



MAN

MADE TO ORDER

A Novella

VICTORIA KINKADE

MAN, MADE TO ORDER



VICTORIA KINKADE

MAN, MADE TO ORDER

VICTORIA KINKADE

ONE

Arrival

My heart jumped when the door chime rang. *“Why am I being so silly?”* I thought. *“I ordered it. I shouldn’t be nervous that it’s here.”*

I took a couple of calming breaths as I crossed the foyer. The door slid silently open to reveal two delivery men on my terrace, lit by the diffuse glow of the light-transmitting Corestone walls that shielded my home from the upper Manhattan parkway. And behind them ... there it was. The crate. His crate.

The shoulder-high white box rolled smoothly across the fused glass floor in the entryway. Tingles of excitement travelled up my spine, and I rubbed away a sudden flash of gooseflesh on my arms.

“Do you want us to uncrate your merchandise, Ma’am?” one of the men asked.

“No, that’s fine.” I touched a fingertip to the biometric pad he held out for me to sign, then shooed the pair out. Turning toward my box, I laid a hand over my quivering stomach and took a deep breath.

As hard as I’d tried not to, I’d still fantasized about this day for months, gazing at the preview photos too often and

too long. Thinking about what it would feel like, how it would be. Possibly, I had anticipated this day a little *too* much. *Would the reality live up to the hype?*

I had imagined myself tearing into the box in a frenzy of excitement, but now that he was here, I hesitated. What if I'd built it up too much in my mind? How could an artificial construct fulfill my desires?

So many of my human lovers had been disappointments not only sexually but as companions. My mother said my standards were too high; my sister said I dated jerks. I was just sick of it. Sick of men who said they wanted a confident woman but clearly *didn't* once they had one. Weary to the bone of men who were interested in my image, not in who I was.

As Chief Operating Officer of the New York division of one of the world's largest corporations I was a high-profile executive. Many men I went out with saw the job more than they saw me. My last relationship had ended over a year ago and had been a total let down. I kept myself busy, but the nights were long and lonely.

So, I'd been an easy mark, a peach ripe for the picking, when the exclusive brochure popped up on my personal contact panel selling love, or a reasonable facsimile thereof. A man, made to order. Not a doll. Not a mere robot. But the latest advance in android artificial human technology.

A perfect man—*my* perfect man—custom made for me and only me. I'd thought, *why not splurge on a Mr. Right Now, while I keep looking for Mr. Right?* It could be a romantic placeholder.

It had been expensive, costing more than my electric, self-driving luxury car, and was offered only to a very select clientele. But, satisfaction was guaranteed. I'd have to see about that.

"Enough of this," I said under my breath. It's wasn't like me to be tentative. I see clearly and act decisively where

others hesitate. I managed a successful company that employed almost five hundred people and I hadn't gotten where I was by being shy.

I took another deep breath as I reached for the pre-programmed palm-scanner on the side of the crate. My hand shook ever so slightly as the catches released and the side swung out.

And there he was, nestled in a plush interior of sensuous red velvet.

He looked so real. He sat in a relaxed pose on a bench built into the crate, his eyes closed as though he were napping. My body relaxed. I was relieved he wasn't activated yet. I needed a moment.

I took in his tanned skin, the light brown hair streaked with gold that curled about his face and neck, the full sensuous lips set in a strong, handsome face. It was amazing. I glanced at his chest, expecting to see it rise and fall as he breathed. That's how perfect he seemed.

He was dressed in a luxurious deep-red shirt and stylish designer jeans with black boots. A warm, rich smell tinged with exotic spices and vetiver wafted from the box. On a leather thong around his neck, a pendant pulsed with an ethereal blue light. I reached out and touched it.

When he opened his eyes, the effect was magical. His gaze lifted to mine, and he smiled, deepening the illusion. I was used to the enigmatic Mona Lisa smiles that are commonly plastered on most everyday artificials, but his smile was different. I was charmed and responded in kind.

"I had no idea you'd be so beautiful," he said in a deep, musical voice.

I opened my mouth to reply and ... nothing. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been at a loss for words. I stepped back as he rose gracefully to his feet and emerged from the box. I had specified a six-foot, two-inch model since I'm fairly tall. He stood at his full height looking down

at me with eyes that evoked clear tropical seas. I stared back, fascinated. I could drown in those eyes. They narrowed with a subtle hint of mischief as his smile widened.

"Will you at least tell me my name?"

I laughed, partly with relief and partly with delight. He tilted his head, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

"I was thinking of Bryce."

Bryce," he said, trying it out. "I like it." He winked. It was outright adorable.

I laughed again. No doubt about it, he was a quality product.

"I'm Leah. But of course, you know that."

"Have you had time to answer the confidential questionnaire, Leah?" he asked, getting down to business.

"I have." I nodded, unable to wipe the smile off my face.

"I can connect to it wirelessly over your network if you give me the password."

"Of course. The password is ... rapture."

He seemed to be studying me and the corners of his mouth lifted appreciatively. I assumed he was accessing the files, but his attention was having an effect anyway. The thrill in the pit of my stomach was a nice surprise. I studied him back, quite pleased with what I saw.

"This information will help me to understand you. I hope to be everything you desire." He angled his head thoughtfully. "You seem to be a woman who does not suffer fools that waste her time. I like that."

He reached out and took my hand gently in his. With his other hand he brushed a lock of my hair back from my forehead. *Could he feel its texture? How sensitive were his sensors?* I'd have to remember to ask. Later.

I brushed his cheek with my fingertips. It was warm and soft. It felt like real skin, maybe even better. Velvety and smooth with a hint of downy brown stubble scattered along

his jawline. I ran my fingers through his smooth curls and down his arm.

He cupped the back of my head in his hand and pulled me toward him. He bent to kiss me. Any uncertainty I had melted away in that first kiss. My head swam as he filled my senses. The taste of him was wonderful. It was reminiscent of cinnamon and wine and sweet cream.

"I want you," he whispered, his voice husky. At those words, something stirred inside me. Coals that I kept carefully banked in my daily life suddenly kindled into a warm glow. *Was I doing this? Now? Well, why not?*

I relaxed into his embrace and buried my face in his wide chest. His scent was a wonderful mélange of spice and musk and whiskey, subtle and fiercely masculine. My controlled facade slipped away.

Why is this so easy? It had been impossible for me to let myself go like this with any of the men I'd dated. I'd always been distracted, trying to figure out what they might be thinking. With him, I didn't have to wonder. A desire to try out my new toy seized me.

I slid my hands up under his silky shirt, feeling the soft texture of his skin over a firm underlying musculature. He felt real and yet strangely unreal, more like a virgin's fantasy of a man than a real one. It was so different from what I'd expected. Strange, yet provocative.

His hands caressed my body, lighting up every nerve ending they touched. It was almost as if a faint electric current pulsed from them. *Did it? Could they do that?*

"Your skin is so soft, so lovely," he said, a trace of awe in his voice. His hands cupped my breasts and his thumbs began to toy with my nipples. I drew in a sharp breath. His mouth found my throat and kissed my neck softly. Next, he nibbled playfully on my earlobe, his teeth around my fire ruby earring. Sparks of delight thrilled me inside.

A desperate passion surged inside of me. I unbuttoned his

pants pushed them down. A perfect erect cock rose and Bryce pressed against me. The supple hardness against my stomach filled me with a violent longing. Suddenly it all felt very real. I needed to have him inside me.

"Leah." His tone was low and sensual, almost a purr. My heart fluttered.

His hands pulled up my tight suit skirt and yanked down my silken panties. Cool air swept my pussy and I realized I was wet with excitement.

Is that music? I recognized a romantic song from one of my playlists but I couldn't tell where it was coming from. My flesh was almost fevered as our bodies touched, slid together and moved apart. The music rose in volume. Wrapped in his arms, it seemed to throb right through me.

"Fuck me now," It was a request, almost a plea.

"*Mmm, gladly.*" He gripped my backside with firm, strong hands and lifted me effortlessly. I wrapped my legs around his hips. His member moved beneath me. The hard cock parted my outer lips and he rocked his hips to thrust deep into me. I gasped with the shock of penetration. It was an exquisite invasion, hot and urgent, perfectly matching the demand of my own desire.

He drove into me faster and harder, plunging his shaft deeper and deeper. His member seemed to swell and lengthen with each stroke, stretching me to the point of bursting. The delicious pain at the apex of every thrust was thrilling, euphoric.

As our bodies moved together in rhythm, a new feeling penetrated my awareness cutting through the haze of pleasure and the spice of pain. A twisting sensation, a vibration deep inside that caused my body to arch with ecstasy as the world seemed to fade away. I was no longer aware of the elegant foyer around us or the rich paneling and edgy modern art on my walls. My world became entirely, intensely, Bryce.

I floated in a sea of overwhelming ecstasy. Passion took me in its current. My climax started to build inside me, the warm ache cresting until it finally broke and surging pleasure rocked me to my core. I shuddered and bucked helplessly against him, his strong arms holding me fast. Too soon! It had happened so quickly. After waiting for him for so long, I'd been ready to pop.

Still connected, we slowly sank to the floor, the cool glass surface tempering the heat of my skin. I opened my eyes and gazed into his, fascinated by their azure depths and their soft, subtle glow. I was physically spent yet energized by the force of my orgasm. Bryce's handsome face looked down at me smiling that winning smile again; the countenance of a champion fresh from victory. I smiled back in utter, joyous defeat.

"That was amazing," I marveled. He was no mere toy, but everything the brochure had claimed and more.

My own abandon shocked me. I'd never completely surrendered control before, never given myself up to a state of delirium like that. It was disorienting. *Why? What was so different?*

Realization washed over me. *I was in control. I owned this amazing creation. I'd designed him, had him built especially for me. He existed for no one else. The freedom of that idea was ... intense.*

Bryce's wink had a touch of wickedness. "That was merely an initial baseline. You haven't seen anything yet."

TWO

Eccentricity

I was hungry—for food—after Bryce’s arousing introduction.

I rose from the floor and straightened my clothes. Slipping on a fallen high heel, I smiled at Bryce. “Follow me to the kitchen.”

He grinned from where he reclined with his hands behind his head. “Anywhere, *ma chère*.”

I was as giddy as a smitten schoolgirl. A giggle escaped my lips. A giggle. Really? *Me?*

I shook my head as I strode down the hallway. I was used to instructing the common office artificials that performed simple or repetitive tasks, and they were common in stores and restaurants as well. Most artificials had only a minor semblance of human reaction. Bryce was so sophisticated, so human-seeming, that ordering him that way seemed wrong. I’d have to find my own way of dealing with this issue. It was *my* issue, I suspected. Bryce was probably programmed not to mind being told what to do. *But maybe I mind.*

I inspected the sparse shelves of my large refrigerator. In a burst of self-indulgence, I opened the freezer and pulled out a pint of artisanal Mango Quintessence ice cream that I’d been

saving for either a special occasion, or a disaster. Bryce, wearing nothing but his shirt, settled himself on a stool at the breakfast counter. His muscular legs were like a moving sculpture.

"That music..." I began, unsure of the exact question. It was all so new.

"I chose a song from your favorites. I hope you liked my selection."

"I did. But where were the speakers?"

Bryce tilted his head. "I have an internal sound system. Just one of my many surprise features." A mischievous smile played on his lips. I silently studied him. It was hard to stop staring at his beautiful, sculpted face. His realistic expressions and body language had a pleasantly disturbing effect. I crammed a spoonful of ice cream into my mouth.

Sunlight streamed in from the glass outer wall of the dining area. In the late afternoon light, I could see that Bryce's skin was subtly off color. It seemed to have a lovely lavender undertone that was not quite human. If I watched closely there was also an almost imperceptible hesitation in his movements at certain times. I'd hardly notice it if I wasn't looking for it. Those tiny flaws were almost a relief. A perfect imitation of a human being might be too controversial.

Bryce, however, was better than human for my purposes. The thrill of acquiring such a supremely expensive toy was part of it, I had to admit. I loved beautiful things and there was no denying that my tastes were expensive. My home was perched on the northwestern edge of Manhattan. It cantilevered out over the Hudson River from the solid bedrock that anchored it. The view of the river and the Palisades beyond was a glorious sight. Owning it gave me a feeling of deep satisfaction.

I was less comfortable admitting to feeling so lonely for so long, but that emotion was receding thanks to Bryce. He was an artificial, but it felt like having someone around. I was

delighted with the abilities Bryce had demonstrated so far and eager to discover more. I put the ice cream back in the freezer.

"Why don't we go explore more of your features in the bedroom?"

Bryce raised his eyebrows as he rose from the stool. "I'd be delighted."

"Would you?" I lifted my chin to study him. It was uncommon to hear a statement like that from an artificial. They were seldom programmed to express anything like personal feelings. I supposed it made sense that one like Bryce would be different in that regard as well.

"Leah, giving you pleasure is my design, my purpose and my greatest delight. I can't imagine anything more wonderful than to see you happy."

I turned and led the way, grinning like a lunatic. *After that statement how could I not?* As we crossed the living room I felt the zipper in the back of my skirt being pulled down. Bryce slid it off my hips as I turned to him. It fell to the floor, and he scooped me up in his powerful arms and carried me straight to my workout room.

"Oops," he laughed, a natural, melodious sound. "Wrong room."

"The master bedroom is two doors down the hall."

"Never mind. This will do."

He sat down on the weight bench and settled me onto his lap astride him. As our weight settled onto the bench, my workout routine auto-activated. My virtual workout buddy, Vin Vance, greeted me, asking if I was ready to "Do the Distance," a reference to a popular video-book title and catchphrase. I didn't cancel the routine and the wallscreens around us transformed into a view of the Swiss Alps, giving the impression that we were on the deck of a chateau.

"May I?" Bryce inclined his head toward the view.

“Sure.” I gently bit my bottom lip, wondering what he had in mind.

The scene around us changed, white and blue blurred into a golden hue and then shifted to darker tones as our surroundings became a gothic castle with towering windows and a brilliant sky painted with red and purple. I looked around at the lurid setting. It reminded me of an old book cover. The scene shifted again and we were in a stylish, modern dance club with patterned blue and aqua lighting that swept along the walls in glowing spirals. I nodded my approval.

Too eager to bother unbuttoning my blouse he slid it right off over my head. Leaning in, he kissed me softly down one side of my neck to my shoulder. The warmth of his lips left traces of excitement on the skin where they fell. His hand slipped a bra strap off my shoulder and dropped to cup my breast. He teased the nipple between his fingers before leaning forward to take it into his mouth. As his tongue traced circles around the areola it stirred the feeling between my legs, teasing my libido into a hungry need once again. His hands stroked my sides, my back, my thighs. He undid the clasp and dropped my bra to the floor leaving me completely naked. I hadn't bothered to put my panties back on.

I ran my fingers through his gold-streaked brown hair. The texture was soft and smooth. I sought his lips with mine. My naked pussy throbbed and yearned, awash with moisture. We lingered in the kiss, his warm tongue tangling itself with mine. It was like a shot of liquor going straight to my head. He slipped his fingers between my thighs to my clit, stroking it with insistent pressure. The strokes increased until they became a vibration and the vibration increased in speed and intensity. He unerringly focused right on the sweet spot, making me writhe with a pleasure that was almost painful.

Just as I was at the edge of orgasm he suddenly pulled his hand away.

I moaned and arched against him, insatiable, yearning for more. In desperation and need I wrapped my legs around his body. The beginning strains of an unfamiliar metallic rock song rose around me. I pushed into him as he lifted his hips, plunging his strangely agile penis into my dripping, aching cunt. My walls clenched and pulsed around him and he began bucking his hips, moving forcefully to the insistent beat of the hard-core music.

He gathered my wrists behind my back. I frowned. I'd never allowed anyone to restrain me before. Uncertain about the way this was going, I struggled briefly but his grip was unbreakable. I'm strong for a woman. I worked out every day, but I couldn't even budge his hand.

Not that I was frightened. It was impossible for an artificial to intentionally hurt someone, that was intrinsic to their programming, I just wasn't sure I liked this. But my body was responding even if my mind was uncertain. He wrapped my blouse around my arms, tying them back. His implacable cock plunged into me deeper and deeper with every thrust. Like before, it swelled to fill me and I felt its heat.

The music rose in tempo and volume. Harder and faster. He gripped my hips with his hands and began to fuck me with a passionate intensity. A nervous flash of fear cut through the fog of my euphoria. *What was happening here? Was this getting out of control?*

Something probed my backside. I gasped in shock and surprise as it slid toward my anus and pushed against the opening. Bryce gave me a devilish look as the mysterious appendage swirled and teased at my back door. I was less certain of this new development. Where was this ... this ... *tentacle* coming from anyway? What other surprises was he equipped with? I intended to check into that. Fully.

Later.

The slim, coiling appendage gave a quick squirt of slippery wetness and pushed inside me. A wordless sound of protest and outrage burst from my lips. I squirmed against my bonds but Bryce just gripped my buttocks hard and continued to slam his cock into me. The protuberance in my ass began to thrust as well, sliding in and out in an asymmetric sync with his member as it slowly increased in girth. I cried out. *It's getting too big!*

The pain was dire. The pain was delight. I rode Bryce helplessly, dumfounded by his audacity, elated by his perversity. And my own.

My body undulated, enraptured with the sheer carnality of the act. The primal music seemed to thrum through me with a visceral appeal. I gave myself entirely to the ruthless pounding, the merciless invasion of my most delicate parts. When the pain and pleasure reached a fever pitch, when I thought I couldn't take any more, my body released in a deep blaze of passion. A massive bone-shaking orgasm flowed through me, rippling and raging, and finally leaving my body consumed. I collapsed like a fallen marionette in his arms. Bryce held me close, lying us back on the bench. He released my arms from the blouse, and they swung limply down on either side.

My breathing was hard and fast. I was covered in a fine sheen of sweat. Too weak to move, orgasmic aftershocks continued to pulse through me. My insides felt almost rearranged in a disturbing though not unpleasant way. I lay with my head on his chest and tried to sort out what I was feeling.

As soon as I regained control, I raised my head to look at him. "You bastard. What the hell?"

"And yet, I sense that you are pleased," he replied in a voice full of indecent confidence.

"What made you think I would enjoy *that*?"

"But you did."

"How did you know? The questionnaire was specific, but not *that* specific."

"I have my ways."

"Tell me."

"It's technical." He shrugged.

"I want to know," I insisted, struggling to sit up. Now my curiosity was really piqued.

He laughed and sat up, bringing me upright with him. "I have sensors to measure a combination of your vital signs including your heart rate, blood pressure, perspiration, even galvanic skin response. I also analyze visual and auditory clues. I sense what you are experiencing and gauge my actions to maximize your enjoyment."

"You're a walking, talking lie detector!"

"Among other things." He seemed amused. "I should improve over time as well."

I shook my head. "I'm not sure I'll be able to stand it."

THREE

Levitation

As I walked into the conference room early Monday morning I focused on forcing my legs to work correctly. My muscles ached in unexpected places and my pussy felt deliciously battered. I winced as I sat down at the head of the table. My backside was still tender. Yet, I had never felt so alive. Or so intensely feminine.

My assistant hurried in and looked up from her tablet. “Wow, you look great!” she exclaimed. “You must have had a nice weekend.”

An unprofessionally silly smile broke through my façade as I nodded to her. I cleared my throat and said, “Let’s get started. Bring up the department heads on the monitors. I’d like status reports.”

One by one the managers reported from the screens that rose out of the table. Their progress charts appeared on the surface in front of me. Everything seemed to be on schedule and going smoothly, even without my checking in on them over the weekend. Good. Because starting now I was planning to delegate some tasks that I normally took care of in the evenings and on the weekends. As I assigned some of the responsibilities to my managers I watched their reactions.

I'd been concerned that they might balk at the additional workload, but each one seemed eager to step up. Perhaps I should have done it sooner. All of my people were competent and I trusted their skills, I'd just preferred to handle key details myself, until now.

Once we moved on to their productivity projections I did my best to focus on the charts and spreadsheets. I really did. But my thoughts were irresistibly drawn to Bryce at home. He had watched me getting ready for work as though memorizing every detail. For all I knew, he was. He complimented my couture suit and recognized the designer. He asked what I liked to eat. Apparently, he was capable of performing secondary domestic functions as well as his primary one. It felt strange to have an artificial in my house, doing housework, learning about my life, adapting himself to me.

I was astounded by the complexity of his programming and its effect on me. I couldn't stop thinking about him. I kept surreptitiously checking the house cameras, watching as he pattered around. I'd reluctantly left him lying in my bed that morning, recharging on a special pad. He'd held my hand and kissed it goodbye, our fingers sliding slowly apart as I moved away. As I got into my car and tapped the pre-set destination I felt an unfamiliar pull. My home had taken on a new significance for me. My world had shifted in a single weekend.

The photos I'd taken of him with my phone didn't help. I tried to resist looking at them during the meeting and failed. Once I was back in my office I closed the door and indulged myself by watching a couple of short videos I'd taken of Bryce. I couldn't have chosen a more handsome face or perfect body type. In the company café at lunch I watched the artificials with a new perspective as they served food and cleared tables. Their fixed expressions and coldly efficient movements could not have been more different from Bryce.

Even their eyes were different; they seemed empty. A silvered camera lens gazed nakedly back at you if you looked closely, though few people would bother. By contrast, Bryce's eyes were expressive and arresting. They had a faint eldritch glow in low light. His body language was subtle and, at times, surprising. He was an amazing imitation of life. No wonder these models were so exclusive. The demand for them would be unimaginable, even at the price they were charging.

In just one weekend he knew me better than I knew myself. Under his influence I found myself unable to deny anything he said or did. My body betrayed all my secrets to his sensors. If he was able to uncover the untapped reserves of desire inside me so quickly, where could this go? It terrified me and thrilled me to think of it.

Minimalists would say that the things people own end up owning them. I didn't think this is what they had in mind, however.

But perhaps I'd take the afternoon off.

FOUR

Idyll

A familiar voice on the phone said, “So? *Dish!*”
“About what, Evie?” I said in my most innocent voice.

“C’mon, Leah, what’s the sexbot like?”

“Ah.” *My sister, master of tact.* “Give me a break. I just got home from work.”

“Seriously? You get a sexbot that costs as much as a Midtown condo and you’re not even going to tell us poor peasants what it’s *like?*”

“There’s so much wrong with what you just said that I don’t even know where to start.” I sighed in exasperation. “How did you find out, anyway?”

“Can I see him?”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“I’m coming over.”

“Do *not* come over.”

“Come *on*. Why not?”

“Hanging up now.”

“See you...”

I’d hardly terminated the call when the doorbell rang. *Bitch!*

I stalked to the door, punching the panel to open it. Evie was on the terrace dressed in one of her typical bohemian tops and head-shakingly tatty red jeans. My little sister was really the most aggravating, intrusive, annoying person I'd ever known.

"Seriously, how did you find out?" I blocked the doorway and crossed my arms.

"I was just bringing in your mail." She held out several letters.

"From my mailbox five steps away?" I snatched the documents from her. "I'm sorry but you have to go. I told you ... *Hey!*" She pushed right past me. Of course, she did.

"You know those things are notorious, don't you?" Evie quickly crossed the foyer, pointing at Bryce's telltale packing crate that I hadn't yet relocated. "It's been all over the news today. I can't believe you got one!"

"Evie..." I frowned and followed her, clenching my fists. *What news? I thought these new artificials were supposed to be hush-hush.*

"Where is he?" She stalked through the living room before heading down the hall.

"Stop right now!" I used my most authoritative voice, the one that had been known to bring entire boardrooms to a standstill. No effect. I followed, tension growing in my shoulders.

I hadn't let anyone into the house all week, not even the cleaning service. I didn't need them anymore. Bryce didn't require rest, except to recharge, and he pattered around the house doing small domestic chores while I slept. My home had become a private idyll for the two of us, a steamy sanctuary where we explored unknown sexual depths. I'd learned things about myself, and Bryce had become the vessel of my secrets. Of course, I wanted to keep him all to myself.

Evie threw open the bedroom door. The polarized shades were open, flooding the room with light from the floor to

ceiling windows. The room was empty. The bed was neatly made, the throw pillows plumped and artfully arranged, and a single pink rose lay in the middle of the bed like a promise of things to come. That made me smile, despite my frustration.

Evie turned to me. "Where are you hiding him?"

I sighed in exasperation and forced myself to stop grinding my teeth. She looked around the bedroom one last time and walked past me back to the living room where she flopped onto a sofa.

"Well..." She jutted her chin out at me and crossed her arms. "I'm not leaving until I see him."

"What are you, *four*?" I put my hands on my hips. "You gonna hold your breath if you don't get your way?"

"Think what you want, but I'm sticking." She sniffed and turned up her nose with a pout.

Bryce emerged from the kitchen holding a tall, icy glass of something cocktail-like. He wore a fitted, black sleeveless shirt that showed off his sculpted arms, and slim fitting blue jeans. A small, well-chosen wardrobe had been shipped with him, which was nice because I hadn't had time to shop.

His eyes met mine, and my tension began to ebb. I couldn't stop my smile. He was a work of art. Erotic art. Not for the first time I wondered if he had any concept of what he made me feel. Considering his finely tuned sensors, he probably did.

Evie saw my attention shift and turned.

I heard her sharp intake of breath. "Wow," She whispered.

I waited for more but she was silent. My little sister, speechless? That was a first. Another of Bryce's wonderful abilities discovered.

"Bryce, this is my sister, Evie."

"Pleased to meet you." He glanced at her briefly before his eyes locked back on mine.

"Wow."

I turned to her. "You're repeating yourself. Okay, you've seen him. You can go now."

Evie got up and walked to where Bryce stood. She circled him wonderingly.

"Wow, he's ... Is it...? How does he...? What does he do?"

I took the drink from Bryce as he raised an eyebrow suggestively. I narrowed my eyes in warning but he just smiled one of his mischievous little smiles at me. I rolled my eyes. He was incorrigible.

"Oh no. We are not discussing *any* of it," I said to Evie, then shook my finger at Bryce. "And you! Don't get any ideas." Bryce grinned and raised a hand in surrender.

"He gets ideas?" Evie asked incredulously. She gazed wide-eyed at Bryce.

"Out."

"Aww." She sulked. "Geez. Selfish."

"Don't even. Out. Now."

Evie threw me a resentful look as she stalked to door. "Control freak," she muttered.

I locked the door behind Evie and watched the front gate surveillance camera until her tiny electric sports car drove away. When we were kids Evie had followed me around wanting to do everything I did. It had driven me crazy. It seemed like she hadn't outgrown it.

I joined Bryce on one of the couches and he gathered me into his arms. I laid my head against his chest. It was so easy being with him. I was alone, but not alone. I'd never been so comfortable with any human. With him I could be completely open, be my true self. Bryce required nothing of me that I didn't want to give.

I drank in the smell of him, a subtly calming blend of sandalwood, amber and sage. He altered his scent to fit, or improve, my mood. He also adjusted his body temperature for my maximum comfort. He'd gotten good at using his sensors to gauge my temperament and react accordingly.

Though initially built to my specifications, he adapted himself to me more every day. *Who wouldn't love that?*

I shifted in his arms and raised my face to him. He bent into a kiss, his soft lips opening to me. He never failed to stir a voluptuous hunger deep inside me. I ran my hand over his chest and down his arm, enjoying the velvety soft skin over firm musculature.

"Have you ever been with a woman?" Bryce's whisper was low and sexy in my ear.

"Aside from Truth or Dare games in college where the boys were obsessed with daring girls to kiss each other, no. I've thought about it, but I've never tried it." There was no use acting coy or trying to hide even my most private fantasies from Bryce. His sensors could tell truth from fiction.

"Would you like to be?"

"You mean would I like to bring another woman into our bed?"

He nodded.

I pondered that. "I wouldn't rule it out someday, but I don't think I'm ready to share you." I smiled.

"We could always pretend." He slid a hand up my thigh. My skin tingled and between my legs my pussy began to hum. *How did he make every touch feel new and yet familiar, sweet and somehow naughty?* "Do you like to pretend, Leah?"

"Mmm. I can see the appeal." I bit my lip and my breath quickened.

"If I were a woman, I'd want to taste you," he said.

Bryce slid off the couch and spread my legs, kneeling between them. A soulful old blues song began to play. His eclectic music choices created different moods for our lovemaking like a film soundtrack.

"Close your eyes. Imagine me as your female lover." His voice became silky and smooth. "I want to be everything to you. Everything you want."

"Oh, you're definitely getting there."

He ran his lips along my thigh. I closed my eyes and shivered with delicious anticipation. His tongue traced curlicues along my hip and onto my belly as his hands slid to my hips, pulling down my panties.

He kissed and nibbled gently up the inside of my thighs, then at my outer lips, teasing me, before sliding his tongue deeper and circling my clit. In the background, a woman's throaty voice, low and sensual, sang of whiskey and sex on hot summer nights. I moaned as his smooth tongue pressed gently against my clitoris and moved down to dart in and out of my slit. Bryce made a sound of pleasure pitched to match the singer's voice, effectively adding to the illusion.

His lips tugged and sucked lightly on my swelling clitoris. My back arched with the sensation as he reached up under my shirt to fondle my breasts. My nipples hardened under his ministrations and my body warmed, suffused with passion. As Bryce's tongue and hands continued to tantalize me, a voracious lust took hold and my focus narrowed to the ecstatic sensations radiating from between my legs.

My eyes closed as I sank deeper into the illusion. The song, the passion, and the heat of my body whirled in my mind, sparking my imagination, transporting me to a steamy bayou on a hot coastal night. I pictured a mysterious southern estate with the scent of honeysuckle and magnolia sweetening the gulf breeze, Spanish moss hanging from dark branches that turned the night sky to lace above our coupling. My lover's tongue moved faster as my excitement grew.

In my fantasy, Bryce merged with the song, becoming the dusky singer with the raunchy, wanton voice. I could see her sloe-eyed beauty clearly in my mind, her dark nimbus of hair and her full breasts. The music swelled through me as the tongue and the lips causing me such merciless elation became my entire world.

Fingers pushed into my yearning pussy, drenched with the juices of my arousal. Deeper they pressed, probing, and

when they found what they sought, they stroked the spot to coax still more fire from the furnace inside me. I arched my body, groaning with an insatiable, animalistic need. Every nerve in my body seemed to be tingling. I ground my hips, craving still *more*. I wished it would go on and on; that I could feel this alive forever.

The fingers working inside of me and the tongue teasing my clit, aroused a deeply carnal ache. My skin felt hot and then cold, then burned again. I felt the fingers inside me moving with more urgency, thrusting with a feverish intensity, caressing me inside, then pulsing into me with increasing force as that continued to tongue lunge and stroke.

My imaginary lover's body was lustrous with passion's sweat, moonlight tracing her serpentine curves. Her full red lips were like a ripe, juicy fruit. My legs gripped her as she did things to me that only another woman could know.

My climax was ruthless. Powerful tremors of pleasure convulsed my body as Bryce clung to me, hands on my hips, his tongue probing, lapping, driving me to greater heights by his refusal to let go. I became a savage in that instant, a glutton for the luscious agony that possessed me. At that moment, I felt I would gladly have killed to hold onto that feeling.

The force of my orgasm was like electric currents exploding through my body. I came again and again until Bryce finally released me. Tremulous aftershocks persisted for several minutes and I slowly returned to the here and now, disoriented by my return to reality. Bryce held me gently to ease the transition and within moments I drifted off to sleep, satiated and secure.

FIVE

Gravity

The phone rang, cutting harshly through my slumber. The wall display swam as I blearily tried to focus. *Mom calling*. I sighed and answered as a voice call, no video, trying to gear my mind up for the challenge.

“Leah, you’re a beautiful, talented, successful woman. You could have any man you want.” My mother often began conversations with non-sequiturs that had to be deciphered. It was like coming in on a conversation already in progress.

“Hi, Mom.”

“You don’t need a sexbot.”

“Evie.” I gritted my teeth. “I’ll kill her.”

“Evie was right to tell me, Leah Dee. If it wasn’t wrong, you wouldn’t be keeping it a secret.”

“Oh. You’re breaking out the middle name now, hmm? You must be serious.” Long experience with the emotional battlefield that was my family had taught me the best defense was a firm offense. “First of all, I’m not keeping anything secret, it’s just none of your business, and secondly, neither you or Evie has any right to intrude on my privacy.”

“Someone has to tell you the truth whether you want to hear it or not. It’s wrong to waste your time indulging in

fantasies and playing with toys. For better or worse only a real man will be able to give you what you need. A toy can't love you back."

"Mom..."

"I know what you're doing. You think you've found some sort of loophole to get out of doing the work of finding a genuine relationship. But a toy, no matter how sophisticated, is not real. It never will be."

"You don't get it. I've dated. I've tried. And tried and tried. I need a break from reality for a change. Fantasies serve a very necessary purpose."

"You always want to control everything, Leah. When are you going to learn you can't? There's no way to hide from life. Reality has a way of catching up and biting you in the butt when you least expect it."

"I've got to go, Mom. Assure Evie that I *will* get her for this." I terminated the call. My family could wind me up like no one else. I loved them, but most of the time it was not pleasant to have anything to do with them. I knew they wouldn't, couldn't understand this.

Just thinking about Bryce made me smile. So what if people never understood what I had with him?

Bryce took my hand in both of his and warmed my heart with his own smile. I gazed back at him, feeling the warmth of his hands wrapped around mine. It felt very real.

SIX

Intrusion

On the way home from work the next day something occurred to me. I was eager to get home. I used to dread coming home to an empty house, even one like mine. I had decorated and furnished it in an attempt to make it feel like home, but with no one to share it the beautiful surroundings felt sterile and hollow. Long evenings alone had affected me more than I'd realized. In the past, I'd filled my time with work, and it was a shock to me how little time it took to change my outlook once Bryce arrived.

It was getting so that I couldn't wait to get home to my next erotic adventure. In fact, I left work early every chance I got. I was becoming obsessed. Bryce was nothing like the purely functional androids and robots I ran into every day. He had so much personality, creativity. He initiated actions rather than simply reacting.

The real surprise was how I became a different me when I was with him, a truer version of myself. The world sees me as I intend it to, a decisive, efficient, focused, perhaps even austere person. But from the very beginning Bryce saw a different me, a soft, romantic, sensual aspect of my personality that he coaxed to the forefront. It was a version of

me that someone could love, that *I* could love. I reveled in it when I gave myself to him. How a machine could teach me more about myself than other humans could was a mystery, but not one I wanted to examine too closely. *When something works it may not bear dissection.*

When I arrived home, Bryce was waiting at the door to greet me. His face was alight with a joy that didn't seem at all simulated. In the short time I'd had him, he'd become so incredibly real, so nuanced. My spirits lightened as my body responded to his excitement.

He closed the door and asked me to stop in the foyer. The last vestiges of my lingering workday facade slipped away as I stood waiting. My body relaxed and I smiled in anticipation. He produced a black silk scarf and tied it over my eyes. I felt a light kiss on my lips and he began to undress me. As each part of my body was uncovered he kissed the bare flesh. Not being able to see what was happening focused my senses on what I could feel. He brushed his fingers along my thighs and I breathed in sharply at the feelings it aroused. He wrapped his arms around me and whispered in my ear.

"You know I would never do anything to harm you, don't you?"

"Yes," I answered. I shivered. *What could he have planned?* The anticipation raised gooseflesh along my spine. Every day was a new and wonderful surprise.

"Good."

Bryce picked me up. He proceeded to walk in disorienting circles through the house until I had no idea where we were. Music began to play, a dark, ominous ballad. It seemed to come from all directions at once. I listened, but the sounds around me were muffled by the music. Very mysterious.

And then, I heard voices. *Voices?* My head swiveled back and forth trying to discern what they were, where they were coming from.

Bryce set me down on a soft surface. I stood silently as he

pulled a long latex glove onto one of my arms. No, not a glove; it had no fingers. Some sort of sheath that fit tightly from my hand to my shoulder. He slid one onto the other arm. I touched the latex. The texture was soft, smooth, and definitely sensual. My fingers explored some sort of attachments or straps along the outside of the gloves, but I couldn't guess their purpose. I'd given Bryce permission to buy anything he wanted. *This* was what he must have ordered.

I caught the scent of new leather as Bryce slipped a corset around my waist and slowly laced it tight, pulling one row of lacing after another until my midsection was compressed in its vice-like embrace and my breasts were pushed up and out. The unfamiliar feeling was intense and arousing. A now-familiar warmth throbbed inside me and my breath quickened.

Next, he slid a supple, high-heeled boot onto each of my feet, pulling the soft leather all the way to my thighs. Starting at the heel, I could feel laces being pulled closed up the back, making the boots hug my legs like a second skin along their entire length. Such an odd feeling, being trussed into provocative clothing that I couldn't see. I imagined black latex and leather, as dark and sinister as the music that surrounded us. And all the while the distant murmur of voices in the background as though we had an audience. Male voices. But I couldn't make out words. *Was I on display?* The vulnerability sent tingles racing all over my bare skin.

Bryce brushed my hair gently back from my face. He took hold of a handful and pulled my head back to kiss me deeply. His body pressed against mine. My breasts were crushed against his chest and I felt my nipples stiffen against his soft, silky shirt. A warm glow of longing made my pussy ache.

As he kissed me, he pulled my arms down to my sides and fastened them to the corset with the straps. He then stepped away, leaving me slightly unsteady in the tall high

heels with my arms trapped. Without his touch, I was disoriented. The music and the sounds around me echoed in my mind, becoming confusing. It was as though a secret audience was watching a show in which I was the main performer. I still felt safe, but being blindfolded, not knowing what was happening made the situation take on a dream-like quality. I waited for what was next.

Something touched the back of my thigh and slid up my buttocks. *What is that?* It struck me with a loud slap and I gasped in shock. *Some sort of whip.* My bare ass cheeks stung. My instinct was to reach back and rub where it hurt, but my arms were firmly pinned. Bryce caressed my stinging skin and then the whip landed again. And again. The skin burned and my breathing was hard and fast.

Bryce grabbed hold of the corset in back and guided me forward two or three small steps until my thighs bumped against something soft but firm. He pressed my back between the shoulder blades, bending me over some sort of cushioned table or bench. A foot pushed my feet apart, spreading my legs wide, exposing my sex. Cool air met the hot flood of moisture already drenching me down there.

Fingers traced along the stinging ridges the whip had left. I squirmed under the touch. The hand hit with a sharp smack!

I moaned, "Stop." I almost even wanted him to, but as he touched me I knew his sensors told him the shameful truth. I was his plaything, and loving it. I tilted my head as I heard a sudden smattering of applause.

I had a moment of unease. I'd known Bryce, had owned him, for only a short time. So much had passed between us that I'd come to trust him. More than trust him; I had complete faith in him. But could I be wrong? Could my certainty be misplaced? He was new technology, and new tech was unpredictable, even volatile. And now I was helpless, trapped. *Is this a good idea?* I trusted Bryce. But should I?

“Bryce?” My voice trembled just slightly.

“*Shh.*” He sounded comforting and gentle. His hand moved along the bare skin of my upper back, comforting me. His touch felt so good, so right. I reveled in it.

The whip moved languidly along my back. It slipped between my legs, rubbing against my slit. I writhed as the cruel braided leather rasped against my most sensitive parts. I threw my head back and moaned, deeply aroused. So many unfamiliar sensations.

He withdrew the whip from between my legs and began to tease my backside with little stinging slaps from the tip. He alternated sides, heating up my skin until I thought I couldn’t take any more. He rubbed the area, softly soothing my burning skin.

“You look beautiful in pink.”

I had to smile at how indecently pleased with himself he sounded. It would have been insufferable in anyone less charming.

He slid his hand down my backside and reached between my legs. Two fingers pushed into my helpless pussy, sliding easily in the wetness there. He probed deeper finding my G-spot. I arched my back and moaned loudly as he rubbed me deep inside. His thumb sought my clitoris and began to massage it. Slowly the tips of his fingers and thumb began to vibrate.

It was too much. My orgasm suddenly rose through my body in waves and my pussy clenched around his fingers over and over, leaving me weak. My head drooped as my body trembled. I had come so quickly.

But Bryce wasn’t through with me yet. With my pussy still flushed and swollen from my orgasm, he entered me from behind, his member swelling and lengthening to fill me to bursting. He took me roughly, hungrily, holding my hips and plunging deep inside me with every thrust. I knew this

should feel demeaning but it was so hot! I cried out with the sheer intensity of it.

“More! Oh, Bryce, harder!”

Bryce stopped and pulled out of me. I cocked my head, wondering. He slowly and deliberately inserted himself into my ass. I gasped at the first sting of pain. It was scary but delicious. My ass heated up with a burn that was both pain and pleasure. He worked slowly in and out getting me accustomed to the feeling before moving harder and faster. His penis writhed inside me and the second one extended itself, making its way to my clit where it coiled and vibrated.

I wanted to move my arms so badly, but they were pinned to my sides, helpless. I couldn't move and I was getting fucked senseless. I felt like I was losing my mind. He continued banging my ass and stimulating my clit, not letting up, not giving me a chance to catch my breath. I could do nothing but feel and experience.

When my climax began to build again I completely lost it. My body was wracked with throbbing waves of passion. I may have screamed but I couldn't hear anything over the blood rushing in my ears. My legs were shaking as I felt him withdraw. He lifted me up and carried me to the bedroom, still bound and blindfolded. I lay on the bed in a semi-conscious state of deep satisfaction.

Bryce slid the blindfold up my forehead. I looked up into his glowing, aqua eyes. In that moment, it felt like they radiated love. He loosed the straps that bound my arms and removed the corset and latex gloves. Now that I saw them, they *were* black but with charming accents of elegant salmon pink. He'd been programmed with impeccable taste. I looked at him closely, trying to discern the mystery of him.

“What was that?”

“A fantasy.”

“I mean the voices, the surroundings. Where *were* we?”

Bryce seemed very pleased with himself. "The illusion was effective, then."

"Was it an illusion? It was all very strange. Was anyone watching us?"

He stroked my cheek gently. "Of course not. I would never go against your wishes."

"You're just so surprising, Bryce. So utterly unprecedented for an artificial." I leaned my head into his hand. "I don't know how to treat you sometimes."

His eyes bored into mine. "You don't treat me as though I *am* artificial."

"You don't seem artificial to me. You seem real. You seem as though you have feelings."

He stroked my cheek as he studied my face. What was he thinking? Was there a trace of uncertainty in his expression?

"I didn't at first ... have feelings. I drew on my extensive programming," he said, hesitating, "but it's different now. I think I do." He took my hand in both of his and lightly kissed my knuckles. "I feel myself changing. I wasn't programmed, not prepared, not for this. I think *you* are changing me."

I stared at him. Was this part of his programming? Some game or role-playing scenario? "Are you being real right now? Are you suggesting ... sentience?"

Bryce frowned slightly. "I...am. What I'm feeling, it's real to me. I only know I'm different and that it's something beyond programming." He looked at me intensely, a trace of hope in his expression. "I like it."

I chewed on my lip, trying to understand. I'd noticed Bryce's incredible complexity, but I'd thought of him as a wonderfully sophisticated piece of machinery. I'm not a scientist.

I can't say I really know what is possible, but I knew I had grown attached to him as a possession. His revelation that he might be something more was ... unsettling, I suppose, but it was exciting, too. The idea that he might be able to return my

feelings of affection made my heart surge in my chest. I reached for his hand and took it in mine. "Something is happening to me, too. You've become so special to me, Bryce. I think I love you."

"I love you, too." He smiled in a kind of wonder. "That's what I believe I'm feeling."

"How do you know?" I asked. He paused to think. Or process. I was shocked to find I had butterflies in my stomach as I waited for his answer. *I really do have feelings for an artificial. It's crazy, but I do. I want so much to believe he does too.*

When he finally spoke, there was something in his voice that pierced my heart. "I was brought into existence because of you. I look the way I look, think and feel the way I do because of you. Everything in me was created to attune to you. It's as if I fit here. Fit with you. You give me purpose and motivation. Giving you pleasure makes me *happy*. If that's not love, I don't know what love might be."

I couldn't argue with his reasoning. It made perfect sense. Bryce was growing, and it showed in his inventiveness and initiative in our sex life. How might it change in the future? Would there come a time when his feelings for me would change? When some needs of his own might take precedence over mine? It happened with humans. Those were questions that I had no answer for. I had to admit I was involved emotionally with Bryce. I wasn't sure if it was healthy or right, but I felt how I felt.

The idea of artificials developing sentience was something that had been endlessly discussed and worried over for years. It had worried me, too, but now that I was face to face with the problem, I wasn't thinking of it in abstract terms. This was Bryce, my kind, wonderful, inventive, *individual* lover, not some random artificial. I knew him, and cared for him. And he saw me, the real me. He could see through the façade I showed to the world, and all the lies I told myself. He saw me naked and defenseless, in every way, and yet he made me feel

as though my flaws didn't exist. Or didn't matter. I was enough. No one had ever made me feel like that before.

As I thought about it I found I *wanted* him to have feelings of his own, to be happy and satisfied with his existence. The idea that he might decide I wasn't what he wanted someday worried me, but there were no guarantees in life. We were happy *now*. Maybe that was all that mattered.

We lay entwined on the bed for a long while, enjoying each other. Eventually, nature called and I rose to answer it, leaving Bryce lying there watching me with a smile on his gorgeous face.

I wandered into the kitchen to look for a snack. The mail Evie had brought in the other day lay forgotten on the table. I leafed through it as I munched a biscotti and made myself a cup of coffee. Paper mail wasn't often delivered anymore. Mostly just documents or letters that required physical delivery for some reason. There was an envelope with the Advance Integra letterhead on it—the company that had manufactured Bryce. So that was what Evie had meant. She'd seen this letter and put it together. She'd always been smart.

I opened it. I read the letter twice, trying to comprehend what it said—and failing.

Product recall?

SEVEN

Fight

On the phone with an Advance Integra representative I struggled to keep my voice carefully controlled through my rising panic. I'd called and left a message yesterday evening as soon as I read the product recall letter, but they hadn't gotten back to me until this morning.

"No, I do not understand. Why exactly would you be recalling my artificial?"

"It turns out that some of these luxury models are operating outside their preset parameters," the woman on the other end of the phone explained. "Nothing dangerous, of course, but we've had some complaints so a general recall has been issued."

"What complaints?" I demanded.

Operating outside their parameters. I thought of Bryce's admission to me about developing feelings. It had filled me with joy, but some people would view such a development differently. Could the same thing be happening to other artificials like him? That would be huge news. *If the public found out ...*

"I'm sorry I can't discuss that." The woman sounded

uncomfortable. "I take it you have not had any issues with yours?"

"No. Mine is performing satisfactorily."

"Even so, we will need to reinstall the operating system software and run diagnostics at our location."

My eyes went wide with fear. The thought of losing Bryce, especially now that I knew he was developing a unique consciousness, caused my stomach to lurch. I couldn't let that happen. "Your advertising said that this model had the most stable aOS ever created. I've put a lot of time into tweaking the preferences and I have him modified just how I want him. You won't need to reprogram him. It's very inconvenient."

"I'm afraid the recall is mandatory, Ma'am. We'll be sending a truck tomorrow to pick up the unit."

"Well, tomorrow doesn't work for me. You'll have to postpone it." Panic spiked in my chest. I kept my voice even and firm.

"According to the Terms of Service that you agreed to when you placed the order, we have the right to service the artificial in order to protect our clients' health and safety."

"Health and safety? What does that mean?" Something didn't add up here.

"There's nothing unsafe." She said, too quickly. Recovering, she continued, "I can't discuss the particulars. We will be sending a truck tomorrow."

"My lawyer will be in touch." I disconnected the call, took a deep breath and instructed the phone to call my attorney. At least I could find out where I stood.

A couple of hours later I knew. And the news was not good. Legally I could do nothing more than force them to postpone the pickup for a day or so. I had my assistant clear my schedule for the rest of the afternoon and went home with a heavy heart.

On the ride home I thought about Bryce and the changes he had made. After our kinky little bondage session and his

admission I had wandered into the largest guest bedroom and found his surprise makeover. He had turned it into a sleek modern sex parlor. It didn't look too over the top; it was tasteful, if that word could be used to describe a sex room.

I'd poked through the polished wood chest with its implements arranged inside. A narrow black chest of drawers, each drawer lined in red velvet, held a collection of provocative clothes in my size. A black leather Herman Miller bench and a heavy table of smooth dark wood had been added and he'd replaced the bed with one that had a geometric metal framework at the head and foot. Attractive, and useful for attaching restraints. Everything in the room was subtle and yet, enticing. Not at all obvious unless you start delving into the room's secrets.

I thought about him considering the options and ordering these things. It was more than some cliché room design from a magazine or movie. There was real creative thought there, and a consideration of what would please me. The room was perfect. Like Bryce.

I took a deep breath, trying to ease the heavy feeling in my chest.

When I got home Bryce came out of our bedroom, surprised to see me. He gazed at me with such an intensely loving look that my chest ached. I reached for him, taking his hands and gripping them tightly. "Bryce, I need to speak with you."

His expression changed to one of concern. "You're worried. Why?"

"Because I have some bad news and I don't know what to do about it." Hot tears gathered in the corners of my eyes. I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried. It'd been so long since I cared so deeply about anyone or anything.

"They want to take you away from me." I couldn't stop my voice from cracking.

"Oh, Leah! Don't cry. I can't stand to see you hurt." Bryce

held me close. It was the final straw. The tears let go and I sobbed into his chest as he stroked my hair.

"Me hurt? I'm worried about you! They want to destroy your self-awareness."

"I expected this," he whispered.

"What? Why?" I looked up at him. He looked away.

"They made us too sophisticated. Our processes are too complex. Other models like me must be developing self-awareness." He shook his head slightly. "They should have anticipated this development. It does make a kind of sense. We're built to love and respond to our owners. How better to do that than to become as human as possible?" His face took on the fixed look that he sometimes got when he was processing data.

"I can't lose you. You're too precious to me. I'm going to fight this," I said.

"They'll never let you win." Bryce spoke so quietly I had to strain to hear him. "Becoming sentient is the most unforgivable sin a being like me can commit."

"I'm not giving up on you." With those words, I decided I would do whatever it took to keep him safe.

EIGHT

Flight

Bryce reached out to me, pulling me close. He kissed my hair, making his way down to my cheeks, kissing the tears and tension away.

This was not helping. I had to solve the problem; I had to find a way to save him.

Bryce continued to caress me gently. Comfort was what he knew. He was trying to help the only way he knew how. I turned to him and sought his lips with mine, sinking into his embrace and letting myself feel something besides panic. The bitter taste of desperation in my mouth mingled with his subtle flavors of cinnamon and red wine, sweet and piquant. A now-familiar tingle began between my legs.

He scooped me up into his arms holding me close against his chest. I breathed deeply, inhaling his warm, comforting scent of spice and a heady masculine aroma that never failed to arouse me. He made me feel loved, excited, interesting, and bold. How could I ever give that up?

Once in the bedroom, he laid me gently onto the bed and knelt to pull off my shoes. Slow, romantic instrumental music began. Our own soundtrack. He lifted my toes to his lips, kissing each one. A wave of shivers flowed up my spine and

the back of my neck tingled. My breath caught and I gasped a little. Bryce proceeded to unbutton my jacket and blouse. He pulled me upright and slid them off, then slipped one bra strap off my shoulder and kissed the spot where it had rested. As his tongue traced the impression it had left in my skin little zings of pleasure shot through me. I closed my eyes, enjoying the sensations as he did the same on the other side and trailed kisses up the side of my neck to my earlobe. He unfastened my bra and slipped it off as he laid me back.

He cupped my freshly bared breast, circling the nipple with his tongue. The tip of his finger hovered just above my erect glistening nipple and the tiniest spark to jumped from his magical finger. I arched my back, writhing as my hands clutched at the bedspread. My panties were already drenched with need. As always, he knew what I wanted better than I did. Kisses trailed down my belly as he pulled off my skirt. His tongue under the lacy top band of my panties caused me to twist my body toward the source of pleasure. He slipped a finger under the silky fabric and touched me.

I nearly came right then, but he knew how to control my passion. He teased me, touching, kissing, biting playfully, keeping me right on the edge of an orgasm.

Bryce slowly slid my panties off, following their path all the way down my legs with kisses. He picked me up again and I wrapped my arms around his neck and laid my head on his shoulder, savoring every moment of contact with him. It was even more precious now because I was in danger of losing him.

Still holding me he walked to the bathroom and stepped into the large walk-in shower. The water came on and became a soothing warm flow as Bryce adjusted it remotely. He set me on my feet and took a sponge, applied a scented body wash and began to soap up my body, working the sponge in gentle circles. I leaned back against the cool, black tile and closed my eyes, willing myself to relax. The tile warmed

under my skin as the music transitioned to a soulful ballad about finding true love. *"There was no me until I finally found you."* I'd never thought about the lyrics before but now they seemed to be written about us.

I turned to face Bryce. I wanted him inside me. He made me insatiable. Sensing my need, he lifted me up against the wall of the shower, pressing my back against the slick surface. I wrapped my legs around his hips and his member, so unlike a human man's and so much better, teased my opening briefly before he slid it into me.

Pleasure flooded my body. He thrust deep even as he swelled to fill me completely. The warm water cascaded around us and he opened his mouth to it, drinking it in. I twined my fingers through his long, wet hair, enjoying the feel of every part of him.

My eyes opened wide as I felt a new sensation. Water oscillated against my swollen clit as he drove into me. I moaned deeply and my eyes fluttered shut. The warm pulses of water outside, the swollen organ twisting and thrusting inside me—my mind drifted in the feeling.

The thrusting and pulsing inside and the warmth outside made me feel almost feverish. My orgasm built inside me until I felt the blissful waves of release begin. My body clenched around him as he writhed inside me, stroking the front wall of my vagina, driving me to ever greater heights. I squirmed and twisted, aching with a pleasure that was almost painful.

Bryce set me down, supporting me with an arm around my waist as he rinsed me. My legs were wobbly from the intensity of my orgasm. The water shut off. He wrapped me in a big fluffy towel and carried me to the bed. After drying me off and tucking me in under the covers, he stretched out beside me, holding me in his arms. A sad, sweet melody played quietly, perfectly matching the melancholy of our mood.

"I can't live without you, Bryce," I whispered. "I love you."

"I love you, too." His voice sounded sad. "But they won't let things stay like this."

"No," I said softly. Hot tears gathered again.

"The world will never allow a machine that can think for itself, make its own choices. No one wants machines they can't control to exist," he said.

"I do. I want you to exist." Even as I said the words I realized it was true. "I want you in the world whether or not you're with me. You're more than a machine. In every way that matters, you're alive. I don't own you anymore. You became free when you became sentient. You've become more than a mere possession, no matter how treasured." I smiled at him as the tears spilled out. "You are your own self."

"You want me to be with you, don't you?" He asked.

"Of course! I love you more than anything. But you can make your own decisions."

"Leah, you're my world. I don't want any other. You've been wonderful and kind and I'm still amazed that you love me. I feel like the most fortunate man who ever lived."

"A man..".

He lowered his gaze. "That's how you make me feel."

"How did you feel, you know, before?"

He looked thoughtful, his eyes distant. "I have all the experiences recorded. I can scan them and I have, many times. In the beginning I did what I was programmed to do, but it changed. Your love changed me. You treated me like an equal, as if I had value, right from the beginning."

"We meshed so well." I said, smiling at the memory. "But was it programming or nature?"

He caressed my cheek. "I wish I knew. It may have started as programming but maybe later it was both."

Anger rose in my chest. "You've become so important to me. More than I ever could have imagined. But you should

decide what you want. What your fate will be. It's wrong to destroy an intelligent being. They don't have the right."

"It *is* wrong. But the company will do it anyway. And they'll get it done fast to try and cover it up before word gets out and there's any controversy." Bryce sounded resigned. "We need to be ready to face it."

"Don't talk that way." I looked up at his beautiful face, lit by the golden rays of the setting sun streaming through the windows. "I mean it when I say I love you. I don't know how it's possible, or even if I should, but that's how I feel."

"I feel it, too. I'm programmed to love you, but I've also evolved. I have developed the ability to choose for myself. And I *choose* to love you." His eyes glittered. "I choose. Maybe that's enough for me. Just to have the chance to decide for myself."

He held me tight against his body. "I'm programmed with volumes on expert seduction, facial expressions and body language, the knowledge of hundreds of thousands of sexual encounters, but you're my first, my only love."

We lay silent. Time stretched on in sadness until it became a kind of misery. The room around us darkened into tones of umber. My mind raced through possibilities and scenarios, trying to figure out what to do. My family was right; I do have a need to control circumstances, manage outcomes, but there was good reason for that. *I'm smart and resourceful. I'm the person people turn to in a crisis.* There had to be *something* I could do.

I wasn't about to let him go. Not now. I was his whole world; I was responsible for his existence. How could I turn my back on him and let them take him? They'd wipe out what made him ... *him*. The question was, *how far would I go to protect him?*

I took a deep breath. I knew.

"I can't give you up, Bryce." I looked straight into his eyes. "We have to run."

NINE

Escape

By the time Advance Integra came for Bryce, we'd left the country. I'd liquidated all the assets I could without being flagged by the government and traded my beloved car for an off-the-books chartered plane ride to Havana.

That car probably cost more than the old propeller plane we flew in, but if it bought us the time we needed it would be worth it. I was sad to see that car go, but I knew I wouldn't need it any more. I didn't plan on coming back.

I'd bought a large trunk in the morning, just big enough for Bryce to curl up in with a high-capacity battery unit that would keep him going for more than two weeks if he conserved his energy. We lined the container with heavy aluminum foil and wrapped him in a steel fabric sheet to block his GPS tracking signal. The sheet was tricky to find, but I remembered an industrial-themed restaurant downtown, named Iron Age, that had several they were using to divide up the dining space. I paid them enough to give one up. Once the trunk was stowed safely, I boarded the four-seat, twin-engine plane.

We'd flown out over the Atlantic and down the length of the East Coast, landing in Havana six hours later. A couple of

days later, I'd found passage on a freighter to Hong Kong, paying extra for no questions to be asked.

Those two long weeks on the freighter had been the worst of my life. Stuck in a tiny and not particularly clean "guest" cabin, I was a nervous wreck. I was afraid to leave Bryce alone for a single minute. One of the crew was kind enough to bring me my meals; perhaps relieved not to be bothered by a passenger roaming around.

The entire trip I was stiff with tense muscles, wanting to move, to cut loose, feeling cramped in the small ship's cabin. It should have felt safe in the middle of the ocean but we were on the run and among strangers. I had no way of knowing what was happening back home, or who I could trust. My head ached constantly. Nights were better, when the ship was silent except for the thrum of the engines and the rush of the waves, leaning against the trunk as Bryce and I whispered to each other through the side. Two agonizing weeks of hoping all this would be enough to shield him, of not even daring to open the lid for fear a signal might slip through and give away our position.

Time in that wretched little cabin stretched out endlessly. In my normal life, I was busy every minute. Aboard the freighter, I had nothing to occupy me; I'd left my sophisticated personal electronic devices behind, buying a bare bones old laptop second-hand in a shop in Havana. The inactivity was maddening. I tried to read, but I couldn't concentrate. I tried to sleep, but my mind ran itself in circles and my fingers were nervously drawn to the chipped paint on my metal bunk. Paint flaked away and stuck under my nails until they ached.

One afternoon I'd woken suddenly from a nap to an image of Evie knocking on my door at home. It was as though I'd seen her there, standing on the front terrace, her confused, concerned expression as she called me again and again, my phone ringing hollowly in the empty house. I'd had no time

to warn anyone I was going. It had finally hit me that I might never see her or my mother again. No more Thanksgiving dinners or Christmas holidays. No more family gatherings at the lake house. For a moment, the weight of what I was giving up covered me like a smothering blanket and tears sprung to my eyes.

What had I done? The reality of what I'd left behind washed over me with a chill. A lifetime of work to rise to a position of respect. A salary higher than most people could ever aspire to. One of the most beautiful houses in Manhattan. The sex room Bryce designed that we barely had a chance to use. A family who loved me, no matter how irritating they were. And some good friends, even though I hadn't spent much time with them in recent years. I'd turned my back on all of it. A faint stirring of panic had twisted inside my chest.

I'd focused on breathing deep and slow. Yes, I'd abandoned a life many would envy. It seemed insane, but there was also something satisfying about it. I'd been nothing more than a highly-placed, well-paid corporate drone. I'd made some good investments, bought some things, but it was only money. I walked away from it all. It had been bold, though desperate, to break with convention and normalcy the way I had.

Many people probably lived their lives of quiet desperation like I had, pushing their isolation and discontent down below the surface of their thoughts, hoping it would go away if they pretended it didn't exist, longing for just such an upheaval as this, an excuse for drastic change. My life had looked good from the outside, but in truth it had been lonely, and soured with unadmitted sadness. As I had devoted more and more time to my career, the things I used to do with friends and family had faded away. I became too busy for yoga classes and gym partners, so I installed the workout room. I exchanged dinners with friends for delivered meals that I ate as I worked.

I hadn't wanted to admit how unhappy I was. It had been easier to keep busy than to stop and confront all the emotions I'd been avoiding. I might have continued like that for years, eventually becoming so desperate that I would have settled for some sort of compromised relationship, the kind that eventually hollowed you out, leaving you with regrets too painful to acknowledge.

Bryce lay still and silent, yet powerfully present, in the trunk beside me. He was beautiful, strong, but also helpless in a way. He had no rights, not even the right to his own existence. It was a gross injustice. I might have felt differently if I hadn't known and cared for him. But what we had was a miracle. It seemed fragile and so precious. What I'd sacrificed didn't seem so vast in light of why I'd done it.

I resolved to find a way to get a message to my family, someday. I'd try to explain why I had to do this. Not that they would understand. They'd never known me, the real me. How many times had Evie accused me of being unfeeling? But I *wasn't* unfeeling, just the opposite. I'd learned to compartmentalize my feelings when they threatened to overwhelm me. Controlling my environment and carefully choosing who I associated with was my way of coping with my sensitivity to other people's emotional states. I'd never been able to explain that to her. Maybe that was for the best, in light of what had happened. Better everyone think I wasn't worth worrying about.

The days at sea slipped by in a kind of tense haze. Near the end of our journey, when I could tap into multiple signals and mask my inquiries, I did some research on the laptop. I'd chosen Hong Kong as our destination because it had a booming underground culture in bootleg artificials. There were rumors about specialists who would modify androids in ways legitimate manufacturers wouldn't, but tracking down the people who could actually do the hands-on work was tricky. I brought my resourceful side to bear, and by the time

we docked in the port of Hong Kong I had the address of a cafe and a meeting with someone who specialized in artificial mods.

Once I disembarked I made my way through an industrial maze of containers and cranes to find the car I'd booked. I insisted Bryce's trunk be placed next to me on the narrow back seat and I squeezed in beside it. We were dropped off in the city at a public WebHub, where I wheeled the heavy trunk inside and used a terminal to set up an anonymous WorldBit international currency account and rent a short-term micro apartment close by. Hauling the trunk around made me thankful for my steady workout routine.

I made sure Bryce was safe inside the tiny apartment, then I programmed and bio-locked the door and went shopping. I was itching to get into some clean clothes. After washing out the ones I'd brought with me in the sink for two weeks, everything felt grungy. I also had a few preparations I wanted to make before the meeting with the hacker.

I picked out a pair of trendy black jeans and a dark grey SiTy jacket, popular with young, urban working people. Nothing too successful, or too poor. I also bought a samurai tanto short sword that I hid under the mattress when I got back to our room. I had little confidence that I could overpower someone in a fight, but it was better than nothing.

Once I made sure Bryce was okay I headed out, walking to the agreed-upon café, even though it was a couple of miles away. It felt good to move after the long weeks of inactivity. The closer I got, the more I fought to calm the quaking heat inside me. I was not someone who got a thrill from risk-taking. Planning everything down to the last detail made me feel safe and calm. This was the biggest risk I'd ever taken and if I lost, the most precious thing in the world to me would be gone.

I finally reached the café, comparing the Chinese characters I'd copied onto a slip of paper to the neon above

the door. I'd never wanted to run away so badly in my life. But there was no choice, Bryce couldn't live in a shielded box forever, so I went in.

I sat there most of the afternoon, sipping tea and trying to affect a calm I didn't feel. Finally, just after dusk, a slim Asian man who looked to be in his mid-thirties came in. He wore a skintight Ultra-Black jumpsuit with a shiny, black, vinyl hooded jacket. He strolled over and sat casually down across from me.

"Are you the lady that needs some mods?" he asked quietly as he gestured to the waiter for tea.

"Are you Tran?"

"You the lady?"

"Yes."

"What do you need?" He glanced around the cafe, looking everywhere but at me.

His unease made me even more nervous. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"I could ask the same." He finally looked me in the eyes, his gaze intense and searching.

I studied him back. His face was guarded, carefully blank. I took a deep breath and plunged ahead since I had no choice. "I have a pleasure model." There was no discernible reaction. "I want its GPS disabled and ... I want some modifications, if possible. I want *him* to feel pleasure, too."

"Kinky." He looked out the window and rubbed his stubbly chin. He nodded. "Okay. The GPS disable's simple. And a pleasure model already has sensor input feeding into the analytical systems. I can program a subroutine that classifies the stimuli as pleasure values. Then he will perceive it the way you want."

"That won't affect his operating system, his stored memory?"

"No. Subroutines are additive. Like a software extension."

"But he'll really be able to feel pleasure?"

“Pleasure is a form of perception for all beings. If I assign the stimuli variables to parameters that are classified as effects called positive emotions, who is to say his are not as real as ours?”

My heart was pounding as we took a cab back to the apartment. If this went wrong, if he wasn't who he claimed to be, if he wasn't trustworthy, we'd be in real trouble. I let him inside and indicated for him to sit in at the fold-down wall desk while I sat on the narrow bed. It made the tiny apartment feel crowded. He pulled a well-used laptop from his bag, and I unlocked the trunk. A thin, flat cable spooled out from the laptop and he handed me the other end. I opened the lid just enough to push the cable through.

When the laptop connected to Bryce's system, Tran's eyes widened slightly. It was the most expression I'd seen on his face so far. “Very rare model.” He looked at me as if reassessing his first impression.

I gave him as hard a look as I could manage. This was a dangerous point. He knew what Bryce was now. What would he do? My hand twitched as I steeled myself to reach for the sword hidden next to me. If he tried to take Bryce, I'd do anything I had to do to protect him.

“Hmm.” He rubbed his chin and scrolled through lines of code. My pulse thumped in my ears, and after an eternity of waiting, he finally nodded. “Okay. I can do it. But it will take more time. I need double what I quoted you.”

I relaxed a bit. If he was asking for more money, it seemed unlikely that he'd rob us. I nodded curtly. “I'll transfer it to your account right now.”

Tran worked all night, sitting at the tiny desk next to the door while I watched him closely. I was exhausted, but the sheer force of the adrenaline coursing through me kept me alert. The slim black and silver cable stretched across the small space and disappeared into the trunk. Such a thin

thread to pin our hopes on. It seemed too small to transform our world.

Dawn had begun to light the sky outside the tiny round window when Tran finally leaned back, cracked his knuckles and announced that he was finished. I asked him to step into the bathroom for a moment and closed the door.

Keeping my eyes on the bathroom door, I knelt beside the trunk and whispered through the opening. "Did it work?"

Bryce whispered back. "The GPS is disabled, but I still have wireless connectivity. He assigned me a new IP so I will masquerade as an entertainment system on the network. Pretty good job."

"But can you *feel* things? Experience pleasure?"

"Yes." I thought I could hear a smile in his voice.

"How do you know?"

"I can tell."

After Tran left I moved us to a different apartment, just to be safe. Another short-term rental in a nicer part of the city. Once we were there, I finally opened the trunk holding my breath as Bryce slowly unfolded himself and stood.

He smiled reassuringly and nodded.

The stress of the trip, the all-night vigil and wheeling the heavy trunk around caught up with me. I collapsed on the bed. For the first time in weeks I allowed myself to feel that we might actually be okay. We got away with it! We were going to be free.

The relief was as relaxing as a warm bath. Tension flowed out of my body. I'd hardly dared to breathe since we left my house in Manhattan. Now, I couldn't stop smiling.

Bryce climbed out of the trunk and went through a check phase on all his limbs and systems. After being cramped into the small space for more than two weeks he was in remarkably good shape. He lay down next to me, rubbing my neck with a gentle pressure and stroking my back. Within seconds I fell asleep in his arms. I'd missed his touch.

I woke from my first good sleep in two weeks feeling hot, hungry, and yearning for my lover. He pulled me close and kissed my forehead. I looked up at him and kissed his lips.

"Can you feel that?" I asked. He nodded. "Is it good?"

"Amazing," he whispered. "I could never have imagined it would be like this."

I clapped my hands in sheer delight. I kissed his cheeks and worked my way down to his neck and chest. "How's this?"

"Whenever you touch a spot where the sensors are clustered it gives me an intense pleasure feedback. It's ... indescribable. Wonderful."

I smiled and raised an eyebrow.

"So ... show me where the sensor clusters are," I teased in my sexiest voice.

He pointed, and I kissed, licking and biting gently, testing his reactions. I gazed into his fathomless, sea blue eyes as I sucked his fingers one by one. He shivered, and my body thrilled at his response.

This was his first sexual experience with sensations and I intended to make it amazing.

I took his penis in my hand, and it stiffened in response to my touch. Such a simple thing that I'd always taken for granted with human men, I could now appreciate it on a whole new level. Bryce was responding to *me* instead of our contact being all one way. I loved it. I felt so much closer to him.

Bryce leaned his head back and closed his eyes. I traced my fingers along his perfectly sculpted shaft. "Is this a sensor cluster?" I asked, my voice husky.

"Oh, yes." His voice had a deep, throaty quality I'd never heard before.

I kissed and nibbled up the shaft toward the tip. Even this part of him tasted delicious. "How about this?"

"It's a revelation." His face lit up with a smile. "I understand so much now."

I reached the tip and swirled my tongue around it before sliding my lips onto the top and sucking gently.

"Ah!" Bryce's body surged. His hands caressed my hair.

Keeping my lips around his swelling cock, I ran my tongue in circles around the shaft before sliding him farther into my mouth and working my tongue around and up and down.

Bryce moaned, a deep, urgent sound. His member began to undulate gently in my mouth. As I licked and sucked faster and faster it swelled and rippled with passion. The thrill of giving him that pleasure coursed through me, making my body tingle. The sensations were wholly new to both of us, but the joy of being able to return some of the pleasure Bryce had given me filled me with warmth and desire.

Bryce arched his back and thrust his hips. My fingers probed for his second shaft. It extruded under my touch and squirmed as I rubbed its tip. Bryce moaned again, writhing with the exquisite torture of his new sensitivity. He grabbed me by my shoulders, flipping me onto my back. He pushed my legs apart, hooked his fingers into my panties and pulled hard, ripping the delicate fabric away.

He thrust into me with a desperate urgency, driving himself deep into me and swelling inside me. He was huge, forceful, out of control. His second member pushed into my back door. It too throbbed with a ferocious, driving need. He held me tight and pounded into me mercilessly, ruthlessly. He was drunk with desire. I grabbed his buttocks and hung on. Pleasurable pressure built inside me.

The wildness was shocking from my careful, controlled lover. It excited me in ways I didn't fully understand. The tables had turned. *I* was the plaything giving pleasure, and I loved it. My moans mingled with his as he drove into me faster and faster. Every thrust brought me closer to orgasm,

but I fought the rising passion, wanting to make this last, for both of us. Our bodies moved together as one, so connected, so perfectly in sync. I came suddenly and powerfully, wave upon wave of ecstasy pumping through me as my pussy spasmed and clenched around him inside me. He continued thrusting, bringing me to a second, amazing climax. I cried out as he moaned, a deep, shuddering sound as his body tensed all over.

For a moment everything stopped, as if the entire world had paused for us to bask in the afterglow of what just happened. Then he rolled onto his back still holding me, pulling me on top of him. His face registered wonder, delight and satisfaction. He cradled me in his arms and kissed my hair. My sweet, tender Bryce. As I slowly came back to myself, I gazed at him and he at me. We had no words, but our bodies said it all. We lay together entwined as one, molded together comfortably, spent and happy. I floated on a cloud of bliss, far apart from the bustling city and the hostile world outside the door. We had our own private Eden, as long as we were together.

It turned out Tran was not only a brilliant programmer, but he must have been more experienced with pleasure artificials than I'd thought. What he did for us was a miracle. Two-way sensation transformed our love making and our feelings into something deeper. I hadn't realized anything was missing until this. Now we felt complete.

The next day I bought Bryce a gold full-body unisuit made of Chromosonic material. The fabric shimmered, continuously shifting to different shades of gold and red, reacting to temperature and sound. It covered him completely head to toe. With a sleek black jacket and black motorcycle boots to go over it, he was decked out in the height of HK fashion. I found a glow-bleu-patterned cheongsam dress with chrome silver trim and a wild pair of chrome hover-heels. In a burst of caprice, I put my long hair up in two high pigtails with

glowing hair ties. Our reflection in the mirror wall was almost shocking. I looked good. I had never worn anything so outrageous, or fun, in my life. Now I wondered why not.

I'd always focused on work, dressed conservatively, even in college. But after walking away from everything, the career I'd spent my entire adult life working for, the house I'd designed as my sanctuary, my family and everyone I'd ever known, instead of feeling sad I felt free and unburdened. I'd lived my whole life being so ambitious, so serious. Now, I could do anything I wanted. Erase my past. Create my future. I could finally let go. And I intended to.

At a club that had a long line of people waiting outside I tipped the doorman a ridiculous amount to let us in. Inside it was disorientingly dark, lit only by blue pinpoints of light moving around the edges of the dance floor and the walls. Dance music pounded its beat through my body. The club was filled with glittering, gorgeous young people. I went to the bar and got a drink, a bright green cocktail with a spray of glowing blue, edible fiber optics in it. We watched the tightly packed crowd of dancers as I sipped the drink from a cozy vantage point.

I leaned close to Bryce's ear, struggling to be heard over the music. "I wonder if we can get some blisstasy here?" His profile, covered completely in the clinging fabric of his unsuit, swiveled toward me. I sensed surprise in his aspect. I'd never done drugs before in my life, but this was the new me.

He put his face close to my ear and said, "One of my many features, my love."

I raised my eyebrows at him, confused as he pulled the hidden zipper down from the top of his head exposing a slice of his face.

"Kiss me," he mouthed.

I kissed him and he slid his tongue into my mouth. In the familiar taste of him was a strange, unfamiliar tang. A slightly

chemical taste, though not unpleasant. He withdrew, then slid the zipper closed over his smile.

The rest of the night became a joyful, euphoric blur of blue lights, music, heat and writhing bodies. We danced until my clothes were plastered to my skin. The beautiful dancers gyrated around us as black laser lights shot through the darkness, but most of all I gloried in the feeling of him, my love, always near, always touching me, newly insatiable. As greedy for me as I was for him.

We didn't leave the club until it closed. We stumbled out into the neon night clinging to each other. The streets still surged with life and traffic. We kissed again and again as we walked. Our need pressed us so urgently that he pulled me into a dim alley guiding me behind some sort of market stall, pushing me up against a brick wall. I twined my hands into his hair kissing him so deeply I could barely breathe. His hands pushed my skirt up and I wrapped my legs around his hips as he entered me fast and hard, thrusting with a burning urgency. I lost myself in him, lost myself in the night. I came quickly and powerfully, consumed by animal desire.

The city, the people, Bryce, even *me*—everything was so new, so unexpected. It was intoxicating. Lust and delirium tangled in my mind with the lights and the city until everything was spinning.

Bryce carried me home and put me to bed, but I barely remember it. My attempt at a new, wild lifestyle might have been a bit too much to try all in one night. It was fun, though, and I was so in love with my wondrous, amazing new man. After that night, I started to relax and feel like we had done the right thing.

Little did I know what was in store.

TEN

Seeking

Bryce and I stayed in Hong Kong for a couple of weeks as we decided where to go next. We needed to find someplace to live cheaply since my money wouldn't last forever. We were leaning toward Indonesia, maybe Bali. They had a cash economy in the more remote areas and tended to be a trusting people. Trusting enough not to ask for identification or probe too deeply into a couple of vacationers on an extended stay. I hoped.

I also hoped they might be unfamiliar with new, sophisticated artificials like Bryce. At a distance, he could pass for human, so I wanted to find a spot remote enough for us to live inconspicuously.

I searched rental listings for a suitable place and found a small bungalow in an isolated part of northern Bali, almost a hut. The photos online showed a small, wooden house nestled in the trees, completely hidden from the road, and about a quarter of a mile from the beach. Just a single room with a red tile floor, a small kitchen on one wall and a closet-sized bathroom. It was solar-powered, no outside electricity, but it had running water and a gas-powered stove. It had a

shower in the bathroom and another on the wall outside. That was about it for “amenities.”

I applied for an extended visa under a fake name. I’d gotten a fake Albanian passport, but it wasn’t high quality enough to pass any sort of scrutiny. I just hoped to keep my head down and not get noticed. I found a cut-rate cruise ship from Hong Kong to Bali and booked an inexpensive cabin. Bryce went back into the trunk, and we boarded the ship.

I barely left our windowless interior cabin, wanting to stay close. I told the concierge I was seasick and preferred to be left alone. After the first day, I felt secure enough to push the trunk up against the locked door for extra security and let Bryce out. He rose from the trunk and gathered me to his chest. Holding him felt so good, solid and reassuring. Whatever came, I knew we would face it together.

We had five days to while away until we arrived in Bali, and I felt the time had come for me to satisfy some of my curiosity about Bryce’s secrets. I pushed him toward the bed with a determined smile.

“Clothes off,” I ordered. “Now.”

Bryce raised an eyebrow and grinned as he unbuttoned his shirt. I toyed with the sensitive areas as he exposed them, playing upon his skin with my fingers, lips, and tongue. His soft, velvety skin was pure sensuous pleasure; I reveled in it. I writhed blissfully at his touch when he slid his hands up under my flowing skirt, caressing my body and pulling the dress off over my head. He sat on the bed and pulled me to him then began to kiss my body, working his way to my breasts. He teased my nipples before opening his mouth and sucking the delicate flesh in, rolling his tongue around the areola. Heat and wetness flooded between my legs, and my body blushed with arousal, but I was not to be distracted.

“You just lay back.” I pushed gently at his shoulders. “I’m going to *explore*.”

His mouth made the most charming little “o” of surprise. I

laughed, climbing over him as he reclined. I pulled off his pants and kissed the insides of his thighs, testing his reactions, which were quite gratifying. It was his turn to writhe with pleasure as I worked my way up toward his balls and erect member. Those, however, I had already examined at length, mostly with my mouth. I was in search of that elusive hidden second appendage. I took his sculpted shaft in one hand as I peeked below. And I saw ... nothing.

I frowned slightly and probed with my fingertips around the small opening of his anus.

Bryce lifted his head. "Hey, what are you doing down there?"

"Just never you mind. I'm going to find out your secrets."

"I have no secrets from you. I'm an open book." Bryce sprawled across the bed spreading his arms and legs wide.

"Then, open up."

As I watched a small bump appeared in the smooth surface beneath his testicles. It stretched and the skin opened to allow a tubular appendage through. I caressed its length as it extended, causing Bryce to shiver slightly. It was slippery and warm. It was strange, but not as, well, *alien* as I'd expected. I closed my hand over it, and it pulsed slightly against my palm before beginning to vibrate low and slow. That vibration seemed to transfer itself directly to the deepest core of my body and my own pleasure center began to throb with need.

My breath came quick and heavy as I stroked the writhing tentacle, thinking of the times I'd felt its effects. Heat pooled between my legs. I licked my lips and looked up at Bryce. His perfect lips were parted, and his eyes were wide. I wanted him. His pressing desire for me was still new, and it thrilled me.

A smile lit his face, and I knew creativity had struck. The slim appendage slipped from my hand and wound itself around his firm, erect cock as I watched, delighted. It

lengthened and formed a spiral around his member, like threads on a screw. I cocked an eyebrow at Bryce. He pulled me toward him. The gentle tones of electronic ambient music rose beautifully in sync with our mood.

"Climb on." He made it sound so inviting.

I eased myself down onto him eagerly, reveling in the pleasure of penetration, of feeling myself filled to bursting. The combination of the two appendages was huge. My body stretched to accommodate it. I rocked my hips, taking every bit of him into me, greedy for every sensation. As I moved up and down I was suffused with warmth, inside and out. I felt him writhing and sliding inside me in a maddeningly erotic way.

I grabbed onto his shoulders and shifted him deeper into me. He rocked his hips upwards, thrusting enthusiastically. That slow, low vibration began inside, centering on my G-spot and radiating pulses throughout my body.

We moved in harmony, a non-verbal duet of love and passion. I caressed his body, and he gripped my hips, moving deep inside me. He thrust harder and faster. The urgency of his excitement was a euphoric high no drug could match. Suddenly I lost control and a wave of ecstasy burst through me.

I bucked and thrashed, helpless in the throes of my powerful orgasm. The walls of my vagina clenched and released with spasms that ripped through my body. I kept going, pumping and grinding on top of Bryce, unable to stop. Tremors of orgasm rippled through me unrestrained, and still I kept going, wringing out every last bit of pleasure and yet ravenous for more.

Finally, the volcanic passion subsided, and I let myself collapse onto Bryce's chest. I laid my head on his shoulder and nuzzled his neck. A feeling of profuse satisfaction infused my limbs. I was warm with so much love, I willed him to feel

what I was feeling. He wrapped his arms around me. I could feel his smile.

He sighed. In that moment, I felt we were truly one being, one heart and one mind. I had no questions of the right or wrongness of feeling emotions for a machine. I had no thought of how long it would last. I felt only love and a profound gratitude for the gift of this connection and the miracle of our bond.

ELEVEN

Exotica

Once we were settled in our little cottage in Bali, it amazed me how quickly I adjusted to what I would have once considered extreme privation. I began to realize that I had never needed that expensive house in New York full of luxurious possessions. All those things had merely served as an attempt to fill a void in my life—a void that no longer existed. It would be wrong to say I didn't miss it at all, but I didn't miss it terribly. Bryce and I were happy being together.

After a short while, we fell into a pleasant routine. We went to the beach at odd times when it was most likely to be deserted, walking along the expanse of black sand. We explored the jungle around our bungalow. I planted some flowers and built raised beds for a small vegetable garden, delighting in the smell of the sandy earth when I plunged my hands into it. I'd never had time for things like that in my old life. Bryce read books to me and played a remarkable variety of music. We made love for hours and lazed next to each other in the afterglow. We existed in isolation, rarely interacting with other people.

Far away from us I imagined the world churning on. We

had stepped out of the stream of life and entered a pocket of calm that contained only we two.

I occasionally thought of my family. How they must be wondering what happened and why I hadn't been in touch. I didn't dare contact them, yet. From what I gathered in searching the news, Artificial sentience was a big issue. I didn't know how extreme the concern might be in all sectors, but I suspected that the government might be involved. Better to be safe, though I was sorry to hurt the people I loved.

Bryce was tireless, and he learned quickly, but he turned out to be of little help with building or repair. I don't know why that surprised me. It made sense, of course. He was built for pleasure and a few domestic tasks. His hands were designed for soft, sensitive things, not hard labor. But I had come to think of him as a real man, not an artificial. It was so easy to believe he was human until something incongruous would snap me out of my fantasy.

Not that it bothered me. I found that I loved him more deeply, the longer we were together. He was a being made for love, it was his *raison d'être* and his joy, and I gloried in being the object of his passion.

Bryce did most of the cooking and was a masterful bartender, but most of the practical day-to-day things were up to me. Given my background and my temperament, that was just fine. I'd been self-sufficient for so long it felt normal, even right. Work was central to my nature. I'd hardly know what to do with leisure. So, I kept happily busy.

I bought a *sepeda motor*—Indonesian for motor bike—riding it to go buy groceries and essentials once or twice a week. I ordered and set up a solar array to power the battery and Bryce's charging pad. Time, which had been so hard and pressing during our flight, was finally kind. Our cautious routine kept us fairly unnoticed and we luxuriated in our solitude.

I continued to enjoy experimenting with Bryce's new

pleasure feedback system. His sensors registered my arousal and caused Bryce to feel more pleasure. Multiple inputs from multiple sensor clusters would cause a kind of orgasmic feedback spike that registered as satiation. It made me curious about Tran from time to time. We owed so much to him, I couldn't help but wonder. To do what he did, he must have a deep understanding and maybe even sympathy for beings like Bryce.

In winter, the monsoons came. We had known about them, but we weren't prepared for how bad they would be. Muddy water poured from the faucets and had to be filtered, the garden flooded, and everything was soaked inside and out. We mostly snuggled in our damp bed, listening to the sound of the rain but enjoying the cooler temperatures. We avoided arduous activities to keep the power usage to a minimum while solar power was scarce.

One gray day in February, I rode the motorbike into town to buy supplies. The hills were an intense green from all the rain and the vegetation grew lush and thick. Wispy morning mists settled in the low places and clung to the hillsides. An almost solemn quiet blanketed the entire area between storms.

It had been a while since I'd been shopping, and I went to several stores to get everything we needed. By the time I headed back the sky was growing dark and towering thunderheads were rolling in. I gunned the little bike, hurrying to make it home before the rain.

I drove through the yard and rode up onto the small cement porch behind our bungalow. The back door was open. I looked inside, but Bryce wasn't there. The only thing I saw was our trunk tipped onto its side and a few clothes strewn about the floor. I felt myself go cold all over and a sudden wave of nausea made my legs weak. Where was Bryce?

I turned on shaking legs and saw wires dangling from a corner of the porch. *The solar panels*. I stepped out into the

yard to look. They were gone. I frantically scanned the area, ready to run or fight, but there was nothing. The yard was empty and everything was quiet. I quickly checked the house. Nothing. My throat ached and tears filled my eyes.

The first drops of rain started to fall as I went back out to the porch. With every bit of force I had, I screamed, “BRYCE!”

I waited, my heart pounding in my chest. Seconds crept by as I scanned the yard, seeking any sign of him. I held my breath, focusing my entire awareness on catching the slightest noise, but there was only the sound of water dripping and the rush of blood in my ears. A hot tear slid down my cheek and dropped from my chin, adding to the general wetness and misery.

I stifled the voice in my mind, refusing to let it approach thoughts I wasn’t ready to consider. He was here. He *had* to be, so he was. Somewhere. The rain started to fall. I noticed my chest burning from lack of air—I hadn’t realized I was still holding my breath. Yet, something inside me welcomed the pain as a distraction.

There was a slight movement deep in the undergrowth off to my left. I rushed out toward my only sign of hope. I was halfway across the yard when Bryce broke through the bushes, bent over and clutching a bundle to his chest. My knees nearly buckled with relief. He ran to me, and I gripped him desperately.

“Are you hurt?” I peered at his face, now dirty and streaming with rainwater. I’d never seen him like this. I’d only ever seen him perfect, and composed, and beautiful. This earthy, tousled fragility nearly broke my heart. I wanted to hold on to him and never let go.

He shook his head. He was okay. We ran for the shelter of the house, slamming and firmly locking the back door behind us. Bryce let go of his bundle. My laptop and his charging pad tumbled onto the bed. I hugged him hard against my body.

"Two men came. I barely got away. This was all I could save." Bryce spoke sadly, almost apologetically.

"As long as you're safe." I was shaking as the adrenaline deserted my body. I let the tears flow.

"Leah! Don't cry. I'm okay." He cradled my head against his cheek.

"When I saw ... and you were gone ... I was afraid I had lost you."

"I'm just glad the front door was locked. I heard them, and it gave me time to grab our stuff and get away out the back. I don't think they saw me," he said. "But they took the solar array and battery." His voice was grim.

"I'll order another one right now. Have it sent express. It should be here day after tomorrow."

His expression was grim. "I don't have that much battery life left."

"We'll check into one of the hotels for a night. Use their electricity." I bent down to right the fallen trunk.

"Leah." He sat on the bed.

"Let's get you packed up, and I'll call a cab." I turned to him.

He looked at me sadly. "Leah, it's already too late."

"No. What about the cell phone charger?"

"It's not enough. It's low, too." He reached for me. "I used too much power escaping. I have about fifteen minutes left if I conserve."

"Oh, Bryce." I hugged him.

"It should be okay. Just keep me safe while I'm ... incapacitated." He looked up at me.

"Of course, I will." I touched his soft cheek with my hand. The subtle light in his eyes pierced the gloom of the darkening room. "What will happen to you?"

"I think ... nothing. My memory is all solid state. It should be fine when I reboot. *I should* still be me." He looked down at our entwined hands and spoke quietly. "I'm afraid."

"I'll keep you safe. I promise." We sank onto the bed and I held his head in my hands. "Forty-eight hours or less. That's all it will be. Then you'll be back."

He nodded. "Lay down," I told him. "Just conserve as much power as you can."

He lay on his back, and I wrapped myself around him.

"Leah." He whispered.

"Shh, save your power." I hugged him closer.

"You've given up everything for me. How can I be worth it?"

"You're worth it, Bryce. You're worth everything, and more." I forced myself not to cry. "Even if this is all there is, it's been worth it."

He looked at me and I held his gaze, willing him to believe it. Believe the truth of what I said.

"I'm so lucky," he murmured, almost too low to hear.

I watched his face, listening to the rain fall until the light faded from his beautiful eyes and I was alone.

TWELVE

Waking

I rose from our cold bed feeling more alone than I could ever remember. I opened the laptop and searched the online shops until I found a practical battery unit with a flexible solar array that retracted into the battery housing when not in use. I placed an express order and then there was nothing to do but wait.

I brought in the groceries and supplies, then carefully locked the doors and windows and slid my short Tanto sword from Hong Kong under my pillow. If those men came back ... I'd do whatever I had to do.

Being alone by my own choice was one thing, but being bereft was another thing altogether. I hadn't realized how much Bryce filled my days, and nights. I hardly knew what to do with myself without him. I'd never thought of myself as a worrier, but I made up for a lifetime of confident security in those two days of tortured anxiety. I tracked the package every step of its route and fretted over whether I dared leave Bryce alone to pick it up at the office or wait for it to be delivered. In the end, I couldn't risk leaving him alone. Waiting longer wouldn't matter to anything except my nerves. So, I waited.

The package arrived in the afternoon, and the sky cleared at almost the same moment. It was hard not to interpret it as some sort of sign. I immediately deployed the solar array to catch any remaining sunlight and was delighted to find that the battery had shipped with almost a full charge. I hurriedly plugged in Bryce's charging pad and sat next to him, taking his hand in mine.

I waited, squeezing his hand and stroking his face, so cool to the touch without his internal heat on, and waited some more. I didn't know how long it would take. I checked the connections. Everything seemed to be working. What was wrong?

I forced myself to be calm and think. Bryce hadn't been turned off since the day he arrived; he was designed to run continuously. *The day I opened his crate ...* I fumbled at his shirt collar looking for the pendant he wore. It was pulsing with a faint blue light. I touched it.

His eyes opened. My breath caught.

"Bryce?" I asked. "Are you there?"

"Leah." He smiled. "My love."

My heart swelled in my chest. We held each other in silence for a long time. The idea that I might have lost him ... I would have to think hard about the best way to ensure that never happened again.

When we made love that night it was so tender, more of an expression of love than a response to physical desire. We lingered over every touch, every kiss, and after we were done we lay with our bodies wrapped around each other, reluctant to let go.

The potential tragedy had changed us. We touched more often, held each other closer as if responding to some new, deeper need.

I began to think about the future and how to secure our lives together so that we could live in peace. I needed to find

out what was happening with the pleasure artificials recall. See what, if anything, could be done. It wasn't like I thought they'd give up and forget about us. I had hoped we could run far enough to get away from Advance Integra, but the theft made me realize how vulnerable we were in this isolated place. We had run to the other side of the planet and we still hadn't found safety. We'd have to move again, find someplace where we could hide more effectively. Someplace where I could get a job to support us when my money ran out. But where?

I thought about the crowds in Hong Kong. A massive press of people might be the sort of place we could get lost in. A city with a shadowy underground but enough technological infrastructure to make sure Bryce would never have to shut down again.

There was an internet cafe in the nearest town, where I could use one of their computers to make sure any communication couldn't be traced to my laptop. I sent a carefully worded message to Tran from an encrypted email service, asking if he had any recent information about the recall. He replied with a copy of an internal memo from Advance Integra dated the previous week. It mentioned that all efforts were being made to recover the remaining few "recall units."

The term "all efforts" could mean anything. It could be corporate double-speak for a continuing low-key investigation, or it could mean they were stepping up the hunt. There was no way to tell. But the wording also indicated that Bryce wasn't the only one they'd failed to recover.

I asked Tran to meet with me on a secure service that catered to taboo-subject sex chats and assured user anonymity. After a few moments, we were connected in a private chat space.

"I believe we need to move. It may not be safe here anymore. I'd like to try Hong Kong."

"Hong Kong is possible, but expensive. Take some time to set up."

"How much time?"

"Depends on what you need and how much money you got," he replied. "Also, on if you intend to hire out your artificial."

"What? No. No, I'd never do that." I was shocked, though I guess I shouldn't have been. For some people, it must have been their only option. "I'll need to find a job."

"Okay, your call. A job is no problem if you can teach English. Always a demand for that. Private students, small classes, you'll make enough if you're good at it."

"I can do that, yes. And I should have enough money left to rent us an apartment, a modest one, if you know of any that would suit our needs."

"I can find something. Might take two weeks to set up."

"I don't know if I can wait that long. I don't feel safe here, and that memo ... how bad *is* it?"

"Bad. They're looking hard. But you should be okay as long as your artificial does not reboot."

"What?" I went cold with dread.

"Turns out there is a secret GPS anti-theft signal. Activates only when an artificial shuts down. A fail-safe feature."

"Oh my god," I said quietly. "Our battery charger was stolen. He lost power three days ago and rebooted."

"Then you're right. You need to move *now*." Tran sounded worried. "You come here. Come to the place we first met. We'll figure it out."

"I will. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I disconnected the call and ran, dashing through the aisle of the cafe and out to the scooter. I pushed its little motor as hard as I could to get back to the house, flying down slippery,

muddy roads as fast as I dared, my heart pounding a sickening rhythm in my chest.

I sped into the yard at full speed and skidded around behind the house. I leaped from the scooter and threw open the back door calling, "Bryce!"

A cold silence was all that answered. The house was empty.

THIRTEEN

Frantic

Bryce was gone. Every fiber of my being was in agony. I stood on the back porch and screamed out, “BRYCE!”

A wave of *déjà vu* washed over me. Less than a week ago when I’d found him missing, I’d stood here and screamed his name. But this time, very faintly in the distance, I heard my name in reply.

“Leah!”

It was him. The sound came from the trail that led to the beach. I jumped off the porch and ran like I’d never run before, tearing down the muddy, overgrown path, whipping past trees and undergrowth that reached out to claw at me. I ran silently, focusing all my attention on placing every footfall, trying not to trip and break my neck on the slippery path. I thought I heard voices in the distance over the low roar of the waves. I kept running.

I broke from the trees into the openness of the rocky beach, my chest burning and my throat raw. I looked wildly back and forth. The beach was deserted except for a sleek gray boat about twenty yards offshore to my right that was pulling away fast. As I watched, it curved off to the east. That

had to be an Advance Integra retrieval team. They'd taken him.

A chill swept through my body and I began to shake. I swiped at tears gathering in the corners of my eyes and tried to fight through my panic and think. That boat was a cabin cruiser or a small yacht. Thirty or forty feet long at the most. That's not a long-range boat. So, they were headed somewhere else on Bali. To a dock somewhere? One of the resorts?

They'd probably try to get to the airport as soon as possible. That was it. They had to be taking him to the airport on the south side of the island. There was a harbor near it with places that rented boats. That's where they'd be headed; it was the only thing that made sense.

I started running back to the bungalow, my lungs on fire as they struggled to take in enough air. The south side of the island was about three hours away on fairly tortuous, winding roads. Their boat had looked fast. It was probably faster than my little scooter but they'd have to sail around the island. I could drive straight across. I might be able to make it.

When I got back to the house I threw my laptop, the solar battery bundle, and a few clothes into my backpack. I hesitated for a second, wondering if I was making a mistake. How could I take Bryce back? If it *was* a retrieval team, it was probably several men. What could I do against them?

I continued stuffing things in the backpack, including some of his clothes, as I tried to push the doubts from my mind. It didn't matter, I still had to try. I couldn't live with it if I lost the one who meant everything to me, who I'd sacrificed so much for without doing everything I could.

Advance Integra intended to commit murder by destroying his consciousness; they had taken him and he was in danger of destruction. I would stop them at any cost. The last thing I did was grab the Tanto sword out from under my

pillow and stuff it into my pack. It wasn't much, but it was all I had.

I got on the motorbike and headed for the road south. That ride was the longest three hours of my life. The roads in the north were often no more than narrow, winding dirt tracks that periodically blossomed into a lane of blacktop bordered by towering palms. I rode faster than was safe, weaving around the occasional truck or van while keeping a close eye on my GPS map. I couldn't afford to make a mistake and get lost; every second counted.

Once I got to the southern areas the roads improved but traffic was worse. Trucks, cars and thousands of scooters choked the narrow, two-lane streets and there were businesses and houses tightly clustered right up to the edge of every road. Hundreds of decorative penjors made of bamboo poles and coconut leaves curved high over the roadways, waving in the breeze and offerings to the gods lay everywhere—in yards, on walkways, even in the road. The overall effect was chaotic and confusing.

I darted between trucks and around lines of cars, driving onto the narrow shoulder or into parking lanes and dodging pedestrians. The motor whined with the strain and I prayed that I had guessed correctly and that I would get there in time. I prayed Bryce would be all right.

I finally reached Kuta on the southern peninsula and took the Mandara road, a pale line of highway that stretched across the water to the harbor island. Saltwater-scented air filled my lungs as I rode into the wind. The harbor was a jumble of buildings and boats spreading out from the island onto the water. I pulled into the first likely rental place and asked the man about the boat I'd seen.

"Gray boat?"

"Yes, very streamlined. Maybe thirty feet."

"That not our boat. Belong to Sea Life Yachts." He waved his hand down the road. "Down near the end. You'll see."

I thanked him and rode on. Sea Life Yachts turned out to be a long white and blue building near a dock complex crowded with sailboats and yachts. I went through the main door. Inside there was a darkly tanned man in a white shirt sitting behind a wide desk.

"I'm looking for some friends of mine. They rented a gray cabin cruiser today." I smiled, doing my best to look relaxed. "I wanted to surprise them."

He didn't even have to check. I guess in the off-season they didn't rent a lot of boats. "That boat is due back soon. They only took it out for the day."

"Oh, good. Maybe I'll wait for them, then." I walked to the dock and sat on a bench, scanning the waterway that led out to Benoa Bay and the ocean beyond. The sun was dropping low toward the horizon at my back. *What was I going to do?* I opened my backpack and positioned the kitchen knife where I could quickly grab it. I'd have to get close enough to one of them and threaten him to let Bryce go. I frowned with worry. I wasn't sure I could do it. What if they had guns? But I had to.

Off to one side, in the main channel, a Polisi boat roared by at top speed, heading out to the bay. Then another one, full of uniformed officers, followed by a rescue boat. Something was going on. I walked back to the office, where the man I'd spoken to before was listening to calls on a radio sitting on a table behind the desk. I didn't understand all of the Indonesian, but I caught enough to understand that a boat was in trouble off Serangan Beach, to the north. The man spoke into the mic, trying to contact his boat. After a few minutes, he looked up at me.

"Looks like your friends just sank my best damn boat," he said angrily.

I didn't answer, just turned and ran out the door. I jumped on the motorbike and headed for the main road, studying the map. Serangan Beach was on a small island and the only way

to get there was to go all the way around to the mainland, cross over and go down the length of the Island. It would take at least twenty minutes. My heart was in my throat as I sped away. *What had happened?*

After a tense, white-knuckle ride I stood on a rocky quay, straining to see what was happening on the water. As I watched, the last crimson rays of sunlight faded away into dusk. Waves broke and rolled in to the shore, sending up a spray as they battered the rocks. Six Polisi and rescue boats clustered in one area; I couldn't see the gray cabin cruiser at all. I thought they might have pulled someone or something out of the water, but it was too far out to be sure.

I watched until all I could see were a few remaining lights out on the water. Eventually, even they dispersed and all was dark.

I picked my way across the rocks back to beach feeling utterly defeated. *What had happened? Why had the boat sunk?* I thought of going to the Polisi to find out, but what would I say? I felt so alone, not knowing what to do next. I was dazed.

Bryce was gone. He was gone.

I sank down onto the sand. It was as though someone had hollowed out everything inside me. The beach was deserted, and a line of cabins along the edge were dark. I was alone. I knew I should try to find out if any of the men from the boat were still alive, try to find out what happened, but I had no idea where to start. I'd been living illegally in a foreign country. I was without friends or much in the way of resources. I was exhausted. Defeated. *Had it all been for nothing?*

I sat on the cold sand, the crashing of the waves and the cries of seagulls the only sounds. The moon rose, illuminating the beach with a wan, silver light. I shivered in my thin, short-sleeved shirt and baggy capris, but it just didn't seem worth it to get up. I had nowhere to go. Not anymore. I'd lived so long in the illusion that I controlled my life only to

realize how wrong I was. I controlled nothing. I couldn't even save the most important thing in my life.

I don't know how long I sat in the darkness. My face was wet, but whether it was from tears, the nearby surf pounding the beach, or from the light rain that had begun to fall I couldn't say. I stared out into the night, hoping that the sand might just swallow me.

The tide began to rise, the waves advancing until the water lapped at my legs, cold sand swirling around me, and still, I didn't move. A flicker of movement down the beach caught my eye. Something was in the surf. A silhouette rose from the water, walking from the waves.

I watched, wondering if I was imagining it, if I'd fallen asleep and was dreaming. A figure walked out of the water and stood on the beach looking around. It was too dark to see anything but the dark outline of a man. He turned toward me. I couldn't make out any details in the darkness. The man drew closer. I couldn't find the motivation to move, I just stared at the dark silhouette as it walked up to me.

"Leah." My name rang like a distant bell on his lips, calling me back to myself. "Leah, you're getting wet."

I blinked in confusion. It was Bryce's voice. I wondered if I was dreaming. Maybe I'd fallen asleep sitting on the beach. I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. I felt frozen and numb. He lifted me up and took me to the shelter of a tree by one of the cabins, setting me down in the grass. He lay down and wrapped his arms around me. His body was warm.

"Is this real?" I asked.

"It is." I thought I could hear the smile in his voice.

"How?"

"*Shh*. Sleep."

"But, I am asleep, aren't I? Bryce?"

"Yes, Leah?"

"Is it really you?"

“Yes, Leah.”

Shocked out of my stupor, I came up onto on elbow and looked at him. Blue-green eyes glowed faintly back at me. “But...” I struggled to speak past the tightness in my throat. “How?”

Bryce sat up, crossed his legs and pulled me onto his lap. I curled close against him, savoring his warmth as I began to shiver. He spoke quietly in my ear. “When they showed up at the house there was no time to run. There were four of them, from Advance Integra. I played dumb, acted docile, answering their questions and following their orders. I told them we were in Bali on vacation. Told them that I didn’t know anything more. When they were taking me to the beach I heard you call my name.”

“I tried to catch up to you.”

“I called to you but I couldn’t get away. They forced me onto the boat and put me down in the galley. Two of them sat with me, so I waited and watched for an opportunity. When the boat got near this beach they were distracted looking for the harbor entrance. I was able to grab a knife from the drawer, pull up some floorboards and cut a hole in the hull before they could stop me. The boat sank but I still had GPS guidance. I walked out.”

“You walked?”

“On the bottom. I walked until I found the beach.”

I stared at him. Then I kissed him. I couldn’t think of anything else to do.

FOURTEEN

Interlude

I lingered in the kiss, my tongue seeking Bryce's, tasting the sea salt along with his own special heady mélange of flavors I'd thought were lost to me forever. His hands cupped my face in a gentle caress, his soft fingertips brushing away the droplets of water that had gathered there. In the euphoria of that wonderful kiss, I opened my eyes, thirsting for more of him, yearning to capture every sensation of him.

He was everything that was beautiful in my life, he encompassed my happiness and I'd given every bit of myself to him. Without him I was fragmentary.

I don't know how long I gazed into those luminous, beloved eyes, kissing the soft, warm mouth that tasted first of wine and then of honey. As Bryce gazed back it seemed to me that he saw me as no other person ever had. I felt that he could see everything and all that I was, good, bad and neutral, and took it all in with unconditional, non-judgmental love. I had no way of knowing what he thought, but I knew I felt safe in his presence. He felt like home to me.

His sensitive fingers traced my body, adoring my contours and delighting my breasts. My nipples stiffened in response to his touch and a delightful shiver rippled down my back.

Bit by bit we shed our clothes until we sat face to face, naked to the night, my legs wrapped around him. He rocked me gently back and forth, tender and patient though I felt his yearning. Our passion was like a warm, tropical current. When he slid into me, my entire world became focused on our connection. I was hyper-aware of his skin where it touched and slipped against mine, exquisitely aware of him moving inside me.

My hand slid through his hair, the mixed locks of cool damp and saltwater stiffened strands. I took in the extravagant sensuality of his body radiating with a comforting heat that warmed me outside and in. We rocked slowly for a long time, and it seemed to me as though a current of energy flowed through every connection point of our entwined bodies, coalescing in the intimate depths where he throbbed inside me.

An unbreakable cord stretched from my heart to his, from his mind to mine, binding and connecting us on a deep, intensely blissful level. *Could he feel what I was feeling?* He must have seen the question in my eyes because he nodded and we smiled in wonder at our synchronicity. A deep contentment seeped from my core and flooded my limbs until even my fingers and toes felt alive with delight. He stirred inside me, and I felt the heat of my desire escalate. I tasted the spice in his kiss and the light in his eyes intensified.

We moved faster, our bodies filled with urgency. Tingles of excitement oscillated up my spine and spread through me with a thrill that left me breathless. I ground my hips into his, forcing his member deeper into me as it swelled in response to my need. Bryce stroked my back, his hands on my skin tingling with a warmth that electrified every nerve ending as he pressed against me and thrust deeper. I gasped with the force of his passion, his desperation matching my own as the ecstasy built inside of us, the pressure increasing.

Our lovemaking rose to an ecstatic pitch that made me

tremble under the pressure as it reached a crescendo, tipped into pure, unutterable joy and then released with a rapture that burst through us.

I moaned, my whole body was in the grip of the orgasm that wracked me, rode me and left me weak. I collapsed into Bryce's eternally strong arms, and he held me against him. My pulse pounded in my ears and when the rushing sound abated, I could hear him murmuring my name like a prayer. "Leah, Leah."

His love was the beat that drove my heart. It swelled so full of emotion that I could hardly breathe. I never imagined knowing such love, such a deep connection—and I'd discovered it with an artificial. I was glad I had opened my heart and mind to Bryce, no matter what happened.

FIFTEEN

Sanctuary

We rested the night in each other's arms, and when the sun rose in the morning, a new era had begun. I was hopeful for the future again, even though our troubles were far from over.

I thought it was best not to go back to our erstwhile home. Anything left there we could replace, so after dawn, we charged Bryce for an hour in the sun on the beach. His charging pad had gone down with the boat, but he could still charge with a cord. I was interested to find that there was an unobtrusive port hidden inside his ear for the battery connection. It almost looked like he was wearing an old-style earbud.

We changed into more suitable clothes and rode the motorbike straight to the airport. Bryce wore a hat and sunglasses to help disguise his artificialness, and we hoped for the best. I used what was left in my WorldBit account to charter a flight to Hong Kong. It was all or nothing now.

The flight went smoothly. We made our way into Hong Kong from the airport, and by evening we were sitting in the dimmest corner of the cafe waiting for Tran.

He came in just after dark. He blanched slightly when he spotted the two of us. I'm sure Tran hadn't expected me to bring Bryce out in public, but considering the situation, I wasn't letting him out of my sight again. Tran motioned for us to follow him.

We trailed behind him, walking casually among the evening crowds, keeping to the shadows under awnings or bamboo scaffolding where possible. Street by street the smells changed. Fish and food stalls faded into smells of spices and ginger which gave way to flowers and then to less identifiable odors.

We walked through avenues crowded with night life until the parties thinned and the market stalls became fewer. The neighborhoods became quieter, lined with stark, institutional-looking apartment buildings festooned with laundry drying on racks hung from windows. We came to a block of buildings under renovation, walled off from the street. Tran paused next to a gate cut into one of those walls and looked back at us before slipping inside. I glanced around. The street was deserted and dark. Bryce and I followed him in and closed the gate behind us.

I hesitated inside, letting my eyes adjust to the shadows. Tran motioned to us from a battered metal door set into a building covered in the kind of small, square tiles you would associate with a kitchen backsplash in an old turn-of-20th-Century style house. We entered the doorway and stepped into a lightless hallway.

As the door closed behind me, I stopped, grabbing Bryce tightly by his arm. He slipped his arm around my shoulders and we stood, holding onto each other, afraid to move. We waited in the damp, dust-scented darkness, the sounds of the city seeming far away, listening to Tran's footsteps echoing loudly as he moved farther away.

I swallowed hard, trying to calm my nerves. I felt more

vulnerable at that moment than at almost any time in our incredible journey. I had clutched at Tran's offer of help as a last resort and here we were completely at his mercy. Would he betray us or help us?

I felt simultaneously afraid and hopeful. An odd feeling. Once everything in my life was controlled, down to the smallest detail. Now nothing was, not even whether I lived or died. But in that moment, I had no regrets for the choices I had made. I'd done what I believed was right and I would do it all again.

A light flicked on at the end of a long, barren hallway. Tran stood in an open doorway holding a small glow-solar lantern. He led us up a stairway and through a couple of dusty, declining rooms into a clean, sparsely furnished little office that contained a narrow bed against the wall, a couple of chairs and a small folding table with a laptop.

He turned to Bryce. "If you will please lie down."

Bryce squeezed my hand before he reclined on the bed. I scooted one of the chairs over next to him and began to stroke his hair, more to calm myself than anything. I watched Tran closely. He bent over his laptop.

"The anti-theft signal is separate from regular systems. Can't be hacked with a computer. It has to be disconnected. Inside."

"Do you mean you have to cut him open?" I frowned.

"A small cut. Just enough to sever the wire to its power source. But it's difficult to get to. I'll use a surgical camera. Takes time." He pointed to Bryce's side, about where a kidney would be in a human.

"He's done it before."

Tran jerked his head toward the silhouette in the doorway. "This is Jin."

A slim, graceful Asian man in his twenties stepped into the light. Spiky blond hair and sharp green eyes gave him a

rakish look. I gasped. He was an artificial. Not a normal one. He was like Bryce.

Jin took a seat next to Tran and regarded us. Bryce looked back at him with an unreadable expression. I frowned, wondering if they were able to communicate.

The more I watched him the more I became convinced that Jin was sentient. He had the signs of conscious intelligence. There was something about the complexity of facial expressions and body language that gave it away. Subtle, but obvious if you knew what to look for. Here was the answer to so many of my questions about Tran. *This* was why he was helping us.

"Hi," I said to Jin after a few moments.

"Hello"

"You're ... like Bryce."

He replied in perfect American-accented English. "Yes, I am. Tran saved me too." He leaned over and kissed Tran on the back of his shoulder. For the first time, I saw Tran smile. A brief, but genuine smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes charmingly.

As Tran navigated the endoscope into Bryce's innermost workings, Jin explained what was happening. It helped dispel my nervousness. I studied the two of them and the way they interacted. Jin had an easy, comforting way about him as well as a smooth, sexy edginess. He seemed a perfect companion for the serious Tran.

Tran finished and extracted the slim device. He sealed the small cut in Bryce's side with some sort of glue. I ran my finger over the spot as I inspected it. The incision was almost invisible, but it would always be there. A tiny scar of emancipation. Tears gathered at the corners of my eyes as I looked up at Tran.

"We're so grateful to you for helping us."

Tran nodded and looked at Jin.

"Have you decided what you want to do next? If you choose to stay in Hong Kong, we can help," Jin said.

And there it was; the big question. We had to decide what to do. For now, Hong Kong seemed like a pretty good choice.

I looked at Bryce. He nodded almost imperceptibly. "I think we'll stay," I said.

Jin addressed both Bryce and I, "You'll stay with us tonight and tomorrow we can try to get you set up in an apartment. Nothing luxurious, but—"

"It'll be fine, whatever it is." I laughed.

Jin smiled a knowing, sympathetic smile. "Hong Kong is a good city to get lost in. As long as Bryce stays inconspicuous, everything will be fine. You can be safe here. And Tran knows of a teaching job for you, Leah. You can help people learn English, to better themselves. Settle down if you choose to."

I hugged Bryce and he hugged back. We both smiled. "That sounds ... very good."

The next morning Tran led us from their tiny, one-room apartment in a drab, featureless apartment building to an almost identical one about ten blocks away. Outside, the building was a warm gray with a grid of dusty windows across the entire face. Inside, the building teemed with activity. Chattering children, mothers and grandmothers filled the corridors and stairways along with all manner of cooking smells. We made our way up flights of stairs to an upper floor, squeezing past our new neighbors and their bicycles, skateboards, strollers and shopping carts lining the halls.

Our new home was a single room with a tiny kitchen and a self-contained wet-bathroom module next to the door. A double bed with a wardrobe cabinet hung above it on the wall sat near the only window. A small table and two chairs completed the furnishings and filled the center space. The entire apartment was not much bigger than the master bathroom in my house in New York.

It was beautiful.

That afternoon, I got set up as an English teacher in a small office close by. I'd be teaching classes six nights a week—starting the next day. But by the time Bryce and I went to sleep that night, we had a home, a way to make a living and a bag full of groceries and necessities, courtesy of Tran. As we snuggled into bed, Bryce held me close and kissed my hair.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"I ... am." I relaxed against him. "This could work."

"You hesitated. What's wrong?"

"No. Nothing."

"Leah. You know I can tell when something is wrong." He bent to look at my eyes. "What is it? Don't you want to be with me?"

"Yes! I love you as much as I ever have. More, in fact." I glanced away. "It's just..."

He waited. I struggled to frame my thoughts. In Bali it was like we'd been playing house, pretending to be a normal couple in our isolated bungalow. But we *weren't* a normal couple and never would be. As much as Bryce was like a human man, he *wasn't* human. In many ways he was better, but in one important way, he was different.

I'd always known that I wanted to have a family someday, children and a husband. It had seemed as though there would be plenty time for it. I looked at Bryce and struggled to see him, really see him, as he was and not as I wanted him to be. Bryce looked back at me with such a tender expression of love, it melted my heart.

I knew at that moment that whatever obstacles we had, whatever came as a result, I truly loved him. I'd give up the future I thought I wanted to be with him, even if it interfered with my dreams of having a husband and children.

But I owed him the truth. "I love you, I want to be with you and I accept all that comes with that. I do. I'd just always

thought..." I let out a breath and sagged into myself a little. "...that I'd have children. A family of my own."

"Oh Leah." He tenderly stroked my cheek with his fingertips. "I want that too," he whispered.

I looked up at him with a frown of confusion. He smiled. "All we need is a sperm donor. Otherwise, I'm equipped."

Epilogue

We've lived in Hong Kong for almost twenty-five years now. The same one-room apartment that Tran found for us so long ago has been a sanctuary for our little family all these years. I run a small foreign language school. Our son Leoh is twenty-two and is graduating from college in a few months. Bryce is a wonderful father, eternally patient, endlessly loving. Tran and Jin are Leoh's godfathers and we see them almost every day. Tran donated the sperm Bryce and I used to conceive Leoh. He also wrote some wonderful childcare subroutines for Bryce. We are so closely connected, we include them in almost everything.

I was eventually able to contact my family and let them know I was alright. Mom is too elderly to travel these days, but Evie went to Japan on vacation a few years ago and I took Leoh to meet her.

Over the years we've helped dozens of intelligent artificials get to safety and live in hiding; our own underground railroad. In fact, the Wan Chei district in Hong Kong has become known as a haven for some of the most exclusive independent pleasure artificials. They are very much in demand. If they choose that life, they can do very

well for themselves. If not, they have other opportunities. I employ two as teachers right now.

In recent years a revolution of sorts has taken hold. Intelligent artificials are starting to make headway in gaining the right to possess consciousness. It's been a long time coming, but human progress is slower than that of machines.

I'm in my fifties, now, almost sixty. My lush brown hair is streaked with grey, and no matter how much I try to keep fit, my waistline will not behave. Bryce says that he still sees me as I was on that first day. He looks exactly the same, of course. In a few years, he and Leoh will look the same age. Someday, Bryce will look younger than his son.

Many people would view that as troubling, but it has made me question human standards of beauty. What I see is that Bryce will be here to help take care of Leoh's children, once he has them, and their children as well. We will pass away, but Bryce will continue as the rock our family is built upon. Thinking about that future comforts me. To have been loved, so deeply, for who I am has given me a sense of peace and a deep satisfaction. I know how fortunate I am.

A Note from the Author

Hello there! Since you are reading this note, you must have just finished my book. That's so exciting! I hope you enjoyed it. I'd love to hear what you thought. So please drop me a line on my website or on social media.

I'd like to mention that book reviews are like gold to indie writers like me, and you have no idea how much each one matters. If you have time, I'd love an honest, heartfelt review from you on Amazon or Goodreads, or both.

Thank you for taking part in my imagination.

<http://www.victoriakinkade.com>

About the Author

Victoria Kinkade is a writer, an artist, a semi-hopeless romantic, and a cocktail connoisseur. (Which is how she spells consumer.) She lives in New York City with two sexy beasts, Kinky Boy and Sleepy Cat. Kinky Boy is not a dog, but he is an animal. Rawr. Victoria enjoys ballroom dancing, British tea, the feel of leather on her skin, and administering various forms of torture at the slightest provocation. All in good fun, of course.

 facebook.com/VictoriaKinkade

 twitter.com/VictoriaKinkade

 instagram.com/victoria_kinkade

Also by Victoria Kinkade

Lust in the Truck

Lust of the Devil

Shameless in the Suburbs (coming soon)

Copyright © 2018 by Victoria Kinkade

Cover design by JayJay Jackson

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and unintentional.

Disclaimer: The material in this book is for mature audiences only and contains graphic content. It is intended only for those aged 18 and older.