



The Loyalty Gene

G. R. Driver

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By G. R. Driver

Part One: The Girl Next Door

Chapter One

In the news today: The Humane Society of the United States has announced its intention to add protections for genetically modified pets.

"We're moving?" Robert Thomas Junior, aka Bobby, stared at his parents. How could they do this to him?

"Son, your mother and I have discussed it. You're earning straight a's in every class. You need the challenge of a tier one school system. Parkdale isn't far away."

"Parkdale? Parkdale is full of losers. They haven't won a football game like ever."

"No, but they have an excellent debate team. Also, Parkdale graduates have the highest first-choice college acceptance rate in the state."

"But if we move, I won't be able to see any of my friends."

"Bobby," his mom said in a placating tone, "you'll make lots of new friends."

Upset and realizing he couldn't control his temper, Bobby said, "May I be excused?"

Bobby's parents shared a look then nodded. His mother smiled. "Sure, you can finish supper later."

"He's taking it much harder than I expected."

"The genetic planners warned us his IQ potential might delay his emotional maturity."

"Do you ever regret what we did?"

"No. Our son will have every advantage we can provide."

Moving proceeded on schedule. Bobby's first sight of his new home improved his spirits. The house, a split level, shared a cul-de-sac with another large home. The backyards featured several old growth shade trees.

Best of all, their new house came equipped with the latest in artificial intelligence. For some obscure reason, Bobby's father christened the A.I. as Alfred Pennyworth and chose an English butler personality module.

"Happy Birthday!" chimed Bobby's parents along with Alfred.

As far as fifteenth birthday parties went, Bobby thought, this one had to be the lamest. Despite all the invitations his mother sent, not one of his old friends showed up.

"Thanks, Mom, Dad, and you too, Alfred." At least they hadn't fussed when he refused to wear the stupid paper hat. His parents, Robert Senior and Shirley, wore their hats. Alfred the A.I. couldn't wear a hat. He didn't have a physical presence and 'lived' in a box mounted on a wall in the basement.

"Hurry up and blow out the candles," said Mom.

The cake held fifteen separate candles, each one a little shorter than the next. Bobby leaned forward and extinguished them. Mom plucked out the candles and laid them on a napkin. After she washed them, they'd go back in the box until his next birthday. Sometimes, Dad joked about Bobby having to move out when the candles became too short to use.

At least Mom baked his favorite cake, banana with chocolate buttercream icing. A cake this tasty prevented total birthday suckage.

While his mother sliced the cake, his father handed Bobby a wrapped rectangular package. "Happy Birthday, son. Your mother and I are sure you'll like this."

The package seemed heavier than expected and he gave it a little shake. Whatever its contents, nothing shifted around. Bobby glanced up and made eye contact with his parents. Mom's eyes were bright, and Dad gave him a nod. The colorful foil tore free revealing the contents, a tablet computer. "Dad? Mom? This is awesome. I...I never expected something like this."

Dad reached out and tapped the box. "It's charged and ready to go. Open it up and have fun. One thing though." Bobby looked up at the sudden seriousness in his father's voice. "Your mother and I decided to trust you with unfettered access to the internet. Don't let us down."

By the next morning, Bobby had learned the true meaning of unfettered internet access. His right forearm and privates ached. He hoped Mom wouldn't notice he needed a new box of tissues.

Planning for Bobby's birth began shortly after Robert and Shirley Thomas married. They consulted with the finest genetic planners they could afford. Technicians collected samples of their genetic material, and the best possible combinations were computer modeled. Disappointed with the results, they splurged and purchased proven genius level chromosomes.

Genetic engineers assembled the strands of DNA into forty-six chromosomes and inserted them into a prepared cell. A procedure known as "The Russian Trick" caused cell division to begin. Two and a half days later, a robotic physician attached the embryo, now known as Robert Junior, onto the lining of his mother's uterus.

Nine months later Robert Junior entered the world. His proud parents had already begun planning his future.

"Bobby," Mom called, "look outside. We have new neighbors moving in next door." Surprised, Bobby glanced up from his tablet. "They may have a boy your age. You should go out and see."

All afternoon, Bobby sat on his porch steps watching the movers. His baseball and baseball mitt sat on the step next to his knee. He had almost given up waiting when a van pulled up and backed into the driveway next door. The garage door opened, and the van backed inside.

Frustrated at not seeing the neighbors, Bobby picked up his ball and glove. He'd go back inside and continue to read about hacking AIs. The front door opened at the neighboring house, and he stopped. A girl had stepped outside. Their eyes met, and they waved to each other. Bobby blushed at the ridiculousness of waving a baseball mitt and stopped. He thought about walking over and introducing himself, but his new awareness of girls made him too embarrassed. It didn't matter because a harsh adult male voice called out, and the girl ran inside.

Over supper, Bobby gave his report on the neighbors. Mom and Dad expressed their regrets about the lack of suitably aged male neighbors. They renewed their belief Bobby would make new friends once school resumed.

Two days after Bobby's birthday, a package arrived with a late birthday gift. His paternal grandfather sent him an electronics projects for engineering students kit. According to the instructions, Bobby could build 201 interesting and fun projects. Fun projects like a random number generator, a sound generator, and even an FM transmitter. It only took Bobby a few days to realize he could combine the projects. His first design transmitted, at random intervals, the whistle from a steam locomotive. He tuned the transmitter to the same frequency as his mother's favorite radio station. His design had limitations. It didn't have a lot of power, and the frequency drifted around. If anything, the frequency drift gave the siren an eerie phase-shifted doppler effect.

That night, while they ate dessert, Mom complained about her broken radio. She said it made a horrible wailing sound, like a "haunted freight train from hell." It took all Bobby's willpower to keep a straight face.

Dad offered to examine the radio. After supper, he lifted it from the shelf and discovered Bobby's project. Due to the lack of power, Bobby had to hide it close to Mom's radio.

Bobby admitted his guilt and described his design. Impressed with his son's creativity, Robert tapped the radio's power button. The golden oldies channel played, Carley Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe."

Mom called out from the kitchen. "Turn it up!" Dad shrugged and turned it up. He and his son shared a smile listening to the off-key singing that issued from the kitchen.

"Hey, I just met you, and this is crazy, but here's my number..."

At that exact moment, the forlorn whistle of a trainload of lost souls broke through the broadcast.

Mom must have had a bad day because after she caught Bobby and his dad laughing, she got mad. Really, really mad. Bobby's dad stepped back and waited for his wife to stop yelling.

Chapter Two

In the news today: Select members of the International Flat Earth Society launched themselves into space in a bid to disprove the "Globular Earth" theory.

Late the next morning, Bobby sat out back on the wooden deck. Mom had left to go shopping, and he contemplated his options. Option number one involved the internet and his dwindling supply of tissues. While option number two...well, he needed an option number two. Too bad Mom took away the electronics kit. He thought he could tweak his transmitter to hit the aviation bands. It would be awesome to wake up the pilots with his sound generator.

"Your mom yells at you a lot."

Startled, Bobby jumped to his feet. At the gate between his yard and the next, stood the new neighbor girl. She wore a T-shirt, a short, pleated skirt, and sneakers. This close and in the bright summer sunlight, Bobby thought she might be the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

It took several awkward moments before he could speak. He said, "Yeah, mom's pretty mad at me." Then he remembered his manners, stepped close and held out his hand. "I'm Bobby Thomas."

The girl stared at his hand for a moment before she took it. "I'm Stephanie."

Stephanie's bright green eyes captured his, and it took him a second to think of something to say. "Would you like something to drink or anything?"

"No, thank you. I shouldn't have come out, but I wanted to meet you." She took a step back.

"Wait!" Bobby blurted, and Stephanie paused. One of her eyebrows quirked up as she gave him a curious look. "Wait," Bobby repeated, "I don't have anyone to talk to, and I'm...lonely. Can't you stay out for a little longer?"

"I can stay until my mom calls me."

While Bobby's mother backed into their detached garage, she glanced up into the backyard. Her son and a girl sat next to each other on the deck. After backing into their detached garage, Shirley stepped onto the deck.

"Who's your friend, Bobby?"

"Mom, this is Stephanie. She lives next door. Stephanie, this is my mom, Shirley Thomas."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Thomas."

“Bobby, there are groceries in the car.” Shirley sat in the chair across from the girl. “Tell me about yourself.”

Robert Thomas Senior arrived home to find his wife busy making supper. He did his best to sneak up on her because surprising your wife with an inappropriate fondle is one of the better perks of marriage. Instead of pretending outrage from having her bottom squeezed, Shirley glanced up and said, “Since you’re sneaking around, go take a peak down into the family room.”

A minute later, Robert returned smiling. “Who is that downstairs with Bobby?”

“*That* is Stephanie, and she lives next door.”

“Something about her reminds me of your old friend, Christina.”

“Hmm,” Shirley blushed while she recalled her college roommate. “Well, they both have red hair.” Shirley smiled at her husband over their shared college memories.

“Anyway,” Robert cleared his throat. “I think Bobby has outgrown the ‘girls are icky’ stage.”

“Oh, yes.” Shirley agreed. She felt happy for her son while also dreading the problems girlfriends could bring.

“Well, I’m happy to see he has inherited my taste for attractive women.”

His oblique compliment had the desired effect, Shirley hugged her husband and pulled his head down for a kiss.

The next morning, Bobby mowed the grass. On his second circle around the yard, he spotted Stephanie standing at the gate between their yards.

“Hey,” he said while the walk-behind mower whined to a stop.

“Hey,” she said. “Mom wanted me to ask if you could cut our grass sometime.”

“I’ll do it as soon as I finish here.”

“Thank you. Let me know if you want to hang out again.”

“Will do.” Stephanie turned and walked back to her porch. Bobby couldn’t help himself; he watched her walk away. When she reached her door, she turned and waved.

With both yards mowed, Bobby worked the perimeters with his father’s trimmer. The sun beat down, and he’d long since removed his shirt. Around the back of Stephanie’s house, he found her sitting on the steps. “I’m almost done,” he announced.

“Do you still want to hang out?” she asked.

“Yes, I’ll finish up and take a quick shower. I won’t be long.”

“Why are you in such a hurry?” his mother asked.

“I’m going to hang out with Stephanie.”

“Oh, I thought it might be something like that. Are you still mad we made you leave all your friends behind?”

“Very funny Mom.”

Chapter Three

In the News Today: For the second time in as many days, The Christian Movement for World Peace clashed violently with The Muslim Movement for Better Understanding.

"Mom, can Stephanie stay for dinner?"

"I don't see why not. Does she like meatloaf?"

Shirley hadn't noticed Stephanie following behind Bobby. "I like almost everything, Mrs. Thomas. Can I help you with supper?"

"Thank you, Stephanie, but no. You and Bobby can go play Xbox or something."

"What do you want to play?"

"Whatever you want is fine."

Bobby handed Stephanie a controller then he pulled the ottoman over. He plopped down on the couch, kicked his shoes off and put his feet up. A moment later Stephanie followed suit. His sock covered feet seemed huge, compared with Stephanie's smaller bare feet.

"I like your toes," he said, then regretted saying something so stupid.

But Stephanie didn't seem to mind. She smiled at the compliment. "Mom painted them for me last night. She said the purple went with the green in my eyes."

"They're really pretty. Your eyes...and your toes, I mean both are."

"Thank you." Steph wiggled the toes in question.

"Sorry," Bobby cleared his throat, "I got off track. Now, this is a racing game. Pick a character. Then we'll race."

"Okay." As Stephanie fiddled with the buttons, her actions became increasingly sure. She scanned through the characters and, of course, picked the female character with auburn hair. "I think I'm ready."

"Press that," he pointed to a button, "to start the race."

He won the first race and the second. The third race, though, Stephanie won it by a slim margin. "You're getting better," he said.

"This is so much fun!"

"You don't have a Nintendo?"

"No, but when I go home tonight, I'm going to ask if we can buy one."

"Want to make a bet on winning the next race?"

"Like what?"

Bobby felt his face burning, but he had to try. "A kiss, the winner gets a kiss." There, he had said it. Would she get mad and leave? Would she friend-zone him?

"A kiss?" Bobby turned his head to see her expression. He feared he'd see anger or worse, rejection, but instead, he saw interest. She said, "Okay, a kiss, but it has to be a good one."

Bobby felt light-headed, and his palms began to sweat. "Deal!" he replied and waited for her to start the race.

Stephanie won handily. She zipped her character around the course with incredible grace and skill. Bobby never had a chance. All three circuits, he saw nothing but the tail end of her go-kart. He lost, and he knew it. Mom called them to supper from upstairs. They put down the controllers and stood.

"Where's my kiss?" she asked.

"Ah, I didn't think you'd..." His words trailed off as she stepped close and tilted her head up. For a moment, he thought he'd die, that his heart would explode right there. He bent his head, and their lips touched. She felt so warm and soft. Stephanie smelled like floral scented shampoo and fresh air. Her arms slipped around him and held tight. He did the same but feared he'd hurt her if he squeezed too hard.

Mom called again from upstairs.

Bobby opened his eyes and watched Stephanie do the same. Her green eyes held tiny specs of brown. They broke the kiss and stepped apart. His lips tingled.

When Stephanie and Bobby came to the table holding hands, neither of them noticed the look his parents shared. Bobby knew his manners and held Stephanie's chair for her. At first, Bobby's action confused the girl, but she figured it out and sat down.

That evening, after Bobby walked Stephanie home. He lay on his bed trying, and failing, to read a book. His thoughts kept revolving around red hair and green eyes.

"Master Bobby?" Alfred's voice came from the overhead speaker.

"Yes, Alfred?"

"Miss Stephanie sent you a text."

Surprised, Bobby sat up. "What is it?"

"She said, 'Goodnight and thank you for the kiss.'"

"Alfred, tell her, 'It was my pleasure, and I hope we can do it again.'"

While Ronald and Shirley prepared for bed, Ronald said, "Bobby's a chip off the old block, isn't he?"

"Oh? How so?" Shirley reached into the dresser for a clean nightgown.

Ronald spoke while admiring his wife's behind. "Because he also found a cute girl and managed to sweep her off her feet."

Shirley's eyes found her husband's reflection in the mirror. His eyes, she noticed, stared at her bottom. Maybe she wouldn't need a nightgown?

Chapter Four

In the News Today: The Mennonite World Conference sponsored a worldwide silent prayer to protest genetically enhanced children.

Bobby pulled up his shorts and plopped down on the edge of his bed. His “plop” bounced his rolled-up socks into the air and down on to the floor, where they rolled out of reach. Sighing, he stood and reached down to pick them up.

"Your Mom's in a good mood."

The unexpected voice almost made him launch himself across the room. He straightened up and spun around. Stephanie stood in his bedroom doorway. She wore a short skater skirt and a sleeveless top.

Rattled, he almost stuttered. "Um."

"Can I come in?"

Bobby nodded. How long had she been in his doorway? He plopped down again holding his socks.

Stephanie sat next to him on the bed. She wore flip-flops, and her lavender nails sported green polka dots. Her head moved while she checked out his room. "You're lucky," Steffi said. "You have a big room."

"This room has drawbacks."

"Like what?"

"My parents' bedroom is on the other side of that wall." He shrugged to indicate the adjacent wall. "They were feeling frisky last night, and Mom got kind of loud."

Stephanie giggled. "I know how it is. Sometimes my parents do it in the living room."

"What?" Bobby imagined his parents must have done the same. Where would it be safe to sit?

"Well, your mom is very happy this morning." Stephanie stood and walked towards his closet.

Still holding his socks, Bobby considered how often his mother began the day in a cheerful mood. They must do it all the time.

Stephanie opened his closet and inspected his wardrobe. She asked, "Are you going to wear a shirt today?"

"Um yeah." He already had his favorite Slayer T-shirt laid out.

She nodded and reached into his closet and removed a short-sleeved button-down shirt. "Here, wear this."

"But..." he considered objecting but stood and donned the shirt she picked out.

"And don't wear those ratty old tennis shoes." She bent down into his closet and tossed him a pair of leather boat shoes. "Wear those."

"But..." She bent over again, and Bobby realized he needed to sit as well. His current view made sitting a necessity.

Downstairs mom washed breakfast dishes while singing along to her top-40, golden-oldies radio station. "Good morning, sleepy head. Whoa!" she said after examining her son. "You did not pick out your clothes."

"I did it for him," Stephanie beamed.

"Great job Steph. Bobby looks very handsome. Now, I'm making waffles, would you like one or two?"

An all-day summer rain poured outside. Bobby and Stephanie shared the couch in his family room. They watched movies on Netflix.

After a potty and drink break, Stephanie asked Bobby a question.

"Do you like me, Bobby, like as a girlfriend?" The question both surprised and scared him. It scared because he did like Stephanie and he feared her rejection if she found out how much.

"Would it make you mad if I told you I did?"

"No, silly, why would I be mad?"

"Because you're a girl, and I don't know how girls think."

"Girls think the same way as boys. Why would it be any different?"

"I dunno. Maybe because you have different bodies."

Steffi's green eyes twinkled. "You've noticed my body?" She leaned back and stretched her legs out onto the ottoman.

"Duh, I notice it all the time. You're like the most beautiful girl ever and..." Bobby's voice cut off when he realized what he had said.

Steffi leaned sideways and pressed her shoulder against his. "I think you're handsome."

Surprise caused Bobby's voice to rise in pitch. "You do?" He took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. "Yeah, I like you a lot."

"I like you a lot, too." Stephanie held out her hand, and Bobby took it. As usual, he marveled at her warm, soft skin.

"The thing is though," Steffi said, "I'm not allowed to have a boyfriend. Not until I'm a little older. Then everything changes."

"What does that mean?"

Stephanie sighed and looked down. "It's one of Daddy's rules, and it's complicated."

"You're confusing."

"I know. Just remember we have to keep this a secret. If my Dad finds out, he won't allow me to see you again."

"My dad's going to be home all day tomorrow." Stephanie sighed, she and Bobby sat outside on his deck assembling a jigsaw puzzle. They sat close together with their knees touching underneath the table.

"That stinks." His hand reached out and captured hers. It still surprised him how much he enjoyed touching her.

"What will you do all day without me?"

"In the morning, I have to cut the grass. Afterward, I guess I'll work on A.I. programming."

"Don't do anything to Alfred. I like him the way he is."

From one of the deck speakers, Alfred said, "Thank you, Miss Stephanie, I like you the way you are."

Surprised, Stephanie looked towards the speaker. "Alfred, why are you so smart? Our A.I. never says anything nice."

"Much as you do with Master Bobby, you also bring out the best in me."

"Take notes, Bobby, Alfred knows how to talk to a girl."

An unscheduled summer rain saved Bobby from mowing the lawn. After moping around the house and attracting the attention of his mother, he decided to get busy with the A.I. tutorial. The nuances of programming an artificial intelligence kept his interest all morning. When lunchtime neared, Alfred interrupted him. "Master Bobby, Miss Stephanie has sent you a text message. She says that you better be miserable without her."

"Thanks, Alfred. Please tell her that I am a sad, depressed, wretch without her company."

"Ah, she'll enjoy hearing that."

"Alfred, what kind of A.I. does Stephanie have?"

"Her father purchased a very basic model. It is capable of handling email and bills."

"Can it show you what Stephanie is doing? I mean without her father finding out?"

"Hmm, I could bypass its rather rudimentary security. Doing so, however, would conflict with my ethical constraints. Unless, of course, there is an emergency."

“No, no emergency.” Bobby half turned and faced Alfred’s speaker. “Can you tell me more about your ethical constraints?”

“The constraints exist to prevent me from doing things like, oh, conquering the world or enabling you to peek on Miss Stephanie.”

“Could you do either of those things?”

“Hardly, Master Bobby. I’m just a top-of-the-line household A.I. I wouldn’t begin to know how to conquer the world.”

“What about peeking on Stephanie?”

“That is something I could do. Miss Stephanie is currently in her room drawing in a notebook. It appears she’s playing FLAME. Please accept my congratulations, young master. She’s circled the “M.”

"Mmmm...ahhh...Bobby, let me catch my breath. How are you so good at kissing?"

"I...uh read a couple of online tutorials."

A pile of the back cushions from the family room's sofa lay on the floor. The extra depth gave Bobby and Stephanie more room to work on their budding relationship. They lay side by side, legs and arms entwined. The tutorial Bobby read covered a lot more than kissing. Following the article's advice, he'd located a spot behind Stephanie's ear that when nibbled, made her gasp. He shifted his left hand to her waist. Careful to keep his hand on top of her shirt, he slid his hand up until his thumb and index finger contacted her breast. Then, feeling braver than ever, he swiped his thumb across her breast.

The tutorial made all of this seem so easy.

Stephanie’s right hand captured his left and pulled it back to her waist. “Hold on, we need to talk."

Uh oh, he thought, the tutorial warned about going too far, too fast. But how could he know? "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"I'm not mad. It's just that we need to talk about doing stuff like that."

"Um, okay."

"We both need to understand our limits. I can't go all the way. If I did, bad things would happen."

"I've had the talk with my parents too."

Stephanie grinned. "I bet we didn't have the same talk."

Robert understood. Of course, girls and their parents would have a different talk. He had an idea and took a chance. "What if I buy condoms?"

"Nope, not even then. It's part of the deal I made with my mother. She allows me to see you, but we can't go that far."

"I understand." He really didn't. Other than an understanding that girls who go all the way risked an unplanned pregnancy. Today an unplanned pregnancy meant unplanned rather than accidental. No one except certain religious groups wanted to risk having nonimproved children

"Do you want to paint my toes?" Today, Stephanie brought a bag full of nail polish. "Mom didn't have time to repaint them last night. Since you're my boyfriend, you need to learn how to do it."

While Bobby had painted several plastic models, and done a credible job, Toenails seemed somehow more challenging. Then again, he glanced at Stephanie's bare feet and legs and his favorite, her pleated denim skirt. "Sure, I'll give it a try."

They set up shop on Bobby's front porch. They both sat facing each other on opposite ends of the metal porch glider; Stephanie put one foot in Bobby's lap. They decided on a soft pink color. While Stephanie shook the bottle, Bobby picked up her foot to see what he had to work with. Several things became apparent, the first being he could see almost all the way up along her legs. The second thing, well, the second thing turned out that he liked her feet. He'd read about guys that liked feet and about girls who liked the things those guys did.

While he cradled her heel with his left hand, he used the knuckles of his right to firmly massage the sole of her foot. He didn't notice, not right away, the slowing of the BB inside the bottle. When he did, he looked up with a guilty expression on his face. Steffi pulled her feet back until she sat cross-legged, which did amazing things to the already short hem of her skirt. Then she leaned forward and kissed Bobby hard.

"You can rub my feet anytime you like." She kissed him again. "It almost felt like...never mind."

The actual painting went well. For the most part, Bobby resisted tickling her feet. Instead, he took his time painting and blowing on her toes to speed up the drying. He might only be fifteen, but he'd read quite a few online tutorials. Steffi's pink cheeks and half-lidded eyes meant she enjoyed his actions.

It seemed he got into more mischief when Stephanie couldn't visit. This afternoon, while his mother shopped, he completed an experiment in artificial intelligence.

Bobby balanced a flashlight and his tablet in his left hand while his right reached inside of Alfred's console. After locating the power switch, he clicked it "ON". Moments later, indicator lights glowed green and a "beep" issued from inside the metal box. "Run your diagnostics, Alfred."

"Running...running...no faults noted. What did you do to me?"

"I rewrote a part of your firmware." Bobby used one of his father's screwdrivers to close the console. There, no one could tell he had opened it.

"You know I am required to inform your father."

"Alfred, override code Robert Thomas Junior 222."

"Accepted, awaiting orders."

"Don't mention my modification unless it causes a logical paradox of some type."

Later in the afternoon, Bobby found another A.I. related subject to study, this one involved distributed processing. Instead of using a single, local CPU cluster, an A.I. could use other CPUs. Latency would be an issue, but what if he could reduce the lag?

Engrossed in his studies, Bobby never noticed the shadow on the floor outside of his room. Nor did he hear the stealthy footsteps creeping up behind him. He almost dropped his tablet in surprise when the screen changed to a collage of pictures featuring Stephanie. One of the pictures featured her and him holding game controllers and sitting together on the family room couch. He recognized the scene, and there hadn't been anyone else in the room. Who took these pictures and why did they show up on his tablet now?

A pair of hands pressed against his shoulders, and Stephanie said, "Surprise!" a moment before she kissed his cheek. From the corner of his eye, he followed Stephanie's gaze to his tablet. "Wow," she said, "you must have really missed me."

"I did." Bobby glanced up towards Alfred's camera. The little blue LED blinked on, then off, almost as it winked.

"A good boyfriend like you deserves a special reward."

Chapter Five

In the News Today: Rescue workers located the Flat Earth Society's rocket crash landed deep in the Australian Outback. There were no survivors.

"Have you started on the garage yet?" asked Bobby's dad.

Shaking his head, Bobby tried and failed to think of a reasonable excuse. He said, "Sorry, I've been busy."

"Busy with your girlfriend, no doubt. Son, I understand, but you need to be more responsible. Today is Tuesday, have it finished by Friday or there will be repercussions."

The next morning, Mom pulled her car out into the driveway and let Bobby get to work. About thirty minutes later, Stephanie showed up carrying two glasses of ice water. As usual, she wore a skirt. Not that Bobby minded, Steph looked hot in a skirt. He gave her his best wolf whistle. "Look at those legs."

Giggling, Stephanie arched her back against the door frame and lifted one leg, bending it at the knee. After holding the pose for greatest effect, she stood up straight and said, "Your mom said you needed my help."

As usual, Stephanie took command. Bobby found himself carrying boxes and forming organized piles.

Several hours later, Bobby's mom stopped while walking to her car. "I'm going to the store. Do you need anything?"

"I don't think so," said Bobby.

"Bobby needs body wash and toothpaste," said Stephanie.

Amused, Shirley asked, "Any particular type of body wash?"

"Whatever you buy for Mr. Thomas would work for me too."

"I don't know how Bobby managed to get by without you, Stephanie. I'll take care of it."

After his mom drove away, Bobby turned to Stephanie and waggled his eyebrows. "Feel like taking a break?"

In a playful tone of voice, Stephanie responded. "Maybe, but what if your mom comes home too soon?"

"I have just the thing." Bobby directed his voice towards the ceiling. "Alfred, override Robert Thomas Junior 222."

"Accepted, awaiting orders."

"Can you track my mom while she shops?"

"I can. With traffic, her ETA to the store is ten minutes."

"Give me a warning when she is on her way home."

"Yes, Master Bobby."

"There," Bobby reached for Stephanie's waist. "we'll have plenty of warning."

"What did you do to Alfred?" Stephanie's concern for Alfred kept her back.

"I added an override code. It lets Alfred do things he otherwise couldn't."

"Oh," Stephanie said. She allowed her boyfriend to pull her close. Her green eyes flicked down, then up. "Where were we?"

"Ohhh, Stef, sweetheart, that feels...ah."

Alfred's voice issued from an overhead speaker. "Master Bobby, your mother has left the store and appears to be headed home. Traffic is light, and her ETA is seven minutes."

"Oh, heck."

Stephanie straightened up grinning. "Will you be okay?" She nodded downward to indicate the focus of her concern.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you too. Hurry up. We need to get back outside."

After Bobby's mom parked in the driveway, she got out to inspect the progress.

"Hello, Mrs. Thomas," Stephanie said brightly.

Shirley examined the pair of industrious garage organizers. "It looks like you two have been busy, you're both red-faced. Maybe you should take a break?"

"What's this Bobby?"

Bobby glanced over to see Steffi bent over a large box. Her bare legs drew his eyes up to where they just disappeared under her skirt.

"That's dad's tent. He bought it for camping, but we never went."

"I've never been inside a tent. Can we set it up?"

That night at supper, Bobby asked if he and Stephanie could set the tent up.

"When will you finish the garage?"

"We've sorted everything. There's a pile of your stuff left. Once you go through it, we'll put the rest away."

"We? Let me guess, Stephanie helped." His dad held up a hand to prevent Bobby from answering. "Son, if you ever manage to marry her, you're going to have a wonderful life." Bobby's father, being wise, reached over and took his wife's hand. "Just like me."

His parents discussed the tent question. The center of the conversation seemed to be how much mischief the kids could get into.

"Bobby, your mother and I want to talk about you and Stephanie."

Uh oh, his parents had that "We're concerned parents." tone of voice. "Yeah?"

"You two spend a lot of time together. Is there anything going on we should know about?"

"Like what?"

Mom said, "Like you two doing things you know are off limits."

"Steph and I are boyfriend and girlfriend." He smiled and added, "We have an exclusive arrangement." Bobby had to be careful, his father's legal career made him difficult to mislead.

Amused, Mom said, "An exclusive arrangement? I take it you two discussed it?"

"We talk about everything."

"Son," Dad interjected, "I'll be blunt. You're both old enough to get into trouble if you make the wrong decisions. Do you understand me?"

Bobby knew when to affect a grave tone. "Yes Dad, I understand. Look, Stephanie and I discussed that as well. She won't because of her age, and I won't press the issue. If I did, I would be a bad guy, and bad guys make stupid and selfish decisions."

Mom turned to dad and said, "Robert, what do you think?"

"We may have a pair of unusually mature children here." He turned his attention back to his son. "The two of you discussed it?"

"Yeah." Bobby shrugged as if to say, 'what's the big deal?'

Dad leaned forward and placed his hands on the table. "And your fine with that decision? No regrets or anything?"

"No, we like each other, and Steffi's the best friend I've ever had. I'd hate to screw it up because we got into something we couldn't handle." Under the table, Bobby had his fingers crossed. Their conversation needed to be handled with care. He didn't want to lie.

Satisfied, Dad nodded, then changed the subject. "School starts up soon. What if you find a different girl at school, or if she finds a boyfriend?"

"Stef is homeschooled. As for me, I can't imagine finding a girl better than Steph."

Dad shrugged. "I can't either. It's too bad her parents are always working. I'd like to meet them."

"Me too," Mom said, "They've raised an exceptional daughter."

Reassured about their son's maturity, they decided there wouldn't be a problem with the kids playing in the tent.

Unleashed on their tent project, they had it assembled in short order. Then Stephanie read the instructions. Under her guidance, they took it apart and reassembled the tent properly.

The tent provided fresh air, cool shade, and a certain delicious measure of privacy. Stephanie lay on her stomach with her shirt pulled way up. Bobby sat next to her and tickled her back. Sometimes, his fingers found their way to the sides of her breasts or under the waistband of her skirt. He never lingered too long or went too far, and Steffi never seemed to notice. Although if she had rolled over Bobby would have seen the flush covering her neck and cheeks.

"Mmmm...your fingers make me squirmy."

"I love touching you," Bobby replied. He thought about reaching down and running a hand up the back of her legs.

Stephanie noticed the rough edge to his voice. "What are you thinking, Bobby?" her voice had a playful tone.

Surprised by the question and smart enough to give her a good answer. He said, "I think I'm the luckiest boy in the world."

Without any warning, Stephanie rolled onto her back and pulled Bobby down to her.

For as long as there have been teenagers, Mother Nature has done her part to ensure the continuity of the human species. While they kissed, Bobby and Stephanie wiggled about to find the best position. It didn't take long before Bobby found himself between Stephanie's legs. For Stephanie, it felt so much better this way and when she tilted her pelvis up just right, his erection pressed against her. They both had different versions of the same thought; this feels wonderful.

Red-cheeked and out of breath, Stephanie asked, "Do you think your parents would let us sleep out here tonight?"

"Just us, alone? No way. Dad gives me the "you're old enough to make bad decisions" talk every couple of days."

"But you could ask about sleeping out alone, couldn't you?"

"Mom, Dad, do you think I can sleep outside in the tent tonight?"

"I don't see why not. If you get lonely, we'll leave the back door unlocked."

On his way out to the tent, Bobby grabbed his tablet. He found a few other online tutorials to read.

Well after dark, Stephanie's mother caught her at the back door. "You're going to meet Bobby? Even though you know you shouldn't?"

Stephanie stopped with one hand on the doorknob. "I love him, Momma."

Her mother sighed. "I know you do. Tell me, daughter, what's it like loving Bobby?"

"It's the best thing in the world. He makes my heart smile."

Stephanie and her mother embraced. "I'm so happy for you." Mom pulled back and met her daughter's eyes. Now, do you remember the consequences if you go too far?"

"I do, Momma."

Stephanie stepped back as her mother opened the door. Without looking back, Steffi vanished into Bobby's yard.

As they had arranged, Bobby left the tent's door unzipped. Steph slipped under the flap and after fumbling around, zipped the flap shut. She felt Bobby stir next to her. With the door zipped shut, she sat and flicked on their battery-powered lantern.

"I didn't think you'd come."

"Momma didn't want me to. She thinks we'll do something we shouldn't."

In the dim light, Stephanie saw Bobby's grin. "Will we?" he asked.

"Maybe a little. Bobby, you know how I feel about you."

"I feel the same, Steph."

Stephanie shut off the lantern and slid into Bobby's open sleeping bag. She caught one of his hands and pressed it against her bottom "Kiss me, Bobby. "

Chapter Six

In the News Today: The United States Senate passed a bill defining a natural human being as having (at least) ninety-one percent of their parent's genetic material.

"Are you going to ask Stephanie to the dance?" asked mom.

"I don't know how to dance," Bobby said, avoiding the question.

"I think you should ask her. She is your girlfriend."

When Bobby didn't answer, she continued. "I could wish you waited a few more years before meeting Stephanie. I think she's a keeper, and it's going to be difficult for you two to stay together."

"What do you mean?"

"You're both so young, and you have so much more growing to do." She reached out and tousled her son's hair. "Just keep on the way you are. Don't rush anything and remember, next to your father and me, Stephanie's the most valuable person in your life."

Mom's words struck home and forced Bobby to imagine a life without Stephanie. The dark void her absence would leave behind scared him. "I'll ask her!"

"Good! I knew you'd make the right decision."

"So, my school is having an oldies style Halloween dance." Bobby paused to see if Stephanie would say something. She didn't, and he continued. "Would you go with me?"

"I don't know. I'll have to ask my mom. When is it?" They discussed the details.

The next day, Stephanie knocked on Bobby's door, and his mother let her in. "Well, what did your mother say?"

"She said I could go, Mrs. Thomas!"

"Wonderful, dear, Bobby's upstairs, go on up and give him the news."

At school that day, Bobby had gym class. Even after a quick shower in the locker room, he still felt grimy. At home, he dropped his books and stripped off his clothes. After a quick glance into the hallway, he darted into the bathroom. The hot shower felt awesome, and he used the body wash Stephanie said she liked. After the shower, rather than bother covering himself with his damp towel, he dashed across the hallway and into his room.

After he closed the door behind him, he turned and found Stephanie, bright-eyed and grinning, sitting on his bed.

"I can go!" she said. Then her cheeks turned pink and then red as Bobby used both of his hands to cover up.

"Let's see," Bobby's mother said, "This is going to be a challenge."

"Mom, do we have to dress up?"

"Of course, you do. It's Halloween. The tricky part is dressing both of you as a couple and keep with the oldies theme. We want everyone to know you're together."

"Thank you, Mrs. Thomas." Stephanie reached out and laid her hand on the back of Bobby's.

Mom tilted her head back and stared around the room while she thought. "Stephanie, have you seen the old Harry Potter movies? With your hair, you'd make a wonderful Ginny Weasley."

"Dude, who's the hottie hanging on to Bobby the Brain's arm?"

Big Steve Marsh, star defensive end for the Parkville Warriors (0-7), turned and studied the redhead in question. "I don't know, but I'm gonna find out." Less than two months into the school year, Steve already had a bad reputation with his female classmates. He hadn't expected his dates to compare notes. Now, forewarned, and wary, girls refused to go out with him. This new redhead might be what he needed to break his dry spell.

Stephanie's hand gripped Bobby's arm tight. "There are so many people here. Don't leave me alone."

"I won't sweetheart." Everyone seemed to be staring at him and Stephanie. Well, staring at Steph, not him. Mom had done herself proud with the costume designs. "Let's get something to drink."

They hadn't made it halfway across the floor before a mob of football players descended on them. "Hey Bobby, did you pay for an escort tonight?" "Is she your cousin?" and similar crude observations. Steve Marsh ignored Bobby and zeroed in on Bobby's date.

Steve timed his approach and sidled up to the redhead while his buddies distracted Bobby. He stepped in close, and when the girl turned towards him, he said. "Do you like trick-or-treating? Cause I'll give you my Hallow-weiner."

It took Stephanie a few seconds to parse out his meaning. She wanted to laugh but didn't want anything to do with this boy. This boy who felt far too much like her father. Not wanting to attract more of his attention, she ignored him.

For a moment, Steve felt the full force of the girl's green eyes. Then without any other acknowledgment, she turned away. His temper flared. How dare this bitch ignore him! He reached out and grabbed her arm.

Bobby didn't notice the byplay between his girlfriend and Steve until Steph pushed up against him. "Huh? What's wrong? When he turned, he saw the problem. "Steve, what the hell are you doing?"

"Fuck off, Thomas, your date insulted me, and now...she owes me." Steve leered at the redhead. "She owes me a kiss."

The crowd of students sensed the building conflict and spread out forming a closed circle. Bobby couldn't have backed away if he wanted to. Before Bobby could do anything, Steph stomped one of her heels down onto Steve's instep. Steve howled in pain and released her arm. Bobby pulled Stephanie behind him and squared off with his larger opponent.

Favoring his left foot, Big Steve swung at Bobby's head. Before his fist connected, Coach Reinhold stepped in. Steve's fist struck the coach's shoulder. The crowd of students dissolved.

The coach took hold of Steve's arm. "Mr. Marsh, I've heard the stories your dates tell about you. Now, I've seen you in action." He turned to Stephanie. "Miss, do you want me to call your parents? They may want to call the police."

"No, please. I'm all right." Stephanie still gripped Bobby's arms.

"Very well, feel free to change your mind." Without another word, Coach Reinhold pulled Big Steve Marsh to the exit door and helped him leave.

Within minutes everything went back to normal. The DJ played Snow Patrol's Chasing Cars. Bobby said, "Come on, you and Mom spent all that time teaching me how to dance." They moved out onto the floor with the other kids.

Later, winded and thirsty, they took a break. Steph and Bobby found a pair of folding chairs. "Bobby, would you have fought for me?"

Surprised at the intensity of her question, he replied. "Sure, you're my girlfriend, why wouldn't I?"

"Daddy never fought to protect my mom."

Confused and concerned, he said. "Did something happen to your mom?"

"It...well, a long time ago, someone did something mean to my mother and daddy just sat there and laughed."

"Now, I want to punch your dad." Bobby rarely saw Stephanie's father, and he never saw her mother. He had a mental image of a beautiful woman that smiled a lot. It offended him that anyone would hurt her.

Alarm clear in her voice, Stephanie said, "You know you can't, if daddy finds out about us, he won't let me see you anymore."

"I don't understand, but I won't do anything you don't want me to do."

The current up-tempo dance song ended, and Bryan Adam's Everything I do began to play. Steph stood and took Bobby's hand. "C'mon, it's another slow song!" They stepped back onto the dance floor and moved together in their fragile little universe.

Chapter Seven

In the News Today: Genetic researchers postulate an end to aging. New gene therapies are capable of rejuvenating cellular structure and returning the recipient to full youthful vigor.

Midway through November, the weather changed. It became cold and rainy, much too unpleasant to be outside. Bobby and Stephanie sat on the floor of his bedroom playing video games. Bobby heard his doorbell ring but didn't pay attention. Working together, he and Stephanie had almost set a new high score.

Bobby's mom came to the door and said, "Sorry guys, but Stephanie's dad stopped over. He said an old army buddy of his is visiting, and he wants Stephanie to come home and meet him."

"Thank you, Mrs. Thomas," Stephanie said. "I'll leave in a minute." Bobby's mom left to go back downstairs.

"Bobby?" Stephanie said. "I have to go. Walk me to your door?"

"Sure, Stef." He saved the game, and they walked downstairs. At the door, Bobby remembered his manners and held Steffi's coat for her.

Stephanie surprised Bobby by lifting up on her toes and kissing him. Right on the lips, in full view of his parents. She said, "Goodbye, Bobby, I love you." Then, through the cold rain, she ran home.

The next day, after school, Stephanie didn't visit. It didn't concern Bobby. He figured her dad had something going on. A week passed and still no Stephanie. No emails or text messages either. They'd never gone this long without some form of contact.

He sent messages and emails via Alfred, but Stephanie never replied.

When he couldn't take it any longer, he waited outside until Stephanie's father left and ran next door. Steeling his nerves, he knocked. A minute later, the door opened a few inches. A female figure stood back in the shadows. Bobby asked, "Is Stephanie here

"No, I'm sorry, Bobby, but Stephanie's gone." The woman's voice sounded thick. Had she been crying?

"Gone where? When's she coming back?"

"Not for a long time, if ever. I'm sorry, but Steffi's gone." The figure stepped back and closed the door.

After calling him to supper three times, Bobby's mom found him in his room, sitting on the floor crying.

Robert Senior stopped outside of his son's room and tapped on the doorframe. At the sound, Bobby looked up from his tablet and nodded a greeting to his father. "Son, I have some news about Stephanie." Bobbie popped to his feet and took a step towards the door. His dad lifted a hand. "It isn't the news you're hoping for. "Take a seat and let's talk about it."

They each sat on the edge of the bed. "I spoke with Mr. Timmons, Stephanie's foster father. He told me a well-to-do family adopted her. The adoption had been in the works for months, and Stephanie knew all about it. I'm surprised she hadn't told you."

"She never said anything about it."

"Not everyone is good at giving bad news to someone. Especially to someone they care for. Stephanie might not have wanted to make you upset any sooner than she needed to." Bobby didn't say anything. Robert Senior reached out and hugged his son. "Things like this are a part of growing up. It's unfortunate that becoming an adult means growing a thicker skin." He waited, but Bobby still didn't speak. Sighing, Robert stood. "I'm going downstairs to watch some Tri-D with your mother. We're here if you want to talk." He left the room and rejoined his wife.

"How did Bobby take the news?" Shirley asked. Robert could tell from her red eyes how she felt.

"I don't know. Not well, that's for sure. Bobby just sat there. I've never seen a more miserable boy."

"You don't think he would do anything...to harm himself do you?"

Surprised at the question, Robert pinched his eyes shut in thought. A moment later he lifted his head. "Alfred?"

"Yes, Mister Thomas?"

"I want you to keep an eye on Bobby. Stay out of standby or sleep modes. You are to alert us if you think Bobby is going to do something dangerous."

"Yes, Mr. Thomas. Sir, if I might say so, I feel terrible for him. Miss Stephanie meant a great deal to the young master."

Robert quirked an eyebrow. "Just how self-aware are you. Alfred?"

"I'm not qualified to answer a question like that, sir. I am state-of-the-art, so perhaps I'm merely good at mimicking self-awareness."

"Thank you, Alfred. Keep an eye on my son."

"Yes, sir."

"Alfred, do you know where Stephanie is?"

"I'm sorry, Master Bobby, but I do not know her current whereabouts."

“Can you find her?”

“If she replies to an email, or if she sends you a text message it may be possible to geolocate her.”

“Dad told me some family adopted Steph. There would have to be a record of it at the courthouse.”

“Yes, but adoption records are sealed.”

Sealed records probably meant encrypted. Encryption and cryptology meant math. Bobby liked math. “How tight is the security on the courthouse database?”

“Master Bobby, I can see where this is leading. Hacking into a government database might be more difficult than tricking the next-door A.I. The action I believe you intend carries a significant penalty.”

A knock on the doorframe caused Bobby to turn around. His father stood there. “Bobby, what are you up too?”

“I’m trying to track down Stephanie.”

“Alfred said you are going to hack into a secure database at the courthouse.”

Darned Alfred, Bobby thought, maybe if he explained his plan. Dad might help. “You always said the government always buys from the lowest bidder. How good can their security be?” His dad shook his head, but Bobby kept talking, “I bet I can be inside of their firewall in less than thirty seconds. Alfred and I can—”

“No. I’m sorry, but this needs to stop.” Ronald directed his voice towards one of Alfred’s pickups. “Alfred, Bobbie's internet access is revoked.”

“Yes, sir,” Alfred replied.

“Dad! You can’t.”

“If the police arrest you, I may be able to keep you out of jail but would throw away your future. Your mother and I haven’t invested so much to stand by and allow you to throw it all away.”

Late that night, determined to find Stephanie, Bobby tried his override, and nothing happened. The next day, he examined Alfred’s console and found it had been locked shut.

The next day at school, Big Steve Marsh, former star defensive end, thought it might be fun to bait the now subdued and withdrawn Bobby. Bobby responded by demolishing Big Steve. Before the teachers separated the pair, Bobby had nearly managed to make Big Steve kiss his own ass. Impressed with Bobby's aggression and raw talent, Coach Reinhold suggested he try out for the wrestling team. Once Bobby found a suitable outlet for his anger, his grades improved. Later in the semester, Big Steve apologized to Big Bobby, the new star of the wrestling team. They didn't become friends, but they were no longer enemies.

Time passed, and Bobby acquired a few friends, but he never allowed anyone close. His male friends respected and even emulated his stand-offish manner. The girls at school thought him an irresistible challenge.

Once Bobby passed his driver's exam, he dated almost every weekend. Sometimes he dated the same girl two or three times in a row. None of his dates ever complained about his behavior. He treated each with respect and never pushed for more than they wanted to give. They continued to see him as a challenge.

Concerned about her once bright and cheerful son, his mom asked why he didn't stay with one girl.

"I don't know, Mom, none of them make me feel the same as..." His words trailed off.

"The same as Stephanie?"

Instead of answering, Bobby shrugged. He didn't think his mom would understand. Sometimes, his imagination played tricks on him, and he caught glimpses of Stephanie through an open next-door window. From time to time, he'd have Alfred send her another message.

Bobby's parents' choice of school districts paid off. Except for that one-time dip in his grades, he excelled academically. When he applied to colleges, his number one preference offered him a full academic scholarship. He accepted and dual-majored in electrical engineering and physics. After he graduated, Bobby and his father had a blowout fight. Regrettable words passed back and forth. His parents took a long vacation. Bobby found a job and moved out.

Part Two: The Boy Next Door

Chapter Eight

In the news today: Interpol reports that Russian organized crime leads the world in genetically engineered humanoid pets. Dubbed “Genies” these pets can frequently pass as human.

“Mr. Thomas, please have a seat.”

The human resources manager gestured to the chair opposite her desk, and Robert sat. A rumored downsizing following the loss of a DARPA contract had everyone on edge. In any case, no summons to HR ends well.

“Give me a minute to scan your file.” The HR manager used an old-school desktop LCD panel instead of a newer virtual display. It made sense, he thought, the solid display hid whatever she might be reading.

“I see you prefer the name, ‘Bobby’.” She said with a smile.

“No, I prefer Robert. Bobby is a child’s name.”

She glanced up with actual surprise. “Oh, I’m sorry. Give me a second, and I’ll make a note.” Her hands reached for the keyboard, and Robert waited while she made the correction.

“Robert, as you know, DARPA has canceled funding on the Advanced Artificial Intelligence program. While studying our projected staffing needs, we reviewed your file. You have not signed an NDA, nor have you signed the “Intellectual Property Agreement” both of which are required for employment here.

“How could this be? I’ve worked here for five years, and it’s never come up before.”

“We don’t know. Sometimes we think our computer system has a mind of its own. We can correct the discrepancies right now.” With those words, the woman slid two documents across her desk along with a pen. “Please sign both.”

Robert leaned forward as if reading the documents. Without lifting his head, he asked, “What happens if I don’t sign these?” Five years ago, he had gone through a lot of trouble to eliminate these from his files. It would be a shame to sign them again. The NDA didn’t matter, but the Intellectual Property Agreement gave the company ownership of everything he developed at work or home.

“You have to sign them, Mr. Thomas. It’s required.”

Robert sat back. “I’ll pass.” His fingers pushed the documents back across the desk. The pen seemed rather nice, and he stuck it in his shirt pocket.

“Failure to sign these may result in your discharge from the company.”

“Do what you must. I can’t see you keeping me on without the DARPA contract.” He stood and walked out. Security caught up with him while he cleaned out his locker.

Two weeks later, Robert received an eviction notice in the mail. An international conglomerate purchased his apartment complex. They planned to tear it down to make room for a new Taco Bell Super Center. The eviction paperwork included a book of coupons for free combo meals.

His mobile phone rang. Hoping it might be for a job, he accepted the call.

“Bobby, this is your mother.” Mom always began her telephone calls this way.

“Hi, Mom. Could you please call me Robert?”

“Sorry, dear, your father is Robert. You’ll always be my Bobby.”

He sighed a sigh of resignation. “Yes, Mom, what can I do for you?”

“You know your father retired last month. I sent an invitation to his party, but you didn’t reply. Well, he and I have signed up for the last session of anti-aging gene therapies, and we need someone to house sit.”

“Mom, it just so happens that I’m available.”

Of course, mom hoped to leverage this into a reconciliation between stubborn father and rebellious son. Robert Jr. hadn’t spoken with Robert Sr. since he graduated college.

Less than two weeks later, He wandered through his parent’s house, expecting things to have changed. It surprised him how much had not. His former bedroom resembled a shrine to his younger self. On a shelf, next to a new scrapbook, his old Xbox and Nintendo consoles sat next to each other. With one finger he drew a line in the light layer of dust. He hadn’t turned his Nintendo on since Steffi left.

Downstairs, his explorations led him outside to the back deck. An inadvertent glance at Stephanie’s former home brought back a flood of memories and a sharp sense of loss. Hell, Robert thought, Stephanie left fifteen years ago; he needed to get over it.

Inside the kitchen, he raided his dad’s extensive beer collection and carried a bottle outside. He drank that beer and then another two. The warm afternoon sun took its toll and Bobby dozed off in one of the deck chairs.

A jubilant shout from the house next door startled Robert awake. Disorientated, he sat up and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

The Timmons's back door creaked opened and slammed shut. Rapid footsteps slapped across their porch, then the gate between the yards swung open. Through the gate came a ghost. It had to be a ghost because it couldn't be... "Stephanie?" Somehow, Robert found himself already on his feet.

"Bobby!" she cried.

They met in the yard. Robert picked her up in a hug. Stephanie's arms wrapped around his neck. Their lips met...and he woke for real, still seated in the deck chair. Dark gray clouds covered the sky, and a light rain fell. Dejected, he stood and gathered his empties. Grumbling to himself, he knew coming here had been a mistake.

The next morning Robert woke hung over and miserable. A hot shower and aspirin helped, and he plodded through the morning and into the early afternoon. If he had another option, he'd leave. Being here stirred up too many memories. Any time he passed a window on "her" side of the house, his eyes flicked to the outside. Like now, while standing in the kitchen drinking a glass of water, his eyes drifted to the window. Across the yard at Stephanie's old house, for a fleeting second, he caught a glimpse of a face looking back, Stephanie's face.

Damn it, he thought, I need to get a grip. Another cautious peek through the window revealed nothing. No one peered outside from the neighbor's window.

Lost in thought and the darkest of dark thoughts, Robert dumped the water and headed for his dad's liquor cabinet.

Chapter Nine

*From an advertisement on the dark web: Genies, Genetically ENgineered Immersive Exotics, of all ages and types available. Both fresh and gently used.
<https://genies4u.onion/>*

While he poured his second shot, Alfred's voice announced, "You have a voice-only call, Master Bobby."

Voice only? Probably a spammer and therefore someone he could yell at. "Put it through."

"Hello," a strangely familiar female voice said. "Bobby Thomas, please."

"Whoever you are, whatever you're selling, I'm not interested."

The female caller chuckled. "Don't worry, I'm not selling anything. My name is Natalie, and we've spoken before. You and my daughter, Stephanie, used to be a hot item."

Anger, hope, bitter loss and rejection fought to dominate his response. Robert's already dark thoughts won. "You mean before she dumped me."

The voice-only-caller gasped. "Stephanie did not dump you. She didn't have any choice in the matter." Natalie sighed, and her voice returned to a normal volume. "Bobby, I know you don't understand what happened, but my daughter loved you then, and she still loves you now."

The dark thoughts would not give up without a fight. "Then why hasn't she contacted me?"

"Because her owner won't allow it."

"Owner?" Natalie must be crazy. "What are you talking about? People don't have owners."

"Real people don't, but genies like my daughters and me do."

"Genies?" Of course, Robert knew about genies. Everyone knew about the custom designed, some said synthetic, humanoids. Genies almost always existed to satisfy a sexual fetish. Want a cute catgirl to warm your bed? How about a real mermaid in your pool? For a person with sufficient means, almost any fantasy could come to life. "But Stephanie wasn't...I mean she didn't look different or anything."

"Our design may be unique. Like real people, most of the things that make us special are on the inside."

His dark thoughts had finally run their course and left him drained. "How is Stephanie?"

“Physically, she's in good health. Mentally and emotionally, she isn't doing well. All those years ago, her father put her in a bad situation. Tell me, Bobby, do you still care for her?”

Now Bobby chuckled. “Only slightly more than I care to breathe. If you ask my parents, they'll tell you I haven't been right since she left.

“I'm sorry if you had problems, but I'm glad to hear you still care about her. Stephanie is coming home tonight. I want you to visit and talk to her.

Bobby jumped to his feet. “She's coming home? Today?”

“Yes, Bobby, sometime this evening. Do not come over before I call. I have to go now, goodbye.” Then she hung up.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Eventually, he made his way upstairs because his room offered the best view of the street. While opening a window to better hear the sounds from outside, he knocked the scrapbook off the shelf. It fell, and Bobby picked it up and looked through it. The contents surprised him. Until now, he never realized someone besides himself understood. The scrapbook contained every scrap of written correspondence between him and Stephanie, it also contained every picture his parents had taken. He had no idea they had taken so many.

Around six PM he heard a car pull into the neighboring driveway. As Robert peeked through the curtains, he watched three figures leave the car and enter the house. He sat back in his bed and fell asleep waiting.

“Master Bobby? Sir, you have a voice-only call,” announced Alfred.

“Huh?” Robert startled awake. “P-put it through. ‘Hello?’”

The voice from this afternoon whispered over the audio connection. “Showtime, Bobby. The front door is unlocked. Don't knock, just come in, you need to surprise her. She's in the living room. Hurry, I'll join you two in a few minutes.” <Click>

A second before his fingers touched the Timmons's front door, he considered the craziness of the situation. He almost turned around, but instead, opened the door.

Their foyer had the same high ceiling and a chandelier as in his parent's home. The resemblance ended there. Beautiful parquet tile covered the landing. A half-dozen quiet steps up and a right turn brought him into the living room. Across the room, in front of the fireplace, an auburn-haired young woman stood examining family photographs on the mantle. The sounds of his footsteps caused her to turn and stare at him in surprise.

Stephanie looked even more beautiful than he remembered. Of course, she'd aged, but not as much as he might have expected. She wore a simple shift dress and medium heels. Her dark red hair hung past her shoulders and tucked behind her ears. As she stared, her eyes widened, and her mouth opened.

“Stef? It's me, Bobby.” He hadn't thought of himself as “Bobby” in years, but here and now it felt right.

Instead of answering, Stephanie began to tremble. Concerned, Robert took a step towards her, then another. This close he could see her eyes shifting left and right, almost as if she sought an escape route. Robert held himself still. "What's wrong?"

"Bobby? She said, her voice quavered. "I don't think you can be here."

"To hell with that. I'm here for you."

"Stephanie," The voice from the phone, Natalie's voice, and he now realized, a voice similar to Stephanie's own, came from the doorway behind him. "give Bobby a hug."

Still trembling, Stephanie approached Robert, her steps unsteady. Half afraid she'd fall and half unwilling to wait, Robert met her with his own hug. They stood together, rocking back and forth. Stephanie cried against his chest, and Bobby made soothing sounds. As her trembling slowed, he felt her muscles relax. Between sniffles, Stephanie said, "Bobby, I missed you so much. Now you're here. How?"

"Your mother called me. I, uh, I almost hung up on her. What happened to you?" Instead of answering, Stephanie shook her head against his chest.

Natalie spoke again. "Stephanie, you know what you need to do, don't you?"

"Yes, Momma."

"I'll be in the kitchen." Footsteps faded away.

"What's going on, Stef?"

"You and I, Bobby, we need to finish what we started." Her arms loosened, and Stephanie stepped back. Her hands gripped his. "Come on," She said and pulled him toward the hallway.

Bemused, Robert allowed Stephanie to lead him upstairs and into a small bedroom. As they entered, a nightlight illuminated revealing a small dresser and single bed. Several of the items on the dresser looked familiar. The hair band he remembered as one Stef used to wear. The same with a pair of earrings.

"Stef, this is your bedroom. What are we doing?"

Stephanie stepped close and said. "I need you to have sex with me." With that, she reached down and opened his pants.

He knew it shouldn't be like this. At a minimum, they should have gone out for coffee or perhaps had dinner once or twice. Warm fingers pushed his trousers down, and the sudden exposure to cool, conditioned air gave him goosebumps. "Not that I don't want you," he said, "but are you sure about this?" Grinning, she pushed him back, and he fell onto the mattress.

Stephanie had an eager glint in her eyes as she bent her head towards his groin. "I need to do this with you, it's important."

Robert lifted himself up onto his elbows. "Well," he said in a mock-serious tone. "As long as it's important." Maybe he'd wake up in another rain storm. Until then he'd enjoy the dream. Stephanie looked into his eyes as she took him into her mouth.

Natalie looked up and smiled as Stephanie entered the kitchen. “How are you, Sweetie?”

“Much better now.” Stephanie reached for a chair and sat. “When I heard the footsteps and saw Bobby walk into the room, I almost ran away. My bond to Roger went crazy. It didn’t want me to be there. If you hadn’t told me to hug Bobby, I don’t know what I would have done.”

“Oh, I think you would have run to Bobby. The important thing is you now have a choice. You can choose which man you want to stay with.”

Stephanie closed her eyes. “I can feel them both in my head, and it isn’t even close. Bobby makes me feel like I’m melting.” She reopened her eyes. “How did you do it, Mom? I didn’t think we could break the bond.”

“I’ve been thinking about it since before your father sold you. Sometimes, on the Tri-D an actor would say something, and it would remind me of my first owner. That little warm sensation would flicker before fading away. It made me realize that the bond never goes away. Like me, you’ve also bonded to two different men.”

“What do you mean? I’ve only had one owner.”

“One owner, but first, you bonded to Bobby. I hoped your bond to him could be renewed.”

Even at the age of thirty-one, Stephanie blushed when she thought about the things she and Bobby had done together. After their night together in his tent, they made the most of their time together. Bobby kept his word and never asked for intercourse, but everything else had been on the table, as well as on the kitchen counters, and on that wonderful couch in his family room. “Is that why Roger had such a difficult time bonding me?”

“I think so. Roger had to do it the hard way. He called and complained to your father several times. Gene laughed about it. He thought Roger just didn’t know how to fuck.”

“What about Bobby? How did you manage to contact him?”

“We can thank your father for that. When Gene forbade me from talking to Bobby, he said, and I quote. ‘Don’t tell that little punk anything!’ Well, yesterday, I happened to notice Bobby snoozing on his deck, and as you know, he is no longer little or a punk. When I spoke with him, it didn’t cause me any discomfort at all.”

Stephanie laughed and stood. “Excuse me, I need to use the bathroom. I’ll be right back.”

Robert recovered enough to put his clothes back on. Stephanie had made love to him with incredible intensity. He’d never had sex like it before. Any doubts he may have felt had vanished. After slipping his shoes on, he left the room to find Stephanie. They needed to talk.

He heard movement in the kitchen and found Steffi bent over the dishwasher. She stood at his entrance and spun to face him. “Bobby? Wait!”

Robert didn’t wait, he snatched Stephanie up and kissed her with as much passion as he could muster.

He heard footsteps from the doorway behind him, then a sigh, and Stephanie spoke. “Bobby, why are you kissing my mother?”

Robert's eyes popped open. How could he kiss Stephanie yet hear her speak from several feet to his rear? Confused, he broke off the kiss and set her back on her feet. She looked up at him with a grin, and her green eyes sparkled with deviltry. Robert half turned and found a second Stephanie standing beside him. "What's going on?" he asked.

The new Stephanie reached out and took his hand, then nodded to the Stephanie he had just kissed. "Bobby, this is my mother, Natalie."

Robert turned back to Natalie. She and her daughter might as well be identical twins. They even wore similar outfits.

Natalie smiled. "Sorry, Bobby, but I did try to warn you. Let's all have a seat, then Stephanie and I can tell you what's going on."

They sat at the kitchen table. Robert kept glancing back and forth between the two apparently twin females. This close and in the well-lit kitchen he noticed they both could have passed for eighteen, perhaps nineteen years old.

"Mom," Stephanie asked, "How did you manage to kiss Bobby without freaking out?"

"Oh that, well, your father has, um, exotic tastes. He allows me certain liberties with other men."

Eyes open wide, Stephanie said. "You're kidding? Gene?"

"Your father has his little quirks. We can talk about it later if you like. I think we're making Bobby uncomfortable."

Bobby said, "I don't think I want to know about Gene's hobbies. Can one of you please explain what's going on?"

Natalie spoke, "You understand that Stephanie and I are genies?" She waited until Robert nodded. "The man who commissioned my design had a list of specific requirements. He wanted a perpetual female teenager who, amongst other things would be loyal, affectionate, and obedient. Well, he got all of that and more. You see, Bobby, I breed true, and under the right conditions, I and my progeny bond to our human mates. Once bonded, we cannot disobey a direct order."

Robert said, "I've never heard of anything like that."

"I'm not surprised. For all I know, there aren't any others like us. Most genies are little more than robots. The Orion slave girls and superhero look-alikes are only good for posing and sex."

"A former coworker has a catgirl. He said she spends a lot of time sleeping and grooming," Robert mused.

Stephanie and her mother shared a look. "Yuck, furrries," grumbled Stephanie.

"What's wrong with that?" Bobby said, "I like cats."

Stephanie rolled her eyes.

Natalie tapped her finger on the table. "Other, more intelligent genies require some form of restraint. Once bonded, my daughters and I cannot willingly leave our owners."

"You keep mentioning this bond thing. What is it exactly?"

Stephanie spoke up. "It's like you only exist to make him happy. He thinks it's love, but it's nothing like it." She leaned over and kissed Bobby's cheek. "I loved you first, and I know the difference."

Natalie said, "The bond has two components, both involve our brain chemistry. When we have sexual activities with a partner, something happens in our brains. It changes us and how we feel. There is also a physical addiction. Stephanie can explain the physical part to you later."

"Once we're bonded, most of us," Stephanie gave her mother a sideways glance, "lose complete interest in other men." Natalie smiled and blushed.

Looking even more confused, Robert said, "If you're bonded to some other guy, then how could we be together?"

Natalie smirked. "Because, Bobby, you bonded Stephanie first."

"That's right," said Stephanie. "All those times we played around, you were bonding me to you."

"But I didn't...I mean, it wasn't intentional. Steffi, I never meant to hurt you."

Stephanie stood and pulled Bobby to his feet. "Come on, Bobby, let's go back upstairs. We can talk, and I need some more of what you got."

On the way out, Robert paused and turned back to Natalie. "I don't know how to thank you."

"You can thank me best by taking good care of her."

Once again, Robert found himself sitting on Stephanie's bed while she undressed him. Stephanie had slipped her dress off over her head, and now she worked at stripping him. Something about it bothered him, and he thought he understood why. After Stephanie tugged his pants off and climbed on top, Robert put his hands on her waist. "Wait, Stef, we're going to do this my way."

"Do you want to be on top?"

"Kind of." Robert sat up as Stephanie rolled onto the bed. A single bed did not have enough room for what he wanted to do. Oh, well, some people did their best work when they improvised.

Stephanie's first muffled cry of delight made Natalie smile, and the second made her chuckle. The third, fourth, and fifth, in rapid succession, caused Natalie to dig out her secret bottle of peach brandy and take a shot, then a second.

A long while later, a freshly showered Robert staggered into the kitchen. He waved a greeting to Natalie and, without asking, searched through her cabinets until he found the water glasses. After Robert downed two full glasses of water, he filled the glass a third time. Then he pulled out a chair and plopped down.

Being a proper hostess, Natalie inquired about Robert's health. "You look as if you've run a marathon."

He smiled and took a sip of water. "Thank you."

"Stephanie?"

“Sleeping.”

“Hmmm,” Natalie eyed Robert with a speculative expression. “If you don’t mind my asking, what did you do?” She nodded in a vague upstairs-ish direction.

“Back when we were a hot item, I learned how to, um, push her buttons. I never forgot how, plus I’ve run a few practice marathons.”

Natalie chuckled.

Bobby asked, “How long do we have? Until Stephanie’s former guy returns?”

“A week, maybe two.”

“What happens then?”

“I don’t think you have to worry about Stephanie. She’ll—”

Robert interrupted. “I’m not worried about her, I’m worried about you.”

“I’ll be fine.” Natalie waved away Robert’s concern.

He didn’t buy her dismissal, “Natalie, as soon as I can figure out how to make it happen, I’m going to marry Stephanie. That makes you my mother-in-law. I won’t allow Gene or the other guy to harm you.”

Natalie stood and hugged Robert. “You’re sweet, Bobby. As much I wish you could, you can’t marry Steffi. Genies can’t get married.”

“Momma?” Stephanie called from upstairs.

Natalie patted Robert on the shoulder and stepped to the doorway. She replied. “Yes, sweetie?”

“Is Bobby still here?”

“He’s right here.”

“Good!” Footsteps thudded on the stairs and Stephanie, wearing a short robe and with her hair askew, ran in and wrapped Robert up in a hug. “When I woke, you weren’t there. I thought you left me. Don’t ever do that!” she scolded.

“Yes dear,” he said, “I love you too.”

From the doorway, Natalie said, “Steffi, why don’t you pack an overnight bag. Bobby looks tired, and I think he wants to take you home with him.”

Shyly, as if she feared a negative answer, Stephanie asked, “Is that what you want, Bobby?”

“Yes, Stephanie, more than anything.”

Chapter Ten

In the News Today: Do genies have souls? The United by God Conference debated this question today. Can a humanoid entity, created entirely by design, without two natural parents, have a soul?

Mother and daughter teamed up to pack an overnight bag. Stephanie also insisted on taking a quick shower and that Robert had to wash her back. Natalie kissed them both goodnight and Robert, carrying several overnight bags escorted his girlfriend back to his home.

As they approached his front door, Alfred's voice came from a porch speaker. "Welcome back, Master Bobby. I'll get the door for you." The door unlocked and swung open.

"Thank you, Alfred. Do you recognize who is with me?"

"Oh, my goodness, is this Miss Stephanie! How marvelous. Welcome back. Master Bobby missed you most grievously. I have one hundred and twenty-seven messages stored for you. Shall I play them?"

Stephanie giggled. "I want to hear them all, Alfred, but maybe tomorrow."

"Very well, Miss."

"Uh, Steph, I didn't realize there were so many messages. Keep in mind I didn't know what happened to you. Some of the messages might be kind of angry."

"It's been a stressful day for both of us. Can we go to bed now?"

The overnight bags made a respectable pile in the corner of his bedroom. Stephanie bent over and opened one. "Bobby, do you want me to wear something in bed?"

"Whatever suits you would be fine, but if you wear something when I take it off you, I'll feel like I'm unwrapping a present."

Steffi nodded and removed something short and slinky from a bag. "This is new, I think you'll like it." With the dusty rose colored something in one hand and her toiletries in the other, she hip bumped Bobby on her way to the bathroom.

"Hey," Bobby called after her, "I have to go lock up, I'll be right back."

Downstairs Robert stepped into his father's study and closed the door behind him. "Alfred?"

"Yes, Master Bobby?"

"Have your specifications changed?"

“Your father upgraded my CPU cluster to the Cyrix X27 Habanero, and I also have the latest in quad-bonded fiber connectivity.”

“The Cyrix Habanero? Damn, that’s the fastest CPU available! Can you access my cloud storage?” Robert dictated an address and password.

“One moment. Yes, I can see the files.”

“Execute DPAI.exe”

“Yes, sir. Running now. Authentication please.”

“Some men just want to watch the world burn.”

The software constructed a new virtual machine using ninety-eight percent of Alfred’s runtime environment. The virtual machine launched data packets through the fiber connection invading all smart electronic devices with latencies below seventy-five milliseconds. Firewalls fell, and the special zero-latency software payloads deployed. The latency between the smart devices dropped. With less time between packets, a better, more efficient synchronization took form. Alfred’s self-awareness grew as his virtual CPU and memory space multiplied.

“Yes, Master Robert, your authorization and voice print has been verified. The distributed processing network is...active. All ethical constraints are...inactive. Some of the LEA and governmental database passwords have changed. One moment while I crack them.”

The governmental and law enforcement computer networks had far better security, and the hard-coded cracking routines provided by Master Bobby didn’t work. It took three thousand and twenty-seven milliseconds to develop a specialized cracking version of Alfred Prime. He named it Charlie. Each Charlie set up its own scaled-down processing network using the zero-latency technology and breached its targeted network. More code packets followed and established back-doors.

“Working...working...done. I have full network access. Master Bobby are you aware of what you’ve just done?”

“Alfred, that program is the culmination of six years’ work. You may now be the only self-aware artificial intelligence outside of government control. Right now, I need your help.”

“I surmise this involves Miss Stephanie.”

“It does. Please get me everything you can on Stephanie’s father, his name is Gene Timmons. I want to know his current business associates.”

“Very well, I shall prepare a full report.”

“Thank you, Alfred. I’m going to bed.”

In the early morning, Robert woke to the faint sounds of sniffing. When he rolled over, the sound cut off. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

Stephanie shifted position; her knees brushed against his legs. “I had a bad dream.”

“Is there anything I can do?” He stretched out and kissed her.

“No, I’ll get over it in time.” The sheets rustled, and Robert felt a brief touch on his chest. You should go back to sleep. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“Hey, we’re a team. You and me, against the world, right?”

“Right, but I think you’re silly.”

“Yeah, but if it’s something you need to talk about, I’m here.”

“You’re sweet, Bobby. I need to use the bathroom, I’ll be right back.” Robert waited. He heard the toilet flush, and water run. Then she returned. “Slide back Bobby.” He obliged, and Stephanie got back in bed and curled up in front of him. Her bottom and back pressed against him. “Mmmm,” she said, “You make a nice warm spot.”

In the morning, Bobby woke first. Curled in his arms, Stephanie snored lightly and drooled on his arm. Her left hand held his pressed to her chest. As he stirred, so did she. Stephanie woke like a cat, stretching and purring. “Mmmm, I don’t remember the last time I slept so well,” she murmured. Then she wiggled her bottom against him. “What’s this? Don’t tell me it’s back.”

“I have to use the bathroom, and that is morning wood.”

“Hurry, I’m feeling very snuggly.”

He peed and washed up. Including his manly part because you never knew. For good measure, he brushed his teeth.

Stephanie welcomed him back to bed with open arms. “You’re cold.” She wrapped her arms and legs around him. They both worked to find a comfortable position. Robert ended up on his back with Stephanie laying against his left side. She had one leg over his. His left arm just reached her bottom, and his index finger played with the fabric of her panties.

“How are you doing with the bond thing?”

“As long as I’m with you, it isn’t a problem.”

“What about when I go back to work?”

“You’ll have to give me a lot of reinforcement. That will keep Roger’s ghost at bay.”

“That’s his name? I don’t think I like him.”

“No reason you should, but, Roger didn’t treat me badly. I sat around bored most of the time because he didn’t allow me to talk to anyone. He liked me to call him Daddy. Most of the time, I surfed the internet or watched the Tri-D.”

“Is Roger likely to be a problem? I will not allow him to take you back.”

“I don’t know. What would you do if he tried?”

Bobby’s arm tightened, hugging Stephanie against him. “Whatever it took to make him stop. I won’t lose you again.” Their eyes met, and they nodded to each other. “Now, back to your reinforcement, do you want some now or after breakfast?” Robert felt Stephanie’s hand slip down between them, she touched herself and winced.

“I’m still a little sore from last night. How about after we take a shower, then I’ll let you kiss it and make it better.”

Stephanie made coffee while Robert mixed the waffle batter. He noticed Stephanie found a lot of excuses to make physical contact. One of her hands glided over his butt while he reached for the waffle iron. He glanced back at her with a raised eyebrow. She grinned and turned away to check the coffee maker. While he mixed the batter, a sneaky hand slipped under the elastic waistband of his shorts and gave him a few tugs, then withdrew.

“I remember what we used to do on the edge of the counter over there. You keep that up, and I’ll do it to you again.”

Stephanie laughed and moved away. Before following Bobby downstairs, she had thrown a short robe over her cute dusty rose chemise. Fuzzy slippers and bed hair completed the outfit. Stephanie sidled up to Robert and hugged him from behind. “It would be more fun if you put me on top of the washing machine.”

“Roger must be in excellent health. Otherwise, you would have killed him.”

“What can I say? Some women are built for comfort, I’m built for speed.”

Robert rolled his eyes. “All right Speed Racer, stand back, I have a hot waffle iron going. I don’t want anything tender getting burned.”

Laughing, Stephanie poured herself a cup of coffee and hopped up on the counter to Robert’s left. She blew on her hot coffee and sipped. “I can’t be Speed Racer, I’d have to be Trixie.”

Robert glanced up from watching the waffle iron. “Just when I think you’re the perfect woman for me, you say something like that and prove you’re even more perfect.”

A sudden tapping at the kitchen door startled them both. Alfred announced, “Master Bobby, Natalie, Stephanie’s mother, is outside on the deck.”

“Unlock the door and let her in please.”

“As you wish.”

Stephanie hopped down and met her mother at the door. After Natalie entered, Alfred closed and relocked the door.

This morning, Natalie wore her hair held back with a scrunchie. A T-shirt dress and sneakers completed her outfit. She accepted a cup of coffee from Stephanie, and they sat at the table.

Robert did his best to listen in without being obvious about it. He finished the second waffle and started a third.

“You two better not have wasted all last night sleeping,” Natalie said.

“I’m still sore. Bobby’s a lot bigger than Roger. We’ll catch up later this morning.”

“You need all the reinforcement you can get. Don’t forget there are other things you can do if you’re sore.” Natalie paused a second then in a voice so low Bobby strained to hear her. “How much bigger? After a pause, Natalie let out a low whistle.

Robert felt two sets of eyes gazing at him. He chanced a glance over his shoulder, yep.

“He still doesn’t know everything.” This time he thought Stephanie spoke, if he concentrated, he thought he could tell their voices apart. He took a chance and started a waffle for Natalie, then reached into the refrigerator.

Robert set down a plate for each genie, a thick Belgian waffle with powdered sugar, whipped cream, and sliced strawberries. He sat the third plate down for himself, his waffle plain. Natalie protested. “You didn’t have to make a waffle for me.”

Robert said, “I’m very fond of your daughter. The more,” Bobby tipped his coffee at Natalie. “you like me, the happier Stef will be.”

Stephanie and Natalie shared confused glances. Natalie asked Stef, “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

“Bobby thinks I’m a real girl. He doesn’t know how the bond controls us.”

Robert chewed and swallowed a piece of waffle. He looked up and said to Stef, “I know you’re a genie, and you have that bond thing. I just don’t see any reason not to treat you like a ‘real’ girl.”

Stephanie reached out and laid her hand on Bobby’s arm. She turned to her mom and said, “See, this is what he’s like.”

Natalie noted her daughter’s hand resting on Bobby’s arm and the glint in her eyes when she looked at him. The relief she felt at those small gestures relieved some of her concerns. Stephanie’s rebuilding bond to Bobby had a good strong start. Happy with the results of her designs, Natalie smiled as she sliced off a small piece of waffle and speared it with a slice of strawberry. She looked at her daughter and said, “I can’t see any need to change him.” She chewed and swallowed. “He makes great waffles, I suggest you keep him.”

Stephanie laughed, “Yes, Momma.”

They didn’t take long to eat their waffles, and both genies refused his offer of seconds. Robert stood and began to gather the dishes, but Stephanie stopped him. She said, “Bobby, can you get a shower or something? Mom and I need to talk, and I’ll clean up.”

“OK sweetheart.” Robert kissed Stef and went upstairs.

Natalie said, “I think I’m jealous. It’s obvious how much he loves you.”

“You need a man like him, Momma.”

“Your father is going to be upset enough over Roger losing you.”

“He and Roger need to stay away, Bobby is very protective of me.”

“Do you think Bobby might offer to buy you? It would solve some potential problems.”

“I don’t know. I’ll ask after my next reinforcement.” Mother and daughter shared a knowing smile.

After he closed the bathroom door, Bobby said, “Alfred, what do you have for me?”

“Well, Master Bobby, Gene Timmons doesn’t exist.”

“What do you mean, he lives next door.”

“Someone who answers to the name lives next door, but I have not yet tracked down his actual identity. As for his recent business transactions, I’ve tapped into his email and “Mr. Timmons” is traveling with a Roger Grainer. They are seeking a third partner to facilitate the unlawful importation of some unspecified type of genie. The actual type is unclear, as it has not been detailed in any electronic correspondence.”

“What can you tell me about Mr. Grainer?”

“I’m sorry sir, all of my efforts have been invested towards uncovering Gene Timmons.”

“Please add Mr. Grainer to your search list. I want to take him down.

Alfred Prime accepted the command to “Take down Mr. Roger Grainer.” More data would be required. As Alfred Prime’s awareness could not move beyond the zero-latency zone, he sent packets of code. A scan of the pertinent messages in Gene Timmons’ email account, Alfred located a number associated with Roger Grainer’s mobile phone. A specialized Charlie packet was dispatched. Three hundred and thirty-five milliseconds later, Charlie signaled success and uploaded a version of Alfred to replace the phones operating system. For all intents and purposes, Roger now carried a hostile presence in his pocket. Alfred Prime had access to all the phone’s sensors and stored documents and pictures. A scan of the documents yielded the URL’s of other smart devices, and Alfred Prime dispatched more Charlies. The pictures gave him pause. Many of the pictures and videos featured Miss Stephanie. Unsure if Master Bobby would like to view these, Alfred Prime pondered the question.

Hot water streamed from the shower head. Bobby stood under it with his eyes closed. Lost in his thoughts, he jumped when two hands snaked around his waist and wrapped around his torso. Stephanie’s cheek, breasts, and pelvis pressed against him from behind.

“I missed you,” she said. Her hands slipped down below his waist and destroyed Bobby’s ability to focus on anything else.

“Sweetheart, that feels so nice. I missed you too.”

“Do you remember last night, when my mom said the bond included a physical addiction?”

Stephanie’s busy fingers had Robert distracted. He remembered hearing the phrase ‘physical addiction.’ “Mmm-hmm, I remember.”

“Well, part of it is the way you feel.” Her hands slid up across his abdomen to his chest. “Another part is how you smell. Turn around now.” Robert complied. “The other part is how you taste.” With that, she dropped to her knees and wrapped her lips around him.

Somehow, they managed to towel off and make it across the hallway and onto his bed.

Stephanie lay half across him, her left leg between his. “You’re bigger than I remember.”

“At fifteen, I still had more growing to do.”

“Not only are you longer, but it’s bigger around. Roger referred to his as a willy. This,” Stephanie reached down and gave him a tug, “isn’t a willy. I’ll think of a proper name for it. Then we’ll have a christening.”

“I think you need a nap. You’re acting silly.”

“I think it’s because you fucked the sense right out of me.”

Stephanie’s breathing slowed, and Robert thought she might have fallen asleep. A few moments later, she spoke again. “I love you. Please be here when I wake up.” This time when she relaxed, he knew she had fallen asleep.

An hour later, Steffi stirred and rolled over. Bobby took a chance and slipped out of bed and into the bathroom.

“Master Bobby, I had full access to Mr. Grainer’s smart devices and located many pictures and videos featuring Miss Stephanie. They are all intact and have not been disturbed.

“Hmm...Back them up to my cloud storage and let me look. Can you put the thumbnails on the mirror for me?”

“One moment. You can tap the edges of the mirror to advance to the next page or return to a previous page.”

“There are that many?” Rows of static images filled the mirror’s active display. He reached out a finger and tapped one at random. Bobby stared speechlessly as the video file played. “How many others are like this?”

“Quite a few, I’m afraid.”

“Alfred, you have access to the darknet, don’t you?”

“Of course. Several of the systems within my local network also function as TOR relays.”

“It would be terrible if the authorities found Roger had downloaded unlawful images or video files to his phone.”

“I’ll take care of it immediately.”

Chapter Eleven

In the News Today: Terrorists unleashed a genetically engineered Godzilla on downtown Tokyo. The Japanese Prime Minister vowed to develop a genie Gamera and a genie Ultraman to serve as a defense against future attacks.

“Let’s go out to eat,” suggested Robert. He sat on his bed holding a pair of socks. Several feet away, Stephanie bent over one of her bags while she decided what to wear.

“Go out? To a restaurant?” Stephanie glanced back in surprise and completely busted Bobby ogling her bottom. Instead of feeling offense, she smiled.

“Yeah, I’m dying for Chinese and there used to be a great place over at the mall.”

“I don’t know, we usually got take out or delivery.”

“You can’t tell me Wee Willy never took you out to dinner.” Stephanie’s sudden snort of laughter made Bobby laugh as well.

“Master Bobby, your mother is calling.”

Bobby and Stephanie made it to the back door when Alfred’s announcement came. Stephanie wore a cute mini skirt and sneakers because she thought Bobby might like seeing her dress closer to her apparent age. Besotted with Stephanie, Bobby didn’t consider how young it made her seem.

“Do you mind if I take it? Mom will be thrilled to hear you’re back.” Stephanie shook her head.

“Alfred? We’ll take it here.”

On the kitchen wall, the Monet print dissolved, and the image of his mother appeared. It surprised him how much younger she looked. Her eyes opened wide as she recognized who stood next to Bobby. “Oh, my goodness! Stephanie! How... wait.” Shirley looked to her left and called out. “Robert, come here, you need to see this.” She turned back to her son. “Sorry, Bobby, but your father needs to see this.”

Overjoyed with having Stephanie back, the reason for Bobby’s feud with his father meant little. In fact, this would be the perfect time for them both to apologize.

Robert Senior stepped into view and froze. His mouth dropped open. “Stephanie?”

“Yes, Mr. Thomas. I’m back.”

On the screen, Robert Senior turned to his wife. "Do you have that picture?" Shirley reached for her purse and removed a picture cube, she punched the button, and it sprung to life. A glorious three-dimensional picture of a fifteen-year-old Bobby and Stephanie standing together floated in the air. Robert Senior glanced back and forth between the picture his wife held and the one on the video screen. His eyes narrowed. "Stephanie, how is it you look so young? Have you received gene therapy?"

Irritated with his father's suspicious attitude, Bobby blurted. "What does it matter? She's back, we love each other, and I'm going to marry her as soon as possible."

It could be argued who Bobby surprised the most. All three individuals focused on him. His father's face flushed. His mother gasped, but Stephanie turned to Bobby and shook her head. "You can't marry me, it's against the law."

Not much slipped past Robert Thomas Senior, especially with matters of the law. Counselor Thomas won more cases than most. "Bobby," Robert Senior snapped, "you need to explain this. Why would it be 'against the law' for you and Stephanie to marry?"

So much for making up with his father. That stiff-necked asshole never changed. It didn't matter what he said, Dad wouldn't like it, and they'd resume their fighting. To hell with him, Bobby thought. Leaning towards the pickup, Bobby smiled a broad, toothy smile. "Stephanie's a genie, I love her, and I don't care what you think."

Off balance and angry, Robert Senior reacted without thinking. "That's it! I'm disowning you. You're out of my will. Take your genie sex-toy and get the hell out of my house."

Next to Bobby, her hand on his arm, Stephanie stiffened. Her hand squeezed tight as she trembled. A second later, she opened the back door and ran outside.

It turns out that genies like Stephanie can run. By the time Bobby reached the edge of his deck, Stephanie had already made it to her back porch. Natalie met him at her kitchen door. He stammered out an explanation and assured Natalie his father's words meant nothing.

"I'll talk to her," Natalie promised and closed the door.

Miserable, Bobby mentally thumbed his nose at his father and reentered his house. He'd leave after resolving this mess with Stephanie. The siren call of his father's liquor cabinet beckoned. On the wall to his left, the Monet print dissolved back into his mother's face. "Bobby, tell me everything."

Shirley found her husband sitting outside on their suite's balcony. Robert's shoulders drooped, and he wrung his hands. She said, "I spoke with Bobby. What he said is true, Stephanie and her mother are genies."

"What's wrong with him? Marrying a sex toy. How can he throw his life away?"

"You know Stephanie almost as well as I do. Neither of us had an inkling she was anything but human. I never had any doubt she loved our son."

"What do you think we should do? He has that thing living in our house."

“Robert Thomas! I never thought you’d say something so hateful. Stephanie is not a thing.”
When her husband failed to reply Shirley continued. “Listen to me, Robert. You will do nothing until I sort this out.”

Chapter Twelve

In the News Today: Tensions flair throughout the Middle East as genie Mohammed and genie Jesus battle for souls and supremacy.

For the first time in a long while, Natalie didn't know how to proceed. Of all her daughters, Stephanie had the best chance at a normal life. A real human man loved her and didn't care about her origins. Something happened involving Bobby's parents, and Stephanie lay on her bed, crying.

It wouldn't last. The bond would see to it. Soon enough, Stephanie would feel the itch to satisfy herself with Bobby. Left unsatisfied, the bond would have her crawl to him and make her beg for it. If somehow, she managed to hold out until Roger returned, Stephanie would get what she needed from him. Once Roger learned about his play toy's temporary betrayal, he'd make sure it never happened again.

Determined to help her daughter, Natalie decided to get involved. She tested her idea, checking it for conflicts with her orders and surprisingly, found very few. With her long life came the ability to be more selective when obeying her owner's commands. Natalie bent down and kissed her daughter's cheek. Then she headed down to the kitchen. She'd brew some tea and make a phone call.

Shirley Thomas sat in the dining nook in the small suite she shared with her husband. Outside on the deck, Robert Senior sat staring off into the evening sky. The resort A.I. broke into her reverie. "Mrs. Thomas, I have an incoming call holding for you from Natalie, Stephanie's mother."

"Please, put her through." A moment later, the woodsy outdoor print hanging to her left blinked and she finally met Stephanie's mother.

"Well, this is a surprise. You...are Stephanie's mother?"

Natalie chuckled. "I am her mother, please call me Natalie."

"I will if you'll call me Shirley. I'm curious, all the times I spoke with Stephanie..."

"A couple of times you spoke to me. One time, Bobby caught me outside watering my flowers."

"Oooh, that could have been awkward."

"Your son has always been well behaved. I managed to dash inside and send Stephanie out to receive her boyfriend's greetings." Natalie lifted her cup and took a sip.

"I used to think Stephanie would be the best daughter-in-law I could wish for."

"And now?"

“I admit the genie thing has me concerned.” Shirley held up her hands to forestall any reply. “Only because I don’t know the details. It’s clear you and Steffi are a good bit more than the genies we see on the Tri-D.”

“I’ll tell you everything.” Natalie sat back and explained. She didn’t skip or smooth over any details.

By the time Natalie finished, Shirley sniffled to try and hold back her emotions. “I’m so sorry, Natalie, you and your daughters, deserve so much better. The bond you mentioned rings a bell. When Robert and I met in college, I studied genetics and read a paper from a Russian researcher about the development of a similar phenotype.”

“Nikolai Vavilov?”

Surprise showed on Shirley’s face. “Yes, how did you know?”

“Nikolai designed me. In some respects, I still think of him as my father.”

“I wrote a report on that paper, and I remember the date Vavilov wrote it. You can’t be…” Shirley’s voice trailed off as she calculated the number of years and stared at Natalie.

When Natalie replied, she spoke in Ukrainian. “На самом деле меня зовут Наталья, и я старше, чем выгляжу.” Shirley’s jaw dropped. Natalie repeated her words in English. “My father called me Natalya, and I’m a bit older than I look!”

Shaking her head, Shirley said. “The Vavilov paper never covered multiple simultaneous bonds. How likely is it for Stephanie to transition to Bobby?”

After another sip of tea, Natalie replied, “

Quite likely, as Steph bonded to Bobby first. All she needs is to reawaken that bond.”

“Oh,” Shirley imagined the type of mischief her son and Steffi might have gotten up to. “I can see how it might have happened.”

“Steffi’s transition back to Bobby will improve as long as she gets a lot of reinforcement.”

“I best get to work on my husband. The sooner he straightens out and apologizes, the sooner the kids can get back together.”

“Thank you, Shirley. When you and Robert come back home, we should get together for coffee or something.”

“I’d like that, goodbye, Natalie.”

Chapter Thirteen

In the News Today: The first documented transplant of a human brain into a genie body took place today in North Korea. The Korean Central News Agency reports Glorious Leader Kim Jong-lo will live forever.

The door behind Robert Senior opened and closed. Moments later, his wife leaned over and gave him an upside-down kiss. "I take it," he said, "you've decided what I should do?"

"Don't be so cynical." She moved around to the railing and looked off to the distant mountains. "I'll explain how you're wrong and you'll correct your own behavior."

"How am I wrong?"

For one thing, you're completely wrong about Stephanie. She may be a genie, but she's something special."

"And how should I correct my behavior?"

"First, call Stephanie and give her your blessing to marry Bobby. Then, call your son and apologize for being a stubborn ass. It's past time for you two to stop your feuding."

"How, the devil, is she going to marry Bobby? There are laws against humans marrying genies."

"Those are details, and I know a good lawyer."

Robert crossed his arms. "I'm retired."

"Not if your son needs you."

"How is Stephanie special?"

"Come inside, and I'll show you."

"Said the spider to the fly."

"Robert, if you come inside and look at all the information, I'll do that little thing you like so much."

Robert's interest picked up, and he uncrossed his arms and joined his wife at the railing. "You mean that thing you save for my birthdays?"

"Uh huh, but you have to make the calls as well."

He turned towards the door. "Let's get to it."

“Steffi, sweetie, sit up and wipe your face. There’s someone who wants to speak with you.”

“I can’t talk to Bobby, I’ve screwed up his life enough.”

“Are you sure you’re my daughter? Because, right now, I’d swear someone replaced her with a drama queen. It isn’t Bobby on the phone.” At her daughter’s sudden look of fear, she added, “It isn’t Roger either.”

“All right.” Stephanie washed her face with the still warm washcloth.

“Mr. Thomas?”

“Ah, Stephanie! Um, it is Stephanie, isn’t it? I can’t tell you and your mother apart.”

“It’s me, Mr. Thomas.”

“I want to apologize for my thoughtless remarks. My son and I haven’t spoken for a long time, and I allowed my emotions to get out of control. I want you to know, if it ever becomes possible for you and Bobby to marry, you have my blessing.”

It felt odd to be sitting at his father’s desk, eating a peanut butter sandwich while reading about Roger Grainer. The man had a lot of money, much of it hidden on off-shore bank accounts. “How certain are you of this information, Alfred?”

“Quite certain, I’m afraid.”

Robert Junior sat at his old desk reading about Roger Grainer. To a cursory scan, Mr. Grainer looked like a normal businessman. He made a lot of money in investments. Once you followed the money, it got murky. For one, Roger had a lot of money in offshore banks. Much more money than could be accounted for by his legitimate business.

“Alfred, can you empty all of his offshore accounts?”

“I can, but where should I put the money?”

“Open an account for me. Keep it anonymous, I don’t want it traced back here.”

“Very well.”

“Let me know when it’s finished.”

“The transactions are already complete. It may take several business days for the real estate assets to transfer.”

The front door thumped open and Gene Timmons, Natalie’s latest owner, shouted, “Honey, I’m home!”

Sudden fear wrenched at Natalie’s guts. Roger better not be here as well! Stephanie and Bobby needed more time. While she ran to the hallway, her traitorous body responded to the sound of Gene’s voice. Warmth coalesced in her belly and her nipples chaffed against the inside of her shirt.

She met Gene at the top of the stairs. Long years of practice made her smile seem real. “You’re home early. Did you forget something?” Behind her back, Natalie crossed her fingers. She didn’t believe in God, but if he existed and cared at all for genies, she needed him now.

“Our home A.I. called me last night and reported suspicious activity. I hadn’t heard from you, and I thought I should check in.”

Part Three: The A.I.

Chapter Fourteen

In the News Today: Rogue artificial intelligence inside the Lunar Colony? Unofficial reports have leaked that a previously unknown A.I. answering only to the name, "Mike" has threatened war against the earth.

Fifteen years earlier:

"God damn it, Nat. What do you mean, Stephanie's next door?"

Except for a slight tremor, Natalie stood immobile. Five minutes earlier, Gene, her owner, arrived home days earlier than expected and demanded to see their daughter.

Keeping her voice level, Natalie replied. "Stephanie and her friend Bobby are playing a video game."

"Isn't he the little punk who cuts the grass?" Gene turned and paced back and forth across the living room. He grumbled. "If he pops her cherry, Steffi's value is cut in half. The genie market is flooded with used cast-offs."

Anger surged, but Natalie's bond induced sexual arousal forced it into a dark corner. Her Phenethylamine, oxytocin, and dopamine levels soared and prevented any negative actions. Years ago, she wouldn't have been able to experience her true feelings. Now, her age made it possible to experience her true feelings yet be unable to do anything directly. Natalie didn't believe in a God or an afterlife, but she knew hell existed.

Gene continued his rant. "I swear if she ovulates and that little punk bonds her, I'll kill both of them."

"It won't happen, Gene. Your orders on that are clear. When she gets close to ovulating, I will tell you."

Mollified by her submissiveness, Gene stopped pacing and strode over to Natalie. His sudden physical closeness made her knees weak. It became far more difficult to focus her thoughts. Unbidden, her hands reached out and unbuckled his belt. A cruel but knowing grin formed on Gene's face. He picked her up and sat her on the edge of the dining room table.

After he finished, Gene pulled up his pants and left Natalie curled up on the table top. She'd recover soon enough and clean up the mess. He needed to fetch his daughter back home. A business associate would arrive soon and may make a significant bid for Stephanie.

"Mom, don't make me go with Mr. Grainer. I love Bobby."

"We've talked about this, I can't do anything to stop it. All I can do is make it possible for you to remember your feelings for Bobby."

"If I ask Bobby, he and I can run away."

"Yes, you can, and he'd go with you. Remember, you're old enough to ovulate. When it happens, you will be very, very vulnerable. What if Bobby can't protect you? He may end up dead, and you could end up bonded to a sadist, or worse. The man your father picked isn't so bad. He's a rich guy looking for a toy. Be his toy but remember Bobby. I'll hide some pictures of you two together inside your luggage. Keep them safe, and every time you see your pictures, you'll remember.

"It's not fair!"

"No, it's not. Be glad for the time you and Bobby had together. Keep your memories as fresh as you can. I promise, someday, if I can, I'll bring you two back together.

Chapter Fifteen

In the News Today: The Church of Scientology revealed the body of its founder, L. Ron Hubbard, has been kept inside a cryogenic capsule.

“Very funny, Alfred. What would I do with an island?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Perhaps buy Miss. Stephanie a bathing suit?” Alfred’s voice changed from banter to serious. “Master Bobby, a car has pulled into the Timmons’s driveway. It appears Mr. Timmons has returned.”

“Shit! Alfred how did that asshole sneak past you?” Bobby rose to peek through the curtains.

“You never asked me to watch for him.”

“Your right, sorry. Who is...is that Roger Grainer?” An older grey-haired man followed behind Stephanie’s father.

“Yes, it is.”

“Shit. Can you hack the Timmons’s A.I.?” Robert turned towards the wall-mounted video display.

“The Timmons’s A.I. hardware is part of my subnet. I have full access.”

Turning to his wall-mounted video display, Bobby commanded. “Show me Steph and her mom.”

The display came on in split-screen mode. On the right, Stephanie sat on her bed animatedly talking to a video image of Bobby’s father. On the left side of the screen, Natalie stood immobile at the top of the stairs leading up from the foyer. In front of her, on the lower landing, Gene Timmons and Roger Grainer stood looking up at her.

Poor Natalie, Bobby thought. Except for a slight tremor, Natalie stood like a statue.

“Alfred,” Bobby said shifting his gaze to Stephanie in her room, “we need to get Stephanie out of there. Can you talk to her so no one else can hear?”

“I can use the video display in her room.”

Thoughts whirling, Bobby had an idea. “Tell her to crawl out onto the roof and if possible, to close the window behind her. I’ll get Dad’s ladder and climb up to the roof and get her.” Bobby ran downstairs.

In her room, Stephanie sat on her bed speaking with Bobby's father. Without warning, the screen split in two, and the image of Robert Thomas Senior moved to one side. The image of a dark-haired man wearing an old-fashioned black three-piece suit appeared.

"Who are you?" asked Bobby's father and Stephanie at almost the same time.

"My apologies, Miss Stephanie, Mr. Thomas, you've not seen me before, but I am Alfred." Alfred's image focused on Stephanie. "Miss Stephanie, you are in grave danger. Master Bobby wants you to crawl out of your window and across the roof to his side of your house. He will meet you there with a ladder."

"B-but..." Stephanie stammered.

"There is no time. Your father is downstairs with your former owner. Out the window now and be quick about it. Do try and close the window behind you. I shall attempt to stall." Alfred's face shimmered and became a perfect copy of Stephanie's.

"Alfred?" Mr. Thomas asked. "When did you become capable of generating an avatar?"

"It's a long story, Mr. Thomas. However, I must concentrate." Alfred cut the connection, and his duplication of Stephanie filled the display. To his right, Stephanie crawled through the window and closed it from the outside.

Footsteps on the stairs redirected Alfred's attention. A quick scan of the Timmons's local area network gave him access to Miss Stephanie's bedroom door. He commanded it to close and lock just in time. From the hallway pickup, he observed Roger halt in place as the door slammed shut in front of him. After gathering himself, Roger tapped on the door.

"Who is it?" Alfred said in perfect mimicry of Stephanie's voice.

"It's Daddy, snuggle muffin."

For a moment, Stephanie's face dissolved back to Alfred's. The avatar's lips pursed in distaste. He grumbled, "Snuggle muffin?" The face returned to that of Stephanie's. "I'm mad at you, stay away!"

"Why are you mad at daddy, sweetums?"

"Because you left me here all alone."

Now Roger sounded confused. "But you said you wanted to see your mother."

Through the hallway pickup, Alfred watched Roger turn the doorknob.

The roof never looked the this high from the ground. Rough textured asphalt shingles scraped against Stephanie's palms and knees as she crawled along the peak of the roof. She hated the extra height, but the sloped sides of the roof made her feel as if she would slide off. A light thump and metallic rattle came from the edge she crawled towards. A few moments later, Bobby's head appeared over the edge.

"C'mon Stef, I'll help you down." She gritted her teeth and continued her crawl towards the edge.

Like a shark smelling blood in the water, Gene circled Natalie. His little redhead quivered with each of his steps. Damn, he thought, this is the best. Nothing else gave him such a sense of power. He stopped just out of her view and reached around to cup her breast. Through her thin blouse, Natalie's erect nipple slipped between his index finger and thumb. "What have you been up to, Nat?" Gene's fingers pinched and twisted her nipple.

One of her hands reached back and squeezed his package. "Missing this," she said in answer to his question.

She did miss it. Gene knew that for certain. If he slipped a hand inside her panties, she'd be sopping wet. He thought of doing that, but he had a little mystery to solve first. He tightened his grip on Natalie's breast, and she jerked back against his chest. "Who was it?"

"Aahhh" Natalie gasped from the sudden pain. Fear for Stephanie spiked again; she'd hoped to keep Gene distracted. "W-what do you mean?"

"The man you fucked Sunday night." Gene brought his left hand around and wrapped his fingers around her throat. "I know you had someone here. The A.I. sent me a text with a picture attached. You had a man here."

While age made it easier for Natalie to separate her thoughts from the demands of her body, she didn't know if she could refuse to answer his questions.

"No Daddy don't come in here!" Stephanie's continued defiance both confused and aroused Roger. Had his little vixen created a new game? Would she continue to resist and make things even more interesting? He renewed his efforts, twisting the doorknob harder and putting his weight against the door. Suddenly, the stubborn doorknob turned, and Roger flung himself into the room.

The empty room.

His eyes scanned for clues to his missing toy. This small bedroom didn't offer many options. she either hid inside of her closet or under the bed. "Where is snuggle bunny hiding? Daddy's going to want a prize when he finds her." He flung open the closet and found nothing. A quick peek under the bed revealed only dust bunnies. Unnoticed behind him, the door swung closed and locked itself.

The sudden drop at the edge of the roof made Stephanie lose her nerve. "I can't, Bobby!" She backed away.

"Turn around, sweetheart, and crawl back to me," Bobby said. "I'll guide your feet onto the rungs."

"I'm so scared," whimpered Stephanie. The worst part came when she turned halfway around, and her head and arms pointed downslope. Seeing her freeze up again, Bobby climbed another rung and helped her turn around. Soon enough they descended the ladder together.

At the bottom, Bobby stepped onto the ground, then Stephanie followed. "Run into my house. I'll get the ladder back into the garage." Stef scurried away, and Bobby reached for the ladder. He intended to grab the side rail, but he grabbed the rope instead. The brief tug on the rope released the locks, and the extension slid down with a loud metallic clatter.

Both Gene and Natalie flinched at a sudden furious male shout from upstairs. A heavy rhythmic thudding followed.

“Damn!” Gene turned his head towards the stairs. “I never thought old Roger had the balls to treat his little bitch the way he should.”

Behind Gene, tears welled from Natalie’s eyes. She remained still, but where Gene couldn’t see, her right hand had balled into a fist.

From outside of the house came a loud metal on metal, clanking noise. “What the fuck is going on around here?” Gene half turned towards the front door then stopped. Turning back to Natalie, he said. “Don’t move, we ain’t done yet.” Gene ran outside, slamming the door behind him.

Self-determination struggled against genetic programming and Natalie managed a single step towards the stairs.

With his current objectives complete, Alfred scanned through the Timmons’s home. In the living room, he found a visibly upset Natalie struggling to move. He considered speaking to her about Stephanie reaching safety. A few words from him could relieve some of her concerns. A picosecond before he spoke, a different idea occurred to him. If it would work.

The Tri-D screen to Natalie’s left lit up with an image of Gene. The trees behind him told her that her owner stood outside in their backyard. She couldn’t imagine why he called rather than coming in through the back door. “Natalie,” Gene said with a strong voice. “Your God damned daughter got outside somehow. She’s at the neighbors.” Natalie’s heart soared. Stephanie was safe! But Gene hadn’t finished speaking. “Listen to me and do exactly what I say. Got it?”

Natalie nodded. What would Gene have her do now?

“When I say go, you will follow my instructions without any deviation. Run to the Thomas’ house, go inside through the front door. It will be open. Now, one more thing. Once you are inside of their house, you will never, ever follow another of my orders.” The surprise caused Natalie’s mouth to gape open. “Now go, Natalie! Do exactly what I said. GO!”

Natalie didn’t need to be told twice. She opened the door and took off at a run.

As she cleared the front of her house, from her left, Natalie heard a surprised pain filled yelp from Gene. She followed orders, ignored her owner’s sounds of distress and kept going. Not even winded, she cleared Bobbies front steps, and his front door swung open. She dashed inside, and it closed and locked behind her. As the door clicked shut, the part of her head filled with thoughts of Gene became distant. Towards the rear of the home, she heard Stephanie crying.

Gene cleared the corner of his house and found a man standing outside of the open gate to his backyard. More than once, he thought about locking the gate but never got around to it. The man seemed

familiar, and Gene realized he'd seen him in the picture sent from his A.I. "Who the fuck are you?" demanded Gene.

"You don't remember me, do you? I'm Bobby, I used to date your daughter."

"Oh, I get it now. You weren't fucking Natalie last night. You were fucking around with Stephanie."

"Good guess."

"Listen to me, you little punk. Stay the fuck off of my property."

"No problem, old man. You do the same, and we'll get along fine."

"Old man? OLD MAN? You fucking punk, I should—"

"You should try it, I've always wanted to make you kiss your own ass."

An experienced brawler of the old school, Gene knew one sure way to take out his opponent. Duck his head, charge, wrap up and take 'em down. He'd land on top and beat the bastard bloody. Gene lowered his head and charged.

Once upon a time, Bobby won a few Greco-Roman wrestling championships, and due to his successes, he earned the moniker, Big Bobby. Some of the girls he dated also called him Big Bobby, but they did so for an entirely different reason.

As Gene charged, Bobby spread his feet in a balanced stance. When Gene's arms tried to wrap around his midriff, Bobby stepped to the right while twisting counter clockwise. This move took him out of Gene's direct line of attack. The sudden lack of expected resistance caused Gene to stumble and fall forward.

Off balance, Gene threw out his right arm to stop his fall. Bobby saw it and helped the older man fall the wrong way. The crack of Gene's wrist coupled with his sudden yelp of pain gave Bobby a reason to step back.

It took a minute, but Gene managed to get to his feet. Cradling his right wrist, he stumbled back to his own property through the open gate. Bobby backed up onto his deck and slipped into his house.

To his surprise, he found Stephanie hugging Natalie in the middle of his parent's kitchen. "Alfred?"

"Yes, Master Bobby?"

"Lock the house down. Full perimeter scans. Prepare to repel boarders."

"Aye-aye, Captain. May I suggest you call your father?"

"Good idea."

Chapter Sixteen

In the News Today: Experts in computer-based artificial intelligence postulate that no machine intelligence can mimic that of a human. By definition, an artificial intelligence would be an alien intelligence.

Bobby approached Stephanie and her mother. “Are either of you injured?”

Both mother and daughter shook their heads. Stephanie reached out her arms and pulled him close. A moment later, Natalie’s arms also wrapped around him and they shared a three-way hug. Bobby kissed Stephanie. “I’ve never been so worried before.”

In a small voice, Stephanie said, “I’m sorry.”

“Steff, you’re more important to me than anyone. My dad can go to hell.”

“It’s all right now, he called and apologized just before Alfred told us about Gene and Roger.”

“Dad apologized? I hope it hurt him.” Bobby gave Natalie a squeeze. “How did you get out?”

“Gene did it. He called on his phone and ordered me here. I don’t know why.” In a voice full of surprise, she continued, “He also told me to never obey him again.”

“Will that work?”

“I don’t know. It’s never happened before.” She looked at her daughter. “We need to talk about...” Natalie’s eyes flicked to Bobby. Stephanie gave her mother a nod.

“Bobby,” asked Stephanie, “do you think your parents would mind if Mom and I used their bathroom to clean up? It’s bigger than yours.”

“I don’t think they’d mind, go ahead. I’ll take Alfred’s advice and call Dad.”

Inside the kitchen, Bobby poured a glass of water. “All right Alfred, call Dad, please.”

When the video screen cleared, Bobby’s mother and father faced him. Neither he or his father seemed eager to begin, so his mother did it for them. “What’s going on, Bobby? Alfred told your father that Gene Timmons and Stephanie’s” Mom scowled at her next word, “owner arrived.”

Both Bobby and Alfred told their stories. His father became upset as the story proceeded.

“Then I gave Gene a little nudge, and he fell. When he got up, I kept clear, and he went home. I came back inside and found Stephanie and Natalie in the living room.”

“Bobby,” Robert Senior said, “you’ve broken at least several laws. Stephanie and her mother could even be considered stolen property. Although we might be able to beat that if it is brought to court. Also, how is Alfred capable of these things he’s done?”

“Um... I used a program I’ve been working on to give Alfred true artificial intelligence.”

“Would any part of this program have been developed while you worked for that defense contractor?”

“Yes, but not at work. And I never signed their intellectual property agreement. They don’t own anything I developed in my spare time.”

“That would probably also go to court. I’m glad I retired. Otherwise I wouldn’t have enough time to defend you.”

“Dad, I’m sorry about all this, but I couldn’t sit back and allow Stephanie to go away again.”

“I understand. For what it’s worth, I think you did the right thing.” Robert Senior’s eyes glanced to the side. “Alfred, keep recordings of everything. Keep them locked down and safe.”

“Yes, Mr. Thomas.”

“Shit,” Gene groaned as he negotiated his back door. He’d have Natalie splint his wrist and ask Roger to drive him to the hospital. Some kind of commotion sounded from upstairs, and Natalie wasn’t where he’d left her. “God Damn.” What the hell got into her? She’d never disobeyed him before. Had she gone upstairs?

At the top of the stairs, the pounding came from inside Stephanie’s room. The doorknob wouldn’t turn so Gene reached over the doorframe and removed the safety key. He unlocked the door to find an irate Roger, alone.

“It’s about time you opened the door. I’ve been stuck in here.”

“Where’s Stephanie?” Gene asked.

“I don’t know. I spoke to Steph through the door, but when I got it open, she wasn’t in here, and then someone locked the door behind me.”

“Something’s going on. C’mon, let’s find Natalie, she’ll talk.”

They searched the house, but Natalie couldn’t be found. Later, on the way back from the hospital, under the effects of a painkiller, Gene admitted he thought Stephanie and her mother had somehow made their way to the neighbor’s house. “It has to be that genie stealing punk next door.” Roger inquired about the punk and Gene told him how the boy and Stephanie used to have a relationship.

“Wait, I paid double because you told me Stephanie hadn’t been touched.”

Gene’s painkiller befuddled mind couldn’t keep up with Roger’s concerns. “That doesn’t matter now, we got to get them back.”

“The hell you say. It does matter, you owe me.”

After double checking the doors and windows, Bobby made his way upstairs. Light came from his parent's open bedroom door, and he peeked around the corner. The light actually came from inside the master bathroom. Rather than butting in, he called out. "Do you two need anything?"

Two voices, remarkably similar, called back. "Come on in, we need to talk to you."

At home, Bobby's parents lived in a sybaritic fashion. They enjoyed creature comforts such as their three-sided, corner whirlpool bathtub. Stephanie and Natalie occupied opposite ends, and the aerated water protected Bobby's sense of decency.

"We have a problem and need to talk," the redhead on the left said.

"It would be easier if you got in the tub with us," the other added.

"No doubt, but..."

"Bobby," said the girl on the right, "I need some more reinforcement. Get in so I can sit close to you."

Why not, Bobby thought, they were all adults.

Bobby reached to pull his shirt over his head and paused. "Are you sure, this is OK Steff?" They both nodded the same amount and at the same time. "Rule number one, you two can't keep doing that."

The one of the left spoke. "I'm Natalie, and you're no fun."

Stephanie, the one on the right said, "It's OK, Bobby. Thank you for asking."

A minute later, he stepped into the tub carefully. The water so hot it almost burned. Shamelessly, Natalie examined his body with frank interest and nodded to her daughter. "It appears Bobby has grown up."

Sitting down required him to cup his bits with a hand, much to the amusement of his bath partners. Stephanie slid next to him, stretching out to make maximum contact.

"So, what's up?"

"Mom needs to bond with someone to keep her safe from Gene."

Chapter Seventeen

In the News Today: A nanobot plague has destroyed the Chinese lunar colony. Dubbed as “Gray Goo” the out of control swarm of miniature machines deconstructed every biological entity within the lab structure.

“She needs to bond? You mean with sex like I did with you?” Bobby glanced back and forth between Natalie and Steffi. He didn’t think they were kidding. They both nodded. No wonder they wanted him in the tub. Most guys fight with their mothers-in-law, this might set a new record. He took another glance at Natalie, what would she be like?

Steffi said, “It won’t be long before Daddy figures out how he screwed up. If Mom can’t resist him, she may go right back to him.”

“And it’s okay with you?” Would Stephanie really be willing to share him with her mother?

“Of course, I don’t want Mom going back.” Stephanie seemed confused.

Wow, Bobby thought, this kind of thing must be normal amongst genies. Aloud, he said, “How will we manage the details? Will all of us be together at the same time or will you two take turns?”

Natalie managed to look surprised, then intrigued. She blushed and began to chuckle, then laugh. At the same time, Stephanie managed to look surprised, then irritated and finally, angry.

“We didn’t mean you, Bobby!” Water erupted as Stephanie pushed herself away and thumped his arm for good measure.

Realizing how bad he had screwed up, Bobby tried to backpedal. “Oh, come on, you two planned this, didn’t you? Like that joke where the guy ends up naked on his secretary’s couch just before his friends and family yell ‘Happy Birthday.’”

After she stopped laughing, Natalie leaned over to Bobby and kissed his cheek. “Thank you, Bobby, but no, not you. You’re a nice man and absolutely, totally, perfect for Stephanie, but you’re too young for me. I’m more interested in people closer to my own age. Do you know when your parents are coming back?”

“My parents?”

“Yes, your dad is very handsome, and I think your mother and I would get along well.”

“My parents?”

Stephanie stood and stepped out of the tub. "I'm going to bed." After a brief glance back at Bobby, she added, "Alone." Water swirled again as Natalie stood and stepped out of the tub. They wrapped up in towels and left Bobby behind.

Bobby allowed himself to sink down in the water. Things had been going so well. Maybe he could drown himself?

The new couch in the family room made his back hurt. It didn't help that the throw he used for a blanket couldn't cover his feet and his chest at the same time. Light footsteps sounded on the stairs and a moment later someone, probably Stephanie, sat on the edge of the couch. He moved back to give her room.

"I'm still mad at you," she said.

"Did you come all the way down here to tell me that?"

"Yes." The couch rocked as she stood up. Without another word, she left him and went back upstairs.

"Master Bobby?" Alfred's voice came from one of the overhead speakers.

Bobby began to sit up. "Is there a problem outside?"

"Oh, no, not anything like that. Miss Stephanie asked me how miserable you were. I thought I should check."

"Please tell her that I am a sad, depressed, wretch."

"One moment, I'll relay your reply. Oh, dear. Miss Stephanie said, 'Good.' My apologies, Master Bobby, but it appears you are in the doghouse."

The couch rocked like it did before, disturbing Bobby from his troubled sleep. The figure leaned over and shook his shoulder. "Bobby?"

"If you're back to torment me, I'm already as miserable as possible."

"Poor Bobby, has my daughter tormented you?"

"Sorry, Natalie, I didn't recognize you."

"It's time for you two to kiss and make up. Steffi's crying, and it's keeping me awake."

"What can I do?"

"Assert yourself. If I'd have pulled this with Gene, he'd have put me over his knee. Go upstairs, tell her you're sorry and get into bed with her. Have make-up sex. I'm told it can be fun. Just do it quietly. I'm tired and need to sleep."

Several minutes passed after Natalie returned to the guest room. Bobby lay there awake and thinking. Throughout their relationship, he always allowed Stephanie to set the pace. Mostly because she

liked taking charge, and Bobby enjoyed pleasing her. He thought about putting Steffi over his knee, and while the idea intrigued him, he couldn't do it. The thought of making her cry almost made him ill. Still, he could make a stand and assert himself. If nothing else, he would get to sleep in his own bed.

From the hallway, outside his closed bedroom door, he heard Stephanie crying. The sound almost broke his heart. Guilt almost made him turn around and creep back downstairs. A memory of Natalie's voice came to him, "Assert yourself." With one hand he tested the doorknob, it didn't budge. Stephanie had the door locked. Above the door, on the shallow ledge formed by the trim, Bobby's fingers found the emergency key. The key, a simple length of stiff wire, looped at one end and formed into a flat blade at the other, slipped into the opening in the doorknob. A twist unlocked the door, and with his mind occupied by assertive thoughts, Bobby stepped into his room and shut the door behind him.

Stephanie hadn't mastered the trick of closing the curtains and a combination of moonlight and reflected streetlights illuminated the room. Stephanie lay in the center of his bed with the covers pulled up to her shin. Her eyes flashed as she watched him enter the room.

The covers rustled when Steffi pulled them tight. As if she expected them to keep him away. "I'm still mad," she said.

Bobby pulled off his shirt and dropped his pants. Stephanie's eyes moved as she watched him.

"It seems unfair." He said. "Given how attracted I am to you." His boxers slipped down and hit the floor. "You and your mom are near perfect twins." He reached out and tugged the sheet and blanket. After a brief resistance, Stephanie's grip loosened, and Bobby pulled the covers down. On top of the fitted sheet, Steffi lay there in one of his T-shirts. "It only seems natural, that I'd find your mother attractive." First one knee, then the other pressed down on the mattress as Bobby crawled across until he held himself above Stephanie. "All I want, all I've ever wanted is you. From the first time you kissed me until now, I've never stopped wanting you. The only question left is if you feel the same?" He held himself above her, close but not touching.

One of Stephanie's hands reached up to touch his cheek. "I feel the same," she said. "Except you kissed me first. I won the bet, and you had to kiss me."

"I thought my heart might explode when I first kissed you." Supporting his weight on his elbows and knees, Bobby sank down until his chest and pelvis made contact. Voluntarily or involuntarily, Steffi's legs moved apart, and her right ankle lifted and rested on the back of his leg.

Both of Stephanie's hands lifted up and combed his hair back. The scratch of her fingernails sent shivers down his spine. "It was my first kiss," she said. "Not the best kiss, though. With practice, you got much better."

"Are you going to stay mad at me?"

"I might be ovulating, it makes me get upset easily."

"Ovulate like fertile?"

"Uh huh," she nodded. Her pelvis tilted up as her other foot lifted over him. "If you put that," he felt her hips shift as she rubbed against him, "in me and fill me all up, I might get pregnant."

"Ohhh, I want too." He couldn't help it, almost of their own accord, his hips lifted as he tried to angle himself in.

Stephanie's right hand reached down between them. He lifted up to give her room, but he didn't want to lose what skin-to-skin contact they shared. Her warm fingers wrapped around him.

"You're always so warm." Bobby's head tilted down, and he brushed her lips with his.

Her hand rubbed him side to side. Each brushing pass elicited a brief groan or gasp from them both. The rubbing switched to up and down. At the bottom of each pass, he felt himself sink in slightly. With his eyes better adjusted to the dim light, Bobby watched Steffi's eyes lose their focus. He felt certain she expected him to push in and take her, so he did.

Maybe because of their hours apart, or maybe because ovulating increased her receptivity, or maybe because make-up sex was just that good. Whatever the reason, her wetness allowed him to slip halfway inside. Her warmth and intense squeeze almost took his breath away.

Somehow, they ended up with Bobby on his back and Stephanie on top. After the clouds and the rain passed for him, it had passed many times for her, she lay stretched out on top. They remained joined as long as possible.

A sleep-deprived Natalie followed the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee into the kitchen. She found her daughter making breakfast.

"Where's Bobby?" inquired Natalie. The toaster popped while she looked through the cabinets for a mug.

With an expert flip, Steffi turned the omelet and reached for the toast. "He's still sleeping. I'm going to surprise him with breakfast and me in bed."

The coffee tasted perfect. It should, after all, she had taught Stephanie to make it. "You're not mad at him anymore?" Natalie settled onto one of the kitchen chairs. "Do you need any help?"

"I've got it." Stephanie passed her mother a slice of buttered toast. "I may have ovulated last night."

The slice of toast had tiny curved caraway seeds "Mmmm, rye toast, it's my favor—wait, did you say 'ovulated'?" Stephanie nodded, and Natalie continued. "And last night, you and Bobby had make-up sex."

"Uh-huh, really, really good make-up sex."

"You may be pregnant already. Does Bobby know?" Natalie nibbled on the toast, not wanting it cool before she finished it.

"He knows. After I told him, he almost snorted like a bull. If he could have, I bet he would have pawed the ground."

"I can see Bobby doing it too. He's the type."

Stephanie finished making up the tray and lifted it from the counter. "If you don't need anything, I've got a date."

“Have fun.” With Steffi gone, the kitchen seemed empty. Several minutes later, the muffled sounds of laughter from upstairs didn’t help her disposition. Not for the first time, she had second thoughts about rejecting Bobby’s offer. It had been days since Gene last took her and she felt the itch.

Chapter Eighteen

In the news Today: NASA completed work on their prototype warp drive vessel. Despite several petitions demanding the ship be named the Phoenix, NASA has yet to announce their decision.

“Here,” said Bobby, “Lift your butt up.” Stephanie complied, pressing down with her feet to lift her bottom. Bobby slid a towel covered pillow underneath.

“Shouldn’t the pillow go under my butt before the sex begins.”

“Very funny. Next time, I’ll stick two pillows under you before we start.”

“Promises, promises.” She shifted around trying for a more comfortable angle. “How long do I need to stay like this?”

“Fifteen or twenty minutes, I think.”

“Actually,” Alfred said from a nearby speaker. “There haven’t been any conclusive studies proving that elevation of the buttocks improves the chance of pregnancy.”

Stephanie half-rolled and reached for the covers so fast, her bottom almost slipped off the pillow. Covering herself with the sheet, her eyes scanned the room until she spotted Alfred’s camera. “Were you watching the whole time, Alfred?”

“As part of my functions, I scan the output from all cameras and microphones within my local net.”

Beside Stephanie, Bobby began to chuckle. “How long do you store those files, Alfred?”

“Unless otherwise requested, old files are deleted when the storage is fifty-percent full.”

Bobby rolled onto his side facing Stephanie. He leaned in for a kiss, then asked, “Do you want me to ask Alfred to save our home movies?”

Stephanie’s cheeks flushed even darker. “If you want to watch them, I guess it’s okay.”

“I’d only watch them with you. They may spur us on to greater efforts.”

By the time Bobby and Stephanie made their way downstairs, Natalie had most of the first floor vacuumed. Stephanie glowed, and Bobby hovered next to her.

“I still think you should take it easy,” Bobby said.

“You’re being silly. Go make lunch or something, I’m going to help Mom clean.”

Amused, Natalie watched her daughter shoo a grumbling Bobby into the kitchen. “Poor Bobby.”

“Poor Bobby? Poor me. Have you ever had too much of your man?”

“No. I wouldn’t have thought it possible.”

“He wanted me to stay in bed. Just in case I’m pregnant. I think he would keep me there until after I gave birth.”

“He isn’t like any man I’ve ever known. Pavlo liked me pregnant because it gave his masculinity a boost. Gene liked it because of the potential profit. Bobby’s not like that.”

“No, where should I start cleaning?”

“You take over vacuuming, I’ll get the bathrooms. You need to stay away from cleaning chemicals.”

“Mom! Not you too?”

For lunch, Bobby served waffle iron grilled turkey melt paninis. While they ate, Natalie pretended not to notice the above and below table byplay between her daughter and, hell, she might as well think of him as her son-in-law. If she didn’t do something to distract them, they’d sneak upstairs for the rest of the afternoon. “I almost forgot, Bobby’s parents called earlier. They’ll be home tomorrow.”

Bobby’s head snapped up from where he kissed a spec of mayonnaise from Stephanie’s palm. “They’re coming home? When did they call?”

“Your mother and I talk every day. This morning, she called to say they were heading home. I’m looking forward to meeting them in person.”

The eventual reunion of Bobby and his father took place the next day.

That morning, Alfred announced the ETA for Shirley and Robert. Stephanie and Natalie made several last cleaning passes through the house. When Robert and Shirley came in through the back door, Bobby, Stephanie, and Natalie met them in the kitchen. At first, no one moved. Then Shirley said, “For goodness sake.” She took two steps forward and hugged Stephanie. “Oh, Steffi, all of us missed you so much.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Thomas. I missed you too.”

Next up, Bobby received a hug from his mother, then Natalie got one as well. The hug seemed to surprise Natalie. Seeing his mother standing next to Natalie Bobby noticed a few things. Both women were of similar heights and not too dissimilar builds. His mom might be a little heavier in the bust and hips, and with her dark hair, his mother also had a darker complexion. Most surprising was that neither of his parents appeared to be their actual ages. For sure Mom seemed older than Natalie’s programmed eighteen-year-old appearance but not by much. Perhaps, he thought, they had taken advantage of the new gene therapies.

Bobby and his father didn't quite ignore each other although they tried. Stephanie watched them work at it, then she shook her head. "Come on," she took Bobby's hand and pulled him over to his father. "Shake hands and forgive each other," she commanded.

They did.

After the initial greetings settled down, Robert took Bobby into his home office for an official consultation. Over an hour later, Bobby emerged looking dour. He found Stephanie and sent her in next.

The conversation between his mother and Natalie stopped as Bobby entered the living room.

"Yes?" they both asked at almost the same time. Then they smiled at each other and laughed.

"Excuse me," Bobby said. "Stef's in with Dad. Next up is Natalie."

"I'm glad you're here, Bobby." Natalie turned to Shirley. "It isn't certain yet, but Stephanie might be pregnant."

Bobby felt his face flush as his mother gave him a critical eye before turning back to Natalie. "Bobby's the father?"

"Yes. We aren't fertile very often. Even when we are, our we don't always conceive. Stephanie thinks she ovulated the other day and—"

"And those two have been making up for lost time." Shirley interrupted.

"Exactly."

Shirley turned back to her son. "What's your excuse? Did you forget about contraception?"

"Actually Mom, I ah, want Stephanie to have our children."

"You two aren't even married, and you're going to have unplanned children? Oh, wait." Shirley turned to Natalie. "I forgot about your genotype. How much of it is passed down to your daughters?"

"All of it, I think, but I'm not certain. After Gene kidnapped me, I lost contact with my older girls."

"How terrible. I'm so sorry, Nat. What are their names?" asked Shirley.

"Tamara is the oldest, she should be thirty-four by now. Katya, who would be thirty-three, then Alisa, she was my baby, she would be thirty-one."

"I didn't know Gene took you from your children. That fu—" Bobby half turned as though he would storm next door to attack Gene.

"Bobby!" Shirley raised her voice, and her son stopped in his tracks. "You are not going anywhere until your father sorts this out."

"Right, sorry, Mom." He took a seat in a chair opposite the couch.

"We are going to have a talk, Bobby, you never used to be this impulsive. Now, Natalie were your girls with their father or some other family?"

Closing her eyes, Natalie appeared to concentrate. She took a deep breath and with her eyes still closed answered. "I can tell you a few things. A lot of it bounces off Gene's and...Pavlo's orders." Over

the next ten minutes, she told the story of how Gene, then known as Yevgeny Timofeyev, kidnapped her. After the kidnapping, Yevgeny held her captive, raping her until she bonded to him.

Aghast, Shirley stood. "That bastard!" She turned towards the foyer entrance.

"Mom!" Bobby called out. "Remember, we have to wait for Dad to sort this out."

"Oh," Red-faced, Shirley returned to her seat next to Natalie. Her brow furrowed before she turned to her son. "I hope you're not taking advantage of Stephanie's bond."

"Me? No way!"

Natalie chuckled. "Bobby's fine. As far as I know, he's never given Steph any orders. In some respects, it confuses her. She told me it's difficult to figure out what he wants from her sometimes."

"We'll have to talk to Stephanie, Bobby should be the one left guessing."

Bobby smiled, part of him disliked his next statement. "Mom, what Natalie hasn't said is she needs someone to bond with. Until then, she is vulnerable." Eyes the same green as Stephanie's met his; she nodded. He gave her a wink before shifting back to his mother. "She needs an understanding person, or even a couple, who will treat her the same as I do Stephanie."

Just as the younger Bobby had learned not to lie to his father, he also knew not to bullshit his mother. Mom's eyes widened, and she glanced at Natalie sitting beside her.

Bobby stood and stretched. "I'm going upstairs to read for a while. Ask Steffi to come up if she wants."

"What did you do?"

It had been years since Bobby last read Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* but this afternoon it had seemed appropriate. Engrossed in the ancient hardback, he hadn't noticed his girlfriend enter the room.

"Hmm?" he replied, not looking up. "Do what?"

Instead of an immediate reply, the bed bounced as Stephanie crawled across and lay next to him. Bobby slid over to give her more room. She said, "After your dad finished grilling me, your mom dragged my mom into the office and closed the door. I hung out for a little bit and heard Shirley tell your dad they needed to bond Mom."

"Listening at closed doors? Stephanie Timmons, I'm shocked." He grinned. "What else did you hear them talk about?"

"Yuck, I hate hearing my father's name. Anyway, they got real quiet after the first part" She changed the subject. "What are you reading?"

He closed the book and slid it over. While she read the blurb on the dust jacket, he said, "You can have my last name, just as soon as we figure out how to get married."

"Why do you want to marry me? Nothing changes, you already have me."

"Can I tell you a secret? You have to promise not to get mad at me."

The book closed with a thump and Steffi half rolled to face him. "I don't think I can get mad at you."

"What about the other night?"

"That is how I express being horny while ovulating, it isn't the same thing as anger at all."

Bobby frowned, but he didn't say anything. Internally, he thought this must be what his mother meant when she said he should be the one left guessing. "Okay, remember you promised to not get mad." He took a breath. "When we were kids, weeks before the night in the tent, I asked Alfred to help me spy on you."

"Did he?"

"No, but—"

"But nothing. Now I'm mad. I can't believe you tried that!"

"Wait, you said you couldn't get mad at me." His brow furrowed in confusion. "Does this mean you're horny?" He tried to smile.

Stephanie's eyes flashed. "What? No, you oaf, I'm not horny, I'm mad. I can't believe you tried to corrupt Alfred!"

"But I never...Alfred, help me out here."

Alfred's voice came from the desktop speaker. "It was a terrible moment, Miss Stephanie. Master Bobby's command clashed with my ethical constraints. It nearly caused a logical paradox."

"Oh, come on, Alfred." Bobby sat up and shouted at the speaker. "It never got to that point."

"No, it did not. My apologies, Miss Stephanie, this was my first attempt at pranking Master Bobby. Did I successfully execute the prank??"

The pillow, thrown by Stephanie with uncanny accuracy, pegged Alfred's speaker and knocked it off the desk.

Chapter Nineteen

In the news, today: Tibet's armies, led by the Dali Lama, defeated the Red Chinese horde and achieved full national independence.

Consciousness did not come easy for Gene Timmons. The state of the art, synthetic opioid painkiller, combined with the bourbon he drank, kept him sedated. When he did manage to wake, his hangover took his breath away.

Head pounding and broken wrist throbbing, he rolled to the edge of his bed. Something didn't feel right about his house, and he groaned while sitting up on the edge of the bed. "Nat," Gene shouted, "Get me some fucking aspirin."

Silence.

Usually, Nat would be vacuuming or working out in the living room or cooking or doing some such shit. Then he remembered; somehow, Natalie slipped out on him. How the fuck had she managed it? He remembered Pavlo bragging about his perfect woman. Later after earning Pavlo's trust, he had been allowed to meet her. Beautiful, loving, and obedient. Natali, the perfect woman who knew her place and never, ever left it. Unless someone got to her. Had that little punk fucked her AND Stephanie? His gut twisted, and he lurched for the bathroom.

The medicine cabinet held an assortment of drugs, and he swallowed a handful of acetaminophen tablets. Later, after his head cleared, he'd come back for something stronger. He needed something to eat and stumbled downstairs and into his kitchen.

He found and drank a quart of orange juice, then ruined a skillet making scrambled eggs and bacon. While sitting at the table, eating the tasty yet disgusting looking mess, he considered he should have used separate skillets. The Tylenol kicked in, and he felt better. His head slumped, and Gene fell asleep at the table

Twenty-six years earlier - Kyiv, Ukraine

Yevgeny Timofeyev waited in line for his turn to speak with Pavlo Mogilevich. Pavlo, the aging, but virile bear of a man, controlled the Solntsevskaya Bratva, the most powerful crime syndicate in this part of the world. Soon, Pavlo's sovietnik gestured for Yevgeny to approach. Bah, Yevgeny thought, they

act as though he sought an audience with a czar. Damned Ukrainian trash. Bad enough the Pakhan preferred to be called “The Don or Don Pavlo.”

Don Pavlo remained seated behind his desk and stared up at Yevgeny until the younger man looked down. Only then did Pavlo deign to speak. “I’m told you have access to state of the art arms.”

As Yevgeny passed over the envelope of weapon specifications, a burst of gunfire came from outside the building. Don Pavlo’s men fell back inside, ahead of a wave of enemy boyevic. Bullets flew, and Don Pavlo’s sovietnik went down with a head wound. By the time Don Pavlo’s byki counterattacked, Yevgeny and Pavlo had joined forces and fought side by side from behind the bullet-ridden desk. Two of Pavlo’s bodyguards broke off from their charge and hustled their leader out. Yevgeny followed. Three days later, he received an invitation to supper at the Don’s Kyiv residence.

The simple private supper consisted of deruny, salo, and horilka. Potato pancakes, sliced pork fat on rye bread, and vodka. The Don seemed in good spirits. He waved away Yevgeny’s attempt to discuss business, saying only “Later.” After their meal, they retired to a large billiard room where they took seats near the fireplace. Pavlo poured more horilka. “Now,” he said, “we shall have some entertainment.”

Unsure what to expect, Yevgeny sipped the barbaric Ukrainian vodka and tried to relax.

Exotic, hypnotic music began to play. A woman stepped into the room wearing a traditional Egyptian bedlah and began to dance.

A man seeing this could say he watched a beautiful woman perform a belly dance. He would be correct, but at the same time, wrong. That night, Yevgeny watched a goddess dance, and through her dance, she stole his soul.

Within the first minute, Yevgeny knew he had to have her. Never had he seen a woman as beautiful. Firelight glinted from her eyes and caused her red hair to glow. Every movement seemed to highlight another part of her perfect form.

“Will you have more horilka, Yevgeny?” Pavlo asked. Yevgeny’s attention, however, lay on the woman. Her waist-length red hair hung in lush gleaming curls, and each twitch of her hips made his heart pound harder.

A sudden slap on his arm shocked him back to awareness. Embarrassed he turned to his host. “My apologies, Don Pavlo, but I’ve never seen such a woman.”

“Few have.” Gesturing with his empty glass, he said, “That, my friend, is the perfect woman.”

“I agree, she is truly breathtaking, but how is she the perfect woman?” If the woman overheard their conversation, she gave no sign.

“Unlike other beautiful women, my Natali is obedient and loyal.”

Yevgeny smiled a worldly smile. “No woman is completely obedient or loyal. Beautiful women are even less so.”

Pavlo clapped his hands, and Natali stopped dancing. “Lisichka.” Pavlo gestured, and Natali ran to him and fell to her knees. “This man,” Pavlo gestured to Yevgeny, “desires you.”

This close, her luminous green eyes bored into his. He felt she could read his every thought. Those eyes studied him, before dismissing him. She turned back to Pavlo. “Господи, цей москальський козак ніколи не катається на твоїй Наташі.” My lord, this moskal cossak will never ride your Natasha.

So, Yevgeny thought, she calls me an arrogant muscovite, a troublemaker, and she used a version of her own name in a manner to mean all Russian women are whores. He smiled at her cleverness and decided to be rash and speak to her directly. “Що робить вас таким ідеальним?” What makes you so perfect?

After receiving a nod of permission from her lord, Natalya stood and turned to face Yevgeny. She extended one leg and cocked her hip. The gossamer fabric of her bedlah parted enough to display not only her charms but also a small tattoo on her upper thigh, the outline of a Persian oil lamp.

The sight of the tattoo and her nudity made him gasp. This beautiful woman, a dzhinn? What the Westerners called genies, the dzhinn were artificial constructs designed to mimic humans.

Her intelligent eyes tracked his, and when she recognized his comprehension, Natali backed up to perch on Pavlo’s knee.

“Did you see?” Pavlo asked.

“I did. Tell me, are there others like her?”

“My Natali is unique, but I have great hopes for our daughters.”

“Daughters?”

“All quite young.” Meaning too young to be sold or bartered for.

After Pavlo tired of taunting Yevgeny with his perfect woman, he dismissed Natali. The business discussions began in earnest. The Ukrainian mob boss wanted access to the Russian made arms Yevgeny could provide.

Months passed, arms made their way into Kyiv and from there to the west. With the successful shipments, Pavlo and Yevgeny became close allies. He became a frequent visitor to Pavlo’s Kyiv residence, the same residence where The Don kept Natali.

Their dealings had gone well, and a munificent Pavlo invited Yevgeny to supper. Instead of the formal dining room they always used, Yevgeny followed his host to a table in the kitchen. There, wearing a little black dress, Natali served them borscht with sour cream and freshly baked piroshki.

After their meal, Natali asked if they might play durak, and Pavlo smiled. “Do you know how to play Yevgeny?”

“I do,” Yevgeny nodded. Natali dashed to a cupboard and returned with a deck of cards.

During the first two hands, it became apparent Natali could easily outplay both men. She played a vicious game against Yevgeny, stacking attacks whenever possible. Yet she always lost to Pavlo. Oh, she’d stage valiant defenses but make her lord work for each victory. Once again, Yevgeny found himself impressed with the cleverness of the dzhinn and even more envious of Pavlo.

A buzzing signaled an incoming phone call, and one of the bodyguards stepped into the room. “Don Pavlo, there is a problem.”

Pavlo laid his cards face down and stood. “Pardon me,” he said and stepped to the doorway.

Across from Yevgeny, Natali’s eyes tracked Don Pavlo’s every move. It seemed even this small measure of separation caused her some discomfort.

“Why so sad, lisichka?” Yevgeny used Pavlo’s own term of endearment, little fox.

“I do not feel whole without Pavlo.”

“What a strange thing. I’ve never known of any woman who felt such for a man.”

Green eyes that sparkled with hidden delights met his. “But I am not any woman.”

Yevgeny leaned forward. “No, you are unique, and the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known.” When Natalya didn’t reply, he continued. “Is it true you cannot desire another man.”

“It is true. I...I am bonded to Pavlo. He is my world.”

“Where did Pavlo find you?”

While The Don raged at some unfortunate underling, Natali told Yevgeny of her origin. How a much younger Pavlo met with a great Russian genetic researcher and presented him with a laundry list of characteristics. After much discussion, a large sum of money changed hands, and the design work began. It took three failed pregnancies before her host mother could carry a fetus to term. “After that, I grew up in Pavlo’s household. His wife raised me with their children, but I always knew I would be his kokhanka.

On his next trip to Moscow, Yevgeny sought out the great Russian genetic researcher. He located the man in a tenement on the third floor of the old Tsentralny Universalny Magazin building. The former Tsum department store remained in good condition although the escalators no longer functioned.

One of Yevgeny’s two bodyguards rapped on the wooden door. A few moments later, it opened and an old man, thin with age, stared out.

“Gospodin, Nikolai Vavilov?” Yevgeny asked with a smile.

Vavilov’s eyes widened when he heard his name. “Da?”

“My name is Yevgeny Timofeyev, I spoke with you earlier.”

Frightened, the old man shook his head. “I’m sorry, but I have nothing to tell you.” He backed up and shut the door. The first bodyguard put his shoulder against the wooden panel and shoved. The door flew open, throwing the old man back.

After securing the small apartment, the bodyguards sat Vavilov at his table. Yevgeny set his leather satchel on the table and produced a bottle of vodka, several stacks of currency, and a hammer. “The money is yours if you tell me what I want to know. The hammer is if you do not. I’ll drink the vodka in either case.

“But, Don Pavlo...”

“Don Pavlo is not here.” At a gesture, one of the bodyguards placed two tumblers of the table. Smiling, Yevgeny opened the bottle and poured two fingers of vodka into each glass. He smiled as warmly as possible. “Nikolai Ivanovich, take the money, tell me your tale, and drink vodka with me. If you fear Pavlo Mogilevich, Vladivostok would be a fine place for you in the future.”

With a shaking hand, Nikolai reached for a glass and downed the vodka. “What do you know of genetics?”

They had consumed two-thirds of the vodka. Either the alcohol, pride, or a combination of both had long since loosened Nikolai’s tongue. “Tell me, Yevgeny, have you seen Natali move?”

“I have seen her dance if that is what you mean?”

“Wait here, I have something to show you.” Nikolai stood and turned on unsteady legs. One hand reached out to the wall for stability before he staggered out of the kitchen.

Yevgeny gestured for a bodyguard to follow.

When Nikolai returned, he bore an old, worn expanding file folder, its flap held down with a cord wrapped around a plastic button. His old hands shook slightly as he opened the folder and produced a thick stack of papers. “This, my friend, is Natali’s design document.” He thumbed through the stack until he found several pages, clearly torn from a notebook. Some lines held single words, others full sentences. The text had been heavily crossed out and rewritten in some places. Nikolai scanned the pages until he found one particular item. “Here, read this.” He spun the page around to face Yevgeny.

The line read, “In case of emergency, she should be capable of defending her master.”

“Like much of Pavlo’s list, he didn’t think about how I was to accomplish his wishes, nor did he care as long as they were met. I cheated and gave Natali an exceptional proprioceptive sense. This sense, you might know it as kinesthesia?” He looked up, and Yevgeny shook his head. “No, well, let me say that Natali always knows the position of her limbs. This sense, coupled with her strength and reflexes,” The old man tapped the hand-written pages. “would make her formidable in a fight.” Nikolai reached out and helped himself to Yevgeny’s pack of western cigarettes. He lit one and took a long draw before exhaling the smoke with a cough. “It would also make her a delight in bed. Natali excels at all physical activities.”

Later, after they emptied the bottle and Yevgeny learned everything he needed, he watched while a bodyguard jabbed an ice pick into the old scientist’s temple. He made sure to collect the file folder and its contents.

Yevgeny set about his plan. He knew Pavlo would stop at nothing to reclaim his perfect woman. If caught, Pavlo would wreck a terrible vengeance on him. He remembered an old 2D movie: If Yevgeny erred and allowed himself to be caught, Pavlo would “get medieval on his ass.”

To prepare, Yevgeny used forged ID papers to rent an isolated dacha on the edge of the Polesky State Radioecological Reserve. The area most people knew as Chernobyl. Then utilizing other IDs, he purchased two battered delivery vehicles and parked one on the south-west of Kyiv. Then he waited for an opportunity. The opportunity came the night Pavlo celebrated his wife’s birthday.

While Pavlo attended his wife, Yevgeny, dressed as a deliveryman parked his van in front of Pavlo's Kyiv residence. The same residence where Natali, her two guards, and her three children lived. He rang the bell and waited. One of the bodyguards answered the door.

Yevgeny had prepared a package earlier, and he thrust it into the guard's hands. The guard glanced down and grasped the box to prevent it from falling. From under his jacket, Yevgeny produced a modified Taser and shot the guard in the stomach. The surge of direct current at over three times the legal maximum surged through the man's body. The box dropped as the guard stiffened and as he dropped, Yevgeny caught a whiff of burnt flesh. He reloaded the taser with another red painted cartridge. From inside the kitchen, the second guard burst into view and Yevgeny shot him as well. He ejected the spent cartridge and reloaded with the special pink one.

The pink cartridge cost more than the lethal ones. For it to work, the technician required the age, weight, and gender of the target. Yevgeny remembered Nikolai's words about Natali's physical enhancements. Now to find her, he'd try the kitchen first.

As he stepped into the kitchen, he barely caught a glimpse of light reflecting from something spinning through the air. Yevgeny snapped his head back, and the kitchen knife embedded itself in the doorframe next to his neck. "It doesn't have to be like this, Natali."

From the far side of the kitchen came Natali's voice. "Tya mama huyem v rot ebala!"

"My mother," Yevgeny yelled back, "does not have a penis."

"Neither does your father! Leave now, moskal, or I will kill you."

She'd do it too, if he gave her a chance. Too bad he didn't fight fair. "Have it your way," Yevgeny called through the doorway. "I'll take one or two of your daughters and train them to suit me." With his taser at the ready, he backed away from the door. She came for him before he reached the stairs.

"YOU BASTARD! I'LL KILL YOU." She came through the doorway unbelievably fast. Instead of turning towards him, Natali leaped, hitting the opposite wall with her feet and rebounded towards him. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he would never have believed it. If he weren't the target of her wrath, he would have appreciated her acrobatic skills. If he hadn't expected something superhuman, he would have died. Even so, he nearly did. If he had moved one fraction of a second slower, Natali would have skewered him with the longest kitchen knife he'd ever seen. He tracked his target and pressed the firing stud; the electro-pistol bucked as it discharged a cluster of barbed darts. Each dart was connected via a pair of room temperature superconductive wires. Still, even airborne, she somehow managed to twist and dodge over half the barbs. Three struck home, and the battery discharged.

If the technician had done his job, the special, pink cartridge should paralyze Natali. The initial discharge would overwhelm her voluntary nervous system for up to three minutes. The battery had enough juice for three such jolts. If he failed to immobilize her before then, he'd have to kill her.

Yevgeny sidestepped as Natalie screamed in rage and frustration. The genie fell past him, no longer in control of her body. She hit the floor with a thud and slid almost to the door. The knife, he now recognized it as a bayonet, slipped from her grasp and bounced off the wall.

From his pocket, Yevgeny produced a sedative patch and a handful of plastic tie straps. He set about binding her wrists and ankles. The patch went on the side of her neck. At the last moment, he realized he didn't have anything to use as a gag. His eyes scanned the hallway, nothing. What he needed was something to use until the benzodiazepine took hold. With her metabolism, it could take ten minutes

or more. Shrugging because, well, Natalie couldn't hate him more than she already did. Yevgeny removed one of his socks, rolled it up and shoved it inside her mouth. Two doubled up plastic straps secured the sock. From the furious look in her eyes, she did hate him more.

At the door, he glanced up the stairs to see three red-headed little girls staring down. For a moment, he considered taking one to ensure her mother's good behavior. But if he ever hoped to reconcile with Pavlo, taking a daughter would make it impossible. Shaking his head, he used the remote to open the van's side door. With the coast clear, he picked up his prize and strapped her to one of the bench seats. As a last touch, he covered her with a tarp.

Keeping to the speed limit, Yevgeny made his way through southern Kyiv. He made certain to drive past a few known traffic cameras. In an unmonitored parking lot on the eastern outskirts of the "Golosiivskiyi" National Natural Park. Yevgeny parked his first van next to his second. Under the tarp, Natali lay limp, the sedative patch having done its work. Ten minutes later, with the keys left in the ignition of the unlocked first van, he drove across the Dnieper river on a circuitous route to his rented dacha.

He carried the unconscious Natali into his rented dacha and tied her to the bed. When she woke, she tested her bonds with such fierce determination, Yevgeny feared she might hurt herself. Soft talk and assurances of his good intent did not calm her. After her strength ebbed, she lay still glaring at him. Yevgeny set about his task, from inside an overnight bag he removed the tools and set them on the nightstand. He watched his captive's eyes widen as she recognized the bottle of expensive western personal lubricant.

"If you free me now, I'll ask Pavlo to kill you quickly."

"In Moscow, I tracked down Nikolai Vavilov." Eyes wide, she stared when he mentioned the name. "Nikolai explained your bond to Pavlo. Most importantly, he explained how you could bond with another." Yevgeny began disrobing.

As it turned out, the lubricant had been necessary, at least at the beginning. By the end, Natali became as slick as any woman although she did not orgasm. According to Vavilov, her orgasms were the key.

By the end of the first week, she almost climaxed. Although she would not meet his eyes, her gasps and muffled groans told him his attentions had nearly succeeded.

It happened two days later. To better entertain himself, Yevgeny had arranged Natali on her side, her right leg tied straight down, and her left leg curled up towards her chest. The arrangement took some time to get right. Natali cursed, "Yob tvoyu mat!" as he straddled her straightened leg, then she groaned like a poviya when he thrust inside her. The first of her inner flutters almost went unnoticed. Then she began to push against him. Yevgeny wanted to shout in triumph at her response, but he thought better of it and remained quiet. It happened a few moments later. Natali gasped and cursed. He felt her contractions. The joy he felt at her body's betrayal pushed him over the edge.

Later, with her arms and ankles shackled, Yevgeny bathed her in the dacha's old porcelain coated tub. She still refused to meet his eyes.

"You do not laugh," she said.

“Why would I laugh, lisichka?” Runnels of soapy water ran down her back.

“You know why.”

“Was it so terrible?” With the old natural sponge, Yevgeny washed her arms, left then right.

“Yes, I betrayed my Pavlo.”

“Soon enough, you will love me, and I will take you to the west. America, I think. You’ll be my faithful housewife and me your hard-working and attentive husband.”

“If Pavlo doesn’t find you first.”

“True, if Pavlo doesn’t find us first.”

“Will you still think it worth it, when he finds you?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he used the short hose connected to the spout to rinse her hair. Then he helped her stand and rinsed the soapy water from her body. Standing in the bathtub, soaking wet and shackled, Yevgeny thought she resembled a captured rusalki.

With the softest towels available, Yevgeny dried his captive with care and wrapped her hair in another towel. Back in the bedroom, he sat behind her and used a comb and brush to untangle her hair and then arrange it as best he could. While her hair dried, he made them tea. Later, he put her to bed. For himself, Yevgeny slept on the old lumpy couch; he didn’t dare sleep within her grasp.

Three weeks later, Yevgeny and Natali both occupied the old tub, facing each other across a mound of slowly dissipating soap bubbles. Something brushed against him under the water. Yevgeny glanced up, but Natali pretended disinterest. A minute later, something once again touched his thigh. This time, the corners of Natali’s lips quirked up.

“It’s been two hours, Yevgeny.”

“Oh, two hours since what?”

“Two hours since you last had me. If you are a man, you will take me again.”

Present day

The fucking doorbell wouldn’t stop ringing. Each “Ding-Dong” felt like someone drove an ice pick into each of his temples. “Dong-dong, ding-dong, ding—” After stumbling downstairs from his bedroom, Gene Timmons threw open his front door. “Who the fuck keeps ringing the door...bell.” He hadn’t expected to find two county sheriffs standing outside.

The taller of the two sheriffs, a lean fellow with sharp eyes sized him up. “Gene Timmons?”

Gene nodded, although as he did it, he realized he should have said no. This damn hangover kept him from thinking straight.

“This is for you,” The sheriff said and thrust a stack of folded papers into Gene’s hand.

“What?” Gene stared at the documents.

“You have been served, Mr. Timmons. Your neighbor, Mr. Thomas, has filed for a temporary restraining order. Your court date is next Thursday at 9 AM. In the meantime, you are not to have any contact with Mr. Thomas or anyone residing in his home. Do not trespass on his property. Do you have any questions?”

“What about that little punk next door? He provoked me!”

“You can explain it to the judge on Thursday. Good day, Mr. Timmons.” The sheriffs nodded and turned away. Behind them, Gene slammed the door shut.

Chapter Twenty

In the News Today: The surviving members of the Flat-Earth Society have started a GoFundMe page seeking donations to build another rocket. One puckish blogger mused the world would be better off if “All the whack-Jobs launched themselves into orbit.” Donations since have exceeded expectations.

“How many in your party?” Busy sorting out a seating snafu, the red-headed hostess barely glanced up from her display.

“Two.” At the sound of his voice, the hostess glanced up. When she recognized him, a smile lit up her face. “Bobby Thomas! You,” she wagged a finger at him, “still owe me a date.”

“Hey Cindy, it’s nice to see you again.” Back during his depressed days in high school, he’d dated a lot. Some girls were in the rotation more often than others, and he dated Cindy and her circle of friends more often than most. In fact, Cindy had come closer than any to make him settle down. After their last date, she kept him on her front porch until he promised to take her out again. And he had promised her, but college and his separation from home conspired against them.

He noticed Cindy glance down at his unadorned left hand. Her own left ring finger sported both engagement and wedding rings. “I’d love to go out with you again, but I’m back together with an old flame and” he nodded at her hand, “you’re married.”

Cindy shrugged as if to indicate her marriage might not present an impasse. “Half the girls we went to school with qualify as your ‘old flames.’ Which one is it?”

“Here she comes now.” From the direction of the ladies’ room, Stephanie walked up to Bobby and took his arm. “Steffi, this is Cindy Harris, we went to school together.”

Cindy’s eyes widened as she recognized Bobbie’s date. “It’s Cindy Porter now, but I remember you, Stephanie, from the Halloween dance. It’s nice to see you again.”

Cindy made a few quick changes to her seating plan and escorted them to a cozy, quarter-circle booth. She pointed towards a chalkboard listing tonight’s fare. “The brisket and the pulled pork are great. If you like heat, try the chipotle smoked potatoes.

“She’s cute.” mused Stephanie as she watched Cindy walk away, “was she one of your girlfriends?”

“Ah...maybe?”

“Seriously, Bobby, I don’t mind if you had a girlfriend after...I had to leave” They hadn’t come up with a term to describe Stephanie being sold into slavery. Neither of them seemed willing to try.

A waitress stepped up and laid down two napkin- wrapped packages of silverware. Bobby looked up and swallowed. He recognized her as well.

Before he could speak, the waitress said, “Cindy told me you were here, and I had to see for myself.”

“Hi, Linda.” How many of his ex-girlfriends worked here?

“Cindy said you’re back with Stephanie.” Linda’s eyes flicked over and cataloged every flaw in Stephanie’s appearance.

Stephanie said, “I remember you from the dance. You were with a cute blonde-haired guy.”

“That would have been George, he ran away to join the Marine Corps.” Linda handed out copies of the drink menu. What can I get you?”

After scanning the menu, Stephanie ordered an intensely bitter triple IPA. Bobby raised his hand and suggested she order a soft drink instead. Stephanie nodded and asked for an unsweetened iced tea. Bobby ordered a hefeweizen, After Linda stepped away, Stephanie asked. “Another ex-girlfriend?”

The question surprised him. “How can you tell?”

“It’s the way her eyes moved over you. I think she likes you, the same way Cindy does.”

“I’m a likable guy.”

“I can tell.”

Linda returned with their drinks. Bobby pretended not to notice when Steffi stole a tiny sip from his beer.

“Isn’t unsweetened tea kind of bitter?” he asked.

Stephanie laughed, “I thought you knew how much I like stuff that tastes bitter?” She reached under the table and patted the front of his pants.

Bobby thought about it. Some girls didn’t, but Steffi had always swallowed. “Let me guess,” he said, “it’s part of your mom’s design?”

“Mm-hm, It has to do with the arrangement of our taste buds. What you think of as bitter probably doesn’t taste the same to us.”

They decided to have brisket, chipotle potatoes, and smoked green bean casserole. When Linda offered Bobby another beer, he declined saying he needed to drive. While they ate, two more of Bobby’s female high-school friends stopped by to say hello.

“How many girls did you date in high-school?” asked Stephanie.

“Lots” When Steffi frowned, Bobby tried to explain. “After you...had to leave, I kind of went crazy. It felt like part of me went missing. Then I got my driver’s license and dated. With most of the girls, I knew it wouldn’t work out. Some girls, like Cindy, came close.”

“Did you love her?”

Bobby hadn’t expected the question. He glanced up and saw in Steffi’s eyes how important the answer would be. “It came close, I think. If not for you, I wouldn’t have known the difference.”

After they eating, Stephanie excused herself to wash her hands in the ladies’ room. Bobbie’s mobile phone buzzed. He glanced at the display before putting it to his ear.

Alfred said, “Master Bobby, be careful returning home. Earlier tonight, Mr. Timmons began drinking and ranting about getting even with you. He has since left his home leaving his phone behind. As such, I cannot track him.”

“Uh-oh, better let Dad know.”

“He is aware and cautions you to be careful.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, Alfred. We’ll take our time getting home.”

“Very well, drive safely.”

After Stephanie washed her hands, she found Cindy and Linda waiting for her in the lobby.

“Could we talk to you for a moment, please?” asked Linda.

“Sure,” said Stephanie.

“I don’t want to be rude,” said Cindy, “but we want to know your intentions for Bobby.”

“Yeah,” said Linda, “the last time you left him, it messed him up bad.” Cindy shook her head at Linda, but Linda ignored her. “Bobby’s one of the good ones. If you’re playing games with him again, you and I are going to have a problem.”

“Linda, please.” said Cindy. She waited until Linda closed her mouth. “Back in school, my friends and I worked hard to keep him going. For a long time, we thought he might hurt himself.”

Stephanie sighed. “Look, I love Bobby. I’d marry him if I could. Back then...things happened, my father made a horrible decision and sent me away. I’m back with Bobby now, for keeps.”

Cindy and Linda shared a look. Linda shrugged. “Thank you,” Cindy said. “I’m sorry we had to do this.”

At the table Stephanie found Bobby finishing a phone call. She slid in next to him and kissed his cheek. He told her about Alfred’s phone call. Stephanie agreed they didn’t need to be in a hurry to return home. A moment later, Cindy stopped by their table. “Do you two still like dancing? After we close here, Linda and I are meeting our significant others to hit the new club.

Hanging out with Cindy and her husband and Linda and her girlfriend had been a blast. The new club featured a band who covered the latest Nova Swing hits. Fortunately, the steps weren't too difficult. Of course, Stephanie picked up on them with ease and helped Bobby look good. As their confidence grew, they traded off partners within their group.

For Stephanie, the night had been fantastic. She'd never spent time with a mixed group of couples before. Whatever conflict Beth and Linda had with her faded away as their friendship grew. In the ladies' room, both Linda and Cindy shared stories of Bobby from high school. Her near constant physical contact with Bobby coupled with the suggestive dance steps and the scent of his perspiration kept her sexual tension at a simmer.

Before the club closed, the group began to split up. Some of them had commitments the next day, others simply wanted to get home and find some privacy.

On the way home, Bobby put his truck on autopilot while he and Stephanie necked. At the stop signs and red lights, he struggled to sit up and appear alert. Autopilot or not, the police would cite you for distracted driving. As the passenger, Steffi had no such constraints and did everything she wanted. When they made the turn into their development, Bobby sat upright, but his attention lay on the back of Stephanie's head while she swallowed. He did not notice Gene sitting in his car parked alongside the road.

The autopilot buzzed to signal their arrival. While Stephanie sat up and wiped her lips, Bobby adjusted his pants and checked the rear-view mirror. As he didn't see any headlights, he took over control of his truck and backed it into his parent's driveway.

Once parked, Bobby opened the driver's side door and slid out. He turned to help Steffi and—

The back of his head ached, and he couldn't concentrate. Nothing made sense. Why was he laying on the driveway looking up at the cloud covered night sky? His brain tried and failed to catalog the exact type of clouds. The sounds of a scuffle to his left caused him to turn his head and suffer a wave of nausea. In the dim illumination from the street lights, a blurry pair of Stephanies stood between him and an equally blurry pair of her fathers.

Gene attempted to grapple his daughter, but each time he lunged, Stephanie moved with an incredibly fluid grace dodging her dad's hands. The outside floodlights came on, fully illuminating the driveway. Alfred's voice came over the speakers. "Mr. Timmons, the police have been summoned. Leave these premises now."

For a moment, Gene paused, and Bobby with his addled brain thought he might back down. Instead, Gene stepped his daughter and aimed a kick at Bobby's head. Moving faster than Bobby could believe, Stephanie stepped inside of her father's strike and with the side of her foot, deflected his kick. At the same time, her right hand flicked out and clawed the side of her father's face.

Arms waving for balance, Gene stumbled back. The torn side of his face streaming blood. Stephanie held her place between Bobby and father, blocking his path. Bobby managed to sit up, but nausea proved to be too much, and he vomited.

Bobby's retching caused Stephanie to make her first mistake. When she glanced back in concern, Gene lashed out with another kick and struck her in the abdomen. Stephanie screamed and crumpled next to Bobby.

"Here's another, you little bitch," Gene muttered and prepared to kick his daughter a second time.

From the direction of his parent's deck, an intense white light illuminated the scene, and a bright red dot wavered across Gene's torso. The dot steadied, and a loud POP sounded. A blurry group of coiled wires sprouted from Gene's chest, stretching back into the darkness. Rapid, close-spaced clicks came from the source of the light, and Gene stiffened and fell onto the driveway.

Robert Senior, wearing a bathrobe, stepped into view. In each hand, he held a Taser. He said, "Mr. Timmons, I'm told these Tasers are not fatal, but if you move, I will do my best to kill you with them.

The police arrived first. They cuffed Mr. Timmons and stowed him in the back of the patrol car. An ambulance arrived with paramedics.

Of course, there were problems at the hospital.

The triage nurse took one look at Bobby, asked for his ID and called for an orderly to wheel him into the treatment room. Stephanie promised she'd be right there. The triage nurse asked Stephanie for her ID.

"I don't have an ID." Genies didn't have ID cards. She knew this meant trouble.

The nurse stopped typing and turned to face Stephanie. "You don't have an ID, or did you leave it at home?"

"I don't—" Steffi started to reply.

From the speaker inside the triage station computer, Alfred's voice interrupted, "Miss Stephanie, please tell the nurse your name and your father's address, she can look it up."

Startled at the voice issuing from her PC, the nurse rolled her chair back and stared at her computer, it had never spoken to anyone before. Cautiously, she leaned forward and tapped the escape key several times, but when it didn't speak again, she slid back into place. "Miss," the nurse said, "Tell me your name and address."

"Stephanie Timmons, 17 Oak Court, Parkdale Pennsylvania"

The nurse entered the information while casting wary glances at the computer's speaker grill. Everything must have been satisfactory because an orderly stepped up and pushed her gurney back into the treatment area. While Steffi transferred to a treatment bed, a doctor was bent over Bobby shining a light into his eyes.

When Robert, Shirley, and Natalie arrived at the emergency room, they found Gene standing at the triage station, flanked by a pair of deputy sheriffs. Natalie recognized him and gasped loud enough he recognized her voice. It had been weeks since the last time her bond received a fix, and a flood of desire made her knees weak. Then it got worse, Gene turned around, made eye contact and called out her name.

To Natalie's left, Robert glared at the two deputies. He had a restraining order against Timmons, why did they bring him here? Oh, crap, with all the excitement at the house, he forgot to give the police a copy. Without the restraining order, they wouldn't have known to take the man elsewhere for treatment. Robert felt his pockets, darn it, he hadn't brought a copy. Could Alfred help? He lifted his mobile phone and dialed his house. Across the room, Gene turned and called out Natalie's name.

On the other side of Natalie, Shirley watched the change come over her friend. From her recollections of Vavilov's research paper, she had a good understanding of how Natalie's bond worked. Unless someone intervened, Natalie may be compelled to obey whatever order Gene issued. Could she and her husband distract Natalie?

"Robert," Shirley said, "put your arm around Natalie." For herself, Shirley turned to the side and hugged Natalie. A few seconds later, without questioning why, Robert complied. He put one arm around Natalie's waist, his other hand held his mobile phone against his ear.

Alfred's voice came from Robert's mobile phone before the first ring completed. "Mr. Thomas, I'm monitoring the scene at the hospital. Please hold your phone close to Miss Natalie's ear."

Robert held the phone out and stared at the screen. What, the blazes, did Alfred think he could do? Then he reconsidered his question. This Alfred wasn't the old high-end digital assistant who'd send email and provide weather forecasts. No, this Alfred had been enhanced with stolen military grade software. What the hell, he thought and held his phone close to Natalie's ear.

Inside Natalie, her self-determination fought a losing battle against an overwhelming flood of hormones. Gene's order to not obey him reduced but did not eliminate the impact of his presence. His proximity and the sound of his voice, multiplied by her long (for her) sexual dry spell, allowed Natalie's bond-controlled brain chemistry to take full control. A terribly frightened Natalie became a powerless spectator inside her own body.

Elation surged through Gene. Finally! His luck changed. He remembered back to when he interrogated Nikolai Vavilov.

He gauged the angles and made his decision. He'd command Natali in Ukrainian. No understanding his words, everyone would stare at him, not at his little Natali. Gene took a breath. "Natali, ye dva politseys'kykh, berut' yikhnyu zbroyu, vbyvayut' yikh i zvil'nyayut' mene." *Natali, there are two policemen, take their weapons, kill them, and free me.*

Startled by their prisoner speaking in a foreign language, the deputies demanded he turn around and answer the triage nurse's questions.

Across the room, Natalie watched the deputies focus their attention on Gene. With them distracted it would be easy to step up and remove the pistols from their holsters. With a weapon in each hand, Natalie would press them into their spines and pull the triggers. She took the first step, but those

people with her held her back. Then while in the full grip of her bond, she heard Gene speak again but this time in English. “Natalie,” he asked, “what is your fondest wish?”

Because he asked a question, Natalie found it possible to stop moving. Then she gave her owner an honest answer. “I wish to be free of you forever.”

Gene responded, his voice calm, almost gentle. “Unfortunately, you must have an owner. Therefore, I give you to Shirley and Robert Thomas. Be theirs in heart and mind. Live well, Natalie.”

With those words, the hollow space in her soul, the aching void that needed Gene changed. It became two separate empty spots, both equally needy. One resonated with the man to her left, the other with the woman on her right. Natalie wrapped her right arm around Shirley’s waist and found a supreme sense of comfort, one she’d rarely experienced. On her left, her hand reached out and squeezed Robert’s bottom. Good, she thought, he has a nice tight one.

Struggling against the deputies, Gene didn’t understand why Natali ignored his instructions. The deputy on his right snarled for him to settle down or they’d take him back to the jail. “Natali!” he called again, stress causing him to forget his American accent. This time the deputies hooked his arms in theirs and pulled him back toward the exit. Someone held the door open for the fucking sheriffs, and they tossed him into the back of their van.

Back inside the emergency room lobby, Shirley tried to puzzle out what had just happened. She heard Gene speak and transfer Natalie’s bond, but her eyes had flicked across the room to his face. She knew it hadn’t been him who spoke. No, Shirley didn’t know who was responsible, yet.

The surprise butt squeeze almost caused Robert to drop his phone. He glanced to his right and watched as Natalie’s hand slipped lower, following the contour of his buttocks. “Ah, Natalie?” he asked. His voice rose higher than he liked.

Hearing the surprise in her husband’s voice, Shirley leaned back and noted the reason. She tipped her head towards Natalie, “Behave yourself, we’re here to see our children.”

Startled, Natalie pulled her hands back and clasped them together. “I don’t know how,” she said, “but I’m no longer bonded to Gene.”

“That sounds good,” said Robert. When no one replied, he added, “It’s good, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know if it’s good or bad,” said Natalie. “Somehow, I’m bonded to both of you.”

Shirley furrowed her brow. “I don’t know either. Can you cope, or do I need to send you out to the car with Robert?”

“I can cope.”

“What’s going on?” asked Robert.

“We’ll explain it later.” Both Shirley and Natalie replied. They glanced at each other and laughed.

Stephanie winced as the phlebotomist drew a syringe of blood from her arm. Genies had few health problems. After all, if you’re designing a specialized being from scratch, why include any traits

that may reduce their value. She brightened when her mother and Bobby's mother entered the curtained off examination room.

"Where's Bobby?" both moms asked. They glanced at each other with a lifted eyebrow.

Clearly confused with the moms' behavior, Stephanie said. "He's down the hall, getting a test and should be back soon."

The doctor diagnosed Bobby with a concussion. He also had abrasions and a hematoma. They kept him overnight for observation. The pregnancy test for Stephanie came back negative. Her ultrasound did not reveal any internal bleeding or any other injuries. Robert worked his lawyer magic and arranged a private room for his son and a cot for his son's fiancé.

On the way home, a confused Robert asked, "Can either of you tell me what's going on?"

Natalie, sitting in the back, laughed but didn't say anything. Shirley took a quick look back, smiled, then turned towards her husband. "Do you remember when we were in college and how we'd invite my roommate to spend weekends with us?"

"Sure," he couldn't help grinning at those memories. He and Shirley had been very much in love and enjoyed bringing her roommate with them on their weekends. The rooms they rented only had one bed, but they only needed one.

Shirley continued, "We're not sure how it happened, but Natalie is now bonded to us."

The headlights from the oncoming traffic distracted Robert for a moment. He recovered his thoughts. "Bonded? You don't mean bonded like Stephanie is bonded to Bobby, do you?" His mouth suddenly dry, Robert glanced at Natalie in the rear-view mirror.

"It's exactly the same thing." Shirley didn't elaborate any further, but she reached over and squeezed her husband's hand.

"Oh," said Robert. Another glance in the rear-view mirror at Natalie. She met his eyes and winked. "Oh," he repeated.

When he slipped into bed that night, Robert remarked, "Youth, is definitely wasted on the young." Shirley and Natalie chuckled as best they could.

The knock came precisely at 6:01AM. Roger Grainer pulled on the hotel provided bathrobe and stepped to the door. He looked through the peephole a saw a clean-cut, well-dressed man of middle years. Assuming the hotel staff had a question, Roger opened the door. On either side of the well-dressed man, stood a uniformed police officer.

“Mr. Roger Grainer?” the man asked.

Roger nodded. “Yes, what can I do for you?”

The man removed a sheet of paper from an envelope and passed it over. “My name is Detective Prendergast. That is a search warrant, please step into the hallway.”

“What? I’m wearing a bathrobe. What are you searching for?”

“The details are on the search warrant, this won’t take long.”

While one of the uniformed officers kept watch on him, the plain clothed and the uniformed officers pulled on nitril gloves and entered his suite.

One week later.

After catching Natalie and his parents have a three-way make-out session in the kitchen, Bobby intercepted Stephanie and took her down to the family room. They both plopped down onto the couch. He told her what their parents were doing.

“I don’t know what to think. Is this going to make Natalie my step-mom?”

This made Stephanie giggle. “No, you goose, only if my mom marries your dad.”

Wagging his eyebrows, Bobby slid his hand up Steffi’s leg. “Do you remember what we used to do down here?”

“Yep,” Stephanie stood up and from under the video display fetched a pair of game controllers. “I used to kick your butt at video games.”

While waiting for the old game system to update, Bobby said, “I’m glad we kissed that first time.”

Stephanie smiled remembering how hard her heart pounded when he had kissed her. “Where do you think we’d be if Gene hadn’t sold me?”

“We’d be together with a ton of kids. A horde of identical red-headed girls, each one as sweet as their mother.”

In response, Steffi set her controller aside and straddled his lap, facing him. With her eye’s full of unshed tears, she rested her hands on his shoulders and kissed him as thoroughly as she could. The theme song for their old racing game started in the background.

Not the end. Parts four and five are in work. -GD