

# Yesterday Once More



Karen Culver

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To the women of  
Romance Authors of the Heartland

Thank you for your support,  
your instruction,  
and your friendship

And to the men in my life—  
Bruce, Drew and Grant



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# Prologue



The dull thud of combat boots echoed along the desolate underground corridor as Colonel Gabriel Von Brockman made his way toward gleaming silver-white doors. Square jaw set in determination, he methodically plotted his strategy.

They owed him this assignment. He wouldn't be denied. At long last he'd taste sweet vengeance.

The portal ahead, Brock glanced down and noted his filthy fatigues. He should have changed into dress uniform, he thought ruefully, but time was of the essence. He snatched off his navy blue beret and slapped it against his leg. A fine spray of dust burst into the air, but he continued his trek.

“Von Brockman, two, two, nine, four, eight, nine, five.” He spoke in a clipped toneless voice to the electronic door sentry. Placing his forehead on a raised pad, he waited for the red beam of the retina scan to verify his identity.

“Good evening, Doctor Von Brockman,” crooned a distinctly feminine computerized voice.

“Colonel,” he snapped. “Damn computer can’t even remember my rank,” he muttered in resigned disgust.

The heavy doors slid open in a soft whirr, and his attention returned to more pressing matters. He barely noticed the teeming activity in the cavernous situation room. His mind still focused, he turned down an interior hall and stopped in front of an ornately carved bronze door. Placing his hand on the glass pad next to the portal, he repeated the identification procedure and the door swung inward.

A long, glossy black table stretched out in front of him. Brock studied the faces of the three men at the far end. Two of them, General Cyrus McClellan and Secretary Urie Sedenky, he held in the highest regard. The other, Undersecretary Lawrence Kady, he tolerated. Barely. Stopping a few steps from where they sat, he planted his feet firmly and assumed a military stance of attention.

“At ease, Colonel.” General McClellan appeared troubled. “We’ve called this meeting because Phillip Lilpout has surfaced again. We want Major Davidson to find him.”

Brock lifted the corner of his mouth in what might pass for a smile. “Begging your pardon, sir, *I’m* the best. As the Major’s commanding officer, I’m exercising my privilege to preempt.”

Lawrence Kady leaned forward on his elbows. “Are you insane?”

“You have a problem?”

“You bet your sweet ass I have a problem. You totally screwed up your last assignment. Transferring into a crisis situation without consulting the Council was a stupid, arrogant move. I’ll be damned if I let you do something like that again.” Kady spit each word out in a malicious rasp.

“I’ve already made my statements and the review board supported my actions.” Brock stared down at the wiry little man, raking him with a contemptuous glare.

Under Brock’s intense regard, the man fidgeted in his seat, though his hatred remained clear. Brock never quite understood Lawrence Kady’s resentment. Too bad. Brock was what he was. A warrior. He’d been born and bred for it. Literally. Kady would have to deal with his own insecurities.

Brock dismissed Kady. He wasn’t about to pussyfoot around the jerk. Every minute he stood here the trail grew colder. This time he would find Lilpout. This time he would make the scum pay.

General McClellan waved at the empty chair next to him. “Take a seat, Brock.” He steepled his index fingers beneath his round chin. “Yes, you were vindicated, but you should have at least notified us of your intentions. You took a bad situation and pulled it together as best you

could.” The general cleared his throat. “We’re here to focus on the matter at hand.”

Brock nodded and folded his six-foot-three frame into the offered chair.

His brow furrowed in concentration, the General flipped open a metal folder, which revealed a glowing screen. Pressing a button, he scanned the screen before turning back to Brock.

“We assumed you were still on leave,” McClellan hedged.

“Let’s just say I have a score to settle with Lilpout.”

The General squinted, clearly studying Brock. “Very well. It looks like the year is 1999 this time. Our sources suggest he’s looking for another scheme to increase his wealth.”

Knowing he’d gotten the assignment, Brock nodded. Ordinarily he’d celebrate the victory. Not this time. He knew better than anyone just how dangerous this mission would be. He may have just signed his death warrant—and a whole lot of other people’s as well.

General McClellan glanced at his colleagues before continuing. “As I’m sure you’re aware, several decades ago the Global Leadership Council restricted and appropriated all research and information on preserving and extending human life.”

Brock nodded. “I’m aware of the dictate and its repercussions. Disclosure of those findings would

have eventually caused mankind to exterminate itself from overpopulation. It was a simple choice, either seize the information and outlaw it or sterilize every person on earth.”

The General nodded his agreement. “It would seem that Doctor Lilpout has located the source of the original research and is looking to market it openly. If he gets his hands on it... Well, I’m sure you get the picture.”

Brock pushed himself from the chair. “I do.”

Secretary Sedenky, his own luminous note pad in hand, pivoted in his seat to face Brock. “Our reconnaissance indicates he’s secured a partner from 1999. A woman. Probably the wife of the scientist who made the original findings. The scientist himself is two years deceased in 1999.”

Lawrence Kady shoved another metal folder across the glossy tabletop, the force almost lethal. Brock stopped it with one hand.

“Alissia Prescott,” Kady snapped. “Doctor and research scientist.”

Brock flipped the folder open. A three-dimensional likeness greeted him. High cheekbones, slashing brows, narrow nose and full, pouting lips. In short, a subtle, yet refined beauty. And behind enormous glasses, eyes of the purest jade green.

Brock’s lips twisted in cynical amusement. He’d known she would be beautiful before he’d opened the folder. The beautiful ones always used

their looks to get what they wanted. An indefinable attraction stirred, and he set his jaw to repress the reaction. Yanking himself from the trance, he stood at attention again.

“I’ll leave tonight at twenty-one hundred,” he said.

General McClellan rose, joining him at the door. “Don’t take unnecessary risks. Lilpout is volatile. Secure the research information and get out.” He hesitated, a sly grin forming. “But if you happen to eliminate Lilpout somewhere along the line, then so be it.”

Brock gave a quick decisive nod. He understood perfectly. The General wanted an execution.

“I’ll keep you advised through the standard channel,” he said.

Brock reached for the door and stopped when the General touched his sleeve.

“You have full leverage, Brock. Do whatever needs to be done. Fail and we may not be here when you come back. Nothing will.”

# Chapter 1



*Star bright, star light, first star I see  
tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might,  
have the wish I wish tonight.*

The childhood verse came to mind unbidden. Alissia Prescott wrapped both arms around her knees and dug her toes into the warm sand. It seemed like a lifetime since she'd last whispered the plea into the indifferent night from her bedroom window. Nothing had come of it then, and nothing would come of it this time.

Alissia wasn't even really sure what she wanted, she only knew that a void existed in her life. Feelings and emotions that came naturally to others had always eluded her. What was wrong with her?

She shook her head at the sappy sentimentality. Taking this Caribbean vacation by herself hadn't been such a wonderful idea. She needed to get away from the research center, but the trip left her with entirely too much time to reflect and reminisce.

With her face lifted to the soft caress of the air, Alissia sighed into the obscurity of the night. Palm leaves stirred overhead and the salty tang of the ocean rode the sultry breeze. Sable tendrils of hair floated across her cheeks, and she closed her eyes as the childhood verse played in her mind again. Opening her eyes slowly, she gazed at the dots of light.

Suddenly, a bright white streak sailed through her peripheral vision. The spark appeared to drop right next to her and made her think of granted wishes. Her curiosity piqued, she rose to her feet and dusted her sand-covered hands together. If the star came down nearby, there might be a smoldering ember somewhere on the beach. A resigned smile touched her mouth. It was a long shot; but then again, long shots were her stock in trade.

Strolling leisurely along the deserted beach front, staying just out of the water's reach, she glanced around. Nothing but the flickering lights from paper lanterns strung along the hotel's patio were visible. Muted tones of a calypso band echoed from the tour group party she'd left. Solitude could be so lovely and yet lonely all at once. The soft sounds of laughter left her feeling melancholy, and she focused her attention on investigating the fallen meteor.

A grassy mound interrupted the endless stretch of beach. Rising slightly like an open hand, it jutted into the white sand. Lonely palms and exotic

plants dotted the area, and she slowly picked her way through the foliage.

Glancing toward the beach, she saw a shadowy masculine form emerge from the foaming tide. A stray cloud eclipsed the silver moon, partially obscuring his features, yet she could make out the muscular, well-defined frame of a tall man. His silhouette appeared massive against the water. Gradually, he moved out of the depths, water sluicing down his chest, each measured step revealing more of his lower torso and legs. Frozen to the spot, her eyes opened wide. Awestruck, she surveyed his full length.

*Naked.*

*He's totally naked.*

Alissia immediately forgot her quest for the charred meteor. Mesmerized, her stare took in the size and shape of his sinewy wet body, a body entirely composed of hard angles and molten stone. Her mouth went drier than the beach's sand. He ran tapered fingers through skeins of long golden hair, squeezing excess water from it.

The cloud floated past, and a dusky shaft of moonlight fell across his features. The air in her lungs escaped in a quivering sigh. Spiky wet lashes framed deep-set eyes. Her gaze dropped to his firm lips as he licked a drop of salt water from the corner of his mouth.

Could she be dreaming? No man on earth could be this perfect, this beautiful. Then she

noticed the scar, long and jagged, shining white against the bronze of his skin. The flaw ran from the edge of his eye down below his ear before disappearing in his hairline. The imperfection gave her a strange sense of relief. He was flesh and blood, not a creation of her mind.

He pivoted, scanning the foliage, and she feared he would see her. He must have heard her gasp. Red-hot embarrassment consumed her. Having this man discover her spying would be the worst humiliation in her life. She chanced a quick glance down to see if the leaves still concealed her and realized she'd taken an unconscious step or two forward. Alissia lifted her gaze and met his penetrating smoky blue eyes, eyes that held a glint of recognition and drilled into her as he made a move toward her.

Giant fern leaves sprang together, and she whipped around, shooting off in a dead run. She wasn't used to running for speed. Jogging in the park every morning for half an hour wasn't anything close to the hundred-yard dash she raced now. Heart pounding in her ears, she neared the beachfront terrace. Stealing a quick glance over her shoulder, she scanned the area for him. Empty. He wasn't following.

The tour party appeared to still be in full swing. After a few calming gulps of air, she grabbed her sandals from the bottom step of the terrace and slipped back into the crowd. Hand

trembling slightly, she snatched a glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray. She needed a little mental fortitude right now, and the bubbly drink would have to do.

She waited until she'd taken several bracing sips before stealing one last look across the beach. It was still deserted, yet her legs started to tremble. What was wrong with her?

"I've been looking for you all night."

She jumped and glanced behind her as Tony Wellingsly, a confirmed bachelor and self-proclaimed lady's man, plunked down next to her, his roving gaze inspecting her figure.

"I took a short walk along the beach," she said with as much serene endurance as she could muster. "I'd heard the beach is even more beautiful at night."

Tony casually draped his arm across the back of her chair. He leaned into her, and the vapors from his expensive cologne made her eyes water. "You should have found me. There's nothing better than a romantic moonlit stroll with a beautiful woman," he purred.

Alissia swallowed a quick retort. Tony had been dogging her heels since she'd arrived on St. John a couple of days ago. The purpose of all his lurid comments couldn't be more obvious—he wanted quick, meaningless sex. And he was good at the game, too. Tony covered all his bases. After spending hours attempting to seduce her, he

always managed to find another bed partner when she turned his generous offer down.

“Thanks, but I had to get away from the noise so I could hear myself think. I really need to spend some time alone.” She stressed the word *alone*, hoping he’d take the hint.

“You shouldn’t go off by yourself, especially at night. You never know what could be lurking out there.” He slid into an obviously practiced pose, showing off his sunken-chest physique to its best advantage.

Alissia unintentionally compared Tony’s pale spindly frame with that of the man she’d been watching only minutes before and groaned inwardly. It would be a long, frustrating night if even the likes of Tony Wellingsly could bring him to mind.

“I’ll try to remember that, Tony.” She cringed, placing a hand on her temple. “You know, I think I’m getting a migraine. If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to skip the buffet and just order something from room service.”

Tony’s alcohol-blurred gaze dipped to the neckline of her gauzy blouse. One side of his thin mouth lifted in a knowing grin. Alissia decided to make a break for the hotel lobby before he could come up with another of his sleazy proposals.

She entered her room and, breathing a sigh of relief, stood with her back against the door to rally her strained composure. What a night.

Vacations weren't supposed to be this exhausting. After bolting her door, dinner seemed like too much effort to go through, and she headed straight to bed.

Lying in the solitary quiet, she studied the shadows cast on the ceiling by swaying palms outside her room. Restless thoughts drummed through her mind. How long would it take to forget about the incident at the bay? Alissia flipped onto her stomach and squeezed her eyes closed. The scene replayed in agonizing slow motion against her shut lids. Moonlight caressing damp masculine skin. Taut muscle flexing and rippling in smooth waves.

*Oh, for crying out loud!*

She bolted off the pillow, raking a hand through her long curls. With a sigh, she conceded defeat and admitted she probably would never forget the man on the beach. Or worse yet, the peculiar smoldering feelings he'd evoked.



Alissia woke as the first tentative rays of sun peeked above the horizon. The tender stream of light turned the white walls in her hotel room a fragile pink. Stretching her legs, she slipped off the bed and shuffled to the patio door. Opening it wide, she inhaled the fresh morning air while the dawning light spread farther across the vastness

of the Atlantic Ocean. Except for a few early risers, the beach below her terrace appeared nearly deserted.

Alissia watched a couple stroll hand in hand along the shoreline. It must be wonderful to be in love. What would it feel like to be so totally in sync with another person? To have another part of yourself, an extension, living in another body?

She clucked her tongue, reprimanding herself. Last night, while stargazing, she'd indulged in a few impractical whims and a smidgen of self-pity. Everyone deserved a break from reality, a time to imagine and wish. But that was last night.

The fundamental truth about love was that it took time, effort and dedication, none of which she could spare. Relationships were exhausting, and men, in her experience, were more trouble than they were worth. Her work took everything from her. She preferred it that way.

In the distance, she picked out the sloping finger of land that separated the main beach from the private cove she'd discovered. Her encounter last night with the bronzed Adonis surged to mind. The memory became more graphic each time it played. Every detail of his face and form was seared into her mind. Alissia abruptly pushed away from the doorway to take a quick, cool shower.

A hasty trip through her limited wardrobe produced an airy yellow sundress. She slipped the

dress on and pulled her unruly curls into a loose ponytail. In a spurt of rebellion, she decided to skip out on the snorkeling tour she'd signed up for two days ago. The last thing she wanted to deal with was a leering Tony, preening and posing in a ridiculous speedo.

Recalling a dinner conversation with several of the women at the hotel, she chuckled out loud. Old Tony sure had the widows and spinsters at the hotel hot and bothered. So why had he singled her out? It wasn't like she was some great beauty. Her curves were entirely too pronounced. In a day and age when the reed-thin model type was the accepted norm, Alissia's frame would never be considered in style. Tony probably enjoyed the challenge.

Sandals in hand, she wondered aimlessly along Caneel bay. Taking her time, she explored the inlets, stopping now and again to admire the hibiscus and wild poinsettias growing in natural abundance.

Two hours later, she found herself back at the entrance to the oasis she'd discovered on her moonlit stroll.

Stepping lightly through the grasses, she parted the leaves and gazed across the desolate cove. She held her breath. No one was in sight, least of all last night's Poseidon. A surge of emotion washed through her. Relief or regret? She chose not to analyze her feelings too closely. It was crazy to

think he'd be here again. But somehow, she couldn't help feeling disappointed.

Pure foolishness, she chided herself, venturing further out onto the cove's beach. Perhaps coming here in the light of day would purge some of her torturous thoughts. Remembering last night's reason for exploring the inlet, she took a quick look around for any burnt fragments. Nothing but white sand and turquoise water were visible.

The soulful cry of sea birds distracted her, and she cupped a hand over her eyes to watch them swoop and skim the water. Giddy from a sense of isolated freedom, she pulled the long rope of her hair over her shoulder and removed the silk-covered elastic. The unbound curls floated around her face in the soft morning breeze. In a reflexive motion, she flipped them behind her.

The mesmerizing cadence of the lapping tide drew her, and she lifted the hem of the dress above her knees to stroll through the water's edge. She let her thoughts roam free, knowing full well they would return to images from the night before and the fantasy that had formed with them.

"You seem to have a particular fondness for this stretch of beach, don't you?"

Her head snapped around in surprise. Alissia stared at the object of her every thought for the last ten hours. Her imagination hadn't embellished one single detail.

He was utterly beautiful.

Standing less than ten feet away, both hands in the pockets of his loose-fitting linen slacks, he still seemed unreal. She turned slowly to face him, watching his oversized white cotton shirt billow in the breeze. She wasn't dreaming. It was daytime, and she was wide awake. Had she conjured him by thoughts alone? Recalling the erotic fantasy she'd been indulging in, heat flooded her cheeks.

His mouth formed a wry, sardonic smile as he moved nearer. "I realize you stumbled onto my moonlit dip by accident. There's no need to be embarrassed. If a person skinny dips on a public beach, he should be prepared for someone running across him."

Alissia skimmed her tongue along her top lip in a nervous gesture. His intense gaze tracked the movement, and his jaw tensed. He moistened his own lips with a flick of his tongue, and Alissia's toes curled into the wet sand. How could he be so casual? Incapable of speech, she stared at him. Good Lord, she'd spent goodness only knew how long gazing at his naked body last night like some peeping Tom, and he was simply brushing it off to coincidence? What was he, some sort of exhibitionist?

As if reading her thoughts, he lifted one perfectly tapered eyebrow. "I'm just used to the beaches in the French Caribbean. Several are nude, you know."

His wide-legged stance, every bit as casual as

his attitude, unnerved her even more than his softly spoken words.

“Sorry if I intruded. I guess I was shocked when I found you. I’ve tried to steer clear of *clothing optional* places while I’ve been on the islands. I don’t know how you can do that! I mean swim naked in public.” Her flush deepened, and she bit her tongue to keep from prattling on.

His warm laughter feathered across her skin, seeping into every pore. “Believe me, I’m not usually that liberated. I consider my actions last night pretty impulsive.” He bent to roll up his pant legs, then moved farther out to join her at the water’s edge.

Alissia stared at him openly; she couldn’t stop herself. Yes, he was beautiful, but it was a cold, remote sort of beauty. The combination of scorching sensuality and cool detachment intrigued her.

“If you don’t mind my asking, what made you come out here again?” he asked.

“The meteor.” Her response came quickly, sounding like justification. He stood next to her, his shirtsleeve blowing against the bare skin of her arm, and her flesh prickling from the contact.

“Last night I was sitting on the beach and saw a falling star land somewhere over here. I came looking for it and came across you instead. By accident,” she hastily added. “I thought my chances of finding it might be better during the day.”

“Don’t count on finding anything. The ember landed in the water, not too far from the shore. Actually, diving for remnants was why I went in.” With a sigh of unmistakable longing, he gazed across the tranquil aqua-blue water. “I’m not making you nervous am I? You seem uncomfortable.”

*Uncomfortable? Only if you consider being in skin that’s suddenly two sizes too tight a problem.* “No. No, I’m fine.” More words lodged in her throat, but she cut them off. She felt like a ten-year-old encountering her schoolgirl crush for the first time. Disgusted with herself, she backed out of the water lapping at her ankles.

“If you’re not feeling well, I can walk you back to your hotel.”

“Absolutely not!” she squeaked, and cleared her throat. “I mean, I’m fine. Really.” She retreated another step. “Well, perhaps I’ll come back this afternoon with my suit on and take a look out there.”

“Be careful if you do. The undertow is strong about a hundred yards out, near the mouth of the inlet. Are you an astronomer by profession or hobby?” he asked.

She blinked, his abrupt change in subject taking her by surprise. He stared at her then, waiting for an answer. Brain peddling furiously, she tried to assimilate one.

“Just a hobby. At one time I would have made it a profession.”

“I’d be willing to bet you’re some kind of scientist though.”

“What makes you think that?” Something flickered in the depths of his blue eyes in response to her abrupt tone. Resentment? Accusation? Alissia gave herself a mental shake. She’d become far too cynical lately.

“Only a scientist would pursue something like a burned out ember with this kind of enthusiasm. I should know. I’m one myself.” A self-effacing grin followed his confession.

“You’re an astronomer?” If he’d told her he was the prince of Denmark, she wouldn’t have been more surprised. He certainly didn’t look like any of the cerebral types she’d ever met. And she’d met more than her fair share. His enunciation and faint accent sounded European, but she couldn’t identify exactly from where.

“No, it’s a hobby. I’m an archaeologist actually, as well as a historian. Lately, I’ve found myself branching off in all sorts of directions. And you?”

“Genetics.” She spoke softly into the wind, avoiding his potent gaze.

“Yes.” He drew out the word and nodded, as if he’d been confirming something he already knew.

“Well,” she hedged, backing away from him. “I need to get back to the hotel. I have a few phone calls to make before lunch.” Hesitating, not sure how to end this confrontation, she almost snickered when *it was nice ogling you* came up in

her list of polite options. “It was nice talking with you.” Adding a skittish nod, she straightened her shoulders and turned to leave.

“Maybe we’ll *see* each other again sometime.” A teasing smile danced in his voice.

A visual image of what he meant ran through her mind, and Alissia flinched. Berating herself for her unsophisticated handling of the encounter, she climbed the gradual slope into the foliage. One of her sandals dropped into the dense grass as she moved aside a stubborn vine. Bending to pick it up, she stole another quick glance at the beach.

A short stout man wearing the most hideous powder blue leisure suit she’d ever seen was speaking with...what was his name? Why hadn’t she thought to ask? It would have been nice to have a name to put with the man that would plague her for heaven only knew how long.

Tempted to call out and ask, she noticed they were in some sort of deep discussion. Where had the other man come from? They were standing on an isolated area of the beach, and no one had passed her.

The argument escalated. The stocky-built older man seemed upset about something. He clutched what looked like a bobbing piece of red licorice, giving it a menacing shake at the Greek God. He stopped his tirade long enough to rub a palm across the top of his prickly, carrot-hued crew cut.

Popping the red twist in his mouth, he punched a finger at what looked like a walkman TV.

Alissia glanced at the younger man. His arms crossed casually over his broad chest, he seemed to indulgently tolerate the tantrum. Aware she was once again spying on someone else's privacy, she decided to leave. She didn't need to know his name, didn't need to know anything about him. In her experience, men like him, handsome and sophisticated, left a path of destruction in their wake.

"Self-contained," she whispered forcefully. "I am a self-contained woman." She repeated the affirmation like a mantra.

Squaring her shoulders, Alissia turned to leave. A troubling intuition lurked in the back of her mind. Scientific theory claimed every action caused a reaction. Nothing happened by chance. Her instinct whispered that this chance encounter promised something. She only wished she knew what.

Unable to resist the temptation, she pivoted to take one last glimpse at the man who'd become a curious fascination for her. The pudgy man standing across from him stuffed his half-eaten licorice in the breast pocket of his leisure suit, jabbed a finger at his walkman, and just like that, disappeared. Poof. Alissia blinked several times, then rubbed her eyes and shook her head. Nothing helped. Dazed, she backed away from the scene ordering herself to take an afternoon nap.

## Chapter 2



The minute she entered her hotel room, Alissia saw the phone's blinking light. After toppling onto the bed, she called the front desk to get her messages. She'd no sooner hung up from the clerk than the phone rang. With a beleaguered groan, she picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"Alissia? You're finally there."

Alissia recognized the rich, throaty voice of Mona Duncan, her research assistant.

"I just received your message. What's up?"

"I'm sorry about bothering you on vacation, but I thought I'd better call . . ."

Alissia sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. "What's wrong?"

"I shouldn't have called. Now you're going to get all worked up. It's really nothing big. Well, at least it's nothing you can do anything about. Forget I called. I'll fill you in when you get back."

"Mona." Alissia articulated each syllable in

her most dire tone. “Spill it.”

Silence.

“Now, Mona.”

“Someone broke into the lab during the weekend. The locks on the door and your office were both destroyed when we came in this morning. Security thinks it might have happened Friday night, right after we left.” Mona paused for a breath after the rapid-fire stream of words. “Now don’t start worrying. Nothing was damaged or stolen. Except for maybe some of the research,” she finished in an even, nonchalant tone.

Alissia wanted to jump through the phone. Her damp palm gripped the receiver, and she slumped on the bed. Those computer files contained years of research. Research she and her team had struggled to obtain. Nights, weekends, practically every waking moment had been put into those files.

“What do you mean *maybe some*? Were any of my computer files accessed? Did they destroy any research?”

“That’s just it. We can’t tell. The commands you gave me in case I needed to access something on your computer aren’t working. The system in the lab seems to be fine. It’s only your PC that isn’t responding.”

The news gave her only a marginal amount of relief. Mona was a trusted and responsible member of the research team. She could be counted on when the chips were down, in more ways than

one. And she was without a doubt her best friend. She had held everything together when Carl died. If Mona said something might be wrong, something definitely was wrong.

“Well, I’ve had about as much sun and fun as a person can stand.” Firm in her resolve, Alissia leapt on the excuse to return to the lab. She could always count on losing herself in her work. “I’m hopping on the next plane out of this place.”

“Hey, just a minute! I called to let you know what was going on. That’s all. The security staff was here. They took a report and promised to keep a closer watch from now on. There’s nothing you can do. You still have more than four weeks of vacation left, and if anyone ever deserved time off, it’s you.”

“Thanks for the thought, but to be honest, I’m going crazy down here alone. I was about ready to skip out early anyway.”

“What about all the golden Caribbean hunks? Those travel brochures showed swarms of them covering the beaches. Didn’t you meet any?” Mona’s voice hummed in delicious anticipation.

Alissia started to deny seeing any such thing, but the memory of one particular *hunk* flashed through her mind. Again.

“If you want to know the truth, I think the brochures grossly exaggerated the perks of this trip. So, I’m out of here. I’ll call you from the airport when my plane lands.”

“But—”

Alissia hung up.



The following morning Alissia climbed aboard a plane headed for the States. After stowing her carry-on in the overhead baggage compartment, she sat next to the window and heaved a huge sigh of relief.

She pulled out an airline magazine, and an odd prickling sensation ran cold fingers up the back of her neck. Putting her hand over the raised flesh, she turned to scan the passengers in the back half of the plane. She found only a number of serene elderly faces, one obviously newly married couple, and the front page of USA Today held up by someone deeply engrossed in the news. Nothing unusual. Happy to be heading back to her home in Bethesda and her normal routine, she dismissed her feelings with a shake of her head.

Alissia dropped her head against the seat and turned so she could gaze out the window. The runway flashed past in a blur of gray. She missed Carl's companionship more than she wanted to admit. She'd done a great deal of soul-searching in the last few days, more than she'd done in the two years since a massive heart attack had taken her husband's life.

She could finally admit the truth. She never

loved Carl. He'd been a good man, kind and respectful, but he had never loved her either. With them, it had been business first, last and everything in between.

God, what a waste.

Alissia scanned the bright blue horizon as the plane climbed into the heavens. She clamped her lids shut. Carl would never have a second chance to find the love he deserved. But what about her?



Alissia hurried past the glass-fronted lab shortly after lunch time. She found Mona in the same spot she'd left her a little over a week ago, sitting gingerly on a lab stool, absently eating her lunch, totally absorbed in another book. Mona glanced up just as Alissia swung the glass door open, bumping in with both suitcases and a carry-on slung over her shoulder.

"You were supposed to call me so I could pick you up at the airport," Mona admonished.

"It would have taken longer to get here if I had. I grabbed a cab instead." Her cases clattered to the floor in the corner. "Okay, let's see what damage our intruder did."

Alissia made a beeline for her office in the back corner of the laboratory. She yanked the chair from under the desk and sat down. Before the air could finish whooshing out of the chair's

cushion, she entered commands on her keyboard. Mona stood in the doorway and took another bite of her apple.

“Well?” she prodded, tapping her foot.

“If that doesn’t beat all.” Alissia frowned at the monitor.

“Stop torturing me, and tell me what they did!”

“It looks like our burglar got impatient and shut the system down cold after he found what he wanted. It messed things up a little. It isn’t anything I can’t fix in a jiffy.”

Staring at the terminal, Alissia continued pressing keys.

“So, can you tell what they got into?” Mona slid to the corner of the desk.

She punched the final key to reboot her system, and the usual message failed to appear. In its place a note appeared.

*I’ve been observing you. You know what I’m looking for. If you want a partnership, I’m interested.*

*Leave the material in a conspicuous location. I’ll find it. We can discuss arrangements then. It is in your best interest to cooperate. Remember that. Consider this proposition carefully and tell no one.*

*We can do wonderful things together.*

Alissia scanned the lines, the blood running

cold in her veins. As if the keys were electrified, she jerked her fingers from the keyboard. Her mind spun in circles and her anxiety built as she searched for the meaning behind the words.

“Alissia? What’s wrong? You look like you’ve been slapped.” Mona leaned around the corner to peek at the screen.

“Nothing.” Alissia hit the delete key, and the message disappeared. “The last thing he went through was one of Carl’s old research files. Nothing of mine was touched. I wonder what he could possibly want with material that old?” Her voice quivering, she spoke to herself as much as to Mona.

“What kind of stuff was Carl doing?”

“The fountain of youth.” She couldn’t keep the cynicism from her voice. “Cell regeneration, neural enhances, things like that. He dabbled. Nothing even remotely serious.” Brow drawn, she turned in her chair to address Mona. “Did security have any clue who might have done this? Fingerprints maybe? A dropped glove?”

“They didn’t even check for fingerprints. There was a floppy disk label on the floor. It wasn’t the same type you use, so I assumed whoever broke in dropped it.”

“The burglar actually took the time to copy this junk?” Alissia turned again to her keyboard and pressed the print command. “Maybe I should take a look at Carl’s old research. I might find a

clue about who wants it and why.”

Alissia worried her bottom lip between her teeth as she sifted through the files. The answer came to her in a sudden revelation. One of her colleagues was playing a practical joke. That was the only logical explanation. She blew out a soft breath of relief and put the strange note out of her mind.

Mona turned to leave, then paused at the office door. “Let me know if I can help. I’ll be out finishing my lunch.”

Alissia grinned and shook her head at her friend. “And your latest pulp romance, too.” She laughed at Mona’s chagrined look. “There’s no use denying it. You’re hopelessly addicted to those things. What’s the title of this one?”

Mona, shoulders back and chin up, rose to her full height of five foot two inches.

“*Love Me Forever*. You should try reading one sometime. There’s nothing wrong with indulging in a fantasy or two.”

Alissia dispensed an indulgent smile. “That’s the problem. Those stories are just fantasies, Mona. You’ll never find a real man as perfect as those books portray them. Tall, dark, suavely handsome guys who just happen to be sensitive and tender in the bargain. They simply don’t exist.”

Alissia finished her stern lecture and folded her hands on the desk. Taking Mona’s fanciful

nature in hand required a good dose of sensibility from time to time.

Mona, fists planted on her ample hips, laughed in genuine amusement. “Is that so?” she challenged.

Alissia recognized the honey-you-don’t-know-nothin’ look on her face and cringed. She should have left well enough alone.

“Listen to you! You’re only thirty, and you sound like a jaded old spinster!” Mona chortled. “I’m forty-one years old. I’ve been married twice and divorced twice. I think I know what can be expected from a man, and from a marriage, for that matter. And I have a little secret to share with you.”

A twinkle in her merry eyes, she maneuvered herself to the front of Alissia’s desk. Leaning down, she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

“There’s someone special for everyone. And when you meet him, he’ll look like Adonis to you, even though the rest of the world might wonder what you see in him. As far as being tender and sensitive, well, that’ll just come naturally to him because he’ll love you so much he won’t be able to treat you any other way.” A knowing glint sparkled in her brown eyes. “Don’t count yourself out of the game, honey. I know you cared about Carl. He was your friend and mentor, but it wasn’t a grand passion.”

The observation took Alissia by surprise. Pain

and hurt cut through her, and she glanced out the office window to regain some composure. She'd never discussed the exact nature of her personal relationship with Carl with anyone. Not even Mona.

"Was it really that obvious?" she whispered.

Mona gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry. No, it wasn't conspicuous. In fact, I always found it funny. Most people thought you needed a father figure. But honey, you were the one taking care of him."

Alissia's throat tightened, and she swallowed. "I didn't mind. Not really."

"I know, honey."

"He needed me," she said, as if that explained everything.

"Yes, Carl needed you. And without you, he wouldn't have accomplished half of what he did, personally or professionally. Everybody deserves one grand passion in their lives, and suffice it to say, yours is still due you."

Alissia gave her a dubious glance. "I know you mean well, but . . ."

"Just keep an open mind and an open heart. Hey, look at me! I'm constantly on the lookout for my soul-mate." She winked before sauntering triumphantly back to her stool, and her book.

Alissia sat in stunned silence.

Mona's words had struck a cord. A rather uncomfortable cord. Love? Passion? They'd eluded

her all her life. Did such emotions really exist?

Tapping her pencil against her pursed lips, Alissia returned yet again to the white sand beach and the man she'd met there. Now there was a man who could inspire passion. Just looking at him for five minutes had stirred emotions that three years with Carl never had. The burning excitement and breathless anticipation had taken her by complete surprise.

Recalling the soft timbre of his voice and the sharp, intelligent blue-gray eyes that had unnerved her, she acknowledged maybe Mona could be was right. Perhaps something, or more precisely someone special was out there for her. And she wondered if she'd just left the opportunity of a lifetime standing on a Caribbean beach thousands of miles away.

Shaking herself out of her reverie, she pulled sheets of paper out of the printer. She didn't have time for pointless absurdities. She had a mountain of work to do. More importantly, she had a mystery to solve. One of her esteemed colleagues had decided to make her the butt of a nasty joke. She intended to find out who the prankster was and put an end to his amusement.

## Chapter 3



“So what do we do now?”

Brock glanced up, his attention torn from the stack of books and bound reports covering the tiny hotel room desk and littering the floor. Elbows braced on the desktop, chin cupped in the web of his palm, Gabriel Von Brockman ignored the sudden appearance of his companion. Instead he finished scanning the last page of an inane report.

“Hey, Brock.” Fred nodded toward the large campus of buildings visible through the bay window. “Is that the National Institute of Health place?”

“Yes.”

“So, that’s where we’re supposed to find her?”

“Maybe.”

Lifting his arm with a jerk, Fred scratched under it with enthusiasm. “Gee whiz, I get all itchy when I’m about to be up to my keaster in pocket protectors and black framed glasses.”

Brock had long ago gotten used to Fred's abrupt arrivals and departures. His lips quirked in a grudging smile, and he wondered if he'd ever get used to Fred's sometimes caustic, and always tasteless, wit.

"First, you need to find out exactly what department she's in, where it's located and who's in charge there. Then I'll initiate myself into the department, and if I'm lucky, maybe even her research team."

Pulling out a yellow legal pad, he jotted down information from the bound computer printout open in his lap. A pregnant silence stretched out, and he put the printout aside, turning to face his colleague.

"You have something on your mind," Brock stated, resigned. "I'll give you exactly sixty seconds to speak your peace, express your opinion, or propose another one of your hair-brained ideas. After that, we do things my way."

He leveled his watch in front of his face and assumed his most tolerant expression.

"Come on, Brock! You're goin' about things the hard way. I mean, use that fine form Mother Nature gave you. Give the little lady the whirl she was a wantin'. If you'd done that back on the beach, she'd have been singin' like a canary already." Fred gave Brock an appraising once over and made a tisking sound. "If I'd looked like you back in my prime, I could have really cleaned

up with the ladies. I'd have—”

“Enough!” Brock hissed, vaulting from his chair. “Seduction is out of the question. Not for any reason. Ever! Mother Nature had nothing to with any of this.” He spread his arms as he surveyed his own frame, his lip curled in distaste. “It was a microscopic laser beam and a petri dish. So just leave it alone, Fred. There’s nothing you can say that will change my mind.” He threw his head back and took a deep, calming breath.

“All right, all right. I get the message.” Fred held a hand up and slid off the bed. He pulled an ever-present red twist out of the breast pocket of his chocolate brown polyester leisure suit. After popping the licorice into the corner of his mouth, he tweaked his bulbous nose and straightened six-inch wide lapels before pulling a miniature computer from one of the double-stitched pockets.

“Basically, you wanna spend eight weeks on this assignment instead of eight days. Hey, you’re the boss. I’m just along for the ride.”

“That’s right, Fred. I *am* the boss. So get me the information I need. Now. We’ve only got five weeks before they pull the plug and take drastic action.”

“Say no more. I’ll have everything you need in no time flat.” Fred’s computer beeped and whistled as he punched the keys. “Oh, and Brock, do me a favor. Don’t use that *pull the plug* expression anymore. It kinda gets me all twitchy.”

The corner of Brock's mouth lifted in a reluctant grin as he grabbed another pile of reports before easing into an armchair.

"You got it. And if you help me wrap this up in less than five weeks, I'll buy you a whole box of that stuff." He nodded at the licorice clutched in Fred's stubby fingers.

"Don't bother. Can't really taste it." Fred appraised the length of cherry candy with blatant longing and sniffed at it. "Psychologist told me I have an oral fixation, whatever that means." He sighed. "It's hell bein' synthetic."

When Brock glanced up to add an afterthought, Fred had already left.



A muffled rap sounded on the office door, and Alissia pulled her attention from the report in her hand. "Yes?"

Her boss, Dr. Gene Spence, pushed the door open. Poking his white head in the crack, he flashed a broad smile. She sat up straighter.

"I'd heard you came back early from your vacation," he said.

She regarded the diminutive man with fond affection. "Yes. I'm afraid I ran out of sunblock."

Instead of laughing at her quip, he lifted one bushy eyebrow. "Well, be that as it may, why are you here, my dear? I thought you needed a vacation.

You still do. A long one.”

He carefully lowered his frame into a spare office chair. Leaning forward, he planted his gnarled hands on his knees and tilted his head to the left.

Uncomfortable with his intense scrutiny, Alissia shifted in her seat. Years of experience with this man told her she was about to be on the losing end of a debate.

“I need to work. And then there was the break-in.”

Studying the floor between his parted knees, he expelled a weary sigh, then raised his eyes to pin her with one of his mind-bending stares. “What of the compendium you’ve done over the last few months? You promised to put it together for me. I thought you’d work on that while you were away?”

She nodded. “I’m still planning to have that before next year’s budget projections. I’ll do it in my spare time.”

“Spare time?” He chuckled, shaking his white head. “So you came running back to see that our mysterious burglar did nothing more than nose around?”

At her nod of confirmation, he continued.

“So you cut your vacation short for nothing. Alissia, you’re one of our brightest stars. I’d hate to see you burn out before you’ve had a chance to prove yourself. To that end, I suggest you pick up

your vacation right where you left off. After, of course, you do me a small favor.”

“A favor?” she asked, slanting her head in a wary tilt.

“Yes, well, I promised I’d wait a while before finding another lead doctor to head up your team. It’s been two years now.”

Alissia sat back in her chair. She’d heard this prelude several times before. It usually heralded the arrival of some stiff-necked scientist who sashayed into *her* lab making all sorts of promises to the board of directors and espousing rhetoric about whipping *her* team into shape. Of course he’d claim that, with enough funding, he would make the most brilliant discovery of the century. Glory-hungry goats that they were, the board would believe him.

“Why do we need a big name?” she asked, unable to quell the impatient resentment in her tone. “We’ve made wonderful progress in the last two years. You’ve said so yourself. Why change things now?”

Dr. Spence carefully removed the small round spectacles from his broad nose. Lifting the edge of his white lab coat, he cleaned them meticulously before putting them back on. Alissia recognized the stalling tactic and prepared to dig her feet in.

“It’s true. You’ve made incredible strides with nothing more than yourself and a handful of technicians. But,” he added heavily, “I need

someone with a name in the scientific community as well as indisputable knowledge of the field.” Slapping his knees again, he eased off the chair. “Therefore, I would like you to sit in on a meeting tomorrow morning.”

“Just a little more time, Dr. Spence. We’re so close.”

He expelled a deep breath and shook his head. “I’ve given you as much as I can, Alissia.”

Her mental list of objections grew steadily longer as she envisioned turning the lab over to a stranger. Of course she may not have to use any of them. A true scientific superstar wouldn’t want anything to do with their rinkey-dink operation.

With a heavy heart, she raised her chin a notch and looked Dr. Spence squarely in the eye. “All right.”

“A very renowned scientist contacted me. He’s searching for a home for his current research.” He leaned forward slightly, as if about to dangle a carrot in front of a hungry rabbit. “He’s part of The Human Genome Project.”

Alissia lifted one eyebrow in grudging interest. She didn’t look forward to dealing with a new hot shot doctor in the lab, but the idea of doing such rewarding research excited her. Mapping the blueprint for human creation ranked in the big league. The upper echelon of the big league, to be precise. A scientist of that caliber could take them out of their broom closet lab and put them in the

proverbial penthouse, over in building ten.

“Okay, I admit you have my mouth watering. He sounds like a dream come true. I still don’t understand why you need me there.”

He held his hands out palm up. “Because I don’t know why someone of his caliber would want to throw in with us. Plus he’s going to look us over tomorrow, and I want to put our best foot forward. And you, my dear, happen to be our very best appendage.” He chuckled heartily at his own humor, then sobered immediately.

He wanted *her* to convince this doctor to take over her lab? Alissia grimaced. “I doubt there’s anything I could say that you couldn’t.”

He gave a weary sigh and wagged his head. “I’m not getting any younger. I’d like to retire soon. It would be nice if I could go out on a shout rather than a whimper. This man could do that for me, Alissia. And, if things work out well, he’ll be the perfect candidate to groom for my job when I leave. I could retire knowing my directorship would be in capable hands.”

A wave of apprehension swept through her. She didn’t like how this was beginning to sound. “I don’t mind helping, but just what exactly are you asking me to do?”

“Only that you make the gentleman feel welcome. Introduce him to the staff and show him our facilities.”

Confused, Alissia tipped her head to one side.

“That’s what I’ve done the last few times you brought in other people.”

“Indeed, the last few times you charmed the socks off the hapless fellows. And as soon as they showed a serious interest, you turned such a cold shoulder they were frozen to the quick.” As if deep in thought, Dr. Spence gazed past her shoulder. “As a graduate student, Alissia, you were attractive. Since you’ve been with us, you’ve matured into a stunning beauty. I’m afraid we cerebral types aren’t used to dealing with women such as yourself. Suffice it to say, the previous applicants didn’t deal well with being cut.” He expelled a dispirited sigh.

Could she have been that...cruel? Uncomfortable, she shifted. “But—I didn’t—I’m not—”

“No. Not consciously, I’m sure.”

His shoulders drooped slightly as he stood and turned to shuffle toward the door. A sudden pang of guilt assailed her so strong her stomach knotted. This man had never been anything but gentle and kind to her.

“I promise I’ll be on my best behavior tomorrow. Scout’s honor.” She held her hand over her heart. “If you want him, consider it done. He won’t stand a chance. He’ll be begging to work for you by the time I’m done with him.”

“My office, tomorrow at nine.” His mouth turned up in a sly grin and he opened the door.

“The poor sap won’t know what hit him.” Chuckling, he pulled the door shut behind him.



“Nice threads.” Leaning against the wall with one shoulder, Fred examined Brock with a critical eye. “Not exactly my style, but on you, it’s not half bad.”

Brock surveyed Fred from the top of his prickly red head to the tips of his white patent leather loafers, paying specific attention to his perpetual polyester leisure suit.

“Coming from you, that’s a real compliment.” He checked himself in the full-length mirror. “A suit and tie are a damned sight better than those swashbuckling pirate outfits I’ve been wearing since the Caribbean. There wasn’t more than one button on any of the shirts you brought me. Where did you find those ridiculous get-ups anyway?”

Looking rather pleased with his ingenuity, Fred propped a foot across his ankle.

“I borrowed them from a cabana boy. Actually, a cabana boy on steroids,” he amended with a nod and chortled at his own humor. “Personally, I kinda liked the pirate of the high seas look you had going. I’m even contemplating changing my own style to it.”

“Anything would be better than your nineteen-seventies stuff. I should have known you’d

identify with an era known for free love and polyester.” Brock finished attaching the tie pin at his throat. “Where have you been anyway?”

“Just making arrangements, boss.” Fred crossed his arms above his paunch.

Brock glared at Fred’s reflection in the mirror. “So how did you manage to get me an interview?”

“It was a breeze. I did some checking, and it seems that you come from a long lineage of microscope hounds. Yep, a proud family tradition. Your great, great granddaddy, Gerhardt Von Brockman just kicked off a couple of years ago. Too bad, too. You would have really liked the guy. A first class egghead, if ya know what I mean. Anyhoo, I flipped a couple of switches, pressed a couple of buttons, and ga-bing, ga-bang, you now share all his credentials. Which by the way were fairly impressive for a guy around this time. Not quite as impressive as your own, of course, but still not shabby by any means. And then, it was just a matter of putting a list of those credentials along with a letter of inquiry on the right desk.” As he finished tooting his own horn, he puffed his chest out proudly.

Brock’s hands stilled for a moment, and he contemplated himself in the mirror. It was handy to have the old guy to use as cover, but family meant nothing to him. Less than nothing actually. Even if this ancestor of his had been alive, he would have avoided him like the plague. Brock

had spent most of his adult life trying to forget his family connections. Reminders, no matter how intriguing, were anti-productive.

“Any sign of Lilpout yet?” he asked, buttoning his cuffs.

“Nothing. I’ve checked every place on the probability list, and he’s just not there. You still think the lady’s involved somehow?”

“I’d bet on it.”

“She seems like such a sweet thing.” Fred shook his head, an expression of regret on his animated face.

Brock recalled the fey creature who’d watched him in the moonlight. He’d sensed her presence before actually seeing her. The image of her lovely startled features reminded him of a timid doe. The woman he found the following morning had been entirely different, and yet the same. She’d changed into a water nymph: playful and achingly lovely, but with a cautious reserve that haunted the depths of her emerald eyes.

Could a beauty that enchanting be in league with a notorious criminal? He’d learned from bitter experience that she could and probably was. Women, especially ones as captivating as she, used their beauty to conceal the ugliness in their hearts.

Brock speared Fred with a no-nonsense look. “She’s the key to finding Lilpout. We can’t afford to let emotions get in the way of judgment here.

I've given some thought to what you said last night. A little harmless flirting might speed things up. The sooner she trusts me the better."

Fred clutched at his chest in a mock heart attack. "Whoa! Did you just admit I had a good idea?"

"Don't let it go to your head. Now, do me a favor and get rid of the cabana boy clothes." He glanced at the black watch on his thick wrist. "I'm going to be late if I don't get out of here. By the way, what was grandpa best known for?"

Fred stood up and scratched the back of his neck. "Well, not much of it made heads or tails for me. The last thing he worked on was part of something called The Human Genome Project."

Brock pulled his suit jacket on and rotated his wide shoulders to adjust the fit. "Great. Even back then they were trying to conjure me up."



Hopping on one foot, Alissia slipped her pump on. She'd dug out the heavy artillery this morning—her Donna Karen suit followed by a dab of Perry Ellis in strategic areas. One last check with her fingers confirmed her French braid still held. She'd used enough gel and spray to tame an alpaca's coat.

Alissia checked her bedside clock. *Damn, I'm going to be late.*

Twenty minutes later, she whipped into her parking spot. Briefcase in hand, she walked toward the brick structure, her strides brisk and purposeful. Focused on the building's double glass door, she lectured herself on the proper etiquette for appearing friendly and professional without being coy or flirty. She glanced at her watch, fingered her braid one last time and picked up her pace. Stopping abruptly just inside the door, she rifled through her bag. She pulled out her oversized, black-framed glasses and perched them on her nose.

Moments later, she stood in front of Dr. Spence's office door. After taking a fortifying breath and straightening her spine, she knocked. His familiar voice asked her to enter, and taking one last deep breath, she turned the knob and glided inside.

Dr. Spence flashed her an appraising look while his bushy white eyebrows hoisted practically to his hairline. Then with a grin that went from ear to ear, he turned to the man seated across from him.

“And this, Doctor Von Brockman, is the senior member of the research team you'll be working with. Alissia Prescott.”

Alissia studied the visitor's back. She noted impossibly wide shoulders encased in a flawlessly cut dark gray suit. The gold blonde hair pulled in a tight queue at the nape of a corded neck seemed

vaguely familiar. Even the shape of the neck seemed familiar. As if sensing her scrutiny, the man pivoted in his seat and faced her. The breath caught in Alissia's chest, and her knees quivered. It was *him!* What in heavens name was *he* doing here?

Dr. Spence waved her further into the office. "Come in, my dear. Have a seat." He beamed like a proud papa.

Still dumfounded, Alissia stared at him for a brief moment. What was going on here?

"Doctor Von Brockman was just telling me about all of his many areas of expertise. Hobbies, as he calls them." Dr. Spence chuckled.

Alissia recovered enough to put her case down by the door and slide into a chair. With a snap of her head, she turned to Brock.

"I thought you told me you were an archaeologist?" she said, her brow pinched in confusion.

He smiled then, a bone-melting flash of even white teeth. "My first degree was in archaeology, my second in paleontology. I eventually found I needed to connect with the scientific community and acquired a medical degree. History doesn't mean much unless you apply it to the future. And mankind's future lies in biogenetics."

Digesting everything as quickly as she could, Alissia leaned back in her chair. This was just too bizarre. What were the chances she would meet this man again, and like this? Her eyes narrowed

behind the austere black glasses. The chances were remote. In fact, they were beyond remote. They were downright nonexistent!

It was so obvious. Did the man think she was an absolute fool? He'd followed her to St. John to size up his rival for this job. And after assuring himself she was no competition, he'd decided to move in.

Well, two could play this game. It was to her advantage if he considered her a fool. She'd bide her time until the arrogant Dr. Von Brockman tripped up. She'd seen a lot of men come and go in her profession. All shared one fatal flaw: their egos. Alissia discreetly ran an appreciative eye down the long, impressive length of leg extended next to her. Of course, none of them had as much right to their God complex as this man did. But Greek Gods didn't count.

"I'm sorry, Doctor Von Brockman, it's just that—" She hesitated, casting about for words to best convey thoughts without actually revealing them. "Well, I hadn't anticipated ever seeing you again. Not to mention you aren't what I expected to find here today. You don't look like...like, well—"

"Let me guess. You were expecting an Albert Einstein, and you found an Arnold Schwartzaneger instead."

"Yes," she answered in feigned amazement. "Exactly."

“It’s just my feeble attempt at being a Renaissance man.” He surveyed himself with a mocking grin. “And please, everyone calls me Brock.”

His self-assured attitude grated at her. Unable to completely mask her animosity, Alissia snorted inelegantly and tossed him a rude sideways glance before turning to focus on Dr. Spence.

“Feeble attempt? Yeah right. To look like that you probably spend as much time in a gym as you do in your lab, ‘Brock’,” she said, still refusing to fully look at him.

Brock had the audacity to throw his magnificent head back and roar with laughter.

Dr. Spence caught her eye. Peering over the top of his wire rim glasses, he gave her an almost imperceptible shake of his head. Alissia sighed, remembered her purpose and swallowed any further acerbic comments. Blinking in wide-eyed innocence, she pasted on a sarcastically cordial smile.

Dr. Spence swiveled to his credenza. “I know I put Doctor Von Brockman’s profile somewhere over here. I’m sure you’ll want to look at it, Alissia.”

“Oh, you can be sure of that.”

Brock leaned across the space separating their chairs, his lips inches from her ear.

“By the way, Doctor Prescott, you’re not in such bad shape yourself. You look incredibly lovely, although I prefer the dress you wore on the

beach. Especially when you stood with the sun behind you. Those were some racy underthings you had on,” he whispered, his breath warm on her neck.

Alissia fought the urge to crumble in humiliation. She turned what she hoped was a scathing glare on her nemesis. He waggled his eyebrows and laughed again.

Dr. Spence cleared his throat. He glanced expectantly from a grinning Brock to a scowling Alissia. “Well, it would appear you two have already established a rapport of sorts. I’m sure Alissia will enjoy taking you on a tour of our facilities, Brock.”

His mood clearly jovial, Brock leaned back in his chair to stretch out further and extended what seemed to Alissia like several miles of masculine leg. A contented sigh escaped from deep within his chest, and he folded his hands over his lean abdomen.

“You know something, Alissia? I think I’m going to enjoy being your boss. We can do wonderful things together.”

Those words. The same words as the message on her computer. Alissia’s anger and resentment evaporated. The message had been a prank, hadn’t it?

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# Karen Culver

Karen recalls reading her first romance at the tender age of sixteen. She's been hooked on the genre since. A left-handed, right-brained artistic type, she spent years searching for her perfect creative outlet. Being tone deaf and unable to draw anything more than stick figures, writing seemed the most obvious direction.

A member of the Romance Writers of America, Karen is also active in her local chapter, Romance Authors of the Heartland. She enjoys the daily challenges of living in a household of men, (one husband, two sons and a dog) and wouldn't trade the pandemonium for the world! A native Nebraskan, she is a born and bred Cornhusker football fan.

Karen's writing credentials include a contribution to *Chicken Soup for the Couple's Soul*.

You can email her at [kaycee101@juno.com](mailto:kaycee101@juno.com).



# Karen Culver

*“Yesterday Once More* is full of internal and external tension and intrigue... I give it two thumbs up!”  
*Romance Communications*

The secret to eternal life is no longer a theory in the year 2188. Time travel has become common, and treacherous in the wrong hands.

Colonel Von Brockman returns to 1999 on a mission to find a time-traveling pirate whose greed could be the downfall of all mankind. The key to finding him is Alissia Prescott, the woman he believes is Lilpout’s accomplice.

Alissia, a genetic scientist, is driven to find the cure to a deadly disease that runs rampant in her family, and the only thing keeping her from it is Brock. The attraction between them is immediate, but impossible to act on.

Brock must choose between his duty and the woman he’s fallen in love with. Alissia must decide if she can trust this mysterious man from the future not only with the lives of millions of people, but with her own.

*“Yesterday Once More* was incredibly written and a delightful read.”  
*Martha H.*