

Loving Who



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Published by Mojocastle Press, LLC
Price, Utah

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ISBN: 1-60180-075-4

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LOVING Who

CHAPTER ONE

The Man in the Bar

The one episode I don't like in the new series of Doctor Who is 'The Girl in the Fireplace'. It's not like the writing is weak – because it isn't – or that I didn't care for the premise, because that's okay, too. I like historical setting time travel stories with a mix of future technologies and the past.

I think the real reason why I didn't care for the episode was because Madame de Pompadour, mistress of King Louis XV, shamelessly snogs the Doctor right on the lips.

Why, of all the nerve! The slut!

A fangirl always hates when her fantasy man cheats on her.

I almost spilled my banana daiquiri in my lap.

There he sat at the end of the bar opposite me – the man of my dreams. The man I had been desperately searching for my entire life. The man destined by fate, God or some other sentient power in the Cosmos to become our leading man. The impossible. The improbable. The most important, most influential being ever to travel throughout space and time

He perched himself on a stool in a practically empty watering hole near Lambert Field, St. Louis, nursing a beer. He sat tall, a thin figure sporting short,

chestnut hair mussed in a sexy, endearing manner. And if I wasn't mistaken in the dimly lit, perpetually smoky room, his attire consisted of a rumpled chocolate-colored business suit and a half undone, chocolate and sky blue-swirled tie. He took his first sip of beer and made a pained face, sliding his long tongue across his top teeth as if to analyze the individual components of the brew. He narrowed his large brown eyes and glanced furtively about the place.

My God—it had to be *him*. But how on earth? My raging hormones must have scrambled my neurons. It couldn't be him. He was a fictional character, for heaven's sake. What a time to give up taking Prozac! I had finally dived into the deep end of insanity.

I vowed to stop drinking then and there, but I had to know. I had to find out if this perfect specimen would be willing to help us bring Sammy's cinematic creation to life. I summoned up my courage, put down my drink and stood, ungracefully tugging my short denim skirt down. Then I approached him.

"You come here often?" I said, smiling.

Yes, I know it's horribly cliché—but it's what guys who frequent this sort of establishment expect a lone woman to say. I don't frequently engage in this sort of activity. I actually have other means of making a living. When I do hit the bars, it's more like moonlighting. As a multi-divorced gal who has seen her share of heartaches and financial disasters, it sure helps when I'm short on cash to pay the bills—or if I want to do some serious shopping at a con, a sci-fi convention, that is—or if I need to raise funds for a

worthy cause quickly, as in this case.

Amazingly enough, my rusty overture did the trick.

My dream man immediately stopped searching the room and focused his gaze on my face. His dark, soulful eyes connected with mine for just a second, but in that brief span I felt as if all of time had come and gone and come again. The stale odor of liquor and cigarettes vanished, to be replaced by the uplifting scents of sunlight and roses. The darkness of a thousand starless nights lifted like a veil from my mind. Life's meaning became suddenly and perfectly clear. My psyche rang with childlike wonder. He read my thoughts and, surprisingly, he didn't find them wanting.

Then, just as suddenly, he smiled. He smiled that beautiful, brilliant, captivating smile I'd fallen hard for in his first episode. My knees turned to Jell-O and my hormones shifted into overdrive.

"You come here often." He repeated my words in what sounded like a British accent. The twinkle in his eye conveyed that he found my pick-up line both amusing and intriguing. "Yes, I do. Well, not to this specific place, mind you, but I have traveled to this...area...now and then."

"I know this will sound strange," I said slowly, taking the barstool next to him and gripping the counter's edge hard to remain upright, "but you look very familiar to me. Have you ever acted on television before?"

Up went the eyebrows. "Acted? On television? I took action against a television transmitter once, but I

can't say anyone has ever paid me to appear on the screen."

"Really? I find that hard to believe. You look exactly like David Tennant."

He tilted his head and scrunched up his face. "Who?"

I shuddered. The guy must be totally convinced that I was an escapee from the nuthouse by now, but I pressed on anyway. "David Tennant. He's the current actor who portrays the Doctor on *Doctor Who*. You're the spitting image of him. It's uncanny."

For several long moments those big brown eyes searched my face again. His strength of mind delved deeper into my thought. Oddly enough, I felt like a computer outputting data to a curious user. No, it couldn't be. I blushed under his scrutiny, but remained transfixed. Even if I had ruined my chance to make a couple of bucks bonking another traveling salesman, I had at least found the perfect leading man for Sammy's script. I couldn't afford to let this...whoever he was...get away.

"Oh, *Doctor Who*, the television program?" A light bulb of understanding appeared over his head a moment later. He settled back on his barstool and grinned. "Yes, I know what you're talking about. Used to watch it when I was a kid. I loved hiding behind the furniture whenever the Daleks came onto the screen. Scary beasties, those Daleks."

My shoulders slumped in relief. At least he didn't seem to be an ax murderer, and he could very well turn out to be a fellow sci-fi geek. Perhaps I could appeal to his sense of brotherhood in the world of

fandom?

"The Daleks can be nasty, but I've always thought the Cybermen were much more frightening," I said, smiling at his all-too-commonly made remark.

"You mean the tin androids with the torch on top of their noggins?"

"Torch? Ah, yeah, you mean the flashlight. I agree it wasn't the best of creature designs, but it works for me. The Daleks are just plain too clumsy-looking—although in the new series with all the cool CGI animation they fly and do all kinds of frightening things with those funky toilet plunger arms of theirs."

"It's never been their flying but their voices that scared the wits out of me." He made a fist and stuck out an arm to approximate the cycloptic alien menace's eyestalk. "'Exterminate! Exterminate!' They sound cold and nasal, like they have a terminal sinus condition."

"Exactly!"

We both laughed until our sides ached. This guy was it. We had to have him in the cast, and I knew the fastest way to hook him. I angled my long legs toward his and leaned across the counter with a bold gaze, displaying my plunging neckline to its best advantage.

"So...you wanna come back to my place and watch a few episodes?"

His furtive glancing about the room started again. "I don't know. I'm looking for someone."

"A business associate?"

"You could say that. I don't want to leave until I'm absolutely sure my...*associate* won't show."

I leaned back. "I understand. You don't want the boss to get angry with you for missing your appointment. Maybe later?"

He smiled wistfully. "I'm not staying in town for very long."

I sighed. "Gee, it's too bad you're not the Doctor. If you were a Time Lord, you could stay in town as long as you liked, travel backwards in time to this place and wait for your associate to show up then."

He stared at me for a very long moment. I cringed inwardly. Such incoherent babbling only fell from the lips of a loony bin inmate. What an idiot I could be at times!

"Brilliant!" He clapped his hands together and hopped off the barstool. "What an inspired piece of logic. Let's go."

The fluttering butterflies in my stomach went into kamikaze mode. I couldn't believe my luck. "You—you actually want to come with me and watch *Doctor Who* episodes?"

"Of course. Lead on."

My jaw fell open in shock, but I quickly pulled myself together. I led him out of the bar and to my old Honda in the parking lot. I quickly checked my reflection in the rearview mirror as I plopped into the driver's seat. Ugh. My faded blonde hair and feathered fuchsia lipstick didn't exactly make me the most attractive woman in the universe. Still, it hadn't put my dream man off from crawling into my junker.

"My name is Cicily Connors," I said as I started the car, "but everyone calls me 'Cici' for short. And your name is?"

He flashed those dazzling white teeth at me again and wiggled his eyebrows. His goofy grin rocketed tingles of anticipation up my spine. Somehow, I knew his answer already.

“The name is Smith. John Smith.”

CHAPTER TWO

Fools Reunion

In 'School Reunion', the tenth Doctor meets up with one of his former assistants, Sarah Jane, and he acts quite happy to see her. I found this a novel concept because in the older series the Doctor seems to forget all about his traveling companions once they've disembarked. He never gives them a second thought.

It's nice to know that perhaps he really hasn't forgotten about those brave souls... That saving the universe isn't such an all-consuming task that he doesn't have the time to sit and wonder what his old friends have been up to lately.

Sarah Jane has always been one of my favorite companions. Why do I admire her? It's simple. With or without the Doctor, Sarah Jane can take care of herself.

Before I go much further, I believe I should give some background information on why I was out trawling for Doctor lookalikes in the first place.

It all started about a week earlier at our monthly meeting of TARDIS at the back of Milo's Comics and Collectable Store in suburban Fenton, Missouri. Located in the 'Old Town' section, the aging storefront stands a couple blocks off the Meramec River and a few doors down from the infamous adult book and lingerie store that drives business into the

small downtown area.

I know TARDIS is not an original name, but our acronym doesn't stand for 'time and relative dimensions in space' like it does on the show. Our group's acronym stands for 'Time-travelers and Related Doctor (Who) Interested Specialists'. In other words, we're all fans who love watching and discussing the BBC's long running sci-fi series. At least twenty-five of us get together regularly, and most of us do not live in our parents' basements. We all hold decent jobs and some of us possess some kind of advanced degree, if only from the school of hard knocks.

We had planned to film Sammy's script for some time now, but we had neither the money nor the will to get us off our backsides long enough to actually do it. Then came the news of his diagnosis.

"I can't believe it—I can't believe it," Jessie Erikson said over and over again. She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes beneath her thick, round glasses with a tissue, passing the box to the next person in our semicircle of rickety metal folding chairs. "I can't believe the bone marrow transplants didn't work. How long do they give Sammy?"

"Six months. Maybe a little longer." Milo, Jessie's husband, sighed. A burly guy who enjoyed shaving his head and sporting a gold earring like a pirate, it wasn't like Milo to show much emotion. Still, I could tell the news had hit him hard. He was doing his best to hold back the tears. "Sammy has beaten it this long. It's a miracle he didn't succumb to it as a child."

Chandra Weis, our resident artist and wannabe

hippie, attired in tie-dyed caftan and sandals, stared vacantly into space. "He's looked so healthy lately. I sketched him a couple of months ago wearing the Tom Baker scarf he finally finished knitting, and he was all giggles and smiles. What happened?"

"His body probably couldn't cope with the transplanted tissue any longer, and it quit working." Trina Campbell wiped a tear from her delicate blue eyes and shook her black curls sadly. An expert seamstress and costumer, Trina had helped Sammy to win many a con masquerade over the years. He had been the perfect model for some of her more outlandish spectacles, always willing to sweat buckets inside a fur-covered Yeti suit or roast alive in a silver lame and aluminum foil Cyberman outfit.

"It won't be the same if he's not here to play Davros to my Emperor Dalek." Kevin Grimm, our resident monster and spaceship set builder, shook his head. Kevin sports the Doctor's arch enemy the Master's sinister goatee and moustache and stands as tall as an Ice Warrior, albeit he's a bit softer in the middle. "This sucks. We'd planned to create the entire Slitheen family for Costume Con. We would have won, too."

"I could see it now—it would have been so cool!" Chandra laughed through her tears. "I would paint a picture of you all in oils with number ten Downing Street in the background. Oh..." Kevin gazed down at his shoes, and Chandra grabbed a tissue as another sob racked her thin form.

I sniffed. "Sammy is like the son I never had."

Trina regarded me sadly. "Don't you have any

kids, Cici?"

"No, I've never been that fortunate." I had in fact experienced two pregnancies—and two miscarriages. I swallowed hard and pushed the thought away. I hated to think of yet another failed area in my life, along with not being able to keep husbands from wandering off.

We collectively sighed. The enormity of our pending loss weighed heavily on our hearts for several moments. We couldn't let go of our dear friend so easily. We had to do *something* to honor his contributions to our club and our lives. I blew my nose, pitched my tissue and stood to address the grief-stricken group.

"We can't wait any longer. We need to start production on *The Frightening Fairgrounds* as soon as possible. Sammy should be able to see his story on the screen by Archon in August. Agreed?"

Every head in the room nodded. Good. The will was there, but what about the money? We all turned to Milo. He raised his hands in protest.

"Now, look here, I don't have that kind of money. People aren't exactly rushing into the store these days. Even with the dirty bookstore nearby bringing people into the downtown, Jessie and I are only barely able to get by now. We wouldn't be able to pay the bills if we didn't have her teacher's salary."

"Can we try for an arts grant or something?" Trina wondered out loud.

"Too late for that." Chandra slid from her chair to sit crosslegged on the floor. "Those things take months to write up and submit and then there's no

telling when or if they'll give you the money. Believe me, I've tried."

"A bank loan should do the trick," Rick suggested. Tall, African-American and totally nerdy, Rick Hill is our resident computer whiz and number cruncher. He also has a thing for pyrotechnics. His Fourth of July backyard extravaganzas are out of this world. "Just sign for a small business loan, Milo. You've got good credit. You've got the store for collateral. We'll all pay you back gradually so you can pay the bank back."

A mutter of agreement circled the room. I took the initiative.

"All in favor of Milo taking out a bank loan so we can finance Sammy's film raise your hand."

Every hand except Milo's went up. He slapped his forehead and locked gazes with his wife. "D'oh! Not you, too, Jessie."

She nodded, her bowl-cut, gray-streaked brown hair bouncing up and down with enthusiasm. "It's the least we can do for Sammy. We've all enjoyed acting out his scripts on stage at various cons. The least we can do is to help make his dream come true before..."

Someone hurriedly passed the tissue box to her again. A second later there wasn't a dry eye in the shop. Even Milo couldn't fight back the gloom.

"I'll direct it so we keep things under budget, okay?" His lips quivered with suppressed emotion. Everyone indicated that this was agreeable. "It shouldn't cost too much if we all donate the props, costumes, set building materials and, of course, time,

vehicles and gasoline. I'll talk to the bank about a loan tomorrow."

Every female in the room—along with a few of our differently oriented males—jumped up and gave Milo a hug of appreciation.

"All right, all right, that's enough!" Milo barked, although he didn't appear to mind some of our more attractive female members' attention. "Yes, I know you want me to cast you in the part of the Doctor's companion, but you'll have to do a screen test like everyone else."

"You're not jealous are you, Jess?" I whispered to my friend. If a dozen young things were dying to be the co-lead in a film my husband was directing I'd feel super anxious, but then, that's just me. I've experienced a run of bad luck when it comes to cheating husbands.

"Who me? Jealous?" Jessie sat up straight in her chair. "Milo will not host 'casting couch' sessions. I highly doubt that will ever happen."

I grinned. "Aw, how sweet. He loves you that much, huh?"

She wiggled an eyebrow and smirked. "Yeah, that, too. But mostly because you and I are signing up to be the casting directors, that's why."

Jessie was true to her word. We both became the official casting directors of *The Frightening Fairgrounds* as well as line producers. Of course, with a less-than-a-shoestring budget it meant we couldn't hire professional actors or even really good amateur actors who wanted to springboard into something bigger

and better. Actors' salaries were simply not in the budget. No, we were stuck with bugging our friends and fellow fans to play the parts—many of them in full monster costume and makeup. Jessie and I got to it right away, talking to just about anyone we came across who would remotely fit any of the roles.

Sammy's story essentially revolved around the Doctor and his ever-present young and pretty female companion, Tara Jo, traveling to a Worlds' Fair of sorts. But this fair doesn't take place on Earth. Oh, no, that would be too provincial. It takes place on an alternate Earth where humans and aliens know of each other's existence and want to get together and have a good time. In the midst of this frivolity and diplomacy a murder takes place, evil aliens haunt the happy fair-goers and, of course, general mayhem and confusion and a big chase scene happen before the Doctor solves the mystery and gets things under control.

The actual setting on this alternate Earth was St. Louis during the time of the 1904 World's Fair. We planned on doing some location shoots in Forest Park in front of the Art Museum and the big boat pond. Costumes would reflect both the Edwardian era and alien fashion sensibilities. It was an extremely ambitious project for a bunch of fan filmmakers to tackle, hence our reluctance to do so until now.

Two days after our initial meeting, the crew heads got together to discuss how things were progressing.

"You think we'll be able to start shooting in two weeks like Milo says?" Chandra asked as she put down an armful of sketches in front of me.

I sat at an old Formica-topped table in the small office at the back of the store that served as our headquarters. As artistic director, she had spent the last forty-eight hours sketching out scenes and set pieces and coming up with a color palette for Trina, who was in charge of costuming. Chandra's pretty hazel eyes looked a bit tired and her frizzy, auburn mop appeared a bit more disheveled than normal. Nonetheless, she acted cheerful and upbeat.

"Two weeks? Possibly." I bit my lip. At this early stage, my search for adequate cast members had been far from fruitful. I had had more success locating and acquiring lighting devices and getting the necessary permission to film in Forest Park. "We may have to start shooting without a Doctor or a companion, but at least we can tape a few of the crowd scenes or the monsters coming out of their ship or—"

"I found her! I found her!" Jessie ran yelling into the backroom. She hugged both Chandra and me, then sat down at the table with us. "I've found the most perfect companion ever."

I winked. "Don't broadcast the news too loudly. You'll make Milo jealous."

"Oh, you!" She elbowed me in the side and grinned. "Such a kidder. But it's true. I have found our companion at last. I know she'll be perfect in the role."

"Is she one of your students?" Chandra asked.

Jessie nodded energetically. "Yes, she is. Her name is Ashleigh Witherspoon. She's in my senior English lit class, and she's flunking horribly."

I stared at my dear friend. Had she gone mad?

Obviously the girl couldn't be terribly bright if she was failing her mother tongue. "Flunking? Jess, we need an actress who will be able to memorize lines and speak them with some feeling. You sure this girl is up to it?"

Jessie's full lips formed a confident smirk. "Oh, she'll be up to it."

"What makes you say that?"

She motioned for us to lean in closer and lowered her voice. "The reason I know she'll do a fine acting job is because she did an excellent job trying to bullshit me today into letting her pass English so she could graduate on time."

Chandra giggled. "So she can deliver a line with fake feeling—is that what you mean?"

Jessie winked. "Uh-huh. She's no dummy, but she's definitely got her priorities messed up this term and that's why she's flunking. She wants to be a runway model. She's very pretty and all, but I think she's a bit too short for modeling. But as an actress she definitely shows some potential. Plus, I said I'd give her extra credit if she does the part so she can pass English. That will motivate her to cooperate with us."

Motivation and cooperation guaranteed? "Not a bad idea, Jess," I said, grinning. "What does our new companion look like?"

Jessie reached into her purse and pulled out a small class photo. "This is her senior portrait taken earlier in the school year. Gorgeous, huh?"

Green, scaly, bug-eyed monster envy stabbed at my heart. The thin girl in the photo had long, straight

gold-blond hair, big blue eyes and high cheekbones offset by creamy skin and sparkling, even teeth framed by full, pouting lips. She reminded me of myself many years ago. Many years ago before I ran off and got married the first time at seventeen, then divorced and remarried again by twenty... Many years before I became the world-weary woman with faded blond hair and middle age spread that I was today.

"Yeah, she'll do." I handed the photo to Chandra.

"Ooo! Yes, she's divine. I can envision her in the costumes Trina and I worked out for the companion. Her coloring and features are perfect. Sort of a young Nicole Kidman, don't you think, Jess?"

My friends yammered on about our newest cast member while I quietly sighed and my thoughts wandered. No matter that it's a fictional television series, it still hurt to think I'd never be worthy enough to become the Doctor's time-traveling companion, not even in a low budget fan flick.

In the forty-plus years the show has been around, the Doctor has had his share of companions, too. Sometimes he's traveled with a male and a female or two, but usually it's just the one lone young woman who gets to go along for the ride through time and space. The most common trait his companions have shared outside of their relative youth and good looks is, unlike me, they're smart enough to get themselves out of any fix they get into without any major damage to themselves. How could anyone not wish to possess an ounce of their cognitive abilities or a pound of their youthful good looks?

In Sammy's story, the Doctor's female sidekick comes across more like an old series companion than a new series traveler. She does a bit more screaming and running about than the more recent companions have, and she acts rather childlike, depending on the Doctor to save the day. This reflects Sammy's tastes—he's definitely a fan of the fourth actor to portray the Doctor, Tom Baker, when it comes to how he envisions the Time Lord, but he has a thing for the second Doctor Patrick Troughton's companions. Only diehard fans would understand the source of his inspiration, but the script itself is sufficiently entertaining enough that even the new series *Doctor Who* fans would enjoy it.

"We can't charge admission to see our film at Archon," Milo was saying. He had slipped into the back room from the front counter area while I was daydreaming and now stood behind me. "If we do, the BBC will get onto us and want their share of the take. But we can accept donations for Sammy's medical expenses and transportation costs. Hopefully he'll be well enough to come see its premiere. If not, we'll screen it privately for him at the hospital or wherever beforehand."

Jessie wiped a tear and nodded. "Of course, we'll show it to Sammy first."

"Yeah, I think he should have the final say so on the final cut," Chandra added.

"That'll work," I said absentmindedly. The photo of Jessie's beautiful student had somehow ended up lying on the table in front of me.

"Wow...Is that our companion?" Milo asked.

"That's her, all right." I quickly handed the picture to him before I was tempted to crumple it into a tight wad and pitch it in the wastepaper basket. "She's a good-looking gal with the gift of blarney, according to your better half."

"But can she act?"

"Oh, she can act." Jessie smiled like a cat that had just swallowed an ostrich whole. "No worries there at all. She'll act, or she'll flunk English. Plus the companion doesn't have a whole lot of lines in this script, does she?"

Milo propped a foot up on the empty chair next to me and rested his elbow on his jean-covered knee. "No, not unless you count, 'Eek! Eek!' or 'They're after us, Doctor!' The more I've studied the script, the more I've come to realize that Sammy's not the best at dialogue—or developing female characters, for that matter."

Chandra sighed. "That's perfectly understandable, since he'd never even been on a date before last year when I invited him to escort me to a Winter Solstice party. He's a rather shy guy. I think he watches *Doctor Who* for the sci-fi action more than the character relationships like I do."

"Don't all guys watch it for the blow'em up stuff?" Jessie looked to her husband for confirmation. "You don't watch it because of the subliminal sexual relationship between the Doctor and his companion, do you, Milo?"

I bit my bottom lip to keep from giggling. A nervous sheen of perspiration dotted Milo's forehead. I had overheard him once at a con talking to some

other guys about how much he enjoyed watching the latest female companion's curves jiggle whenever she ran away from danger.

"No comment," he said after several gut-wrenching moments.

I burst out in a fit of laughter. Frowning, Jessie stood and marched out of the room. Milo quickly followed her. I laughed all the harder, so much so that I gulped in air and started to hiccup.

"What's so funny?" Chandra whispered to me.

"No comment," I replied between hiccups.

"Say what?"

I took a deep breath and composed myself. "If I know Jessie, it's not the *casting* couch Milo will be sleeping on tonight."

CHAPTER THREE

The Doctor Dances...Horizontally?

In ‘The Doctor Dances’, the Doctor is pleasantly surprised when the walking zombies are spontaneously healed and returned to normal by the microscopic nanobots from the crashed ambulance spaceship.

“Just this once, everybody lives!” he shouts to his companions with undisguised glee. Death has been defeated, and the typical body count per adventure dwindles to nothing. It certainly is something worth celebrating.

Just this once. It’s always nice when the unexpected happens. I don’t ever expect it, but sometimes it does.

That’s how it all began. A week later, ‘John Smith’ sat next to me on my slate-blue sofa with a bowl of microwave popcorn balanced on his lap. His eyes seemed glued to the TV screen as if it was the most wonderful invention to come to St. Louis since the introduction of microwaveable toasted ravioli.

“The crazy things that bloke gets up to,” he murmured as the credits began to roll on the third episode of the latest series. “Quite unbelievable at times.”

I laughed. “That’s why it’s called science *fiction*. It sure the heck isn’t science fact.”

Suddenly those big brown eyes of his bore into mine. "You enjoy studying the sciences, don't you?"

I swallowed hard. How did he know? I nodded automatically. "Yeah, sure I do. I didn't get a chance to study any science in depth in college, but I've always had a layperson's fascination with all things astronomical."

"Yes, I noticed your Amateur Astronomer certificate on the wall when we came in. It hangs beside the bookshelf containing an astrolabe, a year's worth of *Sky and Telescope*, and the hardback edition of Stephen Hawking's *A Complete History of Time*."

Whoa. This John Smith was much more observant than I had credited him. Here I thought for the last three hours he'd been simply enjoying my TiVoed episodes of *Doctor Who*. Instead, he'd been scoping out my apartment.

"You know what an astrolabe is?" I wondered aloud. Most of my friends had mistaken it for an unusually shaped, miniature telescope.

He frowned, puzzled. "Of course I know what an astrolabe is."

A chill raced down my spine. Perhaps bringing this handsome stranger home hadn't been such a good idea after all...

"Is your fascination with the heavens why you've become such a fanatic over a television program about a time traveler?" he asked.

I blinked, but still I found myself glued to the spot. "Partly. Mostly it's pure escapism for me. I have to have something in life that will rescue me from this dreary existence occasionally. *Doctor Who* is a

godsend."

"Even when it went off the air for a decade?"

"Even then. There were the books, the conventions, the awful TV movie and the fans. The fans are the best. I've met a lot of lovely *Doctor Who* fans over the years. They've cheered me up enormously when I was down and out between jobs and husbands. When Southwestern Bell transferred me here from Dallas I didn't know a soul, but the local fans soon became my family. I'm not alone in the universe as long as I know there are others out there who like the same thing I do."

"Hmm." He scratched his chin thoughtfully. He seemed to be seriously contemplating my heartfelt disclosure. "Then why do you frequent dodgy establishments such as the place I found you in earlier today?"

I blushed and averted my gaze. It was time to spill the beans, to let him in on the underlying motivation for bringing him back to my place. I suddenly felt ashamed of my actions. I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"Cici? Is there something you'd like to tell me?"

His voice sounded soft, yet demanding. He placed a hand under my chin and tilted my face until his penetrating eyes meet mine once more. My heart began to race and my breathing became ragged. His prying eyes continued to probe the depths of my soul. Every fiber of my being burned with a desire to make a clean start of our relationship.

"Okay, you caught me," I confessed with a sigh. "We need you to star in our fan film. You're a dead

ringer for the Doctor. My plan involved kidnapping and seducing you, forcing you to stay in town for a while so we could film our friend Sammy's screenplay. He's terminally ill. We want him to see his movie idea made before he passes on. That's all. I promise."

He dropped his hand. "See, that wasn't so bad after all. I remember someone important telling me once that honesty is the best policy. A big, tall chap he was, too. Wore a stovepipe hat, as I recall. "

I giggled at the absurdity. "Abraham Lincoln?"

"Hmm, could be. That name rings a bell." He jumped to his feet and rubbed his hands together gleefully. "So, what's this movie about? Daleks and Cybermen and other fun things that go bump in the night?"

Crazy or not, his enthusiasm was contagious. I took a deep breath. "It takes place during a World's Fair. Actually, it's a murder mystery, and there are all sorts of alien life forms present."

He grinned. "Sounds charming. I'll help out if I can."

"You will?"

"Don't look so surprised. I can hardly turn down an offer from a woman who would stoop to kidnapping and seducing a stranger from a seedy bar in order to help a dying chum."

"Hey!" I protested with a laugh. "*El Lobo Malo* isn't all that seedy. They serve great nachos."

"Nachos? I should have ordered some. I haven't had any since that time Pancho Villa and I..." He paused, then frowned. "Did you say *El Lobo Malo*?"

"Yes, that's the bar's name. Didn't you see the sign out front when you came in?"

He shook his head. "I entered through the back door."

"Really?" His entrance seemed rather unconventional, but then nothing about the man seemed conventional in the strictest sense of the word. "*El Lobo Malo* means 'Bad Wolf' in Spanish. That's one reason I started hanging out there."

His reaction surprised me. He simply looked past me and stared out into space. All right, he had evidence that I was completely crazy now. But he didn't seem to be itching to run screaming from my apartment—yet.

I sighed. "I know you probably think I'm totally whacko, but I thought the Doctor's companion Rose Tyler may pop in sometime. You see, Bad Wolf was sort of her alias. Bad Wolf Bay is the last place they met before she was left behind in a parallel universe. It was all very sad."

"*El Lobo Malo...*" he whispered.

He turned and walked several paces from the sofa before staring out my front window for a long moment. His shoulders slumped. He leaned an arm against the window and rested his forehead on it. I stood and slowly approached him.

"John?" He seemed a million miles away. I touched him gently on his other arm. "John, are you okay?"

"Cici, you ever get the feeling sometime that someone is watching you—manipulating you—making you go places and do things because they can or they must?"

For someone I'd known for only three hours or so, it was a deeply philosophical question. It deserved a deeply philosophical answer—something well thought out and seriously considered. But my mind had been elsewhere this week after learning of Sammy's prognosis.

I blurted the first thing that came into my head. "All the time. I try not to let it get me down. Sometimes you've just got to keep blindly moving forward or else you'll freeze in one spot forever. And where will that get you?"

He pulled himself from the window and looked at me—really looked at me—and smiled. "You're a very intelligent woman, Cici Connors. Beautiful and intelligent."

"Why, thank you."

My cheeks warmed. I covered them with cool hands. I'd never been complimented so directly before. I didn't know what to say. If this had been my usual sort of interaction with a strange man I'd picked up in a bar, I might have made mention of my prices for various...services I could render. But that was the furthest thing from my mind at this moment.

I would never use John Smith that way. *John Smith!* I laughed to myself at the thought of that well-worn moniker. It had been the Doctor's alias on more than one occasion.

"And you're very loyal, Cici. That's a good trait to have, one that I'm lacking in at times." He shoved his hands into his crumpled jacket pockets and rocked back on his heels. "I try to keep my promises, but sometimes I can't."

"It happens. I'm not the poster child for trustworthiness myself. Take, for example, my ex-husbands."

"Ex-husbands?" He wrinkled his nose. "You have more than one?"

I shrugged. "Some days it feels like I've had more husbands than the Doctor has had regenerations."

He whistled. "Really? That many?"

"All of them swore on a stack of Bibles that they'd love, honor and remain faithful 'til death we do part. But it never worked out that way," I muttered, looking down at my bare feet. I don't know what made me confess my worst sins to this innocent man, but I did. Somehow it felt as though the accumulated grime of a multitude of lifetimes had instantly been wiped clean from my soul.

"You remained loyal to them, though," he said. "They cheated on you?"

I bit my lip. What did he say earlier? Honesty was the best policy.

"Sort of half and half. They'd start it—and I'd end it."

"I see." He turned and walked back to the sofa. He sat down, picked up the popcorn bowl again and patted the spot next to him. "Sit down."

I shot him a questioning look, but did as he commanded. I was pretty certain after the frank admission of my infidelities he'd run screaming from my home, and that would be the end of our relationship. But he stayed put. Staring straight ahead, he picked up the remote and clicked on the DVD machine to advance it to the next episode.

I pulled my feet up under my hips and hugged a throw pillow across my lap as the opening credits began to roll.

"This kidnapping and seduction business," he said calmly several minutes later without removing his eyes from the screen, "does it entail tying me up in your bedroom?"

My eyes practically popped out of my skull. Did he just say what I thought he said? Speech eluded me for a full fifteen seconds.

"Uh...only if you want it to."

He turned to me and grinned. "Well, I don't want to freeze in one spot forever."

I know what most people are thinking at this point in my story. They're thinking that I led John Smith into my boudoir and handcuffed him to the brass posts of my headboard, and then we made hours upon hours of hot monkey love. And they'd be partially correct in assuming that a few of those details did indeed take place. But all I will disclose from our very first intimate encounter is that it was...interesting. Interesting in an almost clinical sort of way.

I know I should explain what I mean by clinical. If I could, I would. It's just the word that comes to mind. I felt like a lab animal, a test subject, a part of a larger experiment. I can't say that our first kiss was as magical as when the ninth Doctor kissed Rose Tyler and sucked all the time vortex energy out of her so she wouldn't explode or something worse. No, our first kiss wasn't exactly 'tonsil hockey'. It was much

more subdued.

For in spite of appearing in the guise of a grown man, I believe John Smith truly is a child at heart. An innocent child. A curious child. A persistent child. A child who once he finds out he enjoys one particular game he has to play it over and over again and again. This is in no way a complaint, as I thoroughly enjoyed myself. And the second kiss ranked right up there with the time-vortex-sucking variety.

I suppose what it all boils down to is that John Smith is a very handsome man. He possesses a sense of humor bordering on the bizarre and a wicked penchant for spontaneity. But he acts very differently than how I imagined my dream man, the Doctor, would act in the bedroom. The subtlety and sophistication one would expect from a being who had lived nine hundred years and several lifetimes is completely missing. Bedroom etiquette seems to have been lost in translation.

Truthfully? He acted as if he had literally landed on Earth from outer space just a few short hours ago and he had landed on his head—hard.

“I wonder who invented the shakable can of whipped cream.” He shook the can for the hundredth time and attempted to spray a glob on his tongue, but found it empty. He tossed it aside. “What a pity. It seems we’ve used it all up. Don’t you have any more around the house?”

I chuckled. “Only what’s left on my body.”

He slowly ran his tongue over his teeth and grinned. “We shouldn’t let it go to waste.”

As he began to perform this very necessary

undertaking once more, I gave thanks for the restraints. Yes, I ended being the one tied up—with silk scarves instead of handcuffs. Slathered in whipped cream and repeatedly licked from top to bottom, I have to admit I enjoyed being on the receiving end of this particular pleasure.

I arched my back and moaned. “Hmm... Honey would work, too.”

His head popped up. “Honey?”

“You know, the stuff bees make and store in their hives.”

He considered this information for a long moment, nodding. “Ah, yes. Honey. I could really use a spot of tea with honey about now.” He sat up and walked out of the room.

“John?” I called out. “I’m tied up in here. Can you loosen my right hand at least?”

“Where’s your kettle?” I heard the sound of pots and pans being dragged out of cupboards and tossed on the counter. “No, don’t tell me. Americans have outlawed teakettles by the twenty-first century. How barbaric.” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “Well, what can one expect after the Boston Tea Party, fun activity that it was.”

“I make tea in the microwave. It’s more efficient since I make just one cup at a time.” I sighed. “Could you please come back in here and untie me?”

“Microwave. Ah, yes, this small rectangular appliance that makes popcorn as well. I wonder what Squanto would think of people making popcorn inside a machine instead of roasting ears over the embers of an open fire. I must remember to ask him

someday.”

Lincoln, the Boston Tea Party, Squanto. The man was a walking American history textbook. Odd, considering his accent sounded quite British to me. The sound of cereal boxes falling off the pantry shelves and landing *splat!* on the kitchen tile greeted my ears next. I had to get out of these restraints.

“John Smith! Get your skinny ass back in here and untie me at once!”

He appeared at the door sporting a pout. Crossing his arms, he leaned against the jamb. “So sorry. I made sort of a mess in there.”

I took a deep breath and tried not to sound angry. “It’s all right. I’ve dealt with worse things. But could you please loosen these knots?”

“Oh, right.”

He did as he was told, and I rubbed my arms to get the circulation going again. “I’ll make you a cup of tea in the microwave. I pitched my electric kettle when it conked out a while back. When you live alone in an apartment, there’s just no sense in having too many useless items cluttering your tiny kitchen.”

“Useless? A kettle is a very useful item. It boils water.”

“So does a microwave or a pot on the stove.”

I stood and picked up my bathrobe lying beside the bed and slid into it. It promptly stuck to the whipped cream remains on my skin. I felt overjoyed he hadn’t found the honey jar now.

“You want a robe?” I swallowed hard to keep from drooling at the sight of him standing naked in my bedroom doorway. Poor bedroom manners or not, he

certainly was gifted where it counted. "I probably have something in your size around here somewhere you could wear."

"That's okay. Clothing is overrated." He scrunched up his nose and flickered his long tongue at me like a snake. "I'm not sure I want to wear something that belonged to one of your ex-husbands. They probably smoked foul-smelling cigars and were the size of American footballers with no necks and huge, bulging arm muscles and legs like tremendous tree trunks." He mimicked a gorilla and frowned. "Not my style, really."

Was he jealous or just describing what he thought my typical choice in men was like? It was difficult to tell. "Don't worry—I gave all my exes' clothing away to charity. I don't think I have anything from any of my recent...boyfriends, either. I just like wearing baggy loungewear."

"And people have told me my taste in fashions were suspect."

I tried to slip past him in the doorway, but he grabbed my hand. I paused and shyly looked up into his eyes.

"Where are you going?" he said breathlessly.

"I was going to go make you a cup of tea."

He pressed his nose against my tangled mop of hair and breathed in deeply. "Hmm, you smell like lilacs and freesia. You sure you want a cup of tea?"

"I don't, but you do. Remember?"

He undid the front of my robe and slipped his hands about my waist, pressing his hard on against me. "I forget. Did I?"

His talented tongue licked at the whipped cream lodged behind my ear. My knees gave way with a moan. I leaned against him for support. "Hmm, I forget now, too."

"Where were we before we forgot what we were wanting to do?" His hands worked the robe off my shoulders so his lips could cover the areas laid bare.

I sighed with contentment. "We were in bed and you were cleaning up the remainder of the whipped cream. From my skin. With your tongue."

"Ah, yes...so I was."

And so he did – and then some.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Idiot's Lantern: Unplugged

*T*elevision is truly an evil invention. In 'The Idiot's Lantern', an evil alien presence tries to take over 1950's Great Britain by sucking the minds out of telly viewers while they watch Queen Elizabeth's coronation.

Brainless. I feel this way after great sex sometimes. And sometimes even after not-so-great sex. And sometimes after watching way too much TV. But never after watching a Doctor Who marathon for some reason.

Weird, huh?

I woke up the next morning practically screaming.

He was gone. John Smith, Doctor clone and eccentric lover, was nowhere to be seen. I threw on my robe and frantically searched the strewn covers of my bed, then under the mattress. Nothing. I stuck my head in the bathroom. Empty. I paced my tiny kitchen and raced into my living room. The chain was still on the door. I checked the closets, the refrigerator and the clothes hamper for good measure. I was coming completely unglued. There was no place else for the man to hide in my microscopic apartment except the postage stamp-sized balcony overlooking the woody ravine out back.

And there I found him, of all things squinting

through my battered old telescope balanced precariously atop its rusting tripod. Luckily, he had remembered to dress before going out of doors. With mussed hair, a rumpled suit, his dress shirt partially unbuttoned and sans tie, he seemed to have the nerdy slob impersonation down cold.

"You gave me a scare," I said, panting. "I thought you had left before I could introduce you to my friends."

"You need to get this thing looked at. There's a scratch on the mirror."

"Probably. My uncle gave that to me as a high school graduation present. He wanted me to become an astronomer. I haven't used it for a long time now. Where did you find it?"

"Standing in the back of the pantry beneath your sorry excuse for tea. 'Herbal Peach' and 'Cranberry with Licorice Root'—ugh! What kind of madman came up with that sort of nonsense?" He continued staring through the telescope, adjusting it and frowning. "Ah, there. It's difficult to make out the stars with all this civilization about, but it's possible."

I shook my head and let out an exasperated cry. "What are you talking about? It's almost eight o'clock in the morning, and it's sunny. That little thing can't make out stars at all under these conditions. You'd better come inside before my neighbors call the cops and report you as a peeping tom or something."

He stood and smirked. "I don't know about that. Come take a look."

I placed my hands on my hips and tapped my foot impatiently. "John, come on inside now. This isn't

funny.”

He grinned and motioned with a nod. “But I’d say it is. Your neighbors are going to have you arrested for indecent exposure long before they ever lay a hand on me.”

I looked down. My robe had come undone. I was indeed flashing the entire neighborhood. Blushing, I grabbed the robe’s dangling belt and quickly sashed it. Then I spun around on my bare heels to head back inside.

“You didn’t look at the stars,” he called after me. “Come on. Take a look. I’ve pointed it toward Alpha Centauri so you can wave at Earth’s next door neighbors.”

“This isn’t funny,” I repeated. His goofy pout gave me pause, however. “Oh, all right. I’ll take a look just to prove to you that you can’t see any stars in the daytime.”

I pulled my robe tightly about me, bent down and closed one eye. I half expected to see an image of a mother bird on its nest or, more likely, the glint of highway signs through the trees. Instead, I saw stars.

Thousands—no millions of stars! I gasped. How in the world...

“This isn’t possible.” I straightened and stared at my houseguest in shock and awe. “What in the world did you do to my telescope?”

“I adjusted it a bit.” He shrugged. “None too difficult a task, really.”

“You certainly did adjust it. It’s got the power of the Hubble Space telescope in the body of a Wal-Mart special.” I bent to gaze through the lens once more.

Stars, dancing stars sparkled like a million multi-colored jewels against a black velvet sky. It was...a miracle.

I clutched at the opening of my robe and shivered. "Who *are* you?" I whispered.

"A fellow lover of astronomy, of course. You know, you never did make me that cup of tea last night." And with that, he headed nonchalantly back into the living area. I quickly followed.

"Sorry. We got distracted. Remember?"

"Oh, yes, so we did." He stooped and picked up the empty popcorn bowl from the coffee table. "Well, we've got plenty to do today. You'd better get dressed so we don't get 'distracted' again."

I mutely nodded. Some lover he was—he went from hot to cold after one night's passion. But what could someone with a track record like me expect? I sighed inwardly. "You want me to make you that cup of tea now?" I asked.

"No, thank you. I think I can live without the Herbal Licorice Peach Cranberry." He fished out a corn kernel and held it tightly between his thumb and index finger, observing it closely as if it were the Hope diamond. "Besides, there's still plenty of nutrition right here at the bottom of the bowl."

"Suit yourself."

I headed toward the shower and some semblance of sanity. Today had started out seriously weird, and it wasn't going to get any better I sensed. As I started to hang my robe on the peg on the bathroom door I could have sworn I smelled something cooking. Then I heard the staccato sound of popping corn. I rushed

back out to the living room.

John Smith stood holding a bowl full of freshly popped corn in one hand and a pen-sized, cylindrical device that resembled the Doctor's secret weapon, the sonic screwdriver, in the other.

"You...you're really *him*."

The sight of the man who I thought was the Doctor utilizing an extraterrestrial gizmo being too much for me to take in at once, I promptly collapsed at my houseguest's feet.

* * * * *

"You really should drink more of this herbal tea, Cici Connors. It says on the packet that it's loaded with antioxidants. You can never have too many antioxidants. They prevent your brain from seizing up."

"What the...?" I blinked slowly and tried to sit up but couldn't. I was lying in my bed, the covers pulled up to my chin, with a fragrant cup of hot herbal tea stuck practically under my nose. My guest sat next to me, a touch of concern etched on his features.

"Here, have a sip." I drank a miniscule amount as he tilted the cup to my lips. "You really should eat something, too." He offered me the bowl. "Popcorn?"

"Uh-huh." I took a handful and crammed it into my mouth.

"Chew, please." He slowly rubbed his tongue across his teeth as if to demonstrate. "It doesn't work unless you chew it first."

I chewed a little, then swallowed. I couldn't stop

staring at him. Was it really *him*? Not simply an actor playing a part on a cult TV show but *the* Doctor?

"Who...are you?"

His eyebrows rose a foot above his big brown eyes. "John Smith. The bloke you picked up last night at *El Lobo Malo*. The bloke you brought home and shagged rotten. Don't you recall?"

"Yeah, I remember, but this morning my telescope—"

"Wasn't working worth a bean. But I fixed it." He smiled. "Thanks are not necessary."

"I saw stars. In the daylight. I swear I did."

He laughed. "Any wonder? You probably hit your head."

"But the popcorn—there was nothing but the nibs in the bottom of the bowl left. You popped them with your sonic screwdriver."

He leaned back and considered me through narrowed eyes. "You must have hit your head harder than I thought."

I sat up and gathered the sheets about me. Suddenly I felt more than naked. I felt exposed, vulnerable. "My head's fine. I know what I saw. You held the popcorn bowl in one hand and a very familiar device in the other."

"My pen, perhaps?"

He pulled a silver-colored cylindrical object from his inside suit jacket pocket. I blinked, then blinked again. That could have been the item I'd seen earlier, but I wasn't entirely convinced.

"How did you pop the popcorn, then?"

He scratched his hair part with the pen and

scrunched up his nose for a second. "Hmm... The machine's called a microwave, I think."

I still wasn't having any of it. "Show me your driver's license."

"All right." He reached into his pocket again and pulled out a rather flat-looking wallet. He flipped it open and stuck it under my nose. "You see? It says 'John Smith, Wood Lane, London W12 7RJ.'"

Sure enough, it did. The photo looked just like him. On a good hair day, that is.

I rubbed my temples and groaned. Oh, God...I was losing my mind. Here I was thinking this poor lost Brit was actually a fictional time traveler. I should be locked away somewhere.

"I'm so sorry. I'm a babbling idiot. I didn't mean to interrogate you, John. I'll take a shower and get dressed and then we'll be on our way."

I scooted over to the opposite side of the bed and gathered the sheet about my body, being extra careful not to trip and fall and hit my head again on the way to the bathroom. The tail end of the sheet snagged on something under my dresser, however, causing it to be abruptly torn from my body.

"Ah, those distractions." He flashed a dazzling grin at me. "Your shower wouldn't happen to be large enough for two, would it?"

CHAPTER FIVE

Army of Geeks

'Army of Ghosts' is truly a disturbing episode. People really believe their dead loved ones are visiting earth as 'ghosts' to be with their families once more. If this ever happened to me, I can tell you I wouldn't act as calmly as Jackie does – I'd run screaming into the streets. I'm ever so glad that some of my relatives and exes no longer dwell here on this plane of existence.

Of course, the so-called ghosts turn out to be part of an alien invasion force. This is Doctor Who – what would you expect?

And it only goes to prove that you can't trust anyone, really. No matter how benevolent he appears at first.

An hour or two later we finally made it to the first shoot of *The Frightening Fairgrounds*. We stood on the shores of the Meramec River, which was doubling for the Mississippi. It's not quite as wide, of course, and it's a bit steeper and a lot more wooded along its banks than the Mississippi is through the downtown area. Later on we'd shoot a few scenes with the Arch in the background and then cut them in. We figured no one from outside the St. Louis area would notice – or even care – about the continuity problems.

"The joys of cheap fan filmmaking," Milo had said

in one of our pre-production meetings. "It's the thought that counts."

I parked my car in the lot near the boat landing and quickly spotted the crew. Things had just started rolling. Milo hoisted his new high definition video camera to his shoulder and began shooting long shots of the chase scene, where the bad guy aliens try to evade the Doctor and his companion in spacecrafts cleverly disguised as present-day motorboats. John left my side to watch the action from nearer the camera set-up.

In *Gone With the Wind* fashion, stunt doubles were cast to play the parts of the Doctor and his companion in this scene. In this case, Kevin and Trina had volunteered to wear the flowing capes and wigs. Currently they were dressed in the round, purple alien costumes of our chief villains of the piece so Milo could get a few shots of them driving their boat. How Kevin managed to steer the watercraft wearing the bulbous costume was a complete mystery to me.

"Not bad for a bargain basement production, huh?" Jessie's dark eyes glowed with excitement behind her thick lenses as we approached the landing to watch the action unfurl. "Sammy's uncle says he won't take any money toward fuel costs, either. All we have to do is mention his boat shop at the end of the film. Isn't that nice of him?"

"Yes, it is," I said, nodding. Considering he was a relative, I had expected Sammy's uncle to act a bit more graciously. A successful businessman like him could have helped us raise the initial outlay of cash. Still, his lending us the boats was better than nothing.

“Who’s your friend?” Jessie interrupted my mental wanderings. She pointed to John Smith. My wandering movie star had sauntered off toward the second boat sitting on its boat trailer until it was needed. She lowered her voice for my ears only and flashed a lopsided grin. “One of your *boyfriends*, perhaps?”

My mouth gaped open in surprise. Now Jessie understood that when I was in desperate financial straits I did things for money that normally I wouldn’t do, but she had never made mention of it in such a manner before. A benevolent earth mother type, Jessie didn’t frown on my activities. I mean, how many other geek gals had slept with a dealer to get a discount on a rare *Star Trek* figurine, for instance? Still, what on earth made her think John Smith could be anyone other than our leading man?

“Jess, wipe your glasses off. Can’t you tell the guy is a dead ringer for Doctor number ten?”

Frowning, she did as she was told. Then she cocked her head to the side and bit her lip in thought. “Hmm, maybe. He seems a bit old to me to pass for David Tennant. Possibly he could pass for number four—or Peter Davison toward the end of his run?” She blinked and looked at him again. “You know...somehow he reminds me of the first Doctor, William Hartnell.”

My jaw dropped. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “You’ve got to be kidding! He’s nowhere near as old as the first Doctor. Next thing you’ll be telling me he resembles Patrick Troughton.”

Jessie shrugged. “Well, now that you mention it,

something about his eyes really makes me think of Doctor number two."

I held my head in my hands and stared at her in total disbelief. How was it possible that I saw a much younger, much taller man than Jessie did? Maybe the glare on the water was playing tricks on her eyes. She was rather nearsighted. That had to be it.

"Lovely piece of machinery they've got there. I can't wait to race it down the river." John ambled up the bank towards us and smiled hello. "I'm the Doctor, if you haven't guessed already."

Jessie threw back her head and laughed. "Oh, I love how you said that! I'm Jessie Erikson." Grinning, she shook his hand. "What's your name when you're not on the set, 'Doctor'?"

"John. John Smith."

Jessie practically collapsed in a fit of giggles. "Perfect!" She elbowed me in the side. "You really know how to pick 'em, Cici." She winked at John. "Your sense of humor will go a long way in helping us pull this thing off."

He flashed a puzzled frown, turned to me and said under his breath, "What's so funny about my name?"

"Nothing." I waved at our fearless leader as he strolled toward us with the video camera resting on his shoulder. "Milo, I want you to meet our Doctor."

Our director froze in his tracks, his small, dark eyes popping wide open. "No way." He gently laid the camera down at his feet and shook John's hand with enthusiasm. "You're exactly as I imagined you."

"I wouldn't have it any other way." John grinned like a fool.

“How do you imagine him?” I asked, my curiosity growing by the moment.

Milo smiled. “Looking like my favorite incarnation of the Doctor, of course.”

I felt another faint coming on. Instead of dropping prone beside the river, however, I excused myself from the conversation and made my way back to my car. There I slipped into the back seat and lay down, sheltering my eyes from the bright noonday sun with my hands. After all the weirdness this morning, I didn’t think it could get any weirder where John Smith was involved. I was wrong.

Because I knew for a fact that Milo’s favorite Doctor was the dark-haired, elfin-like Sylvester McCoy.

How one man could resemble so many others at once didn’t seem remotely possible or probable or likely. The physical dissimilarities between the ten actors who have portrayed the Doctor since 1963 are just too great. Different hair color, different body types, different heights. What was it about John Smith that made him appear to be the Doctor a person most wanted to see at that particular moment?

Dappled light filtering through the rustling leaves splashed across my face. I took a deep breath and sat up. A chameleon—that’s what the man was. He wasn’t the mythical Doctor, but he could be an alien who could change form at will and cast a mental spell over his victims. Hadn’t he read my mind in the bar? Couldn’t he have learned all he needed to project his image from what he learned from my consciousness? I could think of no better explanation for this

phenomenon.

And I had left my friends alone with this alien for the last ten minutes.

"Oh, my God!" I rocketed out of the car and sprinted toward the river. I had to protect them from whatever this...creature...was. I had to keep an eye on it at all times. The Earth's very existence could very well be at stake.

Hell, I had slept with it, too!

"Cici, there you are," John was saying as I raced back to where he stood beside the second boat as they prepared to lower it into the water. "Want to play stuntwoman?"

Maybe he was trying to bump me off because I had discovered his secret? I had to keep quiet to stay alive. I couldn't let on that I knew about his being from another world.

"Stuntwoman?" I frowned, going along with the conversation. "I thought Trina was our stuntwoman in this sequence."

Jessie approached us with what appeared to be two horse blankets tossed over her arm. "Trina went home. She said she felt a bit seasick after bobbing about in the giant grape costume." Jessie held up two very heavy gray-wool capes in front of us. "Here are the Doctor and companion outfits for this scene. We figured from a distance the cape would hide a variety of figure *discrepancies*."

John stuck out his tongue. "Ew. I don't have to wear that dreadful thing, do I?"

"Well, maybe not." Jessie bit her lip in thought. "Okay, if you don't want to, you don't have to. As

assistant costumer, I think the suit you've got on will do nicely. You don't mind wearing it for the next week while we shoot the rest of the film?"

"No, I don't mind at all."

"That's settled then." Jessie took the ugly capes back to the minivan that served as our costume truck.

"This is crazy." I shook my head. I took hold of his elbow and led my alien lover away from the landing. "You can't possibly drive that boat."

"Why not? It's got a steering wheel like an automobile, doesn't it?"

"That's beside the point. They drive on the opposite side of the road where you come from."

"Road? What difference does that make? This is a river. There are no 'keep left' signs around here as far as I can tell."

I could tell there was no sense arguing with the man...thing...alien...whatever. I suppose if he had landed a spacecraft on Earth somewhere then steering a small motor craft shouldn't pose too much of a challenge for him. But still, to get into a boat and go out into the middle of the river with him—should I take the risk?

"Here, Cici." Jessie wrapped a crinkly, silver lamè cloth about my shoulders. "I found something that's not quite as heavy or bulky as that wool vampire cape Trina dredged up from some old costume shop. I suppose we could work it into the script somewhere as a sunblock device or something?"

There had to be some way for me to get out of this dilemma and to keep the potentially dangerous John Smith away from something as powerful as a

speedboat. What if he was a terrorist from outer space? What if he planted a bomb on the boat and then detonated it under a bridge?

I turned to Jessie for help. "I look ridiculous in this thing, Jess. I can't pass for Ashleigh even at a distance. Why isn't our companion actress here?"

"She had to retake her SATs today. But she said she'd make it tomorrow when we film down by the Arch."

John sniggered. "You look like a giant sausage wrapped in aluminum."

"Oh, I do love the way you Brits say words differently!" Jessie gushed. "Al-yoo-*min*-ee-mum. And I like the way you say '*to-mah-toe*' for tomato and '*shed-ju-el*' for schedule."

He grinned at Jessie. "Yes, it's fascinating how much Americans have tinkered around with a perfectly fine language."

They weren't listening to me, and my patience had all but evaporated. "I'm not getting on that boat and that's that!" I tossed the makeshift cape aside and stomped away.

"Cici—wait!" Jessie waddled after me. "Silver compliments your skin tone perfectly."

"I'll talk to her," John told Jessie. Before I could make it back to my car, he stood beside me and gripped me by the shoulders, forcing me to turn around and look at him. Was it the long legs or some alien method of instantaneous transport that allowed him to catch up with me so quickly?

I crossed my arms and stuck out my chin in defiance. "I am not crawling into that boat with you,

John Smith—if that’s even your real name.”

He furrowed his brow. “Of course it’s my name. It’s on my driver’s license, isn’t it?”

“It proves nothing. I once had a fake ID that said my name was Mary-Lynn Munro and I was twenty-two years old when in fact, I was only fifteen.”

“Why would you want people to think you were older? I thought human females were always trying to lie about their ages so they seemed younger?”

I rolled my eyes at him in disbelief. “I lied about my age so I could drink.”

“They allow children to dehydrate if they’re not of a certain age here? That’s barbaric.”

“Huh?” I felt as confused as he looked at that moment. “I meant drink alcoholic beverages. The drinking age is twenty-one in most states.”

“I see.” He nodded. “But what has that got to do with you and me climbing into the smashing racing boat over there?”

“Nothing really, but I—”

“That’s right. It’s nothing,” he interrupted. “My name is unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Cici, I know for a fact you’re not afraid of the water and that you enjoy driving fast—really fast.”

“How do you know all that about me?” I straightened and placed my hands on my hips. I couldn’t recall a conversation where I’d mentioned either thing. Had he truly read my mind in the bar where we met?

“Because I watched the speedometer on the drive over here. You ought to be careful, or you’ll collect a speeding ticket one day.”

True enough. I pouted. "And the bit about the water?"

He leaned closer and lowered his voice to a sultry murmur. "You seem to forget our little escapade in the shower earlier. I never met anyone who could hold her breath for that long. Fantastic."

I blushed and covered my face with my hands. "Oh, yeah...right."

He gently wrapped an arm around my shoulders and started strolling toward the river. Something about his close presence instantly wiped away all doubts and fears from my mind. "You get into the boat with me, Cici, and help film Sammy's masterpiece and I'll gladly allow you to do a repeat performance in the shower tonight. How's that?"

"Oh, all right. But can you do the whipped cream thing first?"

He grinned and squeezed me. "That goes without saying."

* * * * *

I know that I'm an idiot—a trusting, babbling idiot—but after my mysterious lover promised a repeat performance of last night, my brain turned to mush and my legs to Jell-O. My palms went all damp and my heart beat a loud tattoo that I swear mimicked the driving bass line of the *Doctor Who* theme song.

It had been too long, way too long, since I'd experienced a halfway satisfying relationship with a member of the opposite sex. Who was I kidding? I had never experienced a satisfying relationship with

anyone. Ever.

It seemed the only constants in my tumultuous life had been cheating ex-husbands and *Doctor Who* broadcasts every Saturday night at 10 p.m. Rain or shine, I was guaranteed a thrilling and fantastic adventure through time and space and back again in ninety minutes. To bad I couldn't say the same of my exes.

After I left the Dallas area and moved to St. Louis, I had to make do with my videos, which I religiously played every Saturday night at the same time. When the new series started on the Sci-Fi Channel, I saved up and bought a TiVo machine. I didn't want to miss a single moment. As soon as the official DVDs hit the stores, I bought them.

How could I not buy them? The Doctor had become my anchor through all of life's storms. He deserved my full support.

And Sammy deserved my full support. I sighed. I had been acting hysterical all day, thinking a lost Brit was an alien being from another planet. I must be experiencing a nervous breakdown to come up with such an impossible scenario.

So without further protest, I donned the silver cape and crawled into the boat and sat down beside John Smith. Then I allowed myself to be whisked away from shore as Milo both gave us a smiling thumbs-up.

As we slowly pulled from shore, the wind whipped the silver cloak about my body. The brilliant sunshine sparkled like watery diamonds across the river's otherwise placid surface.

I tugged the cloth closer about my dull hair. "Rats.

I'm never going to pass for Ashleigh. She's got beautiful, shiny blonde hair and long, red, fake nails and the whole nine yards of makeup. I look nothing like her."

"This scene is going to be done in a long shot, Milo said, so no worries." John turned to me and grinned. "Kevin says these sleek watercraft can reach speeds of seventy miles per hour. What do you think? Shall we see what she's made of?"

A chill zinged down my spine. I took a deep breath. "Let's not and say we did."

We tooled up and down the immediate vicinity, with Milo shouting various directions from shore for us to turn right then left then right again—and for me to pull the cape up a little higher to hide my face. After a few minutes of this, Kevin hopped back into the bad guy's boat and followed us out to the middle of the river to do the scenes where both boats appeared.

"Who's that sitting beside him in the purple-people-eater monster costume?" I wondered, squinting. "Trina left for the day already."

"I think it's just an empty shell." John raised a hand and shaded his eyes. "Yes, that's it. He's tied down the other costume to the chair so it doesn't blow out."

"Hmm, too bad they couldn't stuff a scarecrow and stick this silly cape on it to fill in for Ashleigh."

"I'm glad they didn't. A scarecrow is a lousy conversationalist." John winked. I suddenly felt as if I had become the center of the universe. No one had ever made me feel that special with such a simple

gesture.

Kevin pulled his boat close and idled his engine. We did likewise.

"Aren't these babies great?" Kevin shouted over the motor noise. His enthusiasm reminded me of a teenage geek let loose in the dealer's room of a major con carrying his parents' credit card. "You feel how responsive the wheel is? Just one little touch of your finger and—wham! You're there."

"It's smooth maneuvering, all right," John agreed. "I'd really like to see what power this engine's got, but I'm afraid Cici says she isn't into speeding."

Kevin threw back his head inside the purple bubble-shaped costume and laughed hard. "Ho, ho, ho! That's a riot, Cici. It's not what I've heard from Trina and Jessie, either. Didn't you get a ticket last year on two-seventy? You had to be doing at least twenty miles over the speed limit there to catch any cop's notice."

I slumped in the seat and pulled the silver lamè cloth over my head. "No comment."

"Well, we'd better get to the big finale as planned," Kevin said, pointing toward shore. "Milo's jumping up and down and indicating his battery pack is low and he doesn't have a spare."

"After you." John reached for the throttle. "You take the lead first, correct?"

"Yeah and then you speed up and pass me and cut me off. Make it look good. We'll probably only get one take."

Kevin motored away and raised his hand to indicate that he was getting into position for the shot.

We followed suit, staying about ten boat lengths behind him until he began to speed up as he reach the middle of the river.

“Let’s see how fast we can pass him,” John shouted over the increasing engine sound as he shifted gears.

“He’s not going all that fast, so there’s no need to push it,” I cautioned.

“You know, this reminds me of a car I owned a few years back. I called her Betsy. She could go from zero to a hundred in less than three seconds.”

“Betsy?” I gulped hard. Did I hear him right? The ruckus the engine and the water splashing made as we sliced through the river made it difficult to hear. He couldn’t mean the third Doctor’s bright yellow Model-A type jalopy. He couldn’t mean the car that the James Bond-like Jon Pertwee sped around England during the UNIT years of the late sixties. The souped up vehicle didn’t exist except as a prop on a TV program. Right?

“Hang on!” he cried.

Three seconds later I felt my body being pressed hard against the seat. The g-force felt as if we were being launched in the space shuttle. I held on tightly to the silver cape and peeled open one eye. The speed indicator needle went off the scale. Kevin diligently tried to match out acceleration.

“Oh, shit! Look out!”

The empty costume had come untied. I ducked as the purple blob came flying toward us from the other boat, splattering into our windshield like a mosquito on a semi-truck. Our boat torpedoed past Kevin’s as if it was standing still. And we didn’t slow down.

John's big brown eyes positively glowed, his grin bigger than ever. He stood to look over the obstruction and waved a hand over his head like a rodeo star. "Yee-haw! Let's do it again."

"No! Stop! We've already passed him—we don't have to do it again. We need to save the costume before it falls off."

The boat lurched to the left as we made a tight u-turn to catch up with our chase object to duplicate the fantastic feat for posterity. My stomach rebelled, threatening to spill its contents at any minute. My knuckles grew deathly white as I clutched the edge of my seat cushion and hung on for dear life. The whole of my wretched existence flashed in front of me.

And, strangely enough, so did the Doctor's—all ten of his lives to be precise. Weirder yet, for some odd reason, whenever I dared spy through my semi-closed eyes at the crazed motorboat driver next to me, I thought I glimpsed the playful, wise guy smirk and elephantine ears of Doctor number nine, Christopher Eccleston.

Dear Lord. My first impressions of John Smith had been correct. He really was a chameleon-like alien.

And he was trying to kill me.

The speed indicator stayed off the dial and still the purple blob remained splayed against our screen. "I'll try to cut him off a bit closer next time," he yelled above the engine's roar. "That should add a little drama to the scene."

"Please, don't..." I could barely manage a whisper. My lunch threatened to jump out of my stomach any second.

My alien lover glanced at me, frowning. "You've got to learn to handle a little motion sickness, Cici, if you ever want to travel in the TARDIS."

"Wha...?" I closed my eyes, but they almost instantly popped open again. The boat swung around to parallel Kevin's drifting craft and abruptly halted.

"What kind of additive did you put in the tank?" I could hear immeasurable awe and respect dripping from Kevin's voice. "Man, I could use some of that in my work truck. I'd never be late for an appointment again."

"It's just a little something I cooked up while I was between...jobs."

"You should patent it." Our chief monster builder, who held dreams of fame and fortune of his own, could spot a good idea a light year away. "You'd make millions—no, billions."

John crooked his arm and scratched his head, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Patent it? Yes, I suppose I could. I've never really thought about it."

"Wanna go 'round again?" Kevin nodded toward shore. "Milo's motioning that he's got more juice for the camera. Hand me the monster and I'll try to tack him down more securely. This time I really should pass you once just to add a little excitement to the chase."

"You're on. But I do need to cut you off closer so it looks like we're bumping each other, right?"

"That's the plan." Kevin revved his engine. "You got anymore of that super fuel stuff?"

"Sorry." John shrugged. "That's it."

"Bummer. I guess we'd better keep our top speed

around fifty. That's about all I can get out of this baby." Kevin saluted and sped ahead of us.

"Ready?" John wiggled his eyebrows and flashed his goofy grin at me. He slowly drove the boat toward the middle of the river, following Kevin's wake.

I shook my head no as I straightened out the silver lame tangled about my head and shoulders. "Please, John, let's not and say we did."

"Aw, come on, Cici! You know you love the excitement. Or why else did you volunteer to be in this scene? You want to prove to the universe that you can take this kind of punishment better than a mere slip of a girl." He frowned and looked at me askance. "Or maybe you can't. Maybe you're just plain scared."

I sat taller in my seat, my grimace resolute. No one ever dared call me a coward before. Not my first husband nor my fourth, the bullies they were.

"Of course I can take it," I spat, "but that's not the point."

"What is the point then?"

I felt thoroughly pissed off now. "There is no point. It's simply not necessary. Milo has more than enough race footage. Doing another take probably won't help us when it comes to editing the final product. The flying purple people-eater shots wouldn't jive with the others."

The boat's speed steadily increased. I could tell he didn't believe a word I said. "Oh, I see. Artistic reasons prevent you from doing another take?"

"Yes, that's right. I'm also acting as chief accountant for the production. I have to keep things

on budget." *And I have to stay alive long enough to do so.*

He stuck out his tongue at me. "Ooo—accountant. Sounds like a terribly boring profession. Why didn't you study astronomy?"

"Because stargazing doesn't pay, and it wasn't offered at the community college I ended up attending while trying to hold down two full-time jobs."

"Work. It's highly overrated. Adventure—now that's where it's at."

His manic grin sent a shiver of trepidation down my spine. The speedometer indicator steadily began to climb. Thirty, forty, fifty, sixty...

"You don't have to do that. Kevin's boat can't go that fast."

My chameleon lover's dark eyes glowed golden with power. "Watch this move."

I didn't. I screwed my eyes shut. I didn't dare open them and we swerved sharply to the right and then to the left. As we crossed Kevin's wake, our craft bounced about like a Mexican jumping bean on crack.

"Fantastic!" John shouted.

A *whoosh* of wind tore the silver cape from my shoulders. "Hey!"

"No worries. It's a long shot, remember?"

I quickly peeked around my shoulder. That was one costume that would have to be replaced. I certainly wasn't doing my job at keeping us on budget.

"Slow down. You've passed Kevin, and he was supposed to pass you."

"Okay." John plopped down in his seat. Suddenly

we found ourselves calmly floating on the river.

I blinked in disbelief at our abrupt halt. "Did we run out of gas?"

"Not exactly." There went his toothy grin again. Was it an evil smirk or a playful one? "We're playing dead in the water."

"Huh?" I sat up and looked around. Kevin was rapidly approaching at his boat's top speed. He'd easily pass us standing still like this. Then it hit me what John was planning.

"Oh, no... You're not going to do what I think you're going to do, are you?"

"Cici, you enjoy watching adventure, so why not live one every now and then?" He placed his hand on the shift lever and stared determinedly ahead. "Ready for takeoff. Five, four, three..."

"Shit," I mumbled. My two sweaty hands gripped the seat's edge. I closed my eyes tight. I heard the Doppler effect of Kevin's boat engine passing by and mentally prepared myself for the sudden increase in gravity.

"Two, one—here we go!"

And off we went. Perhaps, I mused, I should have studied astronomy and become an astronaut like I had dreamed of doing as a child. A rocket launching couldn't be any worse than this. Being catapulted from a trebuchet or shot from a cannon couldn't be any worse than this. So why on earth had I lived so much of my adult life in fear of such simple things like poverty and loneliness and divorce?

"Cici, are you still breathing?" John shouted over the engine noise.

“Yeah, I’m still breathing,” I shouted back. I slowly released my death grip on the seat and settled back to enjoy the ride. “Just let me know when we’re in the next county.”

CHAPTER SIX

Love and Doctors

*I*t's a different sort of episode, 'Love and Monsters'. The Doctor and his companion are barely featured in it. Instead, we follow this geeky guy named Elton around London and discover how he hooks up with other nerds who all hold an interest in the Doctor.

I relate well to Elton and his pals. We all want to find others who are like us – and who actually like us just the way we are. People who love us in spite of our weird obsessions with sci-fi shows. People who don't run to the nearest bottle of booze whenever our strange geeky side takes over, and we feel the need to wear a twenty-foot long Tom Baker scarf to go grocery shopping on a hot summer's day.

Hmm... That's probably the simplest explanation for my failed marriages right there.

"Back from the dead yet?"

John Smith was the last person – alien – I wanted to speak to at the moment.

I lay semi-conscious on a lawn chair Jessie had set up for me. She had come running up to me as soon as she caught my wobbly steps as I crawled out of the boat. She gave me a towel for shade and left me in peace to go fetch me a cold drink from the cooler in

the back of the van.

"Barely. And no thanks to you, either."

He squatted down beside me and lifted the cover from my face. His chestnut hair was windblown, and I found the way he held his jacket over the back of his shoulder incredibly sexy. But I held onto my anger.

"I thought you were quite enjoying yourself the last time out," he said.

"I'm a better actress than even I think I am."

"Could have fooled me. You were whooping it up and hollering all the way. Sounds like you were having fun to me."

I rolled my eyes at him then tugged the towel back down. There was no way I was going to admit that after the initial terror I had actually enjoyed racing down the river at a million miles an hour. There was no way I was going to let John Smith know he had in any way gotten the better of me.

"So, what's next on the agenda, Madame Accountant?"

I wrinkled my nose in puzzlement. "How do you know that I'm an accountant?"

"You said so on the boat."

"I could have been lying." *Or did you read my mind to see if I was telling the truth?*

"Doubtful—you're an accountant. You've got a long stick up your arse. That, and you seem to be keeping a running total of things—particularly the wrongs or slights done to you."

I removed the cover from my face and stared at him. "Excuse me?"

"Jessie told me about your job while you were

having a bit of a lie down. She says you have a mind like a steel trap, but you need to forgive and forget more. She's afraid you take everything too seriously."

"Like she's one to talk. She cried for a week when they canceled the series. I only cried for a half hour."

"A half hour over a canceled television show?" He made a tutting sound and shook his head.

His disregard of our feelings ticked me off. I sat taller and crossed my arms. "You're making fun of me—of all of us here. It's our hobby. It's our pastime. Of course we were upset when we learned there would be no new episodes. A spark of joy in our dreary, workaday lives had been extinguished."

"But it wasn't the end of the world or the galaxy. It's not like you lost all your family and friends in one great, devastating catastrophe."

"Well, no, but personal anguish is all relevant. You haven't suffered such a loss, have you?"

The grin disappeared. "I have."

My ranting ceased. "Oh, God...I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

There were a lot of things I didn't know about John Smith. Other than he traveled without a suitcase and had a penchant for whipped cream and seemed able to make people see him as they wanted to see him, I had no earthly idea about his past or present. He quite purposefully had avoided all my questions about his personal life. What was his occupation? Why had he traveled so far from home? I opened my mouth to gather more information, but something held me back.

"Were you a child when this awful incident

happened?" I asked instead.

He shook his head, then stood. "Speaking of children, Jessie says we ought to pay our respects to Sammy the Scriptwriter. Let's go."

"I'm not certain we should." I took his arm and began walking with him toward the car. "Did she say Sammy could receive visitors today?"

"Jessie said he was fit enough. She said I was just the tonic for what ailed him." Suddenly he stopped and turned around to scan the stand of trees behind us. He sniffed at the air, licked a finger and held it up to the wind. "Hmm... Odd. Most unusual."

Unusual—now that was an understatement if I ever heard one. "What's so odd?"

"You didn't happen to notice someone following us, did you?" he whispered.

A crackle of electricity danced along my spine. I glanced over both my shoulders, half expecting to spot animated shop window dummies or something equally nasty marauding through the woods like in a *Doctor Who* story. "No, I didn't. Did you?"

He shook his head. "I'm just feeling a bit...edgy. It's crazy to imagine there's an evil intelligence lurking about on this bright sunny day." His mood lifted. He flashed his toothy grin, acting as if nothing in the world bothered him. "What I need is a break from all this excitement. Perhaps a visit with another imaginative person will do the trick."

* * * * *

After we made our goodbyes to the rest of the crew,

we headed over to Sammy's place. I should say we went to Sammy's mother's home, as Sammy actually lived in his parent's basement due to his recurring illnesses. At twenty-two, he should have been out in the world hanging with his friends from college or work. He should have been living life to the fullest and planning for an exciting future. Instead he was confined to a hospital bed in his combination bedroom and workshop.

Serena Espinoza led us down the steps to Sammy's lair. Petite and olive-complected with a smattering of white sprinkled throughout her jet-black hair, Sammy's mom warned us to not overtax his strength and that the home health nurse would return within the hour. Our visit could only last ten or fifteen minutes tops.

"If he starts acting a little spacier than normal, don't mind him." Her sigh sounded resigned. "It's the painkillers they gave him. They do funny things to his vision and his thought processes at times. What an awful side effect."

"Don't worry. We'll keep it short." I squeezed her hand. Dry tear tracks graced her cheeks. Serena and I were about the same age, although our lives couldn't be more different. I couldn't begin to imagine the horror of watching your only child slowly die in front of your eyes.

"I see you've almost finished putting together that *Battlestar Galactica* model at last." I smiled broadly and pointed to the half-built spaceship sitting on the table opposite the bed as we entered Sammy's domain. I tried hard not to show my distress at seeing

his pale and listless countenance. His thin form lay framed against a mound of pillows, an IV tube in his hand running from a sinister-looking machine to his right. "The detailing is super intricate. I bet the thing is a real bitch to put together."

"Yeah, it was. The package was missing a couple of decals, too." He pushed away a lock shock of black hair that had tumbled onto his face, squinting through his wire-framed glasses at me for the longest time as if memorizing my face. "Oh, it's you, Cici. How goes the film shoot?"

I sat in the chair beside the bed and gently patted his hand. "The first day's shooting is 'in the can' and it went well. Milo told me to tell you that he thinks the speedboats as spacecraft idea is excellent. And using a shot of the Casino Queen as the mother ship is inspired."

"It's something, all right." Sammy's gaze drifted from me to John standing in the corner examining the young man's extensive *Doctor Who* collection of novels, DVDs and action figures. "Who's your friend?"

I turned around and motioned for John to come closer. I couldn't make out my alien lover's expression in the dim light. I worried that perhaps the sight of seeing someone so near death would frighten him. I worried that perhaps the recent admission that he was practically an orphan would bring back sad memories he couldn't handle.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

"Impressive collection you've got here." He beamed that silly grin of his at Sammy, acting as if

there was nothing out of the ordinary happening in this sick room. "You've spent quite bit of time and money on it, I can tell."

"Doctor?" Sammy's hazy eyes widened in surprise. "Is it really you?"

"Of course it is, silly boy. Who else could it be?"

I leapt to my feet. Gravely ill or not, Sammy shouldn't be treated like he was mentally deficient. "Sammy, I'd like to introduce you to the actor who's *playing* the Doctor, John Smith. John, this is Sammy Espinoza."

"A pleasure to meet you, Sammy." They shook hands.

Sammy wouldn't let go. "Doctor, it's been so long. How old was I the last time we met?"

John wrinkled his brow as if in thought, then gazed deeply into Sammy's eyes. "Let's see... I think you only had about half your collection amassed then."

"And you were wearing that funky piece of celery in your lapel." Sammy laughed a weak but heartfelt chuckle. "I never could figure why you gave up wearing the long scarf. It could be so useful at times, couldn't it?"

They both laughed. My jaw dropped open in amazement. The poor boy's mind had been clouded by his medications. He needed to be grounded in reality. "Now, Sammy, you understand that John isn't a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey. He's just playing the part of the Doctor in your movie. You realize that, don't you?"

The two men looked at each other and then at me as if I had completely lost my mind. "Of course," John

said, “but we have a lot to catch up on, so if you wouldn’t mind...”

Sammy motioned for me to leave the room. I opened my mouth to protest, but thought the better of it. He was so weak. What could a little fantasy talk do but cheer him up? I bit my tongue and slipped up the stairs.

“John Smith,” I heard the younger man say, “now who on earth put you up to using that ridiculous alias? I forget. Was it the Brigadier?”

“How’s he doing?” Serena asked as I entered the kitchen.

I sat down at the round oak table and gladly accepted a cup of coffee. “He and John are getting along famously. It’s weird. It’s like they’ve met before and they know each other very well.”

Sammy’s mother sat down opposite me with her mug and sighed. “Well, the painkillers and other meds are affecting his brain chemistry, the doctors said. As long as your friend John doesn’t mind idly chatting with Sammy, there’s no harm done.”

Laughter echoed up the stairs from the basement. Serena smiled. “In fact, a little cheering up is exactly what Sammy needs. He’s been feeling down lately because he couldn’t help film his screenplay. You and your John will come back and keep him updated regularly on the movie’s progress—yes?”

I nodded. *My* John? He certainly wasn’t mine. I didn’t know whose he was. That uneasy feeling threatened to overwhelm me again. Who did Sammy see when he gazed upon John Smith? Did he see what Milo saw or what Jessie saw or what I saw? I hadn’t

asked anyone else which Doctor they saw when they gazed at our mysterious lead actor. Frankly, at this point I didn't really want to know. Just the idea that man possessed chameleon-like qualities was more than enough to drive me screaming into the street. And it took every ounce of energy I had not to do so.

"Your boss okay with you taking off time from work to help make the movie?" Serena's question brought me back to reality.

"Oh, yes, no problem at all. I've been with them for so long now that I have quite a bit of vacation time accrued."

"But to spend your precious time off to do something like this?" She reached over and squeezed my hand. "You are all very special people, in my opinion. Sammy is so lucky to have such good friends. Very lucky indeed."

Another round of laughter from the basement reached our ears. That was it. I had to know what was going on. I put down my cup and stood.

"Wow, it sounds like they're having a good time down there. I'll go get John now. I don't want to tire Sammy out unnecessarily."

Serena smiled. "No worries. Laughter is good for the soul."

I took the steps two at a time and landed on two feet on the landing with a dull thud. The sound drew John's gaze to mine. Once more he stared intently into my eyes like he did that day in the bar... like he was reading my mind or trying to tell me what to think. I stood frozen in place, my mouth hanging open in shock at the scene that greeted me.

John Smith stood by the hospital bed and held a pen-sized, silver device over Sammy's forehead. Blue light bathed the resting man's features. A high-pitched whirring sound filled the silence and then clicked off. John casually deposited the device in his inner jacket pocket.

"It's always great to see old friends again," he said quietly, stroking Sammy's forehead.

Sammy's eyes were closed. He lay slumped against the pillows. I gave a strangled cry and ran to the bedside. "You didn't kill him, did you?"

"No!" John jumped back from me as if I'd thrown acid at him. He wrinkled his nose, displeased at my reaction. "Whatever would make you think such a dreadful thing?"

I checked Sammy's pulse and watched his chest gently rise and fall several times. I exhaled a long sigh of relief. Our visit had been too long and overtaxing. Sammy had simply fallen asleep. "Good, he's breathing."

"As he very well should be. What makes you think I'd do anything to harm this imaginative boy?"

"Call it a hunch or women's intuition, but I don't know if I can really trust you, John Smith."

He furrowed his brow. "You trusted me enough to take me into your bed, Cici Connors."

I colored. "Uh, well, that was rather foolish of me, I'll admit. It was before I got to know you—or not know you, rather." I stared hard at him. "I really don't know who—or what—you are. It worries me."

He took one of my hands in both of his. "Is it really all that important to you? Can't you take me at face

value?"

"Ahem! Sorry to break anything up..." Serena cleared her throat loudly as she came down the steps and into the room. "The nurse needs to come down and make sure Sammy's IV is working properly."

"It is," John assured her. "He's sleeping soundly now." John looked deep into my eyes. Whatever retort I had planned to give died on my lips. "We've had a good chat."

"Thank you two for coming by and cheering Sammy up." Serena caught sight of John holding my hand and smiled. "You two make quite a pair. You playing the companion, Cici?"

I laughed. "No, no. I'm way too old and way too not the part." I nodded toward the cluster of companion posters decorating the wall opposite the bed. "The Doctor is always saddled with a nubile young girl who makes an excellent pin-up model. He's never chained to a never-has-been like me."

Serena fluffed Sammy's side pillows and slowly lowered the angle of the hospital bed to help her son sleep. "Now, that is unfortunate. Doesn't the Doctor understand you can't put a price tag on experience?"

* * * * *

On our second night together, my telescope returned to normal functioning again.

I didn't see Alpha Centauri or whatever I supposedly had viewed through its lens earlier that day. I could only see the tops of houses and tree branches and the glow of lights from the highway.

Normal stuff.

I missed the stars.

"Is it still not working properly?" John came up behind me on the balcony and looked through the viewfinder. He had doffed his suit jacket and rolled his sleeves up. Considering the amount of living he did in his one outfit, how odd it never seemed to get wrinkled. "Oo, blimey! Why would anyone want to stargaze at billboards?"

"I don't want to, but that's what I get for living in such a crowded place." I sighed and turned to go back inside. He touched my shoulder and turned me back around.

"Would you like to go someplace less crowded someday?"

"Yes."

"Someplace where you can see the stars without billboards mucking it all up?"

"Yes."

"Someplace where you didn't have risk running into one of your ex-husbands?"

"Hell, yes!" I laughed. "Though I sincerely doubt there is such a place."

His grin practically glowed in the dark. "What if I said I could take you to a place where all that and more was true. Would you go with me?"

The question caught me off guard. "I...I don't know."

"I don't know'?" His grin vanished quicker than the Cheshire cat before Alice's eyes. I could hear the skepticism in his rising tones. "What do you mean you don't know? When someone offers you the trip of

a lifetime, you say, 'I'll pack my bags and be right there.' You don't say, 'I don't know'. You jeopardize your chances of escaping the mundane by saying such a daft thing."

I bit my lip and leaned against the sliding door frame. "You're right," I said at last. "You're not supposed to look a gift horse in the mouth. You shouldn't second-guess the giver of such a tremendous gift. But I do, and I always have. And I probably always will."

"Why don't you simply accept the offer for what it is?"

I shrugged. "It's a trust issue. I want to trust—honestly, I do. But after so many times of misplacing my trust and winding up the worse for wear, my heart simply isn't allowed to act without benefit of my cynical imagination. I imagine the worst in every situation. I'm rarely disappointed."

"So, if someone would to tell you that they had the power to take you away from all this...." I caught a blur of his hand gestures indicating the neighborhood around us. "From all this boring and ordinary life of yours, you'd still act the skeptic and refuse to listen further?"

"No, I'd listen. But I wouldn't believe it. Like you said this afternoon, it's only a television show. No one can escape his or her 'ordinary life' by hitching a ride on a spaceship. At least not in this century." I smiled wryly. "I have hopes for the next, though."

His grin reappeared. "Then you're not totally lost, Cici Connors. You may learn to trust—to live—again."

"Thanks. You coming inside now?" I nodded toward the door. "We've got a long day of filming tomorrow. You get to meet Ashleigh, the Doctor's beautiful companion."

"Hmph! Sammy tells me the girl is a first-class twit."

"He did? How on earth does he know? I don't believe they've ever met."

"He knows a friend of her second-cousin who knows the family quite well. The description of her character he gave was far from flattering. A 'spoiled princess with a superiority complex', I believe is what Sammy said."

"Well, you can't have everything." I re-entered the apartment and strolled into the living area. John followed close behind. "As long as she looks good on the screen, that's all that matters at this point."

"If you say so. Though I suppose a spoiled princess wouldn't turn down a proposal to travel the stars with a mysterious stranger because of neurotic trust issues."

Neurotic? I spun around and snarled at him. "Why wouldn't she? If she's a selfish bitch, she may just flat turn the proposal down. She may consider the proposition beneath her."

"Is that what you think? You consider the proposition beneath you?" he asked matter-of-factly.

"What?"

"Is that why you said 'I don't know' when I offered you a chance to leave this rock?"

Warmth rose to color my cheeks. "I didn't mean I was a stuck-up prig who thinks herself superior to

others. I'm just overly cautious, that's all."

He folded his arms across his chest and smirked. "Well, you certainly didn't act overly cautious last night after you brought me home. Remember the whipped cream?"

My mouth gaped open. I struggled to find the words to justify my impulsive actions. "I...I was feeling lonely, and you were more than amiable, as I recall."

"Yes, I was. I'm a very friendly person." He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. "And so are you. Why can't people who act very friendly toward each other in one sphere of interaction trust the same person in another sphere of interaction?"

"Huh?"

"You did stop to purchase another container of that whipped dairy concoction, did you not, on our way home from Sammy's?"

I threw up my hands in exasperation. "Oh, all right, I'll admit it. But I did so only because I needed other things at the grocery store anyway."

"So... You trust me enough to use the whipped cream on sensitive parts of your anatomy, and yet you would blithely turn down my gracious offer to escape your everyday existence?"

He had me there. It didn't make much sense when you phrased it that way.

"Okay," I said crossing my arms to match his posture, "I will go with you if you tell me one little thing."

The smirk instantly faded from his lips. "What's that?"

"What do you really do for a living?"

I had him. He turned around and refused to look me in the eye. I knew it. He was a chameleon-like alien, but he couldn't come straight out and say so. He didn't trust me enough to tell me the real reason for his visit to Earth. I had to continue to play along with him being a simple businessman lost in St. Louis.

I sighed. "See? I'm not the only one with 'neurotic trust issues', it appears."

"It's not quite that simple," he said in a low tone, pacing the rug. "If I tell you, I'll have to —"

"What? Kill me?" I blurted out. "You'll have to kill me if you tell me what your job is?"

"No, not that." He grimaced and stuck out his tongue. "Oo! What an awful thought, Cici."

I cringed. "Sorry. Then why the hesitation? You worry I'll lose all respect for you if I know what you do for a living?"

He laughed. "Hardly."

Despite the tough exterior, he sounded hurt. I sat on the sofa and patted the spot beside me. "Come, sit down. It's all right. Whatever it is you do, I won't hate you for it. But you don't happen to...kill...people in your line of work, do you?"

He plopped down on the sofa and wrinkled his nose in thought. "Well, not as a rule. And I'm not 'regularly employed' as such. I freelance for various concerns, you could say."

Oh, dear Lord! I chewed on a fingernail nervously. Could he be an intergalactic drug smuggler?

"I don't do anything particularly immoral or illegal," he admitted after a long pause. "You feel

better?"

A long-held breath escaped my lips. "Whew! I'm glad. You had me worried for a moment."

"Why? You aren't into criminals, but you don't mind shagging insolvent businessmen?"

I laughed. "Exactly. For a second there I thought you were going to tell me you worked for MI-5 or something, though."

"Hmm...James Bond as my co-worker." He thoughtfully stroked his chin, then winked at me. "I'd rather like that. James and I have so much in common after all."

"Yes, you sound British and you carry miniature devices such as that fancy pen of yours. Can I take a look at it again?"

He nodded. "It's over there in my coat pocket."

I stood and retrieved his jacket from the back of kitchen chair. I reached into the inside pocket and pulled out the gleaming silver writing instrument. I studied it from all angles. It looked like a pen. But I had to test it. I shook it—hard.

"Hey, don't do that!" He jumped up and snatched it out of my hands. "You may cause it to explode. It's not a cheap pen."

"I agree. It looks expensive. And you seem to have some sort of fixation on it. Is it a sentimental attachment or a professional one?"

"Both." He looked it over for damage and then slipped it back into his jacket pocket, holding tightly onto the garment. "I never leave home without it."

"How does it make that whirring noise?" I took a step closer to him and observed his reaction.

Outwardly he acted calmly enough, but I sensed he felt cornered. “What were you doing this afternoon dangling your shiny pen over Sammy’s head? You weren’t doing anything that would harm him, were you?”

“I wasn’t doing anything with it. You’re imagining things, Cici.” He crossed over to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and bent over to raid its contents. “I certainly hope I wasn’t imagining that whipped cream I spied earlier.”

I bit my lower lip in frustration and groaned. So like a man to change topics!

“Ah, there it is.” He held the red and white container of whipped cream high and shook it. “I’m ready for a snack whenever you are.”

Would I let John Smith get away with this? Every time I had pressed him on the issue of who or what he was he had somehow evaded giving a satisfactory response. But perhaps the only way to get the answers out of this chameleon man was to distract him with a little whipped cream and sex?

I sighed. It was my duty as a citizen of Earth. I had to cast my doubts and fears aside and do whatever necessary it took to find out more about this stranger in our midst—even if that included sleeping with the handsome devil.

“Ready, willing and able.” Smiling, I headed toward the bedroom. He followed quickly behind. Thank heavens I’d changed the sheets this morning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Age of Stainless Steel

The Cybermen take over planet Earth in ‘The Age of Steel’. Being heartless cyborgs, they feel no pain or sorrow over gutting the nervous systems from their fellow human beings and plopping their brains into a body of metal. Conformity is an ideal to be praised, as all become identical marching metal men.

Frankly, the Cybermen scare the shit out of me. It’s their conformity that makes them so damn frightening of a Doctor Who creature.

In spite of my outward appearance (on most days) I’m a non-conformist inside. I hate it when people tell me what to think, what to say, what to do. I’m terrified of any man who attempts to bend my will to match his.

Just ask my ex-husbands – they’ll tell you.

The early morning sun’s rays glinted off the polished stainless steel exterior of the Gateway Arch making it appear almost translucent. Its silvery surface mirrored the blueness of the sky adding to the optical illusion. It was as if the graceful sixty-three-story structure wasn’t really standing there at all along the shores of the mighty Mississippi. Somehow the Arch had vanished or had been stolen and taken far, far away. A national monument that one moment

stood there in the light—then it vanished. Had this elusiveness been architect Eero Saarinen’s goal all along?

“Damn, I hate how hard it is to shoot around this damn thing with all this blasted sunlight bouncing off it,” Milo complained to anyone and everyone within hearing distance. “But this is Sammy’s vision, and we do what we must.”

I love the tree-filled park grounds that surround the unique edifice and the silver slip of the Mississippi fronting it. At eight o’clock on a humid Sunday morning in June the Arch grounds are practically deserted. But if we wanted to shoot the few scenes at the Arch that were called for in the script, we had to act fast. Crowds of tourists would soon descend faster than buzzards upon rotting road kill. We had neither the manpower nor the patience to deal with crowd control.

“Where’s our Doctor and companion?” Trina spoke out of the corner of her straight pin-filled mouth. She knelt on the rapidly warming pavement at the foot of the Arch and pinned the skirt hem on an Edwardian-style gown worn by a very shy fan who went simply by the name of Romana. Romana, of course, being the fourth Doctor’s fellow Gallifreyan companion.

“Love the makeup, Romana,” I said, smiling at the fair-haired, plump girl. The Mardi Gras tones of gold, green and purplish-pink swirls that graced her face added a festive touch to the otherwise dull ivory tones of her dress. “This is almost like that scene in *City of Death* where Romana and the Doctor meet in

Paris under the Eiffel Tower, isn't it?"

She blushed and nodded. I squatted down to talk to Trina. "Our Doctor is standing across the street with some of the crew guys watching barge traffic go by. I have no earthly idea where our companion is currently. Didn't she come downtown with Jessie and Milo?"

"No, she didn't." Trina finished hemming the dress and dismissed Romana to join the other extras already in costume. "Jessie doesn't seem too concerned, though. She says she holds the power of the grade book and graduation. Almost godlike powers, if you ask me."

"Yes, but are they enough to wake a spoiled princess on a Sunday morning?"

Trina stood and shielded her eyes against the glare as she scanned the area. "I guess so. Isn't that our companion coming down the steps toward us?"

I turned and caught sight of Ashleigh. Dressed in tight distressed blue jeans and a rose-colored hoodie, she held a Starbucks cup in one hand and her cell phone in the other. She chatted animatedly with whoever it was on the other end and noisily chomped her gum until she reached Trina and her costume trunk.

"Mrs. Erikson says what I've got on should work okay," she announced as she approached. Her cloying perfume overwhelmed me and made my stomach churn. "But she says you have to add something else to my outfit to make it match another scene or something like that."

"Yes, that would be the cape." Trina squatted and

retrieved an identical swatch of silver lame cloth from the trunk like the one I'd worn as Ashleigh's stunt double on the river. "Let me pin in at the neck so it doesn't blow away like it did for Cici."

"No way." Ashleigh stuck out a tongue that matched her pink lipstick perfectly in color. "That grayish thing is *hid-ee-ous*," she drawled. "I'm not wearing it."

Trina stood taller, looming her almost six-foot height above the petite teenager. "You are too. It's already been established that the companion has to wear this cape. We have to match continuity of the scenes. I'm the continuity person, and whatever I say goes."

"Yeah, right." Ashleigh spun around on her flip-flops and bounded over toward where Jessie stood coaching the extras in front of the camera as Milo shot a few atmosphere shots. After a few moments with her teacher—and a full-scale temper tantrum—the high school senior sullenly returned.

"Mrs. E. says she'll give me extra credit if I wear the cape."

"That's the spirit." Trina whipped the cloth about the girl and safety pinned it at the collar. "Rack up all those extra credit points you can get. They could come in handy."

"I still think it looks dumb." She blew a bubble and popped it with a finger. "And it's stupid to film a scene at the Arch. It didn't exist during the 1904 World's Fair. It wasn't even finished until 1965."

I nodded. She was smarter than she looked. Maybe flattering her intelligence was the best way to make a

princess cooperate? "You're right on the dates. But since this story takes place on an 'alternative Earth', the St. Louis World's Fair and the Arch can exist at the same time."

The pretty blonde rolled her eyes and dropped her jaw a moment later as her gaze fell upon the group approaching our position. "They existed along with giant talking grapes?"

Kevin, Rick and three other hardy souls that I knew only in passing came shuffling down the sidewalk in their alien outfits. Drops of sweat dotted their purple and black made-up faces. Only a devoted fan or a confirmed lunatic would volunteer to act in such a hot and bulky monster costume during the month of June in St. Louis.

"Man, I could stand a cold beer just about now." Rick panted and blotted his face with the back of his claw-shaped, gloved hand. "Aw, crap, don't tell me...We've got to climb these damn steps to reach the Arch entrance level for the opening shot?"

I grimaced in sympathy. "Afraid so. Can you guys take the costumes off to make the trip and then slip them on again?"

"I can sort of wriggle out of mine." Kevin demonstrated by ducking into the interior of the roundish foam rubber and latex creation and lifting it up to crawl out from underneath. "But just barely. I had to sort of staple Rick into his get-up."

"You stapled him into it?" Trina looked at him askance. "Kev, be real. How in the hell is he going to take bathroom breaks?"

"He isn't." Kevin frowned as everyone turned and

glared at him. "What? We only have to shoot the opening and closing shots here, right? The Grapenoss don't have a lot to do in these scenes. We stand there and smile and look pretty, mostly. We get to do a lot more stuff in the scenes to be shot at Forest Park."

Ashleigh took an exaggerated sniff of the air and made a face. "Excuse me. I have to go breathe somewhere."

The teen's superior tone grated on my—and everyone else's, I could tell—nerves. She sashayed up the steps toward the camera position to be closer to her English teacher.

Just as well, I thought. I didn't want to deal with the prima donna. I had enough on my hands dealing with our leading man. Our leading man who kept me awake most of last night finding new and inventive uses for whipped cream, among other things... I smiled at the happy memory and stifled a yawn. Alien or not, the man possessed the most limber tongue in the universe.

Slowly the Grapenoss posse made their way up the steps. I turned and motioned to John and the others to cross Eleanor K. Sullivan Boulevard and join the shoot.

"I hope you've got your lines down so we don't have to do more than one take. I'm not sure how long the Grapenoss will last in this heat." I took him by the arm and led him up the Arch steps toward the camera set-up.

"Will they shrivel up like raisins?" He sniggered behind a hand. "That's one method of defeating an alien menace, albeit a slow one."

“Don’t laugh. It’s a distinct possibility. They can’t get out of their costumes very easily. Plus, we’ve got to hurry and get out of here before the tourists wake up and cause trouble.”

“Why would tourists cause trouble? Aren’t we all supposedly tourists on an alien planet in this scene? The real ones should blend in just fine.”

I shook my head. Sometimes John Smith impressed me as being the most intelligent man I’d ever met—and then the next second he’d say or do something that knocked that notion clear out of my head. “Uh-huh, right. Big fat tourists in loud Hawaiian print shirts and ugly Bermuda shorts would blend in perfectly with Kevin’s big round Purple People Eaters. You’d hardly notice the difference.”

“Precisely. ‘Infinite diversity in infinite combinations’ I believe a young lad named Ryan was telling me a few moments ago. He’s big into *Star Trek*, you know. He’s wearing pointed ears and standing in the back, he says. His brother is wearing a Klingon costume in the crowd scenes.”

“I hope Milo doesn’t spot them. I don’t mind how they dress up, but he’s purist when it comes to mixing science fiction universes.”

We reached the top step and paused a moment to catch our breaths. John’s expression suddenly turned dark.

“Who are those people?”

He pointed toward a small group standing off to the side of the milling crowd of extras. I shaded my eyes with a hand and squinted for several long moments. I counted five thin males dressed in solid

black tracksuits, black gloves and black hoods pulled tightly about their heads. They sported ski goggles with thick mirror lenses that covered more than half their pale faces. What a costume... It gave me the creeps. They looked like escapees from the Heaven's Gate cult. It was definitely one way to keep your identity to yourself.

I frowned. "I don't recognize them at all. They're way too thin to belong to our group. They're probably somebody's friends who wanted to be extras in the scene."

"Are you sure?" He scanned the nearest tree-lined sidewalk and then turned to observe the one opposite.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I'm pretty close to it. Who else but sci-fi geeks would wear such dark, heavy clothing on such a sunny summer's day?"

"True. They do look more than a bit uncomfortable." He did another quick scan of the area, pointing toward the apex of the Arch. "Beautiful, isn't it? You ever been to the top?"

"No, I haven't."

He wrinkled his nose and tutted. "You're kidding me. Cici Connors, you've lived here for how long and you've never been to the top of the Arch?"

I shrugged. How could I admit to being both claustrophobic and afraid of heights?

"I can't believe it—the woman who says she wants to travel the stars has never taken the four-minute ride in a suspended soup can to reach the observation deck."

His taunting laughter bridled me. "So you're

telling me you've ridden in the Arch tram before?" I said defensively.

"Well, no, but Ryan and his brother were telling me all about it. Fantastic. You want to go up later?"

I hesitated. If I backed out I'd be labeled a wimp, but if I said I'd go... My stomach twisted into a granny knot. I'd heard the Arch tickets were sold online. Today's tram trips were most likely sold out by now. That convenient excuse could save both my nerves and my reputation.

"Sure, why not," I said, forcing a smile.

"Actors, take your places," Milo shouted. "Quiet on the set."

I pointed John toward crowd and then took my place behind the camera. Today I was acting as stage manager, feeding actors lines and directions as necessary. We didn't have much time to get these scenes shot. Anything I could do to keep the action going while Milo handled the camera and technical issues would be appreciated.

"Hello." John smiled and extended his hand to Ashleigh. "I'm the Doctor."

The thin blonde blew a big pink bubble and popped it with her tongue, ignoring his polite gesture. "Yeah, sure you are."

"Ashleigh, I told you to get rid of the gum." Jessie's teacher voice came from a group of extras milling around in the background trying to look 'natural'. She wore a beautiful crimson and black riding habit, more in the Victorian style than Edwardian. Trina had given her the go ahead to wear it, correctly assuming the majority of fans wouldn't notice or even care just

as long as monsters and the Doctor dominated the shot.

"Yes, Mrs. Erikson." Ashleigh quickly swallowed her gum. "There. I hate littering."

"Me, too." John narrowed his gaze. "You ever been to the top of the Arch?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, and it's like totally dumb. All you see is the river and the junk on the Illinois side. Boring with a capital B."

He nodded. "I see. Thanks for your deep insights."

Milo stepped into the non-conversation and grabbed his lead actors by the shoulders and moved them into place like they were a couple of display racks. "You, stand here," he said to John. "And you — right here."

Ashleigh made a face. "Ugh. Do I have to stand so close to the talking grapes?"

"Yes, you do." Milo returned her ugly scowl with one of his own. She took a step backward toward the crowd. "They've got to bump into you so they can be introduced as the baddies in the story. Got it?"

Ashleigh nodded. Milo glared at both his leads. "Okay then, let's start the scene. You know your lines and what to do?"

John nodded. "More or less."

"Ashleigh?"

She idly wrapped a lock of her hair around a finger. "Yeah, just as long as I don't have to touch any of the stinky guys in the purple blobs."

"Hey!" Rick piped up. "We don't stink. We're hot. These things don't breathe at all."

Ashleigh held her nose. "But I do."

"Enough with the yakking!" Milo snapped. "When I yell action, you two wait until I point at you and then say your lines and do your shtick, all right?" He turned and took up a position behind Bob, our soundman, who signaled his readiness. "Okay, people—action!"

The camera panned down from the top of the Arch to the plaza below, focusing in on background extras circulating about and pantomiming conversations with each other. Eventually the shot came to rest on the Doctor and his companion, alias Tara Jo.

"This is some Worlds' Fair, Doctor." Ashleigh's grating voice flaunted a flat drawl. "How many worlds are represented here?"

"Thousands," John said in an equally nasal tone. Was he making fun of her Ozarks twang? His outwardly controlled expression and erect posture hid his intent. "There's just about every friendly race and species who's anyone here—the Leaf People of Ursa Minor, the Cat Folk of Betelgeuse, the Grapenoss..."

I cued Kevin and the others to come forward and to gently bump into Ashleigh, then briefly introduce themselves as written in the script. I should have realized the girl's earlier comments had inspired them to modify their blocking. With a firm body check to her backside, Rick toppled Ashleigh forward onto her hands and knees.

I cringed. Milo opened his mouth and started to yell, "Cut!" when without a second thought, John reached down and pulled Ashleigh to her feet.

"Careful there, Tara Jo." He dusted her off and

spun her into position. "You don't want to cause an interstellar incident. This gentleman you just bumped into is the Grapenoss ambassador. Say you're sorry."

"Right." To her credit, and in spite of looking dazed and a more than a bit confused by John's ad-libbing, Ashleigh went along with it. "Sorry."

"Apology accepted." Kevin bowed to her ever so slightly in his bulbous costume. "And you, sir, must be the Doctor..."

The scene continued on as scripted until Milo ended it. I blew out a long-held sigh of relief through my pursed lips. One scene down, and a few dozen more to go. The actors were told they had a few minutes rest and to not wander off too far. Of course, John Smith didn't listen. He immediately wandered down the waterfront steps toward the river once more.

"Where's that damn TARDIS? We need it to set up the next shot." Groaning, Milo's gaze swept the horizon for signs of our wayward set director. "I knew asking Chandra to repair it was a big mistake."

"But it needed repainting badly," I reminded him. "Remember what a beating it took at the last con party? The flashing light didn't work on top anymore, and the door kept falling off its hinges."

Our version of the TARDIS, the Doctor's time travel machine, had seen better days. Several founding members of our fan group had built the classic royal blue 'Police Public Call Box', which secretly was the Doctor's ship, as a labor of love. Sadly, its plywood frame and Styrofoam paneled sides had taken repeated beatings over the years. On

top of it all, it had been stored in a very damp basement at one point, causing its support braces to stand at a slightly less than ninety degree angle to its floor. A new TARDIS was called for, but with no set budget, we were forced to spruce up the old box and pray audiences didn't notice its numerous faults.

"She's on her way." Jessie jogged over from the crowd of extras. "I just got off the phone with Chandra. She couldn't find a place close by, so she had to park over near Laclede's Landing."

Milo slapped his forehead. "Good grief. Does she need help moving the thing?"

"No, she recruited her brothers, and she's borrowed a trolley. They should be here any minute."

"All right, let's get this scene set up. Cici— wrangle our leads over here. We're going to shoot both the opening scene of the TARDIS landing and the last scene when they depart. You got those pages in the script marked?"

"Yes, I do. And I'll be right back."

I hurried over to Ashleigh, who was smacking a new wad of bubble gum while she sat on a park bench along the wide sidewalk that led to the Arch's north leg. With a minimum of fuss, I got her off her butt. I led her to a spot along the tree-lined pathway that Milo had chosen earlier this morning to be the resting spot for the TARDIS. Jessie then took over as babysitter for me while I ran down the Arch steps to gather up our wandering Doctor.

I reached the river level sidewalk, gasping for breath. I leaned against my knees and took several deep gulps of air. "John!" I called over here. "Get over

here. The TARDIS has arrived."

That got his attention. He crossed the street with a decided spring to his step.

"Now, this I've got to see." He took the concrete steps practically two at a time until halfway. He turned around and frowned. "Can't you keep up? You really need to exercise more, Cici."

Panting and more than a little sore, I glared at him. "Easy for you to say. You're an alien. You've got two hearts—twice as much oxygen pumping through your veins."

He flashed that idiotic grin of his and winked at me. "So I have. Twice as much energy, too." He bounded up the steps without another word, leaving me to struggle the remaining obstacles alone.

"And some would claim it's always the companion who goes gallivanting about without the Doctor." I took a deep breath and began the steep ascent. "I think not."

By the time I reached the set I could tell John was none too happy. The extras stood at a distance, buzzing and pointing at the shocking sight in front of them.

"The thing is bleeding purple." John danced about the seven-foot tall, four-foot wide cabinet, wildly waving his arms to let off steam. "The Doctor's TARDIS isn't supposed to be purple. It's blue. That's all, just blue."

"It's the best I could do under the circumstances," Chandra explained. Dark circles rimmed her eyes. By the look of her paint-spattered gray T-shirt and ragged jeans shorts, I could tell she hadn't even

bothered to change. She slumped forward and sighed. "I've been up half the night trying to correct it."

"What's all this then?" John raised his voice another pitch higher. "'Police Public Cal Box?' What's a 'Cal Box'? It's a *Call* Box. You left a letter off the sign."

Our beleaguered set designer cringed. "Oh, I didn't notice that...The 'L' must have fallen off when we were moving it. I can make another one and glue it back on."

"It looks like the TARDIS chameleon circuit got stuck in the shape of an enormous piece of toast smothered in grape marmalade." Frowning, John crossed his arms and stuck out his tongue. "Bleh! I hate grape marmalade."

"What's up with the purple color scheme?" Even Miss 'I-Could-Care-Less' Ashleigh Witherspoon seemed to feel the need to chime in on the discussion. "We've got purple talking grape monsters and now this—a purple phone booth. Even I know that the Doctor's box is supposed to be blue. I've seen the commercials."

"Right you are." John flashed a grin at the girl. She smiled back, and suddenly I saw red. "See? Ashleigh doesn't even watch the program, and she noticed the discrepancies. What will the diehard fans think?"

Odd, John Smith voiced exactly what I was thinking—even down to the point about not having a fondness for grape marmalade.

Milo dropped his head in his hands and groaned. "The fans will think we're the rankest of the rank amateurs. Rick! Where the hell is he? Somebody get

our computer expert over here at once."

"I'll find him," Jessie volunteered. "He's a walking grape—he couldn't have waddled very far."

"Thanks." Milo sighed. "Jessie, once you track him down, ask him if it's possible to correct the TARDIS color in the editing program. If it isn't, I don't want to know."

"Right." Jessie pantomimed for me to keep an eye on our companion actress and then swished away in her riding outfit.

Chandra's lower lip quivered. She seemed on the verge of tears. I took a step closer, wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gave her an encouraging squeeze. "It's okay, Chandra. I know you did your best."

"I thought I'd bought the right shade of royal blue the first time, but the guy at Home Depot must have put in a dash of red." She sniffed loudly, then sobbed. "And when I tried to paint over it this morning, it only made things worse."

"You painted it again this morning?" From the corner of my eye I spotted John reaching toward the door panel. "Don't touch it!" I yelled. "Wet paint."

He wrinkled his nose and drew back his hand. "I can see that." He stuck out his tongue and sniffed at the air. "I can smell it, too."

"Everything smells around here, if you ask me." Ashleigh turned toward her favorite park bench. "If anyone needs me, I'll be in my dressing room."

John followed closely behind her. Irritated, I was about to go after them to keep tabs on both our leads when Milo grabbed my arm and turned me back

around for a quiet conversation.

"Can we cut these two scenes?" His hopeful expression was rapidly fading.

"I don't know." I chewed on a fingernail and thought about it for a full thirty seconds before replying. "I don't think so. The opening and closing scenes are important. They set up and conclude the story. They show how the Doctor and his companion arrive on the scene and depart after they've interfered with everything. They're sort of expected in every *Doctor Who* episode. We just can't drop them. We'd have to do something else to replace them."

"Could we shoot the scene as written but leave the TARDIS out of it? After all, the damn paint is still wet. We don't want our actors going in and out of a sticky purple door. We can't afford the dry cleaning bills."

"No kidding." I rubbed my temples to prevent the migraine that threatened to erupt from starting. I tried hard not to observe the animated conversation between John and Ashleigh on the park bench. They seemed to be the best of chums all of a sudden. Wasn't it like a man, when he had an option, to go chasing after a younger woman?

A gray cloud, that hinted at an approaching rain shower, crossed the face of the brilliant sun. One moment and all was sunny and clear; the next, the trees cast long, murky shadows that mirrored the dark envy evading my heart. Suddenly the encroaching darkness gave me an idea.

"I got it. Stick the TARDIS in the deep shade and then you can't really tell if it's purplish blue or royal blue or plain old gray or missing a letter from the

sign. We'll shoot the Doctor and the companion standing at a distance in front of it. The audience can figure it out easily enough if they're coming from or going toward it."

Milo's gaping mouth closed slowly. "Why...that's inspired. Cici, you're a genius. Thank you—thank you."

"You're welcome." Yeah, right. I was a genius who felt like throttling both our leads.

Milo reorganized the shot in minutes, and it only took a handful of crewmembers with drop cloths wrapped around their hands to move the TARDIS to its new shaded location. The two short scenes went off without a hitch. Mission accomplished. After shooting a few close-ups around the Arch featuring the Grapenoss and other extras, our fearless director was ready to call it a day.

"Listen up, people," Milo announced to the group. "We'll see some of you tomorrow for the scenes we're filming on the Grapenoss mother ship flight deck built in Kevin's garage. Don't forget, next Saturday we'll try to wrap this thing up by shooting the outdoor scenes at Forest Park. All extras need to be there and in costume by about ten. Rain or shine, we'll shoot. Thanks for coming, guys."

I wandered over to the park bench 'dressing room'. John and Ashleigh sat laughing at each other's jokes while blowing bubbles and popping them with their tongues.

"However do you do that?" Ashleigh's high-pitched titter sounded like Minnie Mouse on helium. "I'd get gum stuck in my hair if I blew a bubble that

big."

John grinned and chomped his gum a bit harder. "It's all in the tongue action. Here, let me show you."

He blew a gargantuan pink sphere, almost as big as his head. Annoyed, I pretended to trip and stuck my finger smack dab in the middle of it. The bubble instantly deflated and covered the lower half of his face with sticky pink film.

Ashleigh glared at me. "Gross."

"Oops! How careless of me." I sat down on the bench, grabbed a tissue from my purse, spat on it and began to scrub his face. "Ashleigh, Jessie—I mean Mrs. Erikson—wants to have a quick word with you. Be sure to give the cape back to Trina, too."

"All right." The girl sprang to her feet and suggestively waggled her fingers farewell to her bench companion. "I'll see you in a couple of days, John. I'm glad I don't have to be in any of the stinky grape mother ship scenes. 'Bye.'"

He pushed my hand away from his goo-covered lips and wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Bye, now. Remember what I said."

"I will."

I tried not to growl under my breath. The wannabe blonde bombshell sauntered away, swinging her shapely hips side to side like a pole dancer on a catwalk. I could tell that my alien lover had carefully observed and mentally catalogued every move she made. I spit on the tissue again and scrubbed harder on the bubble gum stuck to his ears.

"If you want to lick my face, Cici, we should wait until after we've returned to your place."

"Yeah, I want to lick you all right," I muttered. "Give your backside a good licking with a switch." I crumpled the used tissue in my fist. "There. That's as good as I can do in these circumstances. We may have to try the peanut butter trick to grease the gum out of the tips of your hair."

"Whipped cream won't work? I thought perhaps it was the cure for everything."

"Not quite everything." I started to rise to dispose of the sticky tissue. He grabbed my arm. I sat back down and looked daggers at him. He scowled back.

"Playing the Doctor, I should have realized it all along. Whipped cream doesn't cure old-fashioned jealousy. Perhaps you should have played one of the sour Grapenoss today."

A nasty retort died on my lips. "Sour Grapenoss? *Sour Grapenoss?*"

"Yes, the Sour Grapenoss who come from the planet of Bitter Whine."

I began to chuckle, softly at first and then with more enthusiasm. His trademark toothy grin reappeared as he joined in.

"Sorry," I said as our laughter subsided. "I don't know what got into me."

"Yes, you do. Don't play stupid. You think I won't invite you to travel the stars with me someday because of a silly schoolgirl. Let me assure you that it's not the outward stuff that counts as much as what's up here." He pointed to my forehead. "I need intelligent people on my crew, not a bubble gum chewing teenager who has a thing for Ashton Kutcher, whoever the hell he is."

"You know who Ashton Kutcher is, don't you? Demi Moore's main squeeze? He did a stupid prank show on MTV and acted in a bunch of fairly weak movies."

He nodded slowly. "Oh, yes... That guy. Right. I've confused him with someone else."

I could tell John Smith had no earthly idea who Ashton Kutcher was. Was it just another hint that our Doctor wasn't a native of this planet? Or did it mean he simply wasn't into American pop culture icons and teen girls' heartthrobs?

"Shall we go to the top of the Arch now?" His raised eyebrows and eager question interrupted my mental wandering. "I certainly wouldn't want to miss experiencing St. Louis' most famous tourist attraction next to the Anheuser-Busch Brewery tour."

"The guys told you about the brewery tour, huh?"

"Yes, they did – and they highly recommend it. But I want to go to the top of the Arch first." He leaned toward me. "You're not afraid to go up to the top, are you, Cici?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat and forced a smile. "As much as I'd love to go, we have to buy tickets. Since it's the height of tourist season, they're probably already sold out for today. Sorry."

"No problem. I've got two tickets right here."

"You couldn't possibly have –"

He reached inside his coat pocket and pulled out two tickets for the Arch tram. I snatched them from his hands and examined them closely. They appeared genuine.

Grinning, he rose from the park bench and offered

me his arm. "We better get going. We don't want to keep them waiting."

* * * * *

I could do this. I could crawl inside an enclosed, cylinder-shaped pod five feet in diameter. I could sit quietly for four minutes while the tram hoisted its necklace of eight barrels up from the basement subway station to the top of the Arch structure along the combination elevator/Ferris wheel track. I could really do this. I could look out of one of the thirty-two windows—sixteen on each side according to the nice tram guide—from the observation deck at its peak and marvel at the ant-sized people and cars in the streets below. I could make the stereotypical disparaging remarks about the Illinois side of the river and laugh while a wind gust swayed the Arch an inch or so in either direction. I could do this.

So why did I screw my eyes shut and grasp John Smith's right arm with both trembling hands in a virtual death grip?

"You can let go now," he said firmly. "I need the circulation restored in my extremities. Open your eyes."

I opened one eye and scanned the inside of the lighted soup can. "We haven't started moving yet, have we?"

"No, we're just sitting in the pod while others get seated in theirs. It's nice the guide let us have one all to ourselves. Somehow she knew you wouldn't be a good advertisement for the ease and safety of the

Arch transportation system."

"Wonder how she figured that out. Could it be because my face has turned a horrible shade of green?"

"No, you're not green at all. You're more of a...more of a pasty white, actually. But you look good in white." His goofy grin wasn't taking my mind off our current situation. "Which reminds me," he continued, "we must check out some of these haunted mansions in the city Jessie told me about. I'd enjoy chatting with a few ghosts."

A sudden lurch forward and a mechanical clatter alerted me that we were on our way. I felt my body rising like a phantom's inside the dark interior of the Arch leg, nothing beneath me but this tiny soup can clinking along on its metal track.

"Oh, dear God..." I shut my eyes and pressed a fist to my lips. "I'm going to be sick."

"No, you're not." John grabbed my chin and looked deep into my eyes. The small world of the pod had suddenly transformed itself into an infinite space filled with a gauzy mist. "Cici, listen. Listen closely to me and do exactly as I say. You are going to be fine."

"I am going to be fine," I repeated.

"That's right. You're going to have a lovely time standing 192 meters above the earth, looking out the observation windows at the earth below. You will not feel anxious or dizzy or ill or panicked or anything of the kind. And you're going to say nice things about the Illinois side of the river."

I nodded. I spoke as if the two of us were wrapped inside a dream... A wonderful, gauzy cloud filled

dream. "All right. I will not feel sick or anxious."

"Good, good. We're halfway there now. Everything's fine."

"Everything is fine," I replied automatically.

But it wasn't, and I knew it. I had to mentally force my next words out. "Why do I have to say nice things about the other side of the river? It's a dump."

He sighed. "I know I can't make an individual go against her deep-seated beliefs, but I will try on this occasion." He cleared his throat. "Cici, listen carefully. You're going to say nice things about Illinois from now on because Ryan and his brother are from Collinsville. They told me about the unpleasant things people on the Missouri side say about the Illinois side. It hurts their feelings. So from now on, you will say only nice things and convince others of the same as well."

He lifted one eyebrow, the golden flecks in his brown eyes gleaming. The white mists swirling about me all converged at that one golden point in time and space, pulling me closer, closer...

"Is that understood, Cici?" His voice brought me out of the dive.

"Yes, I understand. I don't have to become a Cubs fan, do I?"

"No, that's not necessary. The three or four fans they have currently are more than sufficient."

I continued gazing into the infinite depth of his eyes for what seemed an eternity. Images of strange places and even stranger faces flashed through my mind. Voices and cries and shouts and explosions reverberated through my head. The visuals and

sounds came faster and faster until they rushed into a blur of color and a cacophony of white noise. What did it all mean?

John tapped my knee. I jumped, startled as if awakened from a deep sleep. The pod doors swung open.

"We made it," he said, smiling. "Feeling okay?"

"You know it's weird, but it feels like I've been asleep forever."

He winked. "Not quite."

We exited the tram and followed our fellow passengers up a few steep steps into the narrow observation room. John immediately took up residence along one of the city side windows.

"Brilliant! The clouds have cleared. 'I wandered lonely as a cloud that floats on high o'er vales and hills...'"

Now he was quoting Wordsworth poetry like the slightly pompous sixth Doctor was prone to do upon occasion.

"Look, Cici!" he shouted. "You can see the tops of the buildings and right into people's windows. I say—I can see someone showering at the Adam's Mark."

I gazed down on the first class hotel below for several moments and shook my head. "Don't be silly. We're way too far up to see into windows unless you've got a powerful pair of binoculars or eyes like a hawk."

A crystal clear image of a peregrine falcon sprang to my mind. Suddenly I left my body... I was soaring like a bird, higher and higher above the Arch. I shook

my head to dislodge the bizarre notion and crossed over to the east side of the gallery to gaze across the Mississippi.

“That’s beautiful.” I gasped in awe. “Quite remarkable. It’s odd how I never noticed it before.”

John crossed the narrow passage to peer through the window beside me. His wild eyes and maniacal grin reminded me of the time the newly regenerated tenth Doctor challenged the vile Sycorax leader to a duel in order to save Earth. “Noticed what?”

“The Illinois side of the river. It’s not half as bad as everyone makes it out to be.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fear Him

*C*hildren can be downright scary in Doctor Who stories. In 'Fear Her', Chloe Webber has the ability to capture and destroy others via her colored pencil drawings. Although she's been taken over by an alien presence, who essentially is a 'lost child', it's still terrifying to think of a kid possessing such terrible power.

An adult would have some rational judgment and life experience to balance such an awesome talent. Well, at least some adults would. I'm not sure I could include any of my ex-husbands in that statement, the more I think about it.

I wonder where that puts me on the judgment scale? After all, I was stupid enough to say yes to their marriage proposals.

The odd coincidences, the odder imagery—these things didn't bother me anymore. I didn't know why, and I didn't care. It didn't even worry me when I had an overwhelming urge to take elevators to the top floors of all the tall buildings in the area, too.

Obviously, the dual effects of too much John Smith and too much science fiction fan filmmaking were getting to me. I realized I needed to minimize these adverse effects, but John and Sammy would have none of it.

Serena left a message on my answering machine inviting us over for supper that evening. John picked up the phone and immediately accepted. I allowed the wave of uneasiness to gently wash over me like a sea-lulled surf jumper on a beach.

"I don't think we should be bothering Sammy again so soon." The words finally gelled in my brain and escaped my mouth during the drive over to the Espinoza's modest home in the Green Park area.

"But they invited us." John leaned forward and tapped the dashboard indicator. "Are you sure you're minding the speed limit, Cici?"

I tapped my brake pedal and frowned. "Hey, you leave the driving to me, and I'll leave the time travel to you, okay?"

"Fair enough." He crossed his arms and gazed out the window. "Doesn't anyone around here take public transportation? That bus back there was practically empty."

"This is the suburbs. That means we're either so filthy rich we can afford our own cars, or we're too stupid to figure out the Metrolink schedule. Your pick."

"I'll go with the latter. Stupidity is a common human complaint."

I watched a solid black SUV with black-tinted windows run a red light in front of me. "Idiot," I said under my breath. "And speaking of complaints, I really don't think we should be bothering Sammy tonight. I mean, the kid's sick—terminally ill. He doesn't need us bombarding him with our germs and overexciting him. We could visit him at the end of the

week and tell him how the entire thing went then. It would be less taxing."

"But it wouldn't be as much fun. It is his movie script, after all. He's dying to know what's happening."

I grimaced. "Dying?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to phrase it that way." He cleared his throat. "You take a left here, don't you?"

I made the turn into the Espinoza's neighborhood and sighed. "I noticed a lot of his homies on their cell phones today giving him the low down. All we can do is rehash the shoot for him."

"You do that, Cici. Sammy and I have other more important matters to discuss."

I didn't have much chance to ponder what these matters could be. Serena immediately hugged us both at the front door and dragged me into the kitchen, where she was making lumpia and another spicy Filipino rice dish she knew I adored.

"Go downstairs and say hi to Sammy, John," Serena said. "He's feeling much better. And he's been talking about you all day. In fact, he's demonstrated more energy today than he has in months."

John flashed a proud smile. "Has he really? Fantastic."

I watched my alien lover disappear down the steps and bit my lip in thought. I should feel anxious about leaving the two of them alone after last time, shouldn't I? But what exactly had I seen that had made feel wary? Funny... I couldn't remember.

"Cici, I really like this guy. You going to groom him into becoming husband number five?"

I blushed. "John Smith? Our Doctor? You've got to be kidding, Serena."

She popped a lumpia roll into a pan full of hot oil to fry. Her rumpled brow made her look serious. "What's wrong with him? He's much better looking than your last one—and he likes science fiction, too."

She lowered her voice and glanced over at the top of the basement staircase. "He doesn't gamble like Harlan did, does he? I'd understand why you wouldn't want to experience another bankruptcy."

"Please, don't bring up that man's name ever again. I'll lose my appetite."

"Sorry." She sighed. "I know he did a bad number on your credit rating. You have every right to act cautious. And I'm one to talk. I could never find a man who could measure up to Sammy's father after the accident. I'm turning into a busybody old widow."

"Stop that. You're not old."

"Busybody, though, maybe?" She chuckled, then dropped more of the meaty Filipino spring rolls into the hot oil. The sizzling concoction filled the air with a mouthwatering, spicy aroma.

I gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "You're a dear who's looking out for me—everyone, really—when you should be focusing all your attention on your son now."

"I focused too much on him at times, the doctors say. I need to let go." She smiled. "Did I tell you about the excellent test results we received today? Sammy's white blood cell count is way up. He's feeling much stronger, I can tell."

"That's wonderful."

"I owe it all to John and you. Sammy started feeling a hundred percent better right after you left yesterday, and he's continued to improve. It's a miracle."

"Really?" I squeaked. Silent sirens went off in my head, and warning lights flashed before my eyes. Something wasn't quite on the level here—but what?

"Excuse me a moment, Serena. I need to ask John something. I'll be right back."

I dashed downstairs and discovered the two men face to face in deep conversation. No, that wasn't it. Sammy wasn't doing any talking at all. John perched on the edge of the bed holding the shiny, whirring pen above Sammy's head. The pen's tip radiated an eerie blue candescence... He stared intently into the young man's eyes

Oh, God... I remembered it all now! I even remembered this afternoon in the Arch. I'd been hypnotized or mind-controlled somehow. I was still under the influence—*his* influence.

"Get away from him," I whispered as I slowly approached. My booming voice had gone AWOL.

John stepped back from the bed and pocketed the pen. "There's nothing wrong here. I was checking to see what progress had been made."

"Progress? Are you brainwashing him?"

"Brainwashing? Why would I do something daft like that? Humanity needs original thinkers like Sammy here. But it needs them healthy."

"Are you...curing him?"

My lover shrugged. "Possibly."

"You aren't making him any worse, are you?"

"Of course not." He pulled out a chair beside the bed and nodded to it. "Now sit down, please."

Silently I obeyed him.

"Cici, listen to me closely. You're going to take a short nap and when you wake up, you're going to feel hungry for dinner. Nothing whatsoever will trouble you about my shiny pen ever again. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

I closed my eyes. I felt the cool mists gathering from the corners of my mind, rolling like a fog blanket upon my consciousness, but I fought them off. I mentally hummed the *Star Spangled Banner* and bit my tongue. The pain and the concentration on the tricky tune kept me aware of my surroundings. I swore to myself I wasn't going to fall for anymore of John Smith's alien brainwashing tricks.

"Cici?" I suddenly heard Serena's voice nearby. "Poor dear, she must have had a tiring day. She's snoring away."

I snorted and popped my eyes open. Serena stood beside me, smiling kindly at my confused look. "Say what?"

"Dinner's ready. Both you and Sammy fell asleep while you were chatting."

"Oh..." I shook my head to drive away the unusual sense of fatigue. "I'm so sorry. I didn't realized how draining today must have been."

"No need to apologize. John helped me set the table. I think he's been well housetrained. He doesn't have a long list of exes like you, does he?"

I stood, yawned and rubbed my eyes. "I think John collects companions like Sammy collects sci-fi action figures. He's never able to quite make a commitment. The ultimate serial monogamist, you could say."

Serena's dark brown eyes widened with curiosity. "Interesting. What makes you say such a thing?"

I didn't know what made me say those words. It was just a gut feeling—a strong, pervasive notion that wouldn't let go. There had been many others before, but none had ever stayed an entire lifetime—nor could they.

"Hmm, dinner smells super." I shuffled toward the stairs and changed the subject before she could probe me about what I really mean. "I hope you made a lot of lumpia. I'm so hungry I could eat a Slitheen."

* * * * *

Does he love me for my mind or my telescope?

On our third night together, I still wasn't sure. The roar of the highway and the chorus of the cicadas lulled us as we sat out on my apartment balcony. John rolled up his shirtsleeves and tinkered with my stargazing device once again. The more time I spent with the man, the less I understood him. I alternatively trusted and feared him.

What was it about him that I feared? His oddness? No, it wasn't like I wasn't fairly eccentric myself. Once, before a costume party, I went grocery shopping in my 'Leela' outfit. Too bad I didn't look half as hot as the fourth Doctor's primitive companion did in her leather bikini. I certainly can't claim I'm the

most normal person to ever walk the earth.

Perhaps it was John's ability to make everything turn out okay without any apparent means of doing so, a concept foreign to my life experience, which frightened me? When the Doctor pulled off these kinds of spectacular feats on television, I applauded. But the Doctor was only a fictional character. The idea of a real live being doing similarly I found both exhilarating and unnerving.

John squinted through the viewfinder and adjusted the focus. "You know, for a simple jumble of optics, this works remarkably well. Have a look at this." He stepped back.

I bent to gaze through the scope. "It's beautiful. I'm not familiar with this particular constellation. Do you know its name?"

"Where I come from, it's called the Throne of Rassilon."

I chuckled. "Yeah, right. And right next door is the Hand of Omega, of course."

"Not exactly. Here allow me." He gently moved me aside and repositioned the telescope. "This constellation is the Hand of Omega."

"The Hand of Omega?" John Smith was more of a fan than I had supposed at first, or he had picked up quite a bit of trivia chatting with people on the film set. I squinted through the viewfinder and spied another unfamiliar cluster of stars and interstellar gas.

I turned to him and smiled. "Lovely. The planet Gallifrey is nestled somewhere between these two groupings, I suppose."

"Yes, you're absolutely right." His toothy grin

faded as my chuckling continued. "What's so funny?"

"You are. Here I thought you knew nothing at all about *Doctor Who* and you wind up being a bigger geek than I am. Imagine that."

"You sound as if I have an illness of some sort."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to. I actually find your enthusiasm quite refreshing. None of my former husbands ever cared much for the show. Nice to know that I've finally met a man who does."

He sat in a deck chair, leaned back and put his feet up on the other. "Cici, don't be silly. You know lots of people who share your taste in television. You're making a fan film with a group of them at the moment."

I playfully pushed his feet aside and sat down in the chair beside his. "I meant it's nice to know a guy that I've *slept* with who doesn't think I'm a total idiot for having a fixation on a fictional character."

"Slept?" He wiggled his eyebrows in amusement. "We've not done a whole lot of that particular activity in your bedroom."

I blushed. "You know what I mean."

"You're right, I do." John's smug smile reminded me of the ninth Doctor's when he boasted of his greatness. I felt like smacking him, but thought better of it.

"Having a companion who understands your fascination with science fiction is important to you?" he asked at length.

I frowned. "Well, yes. Nobody likes to be thought of as a freak by a lover. It's condescending. Demeaning."

"To whom?"

"Me, of course. Why would I want to go to bed with someone who doesn't respect me or my taste in hobbies? We have to have something in common."

He picked up a small gear I had never seen before from the deck table and rolled it about in his hands. "You certainly didn't give me a survey on the subject."

"I didn't because at the time it wasn't important—and I didn't want to scare you off. We needed someone to play the Doctor, and you fit the bill nicely."

He tossed the metal bit up into the air and caught it. "If our having anything in common wasn't important to you then, then why would this acceptance of your favorite leisure activity continue to be of importance to you now?"

"You're deliberately not getting me," I growled. "It's simple. I have to like the guy I have sex with and he, in turn, has to like me—and that means he has to respect my opinion."

"No, he doesn't."

"Yes, he does, and I'm not going to argue with you anymore." I stood. "I'm going to bed now. Coming?"

"See? You don't have to respect the other person's opinion at all. Sex is a simple biological function."

I screamed in frustration. "Fine. Whatever you say. I suppose next you'll be saying that love is a highly overrated emotion."

He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Hmm, I'd have to agree with you there. So we do have something in common after all besides an affinity for science

fiction.”

“That’s the most inhuman, cold-blooded... *Oh!*” I bit my tongue, then blew out an angry breath and clenched my fists at my sides. I wasn’t going to fight with this man. We needed him a few more days to finish Sammy’s movie—then he was history. I strode back into the apartment and headed for the bedroom. He followed close behind.

“Don’t be angry with me.” He tried to grab my shoulders and turn me around, but I’d have none of it. “I’m just not able to see things the way humans—I mean other people do—on occasion. I apologize.”

I sighed. He sounded sincere enough. I turned around and nodded. “Apology accepted.”

“Good.” He grinned. “Now, do we have any more of that whipped cream?”

I slapped my forehead in disgust and sighed. “I don’t get you at all, John Smith. You really are from another planet.”

“You’re very perceptive, Cici Connors. You’re right. I am.”

“You certainly are—Mars, Venus, the dark side of the moon. I don’t know why I bother talking to you at times.”

“Because I’m an entertaining conversationalist?”

I shook my head and entered the bedroom. “Oh, never mind. I agree with Tina Turner—‘What’s love got to do with it?’”

“Exactly.”

He plopped down on the bed and kicked off his sneakers. I went into the bathroom for some mental peace and quiet and to brush my teeth and slip into

my gown.

"Love certainly hasn't played an important part in your life, John Smith," I said a few minutes later as I came out of the bathroom, patting my face dry with a towel. "I can tell. Love conquers all, but it must have missed you somehow during the battle."

He rolled to his side and wrinkled his nose in thought. "If love conquered all, the Japanese would have bombed Pearl Harbor with Valentines—and the Americans would have responded by dropping chocolates and roses on Hiroshima."

"Very droll. But what does that mean?"

"It means love doesn't work that way. Sometimes you have to take a stand and fight for what you believe in. You can't trust that someone else will be there to handle things and take care of you. You have to believe in yourself and your own abilities."

I sat down on the edge of the bed opposite him. "So, let me see if I get what you're saying. If I believe in myself, I don't need anyone to love me. Correct?"

"Correct."

"And if you believe in yourself, you don't need to love anyone. Correct?"

He nodded slowly. "That's essentially it."

I sighed. "People who believe in themselves, but who don't need anyone else... What a lonely existence." I turned off the lamp and silently crawled under the covers.

"It is a lonely existence," he whispered. "But how can anyone escape it?"

"By not pretending love doesn't make a difference. By trusting that maybe the next time love *will* make a

difference — if even just a small one.”

“That’s very profound coming from a woman who possesses a poor track record in the happily-ever-after department.” I could hear the smile in his voice. “You, of all people, shouldn’t hold such an optimistic position.”

I rolled over and kissed his cheek. “That’s what it means to be human. We have short memories and an abundant capacity for forgiveness.”

He kissed me back. “Hmm, I’d love a good case of amnesia, then.”

CHAPTER NINE

The Empty Alien

‘The Empty Child’ is a great Doctor Who story about how technology can both maim and heal. A little boy is killed in a bombing raid on London during World War II and his face is fused with his gas mask. But it isn’t really a bomb that’s fell on him—it’s an alien ambulance ship. Nanobots inside leak out and ‘heal’ the child the best way they know how, which, of course, is the wrong way. The dead child with a gas mask face wanders the streets in search of his mother.

“Are you my mummy?” he says over and over again. It’s downright creepy.

After a while, he’s just annoying. You want to shut the little bastard up.

Kevin Grimm’s garage rivaled London’s Pinewood Studios. In fact, the stand-alone aluminum-sided building surpassed Pinewood Studios and George Lucas’s Skywalker Ranch facilities combined. Unfortunately it wasn’t situated near Hollywood or any other major filmmaking center, but in a slightly rural area of St. Louis County where Kevin, a wannabe special effects artist, ran a prosperous groundskeeping and tree pruning service. And so this little known cradle of creativity benefited primarily

the midwestern science fiction fandom community.

Kevin's monster workshop housed a cornucopia of machine parts and tools, sprinkled with millions of colorful plastic bits and foam pieces for added color and texture. In the midst of this—the junk carnival of other people's cast-off items—stood the newly created set of the Grapenoss mother ship. Sammy's story of fantasy and wonder would rise or fall here, as a good portion of the heavy dialogue scenes occurred on the ship.

"Brilliant!" John cried upon entering the darkened cavern of a building. "The bleak lighting and rough textures are marvelous." He hopped onto the center platform. "Do these console controls really work?"

Our host demonstrated several switches, levers and flashing buttons. "Yeah, they do. Rick has collected some awesome sound effects that we can dub in during post production, too."

"Impressive. You really did your homework, Kev."

"Thanks." The big guy actually blushed. "Notice the design of the captain's chair, John? Recognize what universe it originally comes from?"

I did, of course. It looked like the Enterprise bridge seating arrangement from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. I had helped Kevin and Chandra film a short fan film in the *Star Trek* universe several years—and at least two husbands—ago. It was a testament to Kevin's genius that he had been able to recycle the set piece and camouflage it effectively.

"Which universe?" John's big brown eyes grew large and serious. He slowly circled the bench, studying it closely from all angles. "You mean you

actually scavenged this piece from an alternate universe?"

"Alternate universe? Ah, yeah, right. Good one." Kevin chuckled. For some reason, neither one of us found anything strange in John's remark and accepted it without further explanation.

"Okay, we've got the set and we've got the lighting. Where's our director and cameraman?" I asked.

"Milo is on his way," Chandra exited from a small alcove situated in the back corner that was Kevin's business office. "He got held up with a comic book distributor or something like that. He says he can't trust his part-time help to deal with it."

Kevin nodded. "Considering how little Milo pays his part-timers, I wouldn't trust them to run the cash register without me standing behind them with a shotgun."

"They make up for their lousy salaries with deep discounts on merchandise," I reminded him. I observed John from the corner of my eye browsing about the mess of memorabilia. He seemed to be enjoying himself and not causing any trouble so I turned my mind back to the filming. "Aren't Trina and Rick supposed to be here? I thought their characters each had a few lines."

Chandra wound her way through the clutter to the set. "Their scenes were scheduled to be shot last so they didn't have to take off much time from work today."

"It's just me as head Grapenoss and the Doctor, *mano a mano*, in a lot of these action bits," Kevin

added. "Which reminds me, I need to go back in the house and put on my purple face paint and costume. Excuse me a sec."

Kevin smiled at John as he exited. Our Doctor had found a pile of assorted gears and gizmos in the corner. He lifted and fitted several together, his eyes glowing with interest. He seemed to be in nerd heaven.

Chandra took a seat on the captain's bench and I joined her. "We may as well put our feet up and save our strength until the action begins." She sighed. "I have a feeling this is going to be a long day."

"Me too." I kicked off my sandals and rested my feet gently on the back of the cardboard and Styrofoam control panel. "Whatever was Sammy thinking when he created a purple, globe-shaped monster? Why couldn't he have dreamed up lifelike androids or just stuck a pair of angel wings on a humanoid like in the episode 'Blink'? Those kinds of aliens certainly would've been easier on the actors to bring to life on the screen."

"That's Sammy for you. The more obviously tacky a *Doctor Who* villain is, the more he seems to like it. He thinks the Daleks' pepper pot design is a brilliant idea and they're the best bad guys in the entire series. And he practically worships the Ice Warriors."

"I just don't get it. Bulky, hard-to-move-around costumes don't necessarily make a character evil by any stretch of the imagination. What do you think, John? John?" I stood and scanned the garage for any signs of my alien lover. "John? Where are you?"

"Perhaps he 'buggered off', as they say in jolly ol'

England.” Chandra shrugged. “I bet he went into the house with Kevin to help him with his greasepaint.”

“Maybe. But how did you know where he’s from?” I asked. “Did he show you his ID by chance?”

“No, but he did show me his British National Gallery membership card. He loves Renaissance era paintings. He told me that he and Leonardo were the best of friends.”

“And I have no reason to doubt they are.” I hurried toward the side entrance door and stepped out into the blinding sunshine. “John, are you out here?”

“Sh! Stop!” came his voice from behind a wide oak to my immediate left. “Keep your voice down and casually step back inside the garage. Move—now.”

I stood in place, hands on hips. “What the hell’s the matter with you?”

“Nothing—and I want it to stay that way.”

I made a move to approach, but he poked his head around and halted my steps with a glaring look. I had half a mind to return to the set, but my pride prevented me. “So sorry to interrupt your little game of hide and seek.”

He came out from behind the tree and smiled. “Very good. That’s exactly right.” He focused his attention toward the front of Kevin’s long property. “All right, you can stay where you are. I don’t think they can see us from this angle.”

“Who can see us?” Was it the cops? Or perhaps the intergalactic FBI had arrived to drag my John back to the lunatic asylum where he escaped?

“Cici, can you make out that black sports utility vehicle at the foot of the drive? Think hard. Do you

recognize it?"

I squinted and stared at the black SUV with the even darker tinted windows. A tall, thin man in a black jumpsuit and hood sporting mirror sunglasses and the palest of pale complexions stood next to it talking to Kevin. The shadows moving behind his open door convinced me there were others just like him inside the car.

"That guy looks like one of those weird extras nobody seem to know at the Arch shoot yesterday. And that SUV...I remember it now! That was the one that ran the red light in front of us on our way to Sammy's place last night."

"Good girl. You've retained a lot of the suggestions I've planted in your mind. What other things about these men in black do you recall?"

"For one thing they're definitely not as smartly dressed as Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones were in *Men in Black*."

He frowned. "What?"

I shook my head. "It's a joke. Hmm, I'm not sure I recall anything else about these guys other than we spied them standing on the top of the Adams Mark Hotel from the western Arch observation windows..."

I gasped. Holy crap! I had morphed into a super-sensitive alien myself! Perhaps John had turned me into a chameleon like him. What did people see when they looked at me now? And could I make them see me as a dress size or two smaller?

"How in the world did I remember such an obscure detail?" I whispered to myself. "How did I

see those guys from such a great distance? I'm nearsighted, and my contacts don't work all *that* well."

"They don't. But our combined vision isn't too bad by half. I borrowed a good portion of the vision center from your cerebral cortex to process the information." He smirked and dusted off his lapels. He seemed more pleased with himself than the fourth Doctor did when he'd foiled Magnus Greel's plot in *Talons of Weng Chiang*. "Don't worry. I put it right back after I was done."

"You put it...back? My God, John! What did you do to my brain?"

"Shh!" He cut me off. "Kevin is about done with his landscaping sale's spiel. I can't quite make out what these Bygons are saying."

"What? You can't possibly hear them talking from a half a football field away."

His glare shut me up. Suddenly I could hear their flat, cold voices, too.

"We will rendezvous with your party at the designated coordinates in the recreational area called Forest Park at ten-hundred hours on the last day of the solar week." The pale man in black bowed slightly and reentered the car.

Kevin waved the mysterious strangers goodbye before heading to his house to finish with his costume preparations.

"So we have until Saturday to come up with a plan." John folded his arms and leaned against the tree, muttering to himself as he slipped down to a crouching position. "But how do I keep them from

finding out that I'm onto them?"

"Plan? To do what exactly?"

"To rid the planet of them, of course. They're uninvited guests, and they're up to no good."

I slowly approached and rested an encouraging hand on his shoulder. I'd read somewhere that paranoid schizophrenics needed constant reassurance that they weren't being followed. John's recent actions had led me to just such a conclusion.

"Don't sweat it," I said in my most comforting tones. "They're just a bunch of super-nerdy, sci-fi geeks. They just take themselves—and the alien characters they've created—way too seriously."

He blinked then stared hard at me. "You think they're a bunch of demented science fiction fans?"

"Yes, exactly. I've seen the sort before at cons. To quote the late great Douglas Adams, they're 'mostly harmless'. They're lonely souls who follow single girls around like puppy dogs, hoping to get a pity lay. These guys aren't a threat to Earth or to you or to me. They aren't a threat to anyone."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me down to his level to face him. His gaze immediately locked onto mine. This time I didn't fight the obvious mind connection he was attempting. I simply relaxed and stared back into his fathomless brown eyes. It felt nice actually—sort of like taking a mental vacation.

"Tell me everything you know about these strangers, Cici. You've seen them before, haven't you? Where and when?"

Like a video recording on fast forward, I verbally regurgitated a low down on every science fiction

convention I'd attended for the past ten years and the numerous sightings I'd made of the pasty dudes in shades and their depressing, all-black wardrobe. How I recalled such intricate details from long ago—yet didn't make the connection and recognize them at the Arch—was a complete mystery to me.

"They've been keeping tabs on you for a quite some time," he murmured. "I wonder if they realize what it is special about you that draws them repeatedly to your time line."

"There's nothing special about me," I said. I meant it. "You're the special one, John. Not too many people can hypnotize others so easily and make them go along with their paranoid delusions."

He laughed. The psychic connection snapped. "That's one way of putting it."

I flinched as if I'd been doused with a bucket of cold water.

"Don't mean to interrupt your moment," Kevin said, waddling across the yard in his Grapenoss outfit, "but Milo and Bob the Soundman have just pulled into the driveway. This get-up is hot. I don't want to fart around too much in it. Let's get cracking."

Milo wasn't in any mood to mess around, either.

"Damn it," he cursed under his breath as we set up the first scene. "We don't have our weapon props here, do we?"

"Rick is bringing them later," Chandra explained. She handed me an extension cord to plug in the bank of lights. "He told me on the phone there were a few 'bugs' that needed to be worked out."

Milo frowned. "What 'bugs' are those? He told me yesterday that they performed beautifully. Made a zapping noise and flashed bright red and everything when you shot them. I was really looking forward to seeing them in action today."

Chandra shrugged. "Well, you know Rick. Perfectionistic to the extreme."

"Aren't we all?" I sighed and turned to Kevin. "Don't you have any prop guns around here we can use?"

"I've got some of the larger phaser pistols lying around, circa early classic *Star Trek*. Will those do?"

"I'd go with them," I said. "What do you two think, Madame Art Director?"

Chandra pursed her lips and crossed her arms. "Hmm... Rick's laser rifle design is unique and very original."

"So was the Hindenburg," Milo quipped, "and it blew up just the same. I say a toy gun is a toy gun at this point."

"I suppose there's no sense in getting behind our shooting schedule," Chandra agreed. "We could always have one of the characters in the park scenes say something about using larger rifles when they're off ship and using smaller ones when they're on board."

Kevin nodded his approval, rocking his spherical costume back and forth. "Makes sense. Can we add in the sound effects later during post-production?"

"Sure, no problem," Milo agreed. "We're probably going to sweeten the sound with Rick's guns as well. You need help locating the phasers in that grape skin,

Kev?"

"Definitely."

I followed Kevin's directions and tracked down props on a high shelf in the back, all the while keeping an eye on our silent Doctor standing at the side door. He constantly scanned the horizon as if expecting our friends in the black SUV to return any second. Chandra and Kevin both flashed questioning looks as they motioned toward him. His paranoid behavior was becoming more obvious by the second and impossible for me to ignore any longer.

"Don't worry," I whispered to them. "John's okay. I can handle him. Just don't tell Milo. He's got enough on his mind."

"You positive John doesn't need to take his meds?" Chandra's concern was touching. "I use to act that way occasionally, too, before they gave me some new stuff for my bipolar disorder."

"He took his pill this morning," I lied. "Leave it to me. I may have to do one or two unusual things to gain his cooperation, so try not to stare or make a big deal out of it, okay?"

"Okay," Kevin said. "I'm dressed as a giant talking grape. Who am I to talk about curious goings-on?"

Kevin took his position on the bridge of the mother ship so Milo could film a couple of close-ups of the Grapenoss commander in action. I quietly slipped off the set and approached our worried leading man.

"John, there's no need to keep a watch out. They're not coming back until Saturday," I gently reminded him. "Why don't we —"

"Yes, yes," he interrupted. "I know they said that

to Kevin, but I don't trust them. I don't believe a word they said. They've been tailing you for years now. Doesn't that fact cause you the least bit of concern?"

When he put it that way, yes, it did. It scared the hell out of me. How did I not realize I'd become a magnet for sci-fi fan stalkers in black wearing mirrored goggles? I guess trying to pay the bills and dealing with my current shambles of a marriage, along with my deteriorating credit rating, were all sufficient enough distractions to block these strange followers of mine from my conscious thoughts.

"There's nothing we can do about these creeps at the moment," I said at last. "We just have to push forward. Believe in ourselves and our abilities. Do what we came here to do, and worry about the bad guys later."

His eyes softened. A hopeful grin spread across his features. "You are very wise and brave, Cici Connors. Did you know that?"

I laughed. "I think you told me that once before. Flattery will get you everywhere."

"You didn't believe me then, though, did you?"

I shook my head. "No. And I still don't."

I took his hand and led him toward the set. "Look, we haven't got all day here—we've got to film these scenes and stay on schedule. Why don't you do what Milo tells you to do for a little while? I'll stand watch at the door if that makes you happy. Deal?"

"I suppose that would work." His wrinkled brow indicated that he didn't think it was the best idea, but he'd go along with it. "Promise me two things, Cici."

"What's that?"

"The moment you see or hear anything suspicious outside that door, you'll tell me."

"Of course. And what's the other thing?"

He wiggled his eyebrows and grinned at me. "Start believing the flattery."

* * * * *

The shoot continued uneventfully. Milo positioned and repositioned his actors in various locations on the Grapenoss's bridge, occasionally changing his camera angle. I gave a line or two here and there, but kept my watch stance at the doorway. Chandra frequently touched up the actors' makeup under the hot lights whether they wanted it or not. By the end of the hand-to-hand combat scene—where the Doctor kicks the weapon from the Grapenoss captain's grasp and then tumbles with him to the deck—both men appeared exhausted.

"I've got to get out of this thing." Kevin groaned, picking at his costume. "I need fresh air."

"Me, too. El capitano, may we temporarily abandon ship?" John asked.

Frowning, Milo stared hard at the video monitor while he checked the last shots. "Yes, but you can't wander off too far. We've got the group scenes when the rest of the bunch gets here."

"Bunch of grapes." John sniggered. "You are quite the comedian. Isn't that funny, Kev?"

"Personally, right now I feel more like a raisin."

Chandra came to Kevin's rescue and undid the costume closures in the back. "There. The raisin can

breathe free."

John stepped out the door. Surprised but wary, I followed suit.

"Feeling better?" I smiled. "You're not worried about the 'men in black' anymore?"

"No, we won't be seeing them again until later. I'm fairly certain of it now."

We strolled toward the shady oak and sat down in the grass. "What changed your mind?" I asked.

"Sammy's script. It made me think about invasion strategies. It seems a little silly that the Doctor would take on an alien ship's captain single-handedly. Not a wise move at all."

I lay back in the grass and rested my head in my hands. "That's what the Doctor does—he single-handedly defeats the bad guys, and the universe is a safer place. He's the original Lone Ranger of science fiction."

John harrumphed. "Ha! He saves the entire universe with no help from anyone else?"

I shrugged. "I guess he has his companion—or companions—beside him, but essentially he has all the brains. He works it all out for them and tells them what to do."

He raised an eyebrow. "And they go along with it? No disagreements?"

"Well, they argue sometimes. I mean they wouldn't be human if they didn't."

"You got that right." He rested back on his elbows, a contemplative pose that reminded me of how the young fifth Doctor may have looked while watching a cricket match. "Humans are an argumentative

species. It is a peculiarity of theirs. But look at me. I don't quarrel with anyone."

"Present company not included, huh?" I laughed. "But are you implying you aren't—"

"No, I never quarrel," he cut in. "It's you who beg to differ with me." He pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Yes, that's it."

"What's it?" I was still trying to figure out if John Smith had at last made an outright admission of his non-human status. "What are you trying to tell me, John?"

"I'm telling you that I think you made your point quite well last night, Cici. I'll defer to your better judgment on matters of humanity from now."

It was a pseudo-admission at best. "Gee, thanks. And I didn't even have to use the whipped cream."

"Yes, we'll have to make up for that omission later." He grinned, then sat up again. "Now, getting back to Sammy's story, I deduced that no intelligent creature would ever risk their leader's safety by leaving him to his own devices. He would always have a bodyguard at his side the very least. There is strength in numbers. That's why I'm not concerned about the Bygons."

"The...Bygons?" It sounded like the name of a nostalgic rock group.

"Yes, our 'men in black' as you've termed them. Interplanetary mercenaries. I've met their like before, long ago.

"You have?" I sat up. "So...you're saying that you've actually been to other planets?"

He dusted off his jacket. "Why, of course. You

believe I'm a Time Lord, don't you?"

The man was cruelly toying with my sanity now. "No, you're not an actual Time Lord. You're a deranged alien who is playing the Doctor." *A deranged alien with the ability to place strong subconscious messages into my mind with those big brown eyes of his.*

"There's no need to get abusive, Cici," he said with a sniff. "Perhaps my so-called deranged behavior is perfectly normal from where I originate."

"Perhaps it is."

I looked at his handsome profile for several moments, unsure as to how to proceed. Confrontation didn't work, so the only other way to get him to open up more about his origins was to keep him talking about our recent visitors.

"Getting back to the lessons you've learned from Sammy's story, are you saying that the Bygons aren't a threat now because they are too small in number to attack?"

He wrinkled his nose in thought and shrugged. "Oh, no. There are billions of Bygons throughout space and time. What I'm saying is that today you are surrounded by people. They probably won't attempt anything. They want the odds on their side."

I opened my mouth to speak but no words came. A flashback of breakneck speeding on the river when I was certain John was the alien menace trying to kill me danced before my eyes. "You can't be serious... They're after *me*?"

"Certainly. It's not me that they've followed for the past ten years—it's you."

I glared at him. "John, stop trying to make me as

paranoid as you are."

"It's not paranoia, Cici. It's fact. You have attracted the attention of some rather nasty aliens."

"Perfect. It goes along with my track record for attracting some rather nasty husbands."

I took to my feet and stomped off toward the house, steam pouring from my ears. How dare he imply I was a magnet for thugs!

Suddenly I heard a high-pitched hum and then a popping sound. "What the —"

"Get down!" John shouted.

Before I could turn to see the nature of the imminent threat, I was tackled rugby-fashion about my knees and knocked face first on the ground. The air rushed out of my lungs with an *oomph*.

"Gotcha!" Rick laughed hysterically and slapped his thighs. "You guys really thought my laser thing was the real deal. Fooled ya. You can get up now."

I pushed against the grass, but John's weight wouldn't budge. "I would if I could. John? Move it, will you?"

"Need a hand?" Trina said above me.

"How about a forklift. I think he's passed out."

With Trina and Rick's help, my paranoid protector was hoisted from my bruised back. They deposited him into a plastic patio chair beside the door. I knelt beside him and felt his pulse.

One beat...two...none. I dropped his wrist in shock.

"What happened?" Chandra cried, running from the set. She placed a hand to John's forehead. "He's absolutely cold. Is he breathing?"

"Should I call nine-one-one?" Milo asked as he came to her side. "Where the hell did I stash my cell phone?"

"Use my office phone." Kevin pointed toward his office. I placed my ear to John's chest and listened closely.

One beat...two...none. Damn him! I shook him by the shoulders—hard.

"Wake up, John. It's not funny anymore. Snap out of it!"

"Hey, don't do that!" Trina pushed me away. "He may have suffered a head injury. Shaking could make it worse."

John's eyes popped open. He stretched and yawned, frowning at the ensemble of puzzled faces. "Did I miss something?"

"They're on their way." Milo halted in his tracks and stared blankly at the patient. "Oh. He's looking much better. What happened?"

I shrugged. "Call them back and say it was a false alarm."

"False alarm?" John frowned. "I played possum for nothing? The Bygons didn't shoot at us?"

I shut him off with a withering glare. "Loud noises make him black out," I explained to the others. "It's a rare genetic condition."

"No shit?" Rick scratched his part and furrowed his brow. "It sure the hell scared me. I thought he had a heart attack."

"Me too," Trina added.

John stood and brushed the grass from his suit. "Possibly I did—but since I have a back-up

circulation pump it's not quite as serious for me as it is for species with only one heart."

"Twin hearts, eh? Good one, *Doctor*." Kevin chuckled and patted him on the back. "But don't you think you ought to let the paramedics have a look at you to make sure you're all right?"

"No, thank you. It's not necessary and could prove quite confusing for them with the twin hearts and all." He strolled back to the set. "Well, we shouldn't waste anymore time. Cici and I have some very important business to attend to after we're done here for the day." He stopped and frowned. "Isn't everyone ready? I know I am."

Rick and Trina quickly donned their gear and painted their faces. Amazing how much authority John Smith could wield no matter how totally and completely insane he had acted five minutes previously.

"You want my shrink's phone number?" Chandra whispered in my ear a short time later. "I have her business card in my purse. She'll prescribe emergency meds if you think they're necessary."

I smiled and nodded. "Thanks. I'll take the card. I'm seriously thinking of setting up an appointment for myself."

CHAPTER TEN

Haboom Town

I admire the Slitheen villainess in 'Boom Town' simply for the fact she is a survivor. Sure, she's killed plenty of people and she deserves the electric chair, but hell! She is a survivor, plain and simple. She does whatever it takes to live another day and find a way back to her home planet. Who would do any less?

I have to admit, I admire a lot of the villains in Doctor Who for the very same reason. They survive. Against all odds they make it. And they're up against a formidable foe in the guise of the Doctor.

It gives me hope that I'll be able to fight my foes and survive as well.

I know in the eyes of mainstream society science fiction fans are, on the whole, considered some kind of evolutionary throwback. Some of us dress like our favorite fictional characters; we read everything ever written about and watch every show we can involving our favorite fictional characters. We beg, steal or borrow to collect massive collections of favorite fictional characters' related books, periodicals and memorabilia. And when you put two or three of us together in a room... Well, the conversation

quickly revolves around favorite fictional characters and what fictional adventures they've been up to lately. Is it any wonder that outsiders hold a dim view of our taste in entertainment and leisure activities and, in particular, our sanity?

Of course, there's nothing more desired by a typical, gung-ho sci-fi fan than the opportunity to meet one of their favorite fictional characters in the flesh some day. What fan would give up his or her chance to converse and interact with a favorite fictional fantasy man or woman? No fan in his or her right—if not semi-deluded—mind would.

That's why as of the moment I walked out of Kevin's garage and sat in my car, I no longer considered myself a true fan.

I wanted to kill the Doctor.

Our Doctor, that is.

"With a few adjustments, this thing could be turned into quite an effective weapon."

I glanced in the rearview window at my passenger in the back seat. John Smith sat there, intently absorbed in tearing apart one of Rick's prop laser rifles. For what purpose, I could only begin to imagine. He had assured Rick it would be put to rights by the time the big shoot-out scene occurred in Forest Park on Saturday.

"Don't lose any of the tiny bits," I warned him. "Rick will eat you alive if you mess with his baby—uh, gun."

John snorted. "I won't lose any of the bits. I'm not breaking it. I'm improving it."

I didn't want to continue the conversation, but an

accident on the highway ahead of us brought traffic to a standstill. With nothing else to take my mind off John's bizarre and embarrassing antics of this afternoon, I walked right into his trap.

"Improving it? How are you improving his gun? It's a toy, John. It's just a toy gun that lights up pretty and makes a hell of a popping noise. Remember?"

"Does it ever!" Chuckling, he slid apart two long plastic tubes and exposed the circuitry inside. "The damn thing almost caused me to suffer a dual coronary. Quite an effective weapon."

"Against what? People who are easily frightened by loud noises?"

"That's right." He frowned when he noticed I was facing him. "Aren't you supposed to be looking at the road?"

"We're stuck in a traffic jam." I sighed. "We're not going anywhere for a while. But if you don't want me watching your delicate procedures on Rick's gun, I'll leave you in peace."

I deliberately made a big production of swinging my body around to face front and turned up the radio. Of course, I could see every move he made in the rearview window. I licked my lips in anticipation... Possibly he didn't realize I was watching his actions. Perhaps I'd catch him in the act of diddling around with his so-called pen again.

Sure enough, he soon slipped the device out of his inside jacket pocket and pointed it at the innards of the prop rifle. The tip glowed with an unearthly blue light. The baby boomer tunes blaring from the radio couldn't cover its unmistakable whirring noise, either.

I felt sorely tempted to turn around and confront him then and there. Pummel him with questions about who and what and where and when and why... But then I took a deep breath and realized it would do no good. He'd explain his way out of it like he already had or act deliberately vague or just plain crazy to throw me off track. So I hummed along with the Beatles's *Hey Jude* and drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, pretending I didn't know what my mysterious passenger was up to in the backseat.

Frankly, I didn't know what he was up to. But he had fixed my telescope and he seemed quite good with his...hands. I could be reading too much into his actions. He could simply be making the barrel lights flash in a different pattern than Rick had originally designed.

"There." He slipped his 'pen' back into his jacket and snapped the rifle back together. "Better than new. This should help in case of a Bygon attack."

"Oh, are they likely to attack?" I said innocently.

"I think so. An aggressive species like the Bygons can only trail a target for so long before taking action. This week is an opportune time for attack. They can sneak into the extras and blend in and get close to you with no one the wiser until..."

I involuntarily gulped and turned, wide-eyed, to look at him. "Until?"

He shrugged. "Too late."

"Are you saying these lunatics in mirror sunglasses are going to wipe me out like a Mafia hit?" I shrieked.

"Turn around, Cici. The cars are moving," he said calmly.

I did my best to focus on the road, but my nerves got the better of me. I exited and pulled the car into the parking lot of a convenience store.

"Excuse me. I need a smoothie...and a Snickers bar...and a large bag of Fritos...or ten."

He shook his head and frowned. "Eating won't solve your problems."

"I know—but if I'm going to die soon, I don't have to worry about counting calories anymore."

He followed me into the store and into the salty snacks aisle.

"Wow, what a selection." He picked up a bag of garlic-flavored pretzels and studied it closely. "These would work fairly well to fend off the Bygons."

I reached for a bag of barbecue-flavored potato chips as well as the corn chips. "How would pretzels work to fend off hit men?"

He shoved the bag under his arm and grinned. "It's not the pretzels—it's the garlic. You eat enough of them and no one will be able to come within ten feet of you, the stench of your breath will be so strong."

I felt like hitting him over the head with one of the bags, but thought better of it and headed toward the candy racks instead.

"You know there actually *is* something about garlic and the Bygons...I can't remember what the connection is exactly, but I do think you should stock up on a wide variety of fruits and vegetables."

I grabbed a king-sized Snickers and three packages of M&Ms. "Fruits? Vegetables? Why? The vitamins and fiber will keep me healthy until the Bygons sneak up behind me and do me in?"

"Yes, good nutritional practices certainly couldn't hurt at this point."

I shook my head, then walked toward the cash register to pay for my junk food binge items. John lagged behind.

"Is this all?" the pimple-faced clerk asked as I dumped my goodies on the counter.

"Oh, no. I forgot my smoothie. Just a moment."

I went to the back to grab a super-extra-mega-sized cup. There I stood for several moments biting my lower lip, trying to decide between the piña colada or the orange cream. "Decisions, decisions..."

"Hand over the money!"

I spun around. A hefty man dressed in a black hoodie and dark glasses shakily pointed a gun at the poor clerk. I immediately dropped to the floor, fumbling in my purse for my cell phone.

"Would you like a pretzel?" A smiling John held the open bag out within arm's reach of the robber. "Garlic is supposedly quite good for your circulation, or so they say."

The gunman took his eyes off the cashier and frowned at the interruption. "How would you like a hole in your forehead?"

John scratched his head with his free hand and wrinkled his nose. "Hmm, not really. It wouldn't go with anything. I don't have my ears pierced, so it just wouldn't match my look, now, would it?"

"Say wha...?" The man momentarily lowered his weapon. "Man, what the hell's your problem? I'm robbing this place. Shut up and stay out of the way."

The clerk, during this distraction, had ducked

under the countertop and crawled toward a door in the back marked 'employees only' to make his escape.

I started to follow the clerk out, but hesitated. I couldn't just leave my demented alien lover with a *Doctor Who* fixation to die all alone in a convenience store robbery, could I? Whatever he was, John Smith wasn't a bad guy and certainly didn't deserve to meet his end this way.

I found my phone at last and hit nine-one-one on my speed dial. Then I placed the cell phone in my jeans pocket speaker end up, stood and walked to the front.

"John, forget the pretzels," I said as calmly as I could manage. "This guy wants money. We just need to hit a few buttons on the cash register."

"Now you're talking. You know how to do it?" the gunman asked, pointing the gun at me.

"Sure. I used to work in one of these places in college." I swung open the gate and stepped behind the counter. "Let's see. I just have to press the 'no sale' button and—"

The distant wail of police sirens interrupted my train of thought.

"Damn it! Where's the clerk? He's done called the cops." I heard a click, then, "You're dead, lady."

He raised the pistol level with my eyes. I closed them and said a prayer. The familiar whirring noise began softly and then grew louder until...

The front plate glass windows cracked and splintered into a million tinkling pieces.

"Get down!" I screamed, ducking underneath the cash register counter as a deadly hailstorm of glass

shards rained upon its surface.

* * * * *

The tinkling of breaking glass reverberated in my ears for the next two hours. We sat on my sofa watching classic *Doctor Who* videos from the mid-1960s, munching on glass-dusted, discounted junk food.

“Why weren’t you even scratched?” I wondered aloud.

John reached into the bag and ate another garlic-flavored pretzel. “I grabbed a newspaper and stuck it over my head. That silly Bygon didn’t know which end was up after I set my sonic device on high.”

“John, I hate to be the one to break this to you, but the guy wasn’t a Bygon. He was way too heavy. He was just your ordinary, everyday convenience store thief.”

I had heard the agonizing screams of the gunman and the shouts of the police and then nothing else as I momentarily passed out underneath the counter. When I came to, a paramedic was bandaging me.

I rubbed at the small bandages on my palms. They burned and itched slightly. I must have cut my hands when I pulled myself out from under the counter. The painkiller I’d taken was making me feel a bit fuzzy, too.

“Whatever did you tell the police about how all the glass in the store suddenly shattered at once?” I asked a moment later.

He grinned. “I explained to them that it was a very localized earthquake, followed by the high-pitched

whine of their warning sirens, acted in concert to cause minute faults in the cheaply produced plate glass window to instantly break at that precise, most opportune, moment."

I grabbed another handful of M&Ms and chewed them thoughtfully. "Oh. Right. And they believed you?"

"Of course they did. I'm a materials manufacturing physicist for the Royal Academy. I understand all about these kinds of things."

"Do you now?" I took another bite of candy. "And you showed them that same piece of psychic paper in your wallet that you showed me a few days ago, right?"

He nodded. "You're catching on now."

"Should I start addressing you as 'the Doctor' off set?"

"Why? I much prefer being called John. Being nameless isn't all it's cracked up to be."

"I can understand that." I finished the rest of my gargantuan smoothie and put the cup down on the side table. "Are you really from Gallifrey – or at least another planet?"

He shrugged and pursed his lips. "Can't say. I have to leave some air of mystery about myself now, don't I?"

"I have to tell the others about the sonic...pen...thing, and how you broke the glass and..."

"Yes?" He wiggled his brows, egging me on.

"Oh, forget it. They'll never believe me. But I need to call Jessie anyway."

I rose to retrieve the phone. Suddenly I felt dizzy and plopped back onto the sofa.

"You don't have to tell anyone, Cici," John said calmly. "It's better if you don't tell anyone."

He gently took hold of my chin and turned me to face him. Those deep brown eyes of his again took possession of mine. His thoughts crossed effortlessly into my mind. He didn't want me to know—he didn't want anyone to know.

He didn't want anyone to know he wasn't from our world.

"But...they'll find out eventually. The story will be on the news—in the newspapers. Everyone in St. Louis will be talking about it."

"No, they won't."

I frowned. I suddenly found it hard to speak. "They won't? Why?"

"Because there will be no mention of either you or me being at the scene of the freak accident that occurred during a convenience store robbery. It's better if I don't show up in the official records anywhere. The gunman was thwarted by shards of glass and a clever store clerk who hit the silent alarm. That's all."

"But my hands...? The medics checked me out afterward."

"They won't remember, either."

"I'll remember. Won't I?"

He smiled. "No, you won't. But before you forget, I want to thank you for your courage. You did an amazingly brave and insane thing standing up to an armed thug. You risked your own life trying to

protect me. You were bloody fantastic.”

I tried to focus on his words, to remember all that happened today, but I was failing miserably. Already the trauma and the details of the incident were fading from my consciousness... I clenched my fists and drove a fingernail into a nick on my palm. Ow! That worked. I concentrated on the pungent smell of the garlic pretzels in the open bag beside us and the pain of the scratches on my hands.

“No one needs to know who I am or where I come from,” John was saying.

“No one will know about who you are or where you come from,” I repeated. But I would.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Impossible Planet

'T he Impossible Planet' shouldn't exist – but it does. There is no rational explanation for it not to fall into the black hole's gravity well. The Doctor correctly ascertains that some force is at work beneath the surface that keeps the hellish world from falling into its dying sun.

They say you can't judge a book by its cover. But at times, that's exactly what you discover is true. A lousy cover graces a lousy book. The inside is as rotten as the outside and vice versa. The secret of succeeding in life is to be able to see beneath the surface distractions and discover what makes the thing tick underneath.

As a kid, I sent off in the mail for x-ray glasses I spotted in an ad in the back of a comic book. They never arrived. I'm a sucker! Is it any wonder I've made some of the dumb choices I have?

The fourth day of shooting involved documenting the Doctor's companion's journey through the shops and boutiques of the 'frightening fairgrounds'. What could be better than filming the alien bazaar at a local farmer's market and inside an international foods store? With fellow fans employed at both locations that didn't mind dressing in alien costumes at work on a day that wasn't Halloween, it was a cheap and

easy solution. Since our Doctor wasn't needed in every scene in this sequence Milo gave us permission not to arrive on set until the afternoon.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized the entire film crew was beginning to feel sorry for the mess I'd gotten myself into by housing a certifiable loony leading man. An early phone call from Jessie further convinced me this was the case.

"Morning, Cici," Jessie began casually enough. "I heard you all experienced a couple of 'bumps' yesterday while filming the mother ship scenes. Everything all right today?"

"Everything's fine," I assured her. Of course, John was nowhere to be seen or heard, but I wasn't particularly worried—yet. The alarm clock read seven a.m. I forgot Jessie taught school year round and didn't have today off. I closed my eyes and rolled onto my back, rubbing my temples.

I paused. Didn't I have Band-Aids on my palms last night? Funny, I thought I had cut myself accidentally on something...

"You sure everything is fine?" Jessie repeated. "That wasn't quite the impression my husband gave me."

My curiosity was piqued now. "What exactly did Milo tell you?"

"Not much. He just expressed some concern about John not being quite himself and that they'd called the paramedics at one point. But John's feeling okay today, right?"

I heard the balcony door slide open. "Yeah, John's great. He's up at the crack of dawn and dressed

already. He's *different* all right, but he's harmless. Assure Milo we'll be able to finish the movie with a minimum of disruptions. I promise. I know how to handle the guy."

"You positive?" Motherly concern crept into her voice. "You sure you don't want one of us to act as his handler from here on out?"

"No, that's not necessary." I looked over at the wastepaper basket filled with empty whipped cream containers. I smiled and sighed happily. "It's not necessary."

"I don't want to scare you any, but Rick says he did a quick check online last night. He's not been able to find any information about our John Smith. He thinks the name is a false one—a pseudonym."

Of course John Smith was a pseudonym—who on earth would want to go by such a common moniker? "I think it's his real name," I lied. "Does Rick think our Mr. Smith has a criminal record?"

"No, he didn't say that, but he did wonder if we shouldn't check with the British embassy and see if any..." There was a long pause.

"Jessie? You still there?"

"Uh, yeah. I don't know how to phrase this delicately, so I'll just come out and say it. Rick thought we should call the embassy and check to see if any psychiatric patients had gone missing and wound up here in St. Louis."

A clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen brought me to a sitting position. John's bizarre early morning breakfast ritual of destroying my kitchen while looking for the tea had started again. What else was

new?

"You think a crazy person would be capable of getting on a trans-Atlantic flight unnoticed and winding up here in the middle of the country?" The incredulity in my tone was unmistakable. "Even a madman would have picked a more glamorous tourist location to hang about in, like say Florida or Los Angeles."

Jessie coughed nervously. "That's what I told Rick. I'd think a loony from England would head straight for Disney World. He'd blend in there pretty easily."

John would blend in pretty easily at a sci-fi con, too, the more I thought about it. Another jarring crash from the kitchen area and I was on my feet. "Excuse me, Jess. I've got to check on something on the stove. I'll see you this afternoon, right?"

"Right. I'll see you at the shoot around three, Cici. 'Bye."

I put down the phone and came running. "What are you up to this time?"

"Good morning." Half dressed and barefoot, John Smith sat on the floor stacking the pieces of my Revereware cookery set one on top of another, from the largest Dutch oven up to the smallest saucepan. His cheerful grin made me want to scream.

"There's nothing 'good' about it at all." I marched into the center of my kitchen and gasped. "Look at the mess you've made—again."

He glared at me and stuck out his lower lip for good measure. "Is that anyway to start the day? No wonder your husbands all left! Offering someone a nice cup of tea instead of an accusation is a much

more pleasant way to get going.” He tilted the bottom pan slightly and the stack clattered to the floor once more. “Hmm, I must use some kind of adhesive next time.”

My eyes widened in horrors. “You want to pour glue on the one and only decent wedding gift I’ve manage to keep all these years, through all my divorces?”

“Well, yes—but only in the name of science. The pots don’t seem to want to stay in the form of a catenary arch for any length of time.”

“A catenary arch?” I put my hands on my hips. “You’re trying to make a model of the Gateway Arch in my kitchen?”

He waggled his eyebrows. “Exactly.”

Groaning, I gave up the fight. I turned and threw a filter in the coffee pot. I needed caffeine to deal with my winsomely whacko houseguest today. “For what purpose?”

“I can’t say for what purpose at this time.” He grinned again. “Trust me, it’s for a good reason.”

Trust him? How could I trust a man who kept an incredible secret about his true origins and forced me to do the same? I didn’t know why, but suddenly I felt like throttling him.

“Get out of my kitchen!” I grabbed his arm and tugged him to his feet. “Get out and stay out until I say you can come back.”

He held out the two-quart saucepan as a token of his sincerity. I sighed and took the pot from him and set it on the counter next to the sink.

“You’re going to have a stroke if you don’t learn to

control that temper of yours, Cici.” He leaned against the counter and crossed his long arms across his chest. “I’m trying to help here, but I need to test a theory and I’m without my...lab equipment...so I’m managing the best I can.”

“Lab equipment.” I poured water into the top of the coffee machine and hit the switch. “Yeah, right. What are you up to—manufacturing bathtub meth? It certainly would go a long way to explain your unusual behavior to Milo and the others.”

He scrunched up his face and poked out a tongue in disgust. “They think I’m into the manufacture of illegal drugs?”

“It’s one explanation of why someone without a past would wind up in Missouri, the meth capital of the USA.”

“Surely, that’s not the only reason for my appearance they could come up with.” His voice dripped with disbelief. He paused and looked hard at me. “Is it?”

“You don’t want to know the other one. It’s not quite as flattering as drug dealing.”

“Oh, they think I’ve escaped the loony bin, do they?”

I nodded slowly. “Now you’re getting the picture. I’m starting to believe it myself. I’m starting to believe you’ve created this alien threat yourself, too.”

“What?” His big brown eyes grew wider. “You think I would do something to deliberately harm you—or anyone on this rock?”

“No, but, I mean the Bygons...” I shook my head and threw up my hands. “Oh, for pity’s sake! What a

lame brain name for an alien menace! It sounds like a rip-off of the 'Zygons', who were a really cool *Doctor Who* creature covered with big suction cup protuberances."

He frowned. "It's not a 'rip-off'. It's their name."

"Sure it is." I rolled my eyes at him for effect. "A made-up one. Real aliens from outer space would have a more decent sounding name than 'Bygons'."

"Not necessarily." He stuck out his bottom lip in a pout so reminiscent of the fourth Doctor that I almost laughed. "Perhaps Bygons means something quite grand in their native tongue."

"It's possible. Still, you'd think technologically superior space aliens would be capable of coming up with something better." I dropped a piece of wheat bread in the toaster and caught his movement from the corner of my eye. "Hey—take your finger out of the jam jar. That's disgusting."

He coyly put the container back on the counter and mock saluted me. "Yes, ma'am."

"And pick up those pots and pans on the floor before one of us has an accident."

Accident. The word jarred something in my mind. I slowly rubbed my palms together and winced at the memory of a stabbing pain.

"Does it still hurt?" He gently took my hands in his and examined them. "They look as good as new."

Yesterday's events came flooding back into memory. "You healed them...with that shiny pen of yours. I remember now. I remember everything."

He flipped my hands over and checked the backs, then looked into my eyes with a question.

"Everything?"

I nodded. "Yes, everything. I don't think you can hypnotize me anymore."

"Good." He arched an eyebrow. "It's difficult keeping things from you, Cici Connors. You are persistent."

I smiled. "I'll take that as a compliment."

He squeezed my hands, then let them drop. "So, have you figured out yet why I'm stacking your cookware in the shape of an arch?"

"Haven't a clue." I picked up my toast and began smearing strawberry jam on it. "You tell me."

"All right. I'm trying to test a theory on why the Bygons haven't at least attempted to abduct you after all these years. Something is holding them back, preventing them from acting. I'm not sure what."

I plopped into a kitchen chair and placed my breakfast on a napkin. "They want to abduct me? Like Agent Mulder in *The X Files*? With those anal probes and wires sticking in all parts of my body? Ugh." I put down my toast. I'd lost my appetite.

"Probably nothing so dramatic." He scrunched up his nose in thought, contemplating the pattern of the pots scattered about on the tile. "They could be simply watching you, observing you, collecting data. Or they could be afraid of you and they're waiting to discover a chink in your armor, so to speak."

"A chink in my armor?" I rested my head in my hands. "As if poor, defenseless little ol' me ever had any armor. Who do they think I am? Wonder Woman?"

"No, no, of course not." He looked askance at me

and lifted an eyebrow. "Are you?"

I slapped my forehead. Conversing with a schizophrenic alien lover could be exhausting at times. "If I were Wonder Woman, I would have used my magic rope on you by now and made you truthfully answer a few pertinent questions. But I haven't, have I?"

"No, you had me tie you up with silk scarves and paint whipped cream on your body instead." Grinning, he sat in the chair next to mine and slowly trailed a finger around my jam-sticky mouth. "You care for a repeat performance?"

My heart raced at the thought. Any time I thought I was getting important facts out of the man he sidetracked me with sex, my fatal weakness. If only I were Supergirl, then only Kryptonite could do me in. I bit the inside of my cheek to fight off the mesmerizing effect his hands could have on my body.

"You're not going to get me off topic this time, John. I need to know more about these Bygons. And I'm not buying your line about taking a wrong turn at Lambert Field anymore and winding up here randomly. You're up to something. Something to do with those pasty creeps in black. Don't tell me how I know it; I just do."

"All right, you're onto me." He leaned back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head. "There's no sense not telling you the whole story, since you're able to fight off my helpful mental suggestions."

"I'm glad you see it my way now." I felt pleased. I'd actually outwitted him for once. I picked up my toast to take a bite. "You may continue."

"What else is there to say? The psychic link we've shared is growing stronger and has been ever since that day in the Arch. There's no real reason to explain why it..." He paused mid-sentence, mouth agape. "I think I see the connection now."

Jumping from his chair, he squatted among the fallen pots and pans. "Ah, that's it! The stainless steel in these pots as well as in the Arch itself may be acting as a psychic conductor—and protector—all at the same time."

I turned around in my seat to watch his antics. He behaved like a toddler excitedly playing with his birthday presents. I put down my toast and groaned in frustration.

"Oh, John... Just when you almost had me with promises of whipped cream and silk scarves, you start in on the wearing of tinfoil hats to prevent the government from reading our minds."

"Tinfoil hats will not keep the government from reading your mind, Cici." He sounded deadly serious. "I think it's your pots and pans. What else have you got around here made from stainless steel?"

"I don't know—my hip joint?" He frowned at me. "Okay, I'm kidding. I don't have any steel pins in me yet. I do have a small metal plate in the back of my skull because of car accident when I was younger."

His brown eyes grew as large as an anime character's, filling with awe. He gasped and pointed at me. "You have a metal plate in your skull?"

I nodded. "Uh-huh. They were afraid my brain would fall out or something. What's your excuse? No one bother to close the trapdoor the last time they

rambled inside yours?"

He stood and approached me reverently. "Don't joke, Cici Connors. That metal plate may have very well saved your life."

I shrugged. "That's what the doctors told my parents at the time. Not that it saved me from making some very bad personal decisions when it comes to who not to date and marry."

"Tsk-tsk! How do minor inconveniences like those compare to possibly having the power to protect your entire world from imminent destruction by the Bygons?"

He took both of my hands in his and gently pulled me to the feet. "Allow me to examine you."

"You want to see my metal plate?" I asked, incredulous.

"That, too. First things first, however." He lowered his voice to a murmur and leaned closer to my ear. "Do you happen to have any more of that whipped cream?"

* * * * *

The physical examination was thorough. It completely took my mind off John's growing paranoia and the unusual heartbeat I'd detected the previous day. I rationalized that even if he were an alien, he couldn't possibly come from the planet Gallifrey. The imaginary world created to explain why the Doctor had two hearts just didn't exist. Lots of things could explain his funky heart rhythm, including the fact that I had no medical training

whatsoever and had simply mistaken another bodily sound for his heartbeat.

So...how could I keep my friends from assuming John Smith was a schizophrenic on the run from an insane asylum? I felt honored that they worried about my safety. The only way around their doubts was to emphasize that John really didn't act any crazier than any of my ex-husbands.

He didn't throw things at me—or throw me around. He didn't max out my credit cards or wreck my new car by ramming it into three police cruisers in the middle of a Fourth of July parade. I felt much safer with John in my house than the last goon I'd promised to love, honor and obey. That alone had to convince Jessie and the rest of the gang.

I'd also convinced myself that I could deal with John's more bizarre personality traits like playing with my pots and pans and insisting that I carry a bag of garlic-flavored pretzels with me at all times. Creative types often do and say nutty things.

After all, he certainly displayed creative talent when it came to inventive uses for whipped cream.

By the time we arrived at a small booth at the Kirkwood Farmer's Market to shoot the alien bazaar scenes for *The Frightening Fairgrounds*, I had a permanent smile on my face and all was right in the world. Even snooty Ashleigh Witherspoon couldn't put a damper on my day.

"What do you mean, I have to bite into it?" The pretty blonde stomped her feet and threw the offensive object back into a straw basket on the booth counter. "That thing is raw, and it's like totally gross."

"That 'thing' is called a turnip," Jessie corrected her, picking up the prop and dusting it off with napkin. "And it won't kill you. It's the most unusual vegetable we could find that's completely edible. We just added a little vegetable dye to give it a more alien appearance."

Jessie had spoken true. I had never seen a more unusual vegetable with pinkish vegetable dyed squiggles painted along its purplish cylindrical length. Stranger yet, it was shaped similarly to a male appendage...

"Oh, my God!" I slapped a hand over my mouth and staggered over to our director who was discussing something with Bob, our sound man. I practically crumpled over in hysterics as I waited for Bob to fetch some more equipment.

"D-do you remember that episode of *Blackadder* when Baldrick grew a turnip in the shape of a...thingy?" I managed as my laughter subsided.

"Yes, I do." Milo wiggled his eyebrows and flashed an evil grin. "And that's why Tara Jo gets to bite into one. Call it my little homage to the great Rowan Atkinson."

I smothered another snigger behind my hands and lowered my voice to a whisper. "But what will our beloved scriptwriter think? This is pretty much a G rated story."

Milo shrugged. "Sammy thought it was a great idea when I discussed it with over the phone earlier."

"Oh, really. How's he feeling?" I tried not to sound overly curious, but I couldn't help it. Had John's visit done my friend more good than harm?

"Sammy's feeling great, he says. His white cell count is way up, and he's eating better and feeling stronger. If the doctors give him the go-ahead, he plans to make it for the last day of filming. He can mingle with the crowd at the fairgrounds. We'll give him a few bits of business—sort of like Alfred Hitchcock making an appearance in one of his movies. Maybe he can put on a little makeup and join the Grapenoss contingent."

"Sure thing. He'd love it." The weight of fear that had rested on my shoulders since the day we'd heard of Sammy's prognosis instantly lifted at the look of excitement in Milo's eyes. It must be true, then. "Still, the turnip..." I drawled. "Do you think we can get away with it?"

"The joke will go over the kids' heads, but the British comedies fans will absolutely love it. They'll probably donate an extra buck or two for the laugh."

I stood taller and smiled. "You know, you're right. I know I would."

"See? *No problema, mi amiga*. We've got this thing under control." Milo turned back to the camera setup as Bob handed him a couple of cables.

I looked about the area. John was intently studying a variety of locally grown apples at a booth opposite us. I spied Ashleigh from the corner of my eye talking animatedly with her teacher. The girl seemed to be giving Jessie a headache.

"Any problems shooting with Ashleigh over at Global Foods?" I asked.

"It went quite well." Milo adjusted the camera tripod and tightened the bolts. "The manager really

enjoyed our idea of ‘international aliens’. Roxy and Lila dressed up in some of their more elaborate Goth vampire outfits—complete with fake blood dripping from their fangs—pretending to run the meat counter.”

I had to laugh at the thought of two pale girls in white makeup wearing black lipstick and leather bustiers working in a butcher’s shop. “Lovely. Did Lila bring her boa constrictor for added color?”

“Yes, she did. The manager didn’t think having Mr. Flexo in the store was very sanitary or good for business, however. We were forced to put him back in his box.”

“But not after you all demonstrated how affectionate Mr. Flexo can be on our leading lady, right?”

Milo lowered his voice. “Let’s say it’s always a good thing when you broaden a young girl’s mind about the reptile world. Roxy slipped Flexo around Ashleigh’s shoulders out in the parking lot and you should have seen the girl run.” He sighed. “Ah, I wish now I’d had the camera turned on then. Material for the blooper reel—and a good blooper reel is an integral part of any successful cast party.”

Our grins reinforced each other. “I couldn’t agree more.” I nodded as if we were discussing something of extreme importance as Ashleigh stared daggers at us from across the barn. “The blooper reel is essential. Any other great outtakes?”

Milo chuckled. “We all got to sample some great cheeses in the cheese section of the store. The look on Ashleigh’s face when she bit into a cracker topped

with the four-alarm jalapeño spread..." He smiled dreamily. "Priceless. We're going to keep it in the final cut."

"Should we?"

"Of course. I think the Doctor's companion needs to show a little of her humanity now and again. What could be more human than having steam pour out of her ears while she jumps up and down and demands a glass of water?"

Ashleigh turned her gaze away from us. I bit my tongue to keep from laughing and lowered my voice. "Why, Milo, I didn't know you had it in you. And I thought you and our leading lady had hit it off big time."

"Not really. You haven't heard half the rude things she's said about me behind my back. Chandra and Trina and a few others relayed some of her more choice comments to me. Let's say our last day of shooting is going to be made even more memorable for Miss Bratty Witherspoon."

"Do I detect a big prank in the works?"

He winked at me then looked through the camera viewfinder. "I can't say. But be prepared."

As Milo moved Ashleigh into place for the turnip shot, I wandered across the market to where John stood at a booth carefully handling apples as if they were hand grenades.

"What's wrong with the apples?" I picked up a Granny Smith and drooled as I inhaled its sweet and sour essence. "Hmm-mm. I do love fresh fruit."

"With whipped cream, no doubt." John slowly put down a Red Delicious and glanced furtively about the

market. The hair stood on the back of my neck. "I think the Bygons have been here already," he said under his breath.

"Why do you say that? I wasn't here earlier, and I thought they were after me."

"They are, but it doesn't mean they have to tail you constantly. They've been keeping tabs on you off and on for years. It's only this week they've been following you almost around the clock. That give you any clues?"

"They're after you instead?" I took his pinched look to mean no, I was still Bygon enemy number one. "Then what? It's not like we pose a threat to them when we're together more so than when we're separate." I paused and thought about it a split second. "Do we? Do we threaten them as a team?"

His sudden grin dazzled me with its brilliance. "Smart thinking! That's exactly it. You hold the key to something extraordinary here on earth, and I hold the key to —"

With a glance over his shoulder he cut himself off in mid sentence and raised a finger to his lips. "Shh! We're being watched."

I slowly turned around. Outside of a few elderly shoppers and a mom with a baby stroller containing a cranky toddler a few booths over there was only a handful of cast and crewmembers nearby.

"Whoever is watching us must have excellent vision," I said. "I don't spy any of our paleface friends in black in the area."

He picked up another apple and polished it against the front of his jacket. "I wouldn't underestimate the

Bygons. I wouldn't underestimate them at all. I'd—"

Suddenly he twirled about and hurled a red projectile at the baby stroller with all the accuracy of Doctor number five, a superb cricket bowler.

"John, don't!" I rushed toward the unsuspecting mother and child. The fruit hit the concrete floor and splattered into a mushy mess near the wheels of the stroller.

I knelt to check on the child. "I'm so sorry. Are you two all right?"

The cranky toddler's blue eyes turned a ghastly shade of yellow. I stumbled backward in horror. The woman's deathly pallid features knocked me further back. She spun about on her heels faster than humanly possible and vanished before my eyes could focus on her ice-sculpted face.

"It's like they aren't even..." I gulped. I wasn't going to say the word 'human' out loud in case their hearing was as acute as their sight.

John helped me to my feet, brushing the apple fragments off my clothes. "Luckily for us fresh fruit is anathema to the Bygons. One drop of its acid on their skin and—" He made a slashing sound and cutting movement across his throat.

"What about the garlic pretzels? Isn't there enough acid in garlic to hold them off?"

"No, there's just dehydrated garlic coating the pretzels, which irritates their nasal passageways and make them sneeze. And a sneezing Bygon is an angry Bygon—I just remembered that. We probably shouldn't risk provoking their allergies at this point. They mean business."

"So you mean besides covering ourselves in stainless steel, we can protect ourselves against these Bygons with fresh fruit?" I rubbed my temples as the ridiculous thought took hold and threatened to become a migraine. "Milo is really going to love this one."

John frowned. "One what?"

"This bit added to the script. First we've got a turnip that looks like a thingy from *Blackadder*, and now we've got Monty Python's classic 'How to defend yourself against an attacker using fresh fruit' sketch. All we need now is the talking toaster from *Red Dwarf*, and we're all set to do a big salute to Brit-coms."

"Everything all right, you two?" As Jessie approached, she veiled her worried expression behind her teacher's face, complete with saintly smile. "I was heading over to the van to check on our stars for the next scene, and it looks like we had a little accident over here. Can we explain?"

"You need to pay for that apple." The grimacing woman behind the counter nodded toward the pulverized blob on the pavement.

"Of course." Then I realized I left my purse in the car. "I'll be right back. I have to get my wallet."

"You're not going anywhere." John slapped a hand on my shoulder, gripped hard and reeled me in. "Outside the protection of this fruit stand, both of us are vulnerable."

"I'll pay for the apple." Jessie pulled out a bill and offered it to the woman. "There you go. Cici, why don't you take John over to where Milo is setting up a

shot with Ashleigh? I need to gather up the prop items for the pet shop scene."

I patted the hand resting firmly on my shoulder. "It'll be fine, John. There are turnips over there. They should protect us."

He frowned. "Not as well as fresh fruit, though. Any pumpkins? Tomatoes?"

"Plenty of to-*mah*-toes." Jessie spoke slowly as if he were a child, exaggerating his accent. "Just don't throw one at anybody, okay?"

"Okay." I nodded and winked at her, taking John by the elbow. "Don't worry. I'll look after our Doctor. This way, please..."

"We shouldn't have to use any more apples as ammo if we're left in peace," he muttered. "No guarantees. I just wish we hadn't..." He stopped and shrugged. "Oh, never mind. I enjoyed the banana and the whipped cream, didn't you?"

A delicious shiver of desire tingled down my spine. I couldn't suppress the blush tingeing my cheeks. "Hmm... That goes without saying."

As we crossed the market, I was surprised to discover that Ashleigh had yet to take a bite out of the uniquely shaped turnip on camera.

"You all think I'm some sort of porn star!" Growling, she crossed her arms tightly about her perky breasts and scowled. "Well, I'm not. I'm a serious actress."

"Then why are you doing a fan film?" Milo snapped. "No one will ever take you seriously ever again. You might as well become a porn star and laugh all the way to the bank, sweetheart."

She tossed the vegetable back in its bin and spat, "I'm only doing this poor excuse for a movie because your wife blackmailed me into it. I'd rather repeat English class a thousand times over than to do this crappy scene for one second longer."

"Fine by me." Milo switched off the camera as Bob silently began disconnecting cables. "I've got better things to do with my time." He cupped his hands and yelled, "That's a wrap, people!"

Instantly Ashleigh's big blue eyes grew watery. "Wait a minute... I've got to pass English this year. My boyfriend is waiting for me at Mizzou. I don't want him to wait another semester. He's missing me something awful."

Milo chuckled and shook his head. "Good luck, sister! He's already dumped you for some sorority chick, or any frisky female who puts out in the first five minutes. I mean, who dates a high school girl when you've got plenty of ready, willing and able college women at hand?"

"No, no, you're wrong!" Ashleigh sobbed. "Jared said he'd wait for me. He promised he would."

The tears and hiccups began in earnest now. The pain reflected in the young girl's face touched even my hard heart.

"Now, look what you've done!" I cried. I dropped my hold on John and put an arm around the hysterical teen. "She's smearing her mascara. Apologize, Milo."

He stopped putting gear away and frowned. "Me? She's the one who won't do the scene. She's breaking her contract with Jessie. She's going to flunk, and

she's going to have to repeat a semester. It's not me who won't take one little bite out of a painted turnip."

"I'll eat the turnip if it helps matter any," John volunteered.

Milo grimaced. "No, please—anything but that. We don't want to confuse the fans anymore about the Doctor's sexual orientation after Captain Jack snogged him." Sighing, our director turned to our leading lady. "I apologize for my unkind remarks. Will you please take just a little bite, please?"

"All right. I'll do it," Ashleigh said shakily. "I want to pass English. Just a little bite, yes?"

"That-a girl," John cheered her on. "It's like taking medicine. One gulp and soon it'll all be over."

I handed her a tissue and stepped out of shot. She dabbed at her makeup and cleared her throat. "Okay, I'm ready."

Bob reconnected the cables, and Milo quickly reset the camera, then cued her. "Just a step closer to the basket... Yes, that's good. Perfect. Put your smile on. Good."

Milo softened a bit as he gave Ashleigh further instructions.

"When I say action now, I want you to pick up the turnip and pop it in your mouth. You don't have to chew or swallow—how's that? We'll do a cut away to something else in the marketplace and then come back to you putting it down again and making a yucky face. Got it?"

She nodded. I took John by the arm and pulled him a few feet behind the camera.

Milo smiled and stepped out of the shot. "Okay,

we're rolling and – action!"

A beaming Ashleigh calmly picked up the vegetable from its bin. She gave it a curious look, turning it about in her hands. Then she lifted it to her lips and sucked the entire length of the root into her mouth in one swift motion.

"Well, I'll be damned..." Milo muttered.

Ashleigh winked at the camera, then smoothly removed the turnip and twirled her tongue playfully across its tip. Beads of sweat erupted on our director's brow. Bob the sound man almost dropped the boom mike out of his shaking hands. John's big brown eyes became pizza-sized and his mouth dropped open, staring in amazement at our teen actress's obvious 'talent'.

"Uh, cut," Milo squeaked. "Nice job, Ashleigh." He mopped his forehead with the back of his hand. "Well...I guess we'll have to re-think that cutaway."

"I didn't want people to think I can't do the same things college girls can." Giggling, Ashleigh tossed the vegetable back into its basket. "Jared's never going to leave me for some dumb sorority pledge. Never ever."

John slowly licked his lips. "I would think not."

Suddenly I lost all sympathy for the manipulative little bitch, crying her eyes out one moment and flirting outrageously with every male on the set the next. Jessie had been correct – Ashleigh Witherspoon could act. I motioned for them to follow me, but the men stood transfixed, watching Ashleigh freshen her makeup.

"Okay, guys, you can shut your jaws and quit

drooling now. We need to help set up the next shot. Jessie's bringing a couple of Chandra's parrots in costume, and Lila has Mr. Flexo. We're setting up the exotic animal booth over here in this corner."

"Sure thing." Milo picked up the tripod as if in a daze and repositioned it. Bob reluctantly followed with the rest of the sound gear. John remained chatting with a very animated Ashleigh.

My frustration level soared. "John? You're in the next shot, so you'd better move your butt over here."

I watched him stealthily purloin the infamous turnip before he strolled to his position. I glared at him and nodded to the object poking out of his pocket. He slowly pulled it out and shrugged. "Souvenir."

I yanked the vegetable from his grip. "I'm in charge of continuity today. I'll keep track of our props."

"That's fine," he whispered in my ear. "I'm sure you'll be able to put it to some good use later."

My cheeks burned. I would have decked John then and there if Milo hadn't grabbed him by the shoulders and dragged him away to explain the next shot set-up.

"Say hello to our newest stars," Jessie said, approaching with two birdcages, one in each hand. The birds fluttered their wings and bobbed their heads nervously. "Chandra somehow put tiny gold antennae headpieces on her feathered friends when she dropped them off before work this morning. Beats me how she did it."

The birds squawked as Jessie placed the cages

gently on the ground. I knelt down to get a better look at them. "Glue or corn syrup, I'll guess. That's how my cousin stuck bows on my baby niece's forehead when she had little or no hair. What are their names?"

"This little green parrot here is called Jon Pertwee, known as Twee for short, and the scarlet macaw is T.B., or Tom Baker."

"Tom Baker—I like it." I laughed. "I suppose it's because parrots are such long-lived birds like Time Lords, huh?"

"That and because he's as colorful as Baker's signature scarf."

"Parrots!" Grinning inanely, John approached and squatted to get a better view, poking a finger into T.B.'s cage. "They don't bite, do they?"

"You'll be the first to find out if they do." I shook my head. "Take your finger out of there. I have something better for them to chew on instead."

I placed the end of the phallic-shaped turnip in between the bars. T. B. immediately began to peck at it. I stood and smugly crossed my arms. "See? That could have very well been your finger."

John flinched. "Ow... Rather my finger than something else I prize all the more." He wrinkled his nose and sniffed. "What's that rather pungent barnyard smell?"

Turning, I caught a glimpse of Roxy and Lila approaching the market with their exotic menagerie. Jessie clapped her hands and did a happy dance in place.

"Yes! Yes! Roxy managed to wheedle Mr. Peanut from her ex-boyfriend. I'll go fetch the cute costume

Trina made for him from the van. Watch the parrots for me, Cici."

"Sure thing. Just make sure Peanut is wearing a diaper and is on a leash at all times. The dog laws probably apply to him as well."

"Monkeys *and* snakes?" John grinned. "This movie's cast is getting better all the time. All we need is Dr. Doolittle's Pushme-Pullyou and we're set."

"I think K-9 the mechanical dog would have been better choice," Milo said, peering into the viewfinder to adjust the camera focus, "but Rick's model blew up last year, and he hasn't had time to rebuild him."

Our director looked up and quickly scanned the open market. "Where's our gorgeous companion gone to now? Don't tell me she's scampered off to shop at Plaza Frontenac."

"She was here a moment ago. She couldn't have gone far." I turned to search for the porn-star-in-training, but thought better of it. "Oh, I can't leave the parrots unattended."

"Don't worry. I'll look after them. There is fruit about, so we're safe." John squatted beside the cages. He screwed up his face. "They do seem to love gnawing at that turnip, don't they?"

"You think in spite of their names they're females?" Milo chuckled, then turned to me. "Hurry up and drag Ms. Witherspoon back over here, Cici. We'll do a few close ups of the creatures while we're waiting."

I quickly paced through the open stalls. The blonde teen was nowhere to be seen. I then looked for Ashleigh's car parked on the street. It was still there.

So she hadn't driven off somewhere. Damn the girl! She probably had wandered off to yak in private on her cell phone to her boyfriend about her earlier stunt. She'd ruin today's shoot if she didn't reappear soon.

Suddenly a flicker movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention. I glimpsed a flash of black and silver and heard the sound of a SUV engine roaring to life, burning rubber as it pulled away from the curb. I ran up the block toward the speeding vehicle, recognizing a familiar blonde head screaming from behind a rapidly closing window.

"The Bygons...have Ashleigh." I stopped to catch my breath. "She...should have...held on...to the turnip."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Cretin Invasion

In 'The Christmas Invasion', the audience meets the tenth Doctor for the first time. It's not an auspicious revelation by any means.

Recently regenerated, a sickly Doctor collapses immediately upon arrival back on Earth. His illness effectively keeps him from taking action when the alien invaders park their huge spaceship over London. Luckily for the Doctor, his companions Rose, Jackie and Mickey are able to handle things fairly well between his lapses of consciousness.

What I wouldn't do to have least one of them standing right beside me at times!

"Damn it, we're not going to hang around here all day," I heard Milo grumble as I staggered back to our group. He threw up his hands. "That's it. We'll have to film Ashleigh's scene with the exotic animals some other time. Can we get permission to shoot here again at the Farmer's Market, you think, Cici?"

I took a gulp of air and held my hand up to stop his question then turned to John "Can't...talk. The Bygons have...Ashleigh."

"The idiots!" he roared. "They need their visors checked. They were after you."

A concerned frown creased Jessie's brow. "Did you say Ashleigh went off with someone named 'Byron'?"

"Yeah, that's it," I managed, panting. "She said she'd didn't know how long she'd be and to continue without her."

"Aw, shit!" Milo threw up his hands and stomped away. "Start packing the stuff, Bob."

I dragged my alien lover aside and lowered my voice. "This is serious. Those pasty guys think they've nabbed me instead of a teenage girl?"

"It appears so. You have to admit you two have more than just a passing resemblance. She could pass for you, say...about twenty years ago?"

I sighed. "Spot on. I suppose she wandered away from the fruit stands and they grabbed her. Do we call the police?"

"No, it's better not to contact the authorities in a situation like this. It only confuses them. And then I'd have to erase their memories, and if I forget to do so for one person..." He shrugged. "Well, then he tends to be labeled a lunatic and a UFO conspiracist—and he'll never get invited to any good office parties ever again. You know that could be quite devastating to a person's social life."

"Oh, yeah, like that's important—we're talking about a kidnapping here. Will the Bygons kill her if they find out they have the wrong person?"

He wrinkled his nose in thought. "Possibly. Or possibly they'll let her go and come full guns after you. Either way, we've got to find her and rescue her from their evil clutches."

I stared at him in disbelief. "You say that in such a

blasé-like manner. Like you do things like this all the time."

"Don't I?" He wiggled an eyebrow. "You all think I'm the Doctor, after all."

"Yeah, right!" I let a long stream of air and pent up frustration escape my lips. "Where's your time traveling device then, 'Doctor'? You could go back into the past fifteen minutes and prevent Ashleigh from wandering away in the first place."

John looked decidedly uncomfortable, his brow furrowing in agitation. "Well, I...You're one to talk, Cici Connors!"

"Me?"

"Yes, you! Since when did you start to care what happened to Ashleigh? I thought you didn't care a bean about the girl."

"How did you know...? Oh." My thoughts about our leading lady were probably an open book when he'd walked about in my mind. "Look, it doesn't matter about my feelings about her. I can't let an innocent person be harmed if there's anything I can do to help."

"You didn't happen to bring Rick's laser rifle with you today, did you?" he asked.

"It's in my car trunk. I was going to pass it back to Jessie and Milo after today's shoot. Why?"

"Then we've got a weapon. We just need to track them down."

I rolled my eyes at him. "Great. How in the hell are we suppose to track them down in a metropolitan area of this size? We're going to have to get help from the police. It's the only way."

"Not necessarily."

I followed the line of his index finger to where he pointed across the street. I gasped. "Oh, no. They came back."

"I think they've realized their cock-up," he said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "They probably want to make a trade."

"A trade? For *me*?"

"Of course." He nodded toward the black SUV. "Run along now. Off you go."

"What?" I jumped a foot back from him. "You're suggesting that I turn myself over to those pasty creeps?"

John shrugged languidly. "You said you didn't want an innocent person harmed, so now's your big chance."

I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach. How could my alien lover act so cold? Didn't he have any compassion, any feelings for me?

"Well, I'm not just going to walk into their waiting arms like a lamb to the slaughter," I said. I spun around and headed toward my car. "If I go in, I'm going in armed."

"Now, that's more like it." He followed closely after me. "Clever woman."

But I didn't feel clever—I felt rather silly. I was planning to walk across the street carrying a toy rifle to talk to a group of men wearing black jogging suits and mirror sunglasses. If this didn't read like a scene from a comic book, I don't know what does.

"Be careful when you aim." John picked up the weapon to demonstrate. "Squint and look down the

barrel right...here. I'm sorry I didn't have time to modify that bit. It doesn't have a very good sighting mechanism."

"It doesn't need one—it's a prop, a fake. It's not supposed to hit anything."

"Don't look too surprised when you've taken out a few of the Bygons then. Just don't shoot Ashleigh by mistake," he cautioned as he handed me the rifle.

I stared at him and gulped. "You mean this thing can *kill* people?"

"It can kill whoever you like. That's the whole purpose of a firearm, isn't it?"

"I guess so." A wave of nausea washed over me. I began to shiver ever so slightly. "I'm not sure I'm up to this now. What are you going to carry? We've only got the one rifle."

He smiled and reached into his suit pocket. "My shiny pen, of course."

"Oh, of course...your instant popcorn popper. Stay here. I don't want multiple deaths on my head." I swallowed hard again and cocked the rifle. "All right. I'm going in."

I marched across the parking area, heading directly toward the black SUV. The front window slowly rolled down as I approached. A ghost-white face in mirror lenses slowly turned and met my gaze.

"You will come with us and the young female will be returned to your collective," the Bygon droned in a monotonous tone. "There will be no further discussion on this matter."

"I think not." I raised the prop rifle to eye level. "You will let her go this minute, or I'll blow your

brains out. Tough stains, blood stains. I'd hate to ruin the interior of your Escalade.

"The object you hold is a mock-up of a laser rifle. It can do no harm."

I bit my lip. I hated having my bluff called. "This weapon has been modified recently. Modified by a weapons expert."

The albino stared straight ahead. "Explain."

How could I? I didn't know any impressive technical terms to throw about, and I blanked out of fancy talk from any sci-fi show I'd watched in the last century. I didn't even believe the stupid prop gun did anything than light up and make an obnoxious popping sound when you pulled the trigger. But I had to say something.

Think—think! I bit my lip. What would the Doctor say in this situation?

"The polarity of the neutron flow has been reversed," I said calmly. "And we all know what that means—you don't stand a chance."

The tinted window whooshed shut. I must have said the right thing. I quickly scanned the block and caught sight of John standing on the corner with his pen upraised and pointed toward the SUV. What was he up to?

The window lowered again. "We have decided to release the young female. She is of no further use to our plan. We demand a formal meeting at the collective's designated coordinates on the last day of the solar week. No weapons allowed. Is this acceptable?"

Huh? I'd out-bluffed the evil aliens? It didn't seem

possible.

"Sure thing. Last day of the solar week...Saturday? We'll be in Forest Park all day."

"We will meet at the designated coordinates called Forest Park. Here is the young female. She will not be needed on that day."

The back door flew open and Ashleigh was pushed out into the street. I grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet before the vehicle careened away from the curb.

"Those dudes are the weirdest geeks ever!" Ashleigh's blue eyes flashed with a mixture of adrenalin and fear. "But I gotta admit the one in the backseat was kind of cute."

"Cute? Really?" I gently guided her across the street back to the market. "Now, Ashleigh, I need to know what they said to you and—"

"Terrific acting, you two!" Milo exclaimed running up to us. He lowered the camera as he approached. "I got most of it."

"You filmed us?" My jaw dropped. I didn't know if what I felt was relief, disgust or shock. "You just stood there and shot video of the whole thing?"

He frowned. "Yeah. I saw you with the laser rifle and figured it would be worth shooting. What a great bit of sci-fi improvisation."

"It was," Ashleigh agreed. "Those geeks really are into their characters. It's like they're from another planet totally."

"Even better. Now all we need to do is to figure out a place to use it in the script." Milo scratched his head. "By the way, who were those guys in the black

car?"

"They're friends of Kevin's," John said, strolling to my side with that goofy grin plastered on his face. "They plan to be in the crowd scenes at Forest Park on Saturday."

"Great. Remind me to get their names and addresses, Cici. I don't want their performance to go uncredited. Plus they'll want to come see the premiere."

"Certainly." Alien kidnappers rarely received an invitation to see a fan film. They wouldn't want to miss out on the fun. My stomach did a flip-flop. "Excuse me. I feel a migraine coming on. I need to lie down. We'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, tomorrow it is," Milo said with a mock salute. "Take care."

I gratefully accepted John's arm and somehow made it to the car.

"I'll drive." He reached for the keys in my hand.

I yanked them away. "No, thank you. One shock to my nervous system is all I can take today. I don't need you to smash my car up with me in it while going down the wrong side of the road."

"I won't go down the wrong side of the road. Give me some credit. I'm a quick learner."

"So am I." I crossed my arms and leaned against the driver's side. "Explain what you were doing with your 'shiny pen' on the corner back there. Rick's laser rifle wouldn't have made one bloody scratch on their colorless faces, would it?"

He nodded and grinned. "Probably not. But you handled the whole business beautifully. And if you

had been forced to use a weapon, I would have stepped in and helped at that point."

I gasped. "You...you were willing to risk my life? I could have been *killed*."

"No, of course I wasn't risking your life." He thrust his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight back on forth on the balls of his feet, staring at the ground. I glared at him. "Don't look at me that way, Cici. It turned out in our favor—and I'm not perceived as much of a threat by the Bygons. We have the element of surprise."

"We certainly do."

I felt the element of surprise in an entirely different manner. It surprised me that I actually cared that John Smith could have stood there and watched me die like a squirrel hit in the street without shedding a tear. It's not like he ever showed he cared for anyone other than himself. Why should it have come to matter to me now?

"Okay, you can drive." I tossed him the keys and settled myself the front passenger seat. "What have we got to lose?"

Within five minutes I would have given anything to take back my words.

"The Bygons—there's the black vehicle!" John exclaimed. He hooked a sharp left onto a narrow road in an older neighborhood of Kirkwood and accelerated.

I clutched at the door handle armrest and sputtered, "Whoa there! Slow down. That may not be their car. It's not like they're driving the only black Escalade in St. Louis."

"A black Escalade with tinted windows?" He sped up to within a half block of the SUV. "A black Escalade with tinted windows and a license plate marked 'UFO ONE'."

"You're kidding." I leaned forward and cupped my hands to block out the slanting sunrays of late afternoon. I swallowed hard as he hit a pothole. My head connected with the ceiling several times.

He pulled a sharp right and pointed to the license plate on the black vehicle directly ahead. "See?"

"Keep both hands on the wheel!" I shrieked. "I see. You're not kidding. But I don't believe it for one second. It's just too stupid to be true."

He pouted like Tom Baker having a bad day. "What's too stupid to be true?"

"Why would aliens deliberately choose so obvious a vanity plate? Watch the road, damn it!"

He swerved to miss a parked car. "Why wouldn't they want a vanity plate? You laughed it off—so would every other human on the planet. It makes perfect sense."

"Perfect sense?"

I gasped as I watched a soccer ball bounce into the middle of the suburban street. John narrowly avoided running it and its owner over.

"Yes, it's a brilliant disguise," he said, grinning with enthusiasm. "In order to seamlessly blend into with society, all you have to do is act a bit off-centered." His eyes glowed with an inner insanity as he wiggled his eyebrows. "Works for me."

Zigging and zagging through the tree-lined boulevards, the Bygon vehicle eventually slowed for a

stoplight.

"Look, they're stopping." I sighed in relief. "I'll be able to tell if it's the same vehicle or not, and we can end this chase. We shouldn't attempt to drag race with them on a major thoroughfare—ah!"

The stoplight turned green. The SUV's tires squealed as it zoomed onto Big Bend Boulevard. Suddenly I found myself falling toward John as he took the turn on two wheels, close behind the faster auto. My Honda's gears screeched their protest. I clutched at my shoulder belt and closed my eyes, murmuring a prayer of deliverance.

"John, please slow down," I said in the calmest voice I could manage. "Forget chasing after those paleface geeks. We're outnumbered, and you said yourself that Rick's laser rifle isn't going to stop them."

"We're not going to stop them. We're going to observe them, find out what they're up to."

He sped along the curving and narrowing road. He weaved in and out of lanes, passing several cars, keeping pace with the SUV. My migraine was completely forgotten in a wave of motion sickness.

"Observe them...doing...what...exactly?"

He scrunched up his face in thought. "I don't know. I really don't know. You can't say your curiosity isn't piqued as well, eh, Cici?"

"Curiosity killed the cat. I want to—" He suddenly swerved the car around a slow moving driver on a steep curve. Half my lunch threatened to erupt from my stomach and fly up my esophagus. "God, I so want to live!"

"No, you don't," he corrected me. "You want to exist in peace—dull, boring, non-eventful peace. Don't tell me you find your current existence as an accountant-who-forgot-her-dream-of-becoming-an-astronomer exciting."

"Accounting can be exciting at times," I protested, but it sounded weak even to my ears. "You can't always be what you hoped to be as a child. It's just not possible. You have to make choices in life. Intelligent choices."

"Choices? Hm, it's more like you play it safe—too safe. You wouldn't enjoy watching sci-fi adventure shows and acting them out with others if you had ever really lived."

At this point the black Escalade turned off of Big Bend Boulevard onto a side road and accelerated under an old railroad pass. John followed in pursuit and then hit the brakes hard, sending us flying toward the dashboard.

The Bygons had disappeared.

"They're gone." His brow furrowed. He appeared totally dumbfounded. "They must have a transmat device of some sort around these woods. They've dematerialized right before our very eyes. Very clever."

"They could have simply sped up and turned down the other path." I pointed to a fork in the road directly ahead. "This area dead ends at the Meramec River. There's no way they can get out of here in that car without us seeing them. All we have to do is sit back and wait for them to come out."

"No, Cici, you forget that we were right on top of

them. They headed to their pick up point and had their mother ship transport them out." He sighed and threw the car in reverse and turned back to the main road. "Oh, well. We'll see them on Saturday, I suppose."

Now it was my turn to frown. "You're giving up that easily?"

He hit the brakes and jerked us both forward. "Pardon? I thought you didn't like the way I drove your little car too fast. I'm giving in to your superior wisdom."

"But I'm a scaredy-cat who makes safe choices. I thought possibly you'd veto them and suggest something more..."

He raised an eyebrow. "More?"

I shrugged and grinned. "More exciting."

He returned my smile. "I suppose we could do a search in the area for alien technology. Find out where they've scampered off to or if they left any clues."

"That's the spirit. Even we dull accountants find it curious how an SUV could disappear into thin air. I wouldn't expect our Doctor to feel otherwise."

"You're right." He slapped the wheel in triumph. "You're absolutely right."

John switched off the engine and stepped out of the car. I followed his lead. We walked in silence for several hundred yards, making note of how "normal" everything appeared to be along the semi-rural industrial park road.

"I'm sorry if I made you sweat a little back there at the Farmer's Market," he said at length, bending

down to pick up a discarded beer can by the roadside. "But I was confident you'd acquit yourself well – and you did."

An apology? My heart about skipped a bit. So unexpected, yet welcomed. Did he really care? "Why, thank you."

He sniffed the contents of the tin can and then grimaced. "Yuck. How can humans consume so much of this foul liquid?"

"The effects—it's all about the effects of the alcohol," I informed him, taking the offensive piece of trash from his hands and dropping it where he originally found it. "At least that's the explanation at least two of my ex-spouses gave me. Neither one particularly cared for the taste, they said. It was all about the buzz."

"The buzz." He tilted his head oddly as if listening to a sound I couldn't hear. "Yes, a buzz...a buzzing sound. I've heard it since we stepped out of the car, too. If we can locate it—"

He started jogging down the road.

"John? Wait up!" I gasped, trying to keep up with him. "It's probably just the electrical wires humming overhead."

He suddenly stopped in his tracks like he'd run into a brick wall. He patted the air like a mime. "It stops here."

Panting, I hobbled over to where he stood. "What stops?"

"The buzzing sensation. There is some kind of alien technology employed around here, Cici. But it's camouflaged well and the sun will be setting soon.

We'll check it out tomorrow." John suddenly turned on his heels and marched straight back to the car.

So hot and then so cold... He could turn off his moods and thought processes as easily as I could flick off a light switch. The man could be infuriating. But perhaps this behavior was considered normal where he came from?

"I'll drive," I said as we reached my car. "If we're going to risk getting a ticket, I'd rather be the one behind the wheel."

* * * * *

Soon after calling our alien tech search quits, we decided to make a short visit to Sammy's place to catch him up on the day's action.

"Ashleigh actually bit into the thingy-shaped turnip? Aw, right!"

Sammy clapped his hands and chuckled. Sitting in a reclining chair in the living room, his color was remarkably improved and his strength seemed to have returned to normal. Serena's smile beamed her optimism at her son's miraculous recovery as she brought us lemonade.

"And what about the boa constrictor? Did Ashleigh let them wrap it around her?" Sammy asked.

"No, she drew the line at touching the snake," I said. "Of course they didn't finish filming the pet shop scene, so it's possible she'll agree to do it tomorrow."

Sammy turned his focus to John. "The aliens you threw the apple at—they're still hanging around?"

He nodded and leaned forward, his voice hushed. "Yes, they are. But I'm working on a plan to get rid of them – any suggestions?"

As the two huddled together in serious discussion, I stood and followed Serena into the kitchen.

"Shop talk?" Serena nodded toward the living room as she stepped up to the pile of dirty dishes in the sink. "Sammy sure enjoys having someone to bounce sci-fi script ideas off of."

"Uh, yeah, script ideas. It's always good to bounce them off others."

I bit my lip. It wouldn't do to tell her that John was some kind of extraterrestrial and that possibly Sammy's recovery had been initiated by unknown alien know-how with unknown results possible. The poor woman had enough worries.

"John's a frustrated screenplay writer, if you haven't guessed already," I said casually.

"Really?" Frowning thoughtfully, she rinsed off a pot. "I could have sworn he was...something else entirely."

I picked up a dishtowel to help dry the dishes. "Like what?" I tried not to sound overly inquisitive about her impressions of John Smith. "What does he strike you as? A lawyer? An engineer? A used car salesman? A shrink?"

She laughed. "You're funny. I thought you knew. He reminds me of Sammy's late father."

"A truck driver?"

"No, silly! He acts like a father to Sammy. Well, maybe he's more like a grandfather—kind, caring, understanding—able to sit and talk about science

fiction for hours on end without going insane.”

“You see John as a grandfather?” I nodded slowly in disbelief. “One question—isn’t he a little too young to be a grandfather?”

“What does age have to do with it? It’s all in the attitude. You’re as young—or old—as you feel.” She rinsed off the last dish and wiped her hands on the backside of her jeans. “You either have the patience of a grandfather or you don’t. John has the patience. He’s been around kids like Sammy before. I can tell.”

“I suppose.” I wasn’t totally convinced that John Smith wasn’t Sammy Espinoza in an alternate universe—an overgrown kid living in his parents’ basement with a collection of sci-fi action figures that rivaled some nine-year-old kid’s down the block.

Serena gazed out the window, a calm and serious expression playing up her handsome dark features. “John’s just like the TV Doctor, right? A being who is hundreds of years old dwelling in the body of a younger man—a body that can regenerate whenever it becomes worn out.” She playfully punched my upper arm. “What a terrific idea! It sure beats the heck out of Botox!”

I laughed alongside her, but I couldn’t shake the eerie feeling that Serena Espinoza had hit upon John Smith’s true identity. Perhaps she saw through his disguise better than any of us. How long before the others had figured out his secret? How long before my alien lover left Earth behind to wander among the stars?

And would I ever see him again?

“Serena, are you and Sammy coming Saturday to

Forest Park?" I said, trying to force my thinking to the present and away from distressing thoughts. "We could use all the extras we can get."

"Yeah, we'll be there all day probably. The quacks said that Sammy could go for only a little while, but what do they know?"

"Quacks?" I frowned. "I thought Sammy's doctors were those high-fallutin' research medicos at Barnes Jewish Hospital. They can't all be idiots, can they?"

"Sure they can. They told me last month he was terminal and now listen—he's laughing and chattering away as if he's never been sick a day in his life."

She walked to the entryway between the living room and kitchen, then turned to me and smiled. "I've never been so happy to tell a medical professional off in my entire life. And I have your John to thank for it."

"How could John have anything to do with Sammy's recovery?" I tried to sound lighthearted, but inwardly I wanted to scream. "Maybe Sammy's getting better because he has something to look forward to, like his movie's premiere?"

"That, too. But without your Doctor, there would be no movie. So I believe my gratitude toward him is appropriate. See?"

She motioned me toward the entryway. Sammy and John were laughing over something scribbled on a piece of graph paper. What exactly were they up to? I marched into the living room and was promptly greeted with two innocent expressions as John shoved the paper into his jacket pocket and stood.

"We'll see you on Saturday," John said, pointing both index fingers at Sammy. "Thanks again for your insights, Sam the Man. I owe you big time."

"It was nothing. It's the least I can do, considering..." Sammy turned his attention to Serena and me and nodded. "Will you be in the crowd with us on Saturday, Cici?"

"Possibly. Trina said she had a costume for me, and we need all the long-suffering extras we can get."

"Fantastic." Sammy's self-satisfied expression caught me off guard. All of a sudden he reminded me of the Doctor's arch-nemesis, the Master. A chill of apprehension tingled down my spine. "Fantastic," he said again. "I can't wait."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rise of the Cipher Man

***S**triving for immortality isn't necessarily a bad thing...Well, it shouldn't be. But often it's what the Doctor Who villain desires most, the ability to live forever.*

In 'Rise of the Cybermen', we meet up with John Lumic, a man who creates a way to preserve an individual's brain and nervous system inside a metal casing that will last forever. Of course, without a real body most humans would go mad, and so he very wisely installs a chip to suppress all emotions. Detached from their feelings, his Cybermen quickly become effective killing machines.

Sometimes I wish I had a suppressed emotion chip installed. It certainly would make life less painful, wouldn't it?

Wednesday dawned bright as usual. I had collapsed into bed the night before after a long, trying day of being almost killed by sociopathic aliens and then involved in a high-speed car chase. I wasn't prepared to move a muscle until well after ten o'clock.

John, of course, had other plans.

He leaned over and whispered into my ear at six forty-five. "Let's go back to where we last saw the

Bygons."

"What?" I looked at the alarm clock, then rolled over and stared hard at him. "Why? We didn't find anything remotely interesting there yesterday except a buzzing noise you noticed that I didn't hear."

"But that's it!" He sprang to his feet and began to pace. "We didn't find anything. It just doesn't fit."

I rubbed my eyes and sighed. "Fit what?"

"Fit with what I know about aliens who have been stalking a lone human female for the past ten years or more. Something else is going on here. I can sense it."

"Yeah, they got bored like my first husband did and decided to stalk pastures greener." I sighed and rolled back over. "We don't have to be on set until Milo gives us a call, and that'll probably be later this afternoon. There's no need to get up early and go poking about the woods. Let's just relax and take it easy, okay?"

He sighed and threw up his hands. "Sleep. Humans can never get enough of it. You'll sleep half your lives away and never think twice about the waste, time that you could be putting to good use."

"That's easy for you to say—you aren't human. You hardly ever sleep, eat or perform other necessary body functions. It's just plain weird."

"You mean I haven't got a libido like an alley cat in heat?"

I growled and pulled the pillow over my head to shut him out. He immediately jumped on the bed, knocked it off and held it at arm's reach. I grabbed for my pillow in vain. "Hey!"

"Your need to perform a 'necessary body function'

hasn't gotten your blood stirring yet, huh?" he taunted, suggestively wiggling his eyebrows at me. "I thought you had to have it at least once a day – like a vitamin."

"Now who's acting like an alley cat?"

"If it's the only way to get your heart pumping and your brain working, then it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make." He reached for a can on the floor on the opposite side of the bed. "Looks like this one's got plenty of whipped cream."

I rolled my eyes at him and stuck out a tongue. "Who would have ever thought I'd become bored with whipped cream?"

"Bored?" He stopped shaking the can and looked suddenly dejected. "You're bored with whipped cream?"

I nodded. "There is more to life than whipped cream, John."

He pouted for a second then ran his tongue over his teeth. "What else have you got in the refrigerator that might appeal to you – butter? Marmalade? Spam?"

"No!" I rubbed my aching temples. My poor brain was telling me it was far too early to argue. Okay, so he wasn't human and he didn't know that food and sex didn't always go together. Perhaps it did on his home world?

Suddenly a queasy feeling came over me. The opening music for *The Twilight Zone* echoed in my mind. "John, they don't eat other sentient beings where you come from, by chance? You didn't come here to check out what was on the menu, did you?"

"You think I'm a cannibal?" He sat up and glared at me. "Sorry to disappoint you, Cici, but humans possess sole ownership of that particular market."

I cringed. "We do?"

"Remember the Donner party?"

There he went again mentioning people and events from history as if they had happened only yesterday. The theme from the *The Twilight Zone* was quickly replaced with *Doctor Who*.

"I apologize for insinuating you were a cannibal, John, but you've never told me exactly where you came from." Or when, I said to myself.

"You don't believe I'm from Gallifrey?" He grinned and winked, my slight instantly forgotten. "It makes perfectly logical sense to me."

I sat up and hugged my knees. "You could be from Planet Vulcan for all I know. But none of those places exist outside the imaginations of a million science fiction fans and writers. I just can't believe that a race of beings called the Time Lords ever lived. It's all fantasy, make-believe."

He leaned forward and ran his tongue slowly across his teeth once more, his big brown orbs twinkling with mischief. "But you have no trouble thinking of me as a schizophrenic from another planet with time traveling capabilities, do you?"

My reply froze on my lips. He had a point there, a point that didn't bear too much close scrutiny—especially this early in the morning. I shook my head, then smiled. "Yes, exactly. You're a psycho alien with a whipped cream fetish. And you've traveled the length and breadth of the galaxy and throughout time

and space looking for a companion who shares your kinky fixation for dairy products. Well, lucky you—you've found your girl."

Grinning, he picked up the can and shook it. "I thought so."

* * * * *

The scenes in the market that were rudely interrupted the day before took only an hour to finish. Ashleigh did her lines without fuss and even openly flirted between takes with some teenage fanboys who'd dropped by the set allegedly to play extras.

"She's got the start of a fan club going," Jessie noted as we stood to the side of the apple stand. "She'll be signing autographs before you know it."

"What do you mean?" I said, my disdain barely concealed. "Before you arrived, she signed her name in permanent marker across the stomach of that skinny, redheaded Pointdexter loitering over there with that group in the corner. And he only had to beg her three or four times."

Jessie tilted her head thoughtfully. "Really? Permanent marker? Sounds serious."

"For him, yes. It's probably the closest a girl has ever come to actually touching him."

John became especially attached to Mr. Peanut the monkey during the scene and asked Roxy if he could keep him as a pet. Roxy politely refused.

"Such a charming creature," he said, sighing, as the monkey owner strolled away with her companion perched on her shoulder. "Very intelligent, you can

tell."

"Do you mean Roxy or Peanut?" I knew which one he meant, but it was worth saying it just to get a rise out of him.

"Both really. Roxy, for training and caring for Peanut, and Peanut for putting up with humankind in general. He told me he could do without the clothes and nappies business, however. They're very restricting and not becoming at all."

"Peanut told you all that?" Jessie's composed teacher expression disguised her true thoughts well. "I think we should change your name to Doctor Doolittle, John." She turned and whispered in my ear. "Are you sure John doesn't have any apples in his pockets to throw?"

"He's fine," I assured her. "He's convinced the bad aliens won't drop by again. We're meeting them on Saturday at the park."

"Hmm, good. So he's taken his meds today?"

If whipped cream was a controlled substance, the guy was an addict. "Yeah, you could say that. Don't worry. He'll be fine."

"Peanut did tell me he worries those binding leather garments his caretaker seems to fancy," John added as if he hadn't noticed Jessie's interruption. "He's afraid she can't breathe right in them."

"Well, you tell Peanut not to worry the next time you see him." Jessie patted him on the arm and smiled. "Roxy and Lila both enjoy their leather corsets. They wear them for their...moonlighting jobs."

"Really?" John wrinkled his nose in thought.

"What kind of activities in the twenty-first century demands a leather corset?"

I cringed, but was saved giving him the explanation when Milo picked up his megaphone and did his Cecil B. DeMille impersonation.

"That's a wrap for today, people," Milo announced to the gathering. "Anyone with time on their hands this evening should report to Chandra's studio to help finish the sets for tomorrow's scenes. See you there."

"You going to help repaint the TARDIS and construct the Grapenoss pavilion?" Jessie asked us. "I hear the whole business is quite elaborate—yards and yards of fabric all recycled from various old costumes found in the bottom of Trina's trunk."

"No, we're off exploring for a possible transmat device just outside of town," John said, grinning. "We've got much more important things to do than making sure purple paint isn't mistaken for blue."

"Oh." Jessie nodded slowly and lightly squeezed my shoulders. "I'll let you two get on with whatever it is you need to do then." She silently mouthed beside her cupped hand, "Call me if you need help with him."

I nodded then took my charge by the elbow. "See you tomorrow, Jess. Come along now, John."

"She thinks I'm a nutter," he muttered as we approached my car. "Just because I can sense an alien presence in the vicinity and talk to animals."

"Of course she does. Plus, you're very rude at times, did you know that?"

"Rude? Me, rude?" He laughed then slid into the

passenger seat as I crawled behind the wheel. "Why, I know more about etiquette than your silly lot ever dreamed of. I've addressed queens and emperors and...very powerful blob creatures."

"No doubt. Obviously they overlooked your blunt talk because they needed your help at the time, is that it?"

"Possibly. Are you implying I was rude to them as well, but they ignored it because of extenuating circumstances?"

"You tell me." I started the engine and pulled out onto the road. "The Daleks haven't invaded Earth lately, so we silly humans prefer our alien invaders to demonstrate a few more manners, I guess."

"You still don't think the Bygons pose a serious threat, do you?"

I frowned. I didn't really know what to think. There was no convenient cliffhanger and coming attractions at the top of the hour to let me in on who or what was the real 'bad guy' in this situation.

"Well, the Bygons haven't posed a serious threat to me all these years. They've followed me around at some cons. Big deal. I've dealt with a few more obvious con stalkers in my time by simply telling them to go get a life—or to borrow one from a role-playing gamer."

"How brave of you." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his pen again. "But it doesn't make you any less rude than I am, does it?"

I bit my lip and focused on the road. The whirring sound next to me caught my attention, but I kept myself from looking over at what he was doing until

we reached a red light.

"What are you doing?" The question virtually burst from me before I could take a deep breath and regroup my curiosity.

"I'm fine-tuning the calibration on this thing. We probably overlooked something obvious before because it wasn't set to pick up refined time particles. There." He slipped the device back into his pocket.

"Handy pen. Does it have free nights and weekends long distance calling, too?"

"Ha, ha," he deadpanned with an arched eyebrow. "It's not necessary. I just point it at a conventional phone and *zap*! The line is hooked up to a communications satellite with no charges." He grinned as he demonstrated his technique. "Several phone companies don't like me for some reason."

"I can imagine. Rudeness and stealing services aren't the most admirable qualities in a sci-fi hero."

He frowned. "Can't be helped sometimes. I do whatever it takes, whatever is expedient. It's not a personality contest. It's the struggle of good versus evil."

"Or between the lesser of two evils?" I sniggered.

He shrugged. "Occasionally. It's a far-from-perfect universe."

I turned the car down the semi-rural lane into the wooded area and parked not far from where we'd witnessed the disappearance of the black SUV. We got out and surveyed the road.

"Here you go. It looks the same as yesterday." I pulled off my sunglasses and squatted down to examine the ground. "No new marks on the

pavement as far as I can tell."

John whipped out the 'pen' from his pocket and switched it on. Pointing the bright blue tip at ground, he slowly panned the thin beam across the edge of the road. Suddenly he came to a halt and lowered the pen.

"Hello, hello...What's this, then?"

My gaze immediately zeroed in on a metallic box, the size and shape of a toaster that had materialized out of nowhere. I ran over and knelt down, but thought twice about touching it. "Where did that come from?"

"From another time." His tone registered neither surprise nor fear. "It's how they transported out of here. They simply lined up this transmat device with one on the axle of their vehicle and—ta da! Instant teleportation."

"But it remains invisible until you pass the beam over it. How does it do that?"

"A phased chronometer relay makes it invisible in this time." He pointed the blue beam at the box once again, and it slowly disappeared from view. "Clever use of stolen technology, I might add."

I stood and folded my arms across my chest. "Hmm, do all aliens bend the law to suit their purposes?"

"Like I said before, it's a far-from-perfect universe." He frowned at the spot where the device stood. "Get used to the idea."

"I am. It's certainly been far-from-perfect most of my life."

I crossed to his side and reached for his so-called

pen. He jerked it away the millisecond before I could grab it. "Hey, I've seen that gadget of yours at work up close now. Can't I even touch it?"

He shook his head and stuck out his lower lip in a Tom Baker pout. "No. It's only for use by grown-up aliens."

"Great." I sighed. "So now what do we do? Blow this transmat up so they can't transport again to earth from the mother ship?"

"That's assuming they're still up there." His light-hearted tone turned grim. "They could have teleported down earlier today or have several other vehicles in the area similarly outfitted with transmat devices. They could have millions of these devices throughout the world. Destroying this one won't necessarily stop whatever it is they're up to."

"So we just sit here and wait for them to make the next move, huh?"

He tapped a finger to his lower lip and paced back and forth for several moments. Suddenly he stopped and grabbed my hand and pulled me close, facing him. "Stand right here, Cici. That should work. Perfect." He switched on his whirring pen again and pointed it at the invisible transmat device.

"What are you doing?" A shimmer of light engulfed us, circling us in a ripple of rainbow colors and increasing brightness. "What's happening?"

"There's really only one way to find out what's going on with the Bygons."

The colors and lights intensified tenfold. An odd vibration began at the soles of my feet and worked its way up my body, shaking me until I could barely

breathe. John's eyes blazed with a madman's glee. He grinned like the underfed feline that swallowed the four-hundred-pound canary. The world about us flickered and blurred, then faded away. "You want to know what's happening? We're going to ask them."

* * * * *

I don't know when I began screaming, but my ears throbbed from my shrieks upon our arrival on a dark, featureless plain. I clapped my mouth shut and simply stared at John Smith, the man...alien...sentient being who had made the unthinkable possible, the undoable doable and in the process, had taken me to where I'd always wanted to go.

"Look up," he said calmly.

I did. A million stars stabbed my eyes from a sea of the blackest velvet. A billion times better than staring through my souped-up telescope...A trillion times better than downloading pictures from the Hubble Space Telescope from the Internet.

I was actually here!

"Like what you see?" He chuckled at my thunderstruck response. "Fancy the Bygons placing their teleportation deck where they keep their observatory."

He strolled toward what appeared to be a console and flipped a couple of switches. Low-level lightning came on about the walls and a hum of machinery filled the emptiness of the circular chamber. Dumbfounded, I continued to gaze up through the huge skylight window.

"Cici? You okay?"

I pointed upward. "Stars. Lots of them."

"Eloquently put." He came over to my side and looked up. "You may or may not recognize any of the constellations, but try not to worry. I'll sort it out."

"So many...stars." I had to close my mouth to keep from drooling.

"Uh, yes." He frowned. "It appears I've made bit of a miscalculation. We're not in Earth's orbit. We're not on a spaceship, either."

I gasped. My knees turned to Jell-O. The piercing lights above began to swirl about me. I could feel my breakfast rising as a wave of nausea swept over me.

"Cici? You've lost a bit of color." John caught me by the elbow and lowered me slowly to the deck. My head fell into my hands.

"Where...are we?"

"A planet somewhere to the south and west of St. Louis by several million light years, I estimate." He stood and shrugged. "Not too far off the beaten path."

"Not too far off?" My brain switched back on and things began to sort themselves out internally. "We're several million light years away from Earth, and you considered that 'close'?"

"It's all relative—ask my friend Albert. That's what he said." He offered me a hand, and I shakily regained my feet. "Anyway, we can go back the way we came, so we might as well avail ourselves of a tour of this curious facility."

"Where is everyone? I thought we'd run into the ghostly geeks with the shades."

"So did I. Maybe it's their tea time or something.

Come along. Let's explore."

I gripped his upper arm with both my hands and all the force of a car crusher. He looked askance at me. "Sorry," I said. "I don't want to get lost, and I don't want us to get separated. Nasty things tend to happen when the Doctor's companions go wandering off by themselves."

"Don't worry. I won't wander far, Cici. But I do need some circulation in my extremities or else they'll fall off." I unfastened one of my death holds on his arm. "That's better." He patted my remaining hand. "It's for the best, right? I don't think there's anything to fear with leaving the Doctor's side. It's just a part of the process of —"

A door where there hadn't been one previous silently slid open before us. A short, roundish humanoid silhouette stood in front of a blinding glare emanating from behind him.

"You are here," the silhouette said in mechanical tones. "Humans do not yet have technology capable of teleportation. Explain."

John sniffed. "It's simple, really. I'm not human, and we borrowed one of your transmat devices."

The silhouette ignored him and focused its attention on me. "You are here. At last."

"You've been expecting me and not him?" I narrowed my eyes so I could make out the figure in the doorway. A chill zinged along my spine. Somehow I recognized the voice behind the electronic enhancement. "Have we met before?"

There was a pause while our host re-modulated his speaking device. Suddenly, he sounded halfway

human. "Yes, we have met at Archon, conventions twenty-seven through thirty. I dressed as an Ewok, a Ferengi merchant, a Yeti and a Hobbit. You told me that my costuming skills were quite impressive." He bowed low. "You are my favorite guest."

"Guest? Me?" I laughed. "I think you've got it backward. I was a fan at the con—not a guest. I volunteer on several committees, but I'm not a media guest or published author or anything like that."

"But you attend many of these cons...I see you there."

I smiled then turned to my traveling companion. "This is way too weird. I'm on an alien world trillions of miles from Earth, and I run into some geek I met at Archon a few times. What are the odds of that happening?"

"Not as great as you may think. Not when there's a teleportation machine available." Squinting, John took a step toward the door. "How many transmat devices do you have on the human home planet?"

Ignoring John's question, my fellow fan turned and addressed me. "Will you attend Archon in another solar cycle?"

"Sure thing." I narrowed my gaze and frowned. "But will you be attending with your white faced buddies in the black sweat suits and mirror shades?"

Our host squinted through his bifocals and furrowed his brow. "I do not understand. I have no 'buddies'. I am alone."

I sighed. I should have figured this one out. Our alien host was living in the equivalent of his parents' basement, no doubt. A first-rate, interstellar fanboy!

"Alone?" John took another step toward the door. The silhouette cowered. Yep, that proved he was your typical loner geek. "Why have the Bygons been using your transmat device then?"

"The Bygons!" he roared. "They have been after my collection for millennia!"

"A rival faction?" John grinned and rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Now it's starting to make sense. What exactly do you collect? Weapons? Rare art? Jelly Babies?"

"Action figures."

I blinked. Slowly, my eyes were adjusting to the luminance. A pasty, alien geek wearing the equivalent of Coke-bottle lenses blinked back. "You mean you collect action figures like *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* figures?" I asked.

"No, I collect action figures," the geek said, stepping into the room. "I collect action figures like *you*. You both will make excellent additions to my collection."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Aliens of Saint Louis

*I*n ‘Aliens of London’, we actually see an example of ‘pigs in space’ when a genetically altered porker crashes a spaceship into Big Ben. It’s all a ploy to distract the stupid humans, of course, as the real aliens have already killed and assumed the identities of various officials in the British government and are waiting to launch their evil plan unbeknown to the public.

So how come nobody can tell the alien government officials from the real thing? I suppose the scriptwriter is making a blatant comment on how uninformed the electorates of most Western democracies truly are.

Or it could mean we’re all too busy watching Doctor Who episodes and could care less who is in power. That’s probably it.

I took a step backward. I don’t know what exactly I observed in this short, nerdy alien, but I definitely sensed he was more dangerous than he appeared.

“Ha, ha—good one,” I said, taking another step back. “You’re quite funny. You sure you don’t collect jokes?”

I could make out our host’s face now. Pale, pimply in a rather unusual way—his pinkish zits seemed to

form a grid. His greasy black hair hung limply to what I assumed were his shoulders, humpbacked as he was, poor guy. Obviously he'd spent too many hours in front of his Playstation or Xbox. He pushed his heavy, round horn-rimmed spectacles up his piggish nose and wiped his sweaty free hand on his filthy blue jeans and faded Archon T-shirt.

"I wouldn't tease him too much if I were you," John said from the side of his mouth. "He's pointing a zap gun at us."

"A zap gun—what's that? Something like Rick's laser rifle? All lights and pops and whiz-bangs?" His weapon looked like a child's water pistol to me.

"No, it's more like one zap, and you're instantly frozen—ready to be placed in my collection," our host replied, smiling. "Now if you would be so kind to come this way. I'll prepare you both for my collection."

"After you," John motioned with a grand gesture towards me, "since you obviously are the most desired collectable."

"Gee, thanks." I scowled at him and held my ground. "Aren't we going to attempt an escape or something?"

"Stop talking and get moving!" our host roared. He waved his weapon about, trying to act tough, but I wasn't totally convinced he'd use it. "I haven't got all day. I've got to move my receptor dish so I can download another episode of *Battlestar Galactica*."

"The new or the old series?" I asked.

"There's a *new* series?" His beady black eyes glowed with fannish anticipation. "Is it any good?"

"It's lot better than the old," I assured him. "It's aimed at adults."

John picked up on my cue to engage him in conversation and began to distract him as well. "Adults? Our host here is much too young to enjoy it, then. He can't be much over four hundred years old."

"I'm four hundred and twenty," the alien protested. "I'm not a child."

"Yes, but emotionally it's far too gritty for someone of your obvious sensitivities. Right, Cici?"

"Right." I shook my head solemnly as if we were discussing some school of ancient philosophy. "You've got to be at least...five hundred to understand its subtle nuances. I'm afraid you – what's your name by the way?"

"Alfin. But my friends call me Alf."

"Alf the alien?" *Alf* was not one of my favorite situation comedies. I tried not to laugh, but I couldn't keep a grin from curling up the corner of my lips. "Well, *Alf*, I'm afraid you probably would miss out on a lot of the best parts unless you had an older friend to sit down and watch it with you."

He lowered the zap gun and wailed, "But I don't know anyone older than four hundred and thirty!"

"Now you do, Alf my boy." John waltzed to his side and easily pocketed the weapon. "I'm over nine hundred."

"What about her?" Alf nodded toward me. "Is she old enough, or should I go ahead and freeze her for my collection?"

"I'm older than dirt," I said. "My nephews and nieces tell me that every time they see me."

"See? She's even older than I am." John grinned and took the fanboy by the arm. "Come on now. Let's work on your receptor dish and see if we can't help you download some choice viewing material, and you can tell us more about your collection."

For my first time off world, I can honestly say I was underwhelmed. Alfin's home didn't possess thousands of flashing and blinking Christmas tree lights atop of endless consoles. He did own a fairly decent high-definition television screen in which he could watch his favorite shows gathered from all around the galaxy along with a very comfortable conversation pit full of pillows and low-to-the-ground, tilt-back chairs. His décor included several original classic sci-fi B-movie posters—some I even recognized—and in one corner a very nice replica of the Doctor's TARDIS Police Call Box—a BBC original, no doubt.

As I scanned the room, John acted the perfect guest—chatting and arguing about the pros and cons of a variety of alien sci-fi shows, as if he'd watched every episode himself.

"I still say nothing beats classic *Stel Truk*," John replied, gesturing at the screen with his pen device. "They can recycle and rename it all they like, but nothing will ever beat Captain Krunk and Mr. Spod."

I giggled and shook my head. "Uh, yeah, right! It sounds like a rip-off of *Star Trek*."

"Who says Gene Roddenberry didn't rip it off?" John grinned. "How long has *Stel Truk* been on the airwaves, Alf?"

"Forty thousand solar cycles." The pimply-faced

geek popped another handful of what appeared to be popcorn—but tasted more like fish scales to me—into his mouth. “It is the first and the best of all the science fiction series ever produced.”

“I stand corrected.” I took a long look around at the smooth, gray metallic walls that surrounded his awesome home theatre system. “Where is your fan figurine collection, by the way, Alf?”

“All around.” He picked up a remote device and clicked it once. Instantly the walls dissolved.

“Oh, my God ...” I covered my gaping mouth with both hands. Lifeless faces, oddly posed arms and legs splayed akimbo, pleading, terrified eyes frozen in time stared back at me. “They’re...they’re really people and...other things.” I closed my eyes and clutched at my stomach. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

John wrinkled his nose and scratched his head thoughtfully. “Quite a collection you’ve got here, Alfin.”

Alf grinned. “Thanks. I’ve been collecting figures since I was two hundred.”

“And it shows, it shows.” John stood and pointed his shiny pen at our host. “But now’s the time to call it quits, eh?”

Our host frowned; his shoulders slumped dejectedly. “Do I have to?”

John gave him a piercing look like a teacher disciplining a stubborn student. “Yes, you do. I assume they were all quick frozen?” Alf nodded. “Good. You can quick thaw them and send them back where you got them then.”

"Yeah, sure. But some of them have been gone from their home worlds for some time now. Is it a good idea to send them back after their generation of beings have long since become extinct?"

"You got me there." John scratched his head again. "I suppose I can help you with getting them all home to their exact points of origin. Give me a few days, and I'll return and help you with the repatriation. Deal?"

Alf shrugged and gave up a mechanical-sounding sigh. "Oh, all right. Deal."

I flopped back down on the pillowy sofa. I had almost become a part of Alf's collection just because I was a dedicated sci-fi fan who attended cons regularly. The horror of it all! I shivered. The idea couldn't bear much contemplation.

"Cici? You feeling well?" John actually sounded concerned. "You look about as blue as Mr. Spod in the center case."

"I almost was turned as blue as Mr. Spock—I mean Spod. I think I'm going to be sick."

Alf jumped to his wide, flat feet. "Oooo—not in here! My parental units will execute me if I destroy the cushions with biological waste products."

"All right, I won't puke on the furniture." I rolled to my side and grimaced. "Let's go back to Earth now, John. I've seen an alien world, and it's been both all too familiar and all too frightening at the same time."

"Hasn't it, though?" He wiggled his eyebrows with a gleeful wink. "Still, we haven't quite made the Bygon connection with our pal Alfin here."

My Doctor look-alike rose and began to pace about

the conversation pit. "Why would the Bygons be using your transmat device and following Cici around—one of your potential collectables?"

"I don't know." At once, our host looked decidedly uncomfortable. "It's not like they don't have their own collections. In fact, I think Mertron—the Bygon supreme leader—has perhaps the largest figurine collection in the galaxy. Mine is distant second compared to his. He's won all kinds of awards for it. He's sure to do so again at UniCon 5001, the biggest sci-fi convention in the universe."

"Hmm, sounds like a fun con. I'll have to check it out sometime." Another icy shiver tickled my spine and my stomach lurched. I motioned toward the walls. "Could you close the doors on those poor people, please? Their stares are making me...feel worse."

Alf hit the remote button and the steel gray covers descended over his collection. "Better?"

"Yes, thanks." I sat up straighter and took a deep breath. And then it hit me. "I've got it!"

"I sure hope whatever it is it isn't catching." Alf whipped a rather soiled handkerchief from his back pocket and blew his nose. "I just got over an interstellar cold. I have asthma, too."

"You should try Echinacea and vitamin C. Or better yet, a good hot cup of tea with all those free radicals. Great for your sinuses." John grinned at me. "Now, Cici, what's your idea?"

"The Bygon leader could be worried Alf's collection might rival his one day soon. Maybe that's why he's sent his henchmen to follow me around the

con circuit over the years...He's keeping tabs on what people—figurines, I mean—Alf the alien here has collected or might collect."

John shook his head in that high and mighty manner of his. Instantly I was reminded of the fifth Doctor who tended to talk down to his young companions. "Excellent bit of logic, but I'm afraid you're wrong."

"Wrong?" I glared at him. "But it's the most obvious explanation."

"And that's where it falls down." He stopped pacing, sat beside our host and leaned in close. "There's more to your rivalry with the bigwig Bygon than just a bit of fanboy jealousy, isn't there?"

Alf looked decidedly uneasy. "What do you mean?"

"This Mertron wants something else of yours, something very rare and precious..." John turned, spying at me from the corner of his eye. "Something even more rare and precious than Cici Connors."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Alf started to stand, but my companion pushed him back in his seat.

"I think you do." John's quiet tone meant business. Alf pushed his glasses up his snubbed nose, cowering as John reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved the silver pen. He switched it on, pointed the blue light toward the alien's forehead and stared deeply into his eyes. "Are you going to talk, or will I have to force it out of you?"

"All right, all right! I'll tell you." Alf threw up his hands in surrender. Sweat ran in thin rivulets down

his pimply face. I really felt for the guy. I knew what it was like to have someone walking around in your thoughts. It wasn't all that pleasant at times. "The plan was all Mertron's idea. He made me do it."

John switched off the whirring device and slipped it back into his coat pocket. "There, that was easy. Now, what did Mertron make you do, exactly?"

"He made me give his soldiers the transmat devices I set up to visit Earth cons and directions on how they could blend into Earth society."

"Ha! Great directions!" I snorted, folding my arms across my chest. "Next time, I'd tell them to lay off the heavy mime makeup and can the jogging suits. They look more like a bunch of cultists overdosed on sun block than everyday people."

John looked pointedly at me, indicating that I should keep silent. "For what purpose did Mertron want his soldiers to 'blend in'?" he asked our host.

Alf shrugged. "I don't know. I assumed he wanted to invade the planet—you know, take all the natural resources and scrap it eventually. Funny thing is, he's never made a move to do anything remotely like that. I don't think those were ever his intentions, but I can't prove otherwise."

Alien invasion? It sounded...it sounded too much like a *Doctor Who* script!

"Why not hire the Daleks or the Sontarans or the Cybermen or someone equally nasty if he's hell bent on invading Earth?" I asked.

John and Alf both frowned and sadly shook their heads at me.

"Because we're talking about a real alien invasion

of Earth, Cici,” John explained in an irritatingly condescending tone, “not a fictional one. And I have to agree with good ol’ Alf’s assessment. Mertron could have easily invaded and taken over the planet years ago if he wanted. Instead, he’s sent hirelings to follow you and Alf around seemingly harmless science fiction fan gatherings. Hmm...” He stood and paced again.

“But they’re not all that harmless,” I insisted. “Alf was going to freeze me for his collection because he’s met me a few times at a con.”

John immediately stopped pacing. “Good point.” He spun on his heels and stared at our host. “How does Mertron go about collecting his ‘figures’? Does he let his henchmen do it for him?”

“Nah, he does it himself as far as I know, although...” Alf scratched his flabby chin and chewed his bottom lip. “I shot some holo-images of the last con we both attended. We sort of had a nasty run-in.”

“You fight over who was going to quick freeze the guest of honor?” I said, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

The alien nodded. “Yeah, that’s the gist of it. Let me get the disk and show you.”

Alf hit another button on his remote and instantly a large black cube rose up from beneath the pillows at his feet. Another flick of a button opened a small panel revealing a mixture of contents—yellowing comic books in plastic sleeves, an ancient Betamax tape of the first *Star Trek* movie, and several autographed photos of what I could only determine to be alien sci-fi stars.

"I kept this copy in a safe place just in case I ever needed anything on Mertron. You two promise not to tell anyone where I hide my safe box?"

"Never." John touched his finger to his lips.

"Your secret is safe with us," I assured him.

"All right. Here goes." Alf pulled out an iPod type of device from his jeans pocket and slipped the quarter-sized disk into it. Immediately a three-dimensional scene sprang to life in front of our eyes.

"Alfin Bedsor, I should have expected to see you here," a corpulent, sallow-faced bi-pedal bugged-eyed monster I assumed was Mertron bellowed. "Your puny, so-called collection is about to become punier still."

In the image our host took a big step back and bumped into one of the pasty Bygon henchmen—minus the shades and black tracksuit. "Oh, excuse me. Mr. Mertron, I...I figured what harm could it do to attend this one lousy con? After all, I've kept my end of the bargain, and—"

"Silence! You're not to speak of our arrangement in public." Evil green eyes stared the alien adolescent into acquiescence. "Understood?"

"Yes, Mr. Mertron."

Alf turned to leave the scene, but as he did so, a henchman deliberately bumped into him and slapped him hard on the back.

"Watch it, pipsqueak. If we ever run into you again..." The thug's growl and snarl made his meaning obvious.

"Yes, sir." Alf nodded and slowly backed away. A few feet later he turned around, revealing a greenish-

gold glowing patch predominately displayed on his hump.

"Pause the holo-image there," John ordered. "What exactly did the Bygon slap on your shoulder, Alf?"

"I don't know. I never noticed that bit before." He hit another button on the mini-image projector and zeroed in on his shoulders.

"It looks like iridescent paint of some kind," I said. "Why would they want to mark him with paint?"

John frowned. "Advance the image a couple of frames. Slowly, slowly – there. Did you see that?"

"I don't see anything. Has he ruined my favorite con shirt?" Alf whined.

"Not exactly. It's been absorbed through your clothes and possibly into your skin." John grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him to his feet. "Off with your shirt. I need to examine you." He winked. "No worries – I'm a doctor, after all."

Alf cringed and turned his face away. "Does she have to be in the room? I've...never been undressed in from of a female of any species before."

"No doubt. Cici, do you mind?" John raised an eyebrow and motioned toward the exit. "It'll only take a moment."

"I'm out of here." I stood and headed to the transmat area. If I hadn't already been grossed out by our pimply-faced host's disgusting habit of sniffing and slurping constantly, I'm sure seeing him half-dressed would have reawakened my churning stomach.

I strolled into the tall chamber and stared up at the starry sky. So dark, so large, so endless... How I

longed to return to college and study astronomy! Enjoying science fiction and fantasy books, films and television shows weren't enough anymore. I desired to see more of the cosmos first hand.

I'd always wanted to travel with the fictional Doctor, but reality was better yet. I had traveled with a real live space traveler in the guise of John Smith. Perhaps I could sign on to his crew and do so again?

The real question was, would he even consider taking me?

"Cici, you can come back in the room now."

I turned and followed my dour-faced lover back into Alf's home theatre room. "What is it?"

John pulled out his pen and gave me a quick once over. "Think carefully—your life may very well depend on your answer. Have you ever touched Alf before today?"

"Touched him?" I wrinkled up my nose in disgust and stuck out my tongue. "Ew! Not deliberately. But I may have helped him get into costume backstage for the masquerade once or twice. Why do you ask?"

John ran the blue beam of the pen over my hands. The same greenish-gold that had glowed on Alf's hump blazed to life on my palms. I gasped. "What is it?"

"It's why the Bygons have been following you around all these years." He clicked off his instrument and pocketed it. "You're a walking marker of sorts. Mertron has been using you both to track down others."

"Others?"

"Others like you. Figurines for his collection. This

'glow' is sort of a tracking device. Anyone you've ever touched since you last touched Alf will sport traces of it as well."

"But I've touched probably hundreds of people since the last Archon masquerade I worked. Oh, my God..." I slowly sank to the floor cushions. "I've touched the entire cast and crew of Sammy's movie."

John nodded. "That's what I thought. Mertron is a patient sort. He has been waiting for a critical mass to teleport. He's been watching you carefully for an opportune time when you are all together in one place and then he'll take the whole lot of you at once for his collection."

My throat constricted. I couldn't breathe—I couldn't scream. I stared at him in horror. "M-Mertron's going to kidnap the entire group? He wouldn't do anything that rash—would he? Wouldn't people notice we were missing?"

"Your employer might wonder why you didn't show up for work on Monday perhaps." John shrugged. "You can imagine all the fun the UFO conspiracy theorists will have with this one."

"No doubt!" Alf chuckled. "It'll be cool visiting your planet after you've all been mass abducted. Everyone will be talking about it at the cons."

"You forget you're marked like I am," I spat at him. "Mertron will drag you in and freeze you as well as us."

"What for? I'm not a famous science fiction figure from either Earth or anywhere in the galaxy. I'm just a collector, like he is."

I stood and stared him down. "Can you think of a

better way to eliminate the competition for good?"

"Oh." Alf slumped. "I guess I'm sort of famous at cons for my great figurine collection. I could understand why a collector would want to collect me. To be in Mertron's collection..." His face brightened. "What an honor!"

"Wonderful—he actually wants to be frozen and displayed like a butterfly." I frowned at my traveling companion who stood scratching his chin, deep in thought. "John?"

"Butterflies aren't frozen," he murmured. "It would damage their delicate membranes."

I exhaled a long sigh. "Yeah, right. Okay, you got any ideas on how to wash this glow-in-the-dark paint off? I assume soap and water won't do the trick. Is there some kind of chemical we could splash on that would negate its affect? John? John?"

Talk about rude and insensitive! My alien lover strode from the room and toward the transmat chamber.

"Wait up!" I ran after him. Alf followed suit, huffing and puffing.

"What's with him?" our host said, panting. "He seems quite adept at tuning out others."

"He does, doesn't he? I find it irritating at times."

Suddenly John stopped in front of a closed door. "Is this your cleaning cupboard by chance, Alf?"

"I think so. Only my maternal unit has ever opened it. I'm not much into cleaning up after myself."

A spoiled virgin fanboy living in his parent's basement who has never cleaned up after himself in his life...I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Where

had I run into that sort before?

"Open it," John said, nodding toward the door.

Alf pressed a button on his remote device. Nothing happen. "Strange. I was sure that would open it." He tried another button and then another. "Hmm. Maternal Unit must have locked it so I wouldn't get into any nasty chemicals. Thoughtful of her."

"Or she's in on Mertron's scheme." John pulled out his pen and switched it on. "Sorry if this scratches the paint a little, but it can't be helped."

Pointing the device at the door's edge, a spark instantly appeared and short-circuited the electronic lock. As the smoke cleared, the cupboard door slid noiselessly open. John sorted through the various containers.

"Window cleaner, floor wax, furniture polish..."

He blithely tossed the bottles and boxes over his shoulder. Alf scrambled to catch each before they crashed on the deck.

"More window cleaner, aluminum polish, rat poison—rat poison?" John frowned and looked at the package again. "You get many rats this far into space, Alf?"

"You'd be surprised. I ordered a crate of comic books from Ceti Alpha that was just full of the suckers. Ma-Unit screamed her head off for weeks afterwards whenever she glimpsed something moving in a dark corner."

I cringed. "I totally sympathize. I hate rodents, too. Where's your mother now, Alf?"

"Mother? Oh, Maternal Unit went on holiday to her sibling's dwelling on the dark side of the planet.

She'd had enough of all the comings and goings here with the Bygons recently. Too much for her nerves, she said."

"I can imagine." John tossed the box to Alf and squatted to begin searching the next shelf. "Shoe cleaner, upholstery stain remover, more window cleaner...Hello!" He paused and grinned. "I think I've found it."

I knelt to his level. "What? Mouse traps?"

"Better. It's a Bygon trap."

"A trap that size wouldn't fit into the cupboard," Alf said.

"But this would." He pulled out a small blue bottle of liquid and shook it above his head. "Anti-freezing solution."

"Anti-freezing solution?" I stared at the vial. It seemed very ordinary and very little of whatever it was to unfreeze more than my little pinky. "Do you pour this on those poor frozen people in the other room and they're instantly thawed?"

"No, this is the antidote for the person doing the freezing in case he accidentally gets quick frozen while working on his frozen collection. Sort of like Syrup of Ipecac. It prevents an overdose and freezing by purging the quick freeze chemicals out of your system."

"Oh, I remember where that came from now," Alf said. "I froze my arm by mistake once while preparing a figurine for my collection. Ma-Unit teleported to the chemists and came back with that to unthaw me before it spread. I'm lucky to be alive. Ma-Unit's quick thinking saved me."

"Very touching." John pocketed the blue bottle and stood. "Now, we best be on our way. All we have to do is get all of Cici's friends to drink a little of the solution and then they're protected against Mertron's freezing them."

"How is that tiny bottle going to protect so many people?" I wondered.

"It's concentrated. We pour it into a vat of lemonade or beer or what-have-you and everyone is protected. I'm sure there's enough in here to prevent an army from freezing for centuries if necessary."

I scratched my head. I had my doubts. "But wouldn't that force Mertron to kidnap us unfrozen?"

"Nah, that won't happen." John wrinkled his nose at me. "I sincerely doubt he wants to start a zoo, so he'll be forced to leave everyone as they are."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," Alf murmured. "Mertron lives in a huge complex, and he could start a different kind of figurine collection—a live collection."

I shivered. "Oh, that's nice to know." I turned to John. "Any way to stop Mertron from becoming a zookeeper?"

"Hmmm..." He tilted his head and thought a moment. "I'll work on that angle later. Alf, you stay put for a while. Keep a low profile and stay away from Mertron and his gang."

"What if they come looking for me?" The alien fanboy's voice rose practically an octave in fear. "After all, they've been using my transmat device."

"You switch the transmat off after we've teleported, okay?"

"I suppose so." Alf slumped and sighed. "I always miss out on all the fun."

"Sorry, can't be helped." John headed toward the transmat chamber. "We've got to get back now and make sure everyone Cici has ever touched is protected for his or her own good."

I followed closely behind him. "Everyone? Does it have to be everyone?"

He stopped, turned and flashed a wicked grin at me. "All right, not everyone. We'll skip your ex-husbands."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Gloom Day

'Doomsday' makes me cry. The Doctor loses his companion Rose. Forever. She's not dead, but there is a big blank wall and beyond it a dark void between parallel universes. There is no way for them to reach each other.

It is a fate worse than death to be separated from that special someone you love dearly and to know you'll never see him or her ever again.

What more can I say?

I should have known something unusual dealing with time and space and warp fields and whatever was going to happen the second I stepped into that transmat beam. Didn't something always go wrong for the Doctor when it came to time travel? Why should it be any different for the mysterious John Smith?

"How odd. It's so dark and gloomy," I noted after we dematerialized. "What time is it?"

He shrugged. "How should I know? You're the one wearing a watch."

I checked it. "We've only been gone about two hours all together. Why isn't it daylight still?" We walked toward the car. "Could we have jumped

forward in time when we climbed into that beam?"

"Probably, but only by a few hours at most. We can start bright and early tomorrow inoculating your associates. It will give me some time to figure out the proper ratio of anti-freezing solution to...beverage. And you can figure out a way to get everyone to drink it."

I crawled behind the wheel and started the engine with a sigh. "Why don't we try the Jonestown Kool-Aid bit? We tell everyone that to become a part of our cult, they need to ingest a little poison first."

John stared at me as if I'd totally lost my mind. I had actually, but there was no need to frighten him that way. "I'm joking," I reassured him as I pulled the car onto the road. "Can we pour the stuff into a water cooler? Most people will drink water with little or no prodding."

"I don't know if this will mix well with water." He opened the small bottle, shook a miniscule amount onto his tongue and promptly began to cough. "Blech! It's not going to mix well with anything except possibly gin or vodka. That won't be of much help to those who don't imbibe."

"No kidding. We've got way too many young kids in the cast and crew. We don't want to get their parents on our case. You sure the taste would be noticeable in water?"

"Believe me, a milligram would be noticeable in a metric ton of rocky road ice cream—the good kind, no less." He stuck out his tongue over and over again. "Ugh. It lingers on the taste buds, too. Could stand a little salt."

"Salt?" That gave me an idea. I turned onto the highway to take a short cut home. "Maybe the solution would blend in with food better than liquid?"

"Possibly. Any ideas?"

"Well, it would have to be something that would appeal to the vast majority in these parts. Not everyone can eat sweets, but most people will eat junk food like French fries and peanuts and...I got it." I grinned. "I know the one food everyone in our cast and crew will at least sample if I ask nicely."

He kicked back in his seat and wiggled his eyebrows at me. "What's that? Your famous whipped cream and popcorn dessert?"

I laughed. "No, better than that. I hope I've got enough ingredients on hand to whip up a batch tonight to test it out."

The kitchen clock read eight-thirty when we arrived at my apartment. If I could start in on my recipe, I should have enough homemade pretzels made for everyone to sample at the shoot tomorrow. Then I could go to the store for more supplies on Friday in order to make a huge batch for all the extras in Saturday's scenes filmed in Forest Park.

The flashing light on the answering machine drew my attention. I hit the playback button and was surprised to hear Jessie's worried voice scolding me.

"Where are you two?" she said. "We've been waiting for hours. Are you all right? Milo's shot all the scenes in the Grapenoss embassy that don't involve the Doctor directly, but if you're not here tomorrow he's going to have to find a substitute

actor...Sort of like Ed Wood using his chiropractor in a cape for Bela Lugosi in *Plan Nine from Outer Space*. Give me a call on my cell when you get this message. 'Bye.'

"That doesn't make any sense," I mumbled. I picked up the receiver and dialed Jessie's number. It rang repeatedly, but there was no answer. I hung up and crossed my arms tightly about myself. A chill of foreboding washed over me. "Weird."

John wandered back inside from the balcony where he'd been checking the view through my telescope again. He doffed his jacket and laid it on the edge of the couch. "What's weird?"

"Jessie called and said we'd missed the shoot for tomorrow. I don't get it. Today's Wednesday, right?"

"Is it? What's your telly say?"

I walked over to the sofa and picked up the TV remote. I switched it on and surfed over to one of the all news station. I dropped both the remote and my jaw as the date flashed on the screen. "Oh, my God..."

"What?" He stared at the screen and shrugged. "Ah, well. It happens."

I could feel the blood draining from my face. My knees gave way and I sat down. "It says it's Thursday night. We've lost an entire day."

"Only a day—that's good." John plopped down on the couch beside me. "If it had been a month or a year, we might have returned to find all your friends frozen already."

"Good? *Good?*" My voice went up the scale and red-face anger flooded my cheeks. "How can you say

it's good? We lost a day—a whole, stinking day. No wonder Jessie sounded frantic. How are we going to explain our absence?"

He pulled the vial of anti-freezing solution out of his jacket pocket and twirled it slowly about his fingers. "Hmm, we could tell them we had to leave the planet to do some drug running, I suppose."

My sense of humor definitely didn't follow along. "I don't think so. If we tell them they're all under threat by a big, bugged-eyed, pale-faced monster who wants to freeze them for his collection, they'll lock us both up. No, honesty is *not* the best policy in this situation." I rubbed my temples and thought hard. "All right, this is what we'll do. We'll tell everyone we went away somewhere late Wednesday afternoon, and we were having such a good time that we lost track of what day it was."

"I think they'd believe the drug running story over something as weak as that scenario." He narrowed his eyes and looked askance at me. "Where could we have gone that we wouldn't have known that an entire twenty-four hours had passed without us being aware of it?"

I bit my lip and closed my eyes. What kind of places had I visited before where I didn't realize the passage of time? Where had I stayed up all night and didn't realize it until the next day?

"The casino!" I cried. "It's the perfect alibi. We could tell them that we hit one of the riverboat casinos and were on such a roll that we just couldn't stop gambling."

"Are the riverboat casinos open twenty-four

hours?"

"Well...no, I don't think they are on weekdays." I sighed. "Only the casinos in Vegas stay open like that."

"There you go then." He stood and wandered over to the kitchen, twirling the solution vial in his fingers as he went. "We say we went to Las Vegas to gamble and lost track of time. Makes perfect sense."

"Not really. It's a three-hour flight from here to there. Why on earth would we spend money on an airplane trip of that length to gamble for less than twenty-four hours?"

He grabbed a plastic water pitcher from the cupboard, uncorked the bottle and poured a drop into it, then filled it with water from the tap.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Seeing how much we'll have to dilute this stuff to be tolerable by human taste buds." He stuck a finger into the pitcher and twirled it around, then brought it to his lips. "Ugh! Too strong. You got any larger containers?"

"Look in the cupboard below. And you still haven't answered my question. Why would anyone go to Vegas for less than a day? It doesn't make any sense."

He popped back up holding a two-gallon water jug. "Maybe we flew out to catch a show. Doesn't Elvis still sing somewhere out there? We could tell your friends we went to see Elvis."

"Elvis?" I slapped my forehead in disgust. "How could we have gone to Vegas to see Elvis? He's probably quick frozen in Alf's action figures

collection.”

John’s big brown eyes glowed with excitement “Really? I didn’t see Elvis there, although that would explain quite a lot about his whereabouts for the last few decades. I sure hope he’s in there. I can barely wait until Alf unfreezes him if he is in there.”

I shook my head at the thought of a Frozen Elvis on a Popsicle stick.

“Ah, to see the King of Rock and Roll in action again!” John sighed. He appeared overjoyed at the thought. “You ever see the King on stage, Cici?”

“What? No, of course not. Elvis died over thirty years ago. My mother was into his early stuff and had a few of his records, but that’s about as close as I ever got to the man. Don’t tell me you attended one of his concerts.”

“I saw his very first television appearance in person, actually.” He began filling the water jug. “Terrific performance.”

“I saw it, too—in a documentary on PBS.”

He smirked. “I saw it live.”

“Impossible. You’re not that old.” I frowned. He wiggled his eyebrows at me. “Are you?”

“It isn’t polite for an alien to give his age. I don’t want to be stereotyped by your limited human standards.” He turned and poured the first pitcher’s contents into the larger water jug, stuck a finger in and tasted it again. “Blech! It’s still too strong. It has to be diluted further. Anything bigger around here?”

I thought of a snappy comeback like ‘your mouth’, but kept it to myself. “No, I’m afraid that’s it when it comes to water containers...other than the bathtub,

that is."

He lifted the water jug to his shoulder and headed for the bathroom. "The tub will do nicely."

I jumped to my feet. "Wait! Let me clean it out first. You want people to ingest that stuff—not my hair clogging the drain."

Ten minutes later the bathtub was cleared of hair, shampoo and soap residue and scrubbed with bleach cleanser to a somewhat antiseptic level of cleanliness. John then pulled the plug closed, dumped the two-gallon container of water into the tub and turned on the tap full blast.

"Ten or twenty gallons of water should do the trick," he said, sitting on the edge of the tub.

I sank to the bathroom rug and sat cross-legged. "Wonderful. But I'm afraid we're not closer to coming up with a suitable alibi for our mysterious disappearance today."

"So we can't say we flew to Vegas to see Elvis, since he's frozen according to you. What else do people do in Vegas beside gamble and watch non-dead singers?"

"Go dancing, get drunk, get mar—" I cut myself off, blushing. "Oh, no."

He frowned. "You catch something at Alf's? You look a bit pink about the gills all of a sudden."

"I'm fine." I batted his hand away as he attempted to feel my forehead for signs of fever. "We can't tell Jessie and the others we went to Vegas."

"Why not?"

"They will jump to the entirely wrong conclusion. With my track record, it's not hard to do."

"Why's that?" He pursed his lips in thought. "They'll think we went there to gamble and down a few banana daiquiris in the desert sun and lost all track of the time. Brilliant."

I stared at him. "You really don't get it, do you? You can get drunk anywhere, but you can't get married in five minutes or less except in Las Vegas."

He turned off the tap and dipped a finger in for a taste test. "Getting better." He turned on the water again. "So, what's the problem?"

"Problem? You want people to think we flew to Vegas for a quickie wedding?"

He wrinkled up his nose in his peculiar way and frowned. "No, I suppose not. I've avoided matrimony this long; I'm not about to give in now."

"Oh." His attitude didn't surprise me. Still, 'oh' was all I could say.

"And it would only cause you grief after I'm gone," he continued. "Your friends would keep asking you where I went, or what happened between us, and that wouldn't be fair to you, now would it?"

I nodded mutely. I swallowed a sigh of regret and plastered a smile on my face.

He turned off the tap and sampled the water again. "Eureka! I think it's at the perfect ratio of water to solution. There's enough anti-freeze solution here to inoculate half the planet, I would think."

"I can't possibly use that much liquid in the pretzel recipe I'm preparing. Can't you concentrate it again in its diluted form?"

"Possibly. You got a smaller container I could borrow, then?"

"Of course." I rose and went to the kitchen to start gathering ingredients together. A few moments later he came into the room and snuck up behind me.

"We could tell them we forgot to set the alarm this morning and slept in," he whispered softly into my ear.

I smiled. His childlike innocence at times intrigued me. "I sincerely doubt anyone would believe we slept an entire day away."

"It depends on what we did the night before. We could have gone out dancing and gambling and drinking and then we could have slept in, and before you know it, it was too late to go to the shoot."

"But we would have heard the phone message—Jessie's call. I would have woke up and called her back right away. She knows that. I'm a responsible person."

He slowly pulled a silk scarf out of his back pocket and dangled it in front of me. "Not if you were tied up, and I had several cans of whipped cream at my disposal. Tell Jessie we were...busy. She'll believe you and convince the others."

I turned and looked him square in the eye. "I find it difficult to lie to my friends."

He raised an eyebrow suggestively and waved the scarf in front of us. "So, we're off by a few hours..." He leaned in closer. "Is that such a crime?"

* * * * *

The whispered conversations, the pointed looks—all these I could take from my friends—but the rumors

had to be squashed—and squashed now. Who in the world had started them? As the actors readied themselves for the next scene, I picked up a hand-sized chunk of Styrofoam off the floor that had fallen off one of the pillars of the embassy set and frowned.

“Oh, dear.” Chandra accepted the piece from me with a sigh. The dark circles under her eyes indicated that she hadn’t slept in over a week. “I thought I’d glued everything back after yesterday’s fiasco. Milo practically had a hissy fit over the set problems.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Yeah. You try squishing four or five actors in large, grape-shaped costumes in a set the size of a pup tent and you see what happens.” She attempted to glue the fallen piece of column back to its original place, but it fell off again. “Darn. This set sucks.”

“It’s not that bad,” I said, smiling in a vain attempt to comfort her. “I love what you’ve done with the tapestries—nice medieval effect. It’s not your fault we can’t afford real marble columns.”

“But it should have held up a bit better. I couldn’t convince the Grapenoss that they shouldn’t bump or lean against the set pieces. I certainly could have used your people skills yesterday, Cici.”

People skills? I barely had any, but then Chandra was somewhat of a loner. “I’m sorry I wasn’t here to help.”

She leaned toward me, lowering her voice. “It’s okay. Everyone needs a break now and then. And from what Jessie hinted on the phone to me, it sounds like you had a fun time with our leading man.”

Jessie. I should have known. The more I’d stressed

to her to keep things quiet, the more she had squealed. I couldn't blame her, really. Whoever my latest victim—boyfriend—was, was pretty big news for our small group. But with my closest associates, I wanted the truth to be known. I wanted them not to laugh at me behind my back, chalking this up to yet another hilariously tragic 'Cici fling'.

"Let me tell you the real story, Chandra." I glanced furtively around Chandra's spacious warehouse-converted art studio and pulled her closer to me. "The truth is, I wasn't tied up all day yesterday covered in marmalade and whipped cream."

Chandra pouted. "Oh. You weren't?"

"No, it's just a cover story. John and I teleported to a distant world to help foil a plot that could have serious consequences for our little corner of fandom."

"Oh, yeah—that's good!" She slapped a hand over her mouth and began giggling. Her giggles all too soon turned into full-fledged, raucous laughter. "You had me going there," she managed between snorts. "Sammy's dropping by tomorrow. I can't wait to find out if that's something he'll put in his next script."

"But it's the truth. Honest to God it is. Chandra?"

I stared at her as she staggered away, laughing. Obviously, truth that is stranger than fiction wasn't believable. Then the awful realization hit me hard: I'd never convince anyone that I had indeed been transported off the planet. No one would ever believe me...

Frankly, I wasn't sure it happened myself.

Perhaps it had all been a dream—or a planted memory. Yeah, that had to be it. John had used his

psychic voodoo and that pen of his to hypnotize me again. How could I've been so blind, so foolish, so damn blonde? Grr! I hated myself for falling lock, stock and barrel for it.

"Have you seen Alf today?" John said a few minutes later as I sat by myself sorting through various lengths of cable for Bob our silent sound man.

"Alf?" Okay, maybe it wasn't a planted memory after all. "I thought you told him to stay put."

"I did. But just look at the evidence." He pulled out his device and switched it on. Suddenly the glowing mark was evident on just about every piece of the Grapenoss Embassy set.

"The bastard! He was planning on absconding with the set as well as the cast and crew."

"They are probably some of your handprints and the others, but yes, I do believe somehow Alf has been here recently as well." He scrunched up his face in thought. "Perhaps he visited here yesterday while we were lost in the transmat beam?"

"Huh?" I put down the cable I was winding and stood, hands on hips. "How could he have been here, on Earth, while we were conversing with him there— wherever there was—not on Earth?"

"Time travel, of course." John switched his device off and slipped it into his jacket pocket. "He may have popped in earlier after we left him later."

Now my head was really spinning. "You mean Alf crossed his own timeline? That's not possible, is it?"

John shrugged. "Perhaps in fiction it isn't. Everything's possible in reality, you know."

"Great." I sighed and crossed my arms. "I take that

it means we can't trust Alf to keep his word. He's probably a double agent, and he's probably feeding all the information we gave him yesterday to Mertron today – or is it tomorrow?"

"Either one or neither." John squeezed my shoulder gently and grinned. "You're very sharp, Cici Connors. You hardly trust anyone, which in this case is a very good thing."

I beamed a broad grin at him. "I'm glad my paranoia has at last proven useful. That'll show that high school counselor who told me paranoia was a 'defective coping mechanism' a thing or two."

Milo stepped back into the room at this point and grouched, "Where the hell is everybody? I told them to take a half hour break, not a two hour, four course luncheon."

"You shouldn't have told them to grab a burger box at White Castle then," I reminded him. "Do you want me to call Kevin's cell and tell them to forget your double order of onion rings?"

"No, that's not necessary. I've got you two here to help me move the TARDIS in here for the next shot."

"The TARDIS winds up at the Grapenoss Embassy?" John asked. He picked up a loose script lying on the table and flipped through it. "I don't recall reading about that happening."

"Another one of Sammy's script changes?" I asked. The better our screenwriter felt, the more convoluted his script became it seemed.

Milo nodded. "Sammy said he wanted to add a bit more Doctor action, since yesterday those scenes were fairly Doctor-less. He phoned in a few ideas that I

agreed would help bring these scenes alive."

"All right. Where did Chandra go?" I asked him.

"She's in her office on the phone with a client, I guess. She actually sells her artwork from time to time, amazingly enough."

"Don't be so cruel. You occasionally sell a comic book or two yourself."

"Flattery will get you everywhere." Milo chuckled and patted me on the back. "Come along now, Assistant Director. The TARDIS is stored in a storage room down the hall. The three of us should be able to scoot it into place. You helping, John?"

"What could be more appropriate than a purple police box in a embassy for talking grapes," John muttered, crossing his arms. "But I'm cast, not crew. It might dirty my costume."

Milo threw up his arms in disgust. "Too late. I spotted some food stains on your jacket lapels earlier. A little dust isn't going to make it any worse."

Our Doctor scowled like a prima donna. "Well, it's not going to make it any better."

"We can shift it by ourselves," I said, grabbing Milo by the elbow. "There's no use arguing with the man until he's had his tenth cup of tea of the day anyway."

Milo groaned. "Stuck-up Brit. So glad we kicked the tea habit two hundred years ago. But I certainly could stand a strong cup of coffee about now."

With a modicum of kicking, pushing and cursing, Milo and I managed to move the freshly repainted phone box prop onto the tent-like embassy set.

"There. It's blue now. You happy?" I asked John

between gasps of breath.

"It's...bluish, I suppose." He frowned and screwed up his eyes to peer at it closely. "The sign still says 'Cal Box', in case you hadn't noticed."

"Crap." Milo sighed. "I saw the paint on the shelf in the other room. Grab me a small paintbrush, Cici. I'll fix it."

"Where do I look for one?"

"How should I know? Chandra's an artist—there has to be one around here somewhere."

After several minutes of searching, I found a thin paintbrush near the paint cans. Milo piled a couple of old crates on top of each other to stand upon to reach the top of the call box. Unfortunately, it was easier said than done.

"How does that look now?" he asked John, deferring to his leading man's offended sense of taste. Our Doctor look-alike crossed his arms and tilted his head in thoughtful consideration.

"It isn't as straight as the other L," he said at last. "The whole word looks crowded."

Milo shook his head in disgust. "You think you can do any better?"

"I know I could do better, and I will. Tomorrow the TARDIS will look perfect. I promise. Right now, I've got other more important things on my mind to attend to."

"Like studying your lines?" Our director stepped down from his painting perch, frowning thoughtfully. "That doesn't seem to be a problem for you. It's like you have a photographic memory. You only have to glance at the page and you remember everything

perfectly."

John grinned. "So you're not just another pretty face, Milo. You're very observant."

The large man actually blushed. "Of course I'm observant. It comes from years of working in retail. You learn to watch people and their behaviors, and some of your behavior is..." He shrugged, then turned and winked at me. "Well, let's just say you're different than most, John Smith."

Our Doctor look-alike grinned. "Thank you. I take it as a compliment."

Good thing he took it as a flattering remark, I thought, as Milo made the infamous 'crazy' circling gesture to me as soon as John had turned his back. Fortunately the rest of the cast and crew returned at that moment to break the tension.

"Oh, no. I don't have to crawl into that dumb coffin again, do I?" Ashleigh wailed as she walked into the art studio. She wrapped her arms about herself and pouted. "It reeks. Stinks like chemicals or something."

"It smells like paint," I corrected her. "And you don't have to crawl into the TARDIS in these scenes as far as I can tell. It's just window dressing. Milo will give you your blocking."

"That's a relief." She caught John's eye across the room and waved at him. "Although squishing myself into a narrow, dark place with Tall, Handsome and Geeky isn't all that bad an idea."

I strolled over to help Bob with the microphone set up and didn't say a word. Only one more day after today our Doctor would be on his way anyway. Neither Ashleigh nor I would have a chance to squish

into a narrow, dark place with John Smith ever again.

My momentary jealousy was replaced with intense loneliness. Real life wasn't like a television program I reminded myself. All story lines weren't necessarily resolved; all characters' journeys didn't come to a happy conclusion before the end titles rolled. Things sometimes just...ended.

"Did you catch the new pages Sammy wrote?" Rick's enthusiasm caught me off guard. I turned and stared at the purple blob that was our special effects guru.

"The new pages? Oh, yeah." I shook my head. "No, actually I haven't had the chance yet. We were busy moving the TARDIS while you all went out for lunch."

"You need to read them. They're terrific. And we get to have not one, not two, but *three* explosions planned tomorrow for the outdoor exhibition scenes at Forest Park." He was practically dancing with joy. "Yes! This is going to be the best fan flick of all time!"

"Yeah, it is."

Three explosions? I bit my lip. Shit! That's not what I told the park people we'd be doing. Hopefully nobody official was planning to stand around and count them.

"Why aren't our purple people eaters in their places?" Milo shouted upon entering the set. "Kevin—stop eating and climb back into that costume. Trina—stop fiddling with your makeup. You're an evil alien, for Pete's sakes! You're not a freaking fashion model."

"But there's nothing wrong with being a well made

up, good-looking evil alien, is there?" Trina quipped, applying another layer of purple mascara. "I want to look good in my close-ups."

Rick laughed. "Yeah, we're all going to bite it tomorrow anyway, so we might as well look our best today." He picked up his prop laser rifle from the table, frowning as he turned it over in his hands. "I can't quite place it, but there's something definitely different about my gun here."

"Don't touch the safety lever!" John screamed, racing across the room to snatch the weapon from his hands. "Sorry. I modified it slightly the other day. This thing here," he lightly touched a small trigger on the side of the barrel with his pinky, "Needs to stay in the up position while we're filming. Got that?"

"This little bit here?" Rick reached for the rifle. John raised it over his head, out of the bulbous Grapenoss's reach.

"So, what happens if the safety slips?" Kevin asked, intrigued by their antics.

John carefully handed the prop back to Rick. "You all won't be around tomorrow to handle those lovely controlled explosions you have planned."

"What?" Trina flashed a horrified look at him. "It's supposed to be a toy gun. Don't say you actually loaded it with more than just tiny gunpowder caps to make a little noise."

"Of course not," our Doctor reassured her. "This weapon contains no caps whatsoever."

Trina expelled a sigh and returned to her primping. "Whew! That's a relief."

Milo pulled John by the lapel closer to himself and

lowered his voice. "All right, spill. If the rifle no longer has caps in it, what does it contain now?"

John wiggled his tongue about his teeth and grinned slowly. "A small quantity of Nitro-nine."

Milo laughed and slapped him on the back. "Oh, yeah...Ace's favorite explosive. She is my all-time favorite companion, you know. Nice touch, John."

"Thanks. I knew you'd appreciate it."

Milo gave me one of those 'Has he taken his meds today?' looks behind John's back, then yelled, "Places, everyone! Let's try to get the rest of these scenes done in one take. We all need our strength for the big shoot in the park tomorrow."

Tomorrow. The realization hit me hard. Suddenly I felt my heart leap to my throat. I fastened the mike firmly into its holder and slowly took a step back from the scene as Milo called action. Tomorrow wasn't just another day as Scarlett O'Hara had once said. Tomorrow marked the end of our film shoot—

And my relationship with John Smith.

* * * * *

Tonight, I stepped out first onto the balcony to stare up into the black velvet sky.

"Cici? You all right?"

I nodded the affirmative but didn't turn around to meet John's gaze. Odd, tonight he genuinely seemed concerned about my welfare.

"Have you looked into the telescope lately?" he asked.

I sighed. "No, I haven't. What will I see if I look

into it?"

He crossed to my side and stood very close, his hand resting on my shoulder. I felt his breath warm on my neck, sending tingles of pleasure racing along my nerves. "Hmm, I don't know. Perhaps you'll see the Milky Way...or maybe the Big Dipper."

"It's that all?" I chuckled softly and hugged my arms tightly across my middle. "After I've seen so much—from Alfin's world to the distant constellations you've shown me previously—the Big Dipper seems to be a bit of a letdown."

"It does, doesn't it?" He let his hand drop and went to the spyglass. "I suppose I could make some permanent adjustments to it so it'll have a bit stronger resolution and a larger field of vision."

He pulled out his silver pen and pointed it at the instrument. I stepped toward him and put my hand out as the whirring noise began.

"No, don't. Don't alter it, John. Leave it as it is—an ordinary telescope belonging to a very ordinary person."

Frowning, he switched off his pen and slid back it into his jacket pocket. "But you're not an ordinary person, Cici Connors. Far from it. You're exceptional. And you've seen the stars in person now. Don't you want a memento to remember them by?"

I shook my head. "No. It's too...painful."

"Painful?" He furrowed his brow as if it was an entirely foreign notion. "Why? You enjoyed the stars before I came—you can enjoy them after I've gone."

"No, I can't." I sniffed back a tear threatening to roll down my cheek. "You've ruined me."

At this statement, he practically bolted from the balcony. "Uh, I thought you said you were on...something."

"Yes, I'm on something. It's not that."

He grinned. "Thanks to the whipped cream, no doubt."

I started to hiccup as the laughter mixed with my tears. I came toward him, took both of his hands in mine and squeezed them, then let go. He gazed strangely upon my gesture, but relaxed his posture after a few moments.

"I just meant that after you've been to the heavens and back, Earth is a rather disappointing consolation prize. No one will ever believe that I've traveled in space—and time, if we count our lost day. I will continue to be 'Cici the dizzy chick with the long line of love'em and leave'em lovers'. I shouldn't really mind the stereotyping—I've diligently maintained it myself all these years."

He frowned thoughtfully at my declaration. "But it's not true, and you know it. What does it matter what the others' think? You'll know it's true that you're quite extraordinary—and you can do extraordinary things. You *will* continue to do extraordinary things."

I gave him a sad smile and shrugged. "Will I?"

He grinned. "You will. I promise."

A tear spilled onto my cheek. "But I will never have anyone extraordinary to do them with ever again, will I?"

"Don't say that, Cici Connors."

His eyes met mine as his hand on my chin lifted

my face toward his. One kiss, one gentle kiss on my lips...My eyes closed and then —

He was gone.

“What the hell?” It felt as if I’d been asleep for a thousand years — on my feet, no less.

He’d been walking about in my mind! My blood boiled that he’d do something like that to me again. I thought I had become immune to his psychic charms, but I hadn’t. How long had it been since he kissed me and left?

I raced into the apartment and looked at the clock above the sink. Only a few minutes had past as far as I could tell, but there was no trace of him anywhere. Oh, no...What would I tell the others? We had one more day of our filming. Sammy’s masterpiece ruined...

And then I spied a hastily scribbled note on the kitchen table beside a half-eaten bowl of still-warm popcorn:

Cici —

Get the anti-freeze antidote ready for the cast and crew tomorrow. I’ve gone to retrieve a special something for the shoot. Can’t tell you what it is — I’ll meet you in Forest Park. Remember the antidote. It’s vital.

John Smith

I picked up the slightly crumpled piece of scrap paper with his unique chicken scratching on it and held it next to my heart. It could be the only thing I’d

ever possess to remind me of the maddening man. But a deep stirring in my heart informed me that somehow things would turn out better than I expected.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Parting of the Amazed

In ‘The Parting of the Ways’, the Doctor offers the ultimate sacrifice – one of his regenerations – in order to save the life of his companion, Rose. Of course, Rose has unwittingly risked her own life and sanity in order to save both the Doctor and the entire universe from the Daleks first, but that’s beside the point. The Doctor gives up his life to draw the time vortex energy from Rose so she doesn’t explode from her newly acquired, painfully overwhelming ability to see all of time and space. And, in the most gallant of gestures, he does so with a single kiss.

You’ve got to admire television for making the things we do for love seem lofty and above the mundane. Real life is never that neat or that dramatic.

Sometimes it’s just plain crazy.

I got little sleep that night as I filled water bottles with the anti-freeze antidote and thought of other inventive ways of making the cast and crew of *The Frightening Fairgrounds* to consume it. I made one batch of doctored pretzels, but I figured that regular pretzels would make people thirsty enough to drink some of the water in the coolers and decided to purchase pretzels in bulk at a Sam’s Club. Around four in the morning, I finally emptied my bathtub of

the anti-freeze brew and hit the sack for a few hours of sleep.

Golden sunlight danced cheerfully across the shallow, silver surface of the reflection pond at the foot of Art Hill in Forest Park, bringing a relieved smile to my weary features. A light breeze gently tousled my hair and pushed the humid air up and away from the low green mowed field in front of me. What a great day for filming! Sunshine, a breeze and none too warm.

I parked my car in one of the Art Museum's parking lots and looked about for John Smith in vain. Atop the hill, the saintly King Louis sat proudly astride his strapping steed, sword upraised. Behind him came the majestic Greek columns of the Art Museum, one of the few remaining structures actually built for the 1904 World's Fair. Today these noted landmarks would stand serenely confident in the background of the film shoot below them. But John Smith wasn't here. My confidence in his turning up faulted as I ambled down the hill toward the set of huddled tents, fair booths, and other temporary shelters.

"Cici! Over here!" I heard Serena Espinoza's voice calling me. I turned and ran toward them, my heart overflowing with joy as Serena wheeled Sammy toward our set up beside the pond.

"I can't believe how well you look today, Sammy." I bent and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "You think you're feeling up to this?"

"I know I'm up to it. Mom made me sit in this wheelchair because the medicos insisted, but I can

walk just fine." To demonstrate, he sprang to his feet and spun around, laughing. "See? I've got my groove back!"

"You do!" I hugged him and danced around with him in a circle.

"I hardly ever feel tired anymore," he said, barely panting at his exertion. "John completely cured me."

I winked at Serena. She grinned back. "Of course he did," she said softly, pushing the unnecessary wheelchair aside.

"Brilliant!"

I spun around, my jaw dropping open with amazement. John Smith seemed to appear out of nowhere. He made his way through the milling crowd of extras to shake hands with our scriptwriter. "You're simply amazing, Sammy," our Doctor said.

The young man bear-hugged him back. The look of delight on John's face was priceless. It reminded me of the sixth Doctor in *Trial of a Time Lord* when he learned that his companion Peri had not been killed as he had thought, but instead had found love and happiness at last with the bellicose warlord, King Yrcanos.

"Thank you for all you've done." Sammy blinked back tears as they parted. "You'll be leaving us shortly?"

John nodded. "After the day's filming. But I promise not to be a stranger for too long. Now, if you'll excuse us for a moment," he said, taking me by the arm, "I need to discuss something in private with Cici."

"Certainly." Sammy smiled. "I've got to get into

my costume now. See you on the set!"

"Where did you go last night?" I said under my breath as John took me aside from the growing throng of fans. My faith in him had wavered somewhat. And I felt angry that he had popped up in the crowd without trying to contact me first.

"I told you in my note. I had to get something special for the shoot today."

"I wasn't sure that you would show today," I rambled on in my most whiny tone, "but Mertron and the Bygons *would* show, and Sammy's dream would be ruined."

He wrinkled his nose and frowned at me. "I made a promise to you a week ago I'd stay until the last day of shooting. And I've kept it. You still don't trust me?"

"Trust you?" My voice involuntarily went up the scale. I took a step back. "*Trust you?* The only thing I can trust about you, John Smith, is to screw up things and to go off on tangents. But I'm not too sure I trust you when it comes to doing the right thing and not breaking a sensitive kid's heart." I spun around and started walking away from him.

He grabbed me by the upper arm to halt me and lowered his voice. "Do you mean break Sammy's heart or your own?"

"My heart?"

I felt a stab of remorse but kept my face composed and headed toward the camera set up. "Please don't confuse my dedication to completing this film project on time with anything else."

"I don't," he said, following me closely. "But aren't

you the least bit curious about our new TARDIS today?"

"Our new what?" I stopped and looked over to where he pointed across the field. Chandra and several other strong arms were wheeling a picture-perfect police public call box toward us. "Oh...Is that where you were all last night? Chandra's place?"

"Not exactly."

The entire cast and crew swarmed over to check out the new TARDIS. My eyes widened as I took it in.

"Wow. It's perfect. It looks so real – like the one on the actual series and not a cheap knock-off. Where in the world did you get it?"

"Remember when you met me at that Bad Wolf saloon near the airport? You never asked me how I got there, did you?"

I frowned in thought. "I assumed you came in an airplane and took a taxi to the closest watering hole – or perhaps you used a transmat device instead?"

He grinned. "Perhaps I did."

"Superb craftsmanship, John," Kevin said, shaking John's hand with unadulterated enthusiasm. "You should build sets and prop pieces more often."

"Thanks. But I didn't build it so much as I borrowed it."

My eyebrows arched. "Borrowed it?"

"Hey, everyone! It says 'property of the BBC' on the back lower panel!" Jessie cried out. The gathering crowd cheered and applauded.

"It's one of the originals?" Kevin whistled and shook his head slowly. "I'd hate to think what the mailing costs were to ship it across the Atlantic

overnight.”

John thrust his hands in his jacket pockets and rocked back and forth on his sneaker heels. “Well, let’s just say I have contacts in the intergalactic postal service as well.”

“You must.” Laughing, Kevin wandered back to where the Grapenoss contingent was forming on the opposite side of our fairgrounds.

I crossed my arms and furrowed my brow in thought. Where did this new TARDIS come from—and why didn’t he fetch it earlier in the week?

“What?” John snapped at me. “What’s wrong with letting them think I have friends in high places?”

Then it dawned on me. “You stole that TARDIS from Alf’s collection, didn’t you?”

He grinned and winked. “So what if I did? I did a little checking up on our alien nerd, and I discovered he was long gone—even his mother didn’t know where he went after we left the other day.”

A lump formed in my throat. “You mean Alf has hooked up with Mertron and the others?”

“Appears so.” John nodded slowly. “Never trust a space geek whose collection doesn’t contain a single item from *Space: 1999* or *UFO* or the animated series of *Star Trek*. It wasn’t complete.”

“I assume Mertron’s collection has all the missing bits and vice versa.” I bit my lip as I slowly scanned the crowd. “I don’t see any black tracksuits and pasty Michael Jackson wannabes yet. Could they have actually picked more realistic disguises?”

“No, that can’t be right,” I heard Trina exclaim to an assistant costumer standing behind us. “We’ve

already got more than enough purple people here. So, why do we have all these leftover costumes?"

My heart began to beat faster. "You don't think..."

"Now, let's don't jump to conclusions," John with a calming gesture. "Shh! Stay here and listen."

"Where the hell did the prop laser rifle go?" I heard Rick ask Trina a second later.

"How should I know?" Trina sounded irritated. "I'm not in charge of props. Jessie is."

"But she said she hasn't seen them since they were taken from the van," Rick insisted. "She told me to ask you since you unloaded stuff after they unloaded props and may have kept them together with the costumes."

"But I have extra Grapenoss costumes. What's the deal with that? Didn't Kevin get a hold of those other guys who said they'd wanted to be in the movie?"

"He must have—we've got fifteen new Grapenoss in our posse. They must have made their own costumes. And they're damn good ones at that, too. The hood part seems to blend in perfectly with their face paint."

"That good, huh? Let me see. I need to approve all costumes before filming commences anyway."

Trina and Rick walked off together across the set. I turned and followed them over to the where Kevin and the others had congregated.

Some of our Grapenoss actors sported oddly familiar black sunglasses.

"Shit! They're here already—that's them!" I whispered to John, who had followed me. "What do we do? We can't be sure that everyone here has had a

drink of the anti-freezing antidote yet."

"The ground seems littered with half-empty water bottles," he said, pointing to the obvious signs that my plan had limited success. "I think we can safely assume that at least a good portion of the crowd is partially protected against the freezing process. Our actions will slow Mertron's plan down, but it may not totally thwart it." John tilted his head and smiled to himself. "Hmm...Infiltrate the group and capture from within—you've got to admire Merton's strategy. It's brilliant."

"Brilliant, my ass," I muttered.

I always hate it when people compliment the bad guys—in either real life or in the fiction. The baddies don't deserve our praise—they deserve their proper punishment. My anger boiling inside my ulcer-ridden stomach, I marched over to the camera where Milo had stashed the electronic bullhorn. I picked it up and switched it on.

"Attention, cast and crew of *The Frightening Fairgrounds*," I began slowly. "I'm Cici, one of the producers...Uh, hello there." I waved coquettishly, then remembered what I was doing and carried on. "The weatherman said it's going to be a real scorcher today. I don't want anyone fainting in his or her hot costume because of dehydration. I highly suggest that if you haven't done so already that you grab yourself an ice-cold water bottle from the stack to my right and chug it down right now before we begin filming. I promise to buy more water as soon as this lot is drunk up. Got it?"

Immediately a mass of fans swarmed the table and

guzzled down my bottled concoction without one remark of "It tastes like recycled bathtub water", either.

"Good idea, but now won't everyone be heading to take a piss at approximately the same time?" Milo asked as I handed him the bullhorn.

I shrugged. "Maybe. But it's better than people sweating to death in purple spandex." *And infinitely better than having them frozen and shipped into outer space to reside in some intergalactic geek's sci-fi collection for all eternity.* As I turned, I caught my lover applauding my bold action.

"Brilliant, eh?" I said.

He nodded. "Did anyone every tell you that you are a most intelligent and competent woman, Cici Connors?"

"You have on occasion—it certainly wasn't any of my ex-husbands." I smiled. "Now, what do we do about the Bygons?"

"I'd say we'd sit back and wait for them to make the first move. They probably don't realize the water has an anti-freezing antidote in it, but after a few attempts to freeze a specimen fail, they'll catch on and then things could get a bit nasty. They'll call for reinforcements."

"Reinforcements?" My heart raced. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, preparing me for either fight or flight. "You mean like a whole squadron or battalion or whatever?"

"Oh, don't be silly. Don't make me take back what I just said about you. This is reality, Cici, not a children's fantasy show."

I blushed under the scolding. "Sorry."

"They'll contact Mertron and Alf for help. We're talking about a couple of super-nerds—not the entire Dalek Empire."

I raised an eyebrow. "Now who's acting silly?"

He shrugged. "It's contagious. The longer I'm around you humans, the more I become like you. Occupational hazard."

"And your true occupation is?"

He shook his head and grinned. He reminded me of the ninth Doctor whenever he was asked a direct question. "You're not going to get that information from me quite that easily."

"You're right." I sighed. "If whipped cream and silk scarves didn't get it out of you, then a simple question would never do the trick."

I shielded my eyes with a hand and scanned the crowd once more. Our pasty friends in purple seemed to have blended into the crowd and disappeared. Milo yelled at a few stagehands to help Rick with the set up for the timed explosions in the last scheduled shot of the day.

"All right, people," Milo began as the bullhorn touched his lips, "Let's be careful of these trip wires. Those of you who are in charge of tripping them know who you are and when and how to do so. Right?"

"No problemo," Rick shouted.

"In case the rest of you are wondering," Milo continued, "we're setting the explosives up now because there's a chance of thundershowers this afternoon, and we want to make sure our special

effects budget isn't totally wasted. If it even begins to rumble, we'll stop and go immediately to the last shot when the Grapenoss invade the fairgrounds and things get blown up. Got it?"

A general affirmative murmur arose from the group. Milo put down the bullhorn and looked at me. "Okay, we're ready to go. We got the Doctor and all the extras in place, but where the hell is the companion?"

I looked at my sign-in clipboard and bit my lip. "Ashleigh hasn't checked in yet."

"Don't tell me—she has a nail appointment this morning or some other inane excuse for being late."

"None that I know of. Perhaps I should ask Jessie if she's heard from Ashleigh today."

"Good idea, assistant director slash producer." He rubbed his stomach and grimaced as if his ulcer was acting up. "Get to it!"

"Right."

I dashed off toward the parking lot at the top of the hill where several cast members told me they had last spotted Jessie. I found her sitting beside the opened sliding door of the costume van.

"Have you heard from our companion yet?" I asked, breathless.

"Ashleigh said she'd be here bright and early—that she was looking forward to the filming and the wrap party tonight..." Moisture pooled in Jessie's big dark eyes. "What if she's had an accident?"

"With all this coming and going of fans, I'm sure we'd hear something about anything like that by now. Have you tried her cell phone?"

"I've tried all her numbers. Nothing."

Jessie's worried look did nothing to soothe my nerves. Aliens invading our peaceful fan film project and a missing leading lady – what could be worse?

I caught a blur of violet in the corner of my vision as I turned around. "Say, Grapenoss—or whoever you are—have you seen Ashleigh?"

The roundish actor continued on his way without turning or speaking.

"How rude," Jessie commented. "Must be one of Kevin's new friends. None of them knows how to speak a proper English sentence, I think."

"Friends of Kevin's?" I asked.

"Yeah, he invited them the other day, he told Milo. Trina says their costuming skills are first rate, but their social skills are worse than the Doctor's on a bad day."

Worse social skills than the Doctor's? 'Alien' was written all over that description.

"Excuse me, Jessie. I have a hunch where Ashleigh may have gone to."

I ran after the purple blob galloping down Art Hill with amazing agility.

"Hey, you! Wait up! I think you may have something of ours we need."

The Grapenoss quickly glanced around, then sped away. Fortunately the bulky costume hindered his movements, and I was able to grab him by the shoulders and spin him around before he'd hobbled off too far.

He raised what appeared to be one of our prop laser rifles and leveled it at me. "Do not resist."

"It won't work. I've swallowed an antidote to the freezing process...and so has everyone else here."

A tiny tic twitched at the edge of his thin, whitish lips. "That is not possible."

"I'd say your brilliant scheme is screwed. Tell Mertron and the rest to give up and call it a day and get the hell off our planet or else."

"Or else what?"

Good question. I hadn't planned the 'or else' part yet. "Or else, I've got a crate full of fresh fruit sitting on the sidelines and many in the crowd have taken a piece of two already. We'll start a food fight and start throwing them at y'all."

"You bluff. There is no crate of vegetation. There is no manner to deliver enough anti-freezing antidote to this mob quickly enough to prevent some of them from not being frozen..." He turned and looked toward the crowd. "I must confer with my superiors."

"You do that. By the way, you didn't happen to cross paths with a skinny, blonde girl with too much eye makeup and an attitude, have you?"

An evil smirk curled one side of his mouth. "The female is an excellent specimen for our master's collection."

Oh, shit! Ashleigh Witherspoon was far from being my bosom buddy, but I couldn't let these intergalactic thugs make off with her. What would her family think? Worse yet, what the hell would fandom think?

I pulled him by the collar closer and snarled in his face. "If you have her, give her back. Take me to her this instant."

The pasty thing grew paler still. "The female you

described is in the keeping of our master. He waits while we gather items for the collection."

"Where is Mertron?" I barked.

"Near," the Bygon squeaked. "He is near. That is all I know."

I dropped him to the ground and groaned. Damn peon! I needed to deal with the bigwig himself. I watched the flunky scramble to his feet and make for the fairgrounds set-up. Most likely he'd blend in with his fellow Bygons in Grapenoss costume and relay my message to his superiors. John Smith was right. All we had to do is wait for Mertron to make the next move.

And his move better include giving back Ashleigh—and whoever else they might have bagged for the collection—first.

"Cici!" Trina shouted as she passed me on the way back to the costume van. "Milo wants you on set. Pronto!"

"Gotcha." I sighed. Whoever said a woman couldn't multi-task?

I scanned the milling throng and frowned. The Grapenoss contingent was nowhere to be seen now. Only a few green-painted, leather clad aliens, a couple of Klingons and numerous standard humanoids in Halloween styled costumes seemed to inhabit the mini-village of makeshift tents and booths.

"It's your lucky day once again," Milo said, smiling at me. I could tell he wasn't happy but was making the best of a bad situation. "Rick has been listening to his weather radio and the front is probably going to hit within a hour or so. We're going to go ahead and

do the big crowd scenes that go right into the shoot-em-up scene first and then we'll do some close-ups on the dialogue shots with the leads later – possibly even tomorrow if necessary."

"Sounds workable. What do you need me to do? Wrangle the extras and get them in position for the crowd shots?"

"No, I need you to play the companion again like you did on the river. Long shots, of course. Unless Ms. Witherspoon has decided to grace us with her presence, or she is even on her way?"

I shrugged and shook my head.

"Okay, you're the substitute companion. Trina!" he bellowed. "Somebody...anybody handling costumes, get that shiny cape thing for Cici. It'll have to do. Bob, get the camera and microphones ready. As soon as she's camouflaged, we'll start shooting."

I turned around and caught John standing a few yards away. I followed his line of sight and spied a large, black-caped, cowl-draped form slowly lumbering toward the set.

"Mertron?" I mouthed at him when he looked at me. He nodded. "They have Ashleigh," I whispered. He put his finger to his lips, then made a beeline toward the hulking figure. I immediately went after him.

"John? Get your ass over here!" Milo shouted, but our Doctor paid his director no heed.

"Stay with the others," John told me under his breath. "I'll deal with it. I don't need your interference."

"Tough, I'm not going anywhere. Mertron's got

Ashleigh, and there's no way I'm going to play that scene in that stupid silver sheet. We're going to get her and then we're going to kick their pale backsides off the planet and finish shooting this film before it starts raining."

"In that exact order?" he said drolly.

I nodded at him. "And you'll stop the rain if it gets in your way, I'm sure."

John quirked an eyebrow and grinned. "You never cease to amaze me, Cici Connors. Next thing you'll be insisting I divulge the cure for the common cold before I crawl into my...transport...and high-tail it out of here."

"Yes, the cure for the common cold is next on my to-do list. After all, you cured Sammy, didn't you?"

He halted in his tracks. "I told you earlier Sammy healed himself—which is more than I can say for our friend Mertron. Look at him."

The alien stood five yards away and yet I could hear wheezing and slurping and gasping coming from his darkly cloaked form. A pallid, shaking claw of a five-fingered hand leaned heavily on a dull-finished metal cane that sported flashing buttons along the side. Each step seemed an agony.

"Oh, my!" I gasped. "He's not well at all, unless all that sputtering and moaning is a healthy reflex for his species."

"Damn atmosphere. Damn gravity," Mertron muttered in a gravelly roar. My fear evaporated. I was overcome with pity for the creature before us.

"Can you heal him like you didn't heal Sammy?" I whispered to John. "It would make a strong

bargaining chip, wouldn't it? A treatment for his agreeing to leave our world the hell alone?"

"I'm not sure there's anything one can do to cure extreme old age."

"I'm only three thousand," Mertron said as we met halfway. "My hearing is quite acute, and three thousand is only late middle-age for my kind. Of course, I've led quite a hedonistic lifestyle. Too much wine, women and song, you could say."

"And too many specimens taken without their permission," John added.

Mertron's bloodshot eyes glowed red from beneath the shadows of his cowl. "I suppose so. My collection is all I have left. My legacy, if you will. What I leave for posterity to remember me by."

"But don't you want posterity to remember you for your kindness and not your selfishness?" I smiled. "Give us back those you've taken, and we'll make sure your eulogy mentions how unselfish you were to those species less fortunate than yourself."

"To be remembered for my kindness and not my selfishness? Hmm..." He scratched his hairless triple chin. "Now that's a novel concept. Greed is openly admired in our society."

"So...being the galaxy's greediest person is no big deal, then? There's nothing special about it at all, is there?" I said.

He frowned thoughtfully. Perhaps my line of reasoning was actually getting through to him.

"It would certainly throw the Intergalactic Collector's Society for a loop if I actually *gave away* the galaxy's largest science fiction related collection ever.

Their cranial appendages would spin and their nasal and audial outlets would spout steam!" He chuckled and tapped his cane on the ground. "What a pretty picture! I'll do it!"

"That easy?" John blinked twice, apparently dumbfounded. "You're going to chuck it all in because this human...Cici...asked you to?"

Mertron laughed again. "Yes! The stunned look on your face is worth it alone." He turned and grinned a big black-toothed smile at me. "Alfin has some very funny friends. Quite entertaining. I'll give you the blonde girl my men snagged earlier today as a token of my good intentions, and the rest later. Alf isn't going to like it at all, I'm afraid."

He laughed harder. "Ooo, I can't wait to see how Alf reacts. I must have a vid cam at the ready so I can record his reaction for future enjoyment. Kindness—what a kick!"

John Smith continued to stare, mouth agape, as if he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words to express his consternation. Mertron pressed a button on the side of his cane and Ashleigh materialized in front of us, her face and gestures frozen in mid-tirade, apparently.

"Miniature transmat device," Mertron said proudly. "Got it a couple of days ago. I was thinking of using it to transport some choice specimens individually like this one. It takes too much power and time to do any real mass specimen collecting with it. I definitely needed Alf's transmat equipment. The boy really was set to pass me by if he hadn't talked me into joining forces with him."

John frowned. "Mertron, are you sure Alf talked you into joining forces with him—and not the other way around?"

"Of course. Why would I want anything to do with his puny collection otherwise? But when he showed me his transmat set up and how he'd been using Bygon operatives to help scope things out for the ultimate specimen-collecting event...Well, how could I say no?"

I gulped. "You mean those bleached-faced goons are working for Alf all along and not Mertron?" I whispered to John. "He certainly fooled us."

"Speak for yourself. My motto is never trust a teenager—no matter how old they may be." John pulled his pen from his pocket and activated it, scanning it across Ashleigh's frozen features. "She appears fine. Give her a sip of that antidote water and a few slaps and she'll come out of it."

I reached for a bottle in my back pocket. "Are you sure that'll work?"

He shrugged. "It should."

"Then what?"

"Then take Ashleigh back to the set and placate our director until Mertron and I come back." He and our alien visitor began strolling in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

He turned and looked at me, his eyes growing larger than the ninth Doctor's when he first cried "Fantastic!" in front of the Millennium Wheel. "We need a few minutes to talk strategy. We'll return soon." And then they ambled off, leaving me alone with our frozen leading lady.

"Great. He gets to talk strategy and other exciting things, and I'm in charge of reviving the blonde bimchette here." I scrunched up my face and considered my options. "A sip of water and a few slaps, eh? Well, here goes nothing..."

I pried open Ashleigh's frozen lips and poured a large dollop of water inside. I pushed her mouth closed and tilted her backward as if she were a life-sized Barbie doll. A few seconds after I'd righted her, I noticed a slight coloring to her bronzed, tanning-booth skin tone.

"That was the sip. What's next?" I tried not to take pleasure in the situation but I couldn't help it. "Oh, yeah." I slapped her pale cheek—hard. The rose color returned, but she didn't seem to be breathing yet.

"What else can I do? CPR? What do they always do in movies to revive people?" Then it hit me. I splashed the rest of the water on her face, then gave her other cheek a slap as well.

"What the fu—ah!" Ashleigh jumped back five feet and stared in horror, rubbing her face mechanically. "What happened? Did you just slap me?"

I bit my lip, hiding the smile that threatened to erupt on my face. "Of course. You were hysterical." I grabbed her hand and headed back to the set. "No more time for theatrics, Ashleigh. It's going to rain, and we need to get this film in the can. Get moving."

As we approached the set, I noticed Milo suffering from his usual fit of pique. The rest of the cast seemed content to goof off as they stood around in costume. Other than that, everything seemed fine.

"Great. We have our companion, but I just saw

John walking off in the opposite direction. Somebody – anybody – go try and grab him before he wanders too far. And you –” Milo pushed Ashleigh in front of the camera, “you stay right there and do a couple of close-ups for us while we’re waiting for our Doctor.”

“Okay.” A blank look clouded the teen’s eyes. “Which scene is this?”

“We’re doing a reenactment of the Titanic sinking. What do you think?” Milo sighed and shook his head. “Why is there water dripping off your chin? Did you fall in the reflecting pool?”

She scratched her head slowly. “Strange...I don’t remember.”

Milo rolled his eyes then barked at me, “Throw her a towel, and let’s get shooting.”

I did as I was told, keeping my eyes peeled for any signs of John and Mertron or Alf and his flunkies. The sun came out from behind a large gray cloud a few minutes later, bringing a sigh of relief from the assembly as they took their places at the various tents and booths of the fairgrounds. Milo yelled, “Action!” and Ashleigh acted quite the professional, hitting her marks and saying what she was supposed to say on cue.

“Where’s the damn Doctor?” Milo grouched after he indicated cut. “Didn’t anyone snag John before he got himself lost? We can’t wait a whole day for him.”

“Trina and I looked all over this area of the park.” Jessie’s tone and features both expressed her helplessness. “He’s simply vanished.”

“No one can simply vanish without someone

seeing something," Milo said, frowning. "We've all been working on this movie too long, I'm afraid. The TARDIS is standing over here. And I don't believe in invisibility, either. He's around here somewhere. Keep up the search."

We took a short break to rearrange the set slightly for the final sequence. I wasn't too worried. John Smith had promised he'd stay with the project to the bitter end. He and Mertron were just chatting somewhere Jessie and Trina hadn't scoped out yet. I breathed easy, believing everything was going to turn out just fine...

Then I heard Sammy's shouting from the back of the crowd.

"Hey, you can't do that! That's not in the script. Who are you? What are you guys doing here?"

Shit. I went running toward his voice and immediately discovered the source of his anger. The extras opened a wide path for me, and I spied what I had assumed would happen all along. Alf held a laser rifle to Sammy's head, several of his henchmen standing nearby for crowd control.

"Where the hell is the Doctor when you need him?" I muttered. Sighing, I placed my hands on my hips and took a bold step toward our villain.

"Give it up, Alf. We can't be frozen, and there's no use trying to convince me that these idiots work for Mertron. He told us it was all your plan."

"That's only because he's senile and couldn't recognize a good opportunity if it splattered like a zedo bug on his hover car windshield." He pulled Sammy tighter into his pimply grasp. I backed off, not

wanting him to force him into doing anything I'd later regret.

"Put down that toy rifle, Alf. You're not going to hurt anyone."

"Ha, that's what you think. This is a real laser rifle and it's fully charged. See?" Alf lifted the pinkie of his trigger hand to reveal the power supply that John had said made all the difference between prop and lethal weapon. "I figure I can teleport this one back to my place and give him an anti-antidote and then freeze him."

"You don't want him, Alf. He's not a limited edition action figure or a first edition comic book. He's just a kid. Like you are."

Alf wrinkled his nose and shrugged slightly. "Possibly, but he's also a rare find. He's a collector of collectables—he told me all about his collection. And once he's in my collection, I'll assume ownership of it. If it's good for a human collection, that is."

"Sammy!" Serena screamed from somewhere in the crowd. "What are you doing to my son?"

"It's okay, Serena. I'm taking care of the situation." I turned and found Kevin staring at me in disbelief with his mouth agape. "Can you handle Serena for me? It would be better if I wasn't interrupted while I negotiate with this...irate fan."

"Sure thing." He took a step forward and lowered his voice. "When did you get to be so good at dealing with psychos, Cici?"

"Four failed marriages—I can deal with anything in regards to the male of the species." *Except when it comes to loony whipped cream-loving aliens who disappear*

when you could use their help. I turned back to Alf and Sammy. "Who said you could have Sammy's collection, Alf?"

"I certainly didn't," Sammy said, laughing. "This moron really believes in a 'winner takes all' scheme — and he's willing to point a toy gun to my head to prove it. He'd make the perfect villain for my next script."

I bit my tongue before I blurted out that it wasn't exactly a *toy* gun, but I shook my head in agreement and smiled. "Yeah, Alf is definitely bad guy material."

The rest of the crowd who had been shocked into silence up until this point began to laugh as well.

"Great twist on the plot, Sammy. That guy is a real jerk!" shouted Rick from where he stood near one of the explosive caches. Catcalls and whistles followed his comments.

"See, Alf? Everyone thinks you're a joke," I said calmly, my arms open wide to show that I had no weapon and no ulterior motives. "Why don't you lay down the rifle and let Sammy go. I'll get you home before your parents miss you."

"I'm old enough to stay off planet as long as I like." He stuck out his double chin and scowled at me. "And you seem to be forgetting something very important here. You're out-numbered and out-armed."

He nodded toward his Bygon comrades dressed as Grapenoss. They each immediately grabbed a hostage and raised their rifles in threatening gestures. Some of the fans laughed and snorted at the outrage, while a

few blanched and began to sweat.

"Love the improvising—keep it up, Grape Guys!" Milo shouted into his bullhorn as he stood behind the camera set-up. "We're getting it all on tape. We can overdub the dialogue and sound effects later."

Wonderful. A potential group slaughter in Forest Park by aliens and we were getting it all on tape with no sign of John Smith in sight. I sighed and threw up my hands. I knew what I had to do.

"All right, Alf. You win." I took a step toward, my hands out raised. "You can have a least one of the fans for your collection, but it's going to be me. I don't want to see anyone else hurt."

"You?" The greasy-haired alien fanboy could barely keep from sniggering. "Sorry, Cici. I've followed you around for years, but I if I'm going to only take one figure for my collection, it's going to be someone halfway decent like Sammy here or that guy in the brown suit and sneakers over there. He knows what he's talking about—at least sometimes he seems to."

I spun around and quickly hid my look of relief. Oh, the nerve of the man! John Smith stood beside the TARDIS prop, grinning like the mad sixth Doctor when he tried to strangle his companion. He nodded to the assembly, then marched straight up to me. "It's very noble of you to sacrifice yourself for the good of the group, Cici Connors, but it's not necessary."

I sighed. "Great. I still get points for acting selfless though, right?"

"Definitely." John leaned close as if to kiss me, but lowered his voice instead. "Stand back and try to

keep out of the melee when the first explosion goes off. Mertron gave me some mini-transmat boosters. He's going to attempt to teleport Alf and his lot in the midst of the confusion after I mark them for transport. Understand?"

I nodded. "Okay. What about the laser rifles? They're not fakes. I spotted the little power pack near the trigger. How are you going to deal with them?"

"Oh." He wrinkled his brow in thought. "Hmm...Keep down and tell everyone else to keep low, too. Bygons aren't known for their marksmanship, and they're probably only set on stun. Alf certainly wouldn't want to dent or bruise any of his figures for his collection."

"Probably not." I sighed again. "And when do these explosions start?"

"As soon as I raise my hand like this." Grinning, he raised his hand. "And wave at Rick across the way like so."

"No, wait! Let's not act too hastily —"

He gave his hand a funny shake, then quickly darted toward Alf and Sammy as the first explosion reverberated across the field, shaking and toppling over half the crowd in the process. I staggered forward and caught Sammy as John tackled Alf to the ground and disarmed him.

"It's back to the basement for you," John said, slapping a hand onto Alf's shoulder. The spot glowed momentarily and then the alien menace was gone—vanished into thin air.

"Cool!" Sammy's face glowed with excitement. "Can I do that?"

John winked. "No, you can't."

All the extras went crazy at this point, screaming and shouting, scattering across *The Frightening Fairgrounds* set like bewildered wildebeests on a stampede across the Serengeti. The Bygons, sheathed in their bulky Grapenoss costumes, lumbered about shooting wildly, missing pretty much everything that crossed their paths.

John, meanwhile, turned to me and snapped, "Get Sammy out of here. He's much too important to be trampled on."

"Right."

I put a hand around Sammy's shoulders and helped him away from the confusion. I deposited him into a lawn chair upon reaching the camera area.

"Whatever the hell is going on, it's going to look great on film!" Milo rubbed his hands gleefully together like a fan in a comic book shop full of rare, first editions at discount prices. "Quick, Bob, pick up the boom mike and let's go shoot this free-for-all from a side angle."

"Here's your mom, Sammy," I said as I spied Serena running toward us, concerned etched upon her delicate features. "You think you'll be all right?"

"Of course I will." He grinned. "The Doctor is on the case. He can fix anything."

Outside of broken telescopes, I wasn't entirely convinced. I ran blindly into the milling crowd in a vain attempt to tackle one of the Bygons and hold him still so John could slap the marker or booster or whatever the hell it was so Mertron could pull them out of here.

"Cici, watch out!" Rick cried as I ran past him. A millisecond later I discovered the cause of his alarm. I had tripped over the trigger wire for the second explosion. It was even louder and more earth shattering than the first.

"Shit!"

Flames arced into the air and the smell of a thousand firecrackers filled my nostrils. I flew for a millisecond and then tumbled head over heels and landed face-to-face on top of one very surprised Bygon.

"Why, hello there. Fancy meeting you here at this riot. What brings you to Earth?"

The creature sputtered and tried to raise his arm, but the bulk of the purple costume wouldn't allow it. We both immediately scrambled for possession of his firearm.

"Oh, no...you...don't!" I wrestled the weapon from his hands and pointed it at his chest. "You're going to be a nice little alien invader and just lie there until we teleport you out of here."

I shakily climbed to my feet, keeping my gaze focused on my hostage. "If you so much as blink, I'll shoot you." Gee—I had always wanted to say something like that! It felt good.

"Brilliant work." John dashed over, slapped a marker onto the lavender blob, then headed off in the opposite direction. "Be careful with that rifle," he called out as my hostage vanished into thin air.

"Yes, I may just shoot you by mistake," I replied, my sarcasm thinly veiled.

No time to act out my frustrations, I turned and

cornered yet another two Bygons in a fair booth and held them at bay until John did a double whammy on them both.

He placed the markers onto their chests and grinned as they disappeared. "Great job. There's only a handful left and they seem to be gathering in a bunch, like grapes tend to do."

Spinning around, I spied five purple spheres huddling together in the center of the set, their weapons pointed outward like giant spokes on a wheel. Several helpless fans were trapped inside the deadly enclosure, including Ashleigh, Chandra and Kevin.

"We've got to get them out of there!" I ran toward the circle. John ran after me, grabbed me by the arm and held me in place. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to keep you from getting yourself shot. You won't be able to help your friends if you wind up on the ground unconscious."

He pulled me closer and lowered his voice. "There's one more explosive wired up, right?" I nodded and he let me go. "Good. We just need to lure the Bygons toward it and then detonate it. In the confusion the hostages will scatter, and we'll race in and slap the transmat booster on them and—poof!" He chuckled. "We'll let Bygons be bygones."

"Aw...bad pun." I groaned. "And there's one problem with that plan." I bent over, trying to catch my breath. "I don't have any of those boosters."

"Didn't I give you any? How thoughtless of me. Here you go." He carefully laid two into my hand, then frowned. "Hmm..."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I only have two boosters left, and there's five of them altogether. And knowing the Bygons, they'll fight to the bitter end just to prove they can."

"How do we get the last one out?" I asked. "Can't Mertron just beam them all out en masse?"

"That would be nice if he could, but his set-up doesn't have that much power," John muttered to himself. "Still, there's always the emergency back-up plan."

"Emergency back-up plan?" I couldn't keep the contemptuous tone out of my voice. "Since when do you have an 'emergency back-up plan'?"

"Since right now." His smile seemed tinged with sadness. It reminded me of the time the Doctor told Rose he was about to regenerate. "It's been great knowing you, Cici Connors. Good-bye."

"Wait—what do you mean, 'It's been great knowing you'?" The words died on my lips as I ran after him. My heart pounded in my ears. He needed me—and I had a weapon.

I followed him to the hostage-takers in purple garb and halted about ten steps back, clinging to every word John Smith said.

"I'll make a deal with you," he announced boldly, slowly circling the enemy. "If you'll put down your weapons and let these poor humans go, you can take me for the collection. I won't even put up a fuss."

"We cannot trust you," the closest Bygon droned in its nasal voice. It raised its rifle and leveled it at John who steadily backed away from the circle. "You have already teleported several of our members."

"Saving you all the car trip over to Alf's transmat device—don't I get points for trying to save the environment?"

His goofy grin didn't fool me one bit. He wrapped his hands about the outside shoulders of the two closest Bygons in a friendly, clownish gesture. Off guard, they were marked and teleported before they realized what was happening.

"Did you see that?" Chandra cried.

"I didn't see a thing. Now run!" Kevin ordered, grabbing her by the hand as the remaining hostages took flight in the confusion.

Chandra frowned, but allowed herself to be pulled along. "That's just it—they simply vanished into thin air," I heard her say as they ran past.

I sensed our alien invaders weren't happy losing their bargaining chips. They moved in and quickly surrounded our Doctor.

"Two down and three angry Bygons to go," John said under his breath. He raised his hands in a placating gesture and continued backing away from them. "Look, no more transmat boosters. You're safe."

Not quite true. I could take out at least two of them. I stealthily moved toward the two closest to me.

"Gentlemen, the proposition still stands. You come along with me, and I'll agree to become a part of Alf's collection. It will be considered a successful hunt, and you will receive full payment for all your troubles."

"Our compensation *was* the hunt." The Bygon nearest to John raised his rifle and aimed it directly at his head. "But if you have another form of payment at

your disposal, we will consider it."

John nodded his agreement. "That's what I like—a simple, honest businessman. I don't suppose we could shake hands on the deal?" He caught my eye and winked. The hint of grin made me think he actually enjoyed the dangerous predicament he always seemed to find himself in...like the Doctor always seemed to find himself in. "No handshake? How about a friendly slap on the back instead?"

That was my cue. I ran toward the two with their backs turned to me and smacked the boosters hard on their backsides. With a cry of surprise, they disappeared. I continued running toward the Bygon with the rifle aimed at our Doctor.

I could do it—I could tackle the last alien invader and save the day. I could do it! Not some dumb companion or even the leading man could do this. I was capable of great things.

"Cici, don't!" John cried.

Too late I remembered why he had been backing up all along. I tripped over the third explosive trigger wire and went flying, knocking John from the Bygon's clutches and onto the ground.

Then all hell broke loose.

Bigger and better than its two predecessors, Rick had outdone himself this time. Cracks, pops and whistles screeched into the air, as a rainbow of fireworks and colored smoke burst into bloom like fiery blossoms on a summer's day. The reverberation echoed and deafened upon impact with the human eardrum. I cringed, but laughed.

It was far better than any diversion the Doctor

could have devised!

The lone Bygon tittered, desperately grasping at his hostage, then lost his balance and tumbled over. He rolled freely across the lawn, knocking over fairground tents, booths, signs and a few hapless extras, a giant purple bowling ball in an outdoor alley.

"Got him," I said, dusting myself off as I regained my footing. "You okay?"

John scrambled to his feet and dusted himself off with a frown. "I sincerely doubt Alf would want me in his collection now. I'm bruised all over."

"Sorry. I was trying to save your life."

"It didn't need saving—and look. He's getting away, and he's still got a weapon."

"Oh." Why couldn't he at least thank me for trying? "I have a rifle, too." I looked down into my empty hands and then at the ground. "Well, I did have a rifle up until a moment ago."

"The emergency backup plan is still in effect," John said, walking stiffly past me without so much as nod.

"I said I was sorry. What can I do to help?"

He halted and plunged his hands into his jacket pockets as if searching for something. "Do as you are told. Keep everyone away from the TARDIS while I roll our invader into it for safekeeping."

I stared at him. "You're joking. He won't fit in there with that costume on. It's not bigger on the inside than the outside. It's a prop."

"But a very useful prop. You'll see." He started jogging toward the still rolling purple cannonball.

"But how?" I cried, following after him. "Sammy

worried so much about getting the story right that he refused to set any of the scenes in the TARDIS console room because we couldn't construct one that resembled it exactly on the show."

"Cici—are you okay?" Jessie threw herself into my path and prevented me from taking another step further. "With all the explosions and the smoke and all, I couldn't see where you'd gone. Milo says that they shot a ton of great shots with such realistic crowd reaction, so everything should work out fine."

"That's terrific, Jess. Excuse me a moment."

I turned and moved away from her, avoiding meeting my friends' gazes in fear they'd halt me again. They didn't know what had really happened—how could they? They chalked everything up to loony fan friends of Kevin's and the mysterious and mentally unbalanced John Smith. I was just another flake in the whole crazy equation. There was no time to dwell on that now—there was one last bad guy to apprehend.

But seriously, why did John say he was going to jail the Bygon in the TARDIS? There was some poetic justice in it, it being a *Doctor Who* fan film and all, but it still didn't make sense.

By the time I'd caught up with our Doctor, he'd already relieved the runaway Bygon of his weapon by kicking it out of the alien's tight grip. He held a tomato at arms' length like a hand grenade, threatening the cowering alien that he'd throw it if the Bygon moved.

"I see the fruit and vegetable angle still works." I grabbed the rifle off the ground before our villain got

any ideas of going for it. "However, I'm still in the dark about what you want to do with this squashed grape, John."

"I told you, I'm sending them all back to Mertron." He motioned for me to help him get the Bygon on its feet. "But since I'm out of transmat boosters, I'll have to improvise."

"Of course," I said. We each took hold of a shoulder and hustled the bruised and groaning Bygon toward the TARDIS. Cast members and crew alike cheered, clapped and parted as we passed with our criminal in tow, allowing us easy access to its doors.

"Quick, Bob, start filming again!" Milo shouted at his assistant. "This will make a perfect ending for the scene."

"And a perfect ending for my time here in Saint Louis," John said softly. He halted in front of the blue police public call box, then tossed me the tomato and reached into his pockets.

"The key." He showed it to me, inserted it into the lock and then pushed the narrow door open. "After you," he said, pushing the Bygon inside. Surprisingly, the alien in the spherical costume slipped inside the box without any resistance. John turned to follow suit.

"What are you doing?" I cried, touching his hand that rested on the opposite door. He averted his gaze.

"I'm taking this one home—and then I'm going to help free all those frozen figurines in Alf's and Mertron's collections."

"You're not leaving us so soon," I whispered. "What about Sammy's film. It's not quite finished yet."

He wrinkled his nose thoughtfully. "I'd say it's mostly done. Any lines that Milo needs the Doctor to say Sammy could probably dub in for him. He does a great imitation of me, did you know that?"

"No, I didn't." I swallowed a lump forming in my throat. "I still don't understand, though. This call box is only a prop. It's not a time machine."

"I know that. But it's a great hiding place to use the extra transmat booster I discovered in my pocket while looking for the tomato. I'll just slap it on the interior wall here and then Mertron will teleport us up to his spaceship and...that's that."

I sniffed. "The TARDIS will dematerialize into thin air and the credits will roll."

He smiled kindly. "Something like that. I'm sure the appropriate sound effects will be added later." He caressed the side of my face with the back of his hand. Moisture welled in my eyes. "I'm sure it'll be brilliant."

"I'm sure it will be, too."

He removed his hand and gazed upon the tear that had fallen upon it as if it had burned him. "I'm so sorry. I have to leave, Cici. I'm not too sure how long I can keep our friend in here from trying to escape. He's just realized that I handed you the tomato."

I tossed it up in the air and caught it like a baseball. "You want it back? I'm not in the mood for salad."

"No, you keep it." He grinned. "Good-bye, Cici Connors. Thanks for everything."

The door shut and I took a step backward. An instant later the police call box disappeared without a sound.

"It's vanished—just like those weird guys all vanished!" I heard Chandra screaming from somewhere behind me. Tears clouded my field of vision as I stumbled away from the crowd and the set.

Left behind. At least the cute teenager didn't get to travel the stars this time, either. Somehow, I found little comfort in that thought.

I walked slowly toward the parking lot and a box of tissues I knew was secreted somewhere in my car. What did I expect? Only in TV does the brave alien time traveler and his beautiful companion get in and out of trouble within an hour or so. A real life time traveler probably wouldn't act so irrationally. He wouldn't risk his safety or risk blowing his cover by traveling with a stupid human...particularly a stupid middle-aged human female. I sighed.

And then I heard a familiar screeching sound, like a herd of elephants roaring only backward. I turned around and swallowed my tears.

The TARDIS had returned.

The door opened ten feet from where I stood. John Smith popped his head out.

"Hello again. Mertron's got our last baddy and I got to thinking, it's awfully dull traveling about the cosmos all by yourself. Why not ask a friend aboard for the trip?"

"You want a...companion?" I squeaked.

He looked thoughtful for a moment and then smiled shyly. "Yes. If you like."

"You sure you don't want someone like Ashleigh or Sammy?" I asked, my hope rising. "They're both very young, and they'd probably enjoy the

adventure.”

“Probably. But neither of them can do half the things you can do, Cici Connors. You aren’t afraid to tackle alien invaders—or drive fast on the highways.”

I laughed. “No, I’m not. But what about my friends? My job?”

“No problem. With a time machine, we’d be gone and back before the whipped cream in your fridge spoiled.” He grin grew wider. “How about it? Fancy a trip in time and space?”

I nodded and walked toward him. “Okay, but one thing I have to know first.”

“All right. What’s that?”

“Should I call you ‘the Doctor’?”

Chuckling, he stepped back and ushered me into the call box. “Hell, no! I hate titles. John Smith will do just fine.”

THE END?

Cici’s intergalactic adventures will continue in *Leaving Who*.

CYNTHIANNA

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