

Domestic Bliss

A Short Story

By C. L. Wells

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Chapter 1 – The Confrontation

As she pulled up her work email account one last time before leaving for the day, Sariah Delphi saw that three emails had magically appeared in the past thirty minutes. Email was the bane of workplace existence; she was sure of it. If it were somehow possible to reclaim all of the time she had spent sorting through useless workplace emails, it would probably add at least six months onto her lifespan. One of the emails was the monthly company newsletter, which she ignored. The second was a reminder about cleaning out old items that may have been left in the break room refrigerator – information that might have been useful if she ever kept anything in the refrigerator overnight, which she didn't. The third email was from the assembly section of the R&D department.

“Please let the new prototype be ready for testing,” she said as she closed her eyes, and then opened them back up to click hopefully on the last email. “Yes!” she exclaimed as she read the good news.

The prototype for project DB45 will be ready for you to pick up for testing tomorrow by 5:00 p.m.

Thanks,

Jake
Build Technician
R&D Assembly Department
Nomel Robotics, Inc.

Project DB45 was her baby. The ‘DB’ stood for ‘Domestic Bliss’, which was the codename for the most advanced domestic humanoid robot on the planet. It was designed to look, talk, and move like an actual human being while serving as a cook,

butler, maid, and all-around domestic support appliance. While they had achieved great advances in the look and feel of the DB45, the most advanced part of this new prototype was its advanced AI capabilities. This machine would learn and adapt. It would learn your preferences for housekeeping, what foods you liked and how to prepare them, and it could even pick out an outfit for you based upon your individual style. After having had one of these robots living with you for a week, it would know your habits, patterns, and preferences even better than you knew them yourself.

She had been working on the software updates for this latest iteration for over a year. Her programming would be coupled with the very latest robotic designs and computer processing chips that Nomel Robotics, Inc. had to offer. If everything went well during this final test, the DB45 would be released for production in time for the holiday buying season, and then everything would change. She couldn't stop smiling as she thought about it.

After punching out from work, she was looking forward to getting home for the evening. A glass of wine, a warm bubble bath, and a chance to read the next novel in the stack of library books that had been collecting dust beside her bed. She had been working ten hour days for the past month, getting all the code revisions tested and ready to upload to the DB45 prototype, and hadn't had a chance to relax and read in a while. She had just finished uploading the final code updates to Assembly that afternoon, in fact, and now she was ready for a break.

As she dug around in her purse for her key fob to open the car door, she almost jumped out of her skin when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She drew in her breath sharply and turned around to see her ex-boyfriend, Jerry Baldachi, towering over her. "Jerry. Don't startle me like that."

Jerry didn't look happy. Sariah had broken off their three-month long relationship over coffee at lunchtime today, and he hadn't taken it well.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, somewhat irritated.

There was a look in Jerry's eyes that Sariah couldn't quite place and it worried her.

"I understand why you wanted to break things off. I just want you to know that I get it," he began. "You've been under a lot of pressure with this project at work, and you need a break."

"Jerry, you're a nice guy," she began, "but I don't want a break. I don't want us to see each other romantically anymore. O.k.? I tried to explain that at..."

"No!" Jerry interrupted her, raising his voice. He grabbed both of her upper arms and began to squeeze hard. "We *aren't* breaking up," he said through gritted teeth.

"Jerry, you're hurting me," Sariah said as he pushed her up against the car. "Let me go," she pleaded as she tried unsuccessfully to free herself from his powerful grip.

"Listen to me," he said as he continued to squeeze her arms tightly, "We're *not* breaking up. You just need a break. So I'll leave you alone for a couple of days, and I'll come over Sunday, and we can go out to the park. O.k.?"

He smiled at her, and a chill ran down her spine. It was an evil smile. She didn't respond to his question – partly out of shock, and partly because she didn't want to give him any more reason to continue hurting her by saying 'no'. She was scared.

Then, just as quickly as he had exploded at her, he seemed to calm down, and the maniacal look went out of his eyes. He released the pressure from her arms and began rubbing them gently. It made her skin crawl.

"Now, you go home and get some rest," he said as he nodded his head up and down. He smiled the pleasant smile that she had been attracted to when she'd first met him. "I'll see you Sunday," he continued. Without waiting for a reply, he turned around and walked away.

Sariah stayed leaning against the car as she watched Jerry leave, too stunned to move. When a co-worker parked farther down the same row said goodnight to her a few moments later, she jerked around in the direction the voice had come from. "Yeah, see you tomorrow," she said absentmindedly.

Opening her purse, she retrieved her key fob and opened the car door, got inside, and sat down in the back seat.

“Good afternoon. Where shall I take you today, Sariah?” the car’s navigation software asked as she hit the button to shut and lock the back door.

“Home,” she replied.

“Of course. We will arrive your destination in approximately twenty-nine minutes and seventeen seconds according to the latest traffic estimates.”

Since the city planners had switched to an all-driverless car system in 2030, traffic delays had been virtually eliminated. All vehicles operating within the city limits had to be driven by a vehicle navigation system that was integrated into the city’s traffic software. Routing was accomplished in real-time as drivers gave instructions about where they wanted to go. Traffic was managed according to complex algorithms to ensure against traffic jams and provide 99.5% accuracy in estimated arrival times.

Sariah tapped the touch-screen on the back of the driver’s seat and pulled up the phone app, hitting the speed-dial icon for her best friend, Jasmine.

“Hey, baby, what’s up?” Jasmine exclaimed as her face appeared on the screen. Even with what had just happened to her, Sariah smiled. That was one of the reasons they got along so well. Jasmine was the Ying to her Yang. The bright and bubbly flip-side to Sariah’s often serious and brooding nature. “Whoa,” Jasmine continued after seeing her friend’s countenance. “What happened to you?”

“Remember that short and sweet break-up coffee earlier today? It turned into a double-feature. Jerry just accosted me in the parking lot at work. I think he bruised both of my arms, he squeezed me so hard.”

“Say whaaat?! That jerk. I *knew* there was something wrong with that boy. I’m coming over, and I’m bringing my mace.”

“Thanks. I could use some company tonight. I was really scared, Jaz. I mean, you know how big he is and how small I am. He pushed me up against the car and kept going on about how we *aren’t* breaking up...” Tears started coming down Sariah’s cheeks, and she reached up to wipe them away.

“Oh, baby, don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll be at your house before you are.” Jasmine turned away from the camera momentarily as she gave her own navigation

system a new destination, and then she looked back at the screen, concern showing on her face. "I'm ordering some Chinese, and we're gonna have a movie night!"

Sariah let out a short laugh. "Thanks, Jaz. You always know how to make me feel better."

"Hey, us girls have to stick together. I'll see you in twenty. Gotta let you go so I can order the Chinese."

"O.k., bye."

The screen went blank, and Sariah leaned back into the seat. She closed her eyes and tried to think of anything but what had just happened with Jerry.

Chapter 2 – The Delivery

Pulling on a button-up blouse as she prepared for work, Sariah winced at the pain she felt in her upper arms. A short-sleeve shirt was not an option today; otherwise, someone might see the bruises and start asking questions. She wanted to sort through things first in her mind before having to face the questioning she knew would come from her co-workers if they saw the bruised skin. And besides that, it was embarrassing. Her first boyfriend in over four years and he'd turned out to be some obsessive psycho – *just my luck*, she thought to herself.

She grabbed a yogurt smoothie out of the refrigerator on her way out the door. Proceeding to her car, she settled into the back seat for the thirty-minute drive to work.

“Good morning. Where shall I take you today, Sariah?” the car’s navigation software asked as she opened up her laptop and began logging in to read through her email.

“Work, please.”

“Yes, of course. We will arrive at Nomel Robotics in approximately twenty-nine minutes and fifteen seconds,” the software responded compliantly.

Sariah pulled up the local police department on the screen and soon the face of a cheerful young woman appeared. “Garden City Police Department, how may I direct your call?” she queried.

“Yes, I need to report an assault...”

* * * * *

By the time Sariah arrived at work, she had finished the police report, forwarded a copy to her lawyer, and scheduled a phone conference with said lawyer for her lunch break. With Jasmine’s encouragement, she had decided not to wait until Jerry did something even more violent than he already had before pursuing legal options. She had felt a sense of shame as she attached the photos of the bruises on her arms, and then

chided herself for feeling that way. *Why should I be ashamed? He's the one with the problem.* After the assault, she was certain she could get a restraining order against Jerry. She still couldn't believe this was happening.

"We have arrived at your destination," the navigation system dutifully informed her.

She went through the motions at work, finishing up a few software modification tests for various projects and attending one meeting. When noon finally came, she closed the door to her small office before placing the call to her lawyer, not wanting anyone else to hear about what was going on. She dialed the number, and the receptionist at his office patched her right through.

"Sariah, I received the report," her lawyer began. "I'm so sorry to hear about this. How are you holding up?"

"I'm doing o.k., considering," she replied.

"Well, the restraining order won't be a problem," he continued, "but I'm sad to say that it won't likely deter the young man from continuing his bad behavior. In most cases like this, the offender continues to pursue inappropriate contact. I would suggest you pick up some mace and keep it with you whenever you go out. Unfortunately, what happened in the parking lot will likely not be the last time he attempts to coerce you back into a relationship with him."

"That's what I'm afraid of, Tom. I mean, he seemed really off-balance when he confronted me in the parking lot. Isn't there anything else I can do?"

"Well, you could hire a bodyguard - but that can be prohibitively expensive. Of course, applying for a gun or Taser permit is always an option. That takes between two and six months, depending on which route you choose - assuming you pass the background check. You don't already have a permit, do you?"

"No."

"Too bad. You could start carrying a walking stick or something like that when you go outside... Look, I don't mean to sound glib about this - it's a horrible situation for you, I know. The simple truth of the matter is that the law is on the side of the bad

guy in this situation. It'll take more than a few bruises on your arms before we can put this guy behind bars. We can do it eventually, but in the interim, you need to be careful."

"What you mean is that we're going to need to wait until he violates the restraining order."

"Not just that. He'll need to break some additional laws, either by vandalizing your property or assaulting you again before we can convince a prosecutor to take the case."

"You're kidding me, right?!"

"Unfortunately, no, I'm not. I wish I had better news for you, Sariah."

* * * * *

The rest of the day was a blur. A rush request came in to make some updates to the traffic drones that the company produced, and Sariah's team was busy for the remainder of the afternoon completing the changes. She had almost forgotten that she was supposed to pick up the DB45 unit for in-home testing when the appointment reminder popped up on her computer.

"I'd completely forgotten about that," she said out loud.

After shutting down her computer for the day, she headed downstairs to the R&D Assembly Department with a smile on her face. After months of development, she was finally going to get a chance to test the final product. It was a nice pick-me-up considering the day she had just had.

She signed into the Assembly Department via the retinal scanner and waited in the reception room until one of the technicians came down to escort her back to the assembly area. The young man who came to pick her up handed her a hard hat to wear when he entered the room.

"Hi, I'm Jake, the guy who emailed you yesterday."

"Hello, Jake. I'm sooo excited to finally be picking up the DB45."

“Yeah, it’s a real piece of work. Hard to tell it’s not a real person when it’s powered up. She’s right through here.”

Jake led Sariah through double swinging doors and into a cavernous warehouse space where numerous products were being assembled by at least a dozen teams. The two of them walked along a path that was outlined on each side in bright yellow tape, leading straight through the center of the room and towards the back of the warehouse. Once there, they went through another door that led into a hallway with an eight-foot ceiling, white tiled floor, and bright fluorescent lighting. The walls were white and spotless. The whole setting reminded Sariah more of a hospital than a robot assembly facility.

At the end of the hallway, they entered what appeared to be a locker room. Jake stopped and took a pair of shoe covers off of the wall for himself, and handed another pair to Sariah.

“Here, take one of these gowns and a cap, too. We’ve assembled her now, so there isn’t much risk of contaminating the parts, but rules are rules.”

After they had their shoe covers, caps, and gowns on, they went through a second doorway and down another hallway.

“She’s in room twelve – last door on the right,” he said, pointing at the number above the room.

When Sariah entered the room, she saw the DB45 seated on a chair. She was stunning to behold – her facial features were so lifelike. She was dressed in a simple grey two-piece smock and was in the powered-down seated rest position, with her hands resting palms down on her thighs, facing straight ahead, her eyes closed. Sariah walked up to the robot and began examining the incredible facial detail, touching the skin and feeling the hair.

“Amazing,” she said under her breath.

“You’ll have to give her some verbal commands to bring her up out of rest mode,” Jake instructed. “I have a list of the commands over here.” He went over to a desk in the corner of the room and picked up a packet of papers.

"I know," Sariah replied. "I programmed most of the commands myself."

"Really? Cool. I mean, I didn't know what your background was. They just told me that you would be testing her," said Jake.

"It's o.k.," Sariah replied, still entranced with how thoroughly human the robot appeared. She stepped back a few steps and spoke to the robot. "DB45, initiate primary user bonding sequence."

The robot's eyes opened, and she stood up, looking straight at Sariah. "Am I looking at the primary user?" she asked in a melodiously pleasing voice.

"Yes, you are," Sariah responded.

"Please state your first and last name," the robot continued.

"Sariah Delphi."

"Voice recognition analysis completed and functional. Please remain still while I initiate facial recognition protocol."

Sariah continued looking straight at the robot as a light shone out of its right eye, moving up and down Sariah's face.

"Facial recognition protocol complete. How would you prefer that I address you?"

"Just call me Sariah."

"Certainly, I will call you Sariah. And what would you prefer to call me?"

Sariah put her hand over her mouth momentarily. "Oh no, I completely forgot to pick out a name for you."

"Would you like me to suggest a name based upon a randomized selection from the top twenty-five female baby names from the last calendar year?"

"O.k. Please suggest a name," Sariah replied.

"Does the name 'Janet' meet with your approval?"

Sariah smiled. "Yes, 'Janet' will be just fine. Nice to meet you, Janet."

"Nice to meet you, too, Sariah."

Chapter 3 – An Unexpected Visitor

Sariah and Janet arrived home somewhat later than expected. A routing drone malfunction at a major intersection had snarled traffic for a good half-hour and caused them to miss the usual twenty-nine-minute window for returning home. When they finally entered the condominium, Sariah was famished.

“Ahhh, it’s good to be home,” Sariah said as she put her purse down on the credenza in the foyer. She interlaced her fingers behind her back and extended her arms to stretch.

“Shall I make you something for dinner?” Janet queried.

“Yes, that would be great. How about some General Tso chicken?”

A look of disappointment crossed Janet’s face as she replied, “I’m sorry, that recipe isn’t in my system.”

“You’re kidding me? I specifically included that recipe on the last update,” Sariah said.

“I’ll download a recipe for General Tso chicken from the internet if you like,” Janet continued.

“No, don’t bother. How about Mexican? A chicken quesadilla sounds good, too.”

“Yes, I have that recipe on file,” Janet replied, smiling slightly. “I’ll go and check to see if we have the ingredients.”

“O.k.,” Sariah replied, yawning. “I’m going upstairs to take a shower. Let me know when it’s ready.”

“Of course,” Janet said. “Kindly direct me to the kitchen.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that. Straight through that door. I think we have all the ingredients, but if we’re out of anything you need, you can run down to the corner store to pick it up. Just knock on my bedroom door and I’ll give you some money.”

“Very well. Thank you,” Janet replied.

Sariah walked up the stairs and went into the master bedroom. She turned on the hot water in the shower and let it run while she began taking off her clothes. With the tankless water heater, she could have waited to turn on the water when she got in the shower and almost instantly have had hot water, but she preferred the atmosphere provided by the foggy mirror and a good vapor cloud in the bathroom. It was one of life's little indulgences that she wasn't prepared to give up, despite the doomsday prophecies delivered on a daily basis by the energy-saving eco-warriors. If the world was going to vaporize tomorrow, at least she would have a relaxing shower first. The eco-warriors would just have to go pound sand.

Twenty minutes later, she had just wrapped herself in a towel and was about to pick out some comfortable clothes to dress in for dinner when her cell phone began to ring. She instantly knew it was Jerry. Why she had ever set his ring tone to the old tune "Endless Love" was a mystery to her now – an error that she would correct momentarily. She hit the disconnect button, and instead of changing the ring tone, she edited the number's properties, checking the box labeled 'block this number' before tossing the phone back down on the bed. She smiled as she turned around and entered the walk-in closet.

* * * * *

Dinner was superb. Sariah was almost glad that the recipe for General Tso had gone missing. Janet's culinary skills were definitely going to be a top selling point. The chicken was tender, there was just the right amount of cheese, and Janet had even succeeded in creating a mildly spicy sauce to go along with it – just like they did in the restaurants.

"This is *very* good," Sariah said through a mouthful of quesadilla.

"I'm glad you like it," Janet replied.

"How did you make that sauce? I didn't even know I had all the ingredients for something like that."

"You didn't. I took the liberty of going to the corner store for the missing ingredients while you were in the shower."

"Really? That's like, six blocks from here. How did you get there and back in twenty minutes and still cook the meal?"

"I'm very fast," Janet replied. "I can run at a top speed of sixty-two miles an hour. However, I wasn't required to run that fast in this case."

"How did you pay for it?"

"Nomel Robotics created an expense account for the project, and I have been authorized to charge incidental amounts to this account for the duration of our test. I simply interfaced wirelessly with the payment device in the checkout line to pay."

"Really? Wow. An expense account." Sariah pondered the fact for a few moments before asking, "How much is in the account?"

"Six thousand dollars."

Sariah almost choked on a bite of quesadilla. "What?"

"Six thousand dollars," Janet repeated. "Does this trouble you?"

"No, no. I just... I mean, I think somebody made a mistake. That's a good bit of change for a one-week test. I'll put that on my list of things to check tomorrow." Sariah pulled her phone out of her pocket and typed a note to remind herself to check on both the missing recipe and the expense account.

After dinner, Sariah left Janet to clean up while she curled up in her favorite overstuffed chair in the den and continued reading an old paperback copy of *The Seer* by C.L. Wells. Even though the physical book was often touted as an obsolete technology, she still loved the feel of holding one in her hands. She was just settling in when the doorbell rang.

Sariah was in the process of getting up when Janet looked over at her from the adjoining kitchen area. "Would you like me to see who it is?"

Sariah smiled. She could get used to having a domestic robot. "Yes, please." Having dispatched Janet to the door, she immediately went back to her book. A few moments later, she heard Janet ask the visitor for their name. Her mood immediately

soured when she heard Jerry's muffled voice reply. *Satan on a stick!* she thought to herself. *This has got to stop.*

She put her book down on the end table beside her chair and walked determinedly toward the front door just as Janet was turning to come back down the hall.

"The visitor says his name is..."

"I heard, thanks," Sariah replied flatly as she continued up to the door. "Jerry," she said, speaking loudly so she could be heard through the door, "I don't want to talk with you. Go home."

"Sariah, come on," he replied, "let me in. I just want to talk."

"What happened with you giving me some space until the weekend?"

"Look, I just wanted to apologize. Can't you just let me in so we can talk face to face?"

"No. Now go away or I'm calling the police!"

There was no reply. Sariah thought that she heard Jerry walking down the steps. She had just turned around and started to walk back to the den when she heard Jerry's voice again. Only, it wasn't just his voice; with each word he yelled, he pounded on the front door hard enough for the whole door-frame to shake. "LET (pound) ME (pound) IN (pound)!"

"Janet, call 9-1-1," Sariah instructed. "I'm going to get my mace."

"Calling 9-1-1 now," Janet replied.

How in Hades do I always get stuck with the losers? Sariah thought to herself as she practically jogged up the stairs to find her purse and retrieve the mace that Jasmine had loaned her.

Meanwhile, there was no more pounding on the door.

Janet faithfully stood guard while Sariah watched somewhat nervously from the balcony overlooking the foyer - phone in one hand, mace in the other. She quickly made a plan in her mind. If Jerry broke in, she would take the two steps to her bedroom door, shut and lock it, and then push the chest of drawers in front of it until

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