

NO TIME FOR JANE

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Chapter 1

“The thing about time is that time isn’t really real.” — James Taylor

It was already dark when Daniel Ross stopped the U-Haul truck in front of his new house. He unhitched his car carrier from the back of the truck and left it on the street, then he backed the truck around, aiming for the driveway. He missed, running over the curb, the rear wheels spinning, chewing up the wet grass. Daniel cursed to himself; he’d been there less than ten minutes and he’d already torn up the lawn.

He finally got the truck backed down the driveway close to the garage door, then he got out and stretched as he compared the house number against the one he had written on the back of the Realtor’s card. The numbers matched; this really was his new house—he was finally home.

It had been a long, weary trip from Colorado Springs, north through Canada’s British Columbia and the Yukon, and finally into Anchorage, Alaska. His friends had told him that he was crazy to drive a U-Haul all that distance, especially towing his car, but he hadn’t listened; he had wanted to see Canada close up. Besides, some of his furniture and possessions were from his mother’s house and he couldn’t bear to part with them.

He raised the door on the back of the U-Haul to unload a couple of suitcases; the sound of the door sliding up echoed though the dark neighborhood. The porch light on the house to his right was lit and the curtains in an upstairs window glowed from within. As he gazed up at it, the curtains rustled, then moved apart. A dark silhouette appeared in the window; Daniel could not make out the face, but judging from the amount of hair attached to the head, it was female. The figure did not move, and although Daniel could not see them, he could sense a pair of eyes staring down at him.

Daniel fumbled for his house keys, praying that the real estate agent had mailed him the right ones. He left the suitcases in the driveway and walked down a curving sidewalk into an alcove. There was a rock garden to his right between the main part of the house and the garage which jutted out some ten feet or so. A spindly tree of some sort leaned out from the rock garden, drooping over the sidewalk; he ducked under its branches and confronted a double entry door.

Here goes, he thought, inserting his key in the lock. He turned it; the bolt slid back. Turning the doorknob, he pushed one of the doors open and fumbled on the interior wall for a light

switch. Finding several, he flipped them all on, flooding the alcove and the foyer with light. He walked back up the sidewalk, ducking the tree—it was a sickly Japanese maple and would be removed just as soon as he found his timber saw—and closed the truck door, glancing up at the window. The figure was still there, unmoving. Either a very nosy neighbor or someone who is bored stiff, he concluded. The motionless figure made him nervous.

Daniel pulled the truck door down and locked it, then he lugged his suitcases into the house. Dropping them in the foyer, he retraced his steps and unloaded a sleeping bag and air mattress from his car. His last act before re-entering the house was to glance up at the window. The figure had disappeared; the curtains now hung limply. As he walked down the sidewalk, the porch light next door winked out. Who had been watching him from the window so intently?

Leaving his stuff in the foyer, he walked around the house, flipping switches and inspecting rooms. Not a close inspection, because he was bone tired; his main concern was a bathroom, he needed to find one quickly.

The house was large and sprawling, built to resemble a mountain lodge. The foyer led past an opening to a formal living room, then directly back into a large great room. The great room sported a high open-beamed vaulted ceiling, paneled, as were the walls, in varnished cedar. A huge limestone fireplace occupied the center of attention, surrounded by bookcases; a luxurious hunter green carpet graced the floor. French doors led outside to a patio and an opening to his right led to a large kitchen. There was another outside door in the kitchen, an opening into the dining room at the front of the house, and a door which led to the double garage.

On the opposite side of the foyer was a hallway which led to three spacious bedrooms. Daniel carried his sleeping bag to the largest of these and tossed it inside, followed by his suitcases. He retraced his steps, turning off all the lights, and retreated to the bedroom. Unrolling the sleeping bag, he slipped into a pair of gym shorts and crawled in the bag, totally exhausted. Nice house, he thought. This will do—this will do nicely. Why was she watching me?

The sun was shining by the time he awoke; he had slept for ten uninterrupted hours. He showered and dressed quickly, then he pulled a small coffee maker and mug from his suitcase and carried them into the kitchen; the little device was soon bubbling merrily as Daniel stood watching, anxiously awaiting the presence of thick, dark Folgers.

As he waited, he heard the doorbell ring. Please not a welcoming committee, he groaned inwardly. Opening the front door, he discovered a large wicker picnic basket sitting on the front step. He picked it up and carried it in; there was a small card tied to the handle with red ribbon. He untied the ribbon and opened the card. It read:

I've been waiting for you. Love

This was one of those things that make you go “Hmmm.” He shrugged and looked in the basket. There was a large Corning Ware dish in the basket surrounded by fragrant red flowers of some kind, a plastic fork and knife, and a large icy-cold bottle of orange juice. He pulled the flowers and utensils out and extracted the dish, then he lifted the lid: a beautiful omelet—at least four eggs—with cheese, pimento, and shallots, six strips of crispy bacon, and two pieces of buttered whole wheat toast with a little jar of strawberry preserves.

Daniel stood at the counter and dug into the omelet; it was absolutely delicious. Soon, there was nothing left. He rinsed out the dish and orange juice bottle, then he filled the bottle with water and put the flowers in, placing them on the window sill. Pouring a mug of coffee, he

sipped and mused. *Who has been waiting for me?* He didn't know anyone in the neighborhood. And why would they write "Love" on the card? Whoever had brought the basket couldn't live very far away; the food was not from a restaurant, and it had been piping hot. Why had they just dumped the basket and run? Very neighborly, but very mysterious. He had the basket and the dish, maybe their owner would show up to reclaim them. Daniel re-read the card and looked at the handwriting; it was very lacy and delicate—the handwriting of a female. Whoever she was, he was grateful—her cooking compared favorably with a four-star restaurant.

Daniel raised the garage doors and walked outside into the sunlight. His first act was to glance up at the window next door. The curtains were drawn back but there was no figure peering down. Raising the rear door of the truck, he pulled out the ramp and started sliding furniture and boxes into the garage.

The sun was beating down on the truck and there was no one out and about in the neighborhood, so he changed into swim trunks, hoping to replenish his tan as he unloaded. Most of his professional life was spent in a physics laboratory, so he had had to resort to tanning salons. Lately there had been little time for lying on a tanning bed.

By late afternoon he had the truck completely unloaded, so he drove it into the street, re-hitched the car carrier and towed it to the U-Haul lot, where he turned in the keys, backed his car off the carrier, and drove it back to his house. He pulled in the driveway and walked down the sidewalk. Directly in front of the double doors was another basket, identical to the one he had found that morning. He walked back out to the driveway and was peering down the street when his eye caught a movement; he glanced up and saw the face of a girl, long hair surrounding her head, looking down at him from the window. She stared at him for a second, then she was gone; she hadn't moved back or ducked, she was just *gone*.

Daniel carried the basket inside. *Curiouser and curiouser*, he thought. Leaving the basket for the moment, he pulled a white dinette table in from the garage and placed it in the corner of the kitchen, then he fetched the four chairs that went with it. He sat the basket down on the table and looked inside; it contained a large Tupperware container, a cold twenty-ounce bottle of Pepsi, and a pile of yellow flowers. Moving the flowers aside, he pulled out the container and opened the lid. Inside were three objects wrapped in aluminum foil. He unwrapped the objects: two huge hamburgers with onions, lettuce, tomato, pickles, and mayonnaise, and a large portion of hot, crispy French fries with a smaller Tupperware container of ketchup. He untied the card and read it:

Soon we will meet. Love

Daniel took a huge bite out of the burger—it was fantastic; built exactly as he liked it, with mayo instead of mustard and ketchup. The fries were delicious: a crunchy crust with a sweet and creamy interior, and just the right amount of salt. He took a swig of the Pepsi and re-read the card, then he fetched the first card from the counter and compared the handwriting. They were identical. The writer had added the word "Love" again. He assumed it was a "she." He would hate to find out it was a "he"—it would destroy his fantasy. Could it be the girl in the window? He hadn't seen much of her face, she had vanished so quickly. Small, oval, and delicate; long dark wavy hair—brown or black. Not a little child, but maybe not yet quite an adult.

It had been a long time since Daniel had eaten two large hamburgers, but they were so good he wolfed them down; by the time he had finished he was completely satisfied without feeling

stuffed. "Thank you, whoever you are," he said aloud. "You are one hell of a cook." He placed the Tupperware container with the Corning Ware dish and put the two baskets together.

The evening was spent sorting paperwork. He called the other members of his research team and informed them that he had arrived in Anchorage safely. They gave him a status report on his project and he agreed to meet with them the day after tomorrow. That gave him just one more day to finish unpacking. From the looks of things and the level of his fatigue, it would take at least a week. Unloading an entire truck might have been fine for an athlete, but Daniel was not an athlete; he did some running and played tennis and golf to keep in shape, but sports were not his forte. He was too short for basketball, too light for football, and baseball bored him to death.

His body was not unattractive; it was lean and hard, but it didn't bulge with muscles. Nor was he particularly handsome. His face had a certain rugged good looks about it with gentle blue eyes; an unruly mop of dark brown hair hung down over his forehead. Physicists didn't need to be handsome.

Daniel stuffed the papers back in his briefcase; his thoughts had wandered to the girl in the window. He was very tired, but even more curious. The night was cool, so he slipped on a jacket and walked outside. Wandering down the driveway, he glanced up at the mystery window. The curtains were down again, backlit by a soft glow. He leaned against his car and stared up at it, hoping to see the girl again. Her small face haunted his thoughts. He thought he could make out some shadows moving behind the curtains.

After a few minutes, he strolled down the street in front of the house, passing it and walking a few hundred feet further on, admiring the neighborhood. Typical suburbia, but with lots of trees and a beautiful green belt running behind the houses, complete with a little bubbling brook.

Crossing the street, he turned around and walked the opposite direction, past his house. A dog barked in the distance; otherwise, all was quiet. Re-crossing the street, he headed down his driveway, pausing to make sure his car was locked. The light in the window had gone out; whoever the girl was, she had either left the room or gone to bed. He walked into his house and shut the door.

On the other side of the window, the girl knelt on the floor and looked out at the night. She had seen Daniel crossing the street, stopping to check his car, then she had watched him as he walked around the corner of his garage and into the alcove. A few seconds later she heard his front door shut.

She stood up and shut the window, then she crawled onto her bed. She had already set her alarm for five o'clock; it took awhile to prepare a proper breakfast and pack it in a basket. She already had the flowers; this time they were pretty blue ones. She hoped Daniel would like them.

She laid in the dark, on top of the covers; she could feel the breeze from her ceiling fan but she was still hot. Sliding her hand down her stomach, she found the bottom of her long T-shirt and pulled it slowly up her legs, arching her back and pulling it above her waist. The cool breeze felt good on her bare skin.

"Daniel," she whispered, rolling the name around on her tongue. "Me and Daniel, Daniel and me. I've been waiting all these years and now you're finally here." She sat up and pulled her T-shirt off, then she laid back down, running her fingertips lightly over her breasts, squeezing them and trembling as little thrills ran through her body. "*Daniel...*" she moaned.

Sliding her fingertips down her stomach, she traced the outline of her small body. She moaned again and rocked her hips as a wave of pleasure enveloped her, crying out in the darkness as she moved her fingers. *Tomorrow, Daniel—tomorrow...*

Daniel tossed and turned on his mattress; he had hauled it into the bedroom, thrown his sleeping bag on it and crashed. But he couldn't sleep. It was the girl in the window. She was in his house; she was walking down the hallway—he could hear her bare feet padding across the carpet. She was in his bedroom; she was crawling into his sleeping bag. He could feel her cool, silky skin against his body, her sweet lips over his mouth. Her bare hips were moving slowly against him, he could feel her breath on his face, it smelled like the flowers on his window sill. Her long hair was in his face, it tickled his chest; she crawled up his stomach, stretching her legs around him. “Ohhhhhh, Daniel,” she whispered. “I’ve waited so long for this...”

“What’s your name?” he asked her as her small body moved against his.

“My name is...”

Chapter 2

It was another bright, sunshiny day in Anchorage, Alaska, matching the pictures in the “Visit Alaska” tourist brochures. The temperature was already warm; the announcer’s voice coming through Daniel’s clock radio forecast a high in the eighties.

Daniel sat on the edge of the mattress. His body was covered with sweat; it wasn’t from the heat, it was from the sleepless night he had spent; a night filled with images of a girl with a small, delicate face, long wavy hair and no name.

He stumbled into the bathroom, then he walked into the kitchen and flipped the switch on the coffee maker. Sitting at the table, he watched the coffee drip down into the carafe, wondering if there would be a basket sitting outside his front door. This is just too weird, he thought. He should not be haunted by images of a girl he had only glimpsed for an instant—it wasn’t like him. So what if she’s watching me—she’s just a kid, anyway.

The coffee maker made loud crackling noises; the carafe was full. He poured himself a mug and sipped, feeling the caffeine course through his body. He had a momentary urge for a cigarette; something he had given up several years ago.

“Okay, Danny,” he said aloud, “let’s go see if we have a present waiting for us.” Sure enough, there was a basket sitting right outside his front door. He carried it in and sat it on the table. Beautiful blue flowers covered another Tupperware container. This one contained a tall stack of steaming pancakes, oozing with melted butter. Alongside the pancakes was a small bottle of blueberry syrup and a brick of crispy hashed browns wrapped in aluminum foil. An icy-cold bottle of apple juice completed the feast. Daniel opened the card.

Today, Daniel. I love you.

Today, *what*? And how did she know he loved blueberry, hated maple syrup? And what was with the “I Love You?” It was one thing to write “Love” on a card, quite another to write “I Love You.” He sat down and ate. The pancakes were light and fluffy; they melted in his mouth.

“She knows my name!” he gasped aloud. He re-read the card. This was getting really creepy. *Today*, the card said. Good—maybe the mystery would be over. He was anxious to meet her, if it was a her. It damned sure better be a “her.”

He heard a loud thump at the door; he jumped—another basket? He sprang to his feet and jerked the front door open. It was a newspaper.

“*Shit!*” he exclaimed, scooping up the paper. On impulse he walked down the sidewalk, peered up at the window, and there she was, staring down at him. She flashed him a smile and vanished. Just simply vanished. “Who *are* you?” he called up to her. But she didn’t answer—she was gone again.

He poured another mug of coffee and scanned the newspaper, then he began the chore of moving boxes and furniture from the garage into the house and placing them in their respective rooms. He had a two-wheeler which helped, but by noon his back was aching. At this point he would have paid anyone fifty dollars an hour to finish the job.

Apparently basket deliveries didn't include lunch, so he drove to the Carr's grocery store and purchased some sandwich components, a TV dinner, a big bag of Skittles, a pint of Bacardi Light, and a two-liter bottle of cola. On the way back home he noticed the engine was running rough—he had put off changing the spark plugs, and the injectors were probably filthy.

After lunch and a thirty-minute rest, he arose, put his bed frame together and started unpacking his clothes. By mid-afternoon he was sick of being indoors. He changed into his swim trunks, opened his garage door and pulled out a new set of Bosch spark plugs. With the warm sun caressing his back, he leaned into the engine compartment and began changing the plugs.

He was wiping oil off his hands when he was startled by a quiet cough behind him. Turning, he saw her sitting on the rock retaining wall which bordered one side of his driveway. She was barefoot, wearing an old faded pair of cutoff Levi's and a very short red tank top; the soles of her feet were stained green from walking through freshly-cut grass. Although the sun was directly in her eyes, she didn't squint; she stared at him through big brown eyes, not speaking, a faint smile on her face. It was she: the girl from the window.

"You startled me," he said to her, laying his shop rag on the fender. She gazed into his eyes, he was slightly uneasy under her piercing stare. "I'm Daniel Ross," he stammered. "Do you live in the neighborhood?"

"I'm sorry," she replied, smiling. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm Jane—I live next door." She held out her hand to him.

Daniel walked over to her and was about to take her hand in his when he noticed that his fingers were still smeared with oil. "Uh, my hands are filthy," he said, wiping them on his swim trunks.

"I don't care," she said, still holding her hand out.

He took her hand in his and shook it. Her hand was very small but she had a firm grip. She was a tiny pixie of a girl, slender without being skinny; delicate without appearing fragile. Long chestnut hair tumbled to her waist in tangled waves, framing her oval face. It was unstyled, parted simply in the middle and left to hang naturally.

Judging from Jane's elfin size, Daniel guessed her to be about fourteen or fifteen years old. She was definitely past puberty—he could see the swell of her breasts beneath the tank top; the small points of her nipples were evident through the thin cotton.

"Jane," he said, releasing her hand, "it's very nice to meet you."

"It's very nice to meet you, too, Daniel," she replied. Her voice was soft, low, and musical—not a buzzy little-girl voice but a mature, adult voice. She laid back on the grass, propping her head up on one elbow. Her tank top rode up, revealing the top of her hip and the sharp curve of her waist; he could see her perfect little bellybutton. Her cutoffs were slit up the sides almost to her waist; there was no hint of panties and he wondered if she was wearing a thong.

"So, Daniel," she said, studying him. "Are you all moved in?"

“Pretty much,” he said, trying not to stare at her body but not having much luck—he really wanted to know if there was anything under her cutoffs. “I have a few things still in storage, but I’ve run out of time—I have to start back to work tomorrow.”

“What are you doing to your car?”

Daniel glanced around at his car, then back to Jane. “Uh, nothing, really—just wasting time. I should be inside unpacking boxes, but I’ve been doing that for two days now and I’m tired of it. This is my ‘play’ car—I need to buy something more practical.”

“It’s pretty,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything like it. What is it?”

“It’s an old Lamborghini Countach,” he replied. “It’s Italian,” he added, unnecessarily.

Jane gazed at the car. “I bet it goes pretty fast, but there’s not much room inside for playing. Would you take me for a ride?”

“Sure,” he replied. “I guess—as long as it’s okay with your parents.” He wondered what she meant by “playing.”

Jane frowned. “My parents are both dead,” she said softly. “I live with my sister Ellen.”

Daniel looked at her lying there on the grass, one leg dangling off the retaining wall, the slit in her cutoffs gaping open—still no sign of an undergarment. She sat up and patted the top of the wall next to her. “Come sit by me,” she said. “You don’t have to stand there, I don’t bite—not hard, anyway.” She smiled at him and clicked her teeth together.

He turned around and sat beside her; the top of her head didn’t even come up to his shoulders. She scooted over until their bare legs were touching. “There,” she breathed. “Isn’t this nice?”

Daniel could feel her smooth skin against his and her arm pressing against his back. “Yes,” he admitted, “it’s very nice.” They turned their heads and looked at each other; Daniel smiled down at her; she smiled back, her brown eyes lifted to his. Her smile was very warm, her cheeks slightly dimpled.

Jane snuggled up against him; despite the warm temperature, he could feel her body heat against his bare side. She had a mixture of scents, he tried to analyze them: fresh perspiration, but another scent as well—Jane smelled very feminine; she smelled like *sex*, as if she were sending him pheromones on all frequencies. He felt nervous but her nearness excited him. She shifted against him; he could feel her tank top sliding against his bare skin.

This isn’t right, he thought to himself. *I’m a thirty-year-old man snuggled up against a fourteen-year-old (?) little girl.* Daniel corrected himself: *little* she might be, but definitely not a girl; she had none of gangly awkwardness of an adolescent, she was proportioned perfectly and she moved with grace, every muscle under smooth control like a ballerina.

Her tank top was scoop-necked, and looking down at her, he could see the deep valley between her breasts, which stood high and firm—another indication of youth. Her skin was soft and smooth, with no trace of moles or freckles on either her upper chest or her glossy legs—it appeared to be absolutely flawless; he longed to feel it under his fingertips. She wore no wristwatch, rings, or other jewelry; not even her ears were pierced—there was nothing to distract his gaze from her body. Except her clothes, what little of them there were. He wondered what she would look like without them. The legs of her cutoffs were almost nonexistent; the bottoms of her pockets protruded from beneath them, and because of the slits up their sides, the leg holes were very loose. *Quit it*, he scolded himself. *She’s just a child. Oh, no, she’s not*, he answered himself.

“Jane,” he said, “I don’t think we should be sitting this close. What if your sister were to see us?”

"Ellen's at work," Jane replied. "And what's the big deal? We're just sitting here talking." She gave him a crooked smile, then she took a deep breath. "Now it *would* be a big deal if you did *this*..." She grabbed his hand and jammed it up the inside of her thigh under the cutoffs.

"Hey!" Daniel gasped, jerking his hand away. "Why did you do that?"

"Because I want you," she said, staring into his eyes. "And you want me; you know you do. It's inevitable, Daniel. It will happen—it did happen."

"Huh? What do you mean, 'it *did* happen?'"

"I meant...I meant it *almost* happened."

Her reply made no sense; he sighed and put his arm around her small shoulders, trying to assume a big-brother attitude. "Listen to me, Jane. You have your whole life ahead of you; you shouldn't even be thinking about these kinds of things yet—you're not old enough."

"Just how old do you think I am?"

"I have no idea, Jane. Suppose you tell me."

Jane smiled. "I'm old enough to be your lover, Daniel. And your wife."

She reached up, put her hand behind his neck and pulled his face down to hers, putting her lips over his mouth. He could feel her tongue sliding back and forth across his lips; he parted them and she pushed her tongue inside his mouth, exploring. Abruptly, she released him and hopped down off the retaining wall, pulling him upright, then her arms were around him, her lips were over his again; she had to stand on her tiptoes to reach him.

Across the street, a door banged shut; a man came out of a house, carrying a rake and a bag of fertilizer. Jane glanced at him, then she put her arms around Daniel's waist and turned him around so that she was hidden from the man's view. She hooked her fingers in the waistband of his swim trunks, tugging him into his garage, then she leaned around him and looked at the man across the street; he was frankly staring at them, although she was hidden from his view by Daniel's backside.

"Damn!" she said. "Nosy bastard. Okay, I give up—for now. Go unpack your boxes, but leave some for me because I'm going to help you."

She kissed him one last time, then she climbed the retaining wall and walked slowly across the grass toward her house, very reluctant to leave. Daniel was just as reluctant to see her go. She glanced back over her shoulder at him several times, her long hair swirling around her, finally waving at him as she opened her door. Her cutoffs were so short he could see the bottoms of her buttocks below them; he wanted to call her back.

"Wait a minute!" he called. "When will I see you again?"

"Soon," Jane answered. "Very soon." She kissed her fingertips and threw the kiss to Daniel; he caught it and put it against his lips. She grinned, then she quickly entered her house, shut the door, and was gone.

Daniel stood there, staring at the door for a minute. *Holy shit*, he thought. *I almost had a sexual encounter with a teenage girl*. He looked across the street. The man waved at him and grinned; he waved back feebly. He wondered if the man knew Jane; probably so, if she had lived here any length of time. He wished he could go ask him about her, but he knew that wouldn't do at all—grown men don't go around asking questions about teenage girls. He thought about ringing Jane's doorbell, but not with the man across the street watching. He wondered how much the man had seen, and decided he didn't care. He also wondered if Jane's encounter with him was the first one she'd had with men in the neighborhood. For all he knew, she was the neighborhood prostitute, going door-to-door on a routine basis. Or maybe the whole encounter had been taped and the police were on their way to arrest him as a pedophile. All he knew was,

he had to meet Ellen as quickly as possible so that he could see Jane again. Shaking his head in disbelief at the whole thing, he quickly finished up his car, then he threw his tools into his toolbox and carried it into the garage, shutting the overhead door behind him.

He spent the next two hours unpacking his computer and stereo system in the great room, setting the components in the bookshelves and plugging everything together. Finally satisfied, he mixed up a rum and Coke, moved several small boxes out of his easy chair, and sat down heavily in the midst of his packing crates. He stared at the fireplace, then he rose and opened the patio doors. There was a stack of wood outside; he carried three logs in, put them in the fireplace and lit the gas, then he pulled his chair up close to the fire despite the heat.

Daniel sipped on his drink, listening to the crackling fire. Jane. He'd never personally known any girl by that name. "*Jane*," he said aloud, listening to her name bounce off the walls. He tried to think of Janes—Jane March, Jane Fonda, Jane Seymour, me Tarzan you Jane, Dick and Jane, Dick *does* Jane, *Daniel* does Jane... Who *are* you, Jane? he asked her image. What's your last name? How old are you? Old enough to be your lover, she replied. And your wife. Why did you do this to me, Jane? Now I can't get you out of my mind. What a fantastic little body you have. What a sweet smile and beautiful voice you have. How wonderful your body smells.

He shook off the thoughts and put in a CD of Karl Jenkins' *Adiemus*, turning it up loud. Roaming aimlessly through the house, he finally stuck his head outside his front door—no picnic basket. He rummaged around in some boxes, found a can of Campbell's clam chowder and poured it into a pan as he listened to the music. *Adiemus* was a series of choral pieces, but the words were in no particular language—they had been put together as semi-nonsense syllables so as not to distract the listener from the instrumental portion of the music, but now every tenth syllable was "Jane."

"*Shit*," he said to his reflection in the pan lid. "Stop it, you idiot—she was just teasing you. She's nothing but a temptress. She'll probably seduce you and call the cops, crying, 'He raped me!' There is no way a girl like that—my *god* she is beautiful—is going to want to have anything to do with you; she probably did it on a dare or something—she's on the phone right now, telling her friends all about it."

He was beginning to think it was all some sort of fantasy but her scent on his fingers was strong and real. He sighed to himself. *Oh, well—eat your chowder, check your e-mail, move some boxes around and go to bed. But—save a couple for Jane, just in case she's sincere—we'll unpack them together, and then...*

There you go again. He sidled over to the kitchen window and looked across at the house next door—Jane's house. There was a window directly facing his—probably her kitchen—but the curtains were opaque. He found a plastic spoon and stood over the sink, eating the chowder out of the pan and washing it down with his rum and cola, then he rinsed out the pan—he was reluctant to wash her from his hands; it was the only thing he had to remember her by—and took one last look at the window across the way. The curtains hadn't budged. He poked his head out his front door, but there was no car in Jane's driveway; either her sister Ellen hadn't arrived home yet or she had driven her car into the garage. Maybe tomorrow he would meet her—and see Jane again.

Daniel mixed another rum and Coke and sat at his computer, drumming his fingers as his e-mail inbox came up. The cable guy was supposed to come tomorrow to hook up his TV and his high-speed Internet connection, so dial-up would have to do for tonight.

“Dear Jane,” he typed, then he backspaced, e-n-a-J. “Shiri,” he continued. “Well, I’ve finally got everything moved in the house, except for the stuff from my storage locker in Colorado Springs. I’ve spent most of my time unloading so I haven’t had much time to look around the town, but from what I’ve seen, Anchorage is a fantastically beautiful city, surrounded by mountains on three sides. I think they call it the “city of flowers,” and there *are* flowers—they’re everywhere. It’s one of the cleanest cities I’ve ever seen. I talked to some local guys yesterday at the grocery store. During the winter they do oil exploration up on the North Slope and around Prudhoe Bay, and during the summer they just hike around, doing glacier and rock climbing, or putting together rafting or kayaking trips down some of the rivers. I’ve been invited to do a five-day float down the Copper River, but I doubt if I’ll get the chance before next summer.

“I’ve already met one of my neighbors—a nice little girl named Jane, she lives with her sister.” [*Nice little girl is an understatement*, he thought.]

“I am anxious to see our new laboratory at Elmendorf Air Force Base. They told me that everything from our lab at NORAD has been moved; Sophie and Carl are already here, hard at work. I faxed them my latest equations and they’ve recalibrated the containment field accordingly. Our last attempt at generating a time portal before we moved was only partially successful, so let’s hope I’ve finally got the math correct. I keep thinking about Doc Brown’s ‘flux capacitor’ and how he built it into a DeLorean. I know we’re on the right track now, and when we’re successful, we’ll have the world’s first time machine. If our schedule holds, we’ll know by the time you get here next week with the government brass.

“I guess I’d better send this message before I fall asleep; I’m really tired and I have to be at the lab at eight. Good luck, and I’ll send you another e-mail tomorrow night.”

Daniel re-read the message, then he pressed the key that would encrypt it and send it to Shiri Newmann, his on-again, off-again lover—he stopped short of considering her to be his girlfriend. The e-mail was more personal than he would have liked, but Daniel believed strongly in the old saying, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” Shiri could well turn out to be his worst enemy.

They had met at Stanford; both of them were physicists engaged in temporal, or time research. Stanford’s 3.2-kilometer long Linear Accelerator Collider was capable of accelerating electrons and positrons (the antimatter version of the electron), smashing them together inside a large particle detector lovingly named “BaBar.”

Thanks to Daniel’s expertise in aligning the spins of the particles, the collisions now were much more powerful, and they began to reveal the specifics of particles called Higgs bosons (particles that imbue all other particles with mass) and light supersymmetric particles (shadowy particles such as the neutralino, which, it was speculated, accounted for the dark, invisible matter that constitutes 23 percent of the universe).

That knowledge, Daniel and his team hoped, would in turn open the door to parallel universes, of which, it was theorized, there were eleven. And short-circuiting the space-time continuum through these parallel universes was the key to achieving time travel—at least Daniel’s equations said it was the key. Their research uncovered the existence of a new particle, duly dubbed the “Ross Particle” in honor of Daniel. This particle did not require a huge accelerator; it could short-circuit the continuum using barely any energy. Whereas Doc Brown’s

DeLorean in the movie *Back to the Future* required 18 gigawatts of power to trigger the portal, Daniel's math predicted it could eventually be done with a 12-volt car battery.

The only problem was that the continuum had to be short-circuited in a containment field, and creating such a field large enough to shape a time portal through which men and equipment could pass required tremendous amounts of ordinary electricity. While others of his team were working on the containment problem, Daniel was feverishly developing the equipment necessary to calibrate the time portal so that it could be set to a particular time and place.

When it appeared that the research team was about to achieve a breakthrough, the military immediately slapped a "top secret" classification on the project and moved it to a more secure facility adjacent to NORAD in Colorado Springs. Now it had been moved again, this time to Elmendorf Air Force Base, just north of Anchorage, Alaska—a much more secure and remote location.

Because Shiri Newmann was an Air Force officer, she had remained behind to escort the top military brass on their first visit to Alaska. Daniel knew that if his team didn't have something positive to show them next week when they arrived, there'd be hell to pay and Shiri would be angry—as usual.

Shiri was an angry person, occasionally given to violence when she didn't get her way, and especially if she wasn't satisfied sexually. And it was Shiri's decision, as the military head of the project, whether the research should continue to be funded. So unless he wanted to be out of a job—and a lover—he had damned well better make sure the experiments went off without a hitch.

Daniel sighed, logged off the Internet, and turned off the computer. He stood and stretched, then he gathered his toiletries and took a hot shower. Slipping on a pair of gym shorts, he laid on his bed and tried to read a few pages in a technical journal; the words blurred together and he tossed the journal aside and turned off the light, staring into the darkness.

The image of Jane was immediately in his mind, and the same questions began to haunt him. She was so *small*; probably four-foot ten or so—what some men referred to as a "teenie" or "Lolita," or more crudely as a "spinner" or "revolver."

He wondered what it would feel like to be inside her. What would it feel like for *her* to have a man inside her for the first time? He had never "deflowered" a virgin—assuming Jane *was* a virgin. He had heard that for girls, it usually hurt the first time. He didn't want to hurt Jane—he wanted her first time (with him, hopefully) to be a beautiful experience for both of them; one that they would want to repeat, over and over.

He remembered *his* first time; he had been clumsy but his partner was admittedly more experienced and she had provided good instruction. "Very slowly," she had whispered as he had moved inside her. "Make it last—let me move with you." She had knelt on top of him so she could control their actions; she had set the pace and it had been perfect—she knew how far along he was and she either sped up or slowed down to match her own level of ecstasy so that they came together. It was the most heavenly feeling he had ever experienced. Kind of a pity he couldn't even remember her last name.

There had not been that many women in Daniel's life: advanced "fast-track" high school subjects, five years at Cornell, another three at M.I.T. for his masters and doctorate, and then immediately swallowed up by the U.S. government to do temporal research. There weren't that many women interested in physics, and the ones that were, were as busy as he was. Especially quantum mechanics, which was his specialty—mostly math, math, and more math, cloistered away with a computer and a marker board. Dates with women in his field usually turned into

professional discussions, all thoughts of sex forgotten, or foreshadowed by arguments about string theory.

Shiri Newmann had been different. Unlike the majority of scientists, she was not a left-brained analytical; she was an emotional control freak who had fought her way to the rank of Air Force Captain, using whatever means necessary to achieve promotion. Daniel didn't doubt for a moment that she had polished many a general's helmet along the way.

When he had met her for the first time, she had not been in uniform; she had been wearing the traditional white lab coat, her blonde hair up in a tight bun and horrible black-framed glasses perched on her nose. Typical bitch, he had thought; then he had admonished himself for having chauvinistic thoughts. But as it turned out, he had been correct in his initial assessment: Shiri *was* a bitch. She had once confessed to him that she hated her name because it sounded too chic and feminine; she had tried to change it to some unisex name—she had picked “Leslie”—but the Air Force wouldn't hear of it.

She preferred her military uniform because it made her look more masculine and gave her the authority to snap orders without being questioned. But underneath the uniform—or lab coat—Shiri was all woman, and she knew when and how to use her body to advantage.

She had been cold and aloof toward him at first, even when working alone and closely with him, putting in long hours at the lab. She was an adequate physicist, uninspired but good enough to recognize Daniel for the mathematical genius that he was. When she realized that Daniel might be successful, she attached herself to him, riding his brilliance and receiving credit along with him. In turn, Daniel realized that Shiri would make a better proponent than an opponent, so he allowed her all the credit she wanted. He didn't care; he couldn't publish so he would never be well known, and he had a very substantial paycheck for his efforts. If Shiri got the credit, fine; and if the project failed, the failure would be on her head, not his.

They had been working around the clock, trying to generate a containment field large enough to create a useable time portal. The rest of the team had left for the night, leaving Daniel and Shiri alone in the lab. The huge room was dark, the only illumination coming from a workbench light. Their heads were together, peering at a printed circuit board through a magnifying lens. Shiri had removed her glasses to see better, then she had put her lips against his ear as he was trying to solder a tiny connection. He felt her tongue on his earlobe and he jerked, causing the soldering iron to slide across several solder joints.

He put the soldering iron in its cradle and straightened up; she straightened up with him, facing him and licking her lips. Gingerly, he reached behind her and unpinned her hair, letting it fall down around her shoulders, neither of them saying a word. She smiled and unbuttoned his lab coat; he did the same with hers, pulling it off over her shoulders and letting it drop to the floor.

Underneath, she was wearing a sheer, sleeveless dress with a narrow belt at her waist. Daniel undid the belt, then he pulled her to him and put his hands on her dress, lifting it until he could put his hands on her legs, sliding his fingers under her panties and around her buttocks. Their lips met and they kissed deeply, then he pulled the dress up over her head and tossed it away. Kicking her shoes off, she turned her back, letting him unfasten her bra. She shrugged out of it and turned back around, facing him.

“My panties,” she whispered. “Take them off.” He knelt in front of her, putting his fingers in the waistband of her white panties and sliding them slowly down her legs. She put one hand on his shoulder and stepped out of them, standing naked before him.

“Now what do we do, boss?” Daniel asked her afterwards as she lie beneath him, her legs dangling off the workbench.

Shiri smiled up at him. “Now we finish the circuit board and get out of here. It’s a good thing I declared this lab off limits to security tonight.”

“You planned this?”

“Of course—I’ve wanted you for a long time, Danny, and I *am* a scientist, whether you men think so or not. I plan everything in advance.” She kissed him soundly.

“So this is not the end of your Daniel Ross study?”

“Oh, the study is just underway,” she said, grinning. “There is much more to come. Speaking of which, I’m ready again if you are.”

And that was how it had started with Captain Shiri Newmann—they had met as often as they could. There were strict rules about her fraternizing with her civilian staff, so they were discreet. They discovered a small unused physical examination room one flight down and invented reasons for being absent from the lab for an hour—an hour spent on the examination table or in an armless chair; Shiri liked sitting astride his lap, her dress hiked up around her waist as she lowered herself onto him. It gave her complete control.

Daniel learned what turned Shiri on—which buttons to push—and he could do it at any time, no matter how seriously they were engaged with some problem. When he felt like it, which was often, he would walk up beside her, and when no one was looking, he would reach down and slide his hand up under her skirt, lightly touching the inside of her thigh, sliding his fingers through the downy hair between her legs and stroking her; he could feel her shake under his touch. She would straighten up, remove her glasses, and look at him, a funny smile on her lips, then she would make some excuse to leave the lab. He would follow her in a few minutes and they would meet in the exam room.

They attended many meetings in the research complex; particularly meetings during which the lights were extinguished for slide shows or PowerPoint presentations. During such meetings, they sat away from other attendees, Daniel’s hand under her skirt as they listened to the presentation. In one of the meetings, right when Daniel had his finger in her body and Shiri was trying not to let anyone know she was having an orgasm right in the middle of the meeting, she was asked a question by the presenter. Afterwards, neither of them could remember what the question was or how she had responded; apparently her answer had been quite incoherent, meaningless, and had a strange, gasping quality to it.

Only once had anyone suspected: they had returned—by different routes—from the little exam room, and it was noted that Shiri was wearing Daniel’s lab coat, and vice versa. They explained jokingly that they had switched name tags just to see if anyone had noticed; obviously, someone had. Rumors started circulating about Daniel and Shiri, but they didn’t care, rumors routinely circulated about various personnel. They continued to meet, often two or three times a day, not counting their evenings together.

They spent most of their time involved in various extracurricular sexual activities and little time working on the project. As a result, the project began to suffer, and experiments began to fail or achieve only partial success. Deadlines came and went, budgets were blown, and Shiri began to feel the heat from her superiors—heat which she passed along to Daniel. It was his job, she had said, to keep her satisfied and devote as much time as necessary to ensure the success of the project. It was becoming more difficult to keep her satisfied, however; she began to have trouble achieving an orgasm, no matter what he tried—he stopped short of anything involving

BDSM or other kinkiness. “If that’s what you want,” he had told her, “then you can go elsewhere.”

Whether she had become bored with him or whether the pressure was taking its toll, he didn’t know, but Shiri became petulant and whiny when they were together. And angry—she begged him to hurt her; he refused and she exploded. That was the first time she had walked out on him, but each time she eventually came back, begging his forgiveness and giving him little presents. She would buy new clothes, expensive ones, and parade around in front of him, stripping and tossing the clothes aside. For awhile, she would be her old self, able to come with just his touch, but it would quickly fade; she would blow up again and walk out. The last time, he had told her either to stay or leave forever. She climbed into his arms, vowed to stay with him, and that’s where they had left it when they got orders to move the project to Alaska.

Now, Daniel wondered what the new research facilities at Elmendorf would be like. They would have to find secret, out-of-the-way places, and that would take time. Shiri could come to his house in the evenings, but for some strange reason, he was uncomfortable with that option, not wanting Jane to see her.

Jane again, back to haunt him. He pictured Jane in his mind: her silky skin—softly tanned, although there was no hint of a tan line—her smooth, glossy legs, the rise and fall of her breasts as she gently breathed. He could feel his fingers on her body, and he could feel her small hands stroking him through his swim trunks; he imagined how incredible it would feel for her fingers to actually be around him.

Daniel liked the way she had gazed up at him, with her head down and her big brown eyes turned up to his, a little smile on her lips. He could still feel her lips over his mouth and her tongue exploring his; he remembered how she tasted and he wanted to kiss every inch of her body.

He thought again of Shiri and tried to compare the two girls in his analytical way, although he admitted that at least for him, women in general defied any kind of analysis. Shiri was very attractive—Daniel stopped short of calling her “beautiful”—once she shed her atrocious glasses and let her hair down; he had explored every inch of her body, both inside and out. She was sexy, he supposed, and insatiable, he knew—almost a nymphomaniac when she wasn’t on a psychotic rampage. But where Shiri was sexy, she didn’t compare with Jane—Jane just *exuded* sex; her smell, her taste, her touch—Jane assaulted *all* his senses; it was as if she had a whole set of pheromones just for him. He could admire Shiri from a distance, but he couldn’t do that with Jane—he had to be close to her, have his hands on her; she was like a magnet.

For shame, Danny, he said to himself. If she were fourteen, that would put her in the ninth grade—just barely in high school. Even worse if she were just thirteen. Regardless, she was very much a woman, and it was obvious she knew the effect her body was having on him. Jane was a woman, and he was a man. Jane was *one hundred percent* woman. And hopefully she was older than she looked. She could easily be in her early twenties; her small size meant nothing.

But still....He tried replacing her image with Shiri’s, but Jane’s long wavy hair kept tickling his chest as she laid above him, their bellies sliding against each other, slippery with sweat—he could almost feel her breathing above him, her sweet breath on his face, her sweet lips over his.

He rolled over and finally put her out of his conscious thoughts as concerns about Shiri and the new lab at Elmendorf flooded his mind. His last thought before drifting off was that of Jane, her fingers setting the dials on the flux capacitor which would plunge them back to the future. “Eighty-eight miles an hour,” she screamed, flooring the DeLorean.

Daniel hadn't been asleep for fifteen minutes when his phone rang. He felt around on the night stand and found the cordless; he looked at the Caller ID but didn't recognize the name or number. He glanced at the clock as the phone rang insistently; it was 11:46 p.m. Punching the On button, he put the instrument to his ear and said, "Hello?"

He heard quiet breathing at the other end. Finally, a small voice whispered, "Daniel?"

"Yes? Who is this?"

"It's Jane. What are you doing?"

Daniel was instantly awake. "Reading," he lied. "What are *you* doing? How did you get my number?"

"Magic," she replied. "I'm sorry I'm whispering but I don't want Ellen to hear me. I hope you don't mind me calling you."

"No," he replied, "of course not—I'm really glad you called. Is something wrong?"

"Yes," she said. "I'm not with you—that's what's wrong. I was just lying here in bed thinking about you—about what we did this afternoon."

"Jane, I'm sorry," he said. "I should never had taken advantage of you like that."

She chuckled softly. "You didn't take advantage of me, it was the other way around." Which was true, he conceded—Jane had grabbed his hand; he had not forced himself on her.

"I'm glad you feel that way," he said, relieved. "So what about me are you thinking?"

"Oh, all sorts of things." She was speaking so softly he could barely hear her; mostly he could hear her breath through the phone. She was breathing rapidly as if she had just run a mile.

"Tell me," he said. He found himself whispering also.

"Okay, Daniel. I'm thinking about how bad I want you. How you'll slowly take all my clothes off and I'll take all your clothes off. How nice it will be to be naked with you. How your skin will feel against mine. What your...your penis will feel like when it's inside me. Daniel? Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here. Jane, you're moving really fast, especially if you've never done the things you're describing. We were together for what— thirty minutes this afternoon? And now you're talking about things that some adults don't even discuss. You said you had watched me from your window, but I'm still a stranger; you don't know me at all—I could be anybody."

"But—don't you like me? Don't you like what we did together?"

"I *do* like you, Jane. I like you very much. And I *did* like what we did together. That's not the point."

"What *is* the point?"

Daniel sighed. "The point is that I'm thirty years old and you're...well, I don't know how old you are, you wouldn't tell me. So that makes me suspect that you're not old enough to be doing this, and I shouldn't be encouraging it. It's very irresponsible on my part, not to mention the fact that it's illegal if you're not eighteen. If you want to be sexually active, I'm sure there are plenty of boys your own age more suitable than I am."

"Daniel, I know you think I'm a child," Jane responded somewhat testily. "You think that just because I weigh eighty-eight pounds and look like a little teeny-bopper that I'm clueless about the world. How old did I say I was, Daniel?"

"You didn't give me a number."

"No, I didn't—I told you something else. What was it?"

"You said you were old enough to be my...my lover."

"That's right. And what else?"

“And my wife.”

“Good. You remembered.”

“Don’t be snotty.”

“Sorry. So how old do I *have* to be to be your lover and your wife? Give *me* a number, Daniel, and don’t say ‘eighteen’—we both know that’s bullshit.”

“Well, I…”

“You don’t *know*, Daniel,” she said harshly. “You’ve been told that girls under the age of eighteen—not to say that I’m under eighteen—aren’t capable of making mature decisions about love and relationships, and that suddenly, on their eighteenth birthday, some sort of wisdom is bestowed on them.

“Well, I’ve got news for Congress, and I’ve got news for you: I love you, Daniel Ross, with all my heart. I knew it from the moment I saw you. If you think that’s just puppy love or childish infatuation, then you’re sadly mistaken.” Jane’s voice was frantic, now. “I want to be with you, Daniel. I want to do the things you do; go the places you go, side by side. I want to share my life with you; I want us to experience it together. I’m a virgin because until I met you, I hadn’t found anyone I cared enough about to share that experience with. Now, I *have* found someone—it’s *you*. I could give a flying fuck how old you are, pardon my French; I wish you could feel the same way.”

Daniel could hear Jane breathing heavily. “So it *was* you,” he whispered. “*You* wrote the cards. *You* left me the baskets.”

“Yes,” she replied. “I left them. I wanted to do something nice for you—to make you feel good about moving in. And I wanted you to know that somebody loves you, namely me.”

“You achieved your goal,” he said. “I’m flattered by your feelings for me, and the food was fantastic. But why did you leave the baskets and run?”

“Because it wasn’t time for us to meet,” she said.

“What do you mean, it wasn’t time?”

“Because it wasn’t. You wouldn’t understand.”

Daniel sighed again. “I don’t understand *anything*, Jane,” he moaned. “You’ve got me all twisted up inside. None of this makes any sense—this kind of thing just doesn’t happen. You’re all I’ve thought about since this afternoon. I guess I do feel the same way about the age thing. I just don’t understand why you’ve decided to pick *me*. I mean, I’m flattered that you did, but…”

“How can I answer that, Daniel? Nobody can even agree on the definition of love, let alone determine why two people fall in it. Just accept that I love you, with all my heart, and the more we’re together, the more you’ll come to believe me. As for the age thing, I said I was old enough to be your lover and your wife, and that’s what I meant. Quit fighting it.” Jane paused to catch her breath. “I won’t push you, Daniel—I want to give you time to think. When are you going to get up tomorrow morning?”

“I set the alarm for six; I have to be to work by eight. Why— you want my decision tomorrow morning?”

“No, of course not. I’d just like to see you before you leave.”

“Oh. Well then, I’d like that too, Jane. I’d like that very much.”

“Then leave your back door open and I’ll see you in the morning. Goodnight, Daniel. You’ll have beautiful dreams about me tonight, I promise.”

The line went dead. Daniel stared at the ceiling. What have I gotten myself into? he wondered. Eventually he drifted off to sleep, and as promised, he dreamed of Jane.

