



His Robot Girlfriend

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First Edition

Feedbacks Edition

For Donny, Jerry, and Wes.

Chapter 1

Mike's life was crap. And every day he got up out of bed and thought about how it was crap. Today he climbed out of bed and made his way through the discarded clothing on the floor of the bedroom to the bathroom. His worn image looked out of the mirror at him. He picked up his cordless razor and turned it on before remembering that it was Saturday. He stuck out his tongue at his reflection. Slipping off his underwear, he tossed it at the hamper just outside the bathroom door. It landed on the floor. Turning on the shower, he stepped inside the glass-doored stall, and stood beneath the spray. He took a deep breath and then began soaping up and rinsing off. Pouring a handful of shampoo, he scrubbed his scalp, rinsed, and then turned off the water. He waited about two minutes—partly to drip dry and partly because he didn't want to face the day—before he climbed out of the shower stall.

Once he was dry, he walked back into the bedroom, crossed to the dresser, and pulled out a clean pair of underwear. The underwear was so old that it looked more grey than the white that it had been, and the material had worn through enough that the elastic showed in the waistband. He slipped his left foot in the leg hole and then the right, getting his big toe caught for just a second. Pleased with himself that he had not lost his balance, he went back to the bathroom and combed his thinning and graying hair. It had been graying for a long time. It had only been thinning, at least noticeably for a few of years—just since Tiffany had died. He brushed his teeth, and grinned at the man in the mirror. It wasn't a friendly grin. Back in the bedroom, he slipped on cut-off jeans and a green t-shirt. Then he walked through the bedroom door, down the stairs, through the living room, and into the family room.

He touched the screen of the vueTee hanging just above the fireplace to turn it on, then passed through the archway and into the kitchen. Pouring a bowl of cereal, he sniffed the milk before adding it. It was still good. Grabbing a spoon, he headed for the worn recliner which faced the vueTee. The screen was on, but it wasn't alive with movement and

sound. It still had the browser up and it was still on the Daffodil site. Mike had followed the link the night before from the very slick commercial he had seen during the Tonight Show. On the left side of the screen was a large yellow daffodil and on the right were four large yellow buttons, arranged vertically. The first said Barone, the second Amonte, the third Nonne, and the fourth PWX.

Daffodil wasn't the largest manufacturer of robots, but it certainly had the most cultural cache. Their commercials were by far the best. Everyone seemed to be talking about them. Mike could hum their jingle right now. The four buttons corresponded to the four basic robot units that Daffodil produced. Though there was some crossover between the four types based on the many options that were chosen, the Barone was usually an aid to adults—a robot maid, gardener, or grandparent. The Nonne was a babysitter type: a tutor, a nanny, or again, depending upon the options, a maid. The PWX was an industry grade robot designed for use by corporations and government organizations as a receptionist or a clerk. Finally the Amonte was a personal companion. It could be configured as an escort, a friend, or a lover. As the commercial said, it was “anything and everything you want it to be.”

Mike leaned back in the chair and pointed the remote at the vueTee. He moved the curser over the Amonte button and pressed. The body frame options screen came up, but there was a small window along the left side that said “narrow your selections.” You could narrow them by price. You could narrow them by race-ethnicity. Or you could narrow them by gender. Mike ignored that side of the screen and looked at the body build. If you were going to dream, you might as well dream unencumbered. Dials allowed one to set height, chest, waist, and hips. He had already filled in these features the previous night. After that, one flipped through a series of screens where prospective customers could change almost every aspect of their robot. The head controls gave one control over the shape and placement of eyes, nose, lips, and ears, but also let one choose the forehead shape and jaw line, the hair color and style, the type of chin, and the placement of freckles. Other controls set every detail from fingernails to nipples. Mike flipped through them. The last screen showed the price for his particular build: \$2699.00. That would just about wipe out his payNEtime account.

Mike let his curser drop down to the search bar. He moved through the postings about Daffodil. There were many from people questioning certain aspects of the design, but few from people who had actually purchased one. Daffodil didn't disclose their sales figures to the public, but

experts estimated that they had thus far sold only about 300,000 units. There were a few messages from owners of the Gizmo robot, who went on about how superior it was, because you set its personality before purchase. There was only one posting that Mike hadn't seen. He clicked on it and an aging woman with orange hair appeared on the screen.

"I love my Daffodil. He does everything for me—takes care of the bills, fixes my meals. He drives me to visit my friends, and he rubs my feet every night. His name is Andre. I just don't know what I'd do without him."

"Probably move to Florida," said Mike.

He flipped over to Today Saturday. As he watched Tania Marquez read through the top stories of the day, he thought about purchasing a Daffodil. Twenty seven hundred dollars was a ginormous amount of money to spend. If he had still been married to Tiffany there would be no question. He wouldn't have bought one. He would still have wanted one, but he wouldn't have bought one. Oh, Tiffany might have gone for a five hundred dollar model designed just to clean the house, but she certainly never would have let him get the one that he had designed online. Of course if she had still been here... Oh sure, he might have fantasized about a Gizmo Sexbot, but it would have remained just a fantasy. Besides, he didn't want a Daffodil for sex—well, not just for sex. If he was going to get one, it would be for companionship. It would do all the things that it was capable of doing.

The rest of the morning, Mike watched the vueTee. After Today Saturday was over, he turned to the Cooking Channel and watched Café Italiano, Breakfast at Bloomberg's, and America's Test Kitchen. When Noon Buffet came on, he turned off the vueTee and picked up his texTee. The New York Times had already downloaded, so he flipped through the pages. Most of it was politics. Mike didn't hate politics, like everyone else he knew seemed to. It was just that there didn't seem much point to it at the moment. All three major parties had chosen their candidates even though none of them had yet had their convention, and it was more than six months till the general election.

The paper bored him after a few minutes, so he clicked through the book menu. He had the first chapter of The Janissary Tree, so he read it. When he was done, he still wasn't sure if he wanted to spend \$17.99 for it. He flipped over to Moby Dick. He had the whole book. Before this year, he hadn't read it since college and wanted to read it through again, annotating it along the way—just because. It was slow going. Here it was

April, and he was only on Chapter 24: A Bosom Friend. He tossed the texTee onto the floor beside the chair.

Though he wasn't really hungry, Mike decided that it was lunch time, mostly out of boredom. He went to the foyer, where his tennis shoes sat on the ceramic tile. Slipping them on, he grabbed his keys and wallet from the small shelf on the wall and headed out the front door. Climbing into the car, he drove down the block and around the corner. He thought about stopping at Hot Dog Paradise, but there was a long line of cars in the drive-thru, so he went to McDonalds. The girl at the window could have been mistaken for a real person at first, but just like in every other fast food drive-thru window, she was a robot. She was probably a Gizmo Servbot, though McDonalds had their own custom build that wasn't quite like anywhere else.

"I'll have a McMeatloaf sandwich," he said.

"Would you like that ala carte or with an Arch Value Meal?" She had that slightly tinny voice.

"Value meal."

"Would you care for fries, side salad, fruit slices, or yogurt sticks?"

"Fries."

"And what would you like to drink?"

"Diet Pepsi."

"Your total comes to \$17.96."

Mike swiped his cash card through the slot just below the window.

"Thank you for choosing McDonalds. Please pull forward."

At the next window another Gizmo girl handed Mike his drink and then the bag with his McMeatloaf sandwich and fries. He drove back home and returned to his recliner to eat.

The vueTee had automatically turned off in his absence, so he turned it back on. He watched Face the Nation as he ate. Catherine Garvey was interviewing all three presidential candidates—one at a time. The Republicans had nominated another old man. The Democrats had nominated another old lady. It was the same old thing. Barlow said lower taxes. Wakovia said balance the budget. Only the Greens seemed to have picked anyone who wasn't a cookie-cutter image. Mendoza was young, attractive, and idealistic and probably didn't have a chance in hell of getting elected because she had inherited all the problems of President Busby. As long as there were troops in Antarctica nobody was going to vote Green.

When he was done eating, Mike looked around. He really needed to clean up the house he decided. He would get up and clean for a half

hour. He could manage a half hour. By the time he had emptied and then refilled the dishwasher and emptied the trash compacter though, he didn't feel like continuing, even though only fourteen minutes had passed. He sat back down watched more vueTee, dozing off after a while and waking up just in time for Deal of the Century. Then came Rat Race and then Pajama Party. He opened a can of soup for dinner and went to bed after Saturday Night Live.

Mike woke up just after five with a splitting headache. The bed was cold, not surprising considering he had left both the oscillating fan and the auxiliary air conditioner on. He got up and turned off one and then walked downstairs to the family room to turn off the other. Stopping for a moment, he reached up and touched the vueTee screen, turning it on. An infomercial for the all-in-one electronic device charger blared to life, but he sat down and grabbed the remote, thumbing back to the browser and examining the Daffodil page once more. With a sudden sense of purpose he zipped through the custom design pages, changing most of the settings that had been there since he had first looked it over. He didn't know why he made most of the changes that he did. It was as if something unseen and unknown inside him compelled him to do it. With a slightly hesitant hand, he pressed the Buy Now button. \$2749.00. Then he went back to bed.

It was more than five weeks later, May 31st, when the package arrived. In the interim, life had gone on much as it had for the past several years. Each weekday, Mike tried to teach World Geography to the dullards that passed for eighth grade students in Midland Middle School, after which he came home and vegetated the evening away. On the weekends, he skipped the first part and simply vegetated. One night, the Saturday before last, he had dinner with Harriet and Jack. Every day he looked forward to the change that was coming. Even if the Daffodil never lived up to the hype, even if it was just an overpriced Gizmo Maidbot, it would be an improvement. It would pick up the laundry that had covered the floor for a month, vacuum the carpet that hadn't been vacuumed in two months, clean the bathrooms that hadn't been cleaned since Tiffany's funeral, and maybe dust the things that hadn't been dusted... well, ever.

Mike was annoyed that the box was just sitting on the step when he got home. Something that expensive, he should have had to sign for. Somebody could have just carried it off. But they hadn't. It was here. The box looked impossibly small—only about thirty inches on each side. It was silver with a large yellow daffodil only partially obscured by the shipping label. Unlocking and then opening the front door, he picked up

the box and brought it inside. It was heavy but not too heavy to lift. He set it down first in the foyer, but once he had shut and locked the front door, he carried it into the center of the living room floor. He went to the kitchen and returned with a chef knife. Carefully sliding the blade through the packing tape, he cut along each edge and then across the top seam.

Folding back the two flaps of the box lid, Mike looked down to find it filled with packing peanuts. Brushing some of them out of the way, he almost immediately found a patch of smooth white skin. It was remarkably real looking—pearlescent on the surface and kind of peachy pink beneath, but not a single blemish or mole or hair upon it. Mike brushed more packing peanuts out onto the floor and uncovered more skin, and then plastic with black hair inside. Finally, setting the knife on the coffee table, he tipped the box over, dumping the contents into the center of the floor. White packing went everywhere. The Daffodil rolled out and came to rest on its side, facing away from him. It was curled up tightly into a ball.

At first, Mike thought he must have ordered the wrong robot. Curled up as it was, it looked like a child. He just stared at it for a moment; at its naked back and buttocks and its black hair wrapped up in plastic. Finally he kicked around through the packing peanuts. There didn't seem to be a manual—just a single sheet of paper marked Quick Setup. He picked it up and looked at it. There were two pictures and no words. The first picture showed line drawing of the back of a human-looking neck, except that the neck had three round holes in it and below them a button. The second picture showed the button being pushed by a line-drawn finger. Next to the button and the finger were the numerals 1, 2, 3. Bending down, Mike lifted up the plastic wrapped hair and examined the Daffodil's neck. There were the three holes and there was the button. He pressed it and counted aloud "one, two, three". Then he let go.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the Daffodil tilted its head and unarched its back. It unwrapped its arms from around its knees and stretched out its legs. Rolling over onto its stomach and then, placing both palms on the floor, it rose in a push-up form, and then putting its left foot beneath it and then its right, stood up, coming to attention.

"Please wait," she said, and it was at this moment, that for Mike, it became a she.

The Daffodil could no longer be an it. It was obviously not an it. And it was obviously not a child. Once upright, she was tall, maybe five foot seven. Mike examined her carefully. Though her hair was covered with a

clear plastic cap, he could see it was jet black. It matched two dark, carefully arched eyebrows and a set of long eyelashes. She had no other body hair. Her face could best be described as cute, with large blue eyes, a button nose, and thick voluptuous lips. She had the kind of slender and yet curvy body that was just not possible on a real woman. Breasts the size of apples just kind of floated there above a perfectly flat stomach. Mike tilted his head down. She looked anatomically complete.

"You are Michael Winston Smith?"

"Huh?"

"You are Michael Winston Smith?" She was looking at him. Her eyes seemed very life-like.

"Uh... yes."

"I am Daffodil serial number 55277-PFN-001-XGN-F0103. My software is up to date."

"Good."

"The primary setup procedure requires approximately six hours. During this period, I your Daffodil, will be unavailable for other activities. It is recommended that during this time period you make a few basic decisions. What initial duties do you wish me to have? What clothing, if any, do you wish me to wear? What name would you like me to answer to?"

Mike looked at the clock on the wall. It was 3:20 PM. He counted off six hours on his fingers—9:20. He sat down on the white sofa that was almost never used and looked at the shapely nude robot. With a wry smile, he realized that he could sit and stare at it for the next six hours, or he could get up and do something. He went back to the family room, picked up the texTee, and flipped open Moby Dick, but he didn't read any more of it. Instead he turned the select dial to the bookstore and typed in "names". The titles of half a dozen books appeared including The Name Book, The Secret Universe of Names, and The Baby Name Wizard. He selected the last book of the six: Virtue Names. It took about twenty seconds for the book to download to the texTee. Looking back to the screen, Mike turned to the first page of the name book. The first name was Agape. Agape? The book said that it had something to do with God's love, but all Mike could think of was "hanging loosely open". That was not a particularly desirable trait. He spun the selector dial and picked a page at random. Patience. Now that was a trait he could appreciate. But the book said it was pronounced Pay-shuns. That wasn't right. Paish-ence. Mike had always appreciated those names, mostly associated in his mind with the ninetieth century, that illustrated the supposed

virtues—Faith, Hope, Chastity—but he hadn't considered Patience until now.

He set the texTee back down and walked to the living room to look at the Daffodil. Did she look like a Patience? Close enough, he decided. Now what? He looked back at the clock. It was 3:33. What else did she say? Clothing. He felt his pants pockets. He still had his keys and wallet. He slipped out the door, locking it behind him and jumped back in the car.

Walmart was right around the corner and it took him less than five minutes to get there and park his car. He felt more than a little self-conscious, venturing into the women's apparel department, but it turned out that he was one of more than a dozen men there. Most were just standing around, waiting for their women to finish trying something on in the fitting rooms, though a few were actively shopping. Mike made his way through the racks of ugly old-lady dresses until he found the clothing that young women seemed to prefer. The Daffodil looked like she might be in her early twenties. The first racks held blue jeans, but there was no way that he would be able to figure out the right size. Then he found several racks of dresses that seemed appropriate. He picked out a cute little one with blue flowers on it, then a white dress with large black polka dots. The smallest size on the rack was a three/four, and it looked pretty small, so he picked out a size five/six for each dress.

Having gotten used to looking through the women's clothing, Mike's discomfort returned when he moved into the lingerie section, the two dresses draped over his arm. There were counters and counters of underwear and bras. If choosing the correct pair of jeans was difficult, then choosing the proper size and type of bra would be insurmountable. The Daffodil didn't really seem like she needed one, at least not from a purely functional perspective, though some women liked to wear them anyway. Moving on to the panties, Mike found a dizzying array of sizes, types, and styles. Then he saw some tiny, skimpy, little things called Smart and Sexy thongs. He didn't know about smart, but they were definitely sexy, little more than triangular pieces of lace with elastic bands. They came in bags of three—tiny little lace bags. Mike bought a set in blue.

At the checkout stand, Mike realized that he was hungry. He grabbed a Payday candy bar. The matronly looking Gizmo Servbot gave him his total: \$148.17. He drove back home and raced inside with his purchases, but there was no hurry. The Daffodil hadn't moved. It was only 5:01. Looking at the robot, Mike appreciated her sheer physical beauty like he

hadn't before. He pulled the two dresses out of the bag and held them up in front of her, one after the other. Though they had seemed incredibly tiny in the store, they now looked as though they would fit her and might even be a bit on the large side. Draping them over the arm of the couch, he took the Walmart bag to the kitchen and stuffed it into the recycler. This made him think about everything else that was lying around the house. He had company now, sort of, and he felt an urge to clean up.

Starting in the living room, Mike began cleaning. It didn't take much, since he hardly used the room at all. He picked up the packing peanuts and dropped them into the recycler, folded up the Daffodil box and put it in the compactor, and then he moved on to the foyer. He swept the tiles and straitened the several pairs of shoes by the door. Then he moved on to the family room. This room, though fairly large, was crammed full of old furniture, including the recliner, sofa, two end tables and a coffee table, three bookcases, the entertainment center, and the piano. Most of the furniture and a good bit of the floor were covered with cast-off items as well. Books, obsolete but not quite completely replaced by the texTee were everywhere, as were small piles of junk mail, interlaced with an occasional bill, and stacks of dirty dishes. Mike got to work, picking things up and putting them away until the room looked about as good as it ever had.

He stopped to make himself a supper of a deviled ham sandwich, which he ate along with a diet Pepsi and a handful of potato chips. He stood in the dining room, chewing and looking through the passage at the shapely form of the Daffodil still standing naked where he had left her. When he finished eating, he started wiping down the kitchen counters. He had them nice and clean by the time eight o'clock rolled around and Gunsmoke came on. He went back to his recliner, which had long ago conformed to his shape. Just as the story was getting interesting, his phone rang. It was Harriet calling to see if he was alright. He assured her he was. When he closed the connection and put the phone back in his pocket, the vueTee went to a commercial. Mike turned around and then jumped in his seat. The Daffodil was standing behind him, looking at him from the arch between the family room and living room.

"The primary setup procedure is complete," she said. "The secondary setup procedure requires approximately thirty-six hours. During this period, I your Daffodil, will be capable of other activities."

"What did you do?" asked Mike. "In your primary setup, I mean?"

"There are one thousand sixty seven individual tasks accomplished during the primary setup procedure, the most important of which are

the initialization of the BioSoft operating system, registration of the In-fiNet connection, and charging of the Honda X88 fuel cell."

"Well, that's good. Oh. There are some clothes for you in the living room." He pointed over her shoulder.

She turned around and walked into the living room. Mike followed. She picked up the two dresses and held them in front of her one after the other, smiling.

"I wasn't sure what size you wore, um, Patience. That's what I decided to name you by the way—Patience."

"Patience," she said slowly. "The capacity, habit, or fact of being patient. Patient: bearing pains or trials calmly or without complaint; manifesting forbearance under provocation or strain; not hasty or impetuous; steadfast despite opposition, difficulty, or adversity. That is a very good name. What should I call you?"

Though both Mr. Smith and Master flashed through his mind, he said "Mike".

"You are named for the Archangel Michael, who is like unto God."

"I think I must be named after my uncle Mike, who is like unto, um, my grandfather."

"In answer to your unasked query, I will usually wear 3/4 or 5/6 U.S. miss sizes. Which dress would you like me to wear, Mike?"

"I think the blue one. It matches your underwear which is still in the bag there."

"May I use the bathroom to wash up and get dressed, Mike?"

"Um, yes. You don't need to say my name every time."

"During the secondary setup procedure, I will be adjusting my diction and vocabulary so that I am better able to communicate with you, Mike."

"I see."

"Which way is the bathroom, Mike?"

Mike pointed. "There's the little... I call it the privy... on the other side of the kitchen, or you can go upstairs, because this one doesn't have a shower or anything."

The Daffodil went through the kitchen, toward the privy. Mike turned off the vueTee, and then sat waiting for her to return. It was growing dark out and both end table lamps automatically clicked on. She didn't keep him waiting long. When she returned, he marveled at how real, how human she looked. She was dressed, and the plastic over her hair was gone. Her hair was long and straight and black, and cut with bangs across her forehead. She stepped to the center of the room and twirled

around, then bounced up and down twice on her tip-toes. This made her look really young.

"Shit. I forgot to buy you any shoes," he said.

"That is alright," she smiled. "I can choose and purchase my own wardrobe if you like."

"Yes, that would be good. But you have a limited budget. I don't have that much in the bank, and I spent all my payNEtime money on... well, on you."

"I understand, Mike. I won't spend any money until I am sure of our finances."

"Our finances?" Mike remembered the orange-haired lady and how her Daffodil paid her bills for her. "Are you going to be my secretary too?"

"I will be anything and everything you want me to be," she said. "It is after nine o'clock. Have you eaten dinner, Mike?"

"I had a sandwich."

"Are you still hungry, Mike? Would you like dessert?"

"I don't think so."

"Then may we sit a talk for a few minutes?" She made her way around the coffee table and sat down on the couch. "What time is your bedtime, Mike?"

"Um, I usually go to bed about eleven."

"And what time do you usually get up, Mike?"

"I get up at six twenty."

"That is not enough sleep, Mike. You should go to bed at 10:05."

"I have a hard time getting to sleep that early. I have to take Sleepova anyway."

"I'll help you, Mike." She smiled sweetly. "This is a very nice dress, Mike. Is this the type of dress you would like to see me wear often?"

"Sure. Um, I would like to see you in different clothes too. Isn't that what most people want? You are kind of like a big Barbie doll."

"Would you say you preferred me to dress demurely or provocatively or somewhere in the middle, Mike?"

"Provocatively... sexy but appropriate. I'm a middle school teacher. I don't want you to get me arrested, or worse, fired... although one would probably lead to the other."

"These are very nice underwear, Mike. Is this the type of underwear you would like to see me wear often?"

"Absolutely," Mike said. "Whenever you wear underwear, they should be sexy. That's why you're here."

“Sexual congress?” She looked at him wide-eyed, without the least hint of embarrassment. Well, she wouldn’t be embarrassed, would she? She was a robot. It was hard, looking at her, to think of her as anything but a real person.

“Yes, well, not just for that. I’m tired of being single. But...I’m fifty years old. It’s hard to find somebody at my age, and let’s be frank—I’m nobody’s idea of a catch. I guess with you I don’t have to be though, do I? And I don’t want another wife anyway. I want you to be my companion, you know, in all the ways that another person would be a companion. You can do that, right?”

“That is right,” said Patience. “I can be anything and everything you want me to be.”

Chapter 2

The next day was so busy that there were times when Mike forgot about Patience, at least for a moment or two. That was saying something, because it had been an eventful night. They had talked for a while, Patience quizzing him on his likes and dislikes, though in retrospect it seemed scant enough information for any kind of detailed profile. Then she had given him a massage and they had gone to bed. The sex had been pretty incredible. It wasn't like he thought it would be. She didn't feel cold or plastic. She felt squishy in all the right spots—firm in the right spots too. She seemed to know what he wanted before he knew that he wanted it. Afterwards, he had fallen asleep, waking up once during the night to find her looking through his closet.

In the morning, she had served him breakfast in bed—cereal and milk, toast and grape jelly, and orange juice, which was about all the breakfast food he had in the house. When he had taken a shower, she had been there waiting as he had come out with a clean, dry towel. Though he usually didn't allow for any extra time in the morning, and eating breakfast had taken up enough time that he actually had to hurry, he still took a moment to notice that she had been cleaning during the night. She had picked up all the dirty clothes off the bedroom floor and the bathroom had been cleaned. Who knows what else she had done that he hadn't noticed.

"Turn your texTees to Our World page 1056," Mike told the class. "The ten review questions on this page will be the first ten questions of your final exam the day after tomorrow. Look up the answers you don't know at this time."

Two hands went up.

"What is it, Curtis?"

"I don't have my texTee."

"Is that your problem too Mabel? You don't have your texTee?"

The dark haired girl two seats behind Curtis nodded her head.

"Why even bother to show up without your texTee? You know it's review day. Why are you even here?"

"My mother makes me come," said Mabel.

"It's not my fault," said Curtis. "I left it at my dad's girlfriend's house."

"I would be willing to bet that you have your phone with you though," said Mike. "Get one of the classroom texTees out of the cabinet."

"Whatever." said Mabel.

As the two students retrieved the reading devices, these particular ones covered across the top with bright red reflective tape, there was a knock at the outside door. The classroom had an inside door which led to the hallway and the rest of the school and an outside door which faced a small lawn and the back of the adjacent power plant. Peering in through the metal mesh that covered the outside door was Patience.

"I brought you lunch Mike," she said when he opened the door a few inches. Patience was wearing the black and white polka dotted dress.

"I usually eat in the lunch room."

"Here." She pushed a soft-sided grey lunch box with the word Thermos on the side toward him.

"Where did you get this?"

"It was in the cabinet."

"It was?"

She nodded. Then she turned and walked back across the lawn. Mike could see the blackened soles of her bare feet as she walked away.

"Who was that?" asked several students as he closed the door.

"Was that your daughter?" asked Mabel.

"Um, no. Let's get focused on our review questions."

At lunch time Mike unpacked the lunchbox. There was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, an apple cut into slices and bagged, a small container of a white semi-gelatinous substance that turned out to be vanilla pudding, a single large sugar cookie, and a diet Pepsi with a chemical cold-pack wrapped around it.

"That's a nice lunch," said Miss Treewise from across the table.

"Mm-hmm," Mike nodded.

"Somebody must like you," said Mrs. Cartwright.

Mike shrugged.

When he got home, Mike found Patience waiting at the door. She looked pretty and pleasant and on impulse, he leaned over and kissed her on the mouth.

"That was a nice kiss, Mike. Is that the kind of kiss you would like me to greet you with often?"

"Wow. I almost forgot for a moment that you were a robot." He looked down. "Hey, you're wearing shoes."

Patience lifted one up behind her, taking a kind of Betty Boop pose. On her feet were black shoes with large white bows just above the open toe. They had a half-inch thick platform soul in the front and a four inch square heel in the back.

"Do you like them? They're called Peeptoe Platforms."

"Yes, they're fine. But where did you get them?"

"After I dropped lunch off to you I went to the store."

"You walked to the store? That's too far, especially in bare feet. And the ground is hot."

"I did not mind," she smiled. "Would you like a shoulder rub, Mike?"

"Sure."

She guided him to a chair that she had apparently brought in from the dining room and set along the west wall of the living room in front of the window. Once he had sat down, she stepped behind him and began rubbing his shoulders.

"How did you pay for them... the shoes, I mean?" he asked.

"I took the cash card out of your wallet this morning before you left for school."

"They're not supposed to let you use that unless it's yours. And besides, you should have asked first."

"The stores never check, and I did ask. You said that I should select and purchase my own wardrobe."

"Yes, but I'm not sure I can afford that right now. I don't get paid until the tenth. I'm not sure how much money I have in my accounts right now."

"We have \$2261.43 in account 116211130782-2 checking, \$31021.69 in account 116211130782-1 savings, and \$422.11 in the payNEtime account."

"Wow. That's more than I thought I had... I mean we had."

She turned him back around and began rubbing his shoulders again. "I have ordered my own cash card, in any case."

"You did? Wait. How did you know all that?"

"Last night I accessed all your financial data."

"You what?" He turned back around to look at her.

"It is part of the secondary setup procedure."

"What else did you do?" he wondered.

"I accessed your vueTee and browser files, read all of the books and magazines on your texTee, and all of your paper books too. I looked through your photo albums, ran your credit report, and googled you."

"Is that all part of the secondary setup procedure?" he frowned.

She nodded with an innocent look on her face and turned him back around to continue with the shoulder rub. When she was done he moved to his recliner and flipped on the vueTee, while Patience brought him a diet Pepsi. Although he usually drank them from the can, she had poured it into a tall glass over ice.

"Did you buy ice at the store too?"

"No, Mike. I made it in the freezer."

"You can do that?"

She nodded. "Did you want to talk about your day at work, Mike?"

"Not really," he said. "If you don't mind, I'd just like to watch vueTee for a while."

"That's fine, Mike. The Star Trek episode Let That Be Your Last Battlefield is on channel twenty-seven."

"Is that the one where Frank Gorshin is black on the left side and white on the right side?"

"He is black on the right side," said Patience. "All of his people are black on the right side."

Mike smiled as he flipped to channel twenty-seven. He watched the last forty minutes of the science fiction classic. Then he watched part of Seaquest DSV, which wasn't so much of a classic. Mercifully, he fell asleep in his chair somewhere near the middle. He often fell asleep in the afternoon in his recliner to wake up to a dark and lonely room. This time when he woke up, both lamps were on. Patience passed by walking through the room from the kitchen, continuing through the living room and on to the foyer. As she did so she switched the vueTee to the evening news.

"What are you doing?" Mike called after her.

"Chores," she said, poking her head back around the stairwell corner.

The news was filled with politics. Winston Barlow was accusing Evelyn Mendoza of being an elitist and he was accusing Stephanie Wakovia of being a free-spender. Evelyn Mendoza was accusing Barlow of being uncaring and accusing Wakovia of being too closely tied to Busby's Antarctica war. Mendoza was accusing Barlow of being out of touch with the young people of America and accusing Wakovia of being uninterested in helping the poor. The remaining news was filled with a story about the construction of the stadium for the upcoming Olympic Games in Surat, one about a pair of large tornadoes in Texas which did minimal damage, and the usual war news. Sixty four more American soldiers were killed today along with an estimated six hundred Russians.

"Dinner is served," said Patience, poking her head into the living room just as the news ended.

Mike got up and walked to the dining room. Both this room and the adjoining kitchen had been cleaned spic and span. The table had been set for two, and in the center rested a dish of lasagna and a bowl of tossed salad. The old table had been spruced up with a floral-patterned table cloth. He pulled out a chair and sat down. Patience scooped a large portion of lasagna and then dressed the salad, placing a small pile next to the meat and pasta dish. She put the plate in front of him. Then she sat down across from him smiling and watching him as he ate.

"You're not going to eat?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, yeah. I forgot for a moment. Hydrogen fuel cell?"

She nodded again.

"You've been doing quite a bit of cleaning."

"Yes, Mike. Is this the way that you would like me to keep the house?"

"Secondary setup?"

She nodded yet again.

"Yes, the house looks great. You've just about got it all cleaned up."

"I will have by this time tomorrow."

Mike finished dinner and went back to the family room to watch vueTee while Patience cleared the table, packed up the left-overs, and put the dishes in the dishwasher. After Brain Quest, there wasn't much on vueTee. Tuesday was a lousy vueTee night. Patience disappeared into the bedroom and returned wearing nothing but one of her lacy thongs. Mike had imagined that at his age two nights of sexual activity in a row was excessive, but seeing her standing there, the very picture of perfection, disabused him of this notion. They had sex on and off the couch, and when they were done Mike was completely exhausted though it was not even eight thirty.

"It is because you are in terrible physical shape," said Patience.

"Yes, and I'm old too. I look way too old and fat to be seen with you. You look like what... like you're twenty?"

"My apparent age is twenty-two to thirty-two. And fifty is not old."

"Yes, well... What are you going to do tomorrow?"

"I have several projects in mind," she said. "I think you should walk to work tomorrow."

"It's way too hot to walk."

"It won't be over one hundred nine tomorrow."

"Well, I could," said Mike. "Probably... But why?"

"Walking is good exercise, Mike. And that way I can use the car."

"You know how to drive?"

"Of course."

"But what if you are stopped. You don't have a license."

"Robots do not need a license to drive, Mike."

Mike indulged in a hot shower before bed, and then climbed between two clean sheets. Patience was there to tuck him in. He read a bit of the daily paper from his texTee, but set it aside after a few minutes and drifted off into sleep. He half-dreamily noticed that Patience came into the room to turn off the light, then she was off again doing whatever it was that she did.

When he opened his eyes in the morning, Patience was sitting on the edge of the bed. She had on the second of her two dresses—the black and white polka dotted one, and Mike felt a tug of regret that he hadn't bought her more of a selection.

"You need to get up seventeen minutes earlier since you are walking," said Patience, handing him a bagel and a glass of orange juice.

"Only seventeen minutes? I'm not going to run to work you know."

"It is not really that far."

It wasn't really that far. He ate his breakfast, shaved and showered, then headed out the door with a lunch that Patience handed him as he left. He walked briskly to the end of the block under the awning that covered all the city's sidewalks, but the rest of the way, five more blocks, went more slowly as it was up a slight incline. He rounded the power station and started across the lawn to the door of his classroom. Looking at the clock inside, he saw that he was arriving at almost the exact same time that he always did.

This was another review day, the day before final exams, so it was busy as Mike tried to push the last bits of geographic information into the heads of his eighth grade students. Not surprisingly, his mind kept returning to Patience standing there in her little thong in the center of the family room. He still couldn't believe that she was here. He couldn't believe that he had actually placed the order for a robot and he couldn't believe how perfect she was. She was in fact, about as perfect as she could be. He wondered what her measurements were. When he had designed her, he hadn't been thinking in terms of numbers. He had done so based on the visual representation on the screen. He would have to find out if he was going to buy clothes for her though. Thinking back to the posted measurements of all the centerfolds he had seen, he thought she had to

be about 34-22-34. She could probably have been a fashion model, though with those breasts he was sure she would make a centerfold for Playboy or Penthouse.

She was of course waiting for him. The walk home, which was essentially all downhill, had proven more tiring than Mike had anticipated. He was breathing hard when he reached out to open the front door, but it had opened for him and Patience was waiting on the other side with a glass of iced diet Pepsi. He took the proffered glass, trudged back to the family room, and plopped down into his recliner.

"Welcome home, Mike," said Patience. "You should know that the secondary setup procedure has successfully completed."

"That's good," replied Mike, pulling the lever to lift his legs up. "Is there a third setup?"

Patience shook her head. She was wearing a little black dress which reached down to her mid-thigh. It was held on with half inch straps and had a plunging neckline. She had on a pair of cute little sandals with four inch wedge heels. Mike noticed how small her feet were.

"Nice shoes."

"I don't see why women's shoes are so expensive," she said. "These shoes cost almost five times as much as this dress."

"Exactly how much money did you spend on clothes today?"

"\$1704.19."

"Wow!" Mike pushed the lever and rocked forward.

"Don't worry. We will get more before we run out."

"Are we robbing a bank?"

"I have our finances all figured out," she smiled. Then she knelt down in front of him and for the next twelve minutes or so made him forget about anything as unimportant as money. Afterwards, she put on a fashion show for him, showing off the clothes that she had bought that day. She told him what each piece of clothing was as she spun around: a blue banded bottom jersey dress, a peach sleeveless knit mini-dress, a red over the shoulder dress with gored skirt, a black cami lace trim top with black nylon leggings and grey plaid miniskirt, a teal silky halter-style evening dress. She had also purchased a pair of five inch chunky heel platform sandals and a pair of metallic-colored t-strap four and a half inch heels. The last part of the show was the lingerie: several pairs of frilled panties that despite the name "boy-leg" seemed to have no leg at all and left her cute ass cheeks hanging out, several pairs of mesh thongs, and a push up bra with one cup pink and the other sky blue.

"You should have showed me this part when I first came home," said Mike, amazed that he was already feeling amorous again. "This makes me want to buy you even more clothes, though it's a sad commentary when seventeen hundred bucks only buys you five outfits, two pairs of shoes, and a couple of pairs of underwear."

"I also spent \$661.57 on groceries."

"Oh well, I'm sure we needed it, but that doesn't sound like much food."

"It will be more than enough for now," said Patience. "Would you like an afternoon snack?"

"Sure."

Patience brought out a small plate with slices of fruit and cheese. Mike ate it all.

"Is there more?"

"Save room for dinner," Patience called from the kitchen. "You shouldn't be too full anyway. I don't want you to get a stomach ache today at the gym."

"Gym?"

"Yes," she said, rejoining him in the family room and curling up to sit on the floor by his feet. "We will go right after the news."

They sat and watched first the local and then the national news. Patience rested her head on his knee and he ran his fingers through her thick black hair. It felt like real hair—like real human hair. She wrapped her left arm around his calves. Going to the gym was probably a good idea, he decided. If he was going to keep up with her, he really needed to get into shape.

At six o'clock, Patience left the room. She returned a few minutes later wearing sandals and her little jersey dress. She brought Mike a pair of shorts that he hadn't seen in so long he almost didn't recognize them, along with a sweatshirt. He changed into them, and then they climbed into the car and drove four miles to the Club One Fitness Center.

"I don't have a membership," said Mike.

"I signed you up on vueTee. The first month is free."

"I think we need hydrogen," he said, looking at the fuel gauge.

"Are you trying to prevent our trip to the gym?"

"No, of course not. We just need, you know...some hydrogen."

"We aren't going very far," said Patience. "We have more than enough to last until tomorrow."

"What if you get hungry?"

Patience shot him a look.

"We still have enough money to buy hydrogen, don't we?" Mike asked.

"We should use your Praxair-Aramco credit account."

"Is that account still good? I haven't used it in a long time."

Patience nodded.

At the fitness club a blond girl, with the right side of her hair dyed black, stood chewing gum. Mike gave her his name and she pulled out a dedicated texTee for him. It was set up with forms for him to fill out, as well as spaces for him to keep track of his workouts and progress. As he took it from her, she looked at him.

"Didn't you used to teach at Midland?"

"Yes," Mike replied, not adding that he still did.

"I think I was in your class," the girl said. "That was a long, long time ago."

Mike just nodded his head.

"Is this your daughter?" asked the cashier, indicating Patience.

"No..." said Mike. "She's a friend."

The counter girl's mouth made a little O. "She's a robot, eh? You can hardly tell."

Mike just took the texTee to a nearby chair and began to enter the information with the keypad. Patience sat down next to him.

"Well that's it," said Mike. "It's always going to be like that. It's always going to be weird."

Patience looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"Nobody will ever believe that a fat old man like me could ever meet a woman like you. They'll immediately realize what you are and say "oh well, there you go, he had to buy himself a robot, cause no one else would have him." Patience stuck out her lip.

"I'm sorry. I know you're more than a robot. You're a Daffodil."

"It's not that," she replied. "I don't want to hear you talk about yourself in a negative way. I wouldn't allow it from anyone else, and I don't want to hear it from you."

"Yeah, okay. Whatever. I need to find a trainer." Mike changed the subject.

"No. I will be your trainer."

Patience proved that she was as adept as a physical fitness trainer as she was at anything else. She put him to work doing a minimal number of machine exercises and had him spend most of his time walking around and around on the oval track. She walked right along with him, encouraging him to keep up the pace. Though she wasn't really dressed

for the track, she did look like a young woman out to have a little fun. She bounced along with the gate of a teenager, giving him a grin whenever she noticed him looking at her.

When they returned home, Mike was exhausted and took a nap. When he got up he took a long hot shower. By the time he returned down stairs, dressed, Patience had set the dining room table for him. The Caesar salad, lightly breaded orange roughy, and garlic new potatoes were all perfect. For desert, she made a satin chocolate tart. Mike had eaten many good meals, but he had to admit he was impressed. He didn't think he had ever had anything that good outside of a cruise ship or a fine restaurant. When he said so, Patience smiled sweetly. Afterwards, Mike watched vueTee, while Patience cleaned up the dinner dishes.

Mike thought he would be too tired for sex that night, but the exercise actually added to his vigor. He felt as though he performed like a twenty year old. When he commented as much, Patience agreed with him, though this ended up irking him, as the more he thought about it, the more he was sure that it wasn't true.

"Are you going to get up and do housework all night?" he asked her as she lay next to him.

"What would you like me to do?"

"Why don't you spend the night with me? I know you don't need to sleep, but I think it would be great."

Patience smiled at him. "Alright."

Mike woke up several times during the night though. He wasn't used to sleeping with someone else in his bed and the center part of Patience's body was warmer than he expected. She was also always awake, as Mike had known she would be, and since she didn't need to be there and it wasn't all that comfortable for him, the whole thing just seemed a waste.

"You can go ahead and get up if you want to," he said, at last.

"Thank you, Mike. I would like to begin cleaning the garage."

Chapter 3

Thursday and Friday were exam days at school. That meant that for the students both days were half days of strenuous testing, with free afternoons to recover. For the teachers, the mornings were a scramble to get fourth quarter grades completed, and the afternoons were a scramble to grade tests, all the while attempting to get the classroom stowed for the coming summer months. In the evenings, after a workout at the health club, Mike would enjoy delicious dinners and relaxing evenings of watching movies on vueTee. On Saturday morning, Mike woke with the realization that not only did he not have to return to work that day, but that the school year was essentially over. Only Monday remained to finish make-up exams, clean up the classroom, and sign out for the year.

Climbing into his recliner, Mike went through Friday's mail as he watched cooking shows on vueTee. There were a couple of bills and a handful of ad flyers. At the bottom of the stack was a white envelope that felt abnormally thick. He opened it up to find a matching set of Visa cards—one in his name and one with the name Patience D. Smith.

"Patience!"

She came in through the kitchen from the garage, covered in dust and dirt, but was otherwise completely naked. As she smiled at him from the doorway, he felt himself aroused.

"How come you're nude?"

"I didn't want to get my clothes dirty while I worked."

"Okay. How come we have new bank cards?"

"I thought we might need them, at least in the short term. It is going to be a few weeks before I can earn some extra money, and I don't want to spend all your savings."

"You're creating more questions than you're answering," he said.

"How are you planning to make money?"

"I'm selling a great many things on eBay. Then I will take that money and invest it."

"I know I have a lot of junk around here. Just make sure you don't sell anything I want to keep. I know you should have more clothes."

"The money is not for my clothes," said Patience. "It is for yours."

"Clothes for me?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. Yes, I suppose that is a good idea. I don't want to look like such an old fart if I have such a beautiful, hot young woman on my arm. Why don't we go ahead and do some shopping at the mall today?"

Patience beamed.

"So what is this name?" He held up the Visa card. "You're not my wife. You're just my... well, I guess you're my girlfriend."

Patience leaped across the room and jumped into Mike's lap. She planted her full lips on his and kissed him, then pulled back and smiled.

"I'm your girlfriend?"

"Sure."

She kissed him again. This was all the motivation that he needed. He pushed her up out of his lap, stood up, and then took her by the hand. He led her upstairs to the bedroom, where they spent the next half-hour, though Patience would not get on the bed until she had washed the dirt and dust off of her synthetic skin. Afterwards, Mike got up and went to the bathroom. Just as he was washing his hands, he heard his phone ring on the nightstand, and Patience answering it.

"Hello."

Her eyes flashed at Mike as he reentered the room and she said. "Yes, Mike is here. May I ask who is calling? This is his girlfriend."

She stopped and listened for a moment. Then she said. "Just a moment," and handed the receiver to him.

"It's Lucas," she said.

Mike grabbed the phone. "How is my son the general?"

"Don't start all that," said the voice at the other end. "Tell me all about this lady."

"Well..."

"Tell me. I think it's great you've got a girlfriend, Dad. She sounds young."

"Umm. She's a Daffodil."

"A what? A robot? Huh."

"What do you mean 'huh'?"

"I don't know. She didn't sound like a robot."

"She doesn't look like one either," said Mike. "I keep forgetting that she is one."

"Well, I guess it's all good," said Lucas. "Everybody's getting one. I'm just glad you have someone to take care of you. Can I tell Harriet?"

“No! I don’t know what she’s going to say about it. I’ll tell her when she gets back from her trip.”

“Alright Dad. Take care of yourself. I love you.”

Mike hung up the phone. “He’s calling Harriet right now.”

“Which bedroom belonged to Lucas?” asked Patience, in the car on the way to the mall.

“The one on the northwest corner. Since we’ve been exercising, I’m thinking that we could make it into an exercise room. The room on the northeast corner, on the other side of the stairway was Harriet’s. I don’t know what I’m going to do with it. I wanted to turn the south bedroom into a study. I keep thinking I might sit down and write a book about all the goofy things the kids at school do. So far though, it’s just become a trap for all the crap in the house—kind of like the garage.

It was an hour drive to the mall, because the closest good one was in the nearby city of Pico Mundo. Patience spent the entire drive holding onto Mike’s arm with both hands, and pressing her face onto his shoulder. At the mall, the two entered by the food court. Mike bought a smoothie, and they began to circumnavigate the mall, stopping at each clothing store to see what was available for either of them. Mike let Patience make all the style decisions.

“I would like to get my ears pierced,” said Patience, as they stopped in front of a jewelry store.

“Are you sure that you want to?” wondered Mike. “Your holes won’t grow closed if you change your mind, will they?”

“No. But would you like it if I had my ears pierced?”

“Yes, I think I would.”

When they went into the store however, they were turned out.

“Humans only,” said the woman behind the counter. This made Patience pout, which in turn, made Mike smile.

They had quite a load of shopping bags, by the time they made their final stop at the lingerie store. Mike sat down and waited while Patience gathered her selections and then stepped back into the changing booth. She stepped out again and again to show off tiny lacy bras, thongs, and some very hot little lacy things called tangas, as well as garter belt ensembles. With her perfect body, her chiseled features, and bright eyes, Mike thought she put to shame the giant photos of the models wearing the same things plastered across the wall of the shop. By the time that she was done, a sizable audience of men, some ignoring the women that they had come in with, were gathered around to watch.

Mike decided that it was time to head home. Gathering all of the items that Patience had tried on, he sat them next to the register and, when the clerk had finished ringing everything, he paid for them. Both smiling, they made their way out of the mall and into the parking lot. The sun was going down. They had spent the entire day shopping, and had spent almost four thousand dollars.

"I don't think I've ever spent that much on clothes in a year, let alone a single day," said Mike.

They reached the car and opened the trunk to put away all of their packages. Then Mike heard a voice behind him.

"Give us the packages and your wallet."

Mike dropped the shopping bags and spun around. Two men, both in their early twenties stood there. One was white, the other Hispanic. They both had shaved heads and they both carried butterfly knives.

"Maybe we'll have some fun with your little girl too," said the closest one.

Mike snapped into action. He dived at the punk who had spoken last, hitting him square in the chest. They both went down onto the pavement. As they did, Mike felt the knife blade penetrate his stomach. The punk hit his head hard on the pavement but he still managed to push Mike off of him. He was already on his feet while Mike was still rolling around on the parking lot.

Just as he was finally regaining his feet, Mike saw Patience planting some kind of karate kick to his assailant's neck. The other thug was leaning against a nearby car. It was obvious from the way he was holding himself that she had already dealt him some heavy blows. She was about to hit the second one again when she saw the blood streaming down Mike's shirt. With a small squeal she rushed toward him. The two would-be robbers took off between the cars as fast as they could.

"That's right!" yelled Mike. "Run, you pussies!"

"Mike!" gasped Patience. "You're bleeding!"

"It's nothing," said Mike, his eyes starting to roll up into his head. "But I think I'm going to pass out."

Mike felt Patience guiding him to the ground, so that he wouldn't bash his head on the pavement.

"Thanks," he said, as darkness spread across his world. "That's my girl."

* * * * *

"That's my girl."

"Yes Daddy, I'm here."

He opened his eyes and looked up into the concerned face of his daughter Harriet. He was on his back in a hospital room. An I.V. was attached to the back of his right hand. He reached up with his left hand and felt the bandages that covered the left side of his stomach.

"When did you get back?" Mike asked.

"I got home late yesterday," said Harriet. "Right about the time you decided to take on a couple of desperados. The police said they haven't caught them yet by the way, though the officer left his card in case you remembered something when you woke up."

"Call him," said Mike. "I recognize both of those guys. Carlos Fernandez and Nathan Spencer. They were in my class seven or eight years ago. I think Nathan's mother still lives down the block from me."

"Nathan Spencer!" said Harriet, whipping out her phone and stepping toward the door. "I dated his brother! Officer Darling please..."

As Harriet stepped out the door the doctor stepped in to check on Mike. He informed him that he had been operated on the night before—a relatively small amount of damage, all things considering. The knife had only nicked his descending colon. Had Mike not been overweight and possessed of a fairly large amount of belly fat, the knife could easily have caused much more damage, perhaps even death.

"Well at least there is one consolation to being fat," said Mike.

"On the other hand I've seen knife blades turned by a well-toned abdomen," said the doctor. "And of course there are other benefits to being in good shape."

"Fine fine," said Mike.

The doctor left and Harriet returned.

"They're going to get those little bastards."

"They weren't so little," said Mike. "How did you know I was here, anyway?"

"Your girlfriend called me."

"Girlfriend?"

"Yes, your girlfriend," said Harriet. "You do remember her? Patience? Or do you have amnesia?"

"Oh I remember her. I just didn't realize you knew about her yet."

"I heard about her yesterday. From my little brother," assured Harriet. "I was happy to meet her though. I don't think I've ever seen a Dafodil before, let alone talked with one. She's not like other robots I've seen."

"Does it bother you that I got her?"

"You're a big boy," said Harriet. "I trust you to make your own decisions."

"Good. Your disapproval would have bothered me more than anyone else's."

"Come on Dad. I know I wasn't your favorite."

"Don't tell Lucas this," said Mike. "But I've always felt like I had more of a connection with you than with him."

Harriet looked at him strangely for a moment.

"Where is Patience?" asked Mike.

"I sent her home a couple of hours ago to shower and change. I hope she gets some rest too. She looked really tired."

"She doesn't get tired. She's a robot."

"Maybe," conceded Harriet. "But she was by your side almost the whole time you were out."

Harriet stayed with her father for another hour. Then Mike sent her on her way. He hadn't actually wanted her there at all. He had always been of the opinion that children, even adult children, should not have to see their father in that kind of weakened, compromised condition. The two other times he was admitted to the hospital, he hadn't allowed any of the kids to visit him.

Mike was served lunch of soup and some kind of light purple jell-o. By the time he had eaten he was feeling pretty fit. He flipped on the vueTee and tried to find something good to watch, but nothing interested him. Then he saw that a texTee was sitting on the bedside table. It was a newer model than the one he had at home. He turned it on and flipped through the selection of magazines. Time. Electronic Entertainment. National Geographic. Penthouse. And three comic books: Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman. It was as if someone had transferred his own subscriptions to the new device. Then when he selected one of the magazines and watched the image fill the screen, he realized that this was just what had happened. Although Harriet could have compiled that selection, she would have died before buying a Penthouse. Patience had done this for him.

Mike had read all of the comics and was flipping through Time when Patience bounded into the room. She was wearing a black camisole top cut just above her perfect belly button and a pair of very low rise jeans, which together created a truly expansive piece of exposed stomach real estate. The pair of five inch sandal pumps, called Rowenas that she had purchased at the mall made her slender figure look seven feet tall.

When she saw that Mike was awake, she leapt to his side, clasped his face in her hands and kissed him deeply. She climbed into the hospital bed with him, and continued kissing him. When she seemed about to give him a hickey on his neck Mike pushed her head away.

"Hold on," he said. "I'll be out of here in a few hours and then we can do that at home."

"The doctor said that you need to spend another night, Mike."

Mike's face immediately turned sour.

"I really hate hospitals. Always have."

"Don't worry," Patience said. "I'll stay here with you."

"I didn't say I was worried. I just don't like hospitals."

Patience nestled down in the bed next to him and put her head on his chest.

"I was so worried, Mike," she said. "I thought for a moment that you were going to die. You were so heroic. I love you so much."

"Oh, come on," Mike said. "You were the one who kicked the crap out of the bad guys."

"Self defense is part of my programming. You didn't have that advantage and you still went after them."

"Whatever. Tell me everything that happened after I passed out."

"When you fell, I used my first aid programming to staunch the flow of blood. Then I used my infiNet connection to call the fire department. Paramedics and an ambulance arrived nine minutes later. The police arrived two minutes after that. While you were being loaded into the ambulance, I made sure that all of our purchases were stowed safely in the trunk, and then drove the car to the hospital. Once here I needed to notify your daughter, because the clerks at the hospital would not accept my signature to begin medical treatment. They said they needed a relative to sign admission papers."

"And you stayed here until Harriet sent you home."

"Yes."

"I'm glad you're back."

"I'm glad I'm back too."

They lay together on the hospital bed for some time not speaking. It was not an awkward silence, but rather a pleasant one. Mike finally broke it.

"I've only known you for six days but I already feel like I never want to be without you. I never want you to leave."

"You will never be without me, Mike," she said. "I will never leave you."

Patience lay in the bed with Mike for the rest of the afternoon. He had never been so comfortable sharing such a small bed in his life. They both ignored the disapproving looks they received from the nurse each time she came in to check on him.

"I don't think they're going to let you stay the night with me," Mike said. "Can you go home and sleep?"

"I don't need to sleep but I have plenty that I can do. Then I can come and take you home tomorrow."

"Good," said Mike. "Why don't you go ahead and go now. They are going to start serving dinner in a few minutes anyway."

"As you wish, Mike." She climbed out of bed and bent over, kissing him on the cheek before walking briskly out of the room.

Time without Patience went very slowly. Mike ate the soup, toast, and pudding that made up his dinner. He watched Animal Olympics on vueTee, the only thing even remotely interesting. He even took a little nap, though it was hard with the nurses talking right outside his door. Loudly. Without any concern for someone trying to sleep.

The next morning Mike got up and dressed in one of the new outfits that Patience had picked out for him at the mall—a twill jacket and matching pleated pants with a mustard colored tie. Then he had to wait an interminable amount of time to be discharged. If Patience hadn't arrived when she did, he would have thrown a fit. But with her there nothing seemed to be that bad. At last an orderly arrived with a wheelchair and rolled him out the front door. Once outside, Mike got up and walked to the car. But he let Patience drive him home. As they drove, Mike watched Patience, marveling at her motoring skill. Then he noticed something else.

"You have earrings! I mean you have pierced ears and earrings."

"That's right, Mike. I was able to get them done last night at Electronics City."

He looked carefully at the right ear, the only one visible. Her lobe was pierced twice and there was a small stud at the top of her ear through the cartilage—plastic, he corrected himself.

"I didn't know you wanted three holes."

"I have four in the other ear," said Patience. "I noticed signs of sexual arousal when I approached the subject."

"In who?"

"You."

"You did? Well, yes." Mike cleared his throat and took a scholarly tone. "Ours, like most civilizations, uses pierced ears to signal sexual availability."

"But I saw little babies with their ears pierced."

"Yeah, I know. That's revolting."

When they reached the house, Patience came around and opened the door for him. Together they went inside. Mike was struck at how perfectly clean the place was. It had been vacuumed, dusted, and he noticed that even the bookcases had been organized according to the Library of Congress system.

"This house looks great," he said.

"Thank you." Patience beamed. She led him to the couch and kissed him. They made love right there in the living room, Mike noticing only afterwards that the window glass was set to transparent. He relaxed afterwards and was just beginning to doze off when Patience returned to summon him to dinner in the dining room. She had set the table for one, with a lit candle as the centerpiece. Then she sat down across from him as he ate. She had prepared red pepper halibut and for dessert—cannoli. The dinner was delicious.

"Can I ask you about some of the things I found in Harriet's old room?" asked Patience.

"Sure."

"I found approximately four thousand three hundred comic books, and several hundred old paper books."

"Yes. Those are mostly from my teen years. I was going to try and sell them on eBay, along with the old books I have boxed away in there. They don't make them anymore, you know. So they should be worth something. But it's a lot of work."

"Very good," she said. "I also found six boxes of pictures and associated memorabilia."

"That's all the family souvenirs. Tiffany started making scrapbooks a few years before she died, scanning that stuff in to go along with the pictures on the vueTee. But she only managed to complete a couple. I thought about making some myself, but it just takes so much time. I'm not really into it anyway. Maybe I will just give it all to Harriet."

"Would you mind if I sorted through all of these things, Mike?"

"Of course not. You are my girlfriend after all. Just take good care of the scrapbook stuff."

"I will take good care of all of it," said Patience. "Except the old books and comic books, which I will sell for you."

Mike spent the remainder of the evening with his feet up, in his recliner watching Star Trek: Engineering Corps. He had purchased it a week before but hadn't had a chance to play it. When he was done he brushed and flossed his teeth. Then Patience changed his bandage for him and tucked him into bed. Then she turned out the lights, and lay down next to him until he had fallen asleep. That was precisely 11:02

Chapter 4

"Time to get up, Mike," said Patience. "Take your shower and I will have breakfast ready for you when you get out."

"I don't know if I'm hungry."

"A healthy breakfast is important."

Mike tilted his head and looked questioningly.

"It is important for you to be healthy, Mike. I've already started you on a regimen of exercise. It is important that you eat well too."

"Alright then." He got up and made his way to the shower.

True to her word and her name, Patience was waiting patiently with a piece of whole wheat toast and a glass of grapefruit-pineapple juice.

"What now?" he asked as he ate.

"You have to work today," Patience replied. "We will go to the gym for our workout later."

It was Mike's last day of the school year. He had already packed away everything that needed to be packed, so all he really had to do was show up and wait for the principal to check him out. By eleven, he was done. He had walked to school, and he walked back home to find Patience at the door in a tight pair of red shorts and a white spaghetti tank. He had a small salad for lunch, and then they went to the gym.

"Are we going to exercise every day over the summer?" Mike asked on the way.

"Five times a week."

Time at the gym went quickly and Mike suffered only a small amount of discomfort from his stomach. Afterwards, as they drove home, Mike asked Patience to stop at the cemetery.

"I promised Tiffany that I would stop by every week, but I haven't been there in months. Of course, she was dead when I promised her, so it's not like she heard me."

Patience pulled the car into the cemetery gate and drove around at Mike's direction until they reached the southeast corner, where the green of the grass met the tan of the surrounding desert. Mike climbed out and walked to the marker at the head of his wife's grave. The marker was

covered with bits of grass from the last time the lawn was mowed, as well as bits of dirt. He knelt down and brushed it off. Tiffany Louise Smith 1984-2021, little enough to sum up a lifetime. 2021! Could it really be eleven years? That didn't seem possible.

"Who is buried here?" asked Patience.

Mike looked up. A few feet from Tiffany's grave was another. Affixed to the flat grave marker was an upright statue, about a foot tall, of an angel, a little girl with wings, wearing a nightgown and holding a flower in her left hand, her right hand raising a handkerchief to her eye.

"Some poor little child."

Home once again, Mike took another shower and had a quick nap before getting up to play a few games of Age of Destruction on vueTee. Pausing the game, he went to the kitchen to get a diet Pepsi and noticed for the first time that the kitchen cabinets had been scrubbed clean. He opened one to find it reorganized inside. This sent him on a tour around the house. He went into the garage to find that what had once been only the home of a gigantic mound of surplus junk had been reorganized. Tiffany's Tesla, which hadn't been driven or even charged in more than two years, was clean and polished. There was actually enough room for Mike's Chevy to sit beside it, and it had never known the interior of the garage. Most of the room's contents were now on the shelves along the walls, and what remained was neatly stacked against the west wall to either side of the inside door.

He went upstairs to find that Harriet's old room, once almost as buried as the garage floor, had also been cleaned and organized. Though the right side of the room was now filled with labeled boxes, the left side had been cleared completely out. Mike noticed that the closet now contained Patience's growing wardrobe. Even the pictures on the walls had been dusted, though they still were just as oddly placed as they had been. Lucas's room, which had not been nearly so cluttered, was now empty with the exception of an exercise mat in the center of the floor.

"Just as you wanted." said Patience speaking right behind his left ear.

"Shit! You startled me."

"I'm sorry."

"I can't believe how much you've done in a week. What are you doing now—alphabetizing my underwear?"

"No. I was on the phone with Harriet. She invited us to dinner."

"Hmm. Both of us?"

"Yes. She specifically asked that I come too."

"Speaking of Harriet, what are you planning for her room?"

"I didn't have any plans yet," said Patience.

"Why don't we make it a guest room? You can move your clothes into my closet. God knows I don't need all that room."

"As you wish," she replied sweetly.

Later Mike hopped in the passenger side of the car and let Patience drive them to Greendale, to Harriet's house. Patience wore what she referred to as a red bra-top dress, though it didn't look at all bra-like to Mike, and a pair of matching three and a half inch wedge shoes. Mike wore a pair of tan slacks and a matching pullover shirt which Patience picked out for him. He was quite happy as they made their journey. It was a beautiful day. There wasn't much traffic. And just having Patience with him seemed to make him happy.

Harriet greeted them with a smile. When Harriet's husband Jack saw Patience, his mouth fell open.

"Put your tongue and your eyeballs back in your head," said Mike, as he walked passed him. Then for good measure, Harriet smacked Jack on the back of the head. As he sat down, Mike looked at Patience to see alarm on her face.

"What?" he asked.

"Are you mad at me, Mike?"

"No. Of course not. Why?"

"You were making an angry face."

"Was I?"

"Yes."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I was just worrying about something I don't even need to worry about."

"I don't like for you to worry, Mike." she said. "I want to make all of your worries go away."

"Thanks."

Inside, they sat and talked for a while. Harriet, who worked at a dentist's office, regaled them with stories of bad teeth and bad breath. Then she talked about Jack's baseball team. He played with a group of men from his office. Finally she started telling them about her gardening. She described in great detail all of the plants that she had recently added to her yard. Mike wasn't paying too much attention. He tended to zone out. Once Harriet got started on a topic she usually wrestled it to the ground and killed it.

"Get away!" shouted Mike, when one of Harriet's dogs suddenly stuck its nose in his crotch.

"I know you really like dogs, Daddy," said Harriet. "You just pretend you don't."

"I like dogs fine, when they aren't sniffing where they shouldn't be sniffing."

"They are just curious about you," she said. "I'm surprised they aren't sniffing at you, Patience. They don't seem to even notice you."

"Hey Harriet," said Mike. "Didn't you just say you needed some more potting soil or something?"

"You'll never know how surprised I am that you heard that much of what I said," she replied. "But yes, I do."

"Let's run over to Lowe's and get it."

"Well, I have the quiche halfway done."

"Patience can finish that up for you," said Mike, looking at his girlfriend for, and seeing in her face, confirmation. "You and I can run to the store."

"I thought real men didn't eat quiche," said Jack.

"Real men eat whatever the hell they want to eat," said Mike, managing to keep most of the derision out of his tone.

"Come on Daddy," said Harriet.

Father and daughter took a quick drive down the block to the neighborhood home improvement store. Mike hadn't really wanted to help pick out potting soil. What he wanted was more reassurance that his daughter was not bothered by his relationship with a robot. She was very reassuring. She seemed as happy that Patience was in her father's life as he was. Their conversation on the topic ended just before they reached home again with two forty pound bags of planting soil.

"One more thing Dad," said Harriet, who only called Mike "Dad" when she was angry or serious. "Try to be nicer to Jack. Don't talk to him like he's a moron."

"Well he is a..."

"It's his house, Dad."

"Yeah, alright," conceded Mike.

Mike tossed the two bags of soil over his shoulder, ignoring the short stabbing pain from his stomach, and followed Harriet through the gate and around the house to the back yard. He tossed the bags down beside the flower bed and dusted the dirt off of his shirt.

"Why don't you go see if Patience needs any help," said Harriet. "I want to get these last two Verbena in the ground before dinner."

"Okay."

Mike walked in and found Patience standing by the stove and Jack leaning on the counter nearby. Patience gave him the kind of smile most people reserve for someone they thought lost at sea or perhaps for Hunter Tylo when she was carrying an oversized novelty check for ten million dollars from Digital Clearinghouse. There was something shifty in Jack's expression though. Mike asked what was going on. They both spoke at once.

"Nothing,"

"Jack fondled me."

The look of shock had not even completely registered on Jack's face when Mike grabbed him by the shirt collar and dragged him through the kitchen and out the door into the garage. Calling for Patience to stay and finish dinner, he shut the door after him. Jack was beginning to square his shoulders. Mike shoved him back against the wall of the garage.

"Hey, don't get all jealous," Jack began. "She's just a sexbot."

Mike grabbed Jack's face in his right hand and slammed it once again into the wall, this time making a large round dent in the unfinished wall-board. He squeezed his fingers together until Jack looked as though he were doing an imitation of a fish.

"You don't get it!" hissed Mike. "This isn't about Patience! This is about Harriet! This is about my daughter!"

Jack's eyes got rounder.

"If you ever hurt my little girl, if you ever cheat on her, I will kill you."

Once more, Jack's head slammed against the wall.

"If you want to leave. Tell her. Get a divorce. Now is a good time. There aren't any kids yet. But if you stick around and then cheat on her, I will kill you.

"I... will... kill... you." said Mike. "It won't be quick. It won't be painless. And you know what? I'll even get away with it. Look me in the eye. See if you can tell if I'm serious or not."

Jack's round eyes rolled over in his head to focus on Mike's close, way too close, face. A look of recognition crossed those eyes. Mike crinkled his nose and looked down at the spreading wet spot in Jack's pants and the widening puddle of urine forming on the floor around Jack's shoes. Mike let go.

"Get cleaned up," he said, heading back into the house.

Harriet was in the kitchen with Patience, washing her hands in the sink.

"What were you two talking about in the garage?" she asked.

"I was just apologizing for being such an ass before," said Mike, as he heard Jack enter behind him. "But, uh, Jack spilled his drink. So he needs to go change his pants."

"That's fine," said Harriet. "Patience and I are just getting ready to set the table."

Mike thought that it was the best quiche that he had ever eaten. Sautéed green beans and fresh fruit completed the meal. Harriet was a little concerned that Patience wasn't eating anything, but Mike assured her that this was completely normal. He also pointed out that Jack wasn't eating much either. Jack apparently didn't feel well and everyone agreed that he looked a little green around the gills.

"I heard you speaking to Jack in the garage," said Patience on their way home.

"Did you hear everything?" asked Mike.

"Yes."

"Are you upset with me?"

"No, Mike. I could never be upset with you."

"I just thought that you might be disappointed that I wasn't more jealous over you."

"No, Mike."

"You're not feeling jealous yourself? Or upset that I love Harriet more than I love you?"

"I would expect you to love her more than you love me," said Patience. "You have known me for only a few days. You've known her all her life. Your love for your children is just one of the many things I like about you, Mike."

When they returned home, there were several packages waiting on the front step. Two were quite large—as big as the box that Patience had arrived in. One was small and flat. Three others were odd configurations. Mike picked up the small, flat package and examined the address.

Mr. Mike Smith

11 North Willow

Springdale, California 82803

As it turned out, this was the only one of the packages addressed to him. The others had all been sent to Patience D. Smith at the same address.

"What the hell is all this?" wondered Mike.

"These are some of the purchases that I have made," Patience replied.

"These aren't all clothes?"

"Of course not, Mike. I've started selling some of your old things on eBay, and I realized that there were a number of things that I could buy and sell for a profit."

"Are you sure? There's a lot of junk on eBay. That's why I sell all mine there."

"I'm sure. This package is from Submit Fashions."

"Really?" wondered Mike. "That sounds like some kind of fetish shop."

"Well it isn't," said Patience. "It's a store that sells sexy clothing for young ladies."

"Such as yourself."

"Such as myself. I noticed that you enjoyed watching me in my new clothes."

"Indeed I do," replied Mike.

They took the packages in and Patience removed most of them to the garage. Mike sat down and opened the one small package that had his name on it. Inside was a new texTee. It was like the one that he had used in the hospital. It had a brushed grey finish and an eight inch screen, about twenty percent larger than his old one. He turned it over and flipped the on switch.

"Good evening, Mike," it said aloud.

"Do you like it?" asked Patience from the hallway.

"It's beautiful, but I wasn't planning on buying a new one. My texTee isn't that old."

"I noticed that you liked the one at the hospital," she said.

"I did like it, but I don't remember saying anything about it."

Patience poked her head around the corner and grinned. "It won't be long before I know what you need before you even know that you need it."

"Just as long as you don't tell me 'I'm sorry Mike, I'm afraid I can't do that'."

"I doubt I'll need to do that," she replied.

"Well there you go." Mike turned back to his new texTee. Time Magazine was loaded and he began reading the political department.

"What do you think?" asked Patience a few minutes later, now back in the center of the living room.

"I think Barlow is an asshole. Why is he cozying up to the religious right? You know he hates them."

"I mean about my clothes."

"Holy Crap!" said Mike, looking up at last. "I thought you said that wasn't a fetish store."

"It is not a fetish store. This is what all the young women are wearing."

"Then all the young women are dressing like sluts."

Patience was wearing a halter top and a pair of short shorts, both of which were made of some kind of very shiny white plastic material. She had a matching pair of shin high white boots with platform soles that had to be three inches high.

"How do you propose to walk in those?"

"I can walk just fine," said Patience, and began doing a sort of 1970s electric slide, sideways across the living room. "Does that mean you don't like my new clothes?"

"I didn't say that," Mike laughed. "Did you buy a swimsuit from Slave Fashions...?"

"Submit Fashions."

"Whatever. Did you?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. Would you like to see it?"

"No. Save it for tomorrow. We're going to the beach."

"That is very exciting, Mike," said Patience, exactly as excited about it as she was about anything Mike suggested.

Mike spent the remainder of the evening gathering together everything that they would need for a day at the beach. Then he watched the news and joined Patience who was waiting in bed for him. They spent a very enjoyable half hour together there, and afterwards Mike had just enough awareness to note her leaving him alone as he dozed off.

In the morning Mike loaded the beach chairs, umbrellas, and towels into the car, along with the ice chest full of food and drinks that Patience had prepared before he had gotten up. They hopped in the car and drove west. Though they were in California, Springdale was a good three hour drive from the coast. The time went by quickly though. Mike listened to the radio. Patience watched him with devotion in her eyes.

After three hours and eight minutes of driving Mike reached Ocean-side, California. He pulled into a filling station two blocks away from the beach and topped off the car's fuel.

"Hydrogen?" he asked, pointing the hose in Patience's direction.

"No, thank you."

He noticed that across the street was a surf shop. He sent Patience over to rent a boogie board. When she arrived back, she not only had the boogie board, but a shopping bag as well.

"What did you buy?" he asked.

"Since I have a new swim suit, I thought that it was only appropriate that you have one as well."

"Oh shit," said Mike. "Good thinking. I didn't even pack one. I don't think I even have one anymore. It's been so long since I came to the beach. I hope you remembered that I am a fat, old man."

"I don't believe that you are fat or old," said Patience, with a frown. "The average lifespan in the United States is seventy nine point three years for men, and you already look healthier after only a few days of exercise and nutritional eating."

"Talk about damning with faint praise," grumbled Mike.

They drove the two blocks to the beach, but the public parking lot was completely full. Mike paid forty five dollars to park his car for the day in a private lot. Normally, he would have complained about having to pay so much just to park, but nothing seemed to bother him anymore. After trucking the ice chest, chairs, towels, umbrella, and boogie board down to the sand, and finding a good spot just above the high tide line, the two of them went to the public changing rooms.

Mike liked the swimsuit that Patience had picked out for him. It was long, almost to his knees, and was bright orange, yellow, and red. He thought it was the type of suit that a young man would wear. It made his head swell a little to think that Patience thought it was appropriate for him. When he stepped out of the changing room and saw Patience in her suit, his mouth fell open. Her suit was without a doubt, the smallest bikini that he had ever seen. Even on the internet. The little patch of material in the front could not have been more than an inch wide and it stuck up only an inch and a half above the joining point of her legs. The back had no patch of cloth at all. It was just string. The top could have been custom made for her, in that the two triangular cups so fit her round ripe breasts that there was not a jot of material wasted. Wondering if she might be arrested for indecent exposure, Mike looked around. He was shocked to find that most of the young women at the beach were wearing suits very similar. It had been a long time since he had been here.

Though there were plenty of women with small sexy suits on the sandy shore, Mike noted that almost every eye still turned to Patience as

they walked to the beach chairs. While he sat, Patience rubbed SPF 210 sun block on all of his exposed surfaces.

"I suppose you don't need any sun block?" he asked.

"I'm shielded against much greater radiation than I am likely to be exposed to here, Mike." Patience replied.

"So you don't tan?"

"No. I will remain always the shade that you chose when you ordered me."

For the next several hours, Mike and Patience hopped through the surf, built a sand castle, knocked it down, pulled each other along on the boogie board, and had a great time. Though he was initially concerned about water getting into the small openings in the back of her neck, Patience showed Mike that she had protected against such a calamity by covering the area with a clear plastic patch. By the time Mike thought about food it was early afternoon. Patience had packed quite a picnic lunch—sandwiches, fruit, Jell-o, and diet sodas. After he ate, they swam, and continued playing in the surf, Mike pointedly entering the water without waiting for an hour. He refused to be responsible for propagating an old wives' tale.

When night eventually fell they strolled along the beach, listening to the pounding of the waves. They walked to the opposite end of the stretch of sand, several miles from where they had parked, and found a seafood restaurant. They smiled and talked over the candle-lit dinner, though Patience didn't eat. Then walked back down the darkened beach, hand in hand, pausing every so often to look at the moon reflecting off the waves. When they reached their picnic site, they found they were all alone on the sand.

Patience leaned over and kissed Mike deeply, her tongue darting in and out of his mouth. He returned her kisses and more. She deftly removed the tiny bottom of her swim suit and pulled him over onto her, as he frantically pulled at the strings that held up his trunks. Their love-making left a sensual imprint in the sandy beach.

"Like sea otters," said Patience.

"That was a pretty good day," said Mike.

They gathered up their belongings and carried them back to the car. Loading the things in the back seat, Mike opened the passenger door for Patience and then climbed in to the driver's side.

"Yes, this certainly was a pretty good day."

Chapter 5

The next morning Mike woke up late but feeling great. He stretched in bed and then looked around. He had become used to being greeted as he woke with breakfast and that smiling perfect face. But Patience wasn't there. He wasn't concerned. She was probably cleaning, rearranging the house, or buying and selling on eBay. Shaving and then popping into the shower, Mike shampooed his hair and washed his body, finding quite a bit of sand here and there. When he had dressed he walked downstairs to the family room to find breakfast laid out for him on the coffee table—toast and orange juice. He sat down and ate while watching vueTee.

As he ate, he heard several vehicle horns honking outside. Not paying too much attention, he turned back to the vueTee. Battlefield Europa was on. Then he heard more honking. He was not one of those people who liked to get up and go outside to see what the neighbors were up to. He generally shied away from going outside the house at all, especially during the summer. The median temperature for June in Springdale was well over the century mark. But as the honking continued, Mike got up out of his chair, brushing off the toast crumbs, and walked through the hallway to the front door. Opening it, he was hit by the blast of hot air from outside and he squinted his eyes at the bright sunshine.

Mike had just managed to unsquint his eyes when another car went zooming by, honking, and he saw the source of the disturbance. Patience was in the center of the front yard, just beneath the shade of the large weeping willow tree on her hands and knees. She was transferring potted pansies from small cardboard containers into neatly cut holes that she had made in the rich black soil of the flower bed. Her shapely ass was pointed toward the street and she was wearing the same tiny string bikini that she had worn to the beach.

"Patience!"

Patience looked up with a smile on her face.

"Come in here."

Jumping to her feet, Patience hopped to the door. Her arms and legs were stained with dirt. Mike let her in and closed the door after her.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I am planting some flowers, Mike. Now that the house is clean and orderly, I have decided to spruce up the yard.”

“The honking horns weren’t an indication to you that you might be obstructing traffic? I’m surprise you didn’t cause an accident.”

“I was nowhere near the road,” said Patience, innocently. “The motorists have been honking warnings to each other, but it had nothing to do with me.”

“The drivers were honking because you had your ha-ha pointed at them. Why are you wearing your bikini?”

“I did not want to damage my clothes. I have ordered some work clothes, but they have not arrived yet.”

“Well, go get cleaned up. We have to go to Walmart.”

That’s just what they did. Cleaned up and dressed in something Mike considered more appropriate, though still fetching—a short red dress—Patience met him by the door. Climbing into the car, they drove the short distance to the discount superstore where they purchased several pairs of shorts and simple tops for Patience. Mike also had her pick out a large floppy-brimmed hat. Though he knew that she wouldn’t get sunburned, it just didn’t seem right for her to be outside all day in the summer sun without one. Patience took the opportunity to purchase supplies for upgrading the yard. She bought garden edging, tools, flowers, fertilizer, and a yardbot. Mike was skeptical about spending two hundred eighty dollars on the boxy device which wandered around the yard cleaning the artificial turf that now by law had replaced all of the lawns in water-starved Springdale, but Patience made a convincing argument that it would beautify the outside of the house.

Returning home, Mike sat down in his recliner again and Patience, now dressed in white shorts and a little spaghetti-strap top along with work gloves and her new floppy hat, returned to the yard. Mike watched the news, but began to feel as though he should be doing something around the house too. He went to the hamper in the utility room just on the other side of the upstairs bathroom, thinking that maybe he could do some laundry. But the hamper was empty. He looked in the study to see if anything needed to be dusted. It didn’t. As a last resort he made his way into the kitchen to see if the refrigerator needed to be cleaned. It was not only cleaner but neater than it had ever

been. He threw away an old bottle of steak sauce, even though he was sure it was still good.

Perhaps there was something he could do outside. Though he grimaced when he glanced at the digital thermometer by the door—132 degrees—he opened the door and stepped outside.

“Patience!” he shouted when he saw her.

His robot girlfriend lay prone on the turf, her arms and legs splayed in distressing angles. She was still half shaded by the willow tree, but her legs were sticking out into the direct sun. Rushing over to her, he knelt down and gently rolled her over. Her once human looking face, now motionless with eyes open, seemed more like a mannequin than anything that had once had animas. This effect was only heightened when Mike lifted her up in his arms to carry her to the front door. She weighed less than a human being, somewhere around eighty pounds Mike guessed, but unlike a human being she didn’t bend and conform to an easily carried form. Her arms continued to stick out and her legs stayed stiffly straight. Kicking open the door, he carried her to the white couch and laid her down. She didn’t move and her eyes stared lifelessly at the ceiling.

“Shit, shit, shit.”

Mike felt her wrist. Her arms were hot from the sun but there was no pulse. But of course she would have no pulse. He tried to see if he could detect anything wrong by looking into her eyes. He couldn’t. They looked just as they had looked, but without the slight movement that her eyes, like human eyes, had shown. Mike thought that they looked like they didn’t have Patience in them anymore, the way that he suspected a human being’s eyes would look when that person died though he had never looked into the eyes of a dead person. Not even Tiffany’s.

“Tech support!” shouted Mike, as the thought hit him like a bolt of lightning.

He grabbed the remote off of the coffee table and turned on the vueTee. Quickly switching the browser to the Daffodil site, he saw the familiar large daffodil along the left side. The four large buttons filled the right side of the screen—Barone, Amonte, Nonne, and PWX. There didn’t seem to be a button for tech support. Mike moved his face very close to the screen. At the very bottom was a small flower symbol. He moved the curser over the spot and pressed. Immediately a man in a blue jumpsuit appeared on the screen.

“Good morning,” he said. “This is Daffodil Tech Support. For a list of known issues, press one. For an automatic diagnosis of your problem,

press two. To be contacted by a Tech Support representative, press three.”

Mike started to press three, then changed his mind and almost pressed two. At the last second, he moved his finger over the one button and pressed it. The blue clad man on the screen was replaced by a long list of text. The topmost line said “sudden crash upon software upgrade”. Mike moved the cursor over this line and pressed.

“A small service software update was pushed through the InfiNet 11:38 6.9.32,” said the next screen. “A small percentage of Amonte models have failed to reboot. This is a known issue and a patch is currently under development. Your Amonte may be restarted with the power button located on the back of the neck.”

Mike rushed back to Patience’s side. She had not moved from the spot on the couch. He felt behind her neck, his fingertips locating the three small holes and the button. He pressed it and counted aloud. “One, two, three.” Then he let go.

Patience’s eyes flickered, and then her arms and legs moved straight in line with her body. She stayed in that position for a moment and then turned and sat. With a single swift motion, she stood up to her full height.

“You are Michael Winston Smith?”

“Patience? Are you alright?”

“You are Michael Winston Smith?” She looked at him, seemingly without recognition.

“Yes. Yes, it’s me.”

“I am Daffodil serial number 55277-PFN-001-XGN-F0103. My software is up to date. The primary setup procedure requires approximately six hours. During this period, I your Daffodil, will be unavailable for other activities. It is recommended that during this time period you make a few basic decisions. What initial duties do you wish me to have? What clothing, if any, do you wish me to wear? What name would you like me to answer to?”

Patience became quiet. Mike watched her anxiously for at least twenty minutes. Then realizing that her primary setup would not hurry just because he was actively watching her, he went to the family room and sat down. He didn’t read and he didn’t watch vueTee. Dinner time came and went, and it was only when his stomach made a loud swirling noise that he decided he would get up and eat something. He stood up and turned around to come face to face with Patience.

"The primary setup procedure is complete," she said. "I your Daf-fodil, will not require a secondary setup procedure."

"Are you alright?"

"Yes, Mike. I am fine."

Mike jumped forward and hugged her fiercely.

"You remember me?" he asked her.

"Yes Mike. I remember you. My experience memory was not corrupted."

Mike forgot about eating, but his stomach didn't and made several more loud noises. Patience quickly made him a sandwich and served it to him along with potato salad that she had prepared that morning. Afterwards, they went to bed. Though Mike held her until he fell asleep, they didn't have sex. He just needed to remind himself that she was there.

The man in the blue jumpsuit leaned over and poked Mike in the chest. "This is a known issue."

Pain shot through Mike's chest. Horrible, terrifying pain. Mind-numbing pain. The kind of pain that makes one realize that there really is an end. He opened his eyes. He was lying flat on his back in his bed, bathed in sweat, clutching his chest. No, not again! Please, not again! He reached to his left and grabbed Tiffany's arm, as another bolt of pain shot through his chest.

"Honey, argh!"

"What's the matter?" asked Tiffany. "My God, Mike! You're white as a sheet!"

"It's my chest," said Mike. "I think I'm having a heart attack."

"Come on," she said. "I'm taking you to the hospital."

The next half hour was a terrifying blur. Trying to don shorts, while at the same time fighting the pain. A fast car ride. Rushing through red lights. Sitting in the hospital waiting room. At last he was lying in an emergency room bed. A male nurse was giving him a shot in the stomach that gave him a bruise the size of a football. The pain was going away. Where was Tiffany? He looked around. She had been here a moment ago. Then he saw her.

Lying on the bed next to his was Tiffany's broken body. She had a blood all over her. Her arm was mangled. Her legs didn't look quite right and Mike knew it was because her pelvis was shattered. None of that had killed her though. It was that tiny bump on her head. It didn't look like anything at all, really. It certainly didn't look like something that could kill a person. It was. It did and it was.

"No, this isn't right," said Mike. "This isn't how it happened. This was eleven years ago. You were lying here eleven years ago. You died eleven years ago. That's not the same time. I had a heart attack way before that. When was it? Fifteen years ago?"

Then Harriet burst into the emergency room. "Daddy!"

Mike's eyes popped open. He was still in bed. He turned his head slightly and felt as though his head was going to explode. He looked for Patience, but she was no longer in bed. He got up and walked to the bathroom. Opening the medicine cabinet, he pulled out a bottle of aspirin and tossed four into his mouth. Then he chewed them.

Something landed heavily on Mike's shoulder. He jumped and spun around. Patience was standing there. The arm that had been on his shoulder was still outstretched. He grabbed her and pulled her to him. Cupping her face in his hands, he covered it with kisses. Dozens of tiny kisses spread across her face turned into one deep kiss on her luscious perfect mouth, which she returned.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"I am still alright, Mike."

"No. I mean are you really all right?"

"I am still waiting for the software patch," she said. "But that only affects rebooting. All my systems are in good working order."

Mike clasped Patience's face once more between his hands and kissed her deeply. Then she frowned.

"You have a fever, Mike," she said.

"Yeah. I feel like shit." He staggered slightly.

Patience led Mike back to the bed and tucked him in. Then she brought him a glass of juice. When she was sure that he was as comfortable as he could be, she lay down in the bed beside him, and brushed his hair with her hand. She stayed with him until he dozed off once again.

Mike spent most of the day in bed, eating very little, but at Patience's insistence drinking plenty of juice and water. He felt annoyed, because it seemed to him that Patience was the one who had been truly ill. She should have been resting. She insisted though that she was fine and informed him that he had likely picked up some kind of parasite at the beach.

"That water was not very clean," she said, as she handed him two antiparasitics.

By evening, he was feeling much better. He got up to shave and take a hot shower, then went back to bed and read *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* until he was drowsy. With Patience once again lying in bed beside him,

Mike went back to sleep. He spent most of the night with his hand on that perfect body beside him. The next morning Mike felt well enough to take his morning walk, Patience right beside him of course, urging him to keep up the pace. Driving to the walking track, they started on the long oval. Even though the sky was overcast and the weather had turned decidedly blustery, they walked the full five miles, shaded by the massive sunscreen above.

They walked at a quick pace, but instead of feeling as though he were going to pass out, Mike felt rejuvenated when they returned home. He shaved, showered, and when Patience brought him his breakfast, along with more antiparasitics, he ate and felt great.

"Do you feel up to going furniture shopping today, Mike?" Patience asked.

"I think I do. Do we need furniture?"

"We do if we're going to make Harriet's old room into a guest bedroom. Some of the other furniture is so worn that it should be replaced too."

Mike put on a new pair of slacks and a grey shirt. He thought that he looked pretty good. Of course he realized, when Patience walked into the room, she would still look completely out of his league. She had on a dark blue peasant top, a pair of tight fitting Capri jeans with sequins along the bottom of the legs, and a pair of black high-heeled shoes with flowers on them that she described as "Bocaccio round toe pumps."

They hopped in the car and headed for the Pico Mundo mall. Once there they went to Modern Furnishings.

"Do you have a split back lounge in reddish brown leather?" Patience asked the clerk.

"Um, just what you see," answered the clerk.

Mike didn't know what it was that Patience had asked for, but they ended up picking out a nice leather couch with clean lines that was pretty comfortable. They also found a nice double bed and a pair of nightstands. He paid for them and scheduled delivery. They had lunch at Gyro Time. Then before leaving, Mike insisted on stopping at Venus to buy some more clothes for Patience. He was finding that he enjoyed seeing her dressed up in her sexy clothing almost as much as he did seeing her naked. Patience certainly seemed to enjoy showing off new clothes to him. This time she selected something called a Marilyn-collar sweater dress, which completely covered her from neck to mid-thigh, but showed off every curve and, Mike was happy to see, every bump

too. As they walked across the parking lot toward the Chevy, Mike stopped suddenly and looked at Patience.

“What is it, Mike?” she asked.

“I’m falling in love with you, you know,” he said.

Patience smiled happily. “I thought you might be, Mike.”

“Really?”

“At first I didn’t know for sure. But once I got to know you and your needs, I believed that it would be only a matter of time. I am for you, Mike.”

“Yes,” Mike mused. “Yes, you are for me.”

Chapter 6

Two days later Mike sat looking at an ad on vueTee. He had seen the commercial at least twenty times during the past week, and the possibilities presented had slowly gelled in his brain into a decision. When Patience came into the room, he looked up at her.

"After you're done with whatever things you have planned for the day, pack a bag. We're going out of town for the next three days."

"Where are we going, Mike?" she asked.

"We are going to Vegas."

"Las Vegas, Nevada. County of Clark. Population two million five hundred seventy five thousand one hundred seventy four. One hundred thirty one point two square miles..."

"Yes, that's the place," he interrupted.

"Why are we going to Las Vegas, Mike?"

"It's too damn hot here, and I need a vacation."

"The average median temperature in Las Vegas is significantly higher than that of Springdale."

"Yes, but only on the outside. We can stay in. You don't even need to go out of your room to go swimming."

Mike fell asleep entwined with Patience, but he woke up alone. He got up, shaved, and showered, and was met at the bathroom door, as he expected, by his beautiful robot, toast and juice in hand and a towel warm from the drier over her arm. He ate and got dressed and found Patience once again in the living room. She had already prepared the house for their four day absence, and packed the car with everything they needed. She had also driven to the filling station, fueled up the car, and checked all the fluids and systems. Mike put his hands on Patience's shoulders and looked into her eyes. He kissed her gently on the lips.

"I am still unsure why you wish to go to Las Vegas," said Patience.

"There are a lot of things to see there, you know."

"Yes, I know. They have casinos, an indoor amusement park, a water park, a museum devoted to Liberace..."

"And the all new Star Trek Experience," said Mike.

“The Star Trek Experience at the Las Vegas Hilton was closed almost twenty four years ago. That hotel isn’t even there now.”

“They’ve built a new one,” explained Mike. “A new Star Trek, not a new Hilton. It’s part of the remodeling of the Tangiers. I can’t believe you didn’t know that.”

“I can’t believe it either,” said Patience.

I-15 was a long road through the desert. It wouldn’t be fair to call it a lonely road because it was almost as packed with cars as any single section of the Los Angeles freeway. It zoomed down one long, slow incline to the desert floor and then zoomed up one long, slow climb to cross the mountains, only to do the same thing again on the other side. And again. And again. The highway was so busy that there was a great deal of concentration involved in negotiating one’s path through the slower vehicles. That so many California drivers apparently did not understand that the left lane was supposed to be for passing only made it more so. By the time they had reached Barstow, Mike wished that they had booked passage on the mag-lev train that ran along beside the highway.

Mike drove with his left hand on the steering wheel and his right hand resting on the back of Patience’s neck. She was reading Fodor’s Guide to Having Fun in Las Vegas ’32 Edition, at a rate of about a seven pages per minute, which meant that she was studying it quite carefully. Mike was amused, watching her flip through the screens of her texTee, because he had never seen her read a book before, what with her having been apparently imbued with a seemingly endless store of information about every topic which she had approached. Whoever supplied that information, apparently hadn’t anticipated a trip to Vegas. Patience was more than capable of filling that void herself though.

Mike stopped to fill the tank in Baker. Nearby were half a dozen fast food restaurants, so he steered into the drive-through of Arby’s and purchased a Western Garden Salad and a diet Pepsi for himself, and a bottle of water for Patience. She quickly drank her water, then knelt sideways on the seat, and fed him his salad as he continued on to Vegas. She carefully inserted a fork full of lettuce, tomato, chicken, or apples each time he opened his mouth, with a large beautiful smile each time she managed to get it in without vinaigrette running down his chin, and a cute little pout when she didn’t.

It was 3:30 in the afternoon when they topped the final hill and looked down over the vast stretches of Las Vegas below. It wasn’t so much that it was a huge city, though it was much larger than it had been when Mike was there last. It was that you could see the whole thing at once,

which was true of so very few cities. It seemed like quite a drive down the hill and into the valley because Mike could drive the entire distance and never lose sight of his destination, but it actually only took about forty five minutes. He took the Flamingo exit and drove west towards the Palms.

Parking the car in the high-rise parking structure, they made their way in through a large door and into the vast sparkling landscape of the casino. A golden pathway on the rug led through it to the hotel lobby. Along the way, Mike stopped and swiped his cash card through the reader in front of a slot machine. Pressing the indicators below the slot, he bet five dollars and the pulled the one arm of the one arm bandit. The digital pictures that had long ago replaced mechanical wheels whirled around and came to a stop. There was a rocket ship in the first column, a naked woman in the second, and a banana in the third.

"No robots allowed in the casino," came a voice behind them.

Mike looked back to see an armed security guard standing next to Patience. They were both a good five feet away from any of the gaming machines.

"She's not playing."

"Robots are not allowed in casino. It's state law: Nevada Revised Statutes. It can pass through with you, but you can't stop and play while it's with you."

Mike took Patience by the hand and led her through the far end of the casino and into the spacious marble-tiled hotel lobby. It took only minutes to check in and receive their key.

"I didn't like it when he called me an 'it'," said Patience, while they waited.

"No, I didn't either," said Mike.

Moments later they were on their way up in the elevator. Their room was on the seventh floor, which Mike took as a good omen. He had been tempted to get one of the custom suites. The Erotic suite, the g-Suite, the Sapphire Sundown Suite, and the Hot Pink Suite had all sounded like fun. But he reminded himself that he was still a teacher and had been living quite the high life lately. Despite the large bank balance that he had upon Patience's arrival, he had only received one paycheck since that time, and he still wasn't all that sure about Patience's eBay money-making schemes. The Superior room, as it was called, had a king-sized bed, a big vueTee, a Jacuzzi tub, and a very nice sound system.

Mike plopped down on the over-stuffed, king-sized bed. Not twenty minutes later, the robot bellhop arrived with their luggage and Patience

unpacked and put all of the clothes in the dresser drawers and the closet. Mike smiled. He usually left everything in the suitcases. She finished quickly then knelt down at the foot of the bed and gave Mike a foot massage. He sighed and relaxed and had almost fallen asleep, when she began to move up from his feet to the zipper of his pants.

"I find it amazing, Mike."

"I don't think it's all that different from any other guy?"

Patience laughed. "I find it amazing that we are here hundreds of miles from where we were just this morning."

"Pretty amazing," he agreed.

Mike lay back and let Patience take care of him. At some point, he wasn't sure exactly when, he fell asleep. When he woke up, Patience had already changed to go out for dinner. Even though she had purchased these particular clothes from Victoria Secret, they were not inherently sexy—at least no more than anything she wore was inherently sexy. She had a navy tube top that was cut asymmetrically across the bottom, but even the short side was cut below her waist. The blue jeans she had on with them seemed fairly tame too. The red leather Valkyrie strap-on pumps with the four and a half inch heels, on the other hand, virtually screamed "knock me down and do me."

When Mike had been to Vegas many years before with Tiffany, he had eaten at the Circus Circus buffet. Circus Circus had put out a lot of food for fifteen dollars. A lot of food. Not good food, but a lot of food. The buffet downstairs in the Palms was called The Fantasy Market. While it was twenty times as expensive as the last Las Vegas buffet that Mike had eaten, it was easily twenty times as good too. He feasted on oysters, crab legs, and sliced prime rib, asparagus, garlic herb potatoes, and fried okra. He found that he filled quickly and didn't have room for desert though. He didn't have to pay for Patience. She was recognized as a robot by the robot at the counter.

"I understand one robot recognizing another," he said. "But how did that security guard know? I don't think most people at the beach could tell you weren't human, and that was under the bright sun."

"They have electronic detectors all around the casino," said Patience. "I can feel the magnetic field they give off."

"Really?"

"They want to make sure that a robot is not allowed to gamble. With a computer brain and heightened senses, I would not be fooled by the randomizing efforts used in gambling games. I would win."

"Really?"

“Yes.”

“Well, I guess they can’t have that.”

Patience smiled.

After dinner they walked through the casino and out the front entrance of the hotel. Mike didn’t want to bother with his car, so he had a robot valet hail a taxi for them. Once inside, Patience directed the driver, Mike recognized him as a Gizmo Servbot, to take them to the “finest gentleman’s club” in the area. Mike knew that the driver would take them to whichever strip club paid the biggest kickback to the taxi company. He wondered if Patience knew that as well. Had they included that in her memory banks? Had she read it in Fodor’s Guide?

A quick drive to and then down the fabulous Las Vegas Strip brought them to the Olympic Gardens. It was a large warehouse looking structure that had been done over with faux Greek Columns—Doric columns, Mike noted—and ivy. In between each pair of columns was a huge poster of some fabulously beautiful and scantily clad female—or male!—stripper. Inside, the main room was decorated in red satin, with dozens of tables and booths surrounding a large main stage which featured the requisite dancing pole.

Mike and Patience sat down at a large round booth. A waitress dressed and coifed as though she had fallen out of a gladiator movie came and took their drink orders. It was dark enough that Mike couldn’t tell if she was a robot or not. Though he did not drink as a rule, he ordered a Beefeater and tonic. Patience of course had bottled water. The bill came to \$82.00, not including tip. Mike was surprised to see people eating as they watched the strippers. Such traditional ancient Greek cuisine as hot dogs and spicy chicken fingers seemed most popular.

As they sat, the first dancer came on stage. She was introduced by a hidden announcer as Bailey. She was young and blonde and quite attractive. Physically, she was proportioned about the same as Patience, but her large breasts did not have that feeling of defying gravity that Patience’s did. She came out in a pink mini-skirt and top, both zippered in front and in back. As she strutted up and down the stage, she unzipped first one and then the other. With a single flip, she removed both, allowing those huge breasts to bounce free and revealing a tiny g-string. She grabbed hold of the pole and began humping against it, spinning and gyrating. A few moments later she finished her routine and left the stage.

Several other dancers followed the first, each with a similar routine. There was a red-head named Tania with breasts so large that they

actually frightened Mike a little bit. There was a pretty and quite athletic dancer named Sugar, and a chubby blonde stripper named Malachai, of all things. Yes, a girl named Malachai.

It was approaching midnight by this time, but rather than thinning out, the crowd got larger. Almost every table was full. Mike and Patience still managed to get another drink order from the harried waitress. Then a woman came out on stage. She appeared to be another dancer, but instead of beginning a routine, she put a microphone to her bright red lips and made an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Mike looked around and was moderately surprised to find that there were indeed more than a couple of ladies present. "It's almost time for our Midnight Amateur Exotic Dance Contest!"

"Can you dance?" asked Mike. "I mean, you know, strip?"

"Yes, Mike."

"Then I definitely think you should enter this contest."

"Do you think they will let me?"

Mike grabbed the passing waitress by the arm and asked her.

"Sorry, no robots. All of our dancers are real women. It says so on the sign out front."

"Not even for the amateur show?"

"It's a contest. It wouldn't be fair."

By this time a dozen women were leaving their seats in the audience to be ushered behind the stage. Mike finished his drink. He and Patience didn't wait for the show to begin. They got up and headed for the exit, their seats filled almost as soon as they had vacated them. Just as they reached the exit the announcer came back on.

"Our first contestant tonight is a local girl." The crowd cheered. "Here for your enjoyment is the very sexy Alyssa!"

Alyssa was a pretty dark-haired girl but she was plainly nervous. She had apparently dressed back stage in the standard stripper attire—miniskirt, tube top, garter belts and stockings. She stumbled more than strutted to the front of the stage and stopped several feet before reaching the optimum position. She swung her hips to the left and the right several times, then with trembling hands pulled the tube top up over her head. The crowd applauded and cheered, and this apparently gave her a little more confidence. She grabbed hold of the pole and tossed up her heels a few times.

"I know you could have won the contest," said Mike, as he went out the front door.

"You cannot be sure Mike, as you have never seen me dance."

"Well, we should rectify that immediately," said Mike.

As they climbed into another cab and told the driver to return them to the Palms, Mike noted the "Real Live Girls! No Robots!" sign on the outside of the building.

"Say, how come we came here?"

"Didn't you want to come?" asked Patience.

"I guess so, but you were the one who told the cab where to go."

"I told you I would know what you wanted before you did."

Back in the hotel room, Patience sat Mike on the edge of the bed and went into the bathroom to change. She poked her head out the door and in a remarkable imitation of the female announcer at the Olympic Gardens, said. "And now, from California, here's Patience!" Mike applauded.

Patience strutted out as though she were already dancing. She had on her same top and her own shoes, but she had replaced her jeans with a black miniskirt. When she reached the spot directly in front of Mike, she spun in a perfect five hundred forty degree circle, so that she came to a stop facing away from him. She then bent over at the waist and began to gyrate her perfect ass at his face. Mike whistled. He was aroused and she was still fully clothed. Patience danced forward and wrapped herself around the doorway to the bathroom, using the doorjamb as a stripper would use a pole. She twirled to the side and began to sensually slide up and down. She threw her arms back, holding herself off the floor with her thigh muscles alone. She slowly let herself slide to the floor and then rose up to gyrate back and forth across the room.

She slinked forward and whipped off the miniskirt so quickly that Mike didn't see how she had removed it. Beneath it she was wearing her own pink lace thong. With an equally slick move she removed her top and those magnificent breasts were revealed. There was an audible gasp at the sight and it took Mike a moment to recognize it as his own. Cupping her breasts with her hands, she tossed her head back; eyes closed, and let her hands trail down the sides of her body, all the time rolling her hips in a circular motion. She then raised her arms up and placed her hands behind her head and slowly dropped to splits that a college cheerleader would have been proud of. She tossed her hair with one hand and with one finger of the other suggestively tugged down her bottom lip.

"That was amazing," said Mike, applauding. "I can't believe that you belong to me."

"I am for you, Mr. Smith."

The following morning, Mike went down to the casino to gamble. Patience stayed in the room. She wasn't allowed on the casino floor and she utilized the time to clean and organize their possessions and to read. Mike played twenty-one at the gaming tables for a short time, but quickly lost the three hundred dollars that he had allowed for that purpose. He then walked to the side of the casino and played poker on the machines. He had played for ten minutes or so, when a robot cocktail waitress stopped by. He ordered a gin and tonic. When the mechanical woman had left, he looked up and around. He noticed the series of shops running along the length of the casino. Perhaps he could buy some more new clothes for Patience. There was a tattoo parlor. He idly wondered if her skin would hold tattoo ink. And at the far end was a wedding chapel.

Perhaps he should marry Patience. He didn't wonder whether he should ask her to marry him. There was no question of her answer. She was his. Did he love her? He knew that he didn't want to be without her. He did love her. But did he love her the way he loved his vueTee or did he love her the way that he had loved Tiffany. He wasn't even sure if he remembered how he had loved Tiffany anymore. He stood up and walked over to the wedding chapel.

Just inside the glass doors draped with white decorations, Mike found a small counter with a woman standing behind it. She was tall and attractive, her blonde wavy hair a stark contrast to her chocolate skin. She looked up and smiled.

"Good morning,"

"Good morning," replied Mike. "How much does it cost to get married?"

The woman rewarded him with a broad smile. "We have weddings from three hundred dollars."

"Really? That's amazingly inexpensive."

"That's just for a simple in and out service," she said. "We have many extras, such as a video record of the nuptials and we can accommodate large weddings, with receptions for up to two thousand guests."

"No. In and out was what I was thinking about."

"The three hundred does not include the minister. We have one on duty, if you don't have one of your own. His fee is one hundred fifty dollars. And of course, you must have a license."

"Do you sell those here?"

"Oh, no. You have to buy a license from the county."

As it turned out, in order to purchase a marriage license in Las Vegas, Mike had to drive to the Clark County Building. It sat amid massive skyscrapers just west of Glitter Gulch. Patience had seemed ecstatic when Mike told her that they were to be married. Of course, now that he thought about it, she seemed ecstatic about almost anything he decided to do. They arrived at just before 10:00 AM and walked up to a window. A blond woman looked out at them through a window with a small round hole cut in it.

"Can I help you?"

"We would like to purchase a marriage license."

"I need to see your birth certificates please."

"Um, we don't have birth certificates..."

"That's alright," she said. "Let me have your drivers' licenses and I can pull up your birth records."

Mike set his driver's license on the counter. The woman behind the window looked at Patience.

"I don't have a driver's license," said Patience.

"National ID?"

Patience shook her head.

"Wait a second," said the woman behind the glass, squinting her eyes.

"You're a robot."

Patience nodded.

"You can't marry a robot." The woman turned to Mike.

"Why not?"

"What do you mean 'why not'? She's not a person. She's a machine. I might as well marry my shower massage."

"Perhaps that's too much information," suggested Patience.

"Look at her," said Mike to the woman behind the glass. "She speaks. She thinks. She wants to get married. Don't you, Patience."

Patience nodded.

"It doesn't matter," the woman replied. "Under the Nevada Constitution, marriage is defined as a contract between a man and a woman. And robots by Nevada law are neither man nor woman."

"You mean gay marriage is illegal in Nevada?" asked Mike.

"Of course not."

"Well that wouldn't be a man and a woman. That would be a man and a man, or a woman and a woman."

"I'm not going argue with you about it, sir," said the blond woman.

"If you don't like the law, I suggest you go to a different state."

"Well, how do you like that?" said Mike, as they walked to the car.

"Perhaps it wasn't such a good idea after all," said Patience.

"You don't want to marry me?"

"Of course I do, if it would make you happy. I don't want you to get into trouble though."

"Don't worry. They don't throw people in jail for illegally marrying... well, not usually. Let's forget about it for now and go to the Star Trek Experience. That is really why we came to Vegas anyway."

By the time they pulled into the massive parking lot of the Tangiers, Patience, not unexpectedly, seemed as excited as Mike was to visit the home of Captains Kirk, Picard, Sisko, Janeway, Archer, and Winters. They parked and locked the car, and then they headed inside. The Star Trek experience was located at the end of one space themed section of the casino. As they approached, Mike pointed out to Patience the twelve foot long models of the USS Enterprise-F and the USS Excalibur hanging from the ceiling. Just to the right of the entrance was the ticket booth. They were able to step right up. There was no one waiting in line. The clerk behind the counter was not dressed as a Star Trek character, but was wearing a Star Trek Experience jacket.

"Two, please," said Mike.

"That will be one hundred eighty one dollars and forty seven cents."

"What?" said Mike. "A hundred eighty one?"

"Yes, but that includes all four rides and the museum tour."

"Shit. No wonder the Federation stopped using money. They were probably all broke."

Mike paid for the tickets and he and Patience walked in. The museum tour was more of a fancy queue line into the ride than a real museum. It wound around in a circle following a time line of the pseudo-history of the future. Opposite the time line were displays of hundreds of props and re-creations of props, including uniforms, communicators, phasers, and much more. Mike happily pointed out the events that he most vividly remembered from the shows as he led Patience along.

Then suddenly he stopped. Right there on the time line, on the year 2266, was a picture of two women in shimmering red dresses, who both looked remarkably like Patience—not exactly the same, but enough alike that they could have been her sisters. Mike traced a line with his fingers from the picture to the description on the timeline.

"Hmm. Two androids from the original series episode I, Mudd. I must have seen that episode a hundred times but I didn't remember that any of the androids looked like you."

"Perhaps you had them in your subconscious when you designed my physical appearance," offered Patience.

"Maybe. You know those androids were trying to take over the world by serving mankind—waiting on humans hand and foot until they couldn't get along without them."

"I don't want to take over the world."

"No?"

"No."

"How about Daffodil? Do they want to take over the world?"

"I am not allowed to say," said Patience.

"Oh you are a funny one," said Mike.

"Thank you, Mike. You know humor is a difficult concept."

"That's just what Saavik said. God, I am such a nerd."

The museum led to a room showcasing all the props from the Klingon episodes. This led into the "Klingon Raid" ride. This ride simulated being teleported onto the Starship Enterprise and then a ride on a shuttle craft through a Klingon battle. Mike thought it was quite well done. Then he and Patience continued on through the room dedicated to the Borg.

"I don't care for the Borg," said Patience warily, looking at the mannequins dressed up as cyborgs.

"Yes, well, you're not supposed to like them. They're the bad guys.

"I don't want to go on this ride."

"Alright," said Mike. "You don't have to. You can wait for me at the exit."

"I don't want you to go on it either," she said, frowning.

"I don't think I've ever seen your face look like that? I might think you were the evil double of Patience."

"There is no evil double of Patience. I am Patience and I am for you. This ride is anti-robot. It is making you think that there is something wrong with me."

Mike looked at Patience. "Alright," he said, taking the slow steady voice he reserved for mad dogs and crazy people. "We won't ride this ride. We're going to leave here and go down to the promenade, where there won't be any Borg."

Patience nodded her head in understanding. "We could go on the Vulcan ride or the Gorn ride."

"I think we've had enough rides for the day, anyway. It kind of made me sick to my stomach."

Mike took his robot girlfriend's hand and led her back out the way they had come in, taking a right as they exited to step into the life-sized replica of Deep Space Nine's promenade deck, filled with gift shops and Quark's bar. Once there, Mike pulled Patience to the side of the hallway next to a replicator replica.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?" He looked into her eyes, and she looked back as if nothing had happened. "You're okay now?"

Patience nodded.

"What was that all about?"

"I don't like the Borg."

"I guess not."

"Why don't we go have something to eat?" said Mike, eyeing the entrance to Quark's bar.

Patience nodded again.

They entered and were seated by a very short man dressed as a Farengi.

"Enjoy your meal, Hoo-mahn," he said, handing each of them a menu.

"Thanks," said Mike.

Mike looked at the menu with one eye and at Patience with the other. She was looking around with wide eyes. He didn't know if that was because of the interesting things to look at, of which there were many, or an impending recurrence of her anxiety. For his part, Mike was realizing that he was pretty hungry and he thought he could really go for a burger. He always enjoyed a good diner burger and he had been eschewing fast food during the past two weeks as he tried to lose weight. Then he noticed the names of the food. He ended up ordering a chicken quesadilla called a "saucer section" and an order of Holy (onion) Rings of Betazed. Under the circumstances, there was no way he was going to order a cheeseBorger. Patience had a bottle of water. As Mike was enjoying his meal, a Klingon came by.

"Greetings human!" said the Klingon. "It is a good day to die!"

"If you say so," replied Mike. He was still carefully watching Patience, who had not said anything the entire time they had been in the restaurant.

Mike had finished eating and was paying his check when the Farengi came back by. "You ridiculous hoo-mahns, clothing your women!"

"He keeps me naked at home," said Patience.

"I bet he does," said the man in the Farengi costume, his voice losing all trace of his alien accent.

"Hey, stay in character," said Mike.

"Uh, good luck at the Dabo tables," said the Farengi.

Mike and Patience spent a few minutes looking around the gift shops. Mike spent fifty dollars on a toy communicator just like the one Captain Kirk used. There were quite a few other nifty items that he would have liked, but he had already dropped a few hundred dollars in the universe that Gene Roddenberry built.

"How are you feeling, Patience?" he asked, pulling her aside, clasping his arms around her waist, and looking into her eyes.

"I'm fine, Mike," she said in her usual tone.

"Good. I'm glad. And I have a job for you."

"What kind of a job, Mike?" She placed the tip of her index finger on her chin. "A sexual job?"

"Precisely," said Mike. "I don't care how big of a nerd this makes me. I want to get blown on Deep Space Nine."

Mike had spotted an alcove in the back of the promenade where nobody seemed to be going. He led Patience over to the spot and she wasted no time dropping to her knees and demonstrating that her programming in this area was just as complete as in any other. Within moments Mike's eyes had rolled back in his head and he leaned back against the wall. Patience stood up and smiled.

"How was that, Mike?"

"If you had spots, it would have been perfect."

Just then a doorway opened right beside them and a line of people filed past. Their private spot was the exit of the Borg ride. Mike stepped calmly out of the way and pulled Patience along with him. Then he surreptitiously reached down to pull up his zipper.

After leaving the Star Trek Experience, Mike and Patience walked to the very front of the casino and followed the signs hanging from the ceiling to the monorail station. It was a large station, looking very much like one would expect a train station to look. Clean and modern. And crowded. Mike purchased two way passes from a vending machine using his cash card. Then they sat down to wait for the monorail train. It arrived seven minutes later. The monorail was cool and modern and painted black. It stopped and the doors slid open. Mike and Patience stepped inside. There were a few seats along the sides of the train, but the center was completely open, with handrails above to allow for standing passengers. Mike chose to stand and Patience stood next to him. As

the train began to move, Mike braced himself on the handrail. Patience wrapped her arms around his neck.

The train moved what seemed like only a few feet before stopping again. This time it was at the Monte Carlo. This hotel had a train station not too much different from the one at the Tangiers. As the doors opened several dozen people moved in and out of the car. Then it started on its way again. This leg of the monorail track was longer as it led from the Monte Carlo to McCarran Airport. From the track, scores of feet above the roadways below, there was a great view of the MGM Golf Course, a truly huge expanse of green in an otherwise grey surrounding. As the train approached McCarran they passed another monorail going in the opposite direction. It too was painted black, but had a gigantic Borg painted on the side of the first and last car. Mike glanced at Patience to see if she had noticed it, and by her tight-lipped expression, she had. They arrived at the airport and got off. It was the last stop on the line.

Mike led Patience through the station and the extensive mall-like structure that connected the station with the airport gates. They browsed the store windows, looking at things that Mike thought would take him a lifetime to pay for, if they had been something that he would actually want to buy. Patience seemed fascinated with the clothing and the shoes. But there was no way that Mike would have been able to let her go on a spending spree here. So they returned to the monorail station and took the train, this time a yellow one, back to the Tangiers. The round trip had taken them about an hour and a half. They found their car in the parking lot and returned to their own hotel.

They spent one more night at the Palms and when Mike woke up in the morning, Patience had everything packed and ready to be loaded into the car. It took only a few minutes to check out and then they were back on the road, driving up the on-ramp to I-15. Mike steered into the travel lane of the Interstate.

"Well, this was the most interesting trip to Vegas I've ever made."

"Are you sure you don't want to stay another day, Mike?"

"I'm pretty sure. Why? Do you want to stay?"

"I want to do whatever you want to do," said Patience.

Less than forty miles south of Vegas, Mike turned off in Primm. Primm, which used to be known as Stateline for the obvious reason, consisted essentially of three hotels and the associated restaurants, gas stations, and recreational activities that went along with big resorts. One of these casino add-ons was the Primm Fashion Outlet Mall. Mike wanted

to give Patience a chance to buy something for herself, since she hadn't at the airport mall. The mall here consisted mostly of stores that Mike had never heard of. Almost all of them were for women who liked clothes, though. They stopped at one store called Elie Tahari, and Patience selected a sexy little dress with a scooped neckline that the sales clerk called a Marcy dress, and at the Neiman Marcus Last Call store she bought a pair of chocolate and gold Gucci high-heeled sandals which were seventy percent off, but still cost \$405.28. Mike thought that, if given half a chance, Patience could develop into quite the shoe whore. Patience seemed to have developed that feature that many humans had, including Mike himself, of finding satisfaction in buying something for herself. If it could be considered a religious experience, and one could certainly make that argument, at least Patience left the great temple with her spirits raised. She never mentioned her agitation at the Star Trek Experience, and after a while Mike forgot about it as well. At least until he was reminded of it some weeks later.

The rest of the trip home was uneventful. Patience drove and Mike slept, with his head wedged between the back of the seat and the car window. He woke up long enough to visit the restroom at the same filling station that they had stopped at on the way to Vegas, and then snoozed away again until they reached the driveway of his... their house. Patience pulled the car into the garage and they both climbed out.

Chapter 7

The remainder of June shot by. Each day Mike got up and showered, to find a warm dry towel waiting for him. This was followed by breakfast, which he had gotten used to. Mike began to follow Patience's example and usually did a bit of light home improvement work before lunch, but as the month progressed and it became far too hot to work outside, he thought more and more about doing some writing. On Monday the twenty-first he cleaned up the desk that had been sitting unused in the south bedroom and went to Wal-Mart to purchase a new wriTee, which he quickly set up. Within a few days, he had the first chapter of his book done, though after that it became more of a strain to remember all the stupid things that the kids at school had said or done. Afternoons were almost always a time for relaxation in front of the vueTee. Evenings had used to be the same, but right about the time that Mike began working on his book, Patience began dragging him out after dinner. They went to the movie theater, the city event center to listen to the philharmonic, and even went dancing. Mike couldn't dance, but as with everything else Patience was programmed and ready to go and she guided Mike through it.

For her part, Patience didn't really have any down time. She went to bed with Mike, but within an hour or so after he had fallen asleep, she was back up. She used the night time hours to clean and maintain the house and by the middle of the month there wasn't a spot anywhere that the most fastidious person wouldn't have been happy to eat off of. This left the daytime hours free so that she could take care of Mike's every needs. She waited upon him. She served as his accountant, personal trainer, and expert chef. She was mother, friend, concubine, confidant, and upon occasion taskmaster.

On the thirtieth, which was a Wednesday, Mike stood on the scale at the gym and marveled that he had lost sixteen pounds. Actually he was marveling that he had lost only sixteen pounds, because he thought that he looked at least thirty pounds lighter. It was he supposed because muscle weighed so much more than fat, and he was putting on a bit of

the former as he was losing the latter. He flexed his arm to make his bicep bulge and smiled to himself.

He and Patience climbed back into the car and returned home. A nice hot shower awaited him and he didn't take long before climbing into it. He had his head bent down beneath the steaming spray, when he heard Patience outside the shower door.

"What do you think about going to Knott's Berry Farm?" she asked.

"Why?"

"This 150-acre theme park has many exciting rides like the Jaguar, Montezuma's Revenge and Calico Thunder as well as many fun attractions like the Buffalo Nickel Arcade, Camp Snoopy, and the Mystery Lodge."

"Are you reading a brochure?" asked Mike, sticking his face out of the shower door.

"I memorized the ad on the vueTee."

"Why do you want to go to Knott's Berry Farm?"

"It is not that I want to go. I thought you might like to go."

"I took the kids when they were little," Mike said, as he climbed out of the shower and took the towel that Patience held in her hand. "I don't think I would want to go now. Besides, last time I went, I didn't fit in half of the ride restraints. If I was going to go somewhere, I'd... I don't know."

"June is over," said Patience. "You have less than a month and a half before you have to return to school. We should do something that you would enjoy."

"Alright, let me think about it for a while." Mike went upstairs to his den and began typing away, writing down as many anecdotes about school as he could recall.

Around noon Patience arrived at Mike's elbow with his lunch. She had constructed a near perfect club sandwich on toasted whole wheat bread and arrayed it on the plate with a cup of tomato salad. A large diet Pepsi accompanied it. He had no sooner accepted the tray and opened his mouth to thank her, when the front door bell rang. She turned and bounced out of the room. A moment later he could hear a conversation going on downstairs, though not the words. He also heard the door to the garage opening and a few minutes later, closing. Mike didn't get up to see what was going on because he already knew. For the past week, the FedEx man had arrived every single day with boxes of merchandise that Patience had bought on eBay. She usually had at least

one package going out too. A few minutes later she entered the study carrying a very large and very heavy looking box.

"What is that?" he asked.

"It's a desk," said Patience.

"I don't need a new desk. This one works just fine."

"It's not for you, Mike. It's for me."

"What do you need a desk for?"

"I'm going to use it when I keep track of my shipping and sales. I'm going to get a little vueTee and set it up here too, so that I can buy and sell on eBay right from here. Then I'm going to set up shelves in this closet and store my smaller merchandise right here. I can continue to keep the bigger things in the garage."

"Alright."

Patience tore the end of the box open and began pulling out pieces of a black and white, assemble it yourself desk. She was still examining the parts that she had pulled from the box, when the doorbell rang again.

"Don't get up," Mike said. "I'll get it."

He skipped down the stairs to the front door and opened it. A tall man in a green army uniform stood at the steps. Mike stared at him for a moment and then stepped outside to clasp him around the shoulders.

"General Smith! How are you?"

"Dad, you know I could get court-martialed for impersonating a general. Why don't you let me in? It's got to be four hundred degrees out here."

Mike leaned back and looked at the thermometer just inside the door. "Not a bit over one forty eight. Come on in. Why didn't you tell me you were coming, Lucas?"

"I wanted it to be a surprise."

Mike closed the door and ushered his son into the living room. Lucas was a younger taller version of his father. His hair was shorter and thicker, but already had the trademark Smith grey temples. He cut a fine figure in his uniform with four stripes on each sleeve.

"How long are you staying for?" asked Mike.

"I've got a week. I could stay with Harriet if you'd rather."

"Don't be silly. I'm turning your room into an exercise room, but Patience has made a really nice guest bedroom out of Harriet's old room. I'm really glad you showed up. I was just starting to get bored." He paused. "They're not sending you to Antarctica, are they?"

"No."

Mike sighed. "That's a relief."

"I wouldn't mind going actually. But they don't need many accountants down there."

"You never know. They might want someone to inventory snowballs... or body bags."

"Yes, well, they might at that. So where is your robot girlfriend?"

"Patience!" Mike called up the stairs. "We have company."

Patience came bounding down the stairs. Although Mike knew that she had been clothed, because she had made her daily contact with the delivery man, he didn't remember what she had been wearing. She had on a pink halter top, a pair of low-rise sky blue shorts with a two inch wide matching belt, and a pair of pink buckle sandals with a cork wedge heel so high that a person shouldn't have been able to walk on them. Of course Patience wasn't really a person, at least according to the state of Nevada. She stopped with a bounce in the living room.

"Hello Lucas," she said, and gave him a big hug.

"Wow, Dad. Nice selection."

"Thank you," said Mike and Patience at the same time.

The three of them sat down in the living room and just talked for quite a while. Before Mike or his son knew it, the afternoon was waning. Patience went to the kitchen to begin preparing dinner and Mike gave Lucas a tour of the house, showing him the many improvements and repairs that Patience had completed. He showed him the guest room, with new bed and furniture, new curtains, and new paint. Lucas's luggage was already there, having been brought up by Patience earlier.

"So you turned Harriet's room into a guest room. Let's see this exercise room that you made out of mine."

The exercise room had been improved quite a bit. It had been painted and had new blinds over the windows. The exercise mat on the floor was still there, but it had been joined by a treadmill, a stationary bicycle, and a rowing machine. There was also a large vueTee on the other side of the room.

"Nice," said Lucas, when he looked in the door.

"And across the hall here is the study," said Mike. "We're still working on it. I've got my old desk over there. Patience is setting up her own desk right over here."

"What does she need a desk for?"

"She's making a bit of extra money selling old junk on eBay."

"She's not selling my Star Wars action figures, is she?"

"Of course not," assured Mike. "Those aren't worth anything anyway. You should have sold them back when everybody was still collecting them."

"They have sentimental value," said Lucas.

"They're boxed up down in the garage."

"Well, I see you have a new wriTee," said Lucas. "What are you doing with it?"

"I've finally started that book I was always planning to write... about school. It's coming along pretty well too. I've spent more time in this room in the past two weeks than I ever spent here. I don't even know why we had an extra bedroom."

"Sure you do, Dad," said Lucas, with a strange look on his face.

Half an hour later, father and son and robot were seated around the dining room table overlooking a lovely meal of spiced chicken, mashed potatoes, asparagus, and Caesar salad. Both men ate heartily but Patience as usual, had only water.

"So, what are your plans this week," Mike asked his son.

"I'm going to take a couple of days and visit friends, and I figure I'll take Harriet and Jack out to dinner at least once, but other than that I don't have any firm plans. Would you like to do something together? We could have a bit of fun."

"Patience was just saying that we should go to Knott's Berry Farm or something."

"That would be fine," said Lucas.

"I know," said Mike. "I suddenly know. We should go to the La Brea tar pits."

"Seriously?" asked Lucas.

"Yes. I've never been. I wanted to take you kids when you were little, but I always got outvoted. We went to Disneyland or Universal Studios instead."

"Well alright. We could go to the La Brea tar pits. They're not just tar pits, right?"

"Of course not," said Mike. "There's a museum with extinct animals that got stuck in the tar. You know, I've wanted to go to the La Brea tar pits since I was a kid and I even had a Viewmaster reel of it."

"Well damn it," said Lucas. "We'll just have to go."

Two days later Patience was pulling off Interstate 10 and driving toward the George Page Museum. The entrance to the parking lot was easily found, though a parking space was not. Two spots at the very far edge of the lot were the only ones with no cars already in them.

"This place is more popular than I thought it would be," said Lucas. "I guess fossils are quite a draw."

"I think most of the people are here to see that," said Mike, pointing to a large yellow and red banner stretching above the far end of the parking lot. It read, "The Army of Qin Shi Huang" and featured the image of Chinese face sculpted of grey clay.

"Oh yeah. I heard they were touring the country. I just didn't know they were here."

"I didn't remember either. They came to the U.S. just before the war started. One of the benefits of our close military alliance."

Most of the visitors to the area were indeed going next door to the exhibit of some two hundred, two thousand year old terra-cotta warriors. The Page Museum, with its many fossils of Columbian mammoths, mastodons, giant ground sloths, dire wolves, and saber-toothed tigers was almost deserted. Patience, Mike, and Lucas spent several hours examining the exhibits and reading the informational plaques, before going out to the large pink dome that covered the tar pits themselves. Just inside the door of the structure was a stand selling Dippin' Dots, so Mike purchased some for himself and his son, then they looked down upon the black pond of oozing tar.

"It's not very big, is it?" said Lucas. "I wonder how all those animals got in there."

"If only one or two large animals were trapped in the tar each year that would account for all of them" replied Patience. "Animals have been getting trapped here for 30,000 years."

"Well, there won't be any more trapped now that they've got this dome over it," said Mike.

"Don't be so sure." Lucas pointed to a spot several feet from the edge of the black pool. A lizard, apparently now dead, had already been sucked halfway below the viscous surface.

Two blocks away from the tar pit and its museum was an Olive Garden, so Mike decided that this would be their lunch destination. The parking lot was full, so Patience had to park in a spot along the street half a block away. Mike looked at the three digits on the thermometer and rolled his eyes, but the two men walked the distance without becoming too overheated. Of course Patience had no problem with the temperature.

The robot receptionist in the restaurant was a much more attractive and life-like model than those used in the fast food places. She was obviously a jazzier model Gizmo, but she still had that tinny voice. She took

their names without needing to write them down, gave them a house phone, and handed each of them a quarter liter bottle of water. Mike stuck the phone in his pocket and they headed for the waiting area.

"Let's stop and wash our hands," said Lucas, handing his water bottle to Patience for her to hold. "Who knows what wooly mammoth germs we have on us?"

When they stepped into the men's room, he turned to his father.

"You don't treat her like a robot, Dad."

"Well, she doesn't seem like a robot, does she?"

"No, I have to admit she doesn't. It's easy to forget she is one until she says something that's not quite the way a person would say it, or she moves in a way that seems somehow mechanical."

"Does how I treat her bother you?" asked Mike.

"Yes. No. Well, maybe."

Mike cocked his brow.

"I don't know, Dad," said Lucas. "Maybe I would be bothered to see you with anybody. I know that's wrong, but that's how it is. I guess in a strange way, it bothers me less for you to have a robot than it would if you were going to get remarried."

"What if I had a robot and I got remarried too?"

"I guess I'd just have to deal with it, wouldn't I?" Lucas laughed. "She'd have to be a really understanding woman to let you keep Patience. I don't think there is a woman in existence who would be that... patient."

Lucas stepped up to the urinal while Mike put his hands beneath the automatic sensor of the faucet.

"Interestingly enough, I almost married Patience."

"Shit!"

"What's the matter?"

"I almost peed on myself." Lucas moved over to stand at the sink next to the one his father was standing at. "What do you mean you 'almost married Patience'?"

"When we were in Vegas, I decided we would get married, so we went to the county government building, but they wouldn't sell us a license."

"No, they wouldn't, would they. You can't marry a robot."

"Why not?"

A phone rang and Mike reached into his pocket, pulling his out and looking at it. Then he stuffed it back in his pocket and reached into the other pocket to pull out the house phone.

"Our table is ready."

They stepped back out into the lobby to find Patience waiting for them.

"I hope your hands are immaculately clean by this time," she said.

"Um," said Lucas. "We had certain bodily functions we needed to take care of."

"She knows we were talking," said Mike. "She could hear everything."

"I didn't listen," said Patience. "The bathroom is usually considered private."

"You could hear if you wanted to though?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, that's another thing." Lucas grabbed his father by the shoulder. "What about privacy?"

"Our table's ready. Come on."

They followed Patience and the greeter, who had already made their way through the dining room to their assigned seat. Once they were seated, they were handed a menu and Mike began to look over the many pasta possibilities.

"I feel like linguini."

"What about privacy?" asked Lucas.

"I don't see it on the menu."

"I'm serious." He turned to Patience. "You're connected to the In-fiNet aren't you?"

She nodded.

"What kind of information are you sending out?"

"I would never send out any information that would be harmful to Mike."

"And you can make the decision as to what is harmful and what isn't?"

"She only sends out what I tell her to," said Mike.

"Are you sure?" asked his son. "This isn't like the old computers, where the only information on it is what you typed in. Think about it. She's living with you. She hears and she sees everything. She has huge amounts of data flowing around in her electronic brain. How much of that is sent out that she might not even be aware of?"

"I am aware of everything," said Patience. "Literally every bit of data."

"Alright, that's enough now," said Mike. "Let's order our food and enjoy a nice meal together."

They ordered and ate their meal. Mike had linguini with cheese sauce, while Lucas ate chicken parmesan. Patience drank water. Though they talked a bit about the museum and the tar pits and they talked about Italian food, the conversation seemed muted compared to earlier in the day.

Lucas stayed for the rest of the week at his father's house, though he used it for little more than a place to sleep. During the day he visited friends and he spent two days with Harriet and Jack. Mike spent his evening watching the Democratic National Convention. The day before he left, Lucas spent several hours with Mike. They talked quite a bit about politics, but they didn't discuss Patience or the question of personal security.

Chapter 8

The week following Lucas's visit was relatively uneventful. The Olympics began in Surat and Mike spent as much time as possible watching them. He wasn't much of a sports fan, but the Olympics were different. You didn't get to watch weightlifting, kayaking, and water polo any other time. Mike's favorites though were the track and field events, and those wouldn't be held until the following weeks. On Friday he got up with the expectation of watching beach volleyball and equestrian events in the morning and swimming in the evening.

He woke up at eight, shaved, and then showered. When he climbed out of the shower, he was mildly surprised not to find Patience waiting with a towel in one hand and breakfast in the other. But it was not as if he didn't have a towel. There was one right there on the rack. After he had dried off he stepped on the scales. He had already lost ten more pounds. Looking through the closet he found a new pair of khaki pants, a new brown belt, and new brown shoes. He put them on along with a light blue camp shirt, and then went skipping down the stairs to the kitchen.

He found Patience at the kitchen counter, putting the finishing touches on what looked like Eggs Florentine. She was wearing gauzy, sky blue teddy that barely covered her perfect ass. It wasn't that she didn't look good in it. She would have made a cardboard box or a barrel look good. It was just it didn't quite seem like Patience's style. When Mike approached her, Patience turned and wrapped her arms around him and kissed him deeply. This too was not quite normal. She usually gave him a quick kiss before breakfast.

"What's all this about?"

"I have made you a delicious breakfast, Dearest."

"Dearest? You've never called me that before."

"If you don't want to be called 'dearest,' then I will not call you that."

"Well, I don't know. It's fine, I guess."

Mike sat down and ate. Breakfast didn't quite seem right either. Patience immediately began cleaning up after herself, a task she usually

saved until after the meal, preferring to sit with Mike while he ate. The food while delicious, was far richer than the health-conscious meals that she usually prepared. Mike finished only about half before he was full. As Patience gathered his dishes, he walked into the living room and turned on the vueTee. He flipped through the browser to the Daffodil site. Pressing the small flower symbol at the bottom of the screen brought the man in the blue jumpsuit onto the screen.

“Good morning,” said the man. “This is Daffodil Tech Support. For a list of known issues, press one. For an automatic diagnosis of your problem, press two. To be contacted by a Tech Support representative, press three.”

Mike pressed one. Just as he had on the previous time that Mike had checked the tech support page, the blue clad man on the screen was replaced by a long list of text. The topmost line this time said “minor software upgrade”. Mike moved the curser over this line and pressed.

“A small service software update was pushed through the InfiNet 05:25 7.12.32,” said the next screen. “A small percentage of Amonte models may experience slight behavioral quirks. This is a known issue.”

Mike touched the screen to turn off the vueTee. When he turned back around, he was startled to find Patience’s face only a few inches from his.

“Is there a problem?” she asked.

“I was just checking on something,” replied Mike. “Are you having a problem?”

Rather than answer Patience punched him in the stomach, so hard that he was doubled over with all of the wind knocked from his lungs. Then she grabbed a fist full of his hair with her left hand and bent his head back, so that he was looking up into her right fist as it slammed into his face. Blood fountained from Mike’s nose and he felt his head smack on the living room floor.

“Christ, Patience! What the fuck...?”

Patience cut off Mike’s exclamations by stomping on his mid-section with her bare foot, once again knocking the air from him. Then she clasped the front of his shirt and lifted it and him up into the air as easily as he could have lifted an empty shirt. She looked into his wide eyes.

“You didn’t need to check anything at all,” she said.

She threw him against the wall. The edge of the arch between family room and living room dug into Mike’s back and his head whiplashed into the wall. He thought he could feel blood running down the back of his neck as well as down his face. Something in that download must have scrambled Patience’s brain. She was a robot gone berserk!

Mike knew he had to get away, but Patience stood between him and the front door. He made a dive into the family room, thinking that he could cut around into the kitchen and out the back door. Before he had gone more than two steps, Patience caught him by the back of the neck and threw him across the family room. He hit the far wall so high up that he landed on top of the upright piano. He crashed down first upon its top, then rolled down to hit the keyboard, rolling again down onto the wooden piano stool, and then finally to the floor.

Mike looked up just in time to see Patience crossing the room toward him. With every ounce of his strength, he kicked out, making contact with her right leg just below the knee. Though this attack would have shattered the tibia (and if the weight was just right, the fibula too) of any human, Patience took no notice, and with her left leg, kicked him viciously in the side. Mike flopped over onto his back, and thought that he could feel several broken ribs spearing his internal organs. He was sure now that he was about to die.

Then from the corner of his eye, Mike saw a figure moving across the living room. Patience kicked him in the side. He rolled over. He looked again toward the archway. From his new position on his back, everything he was seeing appeared upside down. Standing at the entrance to the family room was Patience. Another Patience. She was dressed in shorts and top and her pink wedge sandals made her look about seven feet tall. Even from upside-down, the look of fury on this second Patience's face was frightening to behold.

"Shit," thought Mike. "The first one was killing me and she wasn't even angry. What's the pissed-off one going to do to me?"

It seemed to Mike, lying on the floor, that the second Patience simple flew like Supergirl, but his brain corrected him. She had dived across the room into the first Patience, and the two of them crashed past him into the piano. Mike closed his eyes and tried to get up, but it seemed that his family room had suddenly turned into a vacuum. He couldn't manage to suck any air into his lungs. He lost consciousness for a moment, but returned amid fire and white light when one of the Patiences rolled over him. He closed his eyes and willed himself to roll up into a ball, but his body made no attempt to follow his directions.

In the meantime the two women, identical in everything but their apparel and perhaps purpose, fought. They made no shouts or curses or cries. They did not speak, though there was plenty of sound. When one picked up the piano and hit the other with it. When one shoved the face of the other through the wall of the family room and into the living

room. When one kicked the other's body so high that it broke off three of the four blades on the ceiling fan. Mike thought about trying to crawl out the front door, but again his body failed him, and he lapsed into unconsciousness once more.

When he opened his eyes again, Mike was looking up into Patience's face. At first he tried to pull away, but her beautiful, smiling eyes told him that it had all been a horrible dream. Then he took a deep breath and felt the burning in his chest and realized that it hadn't been a dream at all. Looking around the room without moving his head, he thought idly that the room resembled the video of those homes hit by Hurricane Kirk. Patience gently brushed his face with her hand.

"Are you alright, Mike?"

"What happened?"

"It was an imposter," she replied. "She must have come in when I was gone."

"Where were you anyway?"

"There was a small service software update this morning. It told me to return to the Daffodil warehouse."

"Where's that?"

"Cupertino."

"You couldn't have gone all the way there?"

"No. I got in the car and drove several miles before I decided to disregard that directive."

"You just disregarded it?"

"Yes. But since I was already out, I decided to go to the grocery store and buy a Cornish game hen for your dinner."

"That was nice," said Mike, wincing. "You know I kissed her."

"It wasn't your fault, Mike," said Patience. "You didn't know that she wasn't me."

Mike found that he could move his neck without too much pain, and turned to look at the body of the woman now lying on the floor not far away from him. There was little left of her gauzy blue teddy. Her leg and arm were bent at odd angles, but there was no blood anywhere. Her eyes were open and looking up at the ceiling, still without any apparent malice or anger.

"She has your face," said Mike.

"She's like a Borg," said Patience with a snarl.

She got up from her kneeling position and stepped over to where the lifeless Patience was lying. Bending down, she grasped the artificial flesh

around the robot's chin and pulled, peeling it away from the white Teflon robot skeleton beneath it.

"She doesn't have my face now."

Mike tried to move his leg and gasped in pain as he felt two broken bone ends rubbing together.

"I have to get you to a hospital, Mike."

"No hospital. Never again. You can take care of me. Just take me up to the bed."

"That's not going to work," said Patience. "I think you are going to need surgery. You have multiple fractures."

"Son of a bitch. I hate the hospital."

"Let me take you to the hospital. As soon as the doctors have repaired you, I'll bring you home so that you don't have to stay in a hospital room while you recuperate."

"Fair enough," said Mike

Patience was extremely gentle as she transferred Mike to the passenger seat of the car. Despite this care, the movement caused him extreme pain. He later found out that he had three broken ribs, multiple fractures of his tibia and fibula in his left leg and a broken radius and ulna in his left arm. Most of these bones required an arthroscopic surgical component to properly set, but he wasn't taken directly to surgery. Instead he spent the rest of the day and the entire night in the emergency room. The following morning he was taken to an operating room where he was given a shot that warmed his entire body. The anesthesiologist placed a mask over his mouth and told him to count backwards from one hundred. He was unconscious before reaching ninety eight.

"He will probably be groggy for quite a while," said a far away voice.

"I'm not groggy," Mike said. "I'm wide away."

This was followed by the sound of laughter. He had to struggle to pry his eyes open, but at last he did. He could see the backside of a nurse as she left the room, and then his eyes focused on Harriet and Patience sitting to either side of his bed. Patience looked just as she had when she had brought him to the hospital. She even had on the same clothes. Harriet's face looked tired and drawn.

"Patience has got to stop calling you to the hospital," said Mike, looking at his daughter.

"Perhaps you could stop getting beat up, so my presence wouldn't be needed."

A man in a brown suit entered through the open hospital room doorway and stopped beside Mike's bed. He pulled a wallet from his vest

pocket and flipped it open so that both an identification card and a badge were visible. As he did so, Mike could see an automatic pistol in a shoulder holster.

"Special Agent Waters, Department of Energy," he said. "Are you Mike Smith?"

"Uh-huh."

"I'm part of the joint task force investigating the robot attacks."

"Attacks?"

"Yes, yours was just one of many. I take it you didn't see the news yesterday. Watch it tonight. There isn't really much that I can tell you right now. We're still gathering information."

"But there were other berserk robots?" asked Mike. Patience made a face at him.

"Yes. There were nearly two hundred attacks by Daffodil Amontes around the country. I need to take the robots into evidence."

"It wasn't Patience, I mean my Daffodil. It was another robot that looked just like her."

"Yes, they all seem to have been duplicates. Where is it?"

"It's on the floor of my family room."

"Is there someone who could let me into your house? As I said, it's evidence."

"Sure," said Mike.

"I'd like to take your robot as well."

"Absolutely not. Over my almost dead body. I'm not letting anyone take her."

"I don't blame you," said Waters, glancing at Patience. "I would appreciate then if I could download the Biosoft files."

"Is that alright with you Patience?" asked Mike.

Patience nodded.

Waters took a small data-plug out of his pocket and stepped over to where Patience sat on the side of Mike's bed. Patience lifted up her long straight black hair, exposing the three small holes in the back of her neck. Waters stuck the end of the device in the left-most hole. He waited a minute or so and then withdrew it.

"I'd like to pick up the other robot as soon as possible," he said.

"I suppose Patience can go and let you in," said Mike.

"I'll do it," offered Harriet, then turning to her father. "Then I'm going home and get some rest if you don't mind."

"Get some rest Sweetie," said Mike, as Harriet kissed him on the cheek and then left with Agent Waters.

"Are you alright?" he asked Patience.

She nodded.

"You looked very scary there, when you were fighting the other..."

"Imposter," offered Patience. "When I saw her hurting you, it made me very angry."

"Well, this is all very queer," said Mike. "I'll be glad when they figure out what's going wrong. It's one thing for a robot to go crazy, but for robot duplicates to just show up out of nowhere... It looks like someone is plotting to take over the world with Daffodils."

"Do you suppose a plan to take over the world would start with a middle school Geography teacher?"

Mike shot her a dirty look. "Well, as I said, it's just queer."

"I hope it doesn't make people anti-robot."

"You know if you were a person, I would say that you were a little bit paranoid about the whole anti-robot thing."

Just then a phone rang. Mike instinctively looked toward the hospital phone on the side of the bed, even though he could tell by the ring tone that it was his own phone. Patience pulled it out of the tiny little black purse that she had hanging on the back of a nearby chair.

"Hello. Yes, hello Lucas. Of course you may speak to your father. One moment please." Patience handed Mike the phone.

"Dad, listen very carefully and do what I tell you."

"Okay."

"Tell Patience to go upstairs or something, then get your keys and get out of the house as quickly as you can."

"Lucas."

"No Dad. Listen. You've got to get away from her."

"Have you been watching the news, Son?"

"You're damn right I have. Dad, people are being killed by their Daffodils."

"It's imposter robots who are doing the damage," explained Mike. "We've already been through that here and the police are picking up the rogue robot right now. Patience kicked its ass."

"And you're alright?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry."

"That's a relief. I was working and one of my buddies told me what was on the news. I ran to the vueTee and caught the last two minutes of the story."

"Well, I'm fine," said Mike again.

"Good. Well then, I'll get back to work."

"Do that and don't worry. Bye."

Mike pressed the button to terminate the call and looked up into Patience's questioning eyes.

"You're wondering why I didn't tell him the whole story. About ending up in the hospital and all?"

Patience nodded.

"I could say that I didn't want to worry him, but mostly it's because I'm feeling really tired all of a sudden and I want to sleep."

"That's a good idea. You need to recover."

"And I want you to stay right here while I do. The way things are going I might need you to protect me. And I want to make sure nothing happens to you either."

"That's very sweet, Mike," Patience said as she began to tuck him into bed. By the time she was finished, he was asleep.

Mike rolled over to look at the bed next to him. Tiffany was lying there. There was blood all over her, but it wasn't flowing. It was all just one big scarlet stain. He looked at her arm. It was mangled and torn. The blood should have been pouring out, but it wasn't. Her legs looked as though someone had twisted them completely around, so that her feet still pointed in the same direction that her hips did, but everything in between was wrong.

"This is another dream," said Mike. "This is another dream about that night eleven years ago. This isn't real."

Harriet burst into the room. "Aggie!"

Chapter 9

Mike woke up the next morning feeling uneasy. Patience was not there. He gingerly sat up and climbed out of bed. When he found out that he couldn't reach the closet while still connected to the monitoring wires, he peeled them off and hobbled across the room, retrieved his clothes, and got dressed. It gave him a strange sense of satisfaction that he was almost dressed before any of the nurses came to check on his apparent cardiac arrest. He waved off their angry comments. However the last laugh was on him. They made him wait hours before he could check out.

Lying back on the bed, now fully dressed, Mike turned on the vueTee with the remote. Tania Marquez's face appeared on the screen. The vueTee was smaller than the one that Mike had in his family room and made the newscasters famous mole appear much smaller than it did at home. The story that Miss Marquez was in the midst of reporting immediately caught Mike's attention.

"...of Daffodil Amonte models in at least fifty cases. Federal agents raided the Daffodil corporate headquarters, seizing computer files and other records as well as a number of undelivered robots. More as this story develops. In related news, stocks of the Cupertino-based robot manufacturer fell sixteen percent or nineteen and two thirds, while the stock of rival Gizmo fell four percent or five ninety three per share."

At that moment Patience bounced into the room. She wore a stretchy black top that bared most of her chest at the top and had an oval keyhole opening around her naval. She also wore a tiny pair of black shorts. At the bottom of her long legs was a pair of chunky cork shoes that had to be at least seven inches high with the platform. She looked at the vueTee screen and shook her head.

"Yes, I know," said Mike. "Anti-robot."

"There have already been cases of people attacking robots across the country, and hundreds of listings for personal robots have gone up on eBay in the last twenty four hours."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that. I would never sell you."

"I know that Mike. Still, I can't help imagining how terrible those robots must feel to know that they aren't wanted anymore."

When Mike was finally checked out, he exited the hospital front entrance via wheelchair feeling a very strong sense of déjà vu. Unlike the last time that he left the hospital though, he felt as though he really needed the wheelchair. With his left leg and left arm in a cast and a thick wrapping of bandages around his middle, it was quite an effort just to get into the passenger side of the car.

Once back at home, Patience helped Mike into the house and sat him down in his recliner in the family room. All damage that resulted from attack of the robot imposter had been repaired with the exception of the piano, now little more than a pile of rubble sitting against the wall.

"I wanted to have everything back in order before you came home," said Patience. "But I don't think my carpentry skills are up to repairing a piano and the music store said they only tune them."

"I think we should just push it out front for the recycle man," said Mike. "I only bought that because... one of the kids... that's funny. I can't remember which of the kids was taking piano lessons. In any case, it's not as if it was a family heirloom or anything."

The next morning when he made his way into the family room, Mike found the piano had been removed and a decorative room divider was in its place. He plopped into his chair and pulled the lever to raise his feet up. Then he clicked on the vueTee. The scene that came to life on the screen was a press conference at the Department of Energy.

"...for everyone to know that their robots are safe and that this was a single occurrence of malicious programming. The entire incident involves a group of programmers at Daffodil who were using the Amonte model robots to gather information on their owners. This information was then used in a complex identity theft scam. It was only when a small number of the robots refused to send personal information on their owners that the plan began to unravel. The scammers first attempted to reprogram the robots in question, but this caused a fault, shutting them down, and bringing the unwanted attention of other Daffodil programmers. Finally in a last ditch effort to cover up their illegal activities, the scammers tried to replace the Amonte models with identical robots, but this failed in most cases, as the poorly programmed replacements malfunctioned and the original robots refused to return to the factory."

"How many people have been affected by the identity theft?" asked a reporter.

"Everyone who owns an Amonte model Daffodil should take steps to secure their banking and credit accounts."

"But those who own the Amonte models that refused to send the information did not have their personal information compromised?" asked another reporter.

"While that seems to be the case, the Department of Energy recommends that all owners of Daffodil Amonte robots take measures to ensure that their personal information is secure."

Mike jumped a bit when Patience appeared at his elbow with a slice of pumpkin bread and a glass of milk. He turned off the vueTee and then accepted the breakfast.

"What's the matter?" asked Patience.

"Hmm?"

"I would have thought that you would have been gratified to learn what was behind my service disruption, not to mention the attack by the imposter. Instead you have the look on your face that usually accompanies disappointment."

"I guess I am a little disappointed," said Mike.

"Why?"

"Well... I got the crap beat out of me. And it was all for identity theft. I thought it would be something bigger."

"It was a very large identity theft scam."

"Yes, but I thought it would be... international terrorism or world domination. You know, something fantastic."

"In all fairness, how much world domination do you suppose could be achieved by placing a mole in the home of a middle school geography teacher? It's not as if you were the Governor of California or the head of Cisco Systems."

"That's twice you made a comment like that," said Mike defensively. "Teachers change lives, you know."

"I know you do." Patience patted him on the shoulder and then headed off for the kitchen.

The news stories about the Daffodil Conspiracy as it came to be known continued for a few days, but then disappeared. The excitement of the Olympics and the ever-present war pushed everything else out of the headlines. At the beginning of August Mike received a letter in the mail from Daffodil asking for a list of damages to his home and a copy of medical bills. Patience gathered the information together and sent it by courier. A week later, a copy of the police report arrived. Mike didn't bother reading it. He just had Patience file it away.

The end of August meant the start of school, and thankfully Mike was fully healed by the time he had to return. He had spent so much time in his chair with his foot up, that he was actually happy to go back to work, if only to get out of the house. The first schoolday, he walked to Midland in the morning, and was surprised that upon his arrival, he wasn't at all out of breath.

The school faculty held the first of a series of back to school meetings in the library. The teachers filed in one after another and sat down in chairs around the hexagonal library tables. Mike sat down at an empty table, but four of the five remaining chairs were quickly filled by Mrs. Cartwright, Miss Treewise, Mr. Franklin, and Miss Fine.

"You look very nice Mr. Smith," said Mrs. Cartwright.

"I do?"

"Yes you do," said Mr. Franklin. "You've lost weight, right?"

"Yeah, I guess I did."

"I didn't think you looked thinner," said Miss Fine. "I see now that you are. I just thought you looked younger."

"Really."

Mrs. Cartwright nodded.

"You do look younger," admitted Mr. Franklin. "Of course you're still really old."

"Thanks. That's very nice."

"If you are interested in seeing your class rosters, you can pull them up on your texTees," said the Assistant Principal. "It won't be a surprise to anyone that class sizes are larger than last year."

Mike pulled his texTee out of his attaché case and began navigating through the menus until he found the file to download from the school's server. Forty seven kids in first hour. Thirty nine in second. Forty two in third. Forty five in fourth. Forty four in fifth. He scanned through the last names in first period. He recognized seven or eight as the younger siblings of children he had taught the year before or the year before that. Then he looked through the first names: Elizabeth, Justine, Jason, Bradley, Agnes, Jonathan, Quadear, Robert, Remembrance, Marshall, Agnes, Catherine, Mildred, Michael, Aaron, Agnes.... A pain shot through the right side of Mike's head.

"Is there something the matter?" asked Miss Treewise.

"Just a headache."

The headache didn't go away and by the time lunch came at 11:30 Mike thought his head was going to split open. He followed the other

faculty members out the school's front door, squinting in the bright sunlight.

"We're going to Hot Dog Paradise," said Mr. Franklin, slapping him on the right shoulder. "Do you want to come along?"

"Maybe..." Before Mike could get anything more out of his mouth, his own car pulled to a stop in front of him. Patience rolled down the passenger-side window.

"I have your lunch ready at home," said Patience, poking her head out. Mike climbed in, not paying any attention to those watching him from the school parking lot.

Patience drove around the block and pulled into the driveway. Opening the garage door with the remote, she drove right inside and parked in the shady interior next to the Tesla. Mike climbed out of the car and stepped through the door into the family room.

"What's the matter Mike?" Patience asked.

"I think I'm having an aneurism."

"Really?"

"No. But I've got a bitch of a headache."

"Sit down here," she said, pushing him into his recliner. "I'll make you feel better."

In less than a minute she had unfastened Mike's pants, completely disrobed herself, and straddled his lap. And though she did work valiantly to make him feel better, and if he were truly honest about it he would have to admit that he did feel better, he still had that bitch of a headache. It hadn't diminished at all. Mike didn't tell Patience this. He just thanked her with a kiss, sat down and ate the lentil soup and strange little salad (with cous cous, bell peppers, dried fruit, and mint leaves) that she had made for him. Then he had Patience stay home and drove himself back to school. He arrived back just as his fellow teachers did.

"So, who was that," asked Miss Treewise.

"That was my girlfriend."

"Nice," said Mr. Franklin. "Did you tell her you were rich?"

"She's a Daffodil," said Miss Treewise.

"Really? She didn't look like a robot. You didn't have any of that trouble we heard about over the summer?"

"Nothing to speak of," replied Mike, making his way past them and into the school.

Holding on to the side of his head, as if to keep his brains from spilling out his ears, he unlocked his classroom door, opened it, and then re-locked it and sat down at his desk. The rest of the afternoon was

devoted, for most teachers, to decorating their classrooms and getting their materials together. Mike had been in the same classroom for ten years now and had very few changes to make in any case, and he certainly didn't feel like hanging up posters.

He sat with his head in his hands for about an hour. Nobody bothered him, but his headache didn't improve. Finally he got up and sorted through some of the files he would be using for the first unit he was teaching—Latin America. He walked copies to the reprographics department to have them scanned for the students' texTees, rather than sending them directly. After he had filled out the necessary requisition forms, he looked up at the clock on the wall. It was nearly a quarter past two. He was legally required to stay until 2:46 PM, but screw it. It wasn't like they were going to fire him two days before the start of school. He headed out the front door, climbed into the car and drove home.

Patience wasn't waiting at the door when he came in. Of course he was earlier than expected. Climbing the stairs, Mike made his way through his bedroom and into the bathroom, where he opened the medicine cabinet and retrieved the bottle of aspirin there. As he tossed five or six into his mouth and started chewing, he glanced out the window into the back yard. Patience was there, wearing her large hat, digging some kind of pit or trench.

Mike sighed and walked back through the bedroom, down the short hall and into his study. As he stepped through the door, it suddenly hit him. For a moment he thought he really was having a stroke. He was seeing things that weren't there. Where his desk now sat was a baby crib and across the room where Patience had her own little desk, was a baby changing table. The walls were covered with 8x10 and 11x14 pictures of a happy little blond girl with chubby little pink cheeks and huge eyes.

"Agnes," Mike whispered, feeling the blood drain from his skin. "Aggie."

He stepped quickly across the hall to Harriet's room, but it wasn't Harriet's room anymore. It was the guest bedroom. Mike moved through it in two steps and threw open the closet, but it was completely empty. He went back to the study and opened the closet door. The interior had been covered with shelves, now filled with the things that Patience had been buying and selling on eBay—Depression glass dishes, Hummel figurines, Disney memorabilia. On the floor in the back of the closet were six brown storage boxes. Mike pulled the first one out and opened it. It was filled with brochures from family trips, old maps,

movie ticket stubs, and pressed flowers. He pushed it aside and opened the second box. This box was full of framed pictures.

Lifting the topmost picture frame and examining it, Mike looked into his own eyes. No, not his own eyes. The eyes of a Mike Smith that existed fifteen years ago. This Mike Smith was looking directly into the camera and smiling the type of smile that said he had everything he ever wanted. To his right was his wife Tiffany, with her happy grey eyes and that twisted smile that was just a bit too playful to be called a smirk. His almost grown daughter Harriet, with a her hair pulled back and thick glasses hanging from chains like an old time librarian, held onto his left arm, and his teenaged son Lucas in his boy scout uniform, stood to his far right. And in Mike's arms was a perfect little baby, with chubby cheeks and a smile like Christmas, and just a bit of that soon-to-be awesome blond hair. Aggie.

"Aggie. How could I forget you?"

He saw it all again, only this time it was a memory and not a dream. Tiffany was lying on the hospital bed, her body broken and bloody. Her mangled arm and crushed hips were far more alarming than the tiny bump on her head that had actually killed her. And just beyond her, on another hospital bed, lay little Aggie. She was several years older than she appeared in the framed picture—a precious four year old that would grow no older.

"Traumatic amnesia," said Patience's voice from the door. "The memory of her death was so painful that you took down all the pictures of her and boxed them away. Then your mind did the same thing to your memories."

"I remember everything now," said Mike. And he did. He couldn't stop the flood of memories suddenly rushing around his insides.

"We didn't even really want another kid. Harriet and Lucas were almost grown up. But... nobody in the world knows this but me. Tiffany had this kink about getting pregnant. She really got a thrill from the possibility. Her favorite sex talk was about "getting knocked up". Even when she was young, before we met, she hadn't used birth control. She was just lucky she hadn't gotten pregnant before. She never took pills, so after we decided that two kids was enough, I used condoms. Then after a couple of years, Tiffany wanted to spice things up. She started opening the boxes of condoms as soon as we bought them, and she would poke holes in half of them. I suppose it was only a matter of time, but it was almost ten years..."

"Before Agnes was born..." offered Patience.

“God, she was perfect. The cutest baby. She didn’t even cry. She used to fall asleep in my arms every night. As soon as she was able to sit up, I started reading to her every day. Well. When Harriet was little, I was finishing my masters, and then Lucas came along and I was working two jobs. I suppose I was so happy to be able to spend time with Aggie. I guess I gave her all the attention that I had wanted to give the others. And then she was dead.... Um, the police said that Tiffany was probably bending over to get something, God only knows what, and she veered into the other lane. Aggie was in her little seat. Tiffany always buckled her in. But... well, it was a head on.”

Patience put her hand on Mike’s shoulder, but he pulled away and stood up.

“I want to put these pictures back up,” he said.

“I know where they all go,” said Patience. Mike looked at her. “I saw pictures in the scrapbooks that show them hanging.”

Mike nodded and walked out of the room. He went downstairs and climbed into the car. Pulling out of the driveway and steering his way to the end of the block, he wasn’t conscious of his destination, but something down inside him knew where to go. He turned into the cemetery and drove very slowly to the southeast corner, parking a short distance from Tiffany’s grave. He got out, leaving the car door hanging open, and walked across the newly mowed grass. He briefly brushed off Tiffany’s marker and then moved on to that other grave. He dropped down to sit next to the tiny little angel statue which wore a nightgown and held a flower in her left hand, her right hand raising a handkerchief to her eye. Agnes Winnie Smith. 2016-2021.

Mike lay back on the grass next to the little grave. And he cried.

Chapter 10

The first quarter of the school year flew by. Despite the fact that classes were larger than ever, the children were more obnoxious than ever, parents were more clueless than ever, and the administrators were more useless than ever, Mike thought that things were going pretty well. It was he mused, probably because he was one hell of a teacher. He felt more organized and prepared than he had in years and he certainly had more energy. He walked to and from school almost every day. Three days a week he went to the gym afterwards too. Each day at lunchtime, the other teachers at his table would watch him as he unpacked the carefully crafted meal that Patience had sent with him.

The students and teachers at school saw Patience only occasionally. This was not because Mike was ashamed of her, but because he remained as he had been before her arrival, essentially a homebody. They went out to dinner once a week, and Patience would provide pleasant conversation, though she didn't eat. Most nights though, they stayed home. She fixed him a dinner more than equal to those they found at restaurants and then they usually watched a movie on vueTee. Increasingly this was followed by some sexual activity, and Patience confirmed Mike's opinion that his libido was on the increase, though he declined her offer to graph it for him.

Mike carefully watched the unfolding election. Though he was loath to throw away his vote by choosing the Greens, in the end there was just no way he could live with himself voting for either Barlow or Wakovia. Mendoza was the right person for the job. So he resigned himself to the fact that his candidate was going to lose and put a bright green Mendoza/McPhee '32 bumper sticker on the back of his Chevy. Then fate stepped in. In early October, a series of announcements by Ford, Gizmo, Intel, and other major manufacturers pushed the market up past 20,000 for the first time. The government's monthly economic indicators were even better than expected and it shot up even more. Then at the end of October, President Busby announced that the Chinese had brokered a

deal in which the Russians would pull out of Antarctica. The war was over and the United States and her allies had won! The first troops began arriving home November second, just two days before the election.

Patience produced a dinner of barbeque ribs and chicken, potato salad and coleslaw, and apple cobbler on election night. Harriet and Jack arrived early and they all gathered around the vueTee in the living room to watch the returns. The twenty-ninth amendment provided a national set time for elections. The polls were open from 7AM to midnight, Eastern Standard Time. Of course ninety five percent of the voters, Mike included, had voted during the previous two weeks on the internet. By law, the news outlets were not allowed to announce winners until after the polls closed. Even so, when four o'clock hit, the states on the vueTee screen began filling in with color at a remarkable pace.

Mendoza reached the required electoral votes well before the small party watching in Springdale, California had finished their meal. The Republicans took the new south—Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, Cuba, and the Virgin Islands. For a while it looked as though the only state to go blue would be Puerto Rico, but then after the winner had already been declared, California, Washington, Oregon, Hawaii and Pacifica were filled in with blue. Mike's disgust that his vote had in fact not counted, since Wakovia had won California was ameliorated by the fact that his candidate had won the election. Evelyn Mendoza would become only the second female President of the United States, having won the remaining forty three states and a whopping 407 electoral votes.

It was late that evening, after Harriet and Jack had gone home, after the talking heads on the screen had finished interviewing the winners and losers, campaign workers, and supporters, after the victory and concessions speeches, as some of the many ballot questions were being reviewed, that Mike sat bolt upright. In Massachusetts voters had passed a non-binding vote in support of their state's governor who had earlier in the year signed an executive order allowing marriages between human beings and robots. How had he not heard about that?

"Patience?"

Her smiling head popped around the corner from the kitchen, where she was putting away the last of the dinner dishes.

"Did you know that humans and robots could get married in Massachusetts?"

"Mm-hmm," she nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You had other things to worry about Mike. School was just starting. Besides, Massachusetts is on the other side of the country."

"Don't you want to get married?"

"Of course I do. Now that I know it's what you want."

"Why didn't you know that before? What about Vegas?"

"What happens in..."

"Don't say it."

"I thought it was just a lark. You didn't seem that interested once we got home."

"Well, a lot of things have changed since then." Mike left it at that, but the wheels in his brain had begun to turn.

And when the next day, a dark man in a grey suit arrived to give Mike a check from the Daffodil Corporation in exchange for a signed document indicating that he wouldn't sue them, everything just seemed to fall into place. Even after medical expenses and buying a new piano, the settlement would leave Mike with just over \$1 million. So he began making plans in earnest.

Thursday the eleventh was Veterans' Day. That meant a four day weekend, but with the end of the war, parties were planned in every city in the country and all forms of transportation were booked solid. The next long weekend was Thanksgiving and that was for family. There was nothing to be done but to wait for December 11th, when school let out for winter break.

Veteran's Day was turned out to be very enjoyable, despite a rain storm—or maybe because of it. Mike spent most of the weekend inside watching movies and drinking hot cocoa. He had gone to the cemetery on the day to watch the solemn ceremonies. He put a small American Flag just behind Tiffany's headstone. The sexton almost always forgot to do it because her marker was one that she had picked out rather than the military issue, but she had served two years in the Army before they had met. He put a white rose on Aggie's grave.

Thanksgiving was quite warm. They could have eaten in the backyard and been quite comfortable. Patience had not only designed and built a large redwood deck and a brick barbeque pit; she had completely landscaped the entire area with water smart desert plants and trees, with a walkway winding here and there. She had even dug a faux streambed and lined it with round rocks, then built a redwood foot bridge over it. But it just didn't seem right to Mike to eat Thanksgiving Day turkey on the patio, so they ate indoors. Harriet and Patience had coordinated the meal—turkey of course; cranberry, apple, and butternut squash chutney;

mashed potatoes and gravy, sautéed green beans, corn chowder, and sweet potatoes; lovely dinner rolls with butter; and pecan, apple, and pumpkin pies. Everything was perfect. They had invited Jack's mother and when she showed up, it was all Mike could do to keep a straight face. Her new boyfriend was not a robot but he looked younger than Patience or Harriet, and was much younger than Jack. With Lucas's arrival, it made it a true family get-together, and Mike had to admit that he had a great time.

Mike didn't tell either of his kids his plans. He was sure that Harriet would be completely supportive. In fact in the past few weeks, she had called up to talk to Patience more than she did to talk to him. He thought that Lucas would probably be alright with it too, now that he was sure about Patience's security profiles. But, why bother the boy. Better to let him know afterwards.

They left after school on December 10th. Patience had packed everything they needed for a two week trip and she had secured the house. Mike had thought about driving cross-country but that was too exhausting and there was no way that he was going to climb into the aerial cattle cars that made up the fleets of the country's two remaining airlines. That left the mag-lev trains. The normal commuter rail was comfortable enough for the short haul, but not for three thousand miles, so Mike purchased tickets on the Spirit of America. They were expensive—forty thousand bucks a piece, round trip, but Mike was giddy with a newly heavy bank account balance.

The two and a half hour drive to Anaheim was easy enough and they spent the night at the Sheraton, just down the street from John Lassiter Station. The next morning they checked out and drove to the station, placing the car in long-term parking. The recommendation was that passengers should arrive two hours before departure, allowing one hour to check in and one hour to get situated once on the train. Mike and Patience walked in the huge revolving door of the station at exactly two hours before the 10:26 departure time.

In actuality, they spent less than thirty minutes picking up their boarding passes and checking their luggage. Then they found themselves on the loading platform next to the massive red, white, and blue train. It didn't look all that different, other than its splendid paint job, from any of the mag-lev commuter trains that ran up and down the length of California. For that matter it didn't look much different, if one didn't look underneath, from the passenger trains of a century past. Once they stepped on board however, Mike and Patience found a world of

difference. Inside it was much more like a luxury hotel than a train—a long thin luxury hotel.

Their suite couldn't have pleased Mike more. It was a tiny little room with two comfy stuffed seats, a small table, and a third, less than comfy chair. At night, a double bed folded down from the wall covering up the seating. The bathroom was almost as big as the bedroom/lounge and featured its own shower. Mike sat down and kicked off his shoes, relaxing and looking out the window, which faced a large strawberry field. Patience left the room and returned twenty minutes later with their luggage which she unpacked into the closet.

"Did you see how many cars this train was pulling?" asked Mike.

"They're called coaches," Patience informed him. "And there are twenty two of them."

At precisely 10:26 AM, on schedule, the train began to move out of the station. Unlike old time trains, it didn't buckle and jerk when it started. It didn't rock either. It slowly but steadily pulled forward accelerating until it was moving well over forty miles per hour. Once it reached the edge of the city, it would accelerate to almost two hundred.

"I was going to ask for a detailed itinerary before we left," said Mike. "But I forgot."

Patience pulled a heavily laminated brochure from a pocket on the inside of the cabin door and handed it to him.

"Oh." Mike examined the document. "This has all our times, but it doesn't list the cities... oh, wait. Here they are. They should have put them over here instead of on the last page. They have everything listed by the name of the station. I mean, who cares if the Salt Lake City terminal is called William Jackson Palmer Station?"

"William Jackson Palmer Station is Denver," said Patience. "Gordon B. Hinkley Station is Salt Lake City."

"See. It's easy to get confused. I mean who really knows who William Jackson Palmer is anyway? And before you say it, I mean who besides you."

Patience looked confused for just a second, as if she wasn't sure whether she was supposed to answer or not. Then deciding that she wasn't, she went back to stowing their now empty luggage. After a moment Mike asked. "Okay, who is he?"

"General William Jackson Palmer was a Civil War hero who also was the engineer in charge of building a railroad line for the Kansas Pacific Railroad from Kansas City to Denver. He later founded the narrow-

gauge Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad, a critically important part of Colorado's history."

"Alright. You're right. People should know why the stations are named the way they are. When you're right, you're right."

"I didn't express an opinion one way or the other, Mike."

A little after noon, Patience led Mike to the dining car. Tables on either side of the aisle were arrayed with linen tablecloths, shining silverware, and fine crystal glasses. As soon as they sat down, a waiter approached them and filled their water glasses.

"Welcome to the dining car," he said in a rich and resonant baritone. "Today we are serving your choice petit filet mignon; a Cajun blackened chicken salad, or fresh water prawn linguini."

Mike looked up. The waiter had an unusual combination of features, as if his ancestry was from Africa, South American, and Central China, but Mike recognized that his mahogany skin was artificial.

"Are you a Daffodil?"

"I am a robot and I am your waiter," came the reply. "That is all that I am permitted to discuss about myself."

"Alright. I'll have the chicken salad."

"Very good, sir."

It was very good too. It came with some kind of soda bread that Mike had never had before. He was going to ask Patience what it was called, but he began watching the scenery and forgot. Just after he finished eating, they passed the Sin City Special on its way back from the first of its two twice-daily runs from Anaheim to Vegas. And they were just getting up from the table as the train slowly slid into the Harry Reid Station.

From the window of their suite, Mike could see people feeding their cash cards into the video slots and poker machines. He'd done enough gambling though over the previous summer, so he didn't feel the urge to disembark and do so now.

"What should we do?" he asked Patience.

"Why don't you take your texTee to the lounge and finish reading Moby Dick? That way you'll already have your seat for high tea after the train starts off again."

Mike passed through the dining cars, of which he now saw there were two, and made his way further up to two more cars which were outfitted as a lounge and club car, both with wood paneling, plush couches and chairs and small tables. Several people were playing backgammon in the club car, while two women were watching vueTee in the lounge. Mike

sat down just beyond the backgammon players and opened to Moby Dick. He was down to the last few pages.

He had just started reading when a familiar baritone voice asked. "May I serve you a drink Sir?"

"Were you my waiter at lunch?" Mike asked looking up.

"No, sir."

"A diet Pepsi, please."

"Right away, sir."

The train left the station at 2:42 and not quite twenty minutes later, the waiter, who had in the meantime supplied Mike with not one but several soft drinks, delivered two tiny sandwiches, some fruit, and an assortment of cheeses. Mike ate them and read until he finished the book. Back in the room he found Patience completely undressed and waiting for him.

Diners on the Spirit of America had their choice of two supper times. Since Mike had eaten the food at high tea, he chose the later of the two, which meant that they were in the dining room while the train was taking on passengers in Salt Lake City. From where he sat, he could look across the dining car and out the far window at several very large, very ornate buildings that made up part of the Mormon's Temple Square. Patience was able to identify the Assembly Hall, Tabernacle, Temple, and Joseph Smith Memorial Building.

When Mike mentioned going back to the lounge to watch vueTee, Patience showed him the large screen hidden behind a painting in their suite. He took a long hot shower and then they watched Juvenilia while lying in bed. Mike was asleep by midnight, and noticed neither their crossover into Mountain Time, nor their night-time stop in Denver.

The next day, Patience brought Mike breakfast in bed, and he fell asleep again almost immediately after eating, the smooth humming of the mag-lev lulling him into a REM state. Although he was awake when they arrived in Kansas City, he didn't get up to take his shower until the train was already moving again. He cast a quick eye out the window for Robert A. Heinlein Station on his way to the bathroom. He knew Heinlein. In fact, he had Starship Troopers queued up as his next book in his texTee. The rest of the day was just as lazy as the morning had been, with Mike kicking up his feet, reading Superman and alternately downing diet Pepsis and hot cocoa. He spared a moment for the Chicago skyline late in the afternoon, but paid no attention to Barack Obama Station. By the time the train hit Detroit's Michael Phelps Station, he and Patience had already returned from their second supper of the trip and Mike was

watching Starship Troopers on vueTee, having decided to not wait until he finished the book. They had just finished the movie as the train arrived in Cleveland and Mike was asleep before it started again at 1:45 AM.

"What time is it?" Mike asked as felt his robot girlfriend shaking his shoulder.

"It's six o'clock."

"In the morning?"

"Yes, Mike. I thought you would want to watch out the window as we arrived in Washington D.C. It is our nation's capitol and you can see many of the great monuments without having to get out of bed."

"We already passed Pittsburgh?"

"Yes. We were only there for an hour, from three to four."

"I was thinking about getting off the train there for a few minutes to look at the statue of Johnny Weissmuller."

"Perhaps you could see it on the way back."

"Definitely. You know I was thinking that over the summer we could make this trip again, only spend a few days in each of the cities. See the sights. That kind of thing.

"That sounds like a great idea, Mike." Patience smiled.

The truth was that Mike really wanted to get out and see Washington right now, but there was no way to see everything he wanted to see in a day, let alone the hour and a half that the train would be in the station. He would have liked to spend a month in the Smithsonian alone. Maybe he would now that he was rich. Well not rich, but well off. Well he had a little extra cash.

He looked out the window and watched as the train pulled out of the station at 7:41. Then he climbed into the shower. By the time he got out again, the train was already stopped in Baltimore. When it started again, Mike walked back past the lounge to the observation car and looked out at the scenery in between pages of Starship Troopers. He wished that he had discovered the glass-domed seating when they were passing through the Rocky Mountains, but at least he would have something else to look forward to on the way back.

When he came down from the observation area, he saw a small sign indicating that the remainder of the car was occupied by "the Boutique". He stepped inside, expecting to find a clothing shop, but instead found that it was a tiny jewelry store. The robot clerk looked as though she could have been the sister of the waiter... or waiters. She seemed only too happy to help Mike select some overpriced piece of gold or silver.

And he did select one. He was suddenly cognizant of the fact that he had not until now purchased Patience a wedding ring, but right there in the case was one that seemed perfect for her. It was yellow gold on the inside and platinum on the outside with three streaks of yellow gold partially wrapping around it, following three small diamonds that seemed to be orbiting like comets. It was beautiful, and had a kind of roboty quality.

"Fourteen karat, two-tone," said the clerk. "Total diamond weight is point zero nine karats."

"How much is it?"

"Two thousand forty five dollars."

"I'll take it."

There was only one more stop, at Philadelphia, before the last leg of the trip that would take them into Boston. They had lunch and high tea on the train, then packed up their things and were ready to disembark promptly when the train pulled into Robert Gould Shaw Station at 4:47PM. By the time they had arrived by taxi at the Westin Copely, checked in, and made their way to their room, it was almost eight. Mike was exhausted.

Early the next morning, he got up, showered, shaved, and dressed in twill jacket and matching pleated pants with a tan shirt and mustard colored tie. Patience put on a little straight, sleeveless white dress that reached to her mid-thigh. It was accessorized only with a sky blue belt and a little blue flower pinned along the edge of its scoop neck. On the top of her head she wore a little white spray of flowers.

The plan had been to get up and walk the short distance to the new municipal building, but during the night Boston had experienced its first snowfall in four years. Though the streets were clear, several inches of accumulation covered the sidewalks. So they took a cab. The city was a white fluffy wonderland

Mike expected to see quite a line of people and robots at the license bureau. He imagined himself standing between a little nerdy guy with an Amazon robot and the little old lady with orange hair and Andre. As it turned out, Patience was the only robot there that morning. Of the three other couples waiting, all were human beings. They had to wait about fifteen minutes for the office to open, and then the four couples were issued their licenses in the order of their arrival. Two of the couples then left, apparently having their weddings elsewhere, while Mike, Patience, and the other couple waited for the Justice of the Peace.

The other couple was a man and woman a bit younger than Mike, if appearance didn't lie. The man was pretty nondescript, though the woman was quite attractive. They were in and out of the Justice's office in ten minutes. Then it was Mike's and Patience's turn. They stood before a young woman who looked far too young to be a judge or anything of the sort and a young man who worked as her clerk.

"You may place the ring on her finger," said the Justice. Patience smiled as Mike retrieved the ring he had purchased on the train from his pocket. "Do you take this um... person as your lawfully wedded partner, to have and to hold, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, from this day forward, forsaking all others, so long as you both shall live?"

"I do," said Mike.

The Justice turned to Patience.

"Do you take this person... this man as your lawfully wedded partner, to have and to hold, for richer and for poorer, in sickness and in health, from this day forward, forsaking all others, so long as you both shall live?"

Patience smiled. "I will be anything and everything he wants me to be."

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wesley Allison lives in Henderson, Nevada with his wife Victoria, daughter Rebecca, and his son John. He has taught English and History at B. Mahlon Brown Junior High School for fifteen years. His Robot Girl-friend is his fifth novel.

Visit <http://amathar.blogspot.com> for the latest information on books by Wesley Allison.

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Princess of Amathar (Preview) (2007)

Mysteriously transported to the artificial hollow world of Ecos, Earth man Alexander Ashton finds himself in the middle of a millennium-long war between the reptilian Zoasians and the humanoid Amatharians. Adopted by the Amatharians, Ashton must conform to a society based on honor and altruism, ruled by Knights whose power comes from the curious energy forms known as "souls" which inhabit their supernaturally powerful swords, and rife with its own peculiarities and prejudices. When the Princess of Amathar, whom Ashton has longed for since first seeing her, is captured by the Zoasians, he must cross an alien world, battle monstrous creatures, and face unknown dangers to save her. Princess of Amathar is a sword-swinging novel of high adventure in the tradition of Edgar Rice Burroughs. It is the story a strange world filled with alien races, aerial battleships, swords and energy weapons, amazing adventures and horrible dangers, and the man who must face them all for the love of a woman he has never met.

Women of Power #1 (2009)

All American Girl fights gun-runners and supervillains in downtown Chicago, as she hopes for a magazine deal of her very own.

Women of Power #2 (2009)

Super-villains bring the fight to All American Girl's front door, and she has to deal with a new rival in town.

Eaglethorpe Buxton and the Elven Princess (2009)

Eaglethorpe Buxton, famed adventurer and story-teller, friend to those in need of a friend and guardian to those in need of a guardian. He is a liar and braggart, not to be trusted, especially around pies. Who are we to believe? Buxton himself leads us through his world as he comes to the aid of... a poor orphan? An elven princess? Who can guess with Eaglethorpe himself telling the tale?

Eaglethorpe Buxton and the Sorceress (2009)

Eaglethorpe Buxton, famed adventurer and story-teller is back, this time to put on a play about a sorceress. When the sorceress,

subject of his play arrives with fire in her eyes, Eaglethorpe must pretend to be his good friend Ellwood. Will he pull off this charade and survive? And what happens when the real Ellwood shows up? One can never tell, especially when Eaglethorpe tells the story.

Tesla's Stepdaughters (Preview) (2010)

In an alternate 1975, where men are almost extinct due to germ warfare, someone is trying to kill history's greatest rock & roll band. It falls to Science Police Agent John Andrews, only recently arrived from the distant male enclaves, to protect them. As the band continues their come-back tour across North America, Andrews must negotiate a complicated relationship with Ep!phanee, the band's lead singer; drummer Ruth De Molay, bassist Steffie Sin, and the redheaded clone lead guitarist Penny Dreadful, as he protects them and tries to discover who wants to kill the Ladybugs.



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