

THE TIME TWISTERS

(Sample Chapters)

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CHAPTER 1

10:45 p.m. – July 21, 2011 – An empty warehouse, River North district, Chicago, IL

Congressman Blake Phillips was in the prime of his career and he knew it. At the age of fifty-six, he was in decent shape for his age. He had salt-and-pepper hair with grey eyes and laugh lines on his face.

Standing five foot nine, he was usually well-dressed, well-groomed and looked like a corporate executive. His gray sweat suit and athletic shoes made him look like any other businessman on the way back to his hotel from the gym.

He stood motionless on LaSalle Street, between West Illinois Street and West Hubbard Street. He stared through opera glasses at the upper floors of the apartment tower a hundred feet away.

His logical mind understood why Smith insisted he be here to witness the event. Otherwise, if all went as planned, Phillips wouldn't remember the deal they made and his promise to pay the silver-haired mercenary ten million dollars for his services.

His emotional mind was another story. His stomach was still queasy from the time jump. Everything around him was antiquated. Even the air felt different. It was unsettling, like suddenly appearing as a character in an old movie. And Smith's warnings not to interact with anyone didn't make him more comfortable.

Waiting was always hard on Phillips' nerves. He saw Smith on a balcony a few moments ago.

What's keeping him?

His stomach rolled over again and he wished he were somewhere else.

Smith appeared again and threw something off the balcony. *The girl!* Through the glasses, Phillips watched her body fall from the apartment balcony, drifting slightly as it rolled. It smashed into the sidewalk.

Careful not to be the first person there, he slipped the opera glasses into his pocket and ran to the body. A small crowd gathered and he craned his neck to see around and over shoulders.

Her arms and legs lay at grotesque angles. Blood and tissue were splattered on everything within ten feet.

Oh, God!

His stomach roiled again as he turned his head and swallowed the bit of vomit that came to his mouth.

A pale woman clutched a handkerchief to her lips. "Did anyone see what happened?"

"Not me," said the man who reached the scene first. "I saw her out of the corner of my eye... right before she hit the pavement. Did anyone call 9-1-1?"

"I did," another woman said. "Not that it'll help. Look around you. There's no way."

She looked up and scanned the towering apartment building. "I wonder if she jumped or maybe got drunk and fell off the balcony? Regardless, we shouldn't touch the body. It's a fatal accident scene now. The police will be here any second."

Phillips left the growing crowd and walked to the warehouse. There was nothing more to learn. He heard the sirens of approaching emergency vehicles as they reverberated off the buildings of midtown Chicago.

After walking a block, he became dizzy and disoriented. His stomach heaved and he vomited into a potted plant in front of a bar. A waitress ran over and yelled at him. He waved her away and staggered to a utility pole. He clung to it until the dizziness stopped, then continued down the street.

When he reached the abandoned warehouse, Phillips slipped through the door he and Smith forced open earlier.

He made his way to the rendezvous point. He reminded himself not to venture too close. Smith would jump in soon, and it wouldn't do to be in the exact spot where he arrived. If Smith materialized into the same space his body occupied, Phillips would be dead.

He fought off another wave of nausea and shook his head in irritation.

Now isn't the time to be squeamish – not with Smith returning at any moment.

He needed to be calm and collected. If he wasn't, a man like Smith would eat him for lunch. Or worse, share his weakness with Rho.

The building's dust irritated his nostrils and sinuses. He checked the time. It was 11:01 pm.

He should be here by now.

He willed his body to relax.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he perceived a shadowy figure leaning against a steel column ten yards away.

Alarmed, he fumbled for his phone again to cast light on the figure. Before he could draw it from his pocket, a penlight beam focused on his face and destroyed his night vision.

Phillips shielded his eyes with his hand and squinted.

Smith's voice came from behind the light. "You saw?"

He's already here.

"I did," Phillips said. "Would you mind turning that off, please?"

"Sure," Smith said.

The light winked off and the two men approached each other. Smith towered over Phillips by five inches and stopped just inside Phillips' personal space. Phillips took a small step back.

"Yes," he said, his voice little more than a croak. "I saw."

"You need a breath mint," Smith said. "Are you going to faint on me?"

"No," he said. "I'm fine. Let's go."

"In a minute. Do you agree I've carried out my end of the bargain? Is there anything else to do?"

“No. I agree you've fulfilled your contract.” Phillips waved his arm at the room. “Now, can we get out of this filthy place?”

Smith ignored the question.

“And the rest of my payment will be delivered when we return, right? Half up front and half upon completion is what we agreed.”

“Of course,” Phillips said. “But, I do have a concern about reversal. Are you sure no one can come back and reverse our changes? It's no good for me if it isn't permanent.”

“Yes. After about a week, it's impossible to return to this time – not for another twenty-five years.”

“So after a week the changes are permanent? Are you sure?”

Smith shrugged. “One hundred percent. For the next twenty-five years, anyway. By then, it won't matter, will it? I think we're good.”

Phillips nodded. “Then make it eight days. I need to know it's permanent. You have my word you'll be paid then.”

Smith laughed.

“Your word?” He shook his head, shrugged and then chuckled. “Okay. That'll do for now. I believe you'll honor our agreement. You've everything to gain by paying me. And everything to lose if you don't.”

“As do you,” Phillips said.

Smith shrugged and nodded. “As for your opponent, I don't think you'll see him on the TEV when we get back to our time.”

Phillips smiled at the thought. The technology that made TelExtraVision possible was not new. A small company combined television, the video telephone, and online computer access into one high definition device and branded it. He owned a set, but only used the television functions. He kept the other activities separate.

“That would be a pleasant result,” Phillips said. “I presume you will be around for other specialized work as needed later?”

“I'm open to proposals. It depends on my availability, the price and the risk.”

“I understand. I don't forget my friends, and you've proved your reliability more than once.”

“Yes, I have,” Smith said. “What's next?”

“We wait. In a few weeks we'll have the elections, and a new administration will sweep into power. Led by me.” He paused and smiled. “Me. And I'm taking this government in a new direction if I have to drag it, kicking and screaming.”

“I'll be happy to help in any way I can, Mr. President-Elect.”

CHAPTER 2

6:25 p.m. – June 11, 2036 – Defense Logistics Agency Satellite Office Building, Telegraph Road, Alexandria, VA

It was the end of a long day for Major Marc McKnight. His normal day included a workout at the gym, hand-to-hand combat sparring with his team, reviewing potential missions, coaching his team members and getting up to speed on the science of time travel. He liked the structure and the discipline of his schedule.

None of that happened today. Today, he skipped all those activities to play his part in their move from Langley to new offices on Telegraph Road. The complex there was an aged elementary school the Army bought and converted to offices for a team that needed isolation. Now it was being used as a staging area for the move to the new DLA facility on Fort Belvoir campus.

McKnight started the day at Langley, ensuring that everyone on the team was accounted for and visited by the movers. Then he drove his pickup truck to Telegraph Road. As the team arrived there, he directed traffic.

Satisfied that all his people and their stuff made it to their respective offices, he closed his office door and surveyed his own unpacked boxes scattered around the room. *Nope, not yet.* He stretched his six-foot-one frame, reaching first for the ceiling and then touching his toes. Left and right twists of the torso and side bends helped make him more comfortable. He dropped into his desk chair, turned toward the transparent office wall and put his feet up on the credenza. He was tired and it was the first time today he had a chance to sit and think. He was

glad the move part was over. After he unpacked, he could get some real work done.

A few short years before, the science of historical research changed forever. Doctor Robert Astalos, an MIT physicist, stumbled onto a time travel mechanism that allowed him to visit time periods in the past. The technology was limited – he could only reach time periods that were a multiple of twenty-five years from the present. Nonetheless, it opened the door to study select past events, especially those shrouded in mystery.

The US government classified the technology and Congress established the HERO team to research and validate history. Retired General Mike Drake was asked to provide strategic direction, overseen by Senator Lodge's committee on New Technology. Astalos continued to work with the team, creating support tools and diagnostic applications.

HERO was an acronym. It stood for Historical Event Research Organization. As a project name, McKnight considered it inane and stupid. But he was in the Army and he followed orders. His orders were to help General Drake select Army and civilian talent for the mission team and to command it. Team selection was complete and their first mission, though unorthodox and rushed, was successful. Now they were planning and scheduling subsequent missions.

It was a dream job and a career maker if he did his job well. But he didn't really think about that aspect much, because the work and technology were interesting and so were the members of his team.

Until today, the HERO Team operated out of a crowded facility near Langley Virginia. In six weeks, they would move to a permanent home in the DLA Headquarters building a few miles away. Today, he'd been on his feet for twelve hours as they moved from Langley to this office on Telegraph Road.

He sighed. *Only in the Army would we move to temporary offices six weeks before moving to permanent offices.*

It wasn't bad, though. This building had room for Doctor Astalos' lab, office space for all, a kitchen and conference rooms. It had everything they needed for the short term. Back in Langley, the team was scattered throughout the complex. Here on Telegraph Road, they had everyone in one block of offices. It would make working together much easier.

Best of all, their offices now had a receptionist/office manager. Her name was Cindy Ginn and she came well recommended.

His phone rang. The ring tone was a familiar one. He answered and said, "Hi, Megan."

"Hey, yourself," she said. "Did I call at a bad time?"

"Not at all," he said. "It's actually a good time. We moved into our new office today. I finally got to sit down for a minute. How are things down in Georgia?"

"They're good," she said. "But I'm feeling a little bit ignored. Are you angry with me?"

"No, of course not. I'm sorry – It's been crazy busy. Is everything okay?"

"Yes," she said. "But I haven't heard from you in a few days. I thought you would have called sooner. I have a remedy for that if you'd like to hear it."

"Sure."

"Like I told you the other day, I'm between jobs now and I'm looking for something else. Don't you think that now would be as good a time as any for me to come to Washington?"

"I'd love you to, but there are a lot of things going on right now. We have ongoing projects, plus another office move in a few weeks. After we get that completed would be a better time for a visit."

There was a brief moment of silence from Megan's end of the line. "Marc, I'm not talking about a visit. I'm talking about moving in with you."

"Oh," he said. He pulled his feet off the credenza and sat up straight. Images of home life raced through his mind – moving out of the

Bachelor Office Quarters, skipping gym visits to work around the house, coordinating schedules with Megan, cooking at home, and several others. *Am I ready for that?*

He searched for the right words. None came immediately.

"I'm getting the feeling you think it's a bad idea," she said, unable to hide the disappointment in her voice.

"Nothing about you is a bad idea, Megan. It's just that I've never lived with anyone before. And it's a big step for you to uproot yourself from your family and friends and move to a place where you don't know anybody."

"Yes, it is, but it's what people in love do when they're apart."

"But are you sure we're ready for that? I mean, I do love you. Don't misunderstand that. But we've been in different towns through our entire relationship. What if you moved up here and it didn't work out between us?"

"That's the big risk, isn't it? But you can never know how much time is required to make sure you're compatible. At some point, you just have to take the leap and see what happens. I know that's contrary to your personality, but it's how love works."

"I know, but—"

"How do I like my coffee?" she said.

"Huh?" He paused and smiled. "A splash of French vanilla and one Splenda."

"Correct, and you like yours black, or barefooted as you like to say. I could go on and you know it. We know each other very well."

McKnight shifted his weight in his chair. "I don't know. It seems like such a big step."

"So you need time to think about it? Maybe consider your options? You know, my parents knew each other for less than a year and it's lasted for forty years. We've known each other twice that long."

"Don't get me wrong, Megan. It's just that—"

"You're sending me conflicting signals, Marc. I thought being in love was a good enough reason."

Someone knocked on the door. “Hold on a second,” he said, and put his thumb over the phone’s microphone.

He kicked off the credenza to spin his chair around and sat upright at the desk.

“Come,” he said.

Captain Winston Tyler stepped into the room.

He removed his thumb from the microphone. “Megan, I have to go. Tyler’s here and we have some work things to do. I’ll call you back.”

“Okay. You need to know that this disappoints me and we need to finish this discussion. I love you. Tell Winnie I said hello.”

“Me, too. Bye.” He disconnected the call.

Tyler saluted. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“No, not at all.” McKnight returned his salute. “Your cousin says hello.”

“That was Megan? How is she? Everything okay?”

“Yes, she’s fine. It’s all good.”

Tyler grinned. “Great. You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Yes. As you were. Have a seat, Winnie.”

Tyler dropped into one of the two side chairs.

Tyler and McKnight were roommates at West Point. The two men were friends from day one at the Academy. But no two officer candidates were as different as Tyler and McKnight. Tyler was fair-skinned, blond and blue-eyed, McKnight was one-eighth American Indian with dark brown hair and brown eyes. Tyler was barely five-foot-nine to McKnight’s solid six-foot-one. Where Tyler possessed an outgoing personality, McKnight was introverted. Tyler grew up in Atlanta in a prosperous neighborhood, while McKnight spent his formative years on a farm in rural Oregon. Tyler gravitated toward mission planning and McKnight showed expertise in leadership and decision-making.

During their time at the Academy, they found they worked well together. After graduation, they teamed up for a couple of successful

projects. Tyler was McKnight's first choice to join the HERO Team when it was formed.

"Winnie, I just wanted to comment on the great job you did coordinating the move. Everyone made it into their new offices and, as far as I can tell, nothing got lost. Not bad."

"Thanks, Marc."

"You can start the planning for the next move with Lieutenant Wheeler at your earliest."

"Yes, sir. We've already set up a meeting for tomorrow to get started on it."

"Good. At ten thousand foot level, what are you thinking?"

"A heavily armed convoy, sir," Tyler said. "The technology is important and needs to be protected, even for a short trip."

"Sounds good. Here's another option. Go with a small team for protection, but keep the move totally secret – the secrecy mitigates some of the risk incurred by using a smaller team."

Tyler frowned. "I'm not crazy about that option, sir. Is there a reason why we should take that risk?"

"Unfortunately, yes. I'm getting my ass kicked by General Drake for the budget. Doctor Astalos has some new ideas that need researching and some of our operating budget has been reallocated for that purpose. It's not optimal, but the General and Senator Lodge agreed to the shift in resources."

"I see."

"Captain, I'm not telling you what to do. Just look at the costs of the options and the associated risks and make your recommendation. If we have to overrun the budget, I'll find some way to deal with it. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. We'll need a briefing about a week before the move to go over the details for the team. That's all I have." McKnight mentally checked an item off his to-do list.

Tyler stood. "One more thing, Marc. I was talking to Sarah earlier today..."

From McKnight's perspective, Tyler's attractive fiancée made it her mission in life to find a match for Tyler's best friend.

"Uh-oh. Another blind date? I've been seeing Megan for quite a while now. I, uh..."

Tyler grinned. "Not this time. We figure Megan is more woman than you can handle. No, she wanted me to ask if you've heard from Barbara Howard lately?"

The mention of Barbara's name brought her to McKnight's mind and a smile to his face. He could see her blonde hair, her quick smile and her dancing blue eyes.

"No, I haven't," McKnight said. "Why?"

"Sarah hasn't heard from her in a while and hasn't been able to find her. She's getting concerned and we thought maybe you might have heard from her."

Tyler looked more worried than he sounded.

"No, I'm sorry, I haven't." McKnight said. "Did she get a new job or something? Maybe a new boyfriend?"

Tyler shrugged. "We heard she's dating around, but no serious boyfriend that we know of. But she usually checks in with Sarah every other week or so. It's been two months. Sarah called her parents out in California but wasn't able to get in touch with them as of yet."

"Really? That doesn't sound so good."

"Yeah, that's what we thought. We're pretty much out of ideas about finding her, short of calling the police. That's next, I suppose. We'll wait another day or so before doing that. Let me know if you find out anything."

"We didn't have many friends in common. Just each other. But I'll try all the options I have for contacting her."

"Good deal. Thanks. Well, I've got to go. Sarah's waiting downtown for me. Have a good night." He opened the door to leave.

McKnight held up his hand. “Let me know if you guys hear anything, okay? I’d like to know.”

“Will do. I’ll share anything we find out. See you later, Marc.”

Tyler left the room.

McKnight sat still and stared at the closed door. He thought about Barbara. Inexplicably, he could smell her perfume – a trick of his memory. She was an amazing girl and he wondered how he let her get away.

But he knew how.

Barbara was ready for a deeper relationship and he wasn’t. She got tired of waiting and broke up with him. They remained friendly and he wanted to stay close, but she didn’t. Staying away from each other for a while was necessary, she said, for her to get over him and get herself back on track. He hadn’t seen her for nearly a year.

He drew out his phone, looked up her number in the address book, and called it. He got a recorded message – the number was no longer in service. He frowned. *Well, that’s weird. These days, people don’t ever change their numbers.*

Well, he hadn’t tried to call her lately. There was no reason to expect her to keep him abreast of what was happening in her life.

He sent an email to her and got a quick response. The message said the email address didn’t exist on the domain. *That’s even weirder. Either she really wants to leave this part of her life behind or something is wrong.*

He wondered if she had met someone, had a whirlwind romance and left for some exotic location. It was certainly possible, but out of character for Barbara.

McKnight pulled himself to his feet and stared out through the transparent wall. *I need to call Megan back soon. She was pretty ticked off.*

He looked at his watch. *I need to go work out. Clear my mind.*

He looked again at the unpacked boxes. *The least I can do is to unpack one box.* He pulled the tape off the closest box and opened it.

CHAPTER 3

12:40 p.m. – June 12, 2036 – Defense Logistics Agency Satellite Office Building, Telegraph Road, Alexandria, VA

Trevor George took another bite of his ham and cheese sandwich and washed it down with Diet Coke. He glanced at his watch. He had about twenty minutes before his meeting with Doctor Astalos. The inventor of time travel had an open slot in his schedule and accepted a meeting request to talk about future enhancements to the time travel technology. As an investigator, Trevor wanted to know and understand the tools at the Team's disposal.

He glanced around the office. *And I still need to get unpacked and clean this place up.*

Trevor was in his mid-forties, with a boyish face, twinkling brown eyes, dimples, and brown curls that spilled over his ears. His own apartment looked a lot like the office. In fact, his whole life was in a state of flux. It all happened so fast.

Just a few months before, he was a cold case investigator for the Atlanta Police Department. After being pulled into a fifty-year-old murder case and working with Major McKnight, he jumped at the chance to join the HERO organization when invited. Now, he was living in Virginia and trying to get up to speed on a new job as a civilian employee of the US Army.

Like McKnight, he thought the acronym for the organization was pretty lame, but that didn't dampen his enthusiasm for the possibility of traveling to the past and witnessing history firsthand.

The job change caused plenty of upheaval in his personal life.

His mother and his fiancé weren't happy with his career choice.

In college, Mom pushed him toward a pre-law degree. She was appalled and mortified when, upon graduation, he defiantly entered the Atlanta Police Academy.

His fiancée, seeing herself as the wife of a successful attorney, had the same reaction.

In truth, it wasn't that he disliked the idea of being a lawyer so much. It was breaking away from his mother and fiancée trying to control his life. It had the desired effect. His mother now barely spoke to him and his fiancée found another potential lawyer.

Trevor would also miss his friends at Open Mic Atlanta, where he played saxophone on Wednesday nights. After a couple of failed attempts in local clubs, he found a band looking for a sax player and started gigging with them around Alexandria.

On balance, the new job and the move to DC were worth it.

The work wasn't the only incentive for taking this new position. There was also Kathy Wu, whom he met along with McKnight on the cold case. She was the civilian mission planner General Drake selected to work alongside Captain Tyler on the HERO Team. Trevor had never met anyone like her before. She was fascinating, beautiful, funny, and possibly the smartest person he had ever met. He liked her fondness for quoting lines from old movies at the most inappropriate or awkward times.

They were about the same age and hit it off right away. They grew up with the same music, the same current events. It felt very natural to spend time together and just talk. And they worked together very well. He wondered where the relationship might go from here.

Trevor thought she was warming up to him, but he wasn't sure he was ready for that. Kathy was strong-willed and he wasn't sure about starting a relationship with a woman who might try to control him. He had been there before and didn't like the ride or the result.

But he had to admit there was something there. He felt it and he was pretty sure she did, too.

His reverie was interrupted by an alarm on his phone. He looked at it and turned off the alarm. *Fifteen minutes before the meeting with Doctor Astalos. I need a notepad.*

Despite all the new personal productivity apps in phones and laptops, Trevor never adopted any for his business life except for communications. He found the act of writing things down with a pen engaged his thinking brain and taking notes pushed facts directly into his memory. Once he wrote something down, he remembered it without referring back to the notes.

He tossed his napkin and empty Coke can into the trash and headed for the reception area. In addition to greeting guests and answering the phones, the receptionist also managed and stocked the team's office supplies.

The receptionist Cindy was introduced to most of the team the day they moved in, but Trevor hadn't yet met her personally. He walked down the hall and entered the reception area.

Cindy sat at the desk. It didn't take an advanced degree to notice she was attractive. She had blonde hair that curved to accentuate her face and was about thirty years old. She wore a conservative navy-blue skirt and her white blouse tastefully accentuated her breasts. The matching jacket and a small white purse hung on the coat rack in the corner and an aged cell phone lay on her desk. She smiled at him as he entered.

"Hi, Ms. Ginn. I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Trevor George."

"Oh, I know who you are, Mr. George. You have closed the circle."

"I beg your pardon."

She smiled. "I've met the rest of the HERO Team already. You were the only one I haven't met. Until now."

"Well, now the circle is indeed closed. It's nice to meet you." He waved toward the offices. "I understand you have some admirers here already. I heard you blew the whistle on Mike Smith."

"I didn't do anything, really. My girlfriend and I were out for the evening and ran into him in the Hard Rock Café."

“How did it come about?” he asked. “Before this, time travel technology was a well-kept secret.”

“Yes, I know. He was a little drunk and hitting on us. When he gave up and started talking to another girl about the time travel technology, we left. I had never heard about it and neither had my girlfriend, but it sounded like something that should be classified. I called my former boss – Senator Owen – and told him about it. I wasn’t prepared for his response.”

“Oh, he was on the Senate Intelligence Committee, right?”

“Yes. He told me not to mention it to anyone else and thanked me for telling him. The next day, two agents from INSCOM were at my door for an interview.”

“INSCOM? What’s that?” Trevor asked and smiled. “I’m relatively new to Washington and haven’t heard all the acronyms yet.”

“Basically, military intelligence. I don’t remember what the acronym stands for. Anyway, I hope I don’t run into Mr. Smith again. I heard he lost his consulting position with Senator Lodge and there was talk of jail time. I don’t think he’s happy with me.”

“I’ll bet. But the word got out anyway?”

“Yes. We weren’t the only people who overheard Mr. Smith. It turns out that an anchor for one of the major news channels also heard him and bought him a drink. The next day, the existence of time travel technology was revealed on their morning show.”

“Ouch.”

“Yes, well...anyway, Can I help you with something?”

“Yes, a couple of things. I have a meeting in a few minutes with Doctor Astalos, but I haven’t seen him today. Do you know if he’s here today?”

“Yes, he went to lunch with Kathy, but he did comment that he had a meeting with you when he got back. I’m sure he’ll be here then.”

“Cool. Also, I’ll need to take some notes. Do we have any notepads?”

“Oh, yes, of course.” She jumped out of her chair. “They’re here in the supply room. I just unpacked all the supplies and organized them. Right this way.”

She brushed past him a little closer than expected and stepped into the hallway. He followed her as she turned into the first door on the left.

“I didn’t even know we had a supply room,” he said.

She laughed. “Of course, we do. All the supplies are here and you can find them by the tag on each of the drawers. See?” She pointed to the labels on two of the drawers. “The notepads are here, for future reference.” She opened a drawer and handed him a notepad.

“That’s great, thanks.” He leaned against the door jamb. “Wow. You sure are efficient. Are you from here in Alexandria?”

She smiled and mirrored his posture against the tall filing cabinet.

“No, I worked for the Governor of Oklahoma for six years and a year with Senator Owen here in Washington. Senator Owen was my boss I mentioned earlier. That’s where I go my top-secret clearance.”

“Working for a Senator is a nice position. How come you left that job, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Oh, I don’t mind. Senator Owen lost his election in 2034 and took a job as a lobbyist. When the music stopped, there wasn’t a chair left for me. I was able to find part-time work for a while, but then my savings were almost gone. Finding this job at DLA was a life-saver for me.”

“I’ll bet the Smith incident didn’t hurt your chances for the job. I’m glad to hear it. And we’re glad to have you, Ms. Ginn.”

“Oh, call me Cindy, please.”

“Sure, Cindy. Please call me Trevor. I’m much more comfortable with that anyway.”

“So, Trevor, what do you do for fun?” Her body language suggested more than friendly interest behind her words and his imagination flared. Those eyes and lips would be hard to resist if they were accompanied by an invitation.

Trevor told Cindy about his new band and how much fun it was.

“Oh, I love to hear a good saxophone player. Do you play jazz or what?”

“Well, it’s mostly a combination of several styles. We—”

Doctor Astalos and Kathy Wu walked by the supply room at that moment.

“Hi,” Trevor and Cindy said, almost in unison.

Doctor Astalos responded with a hello. For some reason, Kathy looked irritated.

“Trevor,” Astalos said, “I’m available to meet whenever you’re ready. Just come on down to my office.”

“Yes, sir, I will.”

Astalos continued on down the hall toward his office.

“Do you have everything you need, Trevor?” Kathy asked and stepped past the open door as if she didn’t expect a response.

“Yes, I do,” Trevor said, though he wasn’t sure he understood the question.

He turned toward Cindy. “Thank you, ma’am, for the notepad.”

“No problem, Trevor. I’d love to hear your band play sometime. Let me know when and where.”

“Sure thing,” he said.

“I’m really looking forward to working with you, Trevor,” she said and walked back to the reception area.

“Me, too,” he said and strode down the hall after Kathy with his notepad in hand. It took a bit of effort to catch up to her.

“How was lunch?” he said, matching her stride.

“I’d love to hear your band?” she said and walked faster.

“What?”

They reached her office. She stopped and said, “Really? She’s really looking forward to working with you?”

He stopped and looked at her. She stood there in the hallway before him, her long blue-black hair pulled back in a ponytail and her hands planted on her hips. She looked professional, stunning, and irritated – all at the same time.

Trevor couldn't identify the emotion lying beneath the expression on her face. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

She looked at him for a long moment, as if waiting for a response. Then she rolled her eyes, dismissed him with a wave and stepped into her office.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked.

"Not at all. Don't forget your meeting with Doctor Astalos. He's waiting for you."

Shaking his head in confusion, Trevor continued down the hall and around the corner to Astalos' office in the Lab.

"Sorry, sir," Trevor said. "It took a little longer than I thought."

"Yes, I'm sure it did," Astalos said, his eyes dancing with mirth. "She's a rather striking young lady."

"Cindy? Yes, she is."

Astalos grinned. "I was talking about Kathy."

"Oh, of course. Yes, she is, too."

"It's my opinion that Cindy noticed that you noticed her."

Trevor looked toward the door. "She did? I mean —"

"As did Kathy."

"What?"

"I think she is interested in you."

"Who?"

Astalos laughed out loud. "Yes. Can you not tell?"

Trevor looked flustered. "What? I'm sure you're mistaken, Doctor."

"Maybe. I'm pretty perceptive when it comes to that stuff. Comes with age, I guess. You know what else?"

"What's that, sir?"

Astalos leaned forward and smiled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Two very attractive women in one office. You, sir, I think, are in deep trouble."