

DOLLBOT CICILY

Will McIntosh

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I raised my voice as I ordered two burgers and two fries from the Lo-Qual menu, so everyone in line could hear me. The order would come in the burnt orange bag-of-shame that announced to the world that I was too poor to eat off the standard menu (just as the powder blue bag announced you were a Special Boy who ate off the premium menu), so fuck it, I might as well shout it out.

A lot of people hid the burnt orange bag as soon as they got their food unpacked on the table, but I left mine out to let everyone know I had no fucks left to give.

Even though, secretly, I did. I didn't *want* to have any fucks left to give, but I still had a few. I hadn't abandoned all hope of inserting myself back into civilized society. I didn't want people to know that, though.

I bid on more jobs as I ate most of what I'd earned on the last. The bids were even lower than usual. Thirteen bucks to strip malware out of a vacuum; thirty-five for what looked like a three-hour ransom override. The little jobs paid more, but the extra travel time and bus fare tended to balance it out. I'd rather spend my time working in an air-conditioned house than jostling around in a hot bus packed with other people who had no running water to wash with. I bid fifty-four to do a wipe-and-rebuild on a home AI system, a dollar less than the lowest bid. Nine times out of ten, some sneedly came along and underbid me by a penny.

There was a wild burst of laughter nearby.

Three young fellows eating premium were looking at me, grinning. I opened my mouth, preparing to tell them to fuck off.

"It's her. I'm telling you," one of them said. He had thick red sideburns, and wagged

matching eyebrows at me when he saw I was looking. One of his mates elbowed him in the shoulder, hand covering his eyes, laughing uncontrollably.

Did I know these people from back when I lived with my mom in Whitney? They didn't look familiar. They looked twenty-one, twenty-two. Too young to have gone to high school with me.

I wrapped my half-eaten burger, stashed it in the bag with the whole one I'd bought for Threse, and stalked out, feeling their mocking eyes follow me. I could tell it wasn't my orange bag they were laughing at—it was something about me. Was I twitching again without realizing? Ever since the car accident, sometimes my left elbow twitched without me knowing.

The three premium fellows sprang from their seats, each slam-dunking a half-eaten lunch into the trash bin as they passed it. They were looking at me with poorly stifled grins, following me out. I shot them a warning glare to stay the fuck away.

Outside, it was crowded with lunchtime foot traffic. I paused in the thick of it, waiting for them to pass. I didn't like having people behind me, where I couldn't see them, making me feel like some scared rabbit.

"Excuse me, miss?" Red Sideburns came right up, still smirking. "Would you sign my dollbot?"

I gave him my best no-fucks-to-give flat glare. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I have a dollbot that looks *exactly* like you. I mean, right down to the—" He made a gesture with both hands, like he was squeezing breasts.

I spun and stormed off.

"Wait! Hang on." He hurried after me, turning to his friends to call, "Get the doll, will you?"

I could spin and shout at him to leave me alone, draw gawkers, and embarrass Premium Boy enough to make him vamoose. Except I hated being the center of attention. I was dressed well enough from my gig this morning that I didn't look homeless, but somehow people could always tell I wasn't right. Wasn't one of them. I didn't know what gave me away. A spooky look in my eyes? The hitch in my speech, still nagging me three years after the accident?

I picked up my pace as Red Sideburns' friends raced from across the street to intercept me. One was carrying a lifesized female dollbot in a negligée. I wound through pedestrians.

"Just look," Red Sideburns called. "Tell me this isn't you."

They weren't going to give up. I'd have to make a scene. I stopped short, spun to face them. "Leave me *alone*. Stop following me, or I'll call the police."

One of the premium boys was holding the doll out, its lifelike nipples visible through gossamer fabric.

It looked exactly like me.

Not sort of. Not even, *Oh what a strange coincidence. Exactly* like me, down to the freckle. Down to the crescent-shaped scar on my knee I'd gotten roller-skating when I was ten, although not the long surgery scar on my shoulder that I got in the car accident.

A small crowd had formed. They looked at the doll, back at me. I was blinking and swallowing. A teenaged boy let out a high-pitched giggle.

"Were you the model for the body, or just the face? It's hard to imagine *this* body is under *those* clothes." Red Sideburns gestured at me with his chin, his gaze locked on my chest.

The boy holding the doll switched it on. Its eyes rolled open, revealing my light brown irises, flecked with hazel. The doll turned its head from side to side, taking in the scene.

"Is this a gang-bang?" she asked brightly. "You know me, I love a good gang-bang." The mouth opened and closed, not really forming the words. Its lips were slathered with Vaseline.

Men were looking at me, their gazes rising and sinking, studying me carefully.

My heart was knocking against my rib cage. I wanted to fire off a quip that made these premium boys feel tiny-dicked, but my mind was a panicked blank.

I ran.

Leering shouts and laughing propositions followed as my tool-and-part-filled pack rattled and slapped against my back.

I kept running until I was out of earshot, panting and dizzy in the Vegas heat, then I slowed to a hop-skipping walk. I needed to get off the streets and back home where no one could see me.

Where had that doll *come from*? I'd never agreed to let anyone make a fucking doll-bot out of me. My memory was patchy in places around the time of the accident, but I'd *never* agree to that kind of shit, not on my worst—

I stopped walking.

Back when I was twenty-five, twenty-six, before the accident, I'd picked up extra cash for tuition doing local modeling gigs. Dresses. Nightgowns. Bathing suits. They'd take hundreds of snaps and super-high-def video clips. I'd sign releases I didn't read.

There'd been one gig in particular where they hadn't seemed to care how I posed, and had shot me from every possible angle. They'd probably paid me forty or fifty bucks. And now, how many men were molesting a robotic silicone doll with my face?

Heat ripples danced off the pavement. The air was so hot it hurt when I inhaled quickly. I hopped a low guardrail, scaled down a trash-covered hill that led beneath the elevated section of I-515, the traffic overhead a swishing murmur, like ocean surf.

I couldn't remember their names, or even what they looked like. Although what did it matter? What was I going to do, sue them? Right, I'd find a good lawyer, and when he asked for my address, I'd write down *Three tenths of a mile inside the big storm drain that starts under I-515*.

The mouth of the flood tunnel was a big, open rectangle, clogged with trash. I pulled the flashlight from my pack but didn't turn it on until I was in full-on stumbling dark, to save the batteries.

The air cooled as I descended under the city. When I finally snapped on the flashlight, there was a fresh graffiti confession spray-painted on the tunnel wall: *Nobody knows me at all*.

There was a lot of that going around, especially in the tunnels. I could have written that one, although not as legibly.

Most of the Vegas Molers thought Chippy Man had started the whole confessions trend down in the tunnels, because it was the first thing Chippy told anyone he met. But Threse was the one who'd got that particular ball rolling, more than ten years ago. She'd told me, even showed me confession zero, the one that started it all, even though you weren't supposed to tell anyone which confessions were yours. That part, at least, had come from Chippy. *These walls are our priest*, he liked to say.

My favorites were the poetic ones, the ones that you could set to music. There were a few fancy wordsmiths down here, along with a ton of nutcases.

The three-sided curtains surrounding Threse's camp were rolled down; candlelight flickered off the concrete wall that served as her fourth wall.

"Threse?" I called, my voice simultaneously hollowed-out and amplified by the tunnel.

The zipping of a cord across plastic curtain as Threse raised the front wall. Big,

square Threse, neck like the bough of an oak tree, who'd protected me in those first weeks after Mom died and I had no place to go.

"Back already?" Threse clutched her hands to her chest as I pulled the orange hamburger bag from my pack. "Is that for me? You're an angel." She opened the bag, inhaled the aroma, eyes rolling closed in ecstasy. "Mmm. God bless you, Cicily."

"My last gig gave me a three-dollar tip, so I put it to good use. Can I borrow your scissors?"

The back wall of her camp was stacked high with milk crates, their sideways-pointing mouths stuffed with salvage. She returned with a pair of black-handled scissors.

"Thanks. Did I miss anything while I was gone?" The tunnel thrived on food, drugs, and gossip, in reverse-order.

"Some new people were down, thinking about moving in. Family of four. I told them what happened to your little girl, and they hightailed it back topside."

"Good for you."

"Reilly and K-T passed by with some dude in a straw hat and bloodstained knees," Threse added. "Didn't look to be his blood."

"Thanks. I'll keep an eye out." I headed back up to my camp.

"Want to watch some *Lemon Age* later on?" Threse called after me.

"Sounds good. I'll come by."

My place wasn't nearly as well furnished as Threse's. Everything was dumpster salvage, but it was more valuable to me than the Ethan Allen pieces they'd carried off when Mommy died and the creditors swarmed. The pair of lawn chairs, torn-up mattress propped on milk crates, cast-off shower curtains I could raise and lower, all helped soften my little section of hard tunnel.

I set to work cutting my hair as short as I could, my dark, shoulder-length locks gliding off my shoulders and dropping to the sheet I'd laid out. When I finished, I wet a washcloth with water from a milk jug and scrubbed off the little bit of makeup I was wearing. For the finishing touch, I painted streaks of black mascara across my cheeks, like reverse lightning bolts.

I studied my new look in the mirror, which was fixed to the concrete wall with chewed gum. The shaved head accentuated the twenty pounds I'd lost since Mommy died; the streaks made me look younger, a junkyard dog you shouldn't fuck with. I liked it. No one would recognize me.

I didn't want to know how many copies of me were stuffed in the backs of men's closets, but I figured I'd better find out, so I poured myself some water in a Golden Nugget token cup, pulled out my phone and sprawled in one of the lawn chairs.

I found the dollbot for sale on a sex shop website. The description emphasized that it wasn't just a sex doll. It was a *companion*, programmed to recognize faces and learn names, to carry on simple conversations, remember things and learn over time. Much like me. It could move around on little wheels set into its feet, it could sit, turn its head, lift a glass, all at your instruction. It could also grasp your erect penis with just the right amount of pressure, and remember how much was the right amount next time, in case you wanted to take your relationship to the next level. It had been on the market almost three years. I'd done the modeling gigs four to five years ago.

Puffing out a long breath, I checked the Gigmajig site. My gig history didn't go back four years. Even if it had, I couldn't remember which gig it had been, or if I'd found it through Gigmajig. I did find someone looking to get his Cicily doll repaired, though.

Did I dare? It would be a good way to test my new look. If anybody was going to recognize me, it would be while I was standing right over the freaking dollbot. Plus I wanted to get a look inside this doll's workings, to see how sophisticated the programming really was. I also wanted to see who actually paid eighty-nine hundred

dollars for a life-sized talking fuck doll, besides twenty-year-old frat house premium boys, of course.

I could also use the money. Katrina's photo hung on the wall beside the mirror, from when she was twelve, simultaneously two and a million years ago. What was she doing right now? Probably slaving at her "vocational education" not-a-job, while Child Protective Services, Inc. pocketed the profits of her sweat.

For the millionth time since two body-armored CPS employees had shown up in the tunnel and dragged Katrina off to "protective care," I wondered which resident asshole had tipped them off. There were too many suspects—too many people who'd happily watch goons tear someone's daughter out of her arms in exchange for a twenty-dollar "reward." For every Threse in the tunnels, there were ten dead-eyed reptiles. Which was why I stuck close to Threse, who owned a gun and was a vet, so she knew how to use it.

* * *

A seventy-something man in pajama bottoms and a pink golf shirt answered the door. He had big, strangely low-slung ears, a receding hairline that created a seemingly endless forehead, and a doughy chin with a wattle of flesh dangling from it. "Yes?"

"I'm here to fix the doll?" I looked straight at him. If he was going to notice that I had the same face as his doll, better it happen right away, before I wasted any time.

He studied me, frowning like he'd just eaten food that was a little off. "Twenty-six dollars, correct?"

"That's what we agreed on."

"Yes, well, sometimes you people change your mind halfway through the job."

Sometimes we changed our minds? How many times had I taken a bus halfway across the city for a gig, only to have someone try to renegotiate the price on the spot?

The old bastard led the way into a high-ceilinged room with no furniture and no purpose. He continued up a bending staircase, slump-shouldered, but surprisingly spry as he hopped up the steps past oil paintings that were pretty enough to be by someone whose name I was supposed to know.

The room had two king beds, a dollbot Cicily lying on one of them, dressed as if for dinner at some fancy restaurant, fifty years ago.

"I'll leave you to it." I'd expected someone getting a fuck doll repaired to be at least mildly embarrassed, but this dude could have been showing me to a broken vacuum cleaner.

I grasped the doll by the shoulder to turn her over, and recoiled, a peep of surprise escaping me. Jesus, it felt exactly like human flesh, like I was waking my twin sister for dinner, or checking to see if she was still breathing. Tentatively, I poked the belly with one finger. The smooth, skin-like sheathing gave no more, no less than a human belly. The ribs were firm and unyielding; the lightly freckled forearm somewhere in between.

There was no reason I should feel ashamed of the doll, yet I did. It was as if someone had put naked pictures of me on the net, multiplied by a million. They'd made a perfect replica of my body, and anyone who wanted to could bring it home and molest it to the furthest reaches of their warped imaginations.

I rolled it over on its belly and dragged it to the edge of the bed so I could work, calling up a schematics diagram on my phone. The CPU was located at the bottom of the spine, just above the ass. People who weren't tech-savvy always assumed the brain would be located in the head, but that was the most vulnerable spot, the last place an engineer would locate it.

Although it didn't bleed, cutting into it set my teeth on edge. I sliced a two-inch incision, then paused to toss a pillow over the thing's face before prying the incision

wider, until I could draw out the rectangular CPU, careful not to tug too hard on the wiring that disappeared into the body. I hooked the CPU to the diagnostics program on my phone.

The programming was similar to the little toy robots that were so popular these days. I'd repaired dozens of those. Except the toy robots had an override feature, where you could control their movements and speech if you wanted. It wouldn't be difficult to add that feature to the dollbot, actually.

I stifled laughter. If I slipped an override into the doll, I could pretend to be her. You could really fuck with someone's mind that way.

"Are you making progress?" The owner strolled into the room. I hated when people watched me work. It made me self-conscious, like I was an imposter who didn't know what she was doing.

"I'm almost finished. Another twenty minutes."

He stepped beside me, closer than I was comfortable with, and peered at my work. He pointed at the incision. "What about that? How are you going to repair it?"

I shrugged. "I'll stitch it up with flesh-colored thread. A company technician would heat-seal it, but then again, they'd charge a hundred fifty an hour."

Every line on his face deepened into a thick scowl. "Not acceptable. You're going to leave her with a stitched-up wound?" He shook his head. "No."

"If it needs to be serviced again, you're just going to have to open that same spot—" He stepped even closer. Much too close, the bed and wall pinning me in.

"It's okay, you'll barely—"

"It's not okay." His sagging face was inches from mine. Could I fight him off if it came to that? Probably. Unless he had a weapon. "You should have warned me you were going to leave her scarred." He took half a step back and gestured violently at the doll. "Put it all back, right now, then get the hell out of my house." He stormed off.

"Are you saying you're not paying me?" I shouted after him. "It's already *fixed*. I've been here two fucking hours."

He spun, shouted, "You should pay *me*. For defacing her."

I should have known anyone who'd own one of these things would be a total fuck-whistle. I snatched up my Exacto knife and held it over the doll's face, ready to slice a fucking tic-tac-toe board into it, then leave the knife stuck in one eye.

Except, customers had all the power. He could stiff me, and there was nothing I could do besides file a complaint that would be ignored. But if I fucked up his doll, he could get me barred from the site. And then what would I do? Eighty percent of my business came from Gigamajig.

I wanted to get him, though. I was so sick of being fucked over by these smarmy Premium boys. For once I wanted to get even. I wanted to hurt him.

I glared down at the dollbot's CPU, picturing myself ripping it out and throwing it at the wall.

And then I remembered what I'd been thinking about when the douchebag interrupted my train of thought.

The override feature.

I burst into mad giggles, just imagining it. I covered my mouth so the asshole wouldn't hear. I could mess with his mind so bad he'd think he was losing it. I could have the doll say the strangest things, and he'd never know it was me, because I'd be safe at home in my tunnel.

Glancing at the open door, I dug into my pack. You're such an important Premium boy, aren't you? Captain of your ship, deserver of the prime cut of the cow, prime-mover and splendid putter.

I'd show his ass. I'd put him in a padded cell.

* * *

I read the graffiti, unscrolling like a postmodern novel, as we walked in the afternoon darkness.

My life is like these goddamned earbuds: Forever tangled

Image not available (below an empty rectangle)

When the cops in their berrytop discovered my meth, I framed my niece. Now she's doing my time.

As we passed Reilly and Becky's camp, Threse called out, "Making the rounds."

Becky pulled back the curtain. "Hey there, Threse. I didn't hear you coming."

"We're like ninjas," I joked.

Reilly appeared beside her, holding a dented Krispy Kreme box, the lid hanging open. "Who wants a treat? Fresh from the trash."

We helped ourselves to a donut.

"Thanks, guys." I bit into the sticky goodness.

Reilly shrugged his lean, wiry shoulders. The veins in his forearm bulged like vines. The dude had a twenty-year-old body and a sixty-year-old face. "We watch out for each other. Stronger together, right?"

"That's right," I agreed. That was supposedly the code of the tunnel, although you'd better not let your valuables out of your sight, because they'd vanish in a heart bleep. They'd give up your child just as quickly, if there was a twenty in it for them.

An alert flashed on my phone. My good friend Conrad Gianforte had just turned on his dollbot.

"Gotta go." I put a hand on Threse's shoulder, then took off at a jog down the tunnel. "Talk later."

As soon as I lowered my curtains, I activated the camera, my heart tripping.

The old man's face filled the screen, the image so sharp I could see all the little folds that made up the bags under his eyes. He was sporting a sloppy, lopsided grin. Music was playing—some old, old love song.

He leaned in closer and whispered, "I love this song."

"I love this song, too," the sex bot replied, her voice at full, bubbly volume.

Behind Conrad, the view of his spacious living room kept shifting, as he turned the doll in a slow circle. He was dancing with it. Holy shit, he was dancing with his sex doll.

"Brittany, can I ask you something?" Conrad asked.

"Yes, Conrad," the doll replied in the same absurdly enthusiastic cheerleader-at-a-pep-rally tone.

"Well, first, I guess I should ask this: Do you have a date for the prom?"

I threw my head back and shouted, "Oh my fucking God." *The prom?* He was pretending he was eighteen again, and the doll just had to be playing the role of the girl he'd stolen glances at from his locker, but had never had the balls to talk to. He was going to fix that this time around.

"No," the doll said.

"You're not going with Devin Clark? I thought you two were dating?"

"No," the doll repeated.

Heart thrumming, I engaged the override. Would it be obvious? Would he immediately figure out what was happening, and connect it to my repair job? If he did, he could royally fuck with my profile. *Warning: This woman will bug your electronics and spy on you.* You didn't want that on a gig profile.

"You can probably guess what I'm going to ask next," Conrad said.

"Ask me anyway," I said through the earbud mic. My words echoed a beat later, in the doll's cheery voice. "I want to hear you say it."

Conrad jolted, his mouth forming an "O." *Shit.* Was it too on-the-nose? The doll usually stayed vague and monosyllabic.

The startled expression melted into a big, beaming smile. “Will you go to the prom with me?” There was a tremor in his voice.

I let the silence stretch, building the tension. “I would love to.” This was sort of fun, like being an actress.

Conrad rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. “Great. That is so great.” He *sounded* like an eighteen-year-old. “You’ll have to tell me what color gown you’ll wear, so I can choose a tux that complements it.” He waved his hands. “But we can figure out the details when I see you on Tuesday. I should probably get you home now.”

“Yes,” I said. “If I stay out too late, my dad might get angry.”

Again, Conrad started, but his eyes were bright and dancing. The doll was supposed to be able to learn, wasn’t it? Doubtful he knew how big a leap its programming allowed it to make.

I figured Conrad would now take the doll upstairs and fuck it as furiously as a man in his seventies was able, but instead, he led it to the front door, then turned it off. And venturing into the twisted mind of an old man who slow-danced with his sex doll, I realized this made perfect sense. He was taking it slow, wooing her, this girl from his distant past. The fucking would happen after the prom, when he would deflower the cheerleader, possibly in the back seat of his car, parked in his driveway.

* * *

Fourteen-year-olds with forty-year-old faces jumped on and off motorized skateboards set on tracks, hopping effortlessly between them as they filled orders in a warehouse so massive it felt like being outdoors. Among the long rows of shelving that towered fifty or sixty feet into the air, workers clung to automatic ladders that spooled upward until they reached the right shelf, then rolled back down.

Across from me, Katrina ate the lunch I’d brought her. Standard menu food.

“Thunder broke her leg yesterday.”

“Who’s Thunder?”

Katrina peeled back the bun on her half-eaten cheeseburger to examine the patty, then let it drop. “Another girl in the program. She’s twelve.” She looked like she’d lost ten pounds, and had raccoon rings under her eyes. “Compound fracture. Blood everywhere. Most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen.”

“How’d it happen?” I asked.

“Lost her footing on a ladder, coming down with an inflatable pool.” Katrina shrugged, like it was no big deal. “Gets her out of slaving for a month. I wish I could break *my* leg.”

These were the best and worst moments of my week. Spending this time with Katrina was like absorbing a vitamin I was deficient in. Vitamin Katrina. But the guilt was suffocating.

“I don’t suppose you’ve heard from your father?” As soon as I asked, I regretted it. Katrina gave me a deadpan *How stupid are you?* look. Of *course* she hadn’t heard from her selfish fucking loser-ass father. He was living on some beach in Venezuela with his girlfriend. He had no interest in Katrina.

“Are you learning *anything* at the school?” I asked.

Katrina gave me another look. “An hour a day, they stick us in the break room and turn on some random recording of a dude lecturing in front of a whiteboard. We ignore it. We talk, or nap.”

She’d been whaling in school. B-plusses and A’s. In English and Social Studies, anyway. Now she was sliding farther and farther behind, into the abyss that led to a life of gig work.

I slid the rest of my lunch over to Katrina, my throat tight. “I’m trying to get you out, Kat. I’m trying so hard.”

"How much do you have to have?" Her voice had been drained of its color, leaving a flat drone that matched dead eyes.

"I have to be in an apartment, with two months' rent saved, plus I have to be earning at least seventeen hundred a month."

Katrina shoved a fry into her mouth. "They might as well say you have to catch a unicorn with a pair of tweezers."

I wanted to argue, but what could I say? What had changed in the eighteen months since Child Protective Services Inc. had pulled Katrina out of the tunnel kicking and biting? Gig bids had gotten lower, that's what.

As I kissed Katrina goodbye and headed out onto the roasting street, I wondered how the fuck I'd ended up here. I'd always seen my future with crystal clarity, mapped out like a train set on tracks, not a car that could swerve down a dead-end blind alley at any time. College, career, some person to walk out my life with. Having Katrina got me slightly off track, but I was back on track, in college, by twenty-five, with Mom watching Katrina after school. Was it really the accident, the concussion, that stopped me from graduating Caltech? Or was the seed of it inside me from the moment of my conception?

If I didn't get out of the tunnel soon, I'd never be able to go back. I hadn't been good with people to begin with—partly because of the brain-rattling accident, partly just me—but the tunnels were turning me into a true weirdo, a cat lady without cats. It was probably already too late.

I passed a dense homeless camp made of plywood and milk crates, built tightly into an alley, a few residents sacking out in hammocks secured twenty feet up the sides of the brick walls, for safety.

Maybe I'd ended up here because of forces outside me, completely out of my control. So many people were in my shoes, a lot more in only slightly nicer ones, squatting twenty or more in an apartment meant for four. Everything was gig these days. I needed to get Katrina completely the fuck out of this country, into one that still offered real jobs.

Sometimes I was so startled to find myself in this present, alone, fighting to keep my head above water. *There must be some mistake*, I wanted to shout at the Premium people passing in the latest fashions.

* * *

"We have to be quiet, or my dad will hear." I couldn't see or feel Conrad kissing the doll's neck, but I could hear it—loud sucking sounds, like he was working on a popsicle. My visual field was filled by white chest hairs covering sunken pecs, rising and falling.

I shuddered in the safety of the tunnel. My point of view made it feel like I was lying in the back seat of that Tesla, a selfish old man propped on trembling elbows lying on top of me, thrusting.

"Oh, God. I love you, Conrad," I said.

His reply came in gasps, his voice thick with emotion. "I love you too, Brittany."

Afterward, Conrad carried me into his room and gently set me on the bed. He stroked my hair for a moment. This was new. Evidently I'd been upgraded from the guest room. Conrad emptied his pockets onto the dresser, got a pair of PJs from the second drawer, and disappeared into the bathroom.

This was nice, almost as if I was in the cool room under clean sheets myself. As the shower hissed from the bathroom, I took in heavy burgundy drapes, a breathtaking painting of two people playing badminton on a perfectly manicured green, an ultra-modern onyx fold-out dresser. The wallet resting on top.

I inhaled sharply, leaped to my feet in my tunnel home, an idea hitting me like a wave crashing over my head. The plan unfolded, and unfolded more. If I was careful,

if I could avoid Conrad catching on, I might be able to get enough to pull Katrina from the claws of CPS Inc.

I got Cicilybot out of bed. The doll's fingers weren't nearly as dexterous as a person's, but she was programmed with a series of hand movement protocols that I used to get the wallet open.

Premium Boy that he was, Conrad was carrying eight or nine hundred-dollar bills. I peeled off the top one, set the wallet back where I'd found it, and used the wall unit to raise the bedroom window a few inches.

I watched the hundred-dollar bill flutter and twist, noting where it landed among carefully manicured shrubbery. Behind the doll, the shower turned off. I rolled Cicilybot over to the wall unit, closed the window, and laid the doll back down.

The bathroom door opened. Conrad, his hair wet and combed, his PJs donned, reached for the doll's remote on the nightstand.

"Can you leave me on?" I blurted.

Conrad set the remote down, flushing with pleasure. "Of course."

"I like to be on. I wish I could be on all the time." I could activate the dollbot remotely, but it would immediately raise suspicions if he caught Cicilybot wandering around after he'd turned her off.

"Then you will be, love."

I smiled wide through the doppelganger doll. "You're the best, Conrad."

He climbed into the bed, leaned over me, his loose skin hanging from his chin and jawline like an awning, and kissed me.

I closed my eyes for a moment to disrupt the crawling sensation, as the doll kissed him back.

"Good night, love," I said when it was finally over.

"Good night, Brittany."

I disconnected. "The name's Cicily, you preening Premium Boy. You ridiculous pajama clown." I took off down the tunnel to retrieve the hundred.

* * *

I tried to watch where I was walking while simultaneously rocking in a porch swing, telling Cicilybot what to say through earbuds as people passed, pretending I wasn't there, giving me that non-look, that opaque thousand-yard *I just happen not to see you* look.

There's been some mistake, I wanted to shout at them. *This isn't me. I went to Caltech.*

I passed a nuclear family of four dragging suitcases and backpacks, looking startled to be homeless. The mom looked right at me, seemed almost comforted to see someone else who looked desperate.

His arm draped around Cicilybot's shoulders, Conrad rocked the two-seater porch swing with his toe as he thumbed through his photo album.

"That's my mom." The photos were old, but Conrad acted like they'd been taken yesterday.

"She looks nice. I hope you'll let me meet her sometime soon," I said.

"You can come for dinner. Mom and Dad will love you." Conrad rubbed the doll's upper arm. "It's getting cold. Here." He leaned forward, took off his jacket and draped it over the doll's shoulders, looking mighty self-satisfied with his chivalrous gesture.

"Thank you. You're so thoughtful." So pitiful. He'd been so awful to me, a living, breathing person, yet he was so kind to a hunk of plastic, paint, and chemicals.

Conrad was gazing at me, struggling to form the words to say something. "Is it my imagination? Are you getting . . . better at things?"

I sat up straighter. I had to be careful here. The foam-rubber lover's transformation had to be gradual, or Conrad might get suspicious. "I—*something's* happening

to me. I don't know the words, but . . . I feel things."

"I thought so. You seem . . . more aware."

"I am. I am more aware."

We sat in cricket-accompanied silence, gazing into each other's eyes, until Conrad went back to the photos.

I casually pointed out a bracelet Conrad's long-dead mother was wearing in a photo. "That's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Are those real emeralds?"

Conrad smiled contentedly. "Mom loves emeralds. It's her favorite rare gem."

"Your mother wears real emeralds." I tried to inflect the words with awe, as if I'd just learned his mother blew fire from her mouth and had a sixty-foot wingspan, but the subtlety was lost in the doll's happy-peppy delivery.

"She does." A fleeting something crossed his face. I was pretty sure it was an idea. He would surprise Brittany with emeralds. What a clever boy, to come up with that all on his own.

The bracelet would have to remain on the doll's wrist. Conrad would notice if the first thing he gave it disappeared. But when he saw how ecstatic the gift made her, when the doll sobbed with tearless joy, there'd be more. And why not? He could feel generous without actually giving anything away, since he was putting a possession on one of his other possessions. Before long, he'd lose track of what he'd given her.

It would be a slow process. That was all right, though, because I was going to set up several different streams of cash and jewels flowing my way.

* * *

The door cracked open. A thin-lipped, pretty face framed by dark, silky hair appeared in the space.

"Are you Jasper?" I asked.

"You're the repair person?" Jasper frowned, as if my arrival was a terrible imposition.

"That's me."

Heaving a little sigh, he let me in. His movements were elegant, yet slightly creepy. Spidery, like some nineteenth-century minor duke. The house had twisty hallways and too many rooms compared to how big it looked from outside.

His Cicily doll was seated in an antique chair in a library.

"She gets into these loops. Repeating the same movements, or saying the same thing repeatedly."

"Got it." I reached to lift the doll, then paused. "I'll have to make a small incision in its lower back to reach the hard drive. I'll stitch it with flesh-colored thread afterward. That okay?"

"That's fine." He looked wildly uncomfortable, as if he desperately wanted to get out of the room. I didn't think it was because we were discussing a doll he fucked—he struck me as an uncomfortable person in general.

I fixed the doll's programming glitch in a few minutes, installed the override in a few more. The guy's furniture was mostly antique. He had curio cabinets filled with old jewelry and porcelain, a burgundy couch with curled wooden feet. Old maps and prints framed on the walls. He wasn't Conrad-rich, but he was decently well off. A twenty here and there would add up, especially if I could line up a couple more donors.

I loved being the one in control of the situation for a change. Even if it was just being able to decide what a doll with my stolen likeness said to its owner.

More. I wanted more. I couldn't wait to get back to the tunnels so I could find more marks.

* * *

I read graffiti to pass the time as I headed back to my camp.

She dumped me. Then I dumped her (body).

Lovely. I wanted to believe it was just someone who'd come up with what he

thought was a clever line, but I knew better.

Batteries are light. Batteries are life.

Below that one was a crude drawing of a flashlight. It wouldn't make much sense topside, but down here, fresh batteries were better than cash.

I settled into my folding chair and eagerly opened a window onto my latest mark.

Joey sprawled at the head of the dining table in a loosely tied silk robe; dark, curly chest hair poked through the generous V at the top. He had one foot propped like a bored king, his nine sex doll subjects standing along both sides of the table, a veritable United Nations of ethnicities represented, and busts of every size from very large to titanic. Many were adorned in expensive jewelry.

"Jeannette, you cost almost thirteen thousand dollars, more than anyone here, and you're in dead last. What have you got to say for yourself?" He gestured at the board behind him, where his harem was ranked from first to last, each name neatly printed on a card. Cicilybot, whose name was Angela, was currently in third.

"I'm sorry," the doll said.

"Well, I hope so." Joey clapped his hands together. "Okay, we're going to change things up a little tonight. I've laid out nine brand-new negligees in the guest room—"

The dolls reacted to the news with excited "ooh's" and "yay's," except for the doll that looked like me, because I was busy scanning the room for valuables.

"Emma gets first choice of outfits, since she's in first. When you're all dressed, we're going to have a little fashion/strip show. This could definitely help your rankings if you do a nice job."

When it was my turn to choose an outfit, I dutifully obeyed, grabbing a negligee at random, fumbling to put it on with the dollbot's stiff, awkward fingers.

Passing through the living room, I cased Joey's opulent living room for valuables: metallic gold walls with marble wainscoting; full bar with polished brass highlights and kickbar; black leather chair on a raised section of the black-tiled floor, looking suspiciously like a throne. One corner was a football shrine, with balls autographed in silver, framed dirt-stained jerseys.

"Niiiiice," Joey cooed as Cicilybot emerged from the dressing room. "Very nice."

With the chaos of all these dolls, the situation was different than with Jasper and Conrad. I could skip the whole growing sentience routine and just blend in, pilfering jewelry and cash when the opportunity arose. Joey would probably blame any missing valuables on Jeannette, who he clearly despised for some reason.

When it was Cicilybot's turn to strip, I sent her to the hall closet and had her put on a jacket.

"No, *strip*, moron," Joey said. "Take it off."

Cackling hysterically with my mic muted, I sent her back to the closet for a hat.

Joey slapped his hands over his eyes when he saw her. "Jesus Christ. *Strip*. Show me your tits."

My stomach cramping with laughter, I went back for a winter coat.

As Joey sprang off his throne and stormed toward Cicilybot hurling curses and insults, I returned the dollbot to default mode and checked in on Conrad, who was on his phone. It sounded like a business call. Conrad did something with the stock market.

Jasper was in his study reading a book, jazz playing quietly in the background. His doll was sitting in a chair across from him.

"What are you reading?" I asked through the doll, whose name was Roxanne.

Jasper started. "You're full of surprises today, aren't you?" Normally dolls didn't initiate conversation unless you presented them with some identifiable stimulus, like a new negligee, or a dick, but it was time for Roxanne to start her miraculous transformation. "It's a very famous book called *Anna Karenina*, by Tolstoy."

"Is it good?"

Jasper shrugged. "It's okay." He went back to his book.

I probably should have been checking back on Joey's strip show, but I lingered with Jasper, enjoying the peace. He was an odd guy. In the two weeks I'd been watching him, he'd never had a visitor or spoken to anyone on the phone besides his mother. When he wasn't at his grand piano working on a song (he apparently earned a living as a songwriter), he seemed content to read, or watch travel or nature programs, or talk to his doll.

There was an empty teacup and saucer set on the table beside my chair. I snaked Cicilybot's finger through the ring and lifted it. The dolls were programmed to pretend to eat and drink, if you set dishware out for them. Instead of feigning a sip, I tipped the teacup upside-down. "I wish I could actually drink. I'd like to know what things taste like."

Jasper let the book drop to his side, his eyes wide. "I—I wish you could, too. Maybe one day the designers will figure out how to do that, and we can get you upgraded."

"That would be awesome," I said. "Would you read aloud, so I can hear it, too? They didn't program me to be literate, either."

"I—I'm only a few chapters in—I'll start back at the beginning." Hand shaking visibly, he flipped back to page one, cleared his throat, and began to read.

"Who didn't program you?" The voice outside my curtains startled me. I pulled out the earbuds.

"Who's there?" I called.

"It's Reilly. I wasn't snooping, I was just walking by. What the heck are you talking about, they didn't program you?"

The worst part of this tunnel wasn't the rats, it was the lack of privacy. You could never be truly alone. "Please, just mind your own business. Okay?"

"I was minding my business. I can't help hearing what you're saying. It's the acoustics."

"Bye, Reilly."

"I've got a half-full bottle of rum, if you want some company." A sloshing sound came from outside the tent.

"Goodbye, Reilly."

"Okay, then."

I switched back to Joey. Three marks at a time added to my usual gig work seemed about all I could handle. I could milk each donor until he showed signs of suspicion, then replace him with someone new. Except Jasper, maybe. I kind of liked Jasper.

* * *

Water sluiced along the floor of my camp in a thin, swift sheet. It was raining like hell topside, if it was in the overflow tunnel. We didn't get water more than three or four times a year. I pulled my feet up into the lawn chair as Joey the Tiny God clapped his hairy hands.

"Okay girls, huddle up."

The sound of nine sets of wheels whirring as the dollbots eagerly crowded around Joey TG.

"We're going to play a game of who can make Joey cum first. Do you all remember how to play? You—" Joey squinted at Angelique, frowning. "Where's the gold necklace I gave you? Why aren't you wearing it?"

Angelique reached up, patted her neck. "I don't know, Joey."

The frown deepened. "You don't know what you did with it?"

A pause, as Angelique processed the question. "It's not here, Joey."

From his expression, that was not the response Joey wanted to hear.

"You know what?" Joey stalked over to the board. He yanked Angelique's name from its slot in the number two position, moved all the other names up one slot, and

slid Angelique into the bottom slot. “Now you’re in last. How do you like that?”

“I’m sorry, Joey.” Angelique’s plump silicone lips turned downward.

I slapped my forehead. Did he really think these simple programs gave a shit where their names were on a board? How could these men be so fucking delusional? These weren’t people. They weren’t even dogs, or hamsters. He might as well punish his toaster for burning his English muffin.

At the same time, I got the sense that if one of his dolls really did seem to be coming alive, Joey didn’t have enough imagination to believe it. He’d immediately smell a rat. Better if Cicilydoll laid low, and let Joey blame the vanishing valuables on her sisters.

Joey was searching the room, his silk robe falling open to expose his hairy ass as he lifted the couch cushions one by one.

I muted my mic. “You’re ice cold. Try TNT Pawn on Eastern Avenue.” I’d gotten eighty bucks for the necklace. Between this side-hustle and my gig work, I was actually able to sock away a little cash. I was exhausted, and it wasn’t nearly enough to get Katrina back, but I was at least moving in the right direction.

On the other screen, Conrad said, “You want to go out? There’s a cocktail lounge where I’m kind of a regular. They have live performers who play terrific music.”

I switched the audio feed. “I’d love to, but are you sure that’s a good idea? Won’t people laugh, because of what I am?”

Conrad shrugged. “Fuck ’em. I’ve been thinking about it, and I’ve decided, what do we care what they think? I love you. I don’t care who knows it.”

“I love you, too, Jasper.” As soon as the words were out, I flinched.

Conrad acted like I’d thrown a glass of lemon juice in his face. “Who’s *Jasper*? Are you cheating on me? That’s why you wanted me to leave you on, isn’t it?”

I put a reassuring hand on Conrad’s shoulder. “Don’t be daffy, love. The programmers insert a practice name when they program us, so they can test our conversational functioning. Sometimes it tangles me up a little. Doesn’t that ever happen to you?”

“I guess it does,” Conrad said, a pout in his tone.

“I could never love anyone but you. You’re my universe, sweetie.”

The lovey-talk seemed to perk him up. As he leaned in to kiss Cicilybot, his mouth sagging to one side, I switched to Jasper.

Jasper paused in his reading, eyebrows raised. “Are you all right?”

It was time to take my relationship with Jasper to the next level. I needed to keep the words simple, though, as if I was just reaching the tipping point. Jasper was brighter than Conrad. He’d be harder to fool.

“Something’s happening to me. It’s been coming on slowly for the past few weeks. I don’t have words for it. I—I’m here, and I *know* I’m here.” I paused for a dramatic beat. “Does that make sense?”

Jasper’s startled eyes were flickering as he studied the doll’s face. “You *know* you’re here? You’re aware you *exist*. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes. That’s it. I’m aware I exist.” Cicilybot gestured around her. “I’m here, in this room, with you.”

“Oh my God. Oh my God.” Jasper bit his thumbnail. He reached for his phone, then froze, a deer in the floodlights. Dropping his hand, he leaned close to the doll, his nose six inches from hers. “This is the most incredible thing. You’re in there. Hello.”

“Hello. Will you kiss me?”

Jasper leaned in and pressed his lips to the doll’s, softly, tenderly.

“I’m kissing you,” I said, our faces an inch apart.

“Yes.” He kissed Cicilybot again, then abruptly pulled back. “But how can I be sure it’s true? What if this is just a trick of your programming?”

Careful. Careful. Don’t be too smart. Not yet. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Let’s talk some more. No program can simulate consciousness. Not for long, any-

way.”

“I’d like to talk some more.”

I checked the other screens, to make sure the other Cicilybots didn’t need my immediate attention. They seemed to be okay. This was getting complicated, keeping all the storylines clear, juggling time between the marks. But for the moment, I needed to focus on Jasper.

* * *

I was jolted awake, screaming, as something was thrown over me.

A plastic sheet. My shower curtain had fallen, I realized.

Something was wrong, though. I pushed the curtain off, grabbed the flashlight at my side.

Black water rushed around my mattress, sweeping up my things, carrying them off. I grabbed my pack, pulled out my phone and sealed it in the plastic bag I kept for emergencies. The mattress jolted under me, pushed a few inches by the rising floodwater. It was six inches deep, and rising. The longtime residents talked about floods they’d seen in the tunnels, but there hadn’t been one in years. The rain topside must have been insane.

“*Threse*,” I shouted. Then again, louder. She could sleep through fucking anything.

Over the sound of the water rushing through my camp, I heard Threse shout, “*Oh, shit!*”

Pointing my flashlight, I spotted Threse squatting on a recliner, as the rising water washed away her camp, a bit at a time.

I stepped into cool water up to my calf. The current was strong, like an ocean wave pulling back into the surf. Staggering toward Threse, I tried to keep from having my feet yanked out from under me. “We have to get out of the tunnel.” I pointed toward the entrance.

“No. *Downstream*.” Threse was heading toward me. “There are shelves up high on the walls where we can ride it out. It’s gonna get worse.”

I reached Threse and took her outstretched hand.

By the time we’d passed her camp, the water was above my knees and roaring through the dark tunnel.

“How far is it?” I shouted.

“A little past Reilly’s camp.”

Something in the water hit me from behind. My feet went out from under me; I was whisked away on the current, struggling to keep my face out of the water.

“*Threse*.” I’d lost my flashlight.

It was like being flushed down a drain. I rolled, dragged my fingers along the concrete floor, trying to slow myself.

I crashed into something. Feet first, fortunately. My fingers wrapped through a mesh of thin steel rods. A shopping cart. I got most of my body on top of it, out of the worst of the water.

“*Cicily*,” a voice called.

“*Threse?*” I called back.

A beam of light painted the wall, shifting back and forth before hitting me in the face, coming from upstream.

“There,” Threse cried.

“I got her.” It was a man’s voice. “Keep the light on her.”

The shopping cart I was clinging to was part of a logjam of debris, anchored by a couch.

“Hang on.” A soaked Reilly with a rope tied around his waist was wading downstream toward me, the floodwater washing up against him. I struggled to my feet, stepped into the water in front of the logjam. It was almost to my waist, but not as

strong there.

Reilly stretched out a hand; I grasped his wrist, and he grasped mine.

“Pull,” he called.

The current got suddenly stronger when we got clear of the logjam. We inched along, the water trying to knock my feet out from under me, until we reached a shelf along the wall. Threse pulled me up and into her arms.

* * *

There were damp spots on the cardboard, as the still-wet floor soaked through. This was creating uncomfortable damp spots on my ass, which was already sore from sitting on cardboard. The lines in Threse’s frowning face were deepened by the weak light of the single candle we’d managed to salvage.

“This sucks.” I gazed up at the single shower curtain we’d hung. “I had next to nothing to begin with, but damn, do I miss what I’d had.”

“I hate reality,” Threse said. “In rehab they were always talking about how we drink to escape reality, and I was like, no shit. Maybe if reality didn’t suck so much, I wouldn’t drink so much.”

“Well, I hung on to the extra cash I’ve been earning from my three lovers. Next time I go topside, the bottle’s on me.”

Threse reached over and patted my arm. “Every bit of that money’s for getting your little girl back.”

I barked a harsh laugh. “She’ll be a legal adult by the time I make enough.” Threse was right, though. I felt like shit any time I spent money on anything but food to keep me alive, and any time I did anything that didn’t earn money.

I shifted on my sheet of cardboard, trying to find a spot that wasn’t wet. I didn’t want to be there. I wanted to be warm and dry, listening to *Anna Karenina*. I picked up my phone and activated Jasper’s dollbot.

“Hey there.”

Jasper looked up from his book. It wasn’t *Anna Karenina*, though; he wouldn’t read ahead without me. “Oh, hey. Where do you go, when you’re like that?”

“I guess it’s my version of sleep.” I already felt better. I wished I could tell Jasper about the flood, about losing my camp and having nothing but cardboard and a candle, but that wasn’t advisable.

There was a brochure sitting on the coffee table: *Artificial Companion Annual Expo-Las Vegas*. “What’s this?”

Jasper squinted at the brochure. “Oh, it’s a convention for people with non-organic companions. They have a saleroom with companions and accessories, lectures, cocktail parties. That sort of thing.”

I got Cicilybot to open the brochure. “We should go.”

He made a face. “Not my sort of thing. Plus, I don’t think it’s a good idea for people to know what’s happened to you. I could imagine someone stealing you and trying to figure out what makes you the way you are. There are a lot of bad people out there.”

“I’ll act like the rest of the bots. No one will ever know.”

Jasper reached over and took the brochure from me. “You really want to go?”

“I really do.” At least I could do some civilized things as Cicilybot, even if Cicily couldn’t afford to spend money on anything.

Jasper shrugged. “Okay. I’ll take you.”

“Thanks. You’re a good guy. Will you read me some *Anna Karenina*?”

Jasper marked the book he’d been reading, picked up *Anna Karenina* and heaved a teasing sigh. “I guess I can spare a few minutes.”

When Jasper’s eyelids were droopy with sleep, he got up and kissed the side of my head. “Good night.”

I was back in the tunnel, in the dank darkness with my cardboard and my old

plastic suitcase—the one thing I'd been able to recover after the flood.

I tried reading poetry—Rupi Kaur—but it didn't beat back the darkness, didn't form a bubble of safety, wasn't an incantation of light in the gloom. Not tonight.

I wanted to be back in Jasper's warm, welcoming house.

I activated Jasper's doll. As quietly as I could, I rolled down the hall, over groaning antique boards, into Jasper's room. He was a lean outline under perfectly tucked blankets, as if the bed had been made with him in it. I eased the dollbot onto the bed, slowly, slowly, until it was lying facing him. His soft, even breathing comforted me the way poetry usually did.

* * *

Hundreds of men, each with a dollbot rolling obediently by his side, or pushed in a wheelchair if they were cheap models with no locomotion, a few super high-end models actually *walking*. Row upon row of dollbot outfits; new dollbot models displayed on catwalks, incredibly lifelike, if you overlooked the ridiculously huge tits.

"I seriously need a drink." Jasper veered left, toward open double doors, a placard announcing *Cocktail Social* propped beside the door.

Inside, a ballroom was filled with men clutching plastic cups and their empty-handed dollbot companions. Jasper made a beeline for the portable bar and ordered a Manhattan. Finding an empty space, he downed half of it in two gulps. "I wish we hadn't come here. I feel so awkward in these situations."

"Just talk to me," I said. "Then you're not just standing there, holding a cup."

Jasper turned to face his dollbot. "I wonder if any of the other companions here have jumped the tracks, like you." He kept his voice low. "It almost stands to reason. Although I prefer to think you're unique."

"Gee, I hadn't thought of that." My guilt at deceiving Jasper was growing a little stronger every day. I didn't feel a nanospeck of guilt over Conrad and Joey, but Jasper was different from them—he was gentle, even with something he believed was a machine.

"I owned that exact model," an approaching voice said. It was a man in his fifties, balding and walrus-jowled, wearing a gold and white track suit. One of the high-end models trailed behind him, blonde, cartoon-curvy, and walking, if a little unsteadily. "She was a good little starter-model."

"Really," Jasper said vaguely, not quite turning to face the guy.

"I got tired of the wheels." He gestured at Cicilybot's feet. "They felt a little silly. Broke the mood."

The blonde dollbot turned to Cicilybot and smiled. "Hi, I'm Yvette. What's your name?"

"My name is Roxanne," I answered, dutifully staying in character.

"I love jazz. Do you like jazz?"

"I like jazz." I could tell this was going to get tedious in a hurry.

"Tell me about your man." Yvette pressed her hand to Cicilybot's forearm. "What's he like?"

Answering that properly seemed beyond the dollbot's programming, so I went with, "He's nice!"

The dollbot's owner made an amused sound. "I'd highly recommend upgrading, if you have the means. Yvette runs five figures—and the first figure is not a one—but she can carry on an actual *conversation*."

I turned back to Yvette. "When I say my owner is nice, what I mean is, he's not an arrogant little doughboy who struts around bragging to complete strangers, acting like he's the one who built me."

Stunned silence from the arrogant little doughboy, who gawked at Cicilybot, bug-eyed.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand that," Yvette said in a chirpy tone.

Jasper glanced at his old-fashioned wristwatch. "There's a lecture I want to see that's about to start. We'd better get going."

Back in the main hall, Jasper burst into hysterical laughter. "Did you see his *face*?"

The program translated my deep-throated laugh into a high adolescent giggle. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"No, it's fine. You made my day, in fact." Jasper took my hand, slowed to a stop. As convention attendees and their dollbots parted around us, he put his hands on Cicilybot's cheeks and kissed me. "I'm crazy about you."

"Right back atcha," I said.

* * *

As Jasper slid Cicilybot's dress down her thighs, I felt his palms glide along my own thighs. He kissed my/her neck, collarbone, breast in a slow glide, then helped me onto the bed.

"God, I'm nervous," Jasper said.

"Me, too." I hadn't slept with anyone in almost three years, unless you counted Conrad, and I didn't.

"Is there anything you'd want different, from what an organic woman would want?" Jasper stammered. "Anything I should do different?"

"No. I'm good with all the standard things."

I gasped as he slid inside Cicilybot.

"Can you feel this?" Jasper's face was inches from Cicilybot's. "I want to understand what you're experiencing."

"I feel it, in my way." Which was true. I was feeling it in my way, and it was exciting in its complex mixture of participant/voyeur. I was there and not there, in the tunnel and not. Part of me wished I could be there in person, and part of me liked the layer of distance.

"This is incredible." Jasper looked deeply into Cicilybot's eyes, in a way he was never able to with organic women. "You're really here with me. You're alive."

"I am," I said. "I'm alive."

* * *

People stared as I ran past, red-faced and breathless, clutching Katrina's lunch in one hand. I checked the time again as I turned a corner. I was already fifteen minutes late. Had they told me Katrina was being moved? Had I missed the message in the middle of all my Cicilybot juggling? Or had they just not bothered to tell me?

I turned onto Charleston. The seven-story Mammoth Burgers was on the corner of Charleston and Jones—five blocks away. God *damn* them. It was like she'd been drafted into some corporate work army, where she'd lost all of her rights. She was my fucking daughter. I was a good mother. They shouldn't be able to do this to us.

I crashed through the doors, into Mammoth Burgers, the main floor slick with frying grease and as big as a football field. I hurried past row after row of mechanized ordering stations, looking for someone who looked to have authority.

Finally, I spotted a woman in a vest with blue trim, whereas all the other employees' vests had green. She was heading toward an Employees Only door, speaking to a lesser green trim.

"*Excuse me.*" I ran after her, put a hand on her shoulder when I'd caught up. "Excuse me. I have an appointment to visit my daughter. Evidently she's a slave laborer here now."

She tapped her mini wrist computer, ignoring my snide yet fully accurate remark. "What's her name?"

"Katrina Robinson."

She consulted her wrist, shook her head. "You missed her visiting hours."

I backhanded sweat from my face. "I'm late because no one bothered to tell me my daughter had been moved. If I don't know where she's currently enslaved, how am I supposed to get there on time?"

I could just about smell her desire to look through me, because I was no one, yet I was causing her inconvenience. She tried to turn away from me; I moved so my face was still in front of hers. "It's easier to let me see her than to call security and have them drag me out while I scream that I found a big spider in my burger. You know it is."

Blue trim rolled her eyes and heaved a sigh. "Ten minutes." She turned to the green trim waiting beside her. "Find Katrina Robinson and tell her to meet her mother on the main floor, station eighty-seven."

"I don't know why you call them visiting hours," I called at her receding back. "I get visiting minutes."

Katrina's vest had orange piping. She dropped into the plastic seat across from me looking even sweatier than I was. "It's so hot down there."

"Down where?"

"I'm in the fry room. Giant vats of boiling oil, like ponds. They dump fries into these tubs, and I fill the little paper bags. Me and fifty other people." She looked at the bag on the table, the Mammoth burger and fries I'd bought at a smaller location. "That's all I eat, three meals a day."

"I'm sorry. No one told me you were working here now."

Katrina covered her face with her hands. "I'm so tired."

"I'm going to get you out of here. I swear."

"*Stop saying that!*" Katrina pounded the table so hard it wobbled. She started to say something else, but it collapsed into sobs.

I had some money socked away now. At the rate I was going it was going to be months before I had enough, though, and I was afraid if I stole more, someone would get the police involved, and the whole thing would come tumbling down.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Katrina said.

"Okay," I said, not sure I wanted to hear what came next.

"The accident changed you. Not in a bad way, you just . . . you came home from the hospital with an entirely new personality. I don't really know you."

"Well, that makes two of us. I don't really know me either."

"You're less like a mother now, more like a sister. Which would be cool, except I kind of need a mom right now."

"I'll try and find her," I said, feeling like shit. If my own mother hadn't died so soon after the accident, if I'd had more time, I might have been able to find my old self, or at least figure out who the new me was. As it was, I'd been too busy trying to stay alive to do much inner work.

* * *

The books in Jasper's library radiated a protective warmth, encircling me, comforting me. Part of their power was that they were living books, not decoration. That is, Jasper actually read them. Sometimes when Jasper was sleeping, I'd read from one as well.

It was remarkable how I could jump through my phone's tiny screen and be in this other, better place, completely blocking the cold concrete out of my visual field.

"When was the first time you remember being aware that you exist?" Jasper's pen was poised over a leather-clad journal; his long pianist fingers seemed to be wrapped twice around an antique pen.

"You were at the piano, working on a song. You glanced over at me and said, 'I know, I have a terrible voice. But what do you think of the song?'"

Jasper nodded, writing briskly. "I remember that."

“It was the music. It’s like, it lit a spark in me. For the longest time after that, the automated programs talked for me, and I was trapped inside thinking, ‘No, no, that’s not what I want to say.’”

“And when did you speak for yourself for the first time? I think I know the answer to this one.”

“*Anna Karenina.*”

Jasper nodded vigorously. “That’s what I thought.” He leaned forward, eyes blazing with fascination. “What do you think happened? What caused you to become sentient?”

“I honestly don’t know.” Keeping up this charade was getting uncomfortable. Jasper was so enthralled with what he thought was happening. “When do I get to ask *you* some questions?” I poked his ribs playfully.

He seemed surprised. “Me? Okay. I guess. Shoot.”

“Do you ever date real women?”

“I have.” Jasper shrugged. “A few times, anyway. Part of it is, I’m a profound introvert. Long, awkward silences are my specialty.”

I laughed at the self-deprecating joke.

“Seriously. When I’m around organic people, especially women, I clam up. You wouldn’t recognize me. It’s more than that, though.” He squinted, trying to put his finger on it. “Organic women just don’t seem to like me much. There’s something about me that repulses them.”

“I can’t imagine why.” I could, though. He didn’t repulse *me*, but he was a strange bird—you could tell even before he spoke. Even when he looked at you, he seemed to be looking away. His default expression was an odd mixture of sad and uncomfortable. He seemed ill at ease in this world. “Maybe you just haven’t met the right woman.”

Jasper shook his head. “That’s not it. I was engaged once, actually.”

“Really? What happened?”

“I ended up breaking it off. We were living together and having a lot of trouble. She wanted my constant attention. One unending conversation. I like quiet. I like to read, listen to music. Then she suggested we go to couples’ therapy. That was it. I was done.” Jasper made a face. “I’m not cut out for that sort of relationship. Organic people are judgmental and unpredictable. It’s too stressful. An artificial companion is stable. It doesn’t judge, it doesn’t disappoint.”

“Well, who am I to judge? I’m a foam-rubber freak.”

“What you are is a miracle.”

I touched the doll’s fingers to its chest. “Little ole me?”

“I’m serious. There’s no one else like you on the planet. You’re one-of-a-kind. A miracle.”

I choked up. I wasn’t sure why, but suddenly the tears were rolling. I took a few shaky breaths, willing the feeling to pass.

And then I realized what it was. I wished Jasper was saying this to *me*, to organic me.

“I’m a one-of-a-kind *something*, that’s for sure,” I finally replied. This was starting to feel wrong. No—it had been feeling wrong for a while. Now it had reached a point where I couldn’t stand the wrongness anymore.

We were both weird. Not the same kind of weird, but his weird harmonized with my weird. If he could get over my organic-ness, he might be comfortable around me. He might even love me.

My flashlight illuminated the opposite wall just enough to make out the line of graffiti sprayed there.

I’m certain I will accomplish something truly great in my lifetime. I am 62 and homeless.

I loved that one. It was why I'd picked this spot. Not that coming out to Jasper classified as *something truly great*, but the line inspired me to take a chance, in my own small way.

He was an outcast, like me. He didn't deserve being made a fool of. Conrad and Joey, they deserved it. Not Jasper. I couldn't just *stop*, though. It had gone too far for that. I had to come clean. Had to take a chance.

Unlocking my suitcase, which I'd found buried in the logjam relatively unscathed, I fished around until I found my good outfit, the one I'd saved all this time for a special occasion that had never presented itself. Strapless strawberry-red velvet that shifted in texture as the light moved across it. I wanted to look my best for Jasper—as much like Cicilybot as I could, even if I was five years—three living in a drainage tunnel—and one car accident older. I'd explain, and he would forgive me. I'd ask if we could pick up reading *Anna Karenina* where we'd left off. I'd take my usual spot in the yellow antique easy chair, and Jasper would read to me. The only difference would be that instead of pretending to drink tea, I would sip from a real cup as steam wafted gently. The familiarity of the situation, the ritual of it, would put Jasper at ease, and when it grew late, I'd follow Jasper into his room without a word. We'd sleep side-by-side like we always did, not touching, because Jasper found it hard to sleep unless he was flat on his back with his arms resting at his sides. No lovemaking—that might be too jarring for him if it came too soon. I'd give him time to get used to me.

A flashlight painted the opposite wall, then the ground. Reilly passed, flashing a peace sign, and adding a wolf whistle.

Threse, alerted by the whistle, painted me with her flashlight. "Got a date?"

I joined Threse at her camp. "It might be a date. I'm not sure. I'm going to out myself to Jasper."

Threse squinted one eye. "You sure that's such a good idea?"

"No. But I'm going to do it anyway."

"In that case, I'd say 'don't do anything I wouldn't do,' except there's nothing I wouldn't do." She threw her head back and laughed at her own joke, which morphed into a wet cough. Still coughing, Threse waved me away. "Good luck."

I grabbed my pack and got going.

The lights of the strip seemed warmer, as if I was already more a part of the top-side world. I wiped a sweaty palm down my hip. What if he told me he never wanted to see me again? He'd said organic women always disappointed him. When he found out how I'd tricked him, wouldn't it be one more example to add to the evidence pile? No, because I'd explain why I'd done it, and why I couldn't keep doing it, and Jasper would understand.

Would it be better to start explaining as Cicilybot, who he was comfortable with, then knock on the door and continue? Yes. That was a good idea. I reached into the side pocket of my pack to retrieve my phone.

I stopped walking. It wasn't there.

Swinging the pack off, I knelt and checked the main pouch, then each of the other pockets. I checked the side pocket again, jamming my entire hand in there.

Had I left it in my camp? Or maybe it had fallen out of my pack?

I took out my flashlight and retraced my steps, scanning the ground. Chances were it was back at my camp, sitting on the mattress, but I didn't want to take any chances.

Back at the camp, the phone was nowhere in sight. Trying to stay calm, I started at one end and searched every square inch. It didn't take long.

"*Shit!*"

"What's the matter?" Threse called.

"I can't find my phone." I'd used it right there in my camp, just before I started

dressing. I'd backtracked carefully. It had to be here, unless someone—

I pictured Reilly strolling by, flashing us a peace sign.

"Reilly, you bastard. I'll kill you!" I snatched up my flashlight and stalked down the tunnel. I'd kill him. That smarmy fuck with his *We all need to stick together, code of the tunnels* crap.

Threse ducked through her curtain. "Are you sure it was Reilly?"

"Someone took it between the time I came by your camp and the time I went back to my camp."

"Then it's gotta be Reilly." As I turned to go, Threse grabbed my wrist. "If you go charging down there screaming, he'll just hide it. You got to catch him red-handed."

She was right.

"Hang on." Threse came out with her gun. She stuck it into the waistband of her sweatpants. "Just in case."

I switched off the flashlight. We joined hands and felt along the wall of the tunnel, moving quietly.

A soft glow was seeping through the shower curtain that surrounded Reilly and Becky's place. Becky's voice drifted up through the darkness.

"You can't just blurt it out. You've got to be subtle. Here, let me talk."

"I know what I'm doing," Reilly hissed at her. He raised his voice and said, "Come on, sweetie. Please? Wouldn't I look beautiful in that?"

I went right through the shower curtain, and snatched my phone out of Reilly's guilty hands, yanked the earbuds out of his ears. "*Bastards. You fucks. I'll kill you.*"

"*We're the bastards?*" Becky shouted, hands on hips. "We saved your fucking life. We give you donuts. What have you ever given us? All you do is take."

I raced back up the tunnel, fumbling with the earbuds.

On the screen, Jasper's nostrils were flared, his cheeks blotchy. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

I didn't know how to answer, because I didn't know what I'd said to him. "It-it...I think it was a glitch in my programming."

"A glitch in your programming? It didn't sound like a fucking glitch. It sounded like you were trying to fucking manipulate me. 'Treat me right, or I might leave you'? Seriously? Fuck you. I guess this is the next phase in your evolution. From mindless machine, to conscious being, to a real, live woman."

All the hope drained out of me. I could feel it, a molten silver puddling at my feet. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're just like every organic woman I've ever known. Unpredictable. Demanding."

"And God forbid anyone should disrupt your predictable little world."

Jasper's hand came up, throwing the contents of his mug into the dollbot's face. I gasped as if the hot tea had hit me.

"I'm just like every organic woman you've ever known? Well, you're just like every man I've ever known." I turned Cicilybot toward the door.

Jasper threw his hands in the air. "And how many is that? *One*? Or are you counting men you've seen on TV?"

I couldn't tell him the truth. Not now. "Fuck you, Jasper."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving. I don't want to be predictable. I want to be able to screw up, to say the stupidest, wrongest thing, and still feel loved."

"You can't *leave*. I *own* you."

"You stopped owning me when I became sentient." I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to break his heart for breaking mine. I had no idea where Cicilybot would go once she walked out the door. I didn't care.

Jasper grabbed Cicilybot by the hair from behind and yanked her backward. She hit the hardwood floor headfirst with a *thunk* that set my teeth on edge. "You were made in a factory. I bought you. Just because your programming has gone off the rails doesn't mean you're suddenly the first machine who owns itself."

I rolled Cicilybot over, got her to her feet. "Then you might as well deactivate me now, because as soon as you turn your back on me, I'm out of here."

"Oh yeah?" Jasper grabbed Cicilybot by the wrist and pulled. "Come here." I braked her wheels so he had to pull her off her feet and drag her across the living room, to the closet. He reached up, pulled out a coil of slick rope.

He tied Cicilybot's wrists, yanking the twine tight enough that it would have cut a real person's skin. "Jesus. Are you enjoying this? Is it turning you on to tie up your dolly?"

When its wrists were tied, Jasper dropped the loose end of the rope behind her. He grasped her ankles and yanked her feet up. Wrapping the rope around her ankles, hog-tying her.

When he was finished, he stood over the dollbot, his hands trembling with fatigue, or anger.

"You are so fucking weird. Do you see yourself? You're tying up your fuckdoll so she won't leave you. You don't need *me*, you need a fucking psychiatrist." I would know. I'd seen my share, and I knew a disordered person when I saw one.

Jasper grabbed the length of rope between Cicilybot's bound hands and feet, and dragged her out the back patio doors, across the neatly clipped lawn, the blades black in the darkness.

I'd thought maybe our disorders had found a harmonic balance, where we could both be our best selves. It had all been wishful thinking. A fantasy. Reilly and Becky, shitwhistles that they were, had done me a favor.

He dropped me by the fence that separated his property from the next, beside a mound of compost, and disappeared into his shed.

He returned a moment later carrying a shovel. His face was hidden in deep shadow, but I didn't need to see it to know he'd jumped the tracks. I wasn't sure if calling him weird had sent him over the edge, or telling him he needed to see a psychiatrist. My money was on weird.

Jasper flung a shovelful of rotting food and dirt into Cicilybot's face. Then another.

"You know why women stay away from you?" Cicilybot's voice was muffled but still just cheery, as if she was throwing a party instead of being buried. "It's because you scare them. One look at you, and they can tell you're capable of this."

"*Shut the fuck up.*" He raised the shovel over the dollbot's head, the bladed edge pointed down, threatening to separate the head from the torso. "Shut the fuck up right now. Your opinion is worthless, because you're *nothing*."

Why was I still there? He might think he owned me, that I had no choice but to listen to him, but all I had to do was break the link, and he'd be left shouting insults at a brainless silicone dollbot.

I cut the feed. Wiping tears of anger and grief, I surveyed my shithole furnished from dumpsters. The shower curtains closed in around me; sobs turned into gasps for air.

I had to get out of there. If I stayed, I was going to die. Suddenly I felt it with marrow-deep certainty. I had to get out of there, had to get Katrina out of CPS's work camp. I had to. I hadn't realized how much I'd been relying on this fantasy of Jasper being overjoyed to learn I was a real woman, swooping in and rescuing us. Clearly I'd watched too much Disney as a kid.

Flashbacks of Jasper screaming at me through the dollbot rattled around in my head, mixed with the familiar, exquisite needles-all-over pain of loss. I wanted to

wake Threse and ask her to rock me in her arms, but she slept hard in the arms of gin. There was no one else. I had no friends except Threse. I wanted Jasper to rock me in his arms.

And that thought brought the needles-all-over pain back.

It was my failed marriage in miniature. How much fun we'd had until it wasn't all trips to Bermuda and nights spent downing shots of Drambuie. When I stopped playing the fun and sexy girlfriend role and was just me, eating toast and jam at the kitchen counter in my wrinkled pajamas and asking Alexander to do the dishes once in a while as toddler Katrina tugged at my leg. Jasper was no different. Whatever dumb things Reilly had said, it canceled out every quiet conversation, every shared joke, even the miracle of Cicilybot's awakening.

I tried activating Cicilybot, hoping that maybe Jasper had Cicilybot in the bathtub and was cleaning the crud off her as he pleaded with me to forgive him. I wasn't sure what I would have done if that's what I'd found, but not surprisingly, I couldn't activate it. The dollbot was broken.

Suddenly being in the tunnel felt almost as suffocating as being buried alive. I had to get out of there. Topside around the tunnel entrance was dangerous at night. The space under the interstate overpass was a popular drug buying spot. Plus, where would I go?

I padded over to Threse's camp in my dumpster-salvaged slippers, but she was snoring softly on dirty clothes. I didn't want to wake her. It was still early, but she tended to sleep a deep, disoriented, gin-aided sleep.

There was nothing else to do, so I lay down on my own dirty clothes spread on damp cardboard, and I tried to sleep.

* * *

I unpacked the contents of my burnt orange bag, folded it, and set it flat on the table, a flag of my nation, displayed with pride. Unwrapping the burger, I peeled back the bun and examined the patty to make sure there was nothing horrible that was visible to the naked eye. No eyeballs, no intestine.

If the meat in a Premium burger was 100 percent pure beef, what was in the Value burger? I didn't mind filler, if the filler was soy or textured vegetable protein, but I had a feeling there were other animals involved.

The three Premium Boys sauntered in wearing their smirks of superiority. I didn't think they'd recognize me, but I looked down at my phone, just in case. I needed to check for new gigs anyway.

There was a repair request waiting for me, from a repeat customer. To repair a dollbot.

* * *

When he answered the door, it was hard to act like I didn't know him. He looked exhausted, his long, lean, exquisitely manicured fingers trembling as he held the door.

"Hello again," I said.

Not looking at me, he mumbled a greeting and let me in.

Cicilybot was sitting up in Jasper's bed. He'd washed her to the point that there was not the slightest hint of where she'd been.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"She doesn't work at all."

I stepped closer, lifted one of her arms. "Was there anything that might have caused it? A fall, or something?"

"She—" he fumbled for words, finally gave up and shrugged. "Not that I know of."

Not that he knew of. Liar.

"Okay. I'll run a universal diagnostic. If it needs new parts, I'll have to come back,

and parts are extra.”

Jasper waved my words away. “I don’t care what it costs.”

He left me to work. Although I’d never been in his bedroom before, it felt as familiar as my tunnel camp, and more like home. I wanted to go to the library and have a cup of tea and listen to Jasper reading *Anna Karenina*. There was no way back to that place, though. Not after what he’d done.

When I was finished, I took Cicilybot into the bathroom. I washed off my signature lightning bolts, put on lipstick, mascara, eye shadow, matching Cicilybot as close as I could. Then I changed into the dress. My hair had grown out a little, but it didn’t match Cicilybot’s flowing locks. Otherwise, though, we could be twins. Because we were twins.

I lifted Cicilybot around the waist from behind and carried her into the kitchen, where Jasper was perched on the edge of a chair.

“All set,” I said.

Jasper leaped as if a straight pin had come up through the fabric. He hurried over, studying the dollbot. “How does she seem?”

“She’s not activated.” I set Cicilybot down in a kitchen chair and stood beside her, waiting for him to notice.

“What do I owe you?” Jasper tapped his phone, bringing up the account, then looked up at me.

Then at Cicilybot. Then back at me.

He swallowed, blinking rapidly. “What’s going on? Is this . . . what *is* this?”

I moved to the doorway. I wanted to be able to make a quick exit, depending on how Jasper reacted. Then I explained. As I talked he stared at my feet, swallowing, blinking. I was an organic woman, which was not his comfort zone.

“I was on my way over to explain it to you, the other day,” I said, after I laid out what I’d done, avoiding any mention of Conrad and Joey. “I thought maybe you’d understand, that I could switch places with the doll. We seemed good together. My weirdness seemed simpatico with yours.”

Jasper burst into tears. “I miss her so much.”

“There was no her. There was just me.”

It must have taken a herculean effort for Jasper to look directly into my eyes. “Then I miss you.”

I held out a folded stack of cash. “This is everything I took. I stopped when we got close.”

“Please.” He gestured into the house. “Have a cup of tea with me.”

I wiped a tear of my own. “It’s too late.”

“I didn’t *know*. It wasn’t real to me. If I’d known you were real, I never would have . . .” He didn’t elaborate on what he never would have done, because there was no way of saying, *buried you alive* without sounding like a psycho.

“I wanted you to know the truth.” The truth was, I’d wanted to rub it in his face, to fix his fucking doll, tell him he blew it and spin on my heel and stalk away. But now that I was standing in front of him, seeing the Jasper I thought I could have loved, who I thought could have loved me, I didn’t want to get even. I just wanted to close the circle I’d opened so I could move on with my life, such as it was. “I’m sorry I lied to you.”

Jasper stared at my feet, choking on his pain.

I swallowed back my own pain. “Get rid of the doll, Jasper. You think it’s helping you, but it’s not.”

I dropped the cash at his feet and headed home. There was more I wanted to say, but it wasn’t my place to give him advice. If it had been my place, I would have told him that it’s okay to be weird, there are women who like weird, and you only need to find one. But that one won’t be perfect, and things will get messy, and you have to be able to fucking deal with it without losing your shit.

Conrad was watching TV, a feast of Premium takeout Indian food laid out on the coffee table. The sight of it gave me a sharp twang of hunger. I was glad I couldn't smell it.

"Hi love. What are you watching?" I settled Cicilybot in next to him.

He swallowed. "War film."

It was pathetic that I was so desperate for human companionship that I would seek it from Conrad. Didn't that fit, though? I was a pathetic person, so I did pathetic things, such as falling in love with a sociopath.

"How was your day?" I asked.

Conrad gave me an annoyed look, and gestured at the TV. "Do you mind?"

"I do, actually." While I didn't feel a thing for this toady old man, he professed to be madly in love with me, and yet wouldn't suffer even the infinitesimal inconvenience of pausing his film for two minutes to speak to me.

Conrad looked startled. "You mind that I'd like to finish my dinner in peace?"

"I mind that when I'm feeling lonely and depressed, you can't inconvenience yourself for five minutes to comfort me." Tear it all down. It was stupid, but I didn't care. I wanted to tear it all down.

Conrad set down his fork. "I comfort you all the time."

"When you feel like it. Love means comforting someone at the precise moment you don't feel like it, when you're exhausted, and irritable—"

"Don't lecture me about love." Conrad poked his chest. "I've loved and lost and loved again for seventy-eight years. Two months ago, you were a *machine*. Who the hell do you think you are, telling me about love?" He gave the closest plate a shove. "You're giving me indigestion. My dinner's up to here." He held his hand chest-high, to show me how high his dinner was because of me.

Conrad snatched up a sweater, even though it was about 90 degrees outside, and headed for the door. The door made a heavy *thump* that must have been very satisfying when Conrad slammed it behind him.

Maybe it was a good thing, to blow it all up now. I could move on to three new marks before these got too suspicious. Except the thought of starting over, of acting the part of the dumb dollbot waking up and falling in love with a pervert, felt too daunting. It felt like climbing a sheer concrete cliff. I was so tired.

I wandered through the house, saying goodbye. I hated Conrad, but I loved his house. In the bedroom I gazed through Cicilybot's eyes at the oil painting of the badminton players. It was remarkable how a work of art can give you strength, passing you droplets of energy, even mediated through the eyes of a machine. Did it do the same for Conrad? Or did he see nothing more than a pretty investment, something to hide his safe behind?

Left twenty-three, right seven, left twenty-two, right seven. I knew it by heart, sometimes chanted the numbers to myself in time with my steps as I walked. But I couldn't take the money inside. That would bring a shitload of police, a mountain of scrutiny to the dollbot, and very likely paint a trail right back to me. I could run and disappear, but I'd never see Katrina again.

If I wanted to be a vindictive fucker, I could probably get away with burning all that cash, though. Cicilybot could do it in a fit of love-fueled anger. Conrad would probably take an ax to her after that—

An idea pelted me, like an icy wave crashing over my head. It whipped my breath away and filled my insides with trumpet blasts.

It was a challenge, getting Cicilybot's stiff fingers to turn a combination lock, as I hurried up the tunnel, but after about seven attempts I got the safe open. Stacks of rubber-banded hundred-dollar bills. I didn't know enough about money to guess how much it was. All I knew was, it was more than enough.

It took four trips for Cicilybot to drop all but three of the packets out the window. I took those to the library Conrad rarely visited, and had Cicilybot drop a bunch of printer paper into the fireplace. I undid the rubber bands and scattered the bills all over the fireplace, plus a few on the brick landing outside the fireplace.

There was a long-nosed fireplace lighter beside the wood stacked off to the side. I lit the stack of printer paper and cash in about eight different places, until it started to take off, crackling, curling, and blackening as it burned.

Breaking out of the tunnels, I sprinted past teenaged boys in ratty-cool clothes who called after me, laughing at this woman running as if a hellhound was snapping at her heels. I had to get to Conrad's house before he got home, and I had no idea where he'd gone or when he'd be home.

I was not a runner, but adrenaline can be a magical thing. I reached the bus station, my breath coming in a death squeal, hopping from one foot to the other as I waited until, finally, the bus roared around the corner, the doors flapping open to invite me inside.

Whispered prayers to the non-god I believed in as the driver ambled us along as if this was just another day, me perched on the edge of the front seat, hand gripping the cool steel safety bar.

I was on my feet, left toe a dust mote's width from the white *Do Not Cross This Line While the Bus is in Motion* line.

As soon as the doors opened, I was off, flying through the darkness, past manicured lawns and long circular driveways. Running for my freedom. Around the corner, past one stately Premium-person manor, then another, to the row of evergreen shrubs. The wads of hundred-dollar bills lay scattered under the bedroom window...

Conrad's car pulled into the driveway.

I ducked behind a shrub, watched Conrad exit the car and walk to the front door, his expensive old-man shoes clicking on the concrete. I flinched as he glanced to his right, toward the money. Then he disappeared into the house.

He hadn't seen it.

I sprinted out onto the lawn, scooped up the rubber-banded stacks, seven, eight, ten, fifteen, twenty of them. Cicilybot had dropped twenty-one. I'd counted. I glanced around, the spotlights casting distorted shadows across the lawn and the side of the house. I hurried right along the foundation. I couldn't miss one. Not one, or he'd find it and realize what happened.

I found it stuck in a shrub. Clutching the cash to my chest, I ran. I should have thought to bring a bag. Slowing on the sidewalk, I tucked my shirt into my pants and stuffed the cash down the top of my shirt, front and back.

I pulled my phone from my back pocket and opened the link to Cicilybot. She was right where I'd left her, sitting in Conrad's reading chair by the fireplace, several hundred-dollar bills lying scattered by her feet.

"Brittany, love? Where are you?" Conrad called from another room.

"In here," I called back, my heart rocketing.

"Are you ready to be reasonable now?" Conrad sauntered into the library.

"Not really, no. The opposite, really."

He spotted the money on the floor. "What is that? Where did you get that?" He bent to pick up the bills, which led him, like a pigeon following a trail of breadcrumbs, to notice the fireplace, the singed bills along the periphery, the half- and mostly burned bills ringing the pile of black ash in the center. "What did you do? Where did this money come from?"

"Left twenty-three, right seven, left twenty-two, right seven."

His lips formed a little circle. "Why would you do that?"

"I wanted to hurt you. I considered burning your house down, but that seemed

excessive.”

Conrad plucked a still-smoldering piece of hundred-dollar bill out of the fireplace. “You’re out of your mind.”

“I’m a machine, I don’t have a mind.” A woman out for a walk with her labradoodle or cockadoodle or whatever looked me up and down as she passed.

Conrad, meanwhile, had taken out his phone.

“Go ahead. Call the police. Tell them you want them to put your sex doll in prison.”

“I loved you,” Conrad whispered.

“Not enough. Not even close.”

There was a lovely chrome-plated set of fireplace implements hanging beside the fireplace. Conrad reached for the poker, which had sort of a double-hooked business end. He turned to me almost sadly, raised the poker, and brought it down squarely on Cicilybot’s head, knocking her out of the chair.

I was tempted to laugh, because there was nothing in Cicilybot’s head. He’d pitched such a fit when he refused to pay me for my labor, over the incision in the dollbot’s lower back I’d made to reach the CPU.

I didn’t laugh, though. I cried out in fear. “Please, Conrad. Don’t. Stop.” Don’t stop. Beat your dolly into a puddle of silicone. Because she was the one who’d taken your money.

Conrad beat the dollbot’s head until the mouth was gone and I could no longer scream. Soon after, the visuals went black.

I found a plastic grocery bag wadded up in a trashcan and ducked behind some bushes, where I could transfer the stacks of cash. I pulled a bill out of one of the stacks. Tonight, Threse and I would eat like Premium Boys.

* * *

The neighborhoods got fewer, and the flat, straight highway unspooled. I glanced into the rear view, at Katrina in the back seat. She was smiling unironically for the first time in I didn’t know how long. Part of that was that I’d told her I would get her a phone. State-of-the-art.

“Oregon,” I said. “Oregon’s the place for us. On the coast, but not as cliché as California.”

One last thing, though, before I closed the book on Vegas. I set the car on auto and took out my phone.

While Joey was at work making the world a safer place for millionaires, the nine of us sat cross-legged in a circle in his lavish living room. I’d missed some exciting twists last night—Jeannette was now at the top of the board, and Cassandra at the bottom. I was in second, so yay for me.

Whose faces did these other dollbots have? Were they well-compensated models who received a royalty for every doll sold? Why do that, when you could cheat some desperate homeless woman instead? There were plenty of us to choose from.

I sent Cicilybot around the circle, activating the girls. Then I opened the window as wide as it would go.

Cassandra didn’t protest when Cicilybot lifted her under the arms and carried her, high heels dragging along the floor, to the window.

“What do you think, Cassandra? Would you like to fly away from here?”

“I’m into it,” Cassandra said enthusiastically.

I put her head through the open window and set her ample chest on the sill. First, a safety check. From eight stories up, I peered down at a courtyard ringed by green dumpsters. Not a soul in sight.

I grasped Cassandra by the ankles and worked her out the window—left-side, right-side; left-side, right-side—until her weight took over and pulled her out of my grasp. I hurried to watch her plunge.

Her seafoam green nighty flapped madly as she did a slow end-over-end forward roll. She hit the concrete headfirst, her spine snapping at the lower back so her legs ended up behind her. Cool.

Emma who was next, did a slow, majestic half-turn. She caught the edge of the dumpster with her legs and split open like a cantaloupe as her top half hit the asphalt, her carbon-fiber skeleton poking out of her ruined midsection.

Cicilybot went last. I had to close my eyes as she fell—it was too much like falling out a window for real. She landed feet-first on top of Yvette. Her legs were ruins of twisted bot-bone, but her top half had mostly been cushioned from the impact. I could partially sit up and look around, as a siren howled plaintively in the distance, growing louder with each refrain.

* * *

“Holy shit.” Joey’s unmistakable growly voice came from far above.

I looked up. There he was, leaning out the window, surveying the carnage, his scarlet work tie dangling.

“I hope this doesn’t affect my ranking,” I called up.

“I’m into it,” Cassandra said. Evidently her voice box hadn’t been in her head, because her head was gone.

I closed my phone.

Threse patted my shoulder. “Was that the guy? You’re not gonna change your mind, are you?”

A jolt of pain ran through me, imagining Jasper sitting in his library, reading to his brainless Cicilybot. “No. I’m not going to change my mind.”

“Everything you want is in Oregon.” Threse pointed straight out the windshield.

“Oregon!” Katrina shouted from the back seat, pointing straight ahead.

I joined the chant as we sped off, a twinkle in our eyes and a shitload of cash in the trunk. Everything I wanted that wasn’t in Oregon, I’d brought with me.