

Sarah Stanley

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## SILICON VALLEY ANDROID RETIREMENT HOME

**T**wo things terrified me. The first was androids. The second was asking girls out. Apparently, I needed to add a third to the list: attempting to ask out a girl for the first time while she wouldn't stop talking about androids.

I kept pace with her as we walked across campus. Lucy blended in like a creature of the night—she liked dark colors. She'd be almost impossible to see, if not for the brilliant blue tips of the braids that spilled down her back.

“And the Android Retirement Home is so different from normal retirement homes,” she was saying. “It's more chill. 'Cause everyone there is a bit laggy, if you know what I mean, but you don't have to worry about someone falling and breaking a hip.”

*Go on, I told myself. Ask her.*

It would be easier if I *had* something to ask her to. But Lucy would see right through me if I casually invited her to a concert or something. I didn't go to concerts. And the chess club wasn't exactly the best dating locale. Maybe a restaurant?

“And everyone there is so nice. Except Greg, but that's not really his fault. There's a sweet old lady who's convinced she was a spy, and a guy who used to be an opera singer...”

*If only she wasn't so mysterious, I thought. I don't even know what she likes.*

“Michael,” Lucy said, snapping me out of my thoughts. “I think you should visit it sometime. It’s cool.”

*Visit an android retirement home? I’d rather go to an insane asylum. At least the residents there are human.*

That awful face—almost human, but not, leaning over me—resurfaced in my memories like a monster from a swamp. I couldn’t suppress a shiver. Luckily, a gust of wind blew by at the same time, so it wasn’t too out of place.

“I bet it is,” I said. “Um, Lucy...”

“Yeah?”

I swallowed. “Do you want to go...somewhere?”

“We are,” she said. “We’re walking. Unless you mean in *life*, in which case only one of us is going somewhere.”

I didn’t dare ask who. There was a wicked gleam in her amber eyes.

“Right. Um—I meant somewhere with me. Not right now, I mean. Later. Like a movie, or a concert...” I trailed off, then added hopefully, “maybe a restaurant?”

She stopped dead. “Michael, is this your way of asking me on a date?”

My life flashed before my eyes. “Uh, yep.”

Lucy smiled—the tiny quirk of her lips that was, for her, an outright grin. She started walking again. “Good. I accept.”

She’d said...yes?

For a moment I couldn’t believe it. Then, suddenly, it was all too real. Lucy had just been a hang-around-and-chat friend. Now she was—now *I* was...what, exactly?

“G-great,” I stammered, hurrying to catch up. “Um, there’s a Thai place a few streets over that’s pretty good. Do you like Thai food?”

“Not particularly,” she said.

That was what I liked about Lucy. She said what she meant, and was therefore much less complicated than most girls.

“Roller-skating? Hiking?”

She shrugged.

“Then what *do* you like?” I asked.

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Wrong question. What you *should* be asking is, ‘Do you have any ideas?’ Because I do.”

I got an awful sense of foreboding. *Oh, please, no...*

“The retirement home,” she said.

I knew, rationally, that I was overreacting. Lucy worked there and hadn't died yet.

That didn't stop the sudden fight-or-flight that clamped down on my body.

"Um," I eloquently replied.

"I mean, it's not the most *romantic*," she continued, "but I want to show you this place. They allow visitors, so they'll be cool with it."

Lucy did not get excited. And yet, I could hear it in her voice, see the slightest bounce in her step. This was a completely new side of her. *Dating* her was completely new. If I turned this down now, what would happen to our relationship?

And what was I supposed to do, tell her I had an android phobia? That I couldn't handle a *retirement home*? I had a feeling she wasn't afraid of anything, not when she had a secret pet tarantula in her dorm room.

"Sounds good," I said, hoping I'd kept the dread out of my voice. "When are you free?"

Her smile widened. "Monday night at seven? That's when I get off work. You can meet me there, if you don't mind me being in work clothes."

That was the last thing on my mind. "Sure."

Lucy slowed, and I realized we'd reached the corner where our paths diverged.

"Don't you dare go before Monday," she said. "*I* get to show you the retirement home. It's my surprise. Got it?"

I smiled at her mock-serious tone. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good." She turned onto her street and waved. "Bye, Michael!"

I waved back, a weight in my stomach. *What if I freak out on her? Or I can't act well enough and she realizes I don't like androids?*

Her words floated through my brain. *Don't you dare go before Monday.*

What if I did? If I braved it now, I'd be able to give her my full attention during the date and she'd have a better time. I could prevent myself from ruining it for her.

Guilt twinged in my chest, but I pushed it away. There would still be plenty for Lucy to show me even if I did go early.

Time to face my fears.

Saturday morning, I stood at the front door of Silicon Valley Android Retirement Home with a chess set and a lot of second thoughts.

The building itself was nice—decorative gray stone, a good amount of glass—but it was almost too pretty, like a gingerbread cottage.

*Michael, you're fine. These ones are friendly. Probably.*

Steeling myself, I pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The interior reminded me of a hotel lobby, decorated with warm white lamps, thick carpet, paintings, and potted plants. Most of the paintings had cows in them.

A woman sat at the front desk. She had graying brown hair pulled up in a bun, and, overall, looked more like a librarian than a receptionist. The name tag pinned to her scrubs read *Harriet*.

As I came in, she glanced up from her monitor. “Hello, dear. Here to visit someone?”

I took a deep breath. “Yeah.”

“What’s the name?” Harriet asked briskly.

I hesitated, then held up my chess set. “I don’t have anyone in particular, I just wanted to...”

Her face softened. “Oh, how sweet.”

That made me feel like a terrible person, because I definitely had ulterior motives.

Harriet stood and strode to a hallway, beckoning for me to follow. “Let me show you to one of their rooms.”

I smiled gratefully. Then I had to hurry and catch up, because while Harriet couldn’t have been over five feet tall, she was a very fast walker.

She took me down the hallway to the left. This part of the building kept up the hotel vibe, with doors at regular intervals. Alongside the room numbers were labels bearing names—the names of the androids inside, I assumed. *Sydney, Crusher, LI-96, Bob*.

A screen mounted high on the wall broadcasted the home’s news. *Come on the nature walk, Saturdays @ 10! Remember to sign up for your yearly diagnostic. Happy birthday, Bob!*

Then I realized, belatedly, that Harriet was talking.

“—can visit just about any of them,” she was saying. “They never need to sleep, eat, or bathe, so you rarely have to worry about disturbing them.”

“Sounds good,” I replied, then paused at a door that was different. It still displayed the names of the occupants—*Greg, Amadeus*—but each label had a golden star stuck on the end. “What about this room?”

Harriet glanced back. “Oh, I wouldn’t go in there.”

“Does the star mean they don’t want visitors?”

“No.” Harriet sighed, then moved in closer, lowering her voice. “Those are the virus-affected androids. They’re a little...odd.”

“Oh. Virus, like, computer virus, right? Is somebody going to fix their code?”

She shook her head. “That’s not how it works, dear. High-intelligence androids have structures similar to the neural networks of our brains. Even if we could navigate them, the viruses implant deep, and we couldn’t remove them without harming the android’s mind.”

*Like brain damage, but for robots?*

I rested my fingers on the wooden door. “Are they safe?”

“Yes, of course,” Harriet assured me hastily. “They can just be a little off-putting for first-time visitors, so...”

So of course Lucy would show them to me. If this was the worst the retirement home could throw at me, then all the better to face it now.

I squared my shoulders. “I’ll see if any of them want to play chess.”

She studied me for a moment, clearly doubting my decision, but nodded. “Come to the front desk if you need anything.”

Harriet strode away and disappeared around the corner, leaving me alone.

I turned back to the door, wondering why I had thought this was a good idea. *Remember. Lucy.*

Gingerly, I knocked.

“Come in!” a female voice hollered.

I blinked, looking back to the names on the door. *Greg, Amadeus.*

*Okay...*

My momentary confusion distracted me enough that I opened the door, hardly realizing what I was doing.

And then the door was open, and I was staring inside.

The room looked...cozy. Like something a grandmother would live in, with the weird lamps on the tables and the thick rug in the center of the room. The rug had flowers on it.

My eyes moved up from the rug to the armchairs, and from the armchairs to the androids sitting on them.

There were three androids, not two. All of them were built in the old hyper-realistic style, with features that looked entirely human from a distance, but set every instinct in my body screaming up close.

This style was just plain wrong. Worse, it was the style *he* had been in.

My chest constricted, but I managed to keep control. *Don't think about that. Not now.*

I realized they were staring at me. Shakily, I held up my chess set. "Hi. I'm here visiting. Does anyone want to play—"

"A visitor!" one of the androids exclaimed—the one I'd heard earlier. She had short blonde curls and a perky face, like the ladies who held soda bottles in old advertisements. "Come on in. What's your name?"

Her voice sounded young, but she spoke like my grandma. It was a strange dichotomy. Cautiously, I stepped inside and shut the door. "Michael."

"Hi, Michael! I'm Catherine."

She got to her feet, a little unsteadily, and clapped me on the back. I tried not to shudder. The synthetic skin material felt realistic, but the fingers were cold.

"You're a brave one," she declared, wobbling back to her seat. "Most people see the stars outside and steer clear of us. But you, here you are. Just visiting."

Another android grunted from the corner. He had sweeping black hair and a striking face, one that would have fit a celebrity. He was also scowling at me very intensely. "Or here on a dare. They always are."

Before I could reply, which would have been awkward both if I lied or told the truth, Catherine rescued me. "If he's here on a dare, why does he have that chess set?"

She leaned forward, shielding her mouth from the second android's view. "That's Greg. And don't worry; it's nothing personal. He's always grumpy."

"I can hear you, you know," Greg snapped.

The last android rose from where he'd been sitting in the corner. Silently, he swept across the room. He had broad shoulders, a serious face, and short immaculate hair. For some reason, he was wearing a tuxedo.

He extended a white-gloved hand. I shook it, trying to place him. If Greg looked like a celebrity, he looked like a performer.

"Amadeus?" I guessed, hoping I pronounced the name correctly.

The android appeared pleased. He released my hand, gave me a short bow, and returned to his seat with a flourish.

"He's mute," Catherine informed me.

*How did an android become mute? Was it a virus?* I nodded, unsure how to respond.

"Pull up a chair, honey," she said. "The one by the door. You can bring it closer than that. We won't bite."

She paused. "Well, I can't guarantee anything for Greg."

I slid the chess set under the chair and sat down. They weren't actively trying to kill me, so the irrational fear in my chest lessened. *I can handle this. I'll be fine.*

Voices came from down the hall. They were muffled by the door, but one was unmistakable. Lucy's.

She was working? *Now?*

As they passed, the other voice—higher, slightly nasally—said, "Harriet's shift just ended, so can you take the reception desk until Mindy gets here?"

"Sure," Lucy replied. "When's she coming in?"

I strained my ears, but I couldn't catch the reply. This was bad. How was I supposed to escape now?

*There has to be a back exit, I thought. But—wait—I parked out front. Lucy could see me through the windows.*

Hopefully she didn't recognize my car.

In the split second all these thoughts ran through my head, I came to an unhappy conclusion: I was stuck with these androids. Potentially for a few hours.

Greg gave me a piercing look, as if trying to guess what I was thinking. I smiled awkwardly. "Uh, hi, everyone."

His scowl deepened. Then he slammed his hands on a card table and demanded, "Do you really play chess?"

I blinked. "Um, yeah. I'm the champion of the club at the university."

"Good. I haven't played someone decent in ages."

Greg jerked his chin, motioning for me to scoot the chair closer. I obediently did, placing the chess set on the table.

“Nice set,” he commented.

“Thanks,” I said, caught off guard. “It was my grandfather’s.”

He helped put the pieces in place, spinning the board so he’d play black. Normally I played black, but I let him have it.

“You can’t hog him all to yourself,” Catherine complained.

He growled. “If you’re about to suggest playing chess in teams, I will...”

Greg reminded me so much of my grandfather in that moment that I smiled a little.

“Well, we’ve got to have a conversation, at least,” she insisted. “First outside visitor in—what, three months?”

Startled, I looked at her. Surely they had—

“Nope,” Catherine declared, as if reading my mind. “They’re *that* afraid of us.” She said it proudly, with a glint in her artificial eyes.

Amadeus nodded in agreement. Then he gracefully rose to his feet and strode over, examining our chess board. We were already a few moves in.

Greg whacked the android’s leg. “Don’t hover.”

In reply, Amadeus pointed to his knight, motioning to a nearby square. It was the best move.

“I don’t need help, either,” Greg snarled.

Shrugging, Amadeus winked at me and stepped away. Greg studied the board, then, cursing under his breath, made the move Amadeus had indicated.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” I ventured, “but you’re an android, so wouldn’t you—”

“Just because I have a computer for a brain doesn’t mean it’s programmed to play cruddy chess.” He huffed as I captured his other knight.

“You’d be surprised at how many things we’re terrible at doing,” Catherine said. “And everyone in here is virus-addled besides.” She spun her finger in a circle near her ear and pointed at her two companions. Amadeus pointed back.

“You don’t need to do that, sweet,” she replied. “He already knows I’m the craziest of all of us.”

Amadeus inclined his head, a fond smile lighting his lips.

“That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?” Greg said.



I glanced back to find him staring at me in open challenge. “I heard you talking with Harriet outside. She tells you about the poor *virus-affected* androids, and you can’t resist taking a peek inside.”

It was true, kind of, but for the opposite reason he was thinking. Luckily, I was saved once again by Catherine.

“Why shouldn’t he be curious?” she said airily. “After all, we *are* fascinating.”

She grinned when Greg glared at her, and her grin widened when he fumbled to make a retort. “Well—I wouldn’t say *we*.”

“It’s unlike you to be humble, Greg.”

He knocked over a pawn a little harder than necessary, this time refusing to take the bait.

Catherine leaned forward in her chair conspiratorially. “He’s just jealous because I was a spy.”

“You were not,” Greg muttered.

I looked at Amadeus, uncertain. He didn’t seem surprised by the conversation, as if he’d heard it a million times before.

*Really?* I mouthed.

He only gave me an enigmatic smile. If he knew the truth, he wasn’t going to reveal it to me.

“Yes, I was,” Catherine retorted. “I worked at a lot of embassies in my day. On the outside I looked like a staff bot, but secretly, I was much more intelligent.”

Greg snorted. “That’s debatable. Are you going to make your move, kid?”

I distractedly moved a piece. Apparently, it had been a bad move, because Greg gave a tiny *hah* of victory.

“I was groundbreaking technology,” Catherine continued. “Nobody thought to watch themselves around a bot. At the time they were all dumber than a post. They’d let us into their rooms to clean and would be having very interesting conversations next door.”

“But even if you were a normal staff bot, wouldn’t they be worried about cameras or microphones?” I asked, fascinated.

Catherine shrugged. “Oh, they frisked us. Paranoid lot. But they missed what really mattered.” She tapped her head and winked.

“Wow,” I said.

“Just wait,” Greg grumbled. “It gets better.”

She waved a finger at him. “Who’s telling the story, you or me? Anyway, one day I went too far. A Russian ambassador found

me rifling through his papers. They kidnapped me and brought me back to their country.”

Greg made an impatient noise, so I made another play.

“You can’t move your rook like that!” he exclaimed.

I glanced down, realizing I’d moved it diagonally like a bishop. “Oh. Sorry.”

“This is hopeless,” he groaned. “Even if I win, which is looking increasingly likely, it will be a cheap victory if you’re not even paying attention.”

I set the rook back where it had been. Amadeus knelt by the table and moved my queen. *Check*, he mouthed.

Greg scowled. “So you’re playing now? You can barely tell the difference between a pawn and a bishop. What’s that? Check? No it’s n—” He looked down. “Oh, you little...”

Amadeus quirked an eyebrow at him, which I had the feeling was his form of trash talk.

Greg narrowed his eyes. “It’s on.”

Rising, Amadeus gestured to me, then to his empty armchair, face inviting.

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks.”

He took my place at the card table and I sat in his chair, which was closer to Catherine. Judging by the smile on her face, she was pleased about this development.

“You left me hanging,” I said. “What happened after they took you to Russia?”

“Well, Greg was right about one thing. It *does* get better.”

She leaned forward. “They had their best scientists poke and prod at me. One day, they did something to me, and suddenly I couldn’t stop talking! What’s even stranger is that I couldn’t lie, either. Still can’t.”

Greg snorted, but whether it was at Catherine or at the game, I couldn’t tell.

Catherine seemed to think it was directed at her, because she said, “The irony is that almost nobody believes me. I’m actually glad I was in Russia, because in the United States I would have been dismantled for sure. I told those Russians secrets, and they were good secrets, too.”

“And she was such a terror that the Russians gave her back,” Greg added.

Catherine huffed. “That’s a different story. And I’ll have you know that was because of a treaty.”

“So that’s your virus,” I said.

Catherine nodded. She’d been enjoying herself, but her cheer seemed to falter. “I’ve been a blabbermouth ever since. They put me into retirement. I guess they could have switched me off permanently, but by then there were laws about that kind of thing. Besides, all the secrets I knew had become obsolete.”

She stared into the distance, hands clasped in her lap.

“Do you miss it?” I asked softly.

Catherine chuckled. “Yeah, I do. You know what I want to do? Stupid as it is, I want to be a waitress again. Twirling between tables, serving the fancy food, and doing a little eavesdropping along the way with nobody the wiser... I’ll never forget the feeling.”

I nodded. I’d never expected to be having a conversation with an android, much less a heart-to-heart, but here we were.

“Hah!” Greg exclaimed. He’d captured the white queen, and he spun it in his fingers, grinning. Amadeus had the same cryptic smile on his face, and I was about ninety percent sure he’d allowed it to happen.

“What about them?” I murmured to Catherine. “Why are they here?”

She snapped out of her reverie. “Oh, them? Tragic stories, that pair.”

“I sincerely hope you’re not telling my life story to that random kid,” Greg grunted.

Catherine lowered her voice to a whisper. “Greg was designed to be a comedian. He had the sharpest wit of anyone, both human and machine. Those comebacks? Zing! He was famous in his day.”

Humor? *Greg?*

She saw the doubt in my eyes and shook her head sadly. “I wouldn’t believe it either. But it’s true. I can’t lie. He offended a higher-up, and he hired some scientist grunts to craft a virus. Completely wiped out his sense of humor.”

Greg had paused, gripping a rook so tightly I was afraid it would break. It was obvious he’d heard us. To my surprise, he clenched his jaw and set the piece down without a word.

I regretted asking, but I felt like an apology might make things worse, so I didn’t say anything.

At that point, I’d decided not to push about Amadeus. But the android met my gaze steadily and nodded, as if giving me permission.

Catherine noted our exchange. “Well, okay then. Amadeus has a real tear-jerker. See, he used to be a world-class opera singer. He was built with two sets of vocal chords so he could harmonize with himself. Oh, he sang like a nightingale.”

I blinked. If Catherine’s face hadn’t been completely serious, I would have thought she was joking.

But a wistful look had crossed Amadeus’s face. His eyes were on the chess board, but he didn’t seem to see it.

“It was too much for his rival, a human man,” Catherine continued. “Forgot his name. He was a twit. Amadeus overshadowed him, so the man became obsessed with getting even. He didn’t know much about code—he was an opera singer, not a programmer—so the virus he managed to make was a crude, nasty piece of work.”

Chills ran up my spine.

“This guy infected Amadeus on the opening night of his new performance. He just collapsed, right in the spotlight. The virus tore apart a good part of his mind.”

Amadeus closed his eyes, face pained. A faint shudder went through his body.

“He managed to rebuild most of his synapses, but he’s been mute ever since. The vocal part of his brain is wrecked beyond repair.”

“And the guy who did it?” I asked, rising to my feet. “Did they catch him?”

Catherine hesitated. “Well—”

“Everyone knew who it was, but they couldn’t find any *evidence*,” Greg said, making quotation marks with his hands. “They didn’t even try. Amadeus was too radical for them.”

“What about the man who attacked you?” I asked.

He snorted. “Everybody looked the other way. Nobody likes an android who’s smarter than they are.”

“But surely—I mean, you have rights—”

Catherine spoke, softly. “Michael, at the end of the day, we’re just machines.”

I clenched my fists, angry at those people, but angrier at myself. Because how could I judge them when I’d thought the exact same way half an hour ago? Scared of them because they were different?

“I—”

The door clicked open. “Greg,” a voice said, “Mindy told me you haven’t signed up for a diagnostic—”

It was Lucy’s voice.

I spun. She really was there. The bright dyed ends of her braided hair almost matched the color of her scrubs. She looked *vibrant*—and not just because it was the first time I’d seen her not wearing black.

Lucy cut off as she saw me. “Michael?”

And then I remembered the problem. “Um, hi.”

Her eyes darted around the room. Even Catherine had fallen silent, as if she could sense the tension in the air.

“Why are you here?” she asked—almost demanded. “We had an agreement. Monday. *I show you around.*”

“Well, when you were talking about this place, it sounded...” I trailed off. The honest answer would have been, at least at the time, *terrifying*.

Luckily, her mind filled in another word. *Awesome*, maybe.

Lucy folded her arms. “So you couldn’t wait? You were *so* excited you had to come earlier? Or were you bored and thought, ‘Hey, I know what would be fun to do: break a promise.’ Do I mean that little to you?”

My explanation stuck in my throat. I couldn’t tell her about my phobia. Not when it would lead to uncomfortable questions—or worse, offend the androids around me.

When I didn’t respond, Lucy’s eyes narrowed. “Since you’re already here, I think we can call off the date on Monday. And *don’t* try to text me.”

She didn’t slam the door. She was better than that. Instead, she shut it with a precise click. I winced as her footsteps faded away.

*Just when I would have been fine with all this...*

I’d been entertaining the thought of coming with her every week, of the five of us—Catherine, Greg, Amadeus—visiting and laughing. Well, four of us laughing. No, three.

*This is a terrible world.*

“Well,” Greg said. “I was about to accuse you of wheedling sob stories from us, but I think those fireworks were more than enough compensation.”

I sighed, sinking into the armchair.

“You’re Lucy’s boyfriend?” Catherine asked.

“Almost. Not now, probably.”

Amadeus grimaced sympathetically. It was strange, taking comfort from an android, but it felt right somehow.

“Since you know every detail of our tragic backstories, I have no qualms asking you this,” Greg said. He was staring at me, like he had earlier, but with less hostility. Almost, but not quite, friendly. “Why *are* you here?”

“I...” Suddenly exhausted, I rubbed my forehead. “I have an android phobia. Had, at least. Now that I’ve met you, I see how stupid it was.”

I expected them to be hurt, but none of them—including Greg—were.

“Well, not all androids are as benevolent and charismatic as us,” he grunted.

“I know.” I hesitated, because I’d never told anyone this before. “When I was seven, my mom and I were mugged by an android on the street. He didn’t seem to care that Mom was pregnant, or that she was with her kid. He didn’t seem...human. Um, sorry, that came out wrong—”

“We aren’t human,” he said bluntly. “And neither are a lot of people.”

I nodded.

“You came to face your fear before Lucy took you,” Catherine guessed.

“Yeah. Didn’t want to ruin her surprise by freaking out. Guess I already ruined it.” I stared at the flowery carpet, mind whirling. Were things...over, now?

Catherine shifted in her seat. “Well, there are a lot of ways to make something up to a girl. Chocolate, flowers...what does she like?”

I glanced up. “That’s the problem. I don’t know. She’s opinionated, and those kinds of things won’t impress her. You guys know her, right? Has she said anything to you?”

Amadeus shrugged, and Catherine shook her head. “She’s more of a listener—the only worker that asks us how we’re doing and actually pays attention when we tell her. Such a sweetheart.”

*Lucy? A sweetheart?*

“She’s less annoying than everyone else,” Greg admitted.

“I need to talk to her,” I said. “I feel like she’s going to avoid me, though.”

“Set up a surprise date somewhere,” Catherine suggested. “Then you’d have an opportunity to talk.”

“Where?” I asked. “In her dorm room? No thanks. I’d look like a stalker, assuming the tarantula didn’t get me first.”

Amadeus’s eyes widened. He pointed at the ground, mouthing something. *Here.*

Here. At the retirement home. Where I already knew she’d be, Monday at seven, when her shift ended.

I blinked. “You’re brilliant.”

A smile tugged at his lips, and he gave a mock-dramatic bow.

Greg had been watching the exchange. “Here?” he repeated. “What’s the kid going to do, ambush her in the hallway?”

“No,” Catherine scolded. “He’ll use our room, of course.”

“What, when she’s on the clock? It’s the perfect excuse to leave as soon as she sees him,” he retorted.

She smiled brightly. “So we’ll lure her in when her shift ends.”

“Yeah? And who’s going to do that?” He paused, scowling. “Why is everyone looking at me? I don’t do this kind of thing.”

“That’s why you’re perfect, sweet,” Catherine told him. “No one would ever suspect you. Besides, you know I’d give it away.”

Amadeus gave a helpless shrug. He’d have to pantomime everything, so he wasn’t the best choice either.

Greg growled. “It wouldn’t work anyway. What am I supposed to tell her?”

“That you need her help signing up for the diagnostic?” Catherine nodded to a tablet on a nearby desk.

“And she’s supposed to believe that I’d track her down instead of getting help from one of her boneheaded coworkers? I’m not that—”

He caught the amusement on Amadeus’s face and poked him in the chest. “No, I’m *not*.”

“Greg,” I said. “Please?”

The android narrowed his eyes. “No.”

“It’s not the best cover-up, but it’s all we have. Besides, if there’s anyone who can sell it, it’s you.”

Greg bristled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’d never crack up or give anything away. I bet you have an amazing poker face.”

He puffed up. “The best. Because of—well—”

Greg deflated as fast as he’d inflated. It was the first time I’d seen him look vulnerable.

This wasn't just about Lucy. It was about him. And the virus he thought defined him.

"What that man did was wrong," I said. "That virus changed you."

Amadeus tensed, shaking his head. *Don't bring that up.*

"But just because he took one talent doesn't mean he didn't give you others," I continued. "You're different, but that doesn't have to be bad. You can use it. Use it and prove that even if he did take your identity away, you can make yourself a new one."

Greg had gone very, very still. I expected him to accuse me of manipulating him—*what, establish my identity as a cranky old android to lure your girl inside?*—but he seemed to understand I wasn't talking about that anymore.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I like that."

He straightened, determination glinting in his eyes. "I'll do it. And she won't get anything out of me."

I smiled, and Catherine whooped. "Atta-boy, Greg!"

Amadeus studied his friend, face softening. Then he looked towards me. *Thank you*, he mouthed.

Wow. Here I was, scheming with some androids. And apparently giving them life advice.

"That takes care of getting her here," Catherine said briskly. "What next?"

"I'm afraid she'll leave when she sees me here," I admitted.

She punched a fist into her palm. "Then we'll make something so delightful she can't refuse staying to talk."

"Are you suggesting they have a date here?" Greg scoffed. "Like what?"

Have the date in this room. Maybe Catherine was right—if I set up something nice, showed Lucy I cared about her...

"Well, I did want to take her to a restaurant," I said. "Don't judge me, but I've always wanted to go a fancy one—you know, white tablecloths, live music, that kind of thing."

Greg snorted. "Been watching your mom's romance movies, have you?"

They were my sister's, actually. She forced me to watch them with her. Although it wasn't exactly compulsion on my side—I only pretended to hate them. It's a guy thing.

And right now, they were giving me an idea...

I looked from Catherine to Amadeus. "Would you guys be willing to help with something?"



Amadeus nodded, eyes lighting up. Catherine laughed. “Of course, my dear. Do you have any idea how bored we get?”

I’d met them less than an hour ago. Now they were volunteering to help me fix my own mess.

“Thank you,” I said, gratitude clogging my throat. I cleared it and added, “Because I’ve got an idea.”

Two days later, I watched through the window of the androids’ room.

It wasn’t a great view under ordinary circumstances—the window looked out into the parking lot—but Lucy had parked in the employee section, barely within my line of sight.

Lucy came into view. I drew back, blinds clattering against my fingers. But she wasn’t paying attention to the building.

A few steps later, she was at her car. The headlights blinked as she unlocked it.

*Come on, Greg...*

And there he was. He strode after her as she entered the parking lot, calling her name.

Lucy paused with one hand on her car door and turned. She... was not in a good mood. I recognized that irritated hunch in her shoulders.

*We’re doomed,* I thought.

But, to my surprise, she waited as Greg caught up to her. He gestured back to the retirement home entrance as he spoke. I couldn’t hear any words, but his tone sounded the same as it always did. Annoyed.

Lucy cocked her head, raising an eyebrow. She was suspicious.

*Our date was supposed to be now, plus she found me with Greg,* I realized. *Please don’t put two and two together...*

They locked gazes. Greg’s face portrayed nothing outside of his usual crankiness. Inscrutable.

*Please...*

Lucy sighed and locked her car.

“Yes!” I whispered, punching a fist.

“Is she coming?” Catherine asked urgently.

I nodded, grinning. “Greg did it!”

She let out a girlish giggle, hopping in place. Amadeus tried—and failed—to suppress a smile. In that moment, I was *very* glad

we had Greg. If any of us, including me, had tried it, Lucy would have seen straight through us.

“Well, don’t just stand there,” Catherine scolded. She moved by the door and turned off the lights. “Get in your seat. And you, mister, get in place too.”

Amadeus saluted and moved to the front corner, standing as inconspicuously as a broad-shouldered guy in a tuxedo could.

I hurried to my chair. Just as I sat down, footsteps became audible in the hallway. Then voices.

“What, so Mindy can’t help y—”

She opened the door. Light spilled in from the hallway, landing in shafts on the table in front of me.

Lucy cut off. She was silhouetted in the doorway, but there was enough illumination for me to see her face. Her eyes darted to the candle glowing on the table, then to the white tablecloth, then to me. They narrowed.

She turned away. But before she stormed off, Catherine moved in and caught her arm.

“Welcome to the Retirement Home Restaurant, miss,” she said cheerfully. “Your seat is this way.”

Lucy moved to throw off her arm, but hesitated. She glanced down at what Catherine was wearing—a beautiful red and gold dress. A waitress uniform.

Her eyes widened, and a faint smile flickered to life on her face.

Catherine took advantage of the moment and dragged her inside, with what may have been a literal steel grip. She plopped Lucy into the chair and pushed it in. Amadeus shut the door and gave me a thumbs up.

Lucy glanced back at him, then quirked an eyebrow at me. She was still in scrubs, braids cascading around her shoulders. Beautiful.

I swallowed, my mouth going dry. *Why did I think androids were scary? Girls. Girls are scary.*

Once again, Catherine saved me. She came twirling through with a tray, not a wobble in her step. Gracefully, she slid it onto the table, flicking her wrists with flair.

Her face was radiant. In the candlelight, I couldn’t tell that her hair was frayed or her skin was faded. She moved seamlessly, just like I imagined she had a few decades earlier.

Catherine winked at me and retreated. Amadeus wrapped an arm around her waist, and she beamed.

I remembered what I was supposed to be doing and hastily looked back to Lucy. Fortunately, she was looking at them, too. Her gaze turned back to me, then to the tray. Because she *still* hadn't told me what she liked, I'd gone with an assortment of chocolate and fruit, delicately arranged by Catherine.

Lucy studied me, as if on the verge of saying something. Finally, her face softened, and she murmured, "Is this why you came here Monday? To set this up?"

*Set this—Oh.* She thought I had come the first time to plan this as a surprise? It made more sense than what had actually happened.

And she looked kind of flattered. Or at least, not openly hostile. But I couldn't let her believe this was meant to be a surprise and not a patched-up apology. Could I?

I hesitated, flustered, and looked to Amadeus and Catherine. Unfortunately, it didn't seem as if they'd heard Lucy's question...so they misinterpreted my look as the signal. Phase two.

Catherine banged on the door with the back of her fist as she walked forward, Amadeus in tow.

"As our special guest tonight," she announced, "please welcome the esteemed Amadeus!"

Lucy started, turning to look at them. With her gaze gone, it felt like a weight was taken off my shoulders. The signal had been a mistake, but at least I had time to collect myself.

Amadeus slipped free of Catherine's grip and walked to the other side of the room, where we'd cleared a place to be a stage of sorts.

He straightened his suit coat. It was hard to tell in the dark, but his shoulders seemed tight. Apprehensive.

"Greg!" Catherine hissed. "Come on!"

There was a muffled curse on the other side of the door. It creaked open, just enough for Greg to jam a flashlight through. He clicked it on.

It wasn't a spotlight, but it *was* a pretty good flashlight. The illumination fell on Amadeus in a glowing white circle.

The android shivered. His face grew pained, as if he was caught in an unpleasant memory. *He just collapsed, right in the spotlight...*

I caught his eye and smiled. Slowly, he smiled back.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled his shoulders back.

Then he began to whistle.

His notes were pure and striking. He flitted from one to the next with ease, ascending and descending with a range I would have thought impossible. He might not have use of his vocal chords, but his lungs—or the android equivalent—were powerful.

The song was beautiful and haunting, telling of sorrow and bitter regrets. Amadeus, though, looked anything but mournful. The pain left his face, replaced by something else. Pure joy.

It was the opera piece he'd never performed.

Amadeus ended on a long, quivering note. Then, exhaling and closing his eyes, he bowed.

Lucy was the first to stand up. She rose out of her seat so quickly it nearly fell over, clapping furiously.

I stood, too, and even though there were only three of us—me, Lucy, and Catherine—we managed to make some decent applause.

Amadeus straightened, opening his eyes. They immediately found mine. The android gave me a tiny nod, lips curving upward. Then he walked out of our makeshift spotlight and rejoined Catherine.

Greg switched off the flashlight, and the room darkened. Lucy sat down again, wiping her eyes. She'd been *crying*?

I lowered myself into my seat before she caught me staring. For some reason, it hadn't occurred to me that Lucy *could* cry.

"Are you having a good time?" I ventured.

She nodded. "Thank you. I'm sorry I was angry at first, but this surprise—"

I took a deep breath. "This isn't a surprise. It's an apology. I didn't come here on Saturday to plan this."

Lucy looked at me sharply. "Then..."

"I have an android phobia," I admitted. "Or, well, had. It's complicated. I didn't want to ruin the date for you by freaking out, and I thought if I came here first, then..."

Realizing I was rambling, I shut my mouth. There was a long, awkward pause.

Then Lucy punched me in the arm. "You didn't even tell me, you idiot!"

She was smiling. She was beautiful when she smiled.

"I hope this is an acceptable apology," I said. "I'm sorry if you don't like fruit or chocolate, and the candle is LED, but they wouldn't let us have open flames—"

"Michael," she interrupted. "It's awesome."

As if to prove her point, she popped a chocolate into her mouth. Her eyes widened, and she reached for another. “Okay, more awesome than I thought.”

Really? Because those chocolates had been on clearance. Not like I was going to tell her that.

I blew out a breath, relieved. “So...you like chocolate?”

Lucy paused. She pushed the tray to the side of the table so she could lean forward. “I do. But there’s something I like more.”

My mind went blank. Maybe she was more of a pastry person?

“Them,” Lucy whispered. She nodded toward the androids standing at the edge of the room. Greg had slipped in at some point, joining Catherine and Amadeus against the wall. They were being as unobtrusive as possible—although Amadeus winked at me when I glanced over.

“Now, feel free to buy me chocolate any time,” Lucy said. “I’m not stupid. But that’s not the best thing you did on this date.”

The LED light reflected in Lucy’s amber eyes, making them look softer. Alive. “You made them happy.”

She stole a glance at them and added, “Do you realize Greg is smiling right now?”

I started and looked over. Greg rearranged his face quickly, but there was no doubt it had been there.

“*This* is what I like,” Lucy said. “People. Or, androids, I guess, but they’re basically the same thing.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, they are.”

Now I was in awe of her all over again. This girl was *amazing*. I was glad I’d met her...and relieved to find she didn’t care about the details of the date. Trying to plan this out once had been enough. It would be much simpler to...

*Oh. There’s an idea.*

“Are you up for something else?” I asked.

She cocked her head. “Like what?”

“Like showing me around the retirement home. I mean, I haven’t seen much—”

Lucy grinned. “Of course.”

She snagged another chocolate and stood. I did, too, amazed that I felt *excited* about this.

Amadeus clicked on the lights, and Greg stepped out of the way so we could leave. Catherine slipped behind us and began fussing with the table.

I let Lucy go through and lingered. “I’ll come back and clean this up, I promise,” I told her. “Thank you.”

Catherine waved a hand. “Oh, I’ll get it. You go have fun.”

“But you do need to come back eventually,” Greg interjected. “You left your chess set here last time.”

I blinked. “Oh. I did?”

“And I’m not letting you have it until we play a proper game,” he added smugly.

“You’re holding my chess set hostage?”

A wicked gleam came into his eyes. “Yes, I most definitely am.”

Amadeus clapped me on the back and pointed down the hall. Lucy was already halfway to the front desk. Realizing I wasn’t with her, she turned.

“Right,” I said. “Better go. Thanks again, guys!”

“You’re welcome, dear!” Catherine called.

I hurried to catch up with Lucy. Together, we walked down the hallway, passing the front reception desk.

Harriet was there, so I waved at her. She looked between me and Lucy, eventually giving a bemused wave in return.

She’d get used to me. She’d have to, because I was planning to come back. Often.

Smiling, I turned to Lucy. “Where to first?”