

Autumn Outlaw

A Silicon Situation

James was hunched over in his recliner, the recliner he escaped to after opening his new package. His knees touched his chest, and he buried his face hard into them, fingers tangled in dark brown roots. The chair mimicked James' motions - rocked back and forth - as he cursed under his breath. "This isn't fuckin' possible."

A pair of light hazel eyes dared to peek over his knees, and he followed a trail of packing peanuts to the culprit of his insanity. Delightfully blue painted toenails attached to porcelain feet led the way up a smooth naked body, barely visible through three thick layers of a bubble wrap towel. Before he could go any further, he hid his face behind his hands, sliding sweaty palms over the worry lines that had started to crease.

"There's no way. I'm going crazy. I *have* to be going crazy," he decided, finding temporary courage that allowed him to stand.

He eased his way around the figure, touched its soft skin and breathed in the strange new car smell. The figure's face was pale and feminine, a white canvas decorated by plump, pink lips and blank, blue eyes. Orange locks were trapped beneath a partial Styrofoam cover that protected the back of the figure's head. Steadily, James removed the frame, freeing thick waves of hair that framed a beautiful woman.

His eyes darted back to the living room floor, found the seven-foot box that he kicked across the room, abandoned and empty, after the single item it had contained up and walked right out of it. He searched for answers under the mess of Styrofoam chunks scattered around the figure and found those answers in the form of a receipt and instruction manual. *Eden Fantasys Sex Doll 6000* was spread across the

top of the how-to booklet. James felt both sick and aroused at the same time, the latter turning his face a yellow-green.

He recalled the lonely night from a month earlier when he decided he didn't need a *real* woman to satisfy him. With his hand and a bottle of lotion at arm's length, he made his mistake by clicking on an obnoxiously loud advertisement that flashed onto his computer screen, interrupting his bedtime ritual. A few too many beers at the bar had struck him out with a hot raven-haired woman, and in his drunken stupor, he decided a sex doll was the next best thing.

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James sat at a bar during his firm's Christmas party, side-by-side, with the hot raven-haired woman from his office.

Marlow purred into his neck, silky hair brushing against his clean-shaven face. "I was starting to think this was all in my head."

James chuckled, gulping down half a bottle of his fourth Heineken. "What do you mean?" He pulled away to see her face and breathed in a her black cherry scent as she tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear, momentarily revealing the hint of a small tattoo.

"*This.*" She waved her hand between the two of them. "You and me. I've been flirting with you for weeks, and I thought you felt the same, but ..." She trailed off, dark eyes falling onto her glass of Merlot.

"Hey," James began softly. "I do like you. A lot. You just scare the hell outta me."

She lifted her eyes from the deep purplish-red wine that matched her lipstick seamlessly, and she cocked her head to the side, "I *scare* you?" she laughed.

He rubbed sweaty palms against his jeans before chugging the rest of his beer. "I haven't felt this way about anyone since before my daughter was born." There was a knot twisting in his stomach, getting tighter every second Marlow's brown eyes penetrated him.

She grinned, her fingers dancing down the sleeve of his light green button-up. "So, how else do I make you feel?"

James wanted to say that she put a fire in his soul, that he wanted to travel along the mysterious path of her brown skin hidden beneath a black slip dress and discover each tattoo that she had lurking along her body, but the knot in his stomach strangled all the words that begged to leave his tongue. He abruptly slid off the barstool, “I feel like I’m going to be sick.” He could barely catch his breath as he pulled on his coat.

“You okay?” Marlow wondered, holding the back of his arm.

James slipped from her grasp, nodding. “I’m fine. I just gotta go.”

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“This is a mistake,” he mumbled to himself, sticking the small book in the back of his pants pocket.

“A mistake?” James nearly jumped out of his skin at the unexpected voice. He whipped around to watch the doll, hand clenching at his heart as her lips matched the shape of the words that came next. “Did you not order a *tall, busty, ginger* with *blue eyes*?”

“No!” he insisted, then sighed, scratching the crown of his head. “I mean, yes. Yes, I did place that order, but this isn’t what I expected.”

“What is it that you expected?” the doll wondered, her voice soft and monotone.

“I don’t know, shit. Plastic, maybe?” A school bus horn sounded off in the nearby distance. James’ heart sunk immediately, remembering that it was his weekend with his daughter, and his ex-wife would be dropping her off at any moment.

“*Fuck*,” he breathed, rushing to gather up all the mess spaced throughout the living room. He tossed the trash into the casket-like box and wondered what to do with the doll. “Clothes,” he realized, “You need clothes.”

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James managed to hide all evidence of the package besides for the doll herself, now adorned in a teal blouse, pinstripe pants, and no shoes. He set her at the table, watching through busted blinds for his ex-wife’s Honda to pull into the driveway.

On cue, the neighbor's dogs began to bark. Through tinted windows, James caught the slightest glimpse of his daughter's mom, then followed brown, curly hair that bounced out of the passenger side and headed toward the house.

"Just act natural," James suggested, watching his daughter skip through the front yard, bundled in a puffy jacket.

"Okay, I will act natural."

There was a curious commotion behind James, and when he twisted around to investigate, the doll was lying on her back on the kitchen floor. His hazel eyes popped as the doll swung her legs into the air.

"What are you *doing*? No, no!" he freaked, arms flaying to the ceiling. "Get back in the chair, for fuck's sake."

"I'm sorry. You said to 'fuck Jake'. This command cannot be completed until 'Jake' has been programmed into my system."

"*Please*, just get back in the chair," James begged.

"Okay, I will get back in the chair."

She sat down, and James sat across from her at the table, panting. When the doorknob twisted, James gulped.

"Madeline!" he greeted. A wide smile meant for distracting covered his face. "How was school?"

His 12-year-old stopped in her tracks, "Uh, boring, I guess. Who's this?" She gestured toward the doll, dropping her backpack onto the tile floor.

"I am Sex Doll—" James all but dove across the table, muffling the doll with a stern grip over her mouth.

"Dolly! This is Dolly, um, sexy Dolly, according to her, not me. Yeah, she's, uh, pretty conceited. Don't mind her." James attempted to wave off the disturbed expression his daughter was giving him. He nervously chuckled and let go of Dolly's mouth. "She works at the firm with me."

"Right . . ." Madeline arched a dark eyebrow at her father before turning her attention to Dolly. "Well, I'm Maddy. Nice to meet you."

Madeline's outstretched hand reached for the doll's. James chewed at his stubby fingernails in anticipation. He leaned against the counter, wondering how life-like Dolly felt with this type of hand job. If Madeline suspected anything out of the ordinary, he was screwed

The handshake ended, and Madeline propped up against the back of one of the wooden chairs. "Has my dad ever told you, you favor my mom?" she questioned.

"No, he has not," Dolly responded, looking from Madeline then slowly landing her wide blue orbs on James as he stretched the collar of his shirt.

"Well, you do, except you don't got any freckles," Madeline pointed out.

That's because the website didn't have that option, James thought with a snort.

"What's funny?" Madeline wondered.

"Hm? Oh, nothing, baby doll." He nearly facepalmed, squeezing his eyes shut for a second. Not the best word choice, he supposed.

Then, the door swung open again, and James froze as his ex-wife crossed the threshold with ease, cheeks rosy from the winter breeze and orange hair twisted in a tight bun.

"Uh, Lauren, how are you?" James met her at the door, throwing one arm around her in a quick, awkward hug that was barely returned. He cleared his throat. "Did Maddy forget something?"

"No, I actually needed—"

"Mom, this is Dolly. Don't you think she looks like you?"

James could feel the heat creeping up his neck as Lauren twisted around to get a better view of Dolly, "I don't—" Her mouth clamped shut, and she put her hands on her hips, narrowing her light eyes at James.

"Is she seriously wearing my shirt?"

His face flushed deeply. "I can explain!"

Lauren waved freshly manicure fingers in front of her face. "You know what, I don't want to know." She closed her eyes momentarily and let out a long sigh. "Gary and I are going on a trip next month. I wanted to talk to you about keeping Maddy while we're gone, *but* we can discuss it when I pick her up Sunday. When you hopefully don't have company." She stared pointedly at Dolly and said with a tight smile, "It was a pleasure to meet you."

After a goodbye kiss on top of Madeline's head, Lauren was on the other side of the front door, heading to her car. James breathed deeply, wishing she hadn't left behind the familiar trace of her vanilla shampoo that still lingered in the room.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, also," Dolly perked up with a bright smile, receiving a suspicious creased brow from Madeline and leaving James wanting to slam his head into the wall.

"Maddy, why don't you give me and Dolly some privacy?" He rubbed his temples, head hanging down. "We have some business to take care of."

"Fine, whatever," Madeline groaned. "I'll be next door if you need me."

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"Ah, now I see," James admitted, thick rimmed reading glasses propped onto the arch of his nose. "It's all about the fine print."

James was stretched across his bed, back against the headboard, reading the booklet that came with Dolly. He skimmed through the pages and toyed with her programming.

"Sex Doll 6000, program owner name," James commanded.

Dolly sat to his left, shoulder slightly brushing against his. "Okay, would you prefer to manually input your name or choose from a list of common nicknames?" She straightened her posture, staring across the room.

James weighed the options with his hands, "Eh, what the hell, give me the nicknames."

"In alphabetical order: Adonis, Babe, Bae, Baby, Beast, Big Daddy, Boy Toy, Captain, Cowboy, Cumcake, Cupcake, Cutie—"

"I think I'll just go with Big Daddy," he chuckled, cutting her off. "It's a classic."

"Okay, I will now refer to you as Big Daddy." She smiled at him, her body sinking back into the pillows.

"Now let's program 'Dolly' in for you."

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James continued to flip through the booklet. “*So life-like, you’ll be checking for a pulse,*” he read to Dolly.

“I don’t have a pulse,” she responded.

He groaned, tossed the book toward the end of the bed. Dolly followed his movements with her light eyes, finally settled on his face. She really was beautiful. Her hair matched Lauren’s the most, the way it cascaded over her chest like twin waterfalls reflecting an orange sunset. Her cloudless eyes were pretty damn close, too, yet Lauren’s often suggested an approaching storm that he wanted to forget. Then, there was her skin, porcelain but missing a few dozen freckles sprinkled along her nose.

James imagined each speck, knew them by heart, and lightly traced where they would be on his ex-wife’s face. He took his hand, slid it through the thick, orange mass of Dolly’s hair, tucking it behind her right ear. Biting his lip, he wondered what would come next. He wondered if he should light some candles. Wondered if Dolly preferred a certain type of music. Wondered if she cared at all. Deep down, he knew she didn’t, just like Lauren.

He took off the glasses and tried to shake the thought out of his head, managed to long enough to shut his eyes and go in for a simple kiss. Her lips were just as real as the rest of her seemed, tasted like strawberry Chapstick, but something was off.

He preceded to kiss her sharp jawline, trailed his curious tongue down her neck, and nibbled at the base of her shoulder, surprised by her skin’s unnatural salty taste. She responded with quiet moans, squirming beneath his mouth. Her fingers threaded through his brown curls and pulled gently.

James paused, looked up to find half-lidded eyes and swollen lips, and he began unbuttoning the top of her blouse. He plucked three pearl buttons, revealing the peaks of her snowy breast. He peppered them like the first snowflakes of the season lightly covering the ground, then he buried his face deep into her growing goosebumps.

Her hums vibrated against his face, and he listened, but there was nothing else. Her skin was smooth, warm, normal, but there really was *no* pulse. He swallowed hard and pulled away from her hold, admiring the symmetry of two perfect breast now exposed and a pair of soft, pink nipples that rose and fell with each non-existent breath.

The hum died away, and her chest stopped expanding. James was caught into her wide-eyed, dead stare. His skin crawled, and he sat back.

“I can’t do it,” he admitted. He took a deep breath, “I chose your features using Lauren as a model. But when I look at you, when I kiss you, I realize you’re nothing like her. You’re not real.”

Just like this fantasy I’ve been living since she left, he thought, not wanting to say it out loud. “You’re not Lauren.”

“I can be whatever you want me to be,” Dolly suggested, her smile small and suggestive.

James grinned. “How about we just be friends?”

“I can be your friend,” she agreed, nodding her head.

“Dad!” Maddy’s voice called from the other side of the bedroom door. “Just letting you know I’m back.”

“Shit,” James cursed, rolling off the bed and forcing Dolly up. “Dolly, get in the closet,” he demanded, practically shoving her into the small space. He ran to the bedroom door and swung it open, out of breath. “Did you have fun?” he wondered, leaning against the doorframe.

Peering around his body, Madeline scoped out the bedroom. “Where’s Dolly? I thought I heard you say her name.”

“Oh, Dolly? She’s in the bathroom—”

“Big Daddy, I found a new friend.” Dolly busted out of the closet, blouse buttons still undone and a limp blowup doll hanging from her arm.

“Oh my god!” Madeline cried in disgust, covering her face with both hands.

Cringing, James rushed Madeline away from the door and slammed it close behind them. “Maddy, we weren’t doing anything,” he lied.

She peeked through her fingers, glaring with green eyes. Her hands dropped to her sides. “I’m 12 years old, not an idiot.”

“I know that.” James threw his head back.

“It’s okay if you have a girlfriend, Dad. If you’re worried about how I feel, don’t be,” Madeline began as James curiously brought his attention back to her face. “I didn’t like it when Mom married Gary at first, and I definitely did not like Jacob becoming my brother, but I’m older now. I can tell Mom’s happy with

Gary, and I guess him and Jacob aren't *that* bad." She shrugged. "So, if Dolly makes you happy, I'm fine with that."

There were tears prickling James' eyes, and he quickly wiped them away. "Maddy, I want you to know that you're the smartest kid I've ever known. Seriously, wise beyond your years. I'm lucky I have a daughter as perfect as you." He lifted her into a tight bear hug, her face smushed into his chest. "Dolly is great, but she's just a friend." Marlow came to his mind, and his smile grew. "There is someone else that makes me happy. I don't know if she makes me as happy as you do, but maybe if things work out, you'll be able to meet her."

"Fine," Madeline agreed. "Just stop being weird and gross while I'm here, *please*," she begged, words muffled into his shirt.

He set her down, ruffling her hair. "Note taken. No funny business." He held out his pinky and intertwined it with hers. "I promise."

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When Sunday arrived, James was starting to feel disheartened with his decision to ship Dolly back to China that Monday morning. She had made a third friend in Madeline, and what was supposed to be a father-daughter weekend, turned into a Maddy-Dolly weekend. They played dress up, watched movies, and danced. Maddy introduced Dolly to *Life-Size*, and Dolly taught Madeline how to do the robot.

In the morning, James found his daughter and doll sound asleep downstairs in a fort they had built from couch cushions and blankets. James turned off Dolly's sleep mode just as Madeline began stirring awake.

"Maddy, you should go get changed and brush your teeth." James had started folding the roof of Maddy's fort and tossed it to side before putting away the cushioned walls. "Your mom will be here soon."

Maddy stretched her hands high above her head. "Okay," she yawned, crawling over a pile of pillows that made up the fort's floor.

Once Maddy had disappeared down the hall and into the bathroom, Dolly situated herself on the couch. James smiled at her, and she returned it. “I need to talk to Lauren privately when she gets here. Do you mind entertaining Maddy while I do, Dolly?”

“I do not mind—”

“Wait, no. Don’t *entertain* her.”

“—entertaining her.”

James huffed. “No entertaining. Just watch her for me.”

Dolly inclined her head, “I will watch Maddy.”

At that moment, the dogs began barking outside. “Maddy, your mom is here!” he called, zipping up his jacket. “I’m going to talk to her for a few minutes. Hangout with Dolly while I do.”

“Okay!” Madeline called back.

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James met Lauren as she was getting out of the driver’s seat. “Hey,” she greeted once she noticed him. She shut the car door and crossed her arms. “We can talk about the trip inside. It’s freezing out here.”

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you. Alone.”

Lauren stared at him for a moment, icy eyes on determined hazel orbs. She seemed hesitant but finally agreed, nodding. “Sure, we can talk.”

He led her around to the patio, and they sat across from each other on bamboo chairs.

For the first few seconds, James watched Lauren. He studied her thick, navy coat and pair of blue jeans with knee-high boots. He noticed the orange hair framing her face was dull beneath the stratus clouds looming above them. He returned to her eyes, blue and distant.

“So, what do you want to talk about?” She broke the silence.

“Us.” She started to get to her feet with a huff, but he stretched out his hands. “Not about working things out this time,” he clarified.

She took a deep breath and leaned back into the chair. “Go on.”

“We’ve been divorced for a little more than a year now. You know as well as I do that I’ve had a hard time accepting it, understanding everything that transpired, really.” He cleared his throat. “It all just happened so fast, and you never gave me a plausible explanation.”

Lauren shifted in her seat, frowning. “I was wondering when we would have this conversation,” she admitted.

“Yeah, well, I guess it’s as good a time as any, huh?” He chuckled, humorlessly; Lauren didn’t smile. “I’ve been wracking my brain the past couple of days wondering what happened with us, y’know? Like, where *did* it all go wrong?”

Lauren sighed, crossing one leg over the other. “James, there wasn’t one single moment where everything went to shit.”

“Then what was it that drove you away? The entirety of our relationship?”

“Of course not.” Lauren shook her head. “I loved our relationship. You were the first person I’ve ever loved, and I still care deeply about you.”

“Likewise, Lauren, but that doesn’t answer my question. Why did you do it?” He didn’t take his eyes off, barely even blinked.

“We just grew apart, James.” She shrugged, looking away.

James scoffed, crossing his arms and leaning back. “That sounds like the same bullshit answer you gave me when it happened.”

Her face reluctantly turned back to him. “Listen, James, you just don’t understand. I was six months pregnant when I graduated. I walked across that stage, and I wasn’t just a high school graduate. I was suddenly a wife, a mother, and all my dreams for the future were no longer possibilities. But *you* still went to college. You got your degree. You found a job you enjoyed. Your parents made sure you had everything you needed to succeed. All the while, I sat at home with Madeline, dreaming about what could have been.”

“My parents helped you out a lot too. Don’t forget that,” James reminded, leaning forward, arms propped onto his knees and forehead crinkled.

“Yes, and I am grateful for them. They were there for us in ways my mother couldn’t be. They helped us with a house, food, bills, and Maddy never went without anything. But they only helped as long as we were married, and I was home with Maddy.” Lauren leaned forward also, cheeks pink from the sharp wind

or the memories they were rehashing. She swiped away a strand of orange hair that had fallen out of place before continuing.

“I don’t blame your parents for their decisions, and I would never regret Madeline; she is my everything. But I can’t say that over the years, continuing to be a stay-at-home mom while watching you work and be a wonderful dad, I hadn’t grown resentful toward you.”

Resent. James had turned the reasons over in his mind several times before, but there was never an indication of resentment. “That doesn’t make sense. You had plenty of chances after Maddy started school to go to college.”

Lauren nodded. “I know, but, for me at least, it felt too late. I was stuck in this rut, and I didn’t know how to get out of it. I needed a change.”

“So, you slept with Gary. You fucked the father of our daughter’s classmate.” Saying it out loud hurt almost as bad as the day Lauren had confessed it. A sharp pain shot through his chest, and he ran a hand over his face.

“I’m sorry, James. I wish I could take what I did back. I wish I had told you earlier how I felt and what I wanted,” Lauren insisted. “But I don’t take back leaving our relationship. I am happy with Gary.”

There was a silence that washed over them. James held his face in his hands, processing her words. He felt her palm rest on his knee, and he glanced up at her. Her eyes were clear, and a ray of sunlight peeked through the clouds onto them. It was warm, and James felt it melting away the frozen cage around his heart.

“I am sorry, James. Trust me when I say that.”

“I believe you,” he spoke softly, mustering up a small smile. “I don’t like what happened between you and him, but our wonderful daughter helped me realize that you are happy with Gary in ways you could never be happy with me. And it’s time for me to move on and be happy too.”

James found what he was looking for. It may not have been the answers he wanted, but they were what he needed.

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After he and Lauren discussed her trip, James went to tell Madeline goodbye. To his surprise, she was already at the door with wide eyes and a frown. He felt his stomach drop, wondering if she had heard his and her mom's conversation.

"I think Dolly's broken," she whispered.

"Broken?" James wondered, letting go of the air he had been holding in.

"Yes, broken," she repeated. "The whole time you and mom were outside she just stared at me. She didn't blink once. I couldn't even get her to talk!"

James rubbed the bottoms of Madeline smooth brown locks with two fingers. "I'm sure she's just messing with you."

"I don't know, Dad. I tried to find the reset button but couldn't find it."

"Yeah, I'm not sure—" he began, then James gawked at his daughter. "Wait, her reset button?"

"Yeah, it's on the back of all my other dolls, but not her," Madeline explained. "And can I just say, she is the most detailed doll I've ever seen. In a gross kind of way."

James arched an eyebrow. "So, you know that she's a doll? You didn't think she was real?"

"I mean, at first yeah. I really thought she worked with you. I don't understand why you didn't just tell me she was a doll instead of being weird about it."

"Well, how'd you figure it out?"

"Dad, I'm 12 years old, not some dumb kid," she reminded. "Dolly doesn't eat, and she hasn't been to the bathroom once this whole weekend. Plus, we were timing our heartbeats last night, and she didn't have one." Madeline started pulling on her puffy jacket. "Those were just a few of the red flags," she announced, arms crossed and tight-lipped.

James grinned from ear to ear and ruffled her hair, "You are such a smart kid, you know that?"

"Yeah, yeah." Madeline grinned, slinging her backpack over her arm and hugged his stomach before heading out the door. "Thanks for Dolly, by the way! See you both in two weekends!"

"Wait, Maddy, no—" But the door was already shut behind her, and Maddy didn't look back.

James hung his head and groaned. "How am I going to explain returning Dolly?" he asked himself.

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Monday morning came quick, and James spent a good 30 minutes on repackaging Dolly. The Styrofoam helmet went back on her head; the bubble wrap obscured her new outfit. He placed Dolly gently in the box, covering her with the pile of packing peanuts at his feet. There was only one clue that Dolly was inside, her orange hair peeking through the squishy, white balls. James said his goodbyes, not only to the doll but to the fantasy that Lauren had made a mistake by cheating on him and that they would, one day, be back together.

As he drove to the UPS store, James decided he needed to do one more thing before sending Dolly back. He did a U-turn, his heart set on a new direction.

James ran through the building he worked at, coworkers greeting him and asking “what’s the rush” along the way. In the elevator, his hands bounced in his pockets and he impatiently tapped his foot, ignoring the blonde woman tutting at him. Once he heard the ding on the fifth floor, he rushed from the elevator and stopped outside the door that read *Office of Marlow Davis*.

He straightened his suit, patted down the brown locks that had gone astray, and he took one deep breath before knocking.

“Come in,” Marlow’s sweet voice rang through the door.

He twisted the knob and cautiously entered with a smile. “Good morning, Marlow.”

She smirked, leaning back in her chair and tapping a pen against her chin. “I can’t say I was expecting you to be at my door.”

James' palms were sweaty. “I need to show you something. Mind joining me in the parking lot?” he asked.

“What if your tummy starts hurting?” she teased.

He chuckled in return. “Okay, I deserve that.” He motioned toward the open area outside of Marlow’s office. “Just come outside with me. I promise to make it worth your while.” He winked.

She moved from behind her desk, ran a hand across his chest as she passed over the threshold, hitting him in the face with a sweet aroma of fresh fruit. “You better.”

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“And what exactly am I looking at here?” Marlow wondered, arms crossed, peering into a box in the back of James’ SUV.

James stirred the packing peanuts to reveal Dolly’s face. He pulled her into an upright position, spilling a mess into the back of his vehicle.

Marlow took two steps back, heels clicking against the asphalt, and she scrunched her nose. “What is it?”

James pointed at Dolly, sighing. “This is my life. It’s me.” Marlow cocked her head to the side, and James took it as his cue to go on. “My wife cheated on me over a year ago, and then she left me.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard through the grapevine,” Marlow admitted.

“Well, what you might not have heard is that I’ve pretty much been hung up on her since we split.” He shuffled his feet, staring at the ground. “I just didn’t understand why she did it. I thought we could have tried counseling, maybe just take a break. I don’t really know what I was thinking.” He kicked at a lonely pebble in the parking lot.

“James?” He glanced up, Marlow seemed amused. “This does not explain *that*.” She motioned toward the doll.

“Right, well, the night of the Christmas party—”

“Yes, yes, when I found out you can’t handle your beer.”

James cut his eyes at her, and she laughed, revealing a beautiful row of pearly whites glowing in contrast to her magenta lipstick.

“*Anyway*, it wasn’t the beer that I couldn’t handle, it was the moving on.”

“Obviously.” She grinned. “Please, get to the point. I really want to know what that is.” She poked the doll’s face and covered her own mouth. “That’s oddly realistic.”

“You know, I’ve never realized how impatient you are,” James pointed out.

Marlow threw her hands up in the air. “I’ve waited ages for you to make the next move. I’m certain that I am *plenty* patient. So, please, if you will, hurry up with your story.”

James huffed. “This is a sex doll. I ordered her the night after the Christmas party, and I chose her features to look like my ex-wife.” Marlow’s eyebrow rose as James talked. “She was on my doorstep Friday after work, and I named her Dolly. I’ve spent the whole weekend with her and my daughter.” Marlow

frowned, and James held his hands up to clarify. “Not like that. My daughter thinks she’s actually some elaborate Barbie doll or something.” He took a breath, eyes going up to the clear skies. “The point is, it took me ordering this ridiculous doll to let go of my ex. Now, I have to send her back and come up with some excuse to tell my daughter why I did return her. And that’s just my life. The good, the bad, and the creepy, so take it or leave it.”

He had survived getting everything out, and if he was being honest, there was a knot twisting deep in his stomach, tightening the longer he and Marlow stood there in an awkward quiet, but he wasn’t going to run away. He pulled at the collar of his button-up.

Marlow grinned. “You could *not* send it back and let your daughter keep it until she gets bored with it.”

“Let my 12-year-old daughter keep a sex doll?”

“Who knows,” she chuckled. “It might make a funny story one day.”

“You’re absolutely crazy,” James snorted.

He turned back to Dolly, her eyes suddenly open and wide. “Big Daddy, is that a new friend?”

James coughed over her words and slammed his SUV’s hatch shut.

“You okay?” Marlow asked, suspicious dark eyes following James as a pink tint crept up his neck. He nodded, joining Marlow at her side. “Then, come on. Let’s get to work. We can talk about where you’re going to take me this Friday on the way up.”

James smiled down at her. “Hey, what’s that tattoo behind your ear?”

She tucked away her dark hair. “It’s a daffodil,” she answered, smirking back at him. “And trust me, there are plenty more where that came from.”