes, Amy, the mango was very nice."

Her cheeks flushed as an image of him searching a piece of mango out with his tongue flashed before her eyes. She opened her lips and he slipped the fruit inside. As the aroma surrounded her she felt herself growing damp and aroused. Ryan leaned forward and flicked up a drop of juice from the corner of her mouth. He licked it off his finger in a gesture so sexual she shifted restlessly in her seat. She leaned forward, whispered, "Let's get out of here. I can be a little late for work." But Ryan didn't respond. His posture stiffened, his stare riveted on the doorway.

With a swift surge of apprehension Amy's glance followed his. Scott, the man she'd last seen fleeing her apartment, hurling insults on his way out, stood at the entrance, his gaze switching from her to Ryan and back again.

For a moment Scott seemed to be on the edge of fleeing once more, then he caught her eye, tugged at his shirt and sauntered arrogantly over. How could she ever have thought this man was worth a minute of her time, let alone allow him into her bed? He stopped by their table, a smirk twisting his lips and addressed Ryan. "Dude," Ryan and Amy both flinched. "I think I ought to warn you, mano-a-mano, this one's a nutter. If you get her into bed she's gonna go psycho on you."

Ryan's lips paled, but Scott carried on, oblivious to his reception. His gaze shifted to Amy. "Didn't take you long to find somebody else, but I can tell you now, he won't give you the ride the Scottster did." He did a fake double take. "Oh wait. You're having breakfast. Guess you already know. Well, you look like a pair of losers to me. You probably deserve each other." The other cafe patrons had gone quiet, the clatter of knives and forks ceasing as hands stopped midway to open mouths. In the silence the scraping of Ryan's chair as he pushed it back echoed through the room.

From somewhere near her Amy heard a quick intake of breath.

Ryan's voice rumbled out of his chest. "It appears your knowledge of social behavior is as limited as your knowledge of sexual technique." He was at least two inches taller than Scott and with his powerful build and commanding presence he loomed over him.

Scott swallowed and his voice grew suddenly higher. "Just telling it like it is." He blinked. "Hey, are you saying I'm not a good fuck? If you're taking her word for it, she wouldn't know a good fuck from a hole in the ground."

Ryan seemed to grow even taller. "She knows the difference between a man and an asshole."

"You calling me an asshole?" Scott asked.

"I'm sure as hell not calling you a man," Ryan replied. "A man would know when to keep his mouth shut. An asshole, on the other hand, would try to blame everyone but himself for his inadequacy."

"I didn't come here to be insulted." Scott said, thrusting out his jaw.

"No," Ryan agreed. "But when you saw Amy, the first thing *you* said was an insult. After you apologize to her, you can leave."

"You can't tell me what to do." Scott looked around for support from the others in the cafe. They all avoided his gaze. The cook and the staff stood at the entrance to the kitchens, waiting to see if they needed to intervene or call the cops. Ryan nodded in their direction. "Don't worry. There's not going to be any violence. I wouldn't embarrass my companion by hitting him and he couldn't hit me, even if he had the courage to try." His words were provocative but his assessment of Scott was right. The smaller man backed away, getting to the entrance before he said, "There's plenty of other cafes in the city, with better clientele than this one."

One of the customers snorted in disgust and everyone returned to their meals. The staff eased back into the kitchen.

Amy smiled at Ryan. "Thank you for standing up for me. And thank you for not hitting him."

"I've only been on this planet a couple of days and I have more idea of how to behave than he does." He looked at her from under half-lowered lashes. "And I have a better idea of other things too. I did see him in action, remember."

She'd managed to put that particular memory right out of mind. She groaned and her cheeks heated.

With a decisive shake of his head, Ryan said "What I saw of you put lots of ideas in my head. I don't want to forget that."

The encounter with Scott had killed Amy's sexual excitement. She reached for her bag. "Come on. I have to get to work."

Ryan gave a disappointed sigh, but got up without arguing, throwing a handful of money down on the table as he did.

"You came prepared for everything, didn't you?" Amy asked.

Ryan looked at the pile of notes, then back at her. "Everything except for how I would react to you. Nothing prepared me for that."

Feeling protected and cherished, Amy walked to work in a golden haze. The glow faded when Ray Smallwood met them at the door of the lab. "Did everything go well with the deputation yesterday?" he asked. "I hope you gave Dr. Bjorge everything he wanted. He is a very important man and I wouldn't want any negative comments about our facility or our hospitality."

"I'm sure you will get no complaints from Dr. Bjorge." Ryan said.

"Well, good. I'm a longtime admirer of his work in...in..." Smallwood's eyes glazed over for a moment then he blinked. "It was an honor to have him lead the delegation." He walked away.

"Bjorge could do it too," she realized "He planted memories to make Smallwood think he was expected."

Ryan nodded.

Amy chewed on her lip. "You knew he did it?"

"I know *now* he did it," Ryan explained. "Yesterday I couldn't tell. He didn't attempt to plant any memories in you or me. *I* wouldn't have a clue who is or isn't expected at the facility and Smallwood made a point of mentioning the director had forgotten to tell you. If Bjorge suspected who I was he'd know the memory implant wouldn't work with me and he wouldn't want to risk trying it with you in case I detected him in the process."

Amy inclined her head, accepting his explanation. "I have to find the error. It's the only way this will be over."

"You're right," he said and huffed out a breath of air. "Once it's done, once copies are made, once someone knows what you have discovered, there will be no point in trying to stop you, no point in killing you."

A flaw in that logic, something that didn't quite fit the sequence troubled Amy but she couldn't pin it down. These people had come from the future. Surely someone did know what she discovered? Ray called out a question to her and she brushed the puzzle aside and got on with her work.

The day passed uneventfully. No unexpected visitors, no disturbances of any kind. The train trip home was quiet and although Ryan's nostrils still twitched from time to time, he seemed to be relaxed. They walked home from the station hand in hand.

At her door Amy fumbled one handed for her keys, when a figure leapt from the bushes lining the path.

Immediately Ryan reacted, pushing Amy aside and throwing himself at her attacker.

Off balance and staggering from the force of Ryan's shove, Amy fell to the ground, skinning her knees and scraping her palms on the gravel. By the time she got to her feet again, Ryan was locked in a struggle with Mark Bjorge.

Bjorge's face remained eerily expressionless, but the knife in his hand, a long, wicked blade flashed and winked in the late afternoon sunlight. Ryan side stepped, leaning back, dancing from side to side to keep out of Bjorge's extended, vicious reach.

"Get out of my way, Mandeville." Bjorge snarled "Did you think we would let you get away with it? I could have just corrupted her files but you wouldn't let me. Now we have to do it the hard way."

"You'll have to kill me before you get to her." Ryan breathed fast and heavy, but he evaded every blow Bjorge aimed at him.

"A noble sentiment, Mandeville, but rather pointless under the circumstances don't you think?" Bjorge asked. "After all we both know she has—" Ryan's fist smashed into Bjorge's jaw. Bjorge staggered back, hand held to his mouth. He pulled his hand away and stared at it in horrified surprise. "Blood. How revolting."

Amy searched around her, looking for a stone, a brick, anything she could use to attack Bjorge, to ensure he could not use that fearsome weapon on Ryan. Bjorge shook off his injury and once more swung the knife in wide, slashing sweeps.

Ryan called out to Amy, ordering her to run, but she ignored him. She looked around frantically but the street, quiet at any time, was completely deserted. She grabbed her phone and began to dial emergency, but the signal went dead. She looked up and caught Bjorge's smug sneer. She hurled the useless phone at him, but he merely ducked his head and let it sail past.

Circling behind the battling pair, she looked around for a way to help Ryan. In the garden, hidden behind a straggly rose bush, she found a battered gnome statuette, and snatched it up. It was light, hollow and made of plaster, an unlikely and ineffective weapon, but the only one she had.

Ryan and Bjorge still engaged in their advance and retreat battle. Bjorge sliced with the knife, Ryan stepped back and to the side. Their dance had a strange, erratic rhythm, but if she concentrated she could pick Bjorge's next move. He focused on Ryan, not on Amy's approach. She lifted the gnome above her head and Ryan's eyes widened. He didn't turn or look at her. He made no motion to alert Bjorge to her presence.

With a wild yell she smashed the statuette down onto Bjorge's head. He half turned, blinking, more startled than hurt and in that moment Ryan lashed out a hard kick that connected with Bjorge's wrist and sent the knife spinning away. Before Bjorge had time to react, Ryan followed the blow with a hard punch to the jaw and Bjorge sank to his knees.

Ryan followed him down, reaching out a strong hand to encircle Bjorge's throat. His fingers moved from side to side, feeling for a pressure point.

Bile rose up in her throat and Amy swallowed. She had read books that described the process of killing someone this way, but she never thought she would witness it. She bit her lip to stop herself calling out, to beg Ryan not to do it. He would do what he felt he had to.

The fingers on Bjorge's neck groped and sought. The stunned expression on Bjorge's face sharpened. His hands lifted to tug on Ryan's wrist. Just as Bjorge began to exert more pressure, Ryan grunted in satisfaction. "Got it." His index finger pushed down and Bjorge slumped to the ground. Ryan stood up. "I can never find the damn on-off switch."

Bjorge lay flat on his back, his eyes open. A strange, mechanical voice, its tone a surprisingly matter-of-fact singsong, issued from Bjorge's open mouth. "You have unsaved work. All unsaved work will be lost. Do you wish to continue with the shut down?"

Ryan waited impassively. The voice chimed in again. "Shut down will occur in five seconds." A series of bell-like sounds followed and a logo flashed in Bjorge's eyes. With a whirring sound the eyes closed. Ryan put his hands on his hips and let out a long gust of air.

Leaning over Bjorge's inert body, Ryan ripped the shirt away from his neck, not far from where his hands had found the on-off switch. He called Amy over. She hesitated then took two tiny steps towards him.

"You'll have to come closer, Amy," he told her. "You'll want to see this."

Still trying to keep her distance, she leaned in. Under Ryan's pointing finger, she could see a tiny mark. She took another step nearer. "It's writing!" She peered at it then uttered an astonished gasp. "It says..."

"Mk 1 Cyborg" Ryan read it for her.

"He's a robot?" she squeaked in astonishment.

Ryan shook his head. "He's an organic computer and that's his model number."

"Mark Juan Bjorge!" she gasped. "That was his name."

"I know." Ryan sounded disgusted with himself. "I missed that clue." He reached into his pocket and brought out a clear cylinder.

"What's that?"

"Something anyone who has to deal with organic computers should keep handy." He unscrewed the lid and pulled out a syringe, which he sank into Bjorge's neck. "Nanobots. By the time they've gone through him, changing his programs and rewriting his code, he'll be lucky if he gets a job as a stand-in for that gold toy cat we saw at the Chinese restaurant, doing nothing for the rest of his days but smiling and waving one hand up and down."

He pocketed the syringe and held out his hand to Amy. She stepped over Bjorge, then stopped. "We can't just leave him here."

Tugging her towards the door, Ryan assured her, "He'll be gone before we get upstairs. The mainframe will notice he's offline and arrange to have him recycled."

In the apartment Ryan settled Amy into a chair and made her comfortable. He slipped her shoes off and put her feet up on a low table. He took her hand and gently turned it over. When he saw the grazes, his lips tightened and he ran his eyes over her from head to toe. He brushed her skirt aside to follow the trickle of blood to her scraped knees. He got to his feet and strode into the bathroom. The sound of cabinet doors opening and slamming closed again echoed through the flat. He returned, standing before her with a grim expression on his face, a small plastic container in his hand. "Is this supposed to be your first-aid kit?"

"Yes," she said defensively.

He flung it down on the sofa in disgust. The lid popped off and sticking plasters, a tatty roll of bandages, a pair of tweezers that didn't quite close and a stained piece of paper scattered across the cushions. "Where's the plastic skin, Amy? Where's the ultra-antibacterial agent? Where's the gamma radiation sterilizer?"

"I don't have any of those," Amy squeaked. She cleared her throat and her voice dropped an octave. "No one has any of those. There's some spray-on antiseptic in the pantry somewhere."

He stomped off to get it, muttering under his breath. Amy only caught a few words but since they included, "stupid", "irresponsible" and "primitive", she didn't bother to ask him to repeat himself. He came back in and dropped to his knees in front of her. She

thought the floor shook, but his expression remained fixed and if he felt the impact he made no sign of it. His knuckles whitened around the bottle and he depressed the plunger as if he was trying to force it through the bottom. The spray hit her knees and she winced. "Ouch. That hurts!"

He grunted in satisfaction. "Good. At least it shows it's working. You're just lucky your germs are as pathetic as the stuff you have to combat them."

"Are you insulting our germs? You can't just come from wherever you come from and start being critical about everything you find here," she muttered.

He looked up at her, his eyes narrowed. "No? I think you'll find I can—starting with you. What did you think you were doing?" he shouted at her. "I told you to run and instead you stayed there and got involved in the fight."

Amy's shock gave way to belligerence. "I was trying to save you."

"By hitting Bjorge on the head with a fragile—and may I say very ugly—statue?" he snorted. "I'll have to check it, but that may be the only time in history—your time or mine, that a-a..."

"Garden gnome," Amy supplied.

"Thank you—a *garden gnome* has been used as a weapon."

"It worked." She sounded sulky, rather than assertive, but she couldn't do anything about it. "He wasn't going to give up. He might have cut you and if it had been serious enough you might have..." She stopped, swallowed hard, then whispered, "Died."

Keeping his eyes fixed on his hands, he mopped up the excess antiseptic spray with a tissue. "I'm here to protect *you*, not the other way around. Bjorge wouldn't have been able to kill me and even if he did, he'd only hurt the body. He couldn't touch my core, the essential energy I'm composed of."

A chill that had nothing to do with the fight or her injuries settled over her. He seemed so human it was easy to forget how other he was. She shifted on the seat. Instantly his attention fixed on her face. "Are you all right?" The hand gripping her leg below the knee gentled and he stroked her softly. "If you'd done what I told you, you wouldn't have been hurt."

"I got hurt right at the start," she said. "When you pushed me out of the way, I fell over."

His entire body tensed and stilled, then his head dropped. "I never meant to do that. I just wanted you where Bjorge couldn't get you. I'm sorry."

Ignoring the frisson of pain, she cupped his cheek with her hand. "You have nothing to apologize for. You did what you had to do to save me. A few little scrapes, a couple of drops of blood is nothing compared to what could have happened."

"Nothing should have happened. I came here so sure I could do the job I had to do. Nothing or no one, especially on this out-of-date planet, could interfere with me. I was in charge." He looked up at her, his eyes full of a pain she couldn't see without wanting

to weep. "I haven't been in control from the moment I saw you. Nothing has gone the way I planned and I don't think I can do what I was sent here to do."

She leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. "Of course you can. I'm not hurt."

Pulling her hand away from his cheek, he held it palm up in front of her eyes. She looked at it and shrugged. "That's nothing. Kids get worse than that every day in every schoolyard across the country. You *have* kept me safe. You detected the gas before it could harm me. You stopped Bjorge stabbing me."

He buried his head in her lap, but she pulled him up to face her. "I'm fine, Ryan. In a moment I'm going to get up, go over there and get back to work finding that anomaly. But first," she bent her head and gave him her most serious look. "You have some explaining to do. And don't you dare think about not answering me. I just saw a computer who moved and looked and sounded like a human being. People may think computer geeks like me are harmless, but if you think you are getting out of here without explaining that to me, you are about to find out just how lethal we geeks can be."

"No, I've messed up more important aspects of the job than this," he said, sitting back on his heels and wiping his hands across his face. "It's not going to make much difference if I tell you some of this stuff now. You've been in the thick of it. You deserve to know some of it at least." He took a deep breath. "Bjorge is—was an anthropomorphic, organic computer."

Her lips formed a silent *wow*. "Who makes *them*?"

"No one. They make themselves." He waited a moment to let that sink in.

"Does this...do they...?" She took a breath and tried again. "Has my research got something to do with that?"

"I knew you'd figure it out," he replied. "Your research into organic materials and computer chips laid the groundwork that eventually led to the development of self-reproducing sentient computers."

"My research? That is so great." Her eyes sparkled and she smiled. "It confirms everything I've done and believed." Then she sobered. "I know some people are afraid sentient computers will lead to battles and humans will be destroyed."

"There were no battles." Ryan's tone was flat. "Human beings still exist."

"Oh, good." Her brow furrowed. "Why did Bjorge try to kill me then? Why did he want to stop my research?"

The clouds, lit from behind by the evening sun, seemed to draw Ryan's attention. "There are always dissident groups. The invention of time travel gives people ideas about changing the past."

"But what made Bjorge want to target me? I don't—"

"If you don't find that anomaly, it won't matter whether he killed you or not," Ryan interrupted. "The result will be the same." He got to his feet and pulled her up. "You

get started. I'll go out and get us something for dinner. You'll be safe for a while. It will take at least a couple of hours for them to boot up a replacement. But just in case, don't open the door to anyone but me. Don't answer the phone and don't connect to the internet."

Then he was gone. She still had questions, but compared to his usual reticence he had been open with her, giving her more information than she expected. They both knew her threats meant nothing. She couldn't harm him. He'd already demonstrated that. More importantly she would never deliberately hurt him. Alien or not, she loved him.

Depression settled over her. It wasn't just sexual desire. He looked after her, had protected her from alien attack and the sheer boorishness of Scott, understood her work and cared for her when she was hurt. He even went out to fetch food for her. He was the perfect man. Except, of course, that he wasn't a man and he hadn't said a word about how he felt for her. When she'd asked him to stay, he'd made some positive noises, but he hadn't promised anything. Why would he?

She tried to imagine how she would feel if she'd been thrust back in time and made to live among the dinosaurs. Even if she'd taken the form of a dinosaur herself, she wouldn't want to stay that way, no chance that she would fall in love with one.

A tear trickled down her cheek and she wiped it away and turned to the one thing that never let her down, the one thing she could rely on to put the worries of her life on hold for a while. Her computer. Her program.

* * * * *

When Ryan returned she was deeply immersed in lines and lines of code. She didn't say anything, not even when he silently handed her a bowl of food. She ate it abstractedly while Ryan retreated to a chair in the corner and sat still, letting her work.

Hours passed without a word from her, without a movement from him. Suddenly her chair squeaked. He sat up straight, spine pulled away from the back of the chair. He leapt to his feet when she uttered a little yelp. She rubbed her eyes, leaned in closer. "That's it."

Before she finished the words he leapt out of his chair and stood beside her. "Where? What have you found? Show me."

"There." Her finger pointed to a long line of complex code and algorithms. "In the middle of all those if-then statements and conditions."

Squinting at the screen, he told her, "You're going to have to explain it to me. I am not familiar enough with your primitive—" She glared and he stopped, cleared his throat and said, "You use a *different* system to the one I'm used to."

In her excitement, she waved her finger at the screen, waggling it back and forth, not settling on anything. He grabbed hold of her hand to steady it. "Look here." she

said. "See this set of algorithms? They describe and limit the circumstances under which the organic materials will lay down the binary codes. They are sets of —"

"Yes," he snapped. "I know what binary codes are and how they work."

"I guess you do," she agreed. "The point is, this section of code defines a set of events that will cause the laying down process to stop. It will signal when the end point of production has been reached."

"Okay. Got that," Ryan confirmed. "What's the problem?"

"I omitted one tiny step," Amy confessed. "I need to write a macro that will stop production once the preset point has been reached."

She hit a few keys and a mark appeared on the screen. "I highlighted it, just in case something happens and I lose it again. I've looked at this and checked it for weeks and I kept on missing it. It's one of those cases where you see what you think you've written instead of what's on the screen. If I had someone I trusted not to leak my findings I could have got them to check, but I didn't know anyone who had the expertise, but wouldn't be tempted to steal at least some of my ideas."

To ease her tight muscles she stood, arched her back and stretched her hands way above her head. "I'm going to get a drink, walk around for a bit to clear my head, then I'll get straight back and write the code I need to put into it."

Ryan had been so adamant that she work on this, find the problem, she didn't expect him to accept that she needed a break, but surprised her by pushing her into an armchair. "Sit down," he ordered. "I'll get you a drink. You didn't stop for dinner. You were concentrating so hard, I doubt if you noticed what went into your mouth."

When he settled her comfortably with a cushion at the small of her back, he went get her a drink, not the glass of water or soft drink she expected, but a large goblet of chilled white wine. It looked inviting, but she didn't take it. "I can't drink that, Ryan. One sip and I'll lose the clarity and accuracy I need to follow the code, let alone rewrite it."

He pressed the glass into her hands. "You don't need to write the code tonight. It's enough that you found what you need to do. You're already tired. If you try to do it now you'll only make mistakes. Leave it 'til tomorrow. Let the code wait. You don't know how much time we have left together. Don't waste it."

The glass was cool and dewy and she was thirsty and tired of looking at a computer screen. A headache hovered behind her eyes. A little wine would relax her, loosen her muscles, take away the pain. And he was right. The coding could wait. Hurrying the endpoint was the last thing she wanted. He had been the one who insisted on urgency. If he had changed his mind, she wouldn't argue. She took a sip and closed her eyes in bliss.

When she opened her eyes again, Ryan was on his knees beside her, his dark brown eyes locked on hers. His voice was husky as he said her name. "Amy? Come to bed. You can write the code tomorrow."

"I thought you wanted me to finish it," she murmured.

"Not as much as I want to make love to you," Ryan replied.

Her heart contracted, the pain sharp and intense. "I don't want you to go. I want you to stay."

"I want that too," he whispered. "I want that more than I ever wanted anything." A spasm crossed his face, leaving him looking bereft. "But this is not a simple case of two people meeting, being attracted to each other and letting their lives play out as they will. There are too many variables, too many factors beyond our control. All we can be sure of is now. And right now I want you."

Amy lifted her glass and swallowed. Ryan's eyes followed every movement. His thumbs stroked across her lips, wiping away a stray drop. He leaned forward, covering her mouth with his own, his tongue running along the line where her lips met, tasting, urging them open.

The glass dropped to the floor, spilling the golden liquid to soak unheeded into the carpet. Her arms lifted to wrap around his neck, her fingers curved, tunneling into his hair to nestle against the hard warmth of his scalp.

His lips hardened, his tongue probed and explored and the kiss went from gentle to passionate in an instant. She wriggled forward, her legs twined around his thighs, pulling him in, needing to be joined to him, no space between them, denying the sundering to come.

With a low moan he tore her panties away, tossing them aside like the irrelevancy they were. He straightened and pushed her back in the seat, grabbing her ankles, pulling her down until she was half lying. He pulled her legs wide. Lifting them and hooking them over each arm of the chair, opening her, exposing her to the air and his intense gaze. For a moment he did nothing, just looked. Amy panted, fought the momentary urge to squeeze her legs together again, to protect her vulnerability, but she stayed as she was. She loved him and she would not hide anything from him. Not her body, not her feelings, or her fears.

He kissed his way up her thighs. The first time he had pleased her this way, he had been detached, precise, sure of his technique and sure of his ability to reduce her to a quivering mass without becoming involved himself.

Now, he trembled. His lips were soft, slow, tantalizing her with every kiss, his eyes smiling into hers, glowing with the depth of his emotions. He reached the apex of her thighs and lifted his mouth. He smiled sadly and quoted, "*Had we but universe and time.* But we don't, Amy. All we have is these few brief days."

"You have to go?" she asked, tears choking her voice as she realized he'd lied when he said he'd stay as long as she wanted him.

"I can't explain. I want to but I can't," he whispered.

"I don't understand. Tell me," Amy begged.

Instead of answering, he buried his head in the warm triangle kissing, licking, sending his tongue whirling and circling, covering her fears and sorrows with the heat of desire he stirred in her.

Nothing existed in the room but him and what he did to her, drowning her mind and body in a wash of sensation. The flood built, higher and more powerful, until it burst in a rush, pouring over her as she shuddered and shook under him. Still he continued, deluging her senses, pushing her past the point where she thought she could take no more, bringing her to the peak once more, then resting his face on her stomach while the after quakes rippled through her.

Lifting her in his arms, he carried her into the bed, stripped off his own clothes and lay down beside her. Her skin tingled with an electric awareness of his nearness. He kissed her softly and she could smell her own scent on him, taste what she was to him. Her heart pounded, the rate accelerating, anticipating what was to come. He clutched her to him, so hard he crushed the breath from her lungs, but she didn't complain. She needed this as much as he, would have been happy to have absorbed him into her, to be joined as one body.

At first, as he slowly slid into her, she thought he was going to reproduce the slow, almost silent mating they had before. The languorous slide stretched her, filled her, abraded her tissues with a delicious burn. Her muscles clenched around him, holding him in her hot, slick embrace, all her nerve endings focused on their joining, trying to ward off the moment when she knew she'd have to let him go.

As the walls of her vagina clamped around him, he moaned. A shudder racked him and his control shattered. He hammered into her, over and over, sending her bouncing back onto the bed, driving his cock deeper and deeper into her. With every stroke her desire grew and his ferocity deepened. His desperate need for her ignited her, making her burn when she thought she was sated. Strange words poured into her ears on hot wafts of his breath, words she had no hope of understanding but which carried a wealth of passion. How could a man who felt like this, who made love to her with such desperate abandon plan to leave her? As the thought crossed her mind, Ryan's words slowed, changed, seemed at last familiar, the beat keeping time with his frantic thrusts. In spite of his breathlessness, in spite of the blood roaring in her ears deafening her, with every stroke she thought she heard him chant, "No. No. No."

He came on the last word, his strong body trembling. The pulsing of his cock and the sight of his face, muscles tight in a grimace of passion, triggered her own orgasm, her body contracting in time with his.

Spasms racked her, ecstasy mixed with the agony of impending loss. The solid weight of him pressed her into the bed and she rejoiced in the sensation, knowing she wanted nothing more than to have him touching her skin to skin, soul to soul forever. Part of her, deep inside the most primitive recesses of her brain, knew she would be prepared to die here in this bed, still joined, rather than break apart.

A piece of her heart tore away when he rolled to his side and gathered her into his arms. She opened her mouth but he laid his finger across her lips. "Don't talk. Don't do anything but lie here. Sleep now. Tomorrow will come and there will be time to face what we cannot change. Sleep."

The hypnotic cadence of his voice silenced her. If she spoke, if she asked questions, she would lose this moment, lose the closeness that held them, however tenuously, together. The soft words washed over her and she closed her eyes and slept.

When she woke, in the dark hours of early morning, she lay on her side, her back warm. Ryan snuggled up behind her, his arms around her waist, his body arched protectively over hers. His face was buried in her hair. She tried to stretch, but his arms locked and he held her clamped to him. "Don't move. I want you right where you are."

Unused to the wild abandonment of repeated sexual encounters, her body ached, but the hot juices flowed, readying her for him, perfuming the air with the musky smell of sex and arousal. The thick rod of his erection prodded her bottom and she smiled in sleepy satisfaction and anticipation.

Her legs relaxed, ready to grant him access, but he didn't move. "Just let me hold you, Amy," he whispered. "Let me lie here with you. Let me smell you. Let me take you into my skin so I never forget what you feel like. I don't want you to do anything. I want you just to be."

Without speaking or moving, they lay there until the sun lightened the sky, breaking the spell, reminding them of the inexorable passage of time.

Chapter Seven

The elevator dinged as it arrived. Amy and Ryan, talking quietly to each other walked to the lab. They were almost there when a security guard shouted, "Stop!" The guard wasn't one Amy knew and he nodded dismissively to her. "You can continue on, ma'am." She and Ryan turned once more but the guard grabbed Ryan's arm. "Not you, sir. Where's your ID? You can't come in here without it."

The words had barely left his lips before Ryan bunched his fists and swung at him. The guard stepped backwards and Ryan followed, crashing him to the ground with a powerful tackle. The pair rolled, struggling for dominance, Ryan strong and wiry, the security guard with the beefy build of a weightlifter.

The elevator dinged again and Ray Smallwood stood there, mouth dropped open, a horrified expression on his face. "What's going on here?"

His question distracted Ryan momentarily and the guard landed a solid punch to Ryan's stomach. Ryan grunted and ducked another blow that would have knocked him senseless. His hand groped frantically for the guard's neck and Amy knew he was trying to find the on-off switch.

More people arrived on the scene and as they recognized Ryan a murmur began to circulate around the group, growing louder and louder as voices urged Smallwood to do something.

"Dr. Mandeville!" Smallwood shouted above the din. "You there, guard! What is the meaning of this? I demand you stop immediately."

Someone stepped forward and grabbed the guard from behind, at the same time Smallwood stepped between the man and Ryan. The guard, nose bleeding, face red, veins standing out on his neck, drew his gun and pointed it at Ryan. "This man doesn't have a security pass," he said. "When I challenged him, he attacked me."

"Put the gun away," Smallwood ordered. "This is Dr. Mandeville. His pass is perfectly legitimate. You can see it right there pinned to his..." Smallwood waved vaguely in Ryan's direction.

The guard's gun didn't waver. "I don't see any security pass," he insisted.

Ryan slapped himself in the head. "You *idiot*." He stepped away from Smallwood, until he had a direct line of sight to the guard who stiffened, then relaxed and holstered his gun. "Good morning, Dr. Mandeville. Nice to see you again. I hope you're having a pleasant morning. Good morning, Dr. Smallwood. You're running a little late today."

Smallwood looked at his watch. "We all are. Fancy us all arriving together on the one lift. Shall we get to work?"

Immediately the crowd of onlookers broke up and went about their business. No one mentioned the fight, no one seemed to notice Ryan's split lip and torn shirt.

"What just happened?" she asked, slumping into her chair.

Grimacing, Ryan adjusted his clothes, smoothed down his hair. "I was so busy talking to you, I didn't notice the security guard had never seen me before," he confessed. "I walked past him without implanting any memory and he reacted. I thought he was another anthropomorphic computer and you saw the rest."

A trickle of blood ran down his cheek and Amy reached up with a tissue and wiped it away. "Why did the fight go on so long? Couldn't you have stopped it?"

He rubbed his stomach where the guard had hit him. "Once things got physical, I didn't have time to take care of his memory, even if I'd remembered," he said. "I was concentrating on getting rid of him." He looked sheepish. "First I didn't react fast enough, then I overreacted. I'm sorry if I worried you."

At that moment Smallwood came up to them. "You look tired, Amy. Is it because you're spending too much time working on your own projects at the expense of your concentration on the work we pay you to do? I note you have applied for leave for a few days to attend the conference in Vanuatu. While normally I believe it is an excellent thing for a colleague to present at these conferences, I was disturbed last night when I got online and read the topic of your presentation."

Amy tensed and waited for the criticism she knew was coming.

Through tightened lips Smallwood recited, "*The Role of Organic Semiconductors in the Development of Computer Chips*. I am disappointed to see you did not heed my advice when I told you this area of research borders on science fiction, an area you would be wise to refrain from pursuing."

"Now, as then, Ray, I don't agree with you," Amy replied. "I always believed my theories and research were correct." She looked at Ryan. "And I am even more convinced now."

The narrow line of Smallwood's mouth grew tighter and meaner. "You put yourself at great personal and professional risk if you insist on presenting this paper. You might say it could lead to your death."

Ryan's head snapped up and his eyes narrowed. If Smallwood had been an observant man he might have realized how close he came to his own death.

Oblivious to the danger, he continued, "I mean your professional death, of course. If you make yourself a laughingstock, you will have no future. No laboratory of any repute, including this one, will employ you. You'll find yourself in a high school somewhere, repairing computers destroyed by teenage vandals and reconnecting techno-morons to the internet."

Amy knew Ryan wanted to leap to her defense, but she held up her hand to stop him. In this area, she could defend herself. "Ray, one of these days you are going to remember this conversation and wince. My research is valid and it will make a difference." Her perfunctory smile did not reach her eyes. "And when it does, when the

scientific world understands and acknowledges it, I know you'll be the first to claim some credit for it."

It took him a moment to understand the insult. "I'll ignore that comment, Amy," he said. "I tried to save you professional and personal embarrassment. For the sake of whatever future we have working together, I will say no more. But when your private research is revealed for the lunacy it is, far from claiming some credit, I hope I will have the dignity to refrain from saying I told you so. In the mean time, if you wish to retain your position at the lab, you will devote your full attention to *our* work."

"Creep," Amy muttered to his departing back. "I don't know whether to ask you to implant a memory so he thinks he always supported me because he thinks I am the most outstandingly intelligent, creative programmer he knows, or to let him go and have him grovel to me when I am proved right." She grinned. "If my work is as well received as you say it is, I should have my pick of any research facility in the world. When I quit, I'm afraid I'll have no dignity at all. I hope I get the chance to tell him I told you so, loud and clear."

She looked up, expecting Ryan to share her delight in Ray's future embarrassment, but he seemed somber and distracted and she wondered if he'd heard her at all. He was probably berating himself for another perceived failure on his part, feeling guilty because once again he'd let his enjoyment of her company distract him from the job he had been assigned.

"The security guard was just a security guard, Ryan. You didn't let me down." He still didn't speak, so she nudged him. "Bjorge's gone. They must know trying to stop me is useless," she told him. "It was useless all along. I sent a copy of my paper to the conference organizers two weeks ago. By now, the conference notes will have been printed and bound. Even if I got hit by a bus, my work would be on record." Beside her she heard Ryan's swift intake of breath. She looked at him worriedly. "Are you hurt?"

He shook his head and she went on. "As I was saying, my work is effectively published already. All I need to do is write the extra code and arrange for an addendum to the paper to be distributed. I'll take care of that when I get to the conference. It's too late for it to go to the printer so I'll just photocopy it and arrange to have it handed out. If enough people agree with Smallwood, I might not have to make too many copies. I might be speaking to a half-empty room," she said ruefully, then she shrugged. "I don't care. I know I'm right. It seems the more I think about it, the more of a waste of time it seems for the computer people to send someone to stop me." She planted a kiss on Ryan's cheek. "But even if it was pointless, I'm glad they tried, because without that I would never have met you."

Because he still looked grim, she kept talking, trying to cheer him up, trying to jolt him out of his depression. "If the computers are smart, if they're monitoring what's going on down here, they probably know they should have come months ago, when it wasn't completed. If they'd stopped it then, I wouldn't have discovered..."

Her face froze and she paused, "If my research led to the development of self-reproducing chips and that eventually led to the development of those humanlike computers, why would computers come back to try to stop me?"

When Ryan didn't say anything, she continued, her voice slow, considering all the possibilities. "Are you sure *my* research led to the organic chip?" she asked.

Ryan nodded.

"But was my research, my chip the only one in the field? What if there is another form of chip and the nasty computers like Bjorge developed from it?" Without waiting for Ryan to answer, she said, "There might be some kind of battle for dominance in the future and maybe Bjorge's side wants to come back and make sure the development of the other sort of chip is stopped."

"Amy." Ryan's voice was raspy, pleading. "You know I'm not supposed to tell you."

"But you didn't say I couldn't guess." She looked into his eyes. "I'm right, aren't I? There's some battle for dominance in the future and it all stems from my research. And you're some sort of agent for hire, or a security consultant, employed to make sure my research goes ahead." A sudden flash of light seemed to sear through her brain. "No. Not the research. That is already done. It's the new section of code. That's what you were sent back to protect. There's something very important about that code."

He nodded. "I have to make sure it gets written. I have to protect you from anything that tries to stop you writing it. I didn't expect that to include me."

"I'll write it tonight. I won't let anything stop me," she promised. "I'll back it up, keep copies with me when I go to the conference. I know you can't tell me the details, but I trust you, I know you have to be on the right side. I know you'd never let anything happen to me."

* * * * *

For the rest of the day, Amy worked on routine equations, her mind full of her other problems. Ryan had not told her everything. She knew her speculation was just that, he had neither denied nor confirmed anything she'd said. As much as it annoyed her, she *could* see the necessity for the constraints placed on the information he gave her.

Knowing the future seemed like a great idea, but it wasn't that simple. If she knew what would happen, would she stop working towards it so hard and cause it not to happen? Or if she knew something terrible would occur, would she take steps to stop it, thereby altering the future? No wonder Ryan wouldn't tell her anything. He couldn't. The paradoxes of time travel meant that whatever he told her would become untrue, changed by the act of telling.

The only thing she knew for sure was she had to work on the code.

When they arrived home she set to work straightaway. In spite of his actions the night before, Ryan accepted her determination. He did nothing to distract her, just sat grim-faced as she worked.

Now that she knew where the problem to find the problem and understood its nature, working out what to do and doing it became relatively easy.

Three hours later she leaned back, a satisfied smile on her face. "It's done. I'll back it up, then leave it for a while. Tomorrow I'll go back, look at it afresh and if it's all still looking right, we'll be done."

"You need to go over it again?"

"I am almost a hundred percent sure it's correct now," she said. "But I missed that one thing for a long time. I want to make absolutely sure it's right."

She pulled out a memory stick. "I'll back it up with this. After tomorrow night when I'm sure I haven't missed anything else, I'll make a couple of other backups." She hesitated. "Do you know what you are going to do? Maybe you ought to stay until I deliver my paper. You could come to the conference with me."

"I could," Ryan said.

"Is that a confirmation or a question?" She spun back to the computer before he could answer, clicking a few keys, opening up a browser, searching for a particular web site. After a moment she sighed in disappointment. "The flight I'm booked on is full. So are all the flights before that. Maybe I can get one later and change my reservation."

His eyes flashed. "Yes. Change your flight and I'll come with you to the conference. Take a later flight. Change your reservation now!" His last words were an order. Amy bristled then decided to let it pass. If he was prepared to come to the conference, to spend more time with her, he could be as brusque as he liked. She returned to the screen and squealed in frustration. "I can't get us two tickets on any flight that is going to get us there on time. I have to be there in time for the keynote address where they introduce all the speakers. I'll have to keep my original reservation and get you a later flight. It won't matter. You wouldn't have been able to spend any time with me until the day's sessions were over anyway."

"It seems you are." His voice flattened, all the enthusiasm drained out of it. Amy hugged to herself the knowledge that being apart from her, even for a little while, made him feel as empty as it did her. A spark of an idea formed in her brain. She kept it to herself. When they went to bed, Ryan reaching for her, making love to her, then waking hours later to do it again, she bit her lip to stop herself confiding in him. She wanted it to be a surprise, something to lighten the gloom he tended to fall into, something to make him laugh then make him burn.

* * * * *

At work the next day, she took advantage of a trip to the toilet to make a phone call, unheard and unobserved. The success of the first call spurred her into making another,

but this time she felt her face flame and stuttered over the request. The matter-of-fact tone of the person on the other end of the line helped. Amy assured herself that no one who worked in such a place could remain easily shocked, but she still insisted the package be wrapped and placed in an unmarked bag.

Then Amy strode back into the lab, grabbed Ryan by the hand and announced, "We're going to lunch." Ray Smallwood looked at his watch. "It's a little early. Only ten thirty."

She winked at Ryan and he grinned. No one could suggest he caught on slowly. He turned to look at Ray Smallwood.

After a moment Smallwood smiled, an unattractive sycophantic grimace. "I'm pleased to see you among the first to adopt my plan of staggered lunch breaks so the work at the lab can continue smoothly." He rubbed his hands, ignoring Amy. "I appreciate your cooperation, Dr. Mandeville."

"That man reminds me more and more of a slug," Amy said as they left the building. "I won't be sorry when I don't work for him any longer."

"I don't want to talk about him. What are you up to?" Ryan asked, suspicion lacing his tone. "It's not like you to break routine this way."

"Guess who taught me to enjoy doing something completely different?" Amy asked him with a smile. "A woman who has an alien for a lover is beyond the control of clocks or laboratory team leaders."

Ryan chuckled. "So you think you're a wild woman now?" The chuckle turned into a leer. "I want to drive you wild, make you lose control."

"Your wish may be granted." They reached a hotel—five star, huge, stylish, impersonal. Amy pulled him inside and strode to the desk, trying hard to make it seem as if she did this every day. "I'm Dr. Peters. I have a reservation."

The concierge dipped his head in acknowledgement. "Welcome. Your check-in is preprocessed. Enjoy your stay." He handed her the key card.

A uniformed young man appeared at her side. "May I help you with your luggage?"

"We..." Amy swallowed and started again, praying this time the embarrassing squeakiness would be gone from her voice. "We don't have any luggage. However we are expecting a delivery. I'd like it brought to our room as soon as it arrives."

The kind of person she pretended to be would take the answer for granted. Without waiting she turned—and walked into a potted plant. She backed up a step and holding Ryan's hand tightly, escaped to the elevator. Inside she slumped against the wall. "I guess my suave, blasé woman-of-the-world persona needs some work."

"Next time," Ryan leaned over and whispered to her, "remember you're now a suave, blasé woman of the universe and nothing will intimidate you." He reached out and dragged her closer, nuzzling her neck. "Now, care to tell me what we're doing here, or do I have to guess?"

His hands drifted down, stroking over her bottom, reaching around through the thin summer cotton of her dress to test the warmth and wetness gathering in readiness for him.

Amy made a sound like a throaty purr. "I think you've guessed already."

His hands slid down under the hem of her dress and bunched it up, lifting it high on her thighs, letting his long finger slide up even further, burrowing under the edge of her knickers. Amy's legs sagged open, but she muttered a faint protest. "What if they have a security camera in here?"

Ryan's fingers slid in, rubbing over the warm, moist lips of her sex. His voice rumbled in her ear. "So what if they do? You're a wild woman, remember? Let them look."

Wicked excitement made her stomach flip-flop. Her skin heated. She cast a glance towards the top of the lift and imagined a man, buff, strong, watching the camera feed as part of his job, observing them, growing more excited himself.

Ryan whispered, "What if someone is getting off, watching us." If she hadn't been so aroused, she might have ordered him to stop reading her mind, but right now she didn't care. His voice continued low and sexy, "He's stroking himself." Ryan thrust a finger inside her. "Now he's squeezing, tugging. His cock is aching and he wants to come. Make him come, Amy." He pushed one finger against her clit and thrust another up inside her. "He's watching and his cum is spurting, rich and creamy." The finger on her clit moved rapidly back and forth, the one inside her pushed against a spot on the wall of her vagina and she exploded, the image Ryan created in her head acting like an accelerant. Her knees sagged. The elevator dinged and Ryan removed his hand, pulled her dress down and stepped out, smiling politely at a waiting middle-aged couple.

Through dazed eyes, Amy saw the woman's nose twitch. She looked Amy up and down, then inspected Ryan. She and her husband stepped into the elevator and as the doors closed, Amy heard a burst of laughter. She screwed her mouth up. "I guess they know what we were doing."

"I'm sure they do," Ryan agreed. "Did you see the look on the man's face? Pure envy."

Amy gave a little skip. "I don't care." She stopped dead. "I really don't care." And just to prove it, she leapt at Ryan, locking her legs around him and kissed him. Her tongue surged into his mouth and she tightened her legs to rub herself against the thick ridge of his erection. His arms crossed under her buttocks and he held her there enjoying the kiss. After a long moment he lifted his head and said breathlessly. "Unless you have a particular fantasy involving making love in a public corridor, we need to get to our room."

Still wrapped around him, she nodded. "I paid for it. We might as well use it."

He took a few awkward steps then groped for the card clutched in Amy's hand. He propped her back against the wall while he fumbled the card through the reader. The

door swung open and he carried her inside. He didn't stop until he reached the bed. With her still locked around his waist he fell with her onto the covers.

He ripped aside her panties, pulled down his zipper and drove into her, "I can't wait, Amy."

"Neither can I." She arched her back and took him, hot and thick and hard inside her. It felt right. Ryan had only been with her a few days, but she felt empty without him filling her, making her burn with delicious tightness. He thrust into her hard and fast, harsh, brutal, their bodies slamming together, the sound filling her ears. He grasped her upper arms with a hard bruising grip and it only excited her more. She dug her heels into the small of his back while her fingers dug into his broad shoulders, imprinting the pattern of threads on his shirt into them.

One minute, two, no more than that and they came, their breath rushing out of their bodies with a satisfied grunt.

Ryan rolled to his side and flung his arm over his eyes. "My god. What was that?"

"I believe it's commonly called a quickie."

Ryan moved his arm and looked at her, a wary expression on his face. "Is that regarded as a good thing? On Earth?"

"Not usually," Amy admitted.

"My reputation!" Ryan groaned. "I'll never live it down. I'm supposed to be great at this."

Amy slapped at him. Since her muscles felt like melted marshmallows she did no damage, but he yelped, "Hey. Don't hit me. Can I help it if you're so sexy you drive me crazy?"

Amy preened at the compliment. "You know I enjoyed it every bit as much as you. More, because so far I've come twice." She rolled over and grinned at him. "That's the great thing about being a woman."

"If I weren't in this Earth body, I could come as often I felt like. I could show you bodies with tricks to make your toes curl."

"Oh yeah?" Amy's tone challenged him. "Go on then. I dare you."

"I can't. I'm stuck in this poor one-penised body for the duration of my time on Earth." Ryan leaned up and pulled her onto his chest. "But even with one penis I can make you happy."

The one penis he possessed already showed strong signs of recovery and she wrapped her around it but before she made contact a knock sounded at the door. Snapping upright, she looked frantically around the room, stood up, smoothed the crumpled ruin of her dress and tried to make her hair look like she hadn't just been doing what she'd done. Ryan folded his arms. "You don't care what they think. They're paid to do their job, not judge the clientele."

She nodded and walked to the door. Her confidence didn't extend to flinging the door wide with bland indifference to what the bellboy might see or think, but she did manage to stop the hand she held out for the parcel from shaking.

The bellboy stood there after she'd relieved him of the package and her frazzled imagination made her wonder if he expected an invitation to join them. The thought horrified her so much she slammed the door and with her parcel clutched in her hand, scurried back to the bed.

Ryan collapsed in gales of laughter. "You look like a frightened rabbit. He didn't want to join us. The poor man just wanted his tip."

The tips of her ears heated and she rolled her eyes. "How embarrassing." Then she slapped him again. "You're reading minds again. You're not supposed to do that."

Sultry eyes looked into hers. "If I read your mind I'll know exactly what you want me to do." He pointed to the plain white shopping bag she held in her hand. "If you show me what's in there, I won't have to read your mind to find out." He leaned in for a closer look. "It's taped shut. Come on, Amy, what have you got?"

Whipping her hands behind her back, she said "It's a surprise. Several surprises, actually." She took a deep breath. "I called a sex shop and had them put together a selection of toys we might find interesting. They deliver."

"So I see. I am not familiar with the use of toys as part of sex. Show me." He held out his hand and Amy came back to the bed. She ripped the tape away and pulled out the first object. "It's a vibrator." She turned the package over and read the instructions. "It can be programmed to vary the speed and intensity to maximize pleasure." She dived into the bag again. "And this is a remote control pack. Good grief, this one can be turned on and off from instructions sent over the internet. Oooh. What do you think you'd use this feathery thing for?" Her question met with absolute silence. She lifted her head out of the bag. Ryan had backed up against the headboard of the bed, his face a white mask of revulsion. He scrubbed the back of his hands over his lips. "Put them down."

"What?" she asked, confused and a little annoyed. "I just bought them. There's nothing wrong with them. Look, they're all in brand-new packaging."

She held them up and he recoiled even further. "Put them down, Amy. Throw them out the window."

"I can't. The windows don't open. What's wrong with you?" she demanded.

"Can't you see? They're computers. They have chips, circuits. You cannot mean to let them inside your body. For god's sake, Amy," he exclaimed. "You saw Bjorge. Saw what he was capable of."

The vibrator dropped from her hand so fast it bounced on the floor. "I didn't think. I work with computers. I take them for granted. I can't accustom myself to seeing them as a threat."

Peeling himself away from the board, he said "They're not a threat. Not here. Not now. Do you think I would have let you touch them if they were?" His mouth twisted

in disgust. "I just cannot stand the thought of using them for sex, of having intimate contact with them." He kicked at the bedclothes, sending the rest of the toys onto the floor. "Call it prejudice, or call it foreknowledge, but I am not going to touch them."

"You told me there wasn't a battle between computers and humans."

"They didn't need a battle. Humans in the future embraced computers and the more complex they became, the more humans wanted them. Some computers are like Bjorge, programmed to achieve a certain end whatever the cost, but none of them have feelings, none of them are capable of compassion, or affection," Ryan explained. "They are cold, logical machines and their resemblance to living creatures only makes them more revolting."

"My work is responsible for this?" Amy whispered in horror.

Ryan clasped her cold hand in his warm one. "No Amy, your work will stop the computers being able to control human beings. Your work will save the galaxy."

"But you won't tell me how. You won't tell me anything. You know things I want to know. You know things I need to know." She clasped his face in her hands, turned his head, forced him to look at her. "Why are you so revolted by the thought of intimate contact with computers? What happens in the future? Are all the science fiction stories true? Do computers enslave the human race?"

He looked at her for a moment, his eyes dark and intense. "You deserve to know that much and what can it hurt? You won't be able to tell anyone."

"Because no one would believe me," she said, and bit her lip.

He turned away and his shoulders moved. After a moment he spoke, voice tight. "Your discovery, the research you have completed, paves the way for self-replicating computers."

"I'd figured that out." Amy nodded. "What I want to know, is that a bad thing?"

He paced up and down as he explained. "It started out as a great thing. Humans made good use of cheaply available machines. Computers regulated every aspect of human life. They automated houses and cars, left people free to develop more and more exciting uses for computers. They guided space exploration and provided the programs that helped to fuel it. Humans became dependent on them." He paused and drew a deep breath. "With their help, the human race spread out across the universe and everywhere they went, useful, powerful, necessary computers went with them. Every race, every species they contacted fell under the spell of the computer."

"I can see that. It's already starting to happen here, now," she said. "If every computer chip on the planet failed, commerce, travel economies, everything would grind to a halt."

Ryan stopped his pacing for a moment to look at her. "You're beginning to understand. People knew how important it was to keep the systems going, so they began to organize themselves in ways that best suited the environment computers preferred. Instead of computers behaving in a way that served humans, humans began to conduct their affairs to suit computers. Computers became benevolent dictators."

They demanded logic and ignored passion, wanted order, not fun. Rules became imperatives because breaking the rules threatened the system and humans had become dependent on the smooth running of the system."

Clasping her hands around her knees she waited for him to go on.

"Before long, without ever being aware of how it happened, humans modeled their behavior on computers, logical, meticulous, obsessed with detail and incapable of creativity and originality." He started his restless movement again. "Your work is important because it allows the development of the computer but maintains the distinction between man and machine. Without it, all that makes us real, alive, will be worthless." He turned again. "If you don't complete your research, eventually—millennia from now—man will be indistinguishable from the machine he created and when that happens machines *will* take over the world."

With her eyes closed she tried to absorb all he told her. "So Bjorge wanted to destroy my files because some day, something in them will be found that keeps computers from gaining complete dominance. But you're here. You won't let anything happen to me."

His eyes skated away from hers and he bent down and began to pick up the things they had scattered around the room, leaving the toys lying where they'd fallen. "Let's go home."

The afternoon she'd planned so carefully had fizzled to a miserable ending. She looked at his grim face and knew the happy, playful atmosphere would not come back.

In the bathroom she did only what was necessary. When she came out again, Ryan stood up, face somber. They didn't speak on the way back to Amy's apartment. Sometime during the afternoon, clouds had gathered, turning the blue summer sky a leaden gray. Amy plodded home through the thick air, overheated and miserable, not sure what had happened, but convinced the things Ryan wouldn't tell her were more important than the things he had.

Chapter Eight

Ryan shut the apartment door with exaggerated care, the snick of the latch barely audible. He stood staring at her. Tension shimmered between them. A nervous shiver scurried up Amy's spine. She'd had such good intentions. She'd devised a foolproof plan for the afternoon and yet it had all gone wrong.

"I'm sorry." They spoke in unison. Ryan continued on, "Amy, you don't have to apologize. You did nothing wrong."

"I spoilt it, I brought those things..."

"You did something you thought would please me. It should have. We should have had fun." He sighed, "You worked so hard to surprise me. And I ruined it by overreacting, by behaving like an overindulged child. I am so sorry. Can you forgive me?" He held out his arms.

Tears ran down her face as she fell into them. "I wanted it to be special. I wanted to show you I could be daring and exciting and..." She scrubbed at her face with her hands.

Snatching up some tissues, Ryan dried her eyes and waited while she blew her nose. "You *are* daring and exciting and very special. You don't need to rent a five-star hotel room to prove that to me."

The tissues in her hand crumpled into a damp ball. "It would have been fun though. Maybe we can try it again." She sniffed and blinked away a last tear. "After the conference is over."

Ryan hugged her, holding her until the last of the sobs faded. After a while, she pulled her head back to look up at him. "For now, can we pretend it didn't happen?" He shifted restlessly and she felt him begin to harden against her. She put her hands against his chest and pushed away from him. "I don't... I need a little time and distance." Ryan's response to the toys had disturbed her on several levels and she needed time to recover. Maybe they both did.

Scurrying to her bedroom, she changed into her rattiest old t-shirt and shorts, then emerged and sat down at the computer, forcing herself to focus. A constant tingle in her neck reminded her that Ryan watched her every move. Although his presence disturbed and excited her, she refused to react, refused to let him know how much it mattered to her.

He shifted in his seat and, as clearly as if she could read his mind, Amy knew he had reached a crisis point. She expected him to talk to her, to explain or to try to tempt her away into the bedroom to obliterate her disappointment in sensual overload. As

much as she knew she would enjoy it, she didn't want him to. She needed him to keep his distance, to respect her decision to get the work finished.

When he stood she held her breath. He stretched, raising his arms high above his head, accentuating the flat planes of his stomach. "If you're going to be staring at the screen for hours, I'm going to go and lie down." Amy looked at him and sighed with regret and relief. He arched a brow. "If you feel that way you could come with me."

She smiled, grateful for the easy, relaxed way he spoke, glad the barrier between them had faded. But not enough to abandon her decision to complete the final run-through of her program. "I have to do this. I want it finished."

"You know where to find me if you change your mind." He ruffled her hair as he went past, his face turning serious as he spoke from the bedroom doorway. "If anything happens, if anything goes wrong, I'll come back."

With him out of the room she found it easier to concentrate, easier to shut out the small annoying sounds of traffic in the distance. She had been deep in her editing for a while before she became aware of a noise fluttering on the edge of her consciousness. She lifted her head. No sound came from the room she shared with Ryan. He rested by lying on his back in bed, spread out and relaxed, seldom moving, never tossing or turning. Her ears alert, she listened again. Nothing. She shrugged and returned to work.

Before she sank back into the equations, a faint squeak sounded. She stood up from the chair, so alert her skin broke out into goose bumps. The squeak sounded again, followed by a light scratching on the door.

She ought to call Ryan. She knew that, but he'd been so tired and she knew he spent most of each night alert, watching. An intelligent woman, she could recognize danger and deal with it if she saw it. She hadn't liked Mark Bjorge right from the start and no matter how brave she felt, she had more sense than to open the door to anybody.

All she needed to do was to find the source of that strange series of sounds. At the door she peered through the peephole. Nothing. Not even a shadow. Yet the noises continued. She listened once again. They came from low down, almost at floor level, little squeaks and mewlings, like a lost kitten.

Relief surged through her, relaxing her tight muscles, making her knees shake. She had been terrified of a *kitten*. Nothing else made exactly that sort of noise. The poor little thing had probably wandered in from outside. Now, lost and afraid, it had found its way to her door.

Caution took over before she flung the door open. It sounded like a kitten but a smart person would check first. Opening up only a fraction of the way, she peeked out. A tiny ball of gray and white batted at the door, meowing from a throat gone rusty from overuse. Amy pushed the door hard against the wall and dropped to her knees. "Oh, you gorgeous little thing." She picked it up and hugged it to her where it snuggled in close, curling up in a ball. "You're cold." She ran her fingers over its face, stroking behind its ears, the tip of her index finger feeling the warm, moist velvet of its nose. "You poor baby. You're lost. I bet you're hungry too. Come and we'll get some milk."

She looked up and down the corridor, even walked to the outer door but no one appeared looking for a lost pet.

In the kitchen, she warmed some milk in a saucer in the microwave, put it on the table then placed the kitten down next to it. "Oh, look at your little pink tongue! You're so cute. I hope no one claims you and I can keep you. Would you like to live here with me?"

The kitten finished lapping and yawned. Amy picked it up and headed across to the computer. "I need to get back to work, but you can sleep on my lap. You'll be nice and warm there."

The kitten circled her lap once or twice, kneading with its claws. Unable to find a satisfactory spot, it leapt up onto the bench and walked towards the computer. Amy laughed and reached out her hand to settle it next to the vent on her laptop where the warm air emerged.

Ryan appeared at the door looking tousled and sleepy. "Amy, I thought I heard you talking to someone." His eyes blinked into focus. He leapt across the room, arms in front of him, body horizontal. He scooped up the kitten as he flew past, his momentum carrying him forward until he and the kitten landed with a smack against the wall. The kitten hissed and scratched, its back arching and its fur standing on end as if a thousand volts of electricity had run through it.

Ryan's hands gripped it even tighter and it let out a yelping squeal.

"What are you doing? Leave it alone!" Amy stood to grab the kitten from him, but Ryan snatched it out of her way. "Ryan, give me that kitten."

"That's no kitten." His tone was so fierce Amy laughed.

"It has soft fluffy fur, four paws and the cutest little face. Of course it's a kitten. What else would it be?" A light flashed on in her mind. "Oh. You mean it's a computer? Like Bjorge?"

"It's a Trojan." Ryan ignored the kitten's struggles although Amy could see several scratches on his hands, a couple of them starting to bleed. "This cute little kitten is a cleverly written disguise to get a virus close enough to your computer to infect it. Another moment and it would have been prancing on your keys, releasing the virus to attack your data and you would have watched it with a soppy smile on your face while it destroyed your research."

"And I fell for it completely," she said in amazed awe. "It looks so adorable. It's got the little tabby cat M's on its forehead and all."

"It's only adorable because it's written that way," Ryan humphed. "The little M's you like so much are the key." He grabbed a pinch of the kitten's fur at the base of one of the M's. "If you rearrange the lines," He pulled and the arch of the M flattened out and straightened, "The program reads another way entirely."

Amy's eyes widened in horrified fascination as the kitten began to change shape. The soft ball of fluff disappeared to be replaced by something resembling a character

from a computer game, but with nasty, sharp teeth and slavering jaws. "Ugh! It's horrible!" She shuddered. "Get rid of it."

Carrying it at arm's length, Ryan took it out onto the balcony. He held the creature out and let it fall to the concrete below, where it landed with a wet splat. Amy peered over. Nothing remained but a pile what looked like ants. As she watched, they scattered into the bushes, leaving the path as clean as if nothing had happened. She looked at Ryan. "What was that?"

"Loose bits of code," he said. "They'll blow away. The virus is fragile once it's outside the Trojan."

"You could have lost everything, Amy." He walked back inside. "I thought by now you'd know to be more careful."

"It would have been bad, but not a disaster," she grumbled. "I have backups. Just because I come from the deep past for you doesn't mean we don't know anything."

Ryan looked down his nose at her. "What would you have done if that virus had infected your system?"

"I'm a programmer, Ryan," Amy replied. "I would have disinfected my computer, found the source, done what I needed to do to destroy it."

"That Trojan comes from my time. It's more advanced than anything you have dreamt of," he argued. "You could do all that, be convinced you had removed it from the system but deep down seeds of it would be hidden, ready to latch on to any backup system you tried to insert. Any attempt to restore your program to where it was before would trigger the virus and you'd lose your backups as well."

"I wouldn't lose them all because I don't store them all here," Amy said. "I keep some in a safe place."

"How safe?" he asked skeptically.

"In my desk drawer at work. I have a couple of stick drives. I back my work up on one every night, take that one into work the next day, leave it there and bring another one home."

"That's not safe," Ryan shouted. "Anyone could get them."

"The drawer is locked. No one at the lab would steal them. Smallwood might take credit for work that his subordinates did," she conceded, "but he wouldn't steal someone's work and pass it off as his. Especially this work. You know he thinks it's on the other side of flaky science. I just keep a copy in the lab in case there's a fire here." She pulled open the drawer beside her. "Then there's the hard drive. What else do you want me to do? Lock a copy in a safety deposit box?"

He seemed to not to notice her sarcasm. "Going to a bank might not be a good idea. Banks use accounting programs, security programs. They're a perfect environment for computers. Hell, if a computer like Bjorge infiltrated the bank, no one could tell he wasn't an accountant."

"Maybe they've infiltrated already," she laughed. "It would certainly explain a lot of things about my bank manager's attitude."

When Ryan frowned, still taking her literally, she said. "I don't *really* think he's a computer. He's worked there for as long as I've been a customer."

Ryan's chin stuck out at a stubborn angle. "You don't have the ability to pick out who is and isn't a computer. You proved that tonight. Tomorrow get the stick from the lab and any other backups you have stored anywhere. The information is too important to risk letting anyone else get their hands on them. At least if I have them I'll keep them safe."

Amy rested her head against his shoulder. "Like you keep me safe." Then she grinned up at him. "Even if it's only safe from tiny, cute little kittens." She batted her eyelids. "My hero."

He growled and chased her round the room. She let him catch her, but after a few minutes of allowing herself to enjoy the comfort of being in his arms, she pushed him away. "I think I only have another hour or two's work to go. But until it's done, I have to be self-disciplined." She shooed him away. "And so do you."

His self-discipline consisted of sitting on the floor, his back against the door, arms crossed, prepared to bar the way into her apartment with his body. He waited that way, unmoving, alert for an hour, until Amy stood up and slapped a memory stick down on the desk. "That's it. Finished. I've checked and rechecked, backed it up and backed up the backup. I'm done. The next time I see that program it's going to be on a projection screen at the conference and I'll be looking at a roomful of very impressed people."

The completion of her task, filled her with a sense of satisfaction. The sense of doom, of something hanging over her head lifted and she began to feel that things might work out after all. One problem had been conquered, and there was no reason to believe she couldn't solve the others besetting her. If this afternoon's sexual plans had gone awry, invent some new ones. Like champagne, ideas for ways to spend the rest of the evening bubbled and popped into her mind, and she burst into life.

She stalked over to where Ryan still guarded the door. He'd showered while she was working and hadn't bothered to put his shirt on afterward. The muscular planes and smooth skin of his golden chest made her palms itch to touch them. He watched her move closer, his eyes glinting as he looked up at her. She put her hands on her hips. "Going to stay there all night?"

"Depends."

She tapped her foot. "Depends on what?"

"What you want me to do," he said with easy confidence.

He was so strong, so determined, so much the leader in all they had done, but standing there, towering above him, she felt powerful, wanted to make him do her bidding, wanted to be the one in control. She lifted her bare foot and put it on his chest, pushing him backwards, leaning her weight on him, pinning him to the door. "I want you to do as you're told."

His eyes flashed and for a second she wondered if he would leap to his feet in rage. A surprising rush of warmth flooded her at the thought. What if he overpowered her, dominated her, bent her to his will? She pushed the thought aside, not far, just into a corner where it could be pulled out and examined on another occasion. Right now she wanted to play this game. She wanted to see how far he would let her push, what he would do if she explored this scenario.

Bending down, still with her foot on his chest, so her knee bent and her legs were spread wide, her voice suddenly deep and husky, she said, "You destroyed my pet." She ran her fingers down the center of his chest. "I wanted a pet to stroke and play with. Now I don't have one. That's your fault. I think you should make it up to me."

His tongue came out and ran around his lips. He tried to speak but the sound was tight and constricted. Amy leaned in closer. "I can't hear you." She pinched one of his nipples.

A shudder raced through him and his pupils widened. She removed her foot and straightened. "I want a pet for the night. Since there doesn't seem to be any other choice, that pet will have to be you." She watched him carefully. The thought of dominating him for one night of wild fantasy aroused her but if he showed reluctance, if he laughed or sneered, she could never follow through with it.

Her knees almost collapsed when he whispered, so low and raspy it sounded like a purr, "Yes, Mistress."

When her heart rate leveled out again, she turned her back on him, gesturing with one beckoning finger over her shoulder, "Heel."

She walked into the bedroom, hips swaying, in her imagination no longer wearing her old clothes but something black, leather and corset-like.

Behind her she heard Ryan scramble up, but instead of getting to his feet as she expected, he remained on his hands and knees and crawled. This confirmation of his willingness to subjugate himself to her made her stomach flutter.

In the bedroom she ordered him to stand. "Pets don't wear clothes. Take them off." His eyebrows rose wickedly and his lips twitched, but he regained control of his facial muscles and solemnly unbuttoned his pants, sliding them down his hips. This time it was Amy's turn to lick her lips. His erection jutted out, thick and vibrant, clear evidence he found this game as exciting as she did.

He stood at the side of the bed waiting for further orders. Amy stepped forward and grasped his cock. It jumped under her hand and the skin of his balls tightened and contracted. She squeezed. "Get onto the bed." He looked at her hand, where it grasped him. She gave another little squeeze and released him. "Lie on your back." He did as instructed. Amy grasped hold of the hem of her t-shirt, preparing to pull it off. She lifted it a little, then let it fall. She wanted skin-to-skin contact with him, burned for it, but prolonging the moment tempted her more. His nakedness while she remained clothed added to his vulnerability.

She crawled up on the bed next to him. He lay still, the only movement the sideways slide of his eyes as he followed her, and the occasional involuntary spasmodic twitch of his cock.

For a long while she just looked at him. She studied the ridged muscles of his stomach, let her gaze slide down to his groin. She sat back on her heels. "Hold yourself." He blinked and his eyes widened. She folded her arms. "You heard. I want you to put your hand around your cock." He lifted his right hand from where it lay by his side, his action slow and deliberate. One finger at a time he wrapped his fist around himself. Amy settled harder onto her heels, letting the pressure work on her. She rocked back and forth.

"Move it. As if you were going to make yourself come." His fist jerked up and down, once—twice, then stopped. "More." Her breath came out as a breathy whisper, forced out from lungs that barely worked. He pumped again, his hips lifting off the bed, his chest expanding and contracting. His cock swelled, the tip purple and glistening with beads of pre-cum. Amy reached over and squeezed the tip—hard. "Stop. Take your hand away." He immediately let it fall back to his side. His face twisted into an expression that may have been agony or may have been the first stages of orgasm. Amy didn't know and for the moment didn't care.

She ran her hands over him, unable to wait any longer. She needed to touch him, to feel that hot golden expanse of skin. As she leaned over him, he reached up to enfold her in a hug, but she batted his hands away. "No. Keep your hands by your side. You may not touch unless I instruct you to." He said nothing but the set of his lips looked rebellious. Submission did come easily to him and the sight of him struggling to subdue his alpha male nature excited her even more. She could give in now, tear off her clothes and rub all over him until her skin had fed on the feel of his, until he was buried deep inside her, but denial had its own rewards and when she did put an end to it, that end would be a glorious explosion of sensation.

She fought her weakness and continued to explore his body. She lifted his balls, testing the weight in her hand, running her fingers along the sensitive skin underneath, exploring the solid wall of flesh so different from her own moist cleft.

She ran her finger backwards, debating whether to instruct him to roll over so she could continue her discoveries, but deciding she enjoyed him spread-eagled on his back too much to forgo the pleasure. She loved watching his face reflect his feeling, loved having the power to destroy his cool facade, loved watching his control disintegrate.

His fists were clenched by now. He bit his lip so hard in his attempt to bear her ministrations his teeth left white indentations. He suffered but said nothing. She looked at him, so willing to do what she wanted and her control snapped. The game was over. She ripped her shirt over her head, shimmied out of her pants, pulled herself over him, straddling his hips, raising herself up by bracing her arms on his chest. His eyes met hers and she saw flames burning in their depths, hot, intense, full of passion. He held her gaze and she could see into his soul. A tremor quivered through her and he whispered, "Do it."

She whimpered, then sank downward, thigh muscles straining as she lowered herself. His cock rubbed against her wet folds, but she did not take him in. Rocking backwards and forward, she spread the hot moisture, mixing it with his, drawing out the pleasure, letting the tantalizing touch tease and excite her. His hips lifted and twisted, searching for her opening, trying to find a way inside, but she rocked again, pushing the swollen head against her clit, bracing one hand behind her, lifting her hips, then letting them drop, rising and falling, rubbing the tight knot of nerves along his shaft. Her mouth opened on a breathy gasp of exquisite pleasure.

Ryan's hands reached up and closed on her breasts, his thumbs seeking out her nipples, rasping against them and she screamed in pleasure as his touch sent a current of sensation sizzling along a pathway straight to the spot where his cock nestled.

She felt his balls contract beneath her, the friction of the tightening skin adding another note to the sensory clamor. His lips peeled back in an expression of agony. His voice emerged in a guttural rumble. "Amy. Please. I'm begging. Do it."

She raised herself up once more, positioning his cock at her entrance and took him in, slowly, feeling the way she parted for him, feeling the hot clasp of her body against his firm thickness. He shook and tensed beneath her. His eyes closed. Sweat slicked his face, veins stood out along his neck. His hands had dropped to clutch her hips, his fingers locked in place, holding her so tightly she could feel the indentations.

He was completely, utterly lost in the moment and in her. The knowledge broke Amy's control. She thrust downward, slamming against him again and again, hard and driving. His hands on her hips helped push her up, pulled her down again as if he were trying to drag her into his body, to break the barrier of skin and bone that held them separate. And Amy wanted him to succeed. She ground herself against him, breath rushing in and out of her lungs, forming words she couldn't control, "I want, I need," then the power to form any words at all deserted her, leaving nothing but wild, panting moans and grunts.

Her vision blurred and the only thing in the world was the tightening spiral driving her to breaking point. She felt it coil, her frenzied movements seeking out what she needed. Powerless to stop the frantic drive to completion she surrendered control to her body, her conscious mind bypassed, becoming a creature of pure physicality and emotion. As she exploded, stars bursting against her eyelids, she gasped, over and over again, "I love you, I love you."

Spasming and jerking against him, for long minutes she was aware of nothing but the pulsing of her body. Then, as she collapsed against his chest, through the pounding of blood in her ears, she heard him say, "Yes," and felt the throb of his cock as he beat in time with the last waves of her orgasm.

She lay there, head rising and falling on his heaving chest listening to his heart racing, feeling the slow subsidence of his erection. She still straddled him, thighs still clasped to his sweat slicked hips. Her muscles strained and twinges of cramp warned her to move, but she stayed still, wanting to keep him nestled inside her. Their joining

had been complete in a way she had not known it could be. Pulling apart would be like breaking something precious.

Ryan must have felt the same way. He put one hand on her bottom, holding them together, then he reached out with the other and eased her legs down, relieving the strain on her muscles, letting her relax. Still holding her clamped to him, he rolled them onto their sides.

He gazed at her, eyes now soft and heavy lidded. He ran one hand along her flanks, shaping her body, smoothing the hollow curve of her waist, cupping the roundness of her shoulder, brushing her hair out of her eyes and running a thumb along her parted lips. "I love you," he said, clear and loud.

Amy's mouth curved against his thumb. A different warmth from the heat of passion spread through her. "I love you, too." She glowed in a moment of perfect happiness. Ryan loved her. There would be problems to work out, she knew it and she knew from the unsmiling line of his lips he knew it too, but right now, the simple knowledge of his love was enough. They could work out the implications of their odd pairing later. After all, he came from the future. They had all the time in the world.

Her eyes grew heavy and she drifted. Through the mists enfolding her she heard Ryan begging her, "Don't sleep. Not now." But exhaustion defeated her. She let herself sink, still held in his arms, still cradling him within her.

A wash of cold air brought her to consciousness. The pale gray light of earliest morning showed the empty space next to her. Ryan wasn't there. She snuggled back down, waiting for him to return from the bathroom. She tensed. Her hand spread out, fingers splayed, moving over the crumpled indentation on Ryan's side of the bed. She flung back the covers, pushing her hand hard against the bottom sheet. It was cold, no lingering warmth anywhere. Ryan had left the bed some time ago.

No sound of running water came from the open bathroom door. Puzzled, she got out of bed and wrapping her robe around her, wandered out into the lounge room. When she found it empty, she turned towards the kitchen. Her nostrils twitched, but she didn't detect the aroma of brewing coffee, couldn't hear the clatter of knives and forks.

Surveying the empty space, she called. "Ryan? Where are you?"

Her early morning vagueness gave way to a niggles of fear. Had someone, something else, tried get to her work during the night? Ryan had proven his alertness and his preparedness to protect her again and again. If someone had tried to break in, he would have launched himself into the attack, doing whatever was necessary to save her and her research.

The thought brought no comfort. If he'd left their bed to repel an intruder, where was he now? And how could she have slept so soundly that she had heard nothing?

She rushed outside, robe blowing in the breeze, looking up and down the street calling Ryan's name. She spotted an early morning walker, crossed to the other side of

the road sprinted up to him, grabbing his arm to draw his attention to her when her calls went unheeded. "Have you seen anyone lying hurt on the street?" His eyes widened and he backed away. Pulling the cord of his earphones out she said again, desperation making her shout. "I'm looking for a man – tall dark..."

A look of horror crossed the walker's face and he snatched his earphones back, turned and ran across the road. He looked back once, saw her still standing there and ran faster.

Don't panic, she told herself. If Ryan had been lying injured somewhere, someone would have noticed. If they'd called an ambulance he might be in hospital. She turned and hurried back to her apartment. If he were unconscious, how would anyone know who to call? She pulled the phone book out of the drawer and began to call. Fifteen minutes later, she put the phone down again. None of the nearest three hospitals had any record of admitting a man of Ryan's description in the last ten hours.

Since she'd already made the first moves down that line of thinking, she picked up the phone once more. When she'd finished the series of calls she knew no incidents that might have involved Ryan had been reported to the police.

She wiped her sweaty palms on the side of her robe. Ryan had defeated every attempt to hurt her or her work. He had shown himself more than capable of winning in a physical fight against someone from his own time, and his abilities to manipulate objects and people from this time made it unlikely that he had been hurt by one of them.

There had to be another explanation. She rubbed her tight chest, willing the adrenaline to subside, telling herself to relax. Perhaps he'd been restless, stirred up by the emotional intensity of what they shared the night before. If he'd been unable to sleep and had gone for a walk? She rolled her eyes at her own desperate stupidity. He didn't sleep. His body did, but he remained awake and watchful. And no amount of restlessness would ever make him walk out and leave her unprotected, at the mercy of whoever might come to harm her or her work.

Her work. Like a jolt of electricity the words snapped her upright and she opened her laptop. Her fingers drummed on the desktop as she waited agonizing minutes for the slow march of the startup process.

She clicked and scrolled, shoulders sagging in relief as every line of code came up looking as it should. No corruption marred the serried ranks of numbers and symbols. No one had interfered with it.

In the drawer where she kept her memory sticks she found only empty space. She pulled the drawer wider, yanking it off its runners, turning it upside down and shaking it, even though she could see it was empty.

Dropping it unheeded on the floor she checked her backup hard drive. The files were there, untouched, uncorrupted.

With her head clutched in her hands, she tried to think. The anthropomorphic computers wanted to destroy her and her work. They wouldn't take her memory sticks

and leave her and her computer intact. If extraterrestrial agencies hadn't been at work, that left someone from this time and place. She still had her data so that ruled out sabotage from human interference as well. Someone wanted a copy of her work. That meant either she was a victim of plagiarism or someone intended to use her work to publicly denigrate it.

The conference presenters had a brief outline, but they were unlikely to want to steal her program or ridicule it. That left Smallwood. He was the only person she had told in detail about her theory. If he'd been here and stolen her memory sticks, Ryan would go after him, make him give them back and manipulate his memory so he forgot anything about her theories. Anger at Smallwood swirled about in her mind mixed with the draining aftermath of worry about Ryan.

A glance at the clock told her that by now Smallwood would be at the lab, Ryan probably with him, making things look as normal as possible. She threw on clothes, not caring what she looked like. She just wanted to get to the lab and find Ryan and Smallwood. She remembered Ryan saying when he got angry, people got hurt and she didn't want Smallwood hurt. Not because she cared about him. She despised him, but her contempt for him didn't stop her recognizing their life together would be much easier—no matter what Ryan's skills were—if the lab director didn't have a range of injuries demanding explanation.

The door of the lab slammed against the wall as she shoved it open. "Where's Smallwood?" Aggression colored her voice, making the question a snarl. A stunned coworker pointed a shaking finger in the direction of the production lab. Amy charged. For the first time she didn't stop to don the protective clothing. She didn't care if dust corrupted every chip in the place.

Ray Smallwood turned and gasped. He leapt away from his work bench, arms outstretched and pushed her out the door, but not before she had a chance to see Ryan wasn't in there with him and that neither of Smallwood's eyes had been blackened.

"Where are my memory sticks?" she demanded. "And where is Ryan Mandeville?"

"Who?" Smallwood's eyes went blank for a moment, then rage narrowed his eyes, tightened his lips and reddened his face. "Dr. Peters. You had better have a good explanation for your outrageous behavior. How dare you come barging in here without the proper clothing?"

Maybe she could take care of doling out the black eyes herself. Amy's fists clenched. "I want the memory sticks you stole from me and I want to talk to Ryan Mandeville. What have you done with him?"

Smallwood pulled himself upright, his cheeks puffing out. "I have never stolen anything in my life, least of all a miserable little memory stick and I have no idea who this Mandeville person is."

With her chin jutting forward, Amy strode towards Smallwood until their noses almost touched and said, "You know damn well it's what's on the memory stick you were after..." She stopped, suddenly aware of the other half of his comment. She sank

back on her heels. “No idea who Mandeville is? Ryan Mandeville. Dr. Mandeville. He has accompanied me in this lab for the past few days. You said you admired his work.”

Smallwood took a step back. His nose wrinkled as if he smelled something unpleasant. “Dr. Peters, have you been drinking? Taking illicit substances? No Dr. Mandeville has ever worked here. I have never heard of such a person.”

“He’s tall and dark. You introduced him to the delegation who arrived to inspect the labs,” she insisted.

Smallwood crossed his arms and looked down his nose at her. “No delegation has visited the lab in the last three months.” He cleared his throat. “You are not well. I think perhaps you had better go home. Allow me to call you a taxi.” He turned to the phone.

Amy reached out and grabbed him. “I’m not sick. You’re lying.” She turned to the others in the lab, all of them watching the unfolding drama with eyes agog. “You all met Dr. Mandeville. You remember him.”

A flurry of embarrassed head shakes preceded the swift rotation of seats to face computers and microscopes. Amy faced a row of backs. She wrenched open her desk drawer. Her backup memory sticks sat in there designated spot.

She shook her head. “These don’t have the corrected code. That’s why...”

Smallwood placed his hand on her arm, his voice gentle with the exaggerated patience of those who dealt with the mentally ill. “No one took your memory sticks, Dr. Peters. You’re imagining things, just you like you imagined this Dr. Mandeville. You’ve been working too hard. Why don’t you try to get some rest?”

He escorted her towards the door. She saw him beckon to a security guard and heard him speak a few quiet words.

The guard grasped her elbow on the other side, his grip firm but insistent. “Come along, Dr. Peters. Home’s the best place for you right now.”

He took her down in the lift, summoned a taxi and helped her settle into the back seat. She moved like an automaton.

“Dr. Peters. Dr. Peters.” Her name being called with repeated impatience stirred her from her stupor. The security guard spoke with exaggerated slowness, “The taxi driver needs your address.”

She recited it, her voice flat, devoid of all expression.

The guard leaned in to speak to the driver. “She’s sick.” He made a whirling gesture with his finger round his ear. “She’s not likely to be dangerous. Make sure she gets into her apartment safely. Bill it all to the company.” The driver nodded and as soon as the door slammed shut, took off.

The journey passed in a daze and Amy only stirred when the cab stopped in front of her building and the cab driver opened the door to help her out. “Come on lady. Let’s get you upstairs.”

She shook off his hand and scowled at him. “Leave me alone. I don’t need your help.”

The cab driver went back to his car. "Fine by me."

He drove off, leaving her standing at the curb, staring vacantly after him.

At last she turned to go inside, trudged up the stairs, opened her door and sat down on the couch to wait. Ryan would come back. When he did he would explain all this.

For the rest of the day she sat on the couch. The hours ticked by and the afternoon sun shone in the windows, then faded into night. She didn't eat, didn't drink, didn't dare lie down on the bed she'd been sharing with Ryan. She just sat on the couch and concentrated on creating a hard shell of numbness to protect her from the fear and pain gnawing around the edges, threatening to overwhelm her.

* * * * *

The morning sun burned her dry, gritty eyes. Twenty-four hours since she had woken to find Ryan missing. Twenty-four hours since her life had fallen apart. Twenty-four hours in which to realize he was gone and he wasn't coming back.

The job was done. He had protected her from the threat posed by the computers long enough for her to finish her work. He had wormed and weaseled his way into her affections, made her love him, said that he loved her, but as soon as he knew her work was finished, checked and accurate he had gone, taking copies with him. Sometime during the long, dark hours of the night that conclusion had become inescapable.

She didn't know why, couldn't understand the significance of his taking her memory sticks, but since he'd given her as little information as possible she couldn't be expected to.

Without a goodbye, without telling her why he could not stay longer, even though he cared for her, he had gone. He couldn't have loved her the way she loved him or he could never have done it, but she knew he felt something. Maybe her ego demanded that she think that, but when she replayed the memory of that last night, the shaking of his body, the look on his face, the way he said, I love you, she believed.

She rubbed her eyes and stood up. Her life hadn't ended. All the promise, all the hope, all the love had been sucked out of it, but she had to go on. By the time the next twenty-four hours had passed, she would have delivered her paper to the conference.

Ryan had come to Earth, put his life on the line to make sure she gave that paper, to make sure her research was released to the world. Maybe she could never see him again, but she could do this for him. Deliver that paper so one day, far in the future, somewhere in an unknown galaxy, Ryan could look up from whatever he was doing and smile. Smile because he knew he had helped her do what she had to and because of that the future was as it should be. If regret for what might have been tinged that smile, she hoped he also cherished the memory of what they'd had.

Chapter Nine

Amy struggled downstairs to the waiting cab. The gloomy wardrobe of grays and blacks she'd packed suited her mood, but at the conference she hoped to pass for professional instead of just depressed. She arrived at the airport at precisely the right time. Her eagerness to present the paper had disappeared along with Ryan, but she couldn't stand waiting any longer in the hollow emptiness of her apartment. She took her place in the check-in line. A loud-voiced man behind her complained about the length of the wait, asking why extra staff had not been assigned to the task. Amy wearily stepped aside and gestured him through, too apathetic to care how long she stood there. She just wanted relief from his blustery, bullying tones.

When she reached the counter, she handed over her ticket. "Are you travelling alone?" For a moment she looked at the girl who asked the question, remembering the plans she and Ryan had made. He'd said he'd come to the conference. Her eyes prickled and stared back down at the floor. Even then she'd have flown alone. She mumbled a reply to the check-in clerk, took her boarding pass and made her way to the boarding lounge. She didn't look at her seat allocation. Why bother? Aisle seat or window, or right in the middle where she would have to move every time someone got up to go to the toilet, she didn't care.

Lost in a cloud of darkness, she only vaguely heard the bland voice making an announcement in English, then French. Something about a delay. The second time the voice repeated itself she lifted her head and paid a bit more attention. The name Vanuatu pierced her introspection. She flashed her eye over the departures board. Next to the call sign for her flight a red *Delayed* sign flashed.

Around her, people groaned. The large belligerent man started shouting again. Amy covered her ears with her hands. She stayed that way, eyes squeezed shut, ignoring the sounds around her, even though in the confusion it sounded as though someone called her name. But no one at the airport would call her Amy. If she were needed the loud speaker system would page Dr. Peters.

Why couldn't the noise and the confusion disappear and leave her alone to be miserable in peace? She pushed her hands tighter against her ears. A strong hand pulled them away. "Amy."

Her lids rocketed up and she found herself looking into Ryan's beloved dark eyes. He said again, his voice rich with affection. "Amy."

She launched herself at him, arms wrapped around his neck in a death grip, tears of joy and relief pouring down her cheeks. "You're here. You're all right. I was so worried. I thought you were hurt." She swallowed. "Or dead." She buried her face in his neck, so

he couldn't see her shame at the doubts she'd had. "I thought you'd gone back to wherever it is you came from and left me here alone."

His arms tightened around her and his lips dropped to her hair. "I did."

It took a moment for the meaning of his words to sink in. She lifted watery eyes to his face. "But you came back. You knew you were coming back? You never intended to go without a word and leave me forever."

A muscle flexed in his cheek. "I intended to, yes. I was supposed to."

Her words were almost inaudible, even to her own ears. A bitter hurt and betrayal burned like acid in her stomach. She pulled away from him. "You couldn't wait to go home once you finished the job. Is that it?"

"I hadn't finished the job," he said through gritted teeth, and a muscle flexed in his jaw. "Not until I handed a copy of your research over to those who sent me here."

Amy evaded his attempt to pull her back into his arms. "I suppose that explains my missing memory sticks. Although I'd have thought an alien from the future could have come up with something more advanced than that."

With a shrug he dismissed her comment. "I used what was available." His hand encircled her wrist, so she couldn't get away from him.

She stood stiffly beside him, refusing to unbend. "Why have you come back? Is there something you forgot to do? Find someone else. I've made my contribution to the future."

"I came back for you," he said, giving her shoulders a gentle shake. "You have to listen to me."

"No. I don't have to do anything for you." In the background a disembodied voice announced the flight to Vanuatu was now boarding. Amy lifted her carryon luggage from the seat beside her. "I have to go, Ryan."

His hands tightened on her shoulders. "Amy. Don't get on that plane."

"I have a conference to attend. A paper to deliver." Her voice cracked. "You said it was important. You wouldn't want to stop me from doing it."

"I said your work was important. I never said anything about you delivering the paper." His grim, tight tone held a note of something Amy couldn't decipher. She stood still, gazing at him steadily.

His fingers flexed on her shoulders. He cleared his throat, but when he spoke his voice sounded strangled and rusty. "You never delivered that paper, Amy. You never made it to the conference."

The color had drained from his face leaving it pale and strained. "Terrorists planted a bomb on the plane. It exploded over the ocean. Everyone on board died."

Her knees gave way and she sank. Ryan lowered her onto the chair. He clasped her hands in his. "You never delivered the speech and your amended work disappeared with you. All that remained were the notes for a research paper that was never delivered and a memory stick in your desk with the uncorrected program on it."

Ignoring the crowd of people around them, pushing and shoving to get onto the ill-fated flight she turned dazed eyes on him. "But you said my research changed the world. How could that happen?"

"After the news about the airline disaster hit, as a mark of respect, your paper was read by the conference organizers." He squeezed her hand tight. "It was instantly hailed as a success and several researchers took up your ideas." He gave her a half smile. "Ray Smallwood found the memory stick in your desk drawer and he used the information on it to gain kudos for the lab, making it a world center for research into organic computer chip design."

"So why did you have to come back? If my work went ahead anyway?"

"Because your research still had the original flaw in it. The only copies of the corrected codes were in your laptop and on your backup drive and since no one knew you'd made a correction, no one looked for it."

Her brow furrowed. "Then how did you know?"

"Because we have searched for something like it for eons. Your work led to the design of organic computers, but your amendment stopped them from self-reproducing without human intervention," he told her. "The missing command you detected was necessary to prevent organic-based computers becoming the most prolific life form in the universe."

"Is that why they planted a bomb on the plane?" She gripped his forearm. "Now that you're here and you've removed it, defused it, or whatever you have to do, I'll be able to go to the conference after all."

His lips tightened. "I haven't removed the bomb. This had nothing to do with the future. The terrorists who planted the bomb are home-grown, trying to gain independence for a small nation in the Pacific."

The last man in the boarding queue disappeared around a corner on the boarding ramp. She leapt to her feet. "You have to tell them. You have to get rid of it. We can't let all these people die."

Ryan's feet stayed firmly fixed. "I can't change history, Amy. I came back without permission. I stopped you from going on the plane. I've already interfered too much."

She grabbed his hand and started pulling him towards the boarding ramp. "In that case you might as well go the whole way. We are not letting a planeload of people die when we can prevent it."

The airline employee at the gate moved towards them. He held out his hand. "May I see your boarding pass please, sir, madam."

Amy held hers out, but Ryan's hand was empty.

The man frowned. "I'm afraid I'll have to call security."

"Ryan." Threat echoed in Amy's tone.

Ryan sighed. He looked at the man, making eye contact. The uniformed shoulders relaxed. "Thank you, sir. Seat 156B towards the rear of the plane. Have a nice flight."

As soon as they were out of sight they broke into a run. They skidded to a halt in front of the doors, just as the hostess moved to close them. She looked at Ryan and motioned them inside. People were still standing, stowing luggage in lockers and shuffling about, getting organized. Ryan and Amy made their way towards the cockpit.

Each time someone tried to intercept them, Ryan gave him one of his looks and the way cleared for them. When they burst through the door, the pilot turned, interrupting the final stages of his preflight routine. He looked at Ryan, then swung back in his seat. He spoke into the radio and then moved his hand. The sound of powerful jet engines backed off and slowly died. Ryan slumped back against the frame of the bulkhead for a moment then pulled Amy back into the main cabin. The pilot's measured voice came over the PA system. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. Our pre-flight check has discovered a problem with the electrical system. The aircraft will be unable to make the scheduled flight. The company regrets the inconvenience and assures you will be transferred to another flight as soon as possible. Please exit the aircraft and return to the terminal. Once again, we apologize for the inconvenience."

Amidst a roar of protest and questions, people began to disembark. Most people seemed to be disgruntled, but were more willing to leave a possibly dangerous flight than to take any risk of a crash.

Amy hung back to avoid the crowd. "Is that it?" she whispered. "What about the bomb?"

He walked past an airport security guard. "Watch."

The guard started running, speaking on his radio, gesturing frantically to other guards around him. "That guard is telling everyone the airline just received a bomb threat. Within minutes that plane will be swarming with police and emergency crew. They'll pull the plane apart. They'll find it."

Amy wrapped her arms around his waist. "I don't care if we changed the future. I couldn't have stood it if we'd let all those people die."

He kissed the top of her head. "And I couldn't live on, knowing I'd let you get on that plane." He grinned at her. "Come on, let's go back to the counter."

She wrinkled her forehead. "Why?"

"Because we're going to get your flight rescheduled. You have a paper to deliver."

* * * * *

Steam rose from the warm spa. Outside the glass walls of the room, spotlights shone on the rich foliage of a tropical paradise. Amy sipped golden champagne from a frosted glass. "You got us both a seat on the first available flight to Vanuatu, you got our room upgraded, you got us a private spa. You're useful to have around." Ryan stretched out a long leg and lifted his foot to the apex of her thighs. He burrowed his toes in, wiggling them in a tantalizing way. Amy spread her legs a little wider and

enjoyed. With a deep contented purr, she dropped her head back and muttered. "You'll have to stop for a minute."

Without stilling his toes, he lifted an eyebrow. She sat up, grabbed his foot and pushed it away. "I can't think when you do that."

He moved around the spa to sit next to her. "So don't think. You've delivered your paper and impressed every one with your intellectual capacity. Time to play."

Using only one hand she fended him off. The other she kept firmly wrapped around the stem of the glass. "Seriously. We need to talk."

He groaned. "I may have only been on Earth a little while, but already I know that's not good."

She dug him in the ribs. "I want to understand what happened. I've forgiven you for leaving me to die—but only because you came back to save me."

All signs of playfulness dropped away from him. "Right from the start I knew what I had to do. Before I arrived in your bedroom that night I knew the date you had died in a plane crash. I thought I could get the information we needed and leave before that happened, as untouched as I had been before we started. What could it matter? You were just someone who died thousands of years before my time. Twenty, thirty, fifty years one way or another meant nothing. You were still dead."

Her champagne glass hit on the tiles with a clatter, the wine inside tasted bitter. Ryan reached out to take her hand. "I didn't expect to find you in bed with that jerk Scott and I didn't expect to find you so attractive and erotic. I wanted it to be me in bed with you and because I wanted it, I decided sex would be the best way to relax you and enhance your work output. I had to have the revised code."

Amy battled down her hurt. If he'd started out that way, it didn't matter now. "But why?" she asked. "With all your advances, why couldn't you have found out what you needed to know yourself?"

"The computers had followed basic evolutionary principals. At some point they had developed from machines into self-replicating organisms. We knew it was connected to your work but we couldn't pinpoint the exact moment it happened," he told her. "If we could trace it back, we could prevent it, but it was a bit like your current understanding of the development of life on Earth. You know what the Earth was like before, you know what it was like after, but you don't know what happened at the exact moment life began."

Her brows knit as she tried to follow his argument. "But if I was meant to die and the code I discovered went with me, how did you know to come back? How did you pinpoint it to me?"

He grinned at her, his mood lightening. "Your paper."

"You said the conference organizers delivered my *original* paper and based all the subsequent work on that," Amy reminded him.

His grin widened. "True, but as soon as you discovered the flaw in the code you sent the conference an email advising them you had found an error and that you would be bringing an amendment with you. They made a brief note about it in the program welcoming notes, said that you had exciting new breaking news about implications of organic replication. It was a flag, the clue we'd been searching for over generations. I was sent back to make sure we got the information we needed and you know the rest."

Thoughts flashed through Amy's brain, tumbling over one another. She had so many questions. "What will they do now they have that information?"

"Work out the crucial moment when replication of the chips bypassed the end point in the original program and send someone back to stop it," he explained. "It didn't happen for at least a couple of hundred years after your time, so you won't see it, but you played your part."

"And survived it, even though I wasn't meant to." Another question bubbled to the surface. "You saved me and all those people on the plane. Are you going to get into serious trouble?"

"I would if I went back, but I'm not going back." He shrugged. "I don't think they'll go to the trouble of sending someone after me. They have much bigger problems to deal with."

Her heart warmed from the inside rather than from the heat of the spa. "So you're staying here, with me."

"Not here, precisely. As lovely as it is. But with you, definitely," he confirmed and her heart did a happy flip-flop.

"Will you miss it?" she asked, looking into his eyes. "Miss your home and what you were?"

"It will feel strange, being surrounded by a body at all times," Ryan agreed. "When this body wears out, I'll go back. I'll have to. I don't know how I could maintain my pure energy state here."

She didn't want to think about bodies wearing out, getting old, dying. Not here, not now, not yet. There were consequences, complications of Ryan's nature she was too scared to explore. She had much better things to do. She slid her hand into the warm water.

Her fingertips spread out on his hard thigh, digging into the wet, firm flesh, scraping the skin with her nails. As her fingers slipped higher and higher, his pupils expanded and his eyelids drooped to hide them. Color highlighted the skin stretched tightly across his cheeks and his tongue crept out to moisten his lips. Her nails ran lightly across the underside of his balls and they contracted. He lifted himself on his elbows, just a tiny motion but enough for her to see the tension thrumming through him. Fire burnt in his eyes, the flames fanned by her, and burning for her.

Her hand slid higher, encircling his swollen penis and he gasped out her name. She pumped him, once twice, never taking her eyes off his face, watching emotion shape it, watching it glisten under a sheen of sweat.

When he reached for her she held him off, pushing him back against the side of the spa, spreading him out for her enjoyment. She whispered, "I love you," but she couldn't tell if he heard over the sound of bubbling water and the distraction of her swift strokes.

He obeyed the pressure of her hand, smiling as he tilted his head back and opened his legs, granting her access. Amy's chest tightened with a mixture of love and the intense satisfaction of seeing him, focused on her, giving himself to her wholly, body and soul, so different from the man he'd first been, dispensing sexual favors as a duty; something to be done and done well as a matter of professional pride.

The taut line of his lips, his heavy lidded eyes, his dark, dilated pupils revealed the strength of his need and he did nothing to hide it. Amy almost came from the pleasure that awareness gave her.

She squeezed him again, running her thumb over the slit in the tip, loving the way his breath hitched and his hips lifted uncontrollably. No, not uncontrollably. He chose not to control his reaction to her, to be as open and as honest as he could be. And that more than anything else convinced her of his commitment to her.

The hand she held against his chest flexed and circled the hard points of his nipples. His breath puffed out in short, desperate bursts, the rhythm matching the pumping motion of her hand on his cock. Every breath echoed in her chest, his excitement driving her arousal higher and higher.

His balls contracted again, pulling tighter against his body. A tremor vibrated through him and he groaned. "Amy, I'm going to come. I can't...I can't." His voice failed, his back arched thrusting his cock and Amy's hand with it out of the water. Thick, creamy fluid spurted upward, spattering over his chest and the hand Amy held there, dropping back down to run over her fist.

Amy leaned forward and licked one hard nipple. "Mmmn. You taste so good."

When her pink tongue lapped at the traces of come, he groaned again and his cock flexed in her hand. His hips slowly sank down into the water and his chest heaved as he tried to drag air into his constricted lungs. Under her hand, Amy felt his racing heart begin to slow.

He rolled his head to look at her. "You can do whatever you want with me."

"Is that a complaint?" Amy grinned at him.

"Oh no. It's an offer. Now. In the future. Whenever. I'm yours."

She snuggled up against him. Sweat and semen and his own essential smell made his scent irresistible. She licked his skin again. Like a match to a trail of gunpowder, it set off an instant reaction. He surged up out of the water, taking Amy, still wrapped around his chest with him. He spun her around so she faced the side of the pool, her body draped against the floor, her bottom arched up into the air, her knees on the seat of the spa. Ryan's hands moved around her hips, coming together to cushion her from the floor while the weight of their combined bodies rubbed her clit and her slick folds against them.

From behind, Ryan spread her legs with his thighs. He sank his teeth into the sinews running from her neck to her shoulder and when she arched he drove his cock, hard and hot again into her. Her breath rushed out in a tight scream.

His fingers worked on her clit as his cock drove into her over and over. She reached down and covered his hands with her own, then stretched even further to stroke his balls. Her actions drove him into a frenzy and he pounded against her. Amy writhed beneath him, too lost in passion for the roughness to be anything other than a delicious counterpoint to the pleasure.

She abandoned any concept of the outside world and became a creature of pure sensation, aware only of the urgent need to mate, of the ultimate rightness of being one with Ryan.

He drove hard into her, his fingers vibrated on her clit and the pulse spread through her body, rushing in waves into every cell and she came with a scream that robbed the air from her lungs and left her quivering and blinded, slumped over the side of the spa. She felt Ryan tense behind her, felt his cock spilling into her as his own orgasm hit him. His lips nuzzled the back of her neck and through the haze she heard him mutter, over and over again, "I love you, I love you."

Chapter Ten

They dropped their bags on the apartment floor. Amy waved a piece of paper above her head, her feet shuffling in an impromptu happy dance. "I can't believe they sent a courier to the apartment with this. And that he was waiting when we got here." She stopped for a moment and gave him a narrow eyed look. "You didn't have anything to do with this, did you? No implanted memories? No manipulation?"

Ryan laughed and shook his head. "Nope. You deserved this fair and square."

"A fellowship. At one of Europe's oldest universities," she gloated. "I won't have to face Ray Smallwood ever again—assuming he'd let me back in the lab after my enforced sick leave is over." She twirled around again. "And they want you to work for them too. You really impressed Professor Scarborough over dinner that night." She squealed in delight. "I'm sooooo excited."

"Let's celebrate. I'll take you out to dinner. What's the best restaurant in Sydney?"

She named it, but added, "We can't go there. They have a three month waiting list."

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Lucky I made reservations three months ago for tonight then isn't it?"

"But you couldn't have. You weren't here three months ago. How could you..." Comprehension dawned. "Oh. Okay. I wouldn't want you to help me get offered a position, but dinner reservations I can accept."

She hummed to herself as she put on her best clothes. Living with Ryan had some distinct advantages. At the restaurant, Ryan strode confidently up to the maitre d'. "Booking for two in the name of Mandeville."

The man looked at the book in front of him, then looked back at Ryan. "I'm sorry, sir, we have no reservation in that name."

Ryan made eye contact with him. "Look again, please."

The man dutifully scanned the page once more. His voice took on a frosty note when he replied. "There is no reservation for Mandeville. I am afraid you must have mistaken the date. Reservations are made well in advance, sir."

Ryan looked stunned. Amy grabbed his hand, mumbled a brief, "I'm sorry," and dragged him out.

In the cool night air, Ryan swayed and clasped his hand to his forehead. "I don't feel right."

Across the street was a park and she led him to it. Fear that he was about to be snatched away from her, that the authorities from wherever he came from had come to arrest him—or worse—robbed her of breath, made her knees shake. She didn't want to live without him.

Anger and determination strengthened her spine, tightened her muscles. Adrenaline spiked in her chest. Flight was not an option. If they wanted him they'd have to fight her first. He'd done everything he could to protect her and she'd do the same for him. Especially now, when he seemed so helpless.

When she pushed him down onto a bench his eyes closed. He sat, as rigid as a statue, lost to the sensations of this world. She called his name, prodded him, shook him. He didn't respond.

With frantic fingers she reached under his chin. His pulse still beat. His breath misted warm and moist on her cheek, but he gave no other sign of consciousness. She sat down next to him, took his hand and held on, her knuckles whitening under the pressure. She would not let him go.

People walked past concerned with their own lives. No one spared them a glance. Time stretched and dilated, so that every second took hours to pass. The minute hand on the town hall clock, clearly visible from where Amy sat, crept along...one minute...two. How long before she had to face the inevitable and call for help? How long before she had to admit that Ryan had left her once again. Three minutes...four...chimes rang out to mark the hour.

As the last bell faded away, Ryan's eyes slowly opened. His tongue flicked out to moisten dry lips and his voice rose in wonder. "I'm human."

Amy let go the breath she'd been holding and slumped forward onto his chest, wrapped her arms around him and clung. "I know. You've been telling me that since you first met me."

"No. I mean I'm *human*." He shook his head, his eyes wide. "Nothing more, nothing less. I've lost my ability to plant memories." He sniffed. "I've lost my heightened sense of smell. I have no central energy core. I'm human."

Amy lifted her head to examine him. He looked a little paler, his eyes narrowed with an emotion Amy could not identify. "Are you all right. What happened to you? You seemed to just go off into space for a while."

He cupped her chin in his hands, then began to speak, every word emerging slowly. "That's exactly what I did. They called me back home."

Amy gasped and shuddered. "No. They can't..."

The warm fingers caressing her skin tightened. "They can. They did." He rested his forehead against hers. "They offered me a choice, Amy. Come back to my home planet now, or remain on Earth, as a human. An average, mortal human whose life will end just as every other human's eventually must."

A lump formed in Amy's throat. "And you chose...?"

"I chose you." He looked deep into her eyes. "I love you, Amy."

Warmth, deeper and richer than the summer sun, poured over her. "I love you, too."

Ryan's lips closed over hers. When he drew back, Amy nestled her head against his shoulder. "You've seen the future. Tell me what happens to us."

Ryan laughed, although it lacked much humor. "I don't know, Amy. Not anymore. I'm just a human being in the twenty-first century."

Amy blew out a breath. "Then we'll have to wait and see what happens. Everyone else on Earth lives that way." She looked at the people walking through the park. "I had no idea what would happen if I let you into my life. I took the risk anyway, because that's what people do. We live our lives and hope everything works out well." She flung her arms wide. "I know we have great jobs to look forward to. I know we love each other." She clasped his hands in hers. "That's enough for me."

The fire in his eyes made her heart flip over in her chest. "It sounds perfect." His color had returned and he stood. "Come on, we'll go and get some fish and chips and have them here. I'll have to get used to doing things the way the rest of the human race does." He turned and smiled at her, this time with genuine warmth. "How hard can it be? If all you primitive types can manage it, I will too."

Amy walked beside him, her arm wrapped around his waist. If he found living as a human being hard and at times he would, she'd be there to help him through. All he needed was someone to watch over him, and she had the job for life.

About the Author

Alysha Ellis is a multi-published author who lives in Australia. When she isn't busy drinking champagne, eating chocolate and letting her inner tart run free, she writes erotic fiction. Her favorite quote comes from Mae West... "A hard man is good to find." Who could argue with that? Alysha tires very hard to be bad, because bad girls have all the fun.

Alysha welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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