

# **Derelict**

**by D A Barr**

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The woman looked around the stack of pallets. Dressed in their matching coveralls, The Cleanup Crew were making a second pass today. They had no dogs with them, so the woman relaxed. She had been cautious. She'd left no evidence of her being there, last night. Though the streets were safer than they were even a few years ago, the homeless had to stay alert. Any trash or bedding left behind was evidence that a street person might be nearby. Keeping a tidy territory was one of the best ways to avoid detection. Of course, all bets were off if they had dogs with them. Either the old kind or the newer, two legged variety.

After The Crew passed, the woman gathered up her few belongings and trudged down to her favorite alley. The bakery had just tossed out all of its unsold stuff and there was little competition these days. She grabbed a loaf of sourdough for later and a few hard doughnuts for breakfast. No coffee; practically all of the food kitchens had closed due to reduction in use.

The woman began her rounds. She picked her way along the river, near the empty office building where she had once worked as building manager. She found no salvage worth holding for barter. The river was already running low; drying up for the season. The older trees, rooted along what used to be the high-water banks of the river, were all dead or dying. A few, younger saplings struggled along within the more recently exposed river bed. The woman feared that those trees may not make it in the long run, either. She would miss them. Life, in all forms, seemed to be leaving the city.

None of the regulars hung out along the river walk anymore. The successuls, succs in street speak, were there. Some of the rich ones walked with their expensive pets alongside them. They were much more than pets. The machines had taken most of the other jobs, years ago. In one form or another, these things had taken over the remaining manual labor force.

Her mother, dead for nearly a decade, had told her that those servants from her childhood had talked and behaved like machines. These newer ones, the next generation of non-human servants, they had scared the crap out of her! Mama claimed that they weren't just acting like people. "Somehow," she said, "I see souls behind their eyes." Sometimes the woman wondered if her Mama might have passed on more to her than just her good looks. As she had gotten older, the woman, Gina, began to believe that she could sense other's moods simply by looking into their eyes. Lately, these feelings had grown stronger.

These succs, dressed in clothes that would have cost Gina over a year's pay at her last job, approached with two servants. Walking next to the woman, and standing almost as tall as her, was a fe-man leopard female. On this warm day, her owner paraded her around in what Gina could best describe as a harem costume; much like one she remembered from an old movie that she saw, many years ago. The one walking alongside the man was no ca-man. This male canid, an enhanced canine, walked on all fours and wore nothing but its own brown and gray fur and its master's mark. It's front paws had longer

fingers than a dog would have but she wouldn't call them hands; just paws made better for holding down prey.

The canid looked over at Gina as if it were ready to tear her apart, should it be told to do so. The fe-man looked on with disdain as her human owner purposefully ignored her. They all stayed on the river walk, which suited Gina just fine.

A few years back, before the bus convoys and the trains started hauling volunteers out to new settlements, Gina had walked into one of the corporate supplied housing units. The advertisements had offered warm, private housing and meals for the next three months; the coldest months. In exchange for this, applicants only need submit to a full physical, answer some questions, and pledge to keep their room clean and help maintain the common areas. Though the city no longer suffered the bitter cold temperatures recorded in the past, surviving the winter outdoors was still far from assured. It seemed like a good deal.

The physical had lasted almost two days. The questions reminded her of her last job interview, but would sometimes get uncomfortably personal. Clearly, the anonymous sponsor was shopping for servants. Pretty soon, someone might offer to grow her a fresh, twenty year-old looking clone of her body and a nice severance package in exchange for maybe eighteen years of indenture.

Gina had left early. A few times, once on an especially cold, blustery winter day, she would notice that someone who was there for breakfast that morning didn't show for dinner, that evening. No word; the staff claimed to know nothing. She got the message; it was healthier for her to disappear back out on the streets.

She fingered the dirty and battered pendant of her necklace; a silver teardrop with what she assumed was a large rhinestone embedded into it. It had been a gift from one of the staff. It was pretty and her tech friend, Noet, had told her that it was not a tracker. It was inert, as far as he could tell. It neither emanated nor responded to any carrier frequencies and codes that he knew of. Besides, the clasp had corroded and was stuck. She'd have to break the chain to take it off and she wasn't prepared to do that.

Noet, known in Gina's circles as Mr. Clean, was well known for letting street people come in and shower and do a load of laundry. He would always offer up a new pair of socks; sometimes even underwear. All he asked was that they talk with him and maybe play a board game while the machines did their work. The conversations were always odd. He sometimes replied as if he were in a different conversation altogether, but one could talk to him about anything. He may not remember any of what was said, but he was genuinely friendly and a good listener.

Gina believed that the kind, young-looking man was a victim of shell shock. The chance of suffering from permanent memory loss and/or schizophrenia increased each time one transferred to another shell. It seemed that Noet had prized keeping a young appearance over his own sanity. He had used up his chances early in the game.

The last time Gina checked, Noet's tiny, ground floor apartment had been squatted by a family of five. She had time to notice that the power and water were still on before the family chased her out. Noet had not been gone long. Word had not yet gotten out that Mr Clean's was closed. Gina put out word that she was looking for him.

That day, Gina completely changed her routine. She told only her best friend Shay, the only friend she could find, where she was going. She then abandoned her usual haunts and moved closer uptown. The Cleanup Crew patrolled that way less often.

It was on this new circuit, as she sat at the bench near the high end of the pocket park, that she first saw it. She knew what the old ads called it but she liked the local name best. They had been around since before she was born. This imp-lizard stood on the yellowed, trampled patch of grass that covered most of the pocket park. Like most lizards that Gina had seen, this one was naked. It was maybe twenty meters from her and had just reached down to pick a flower from a weed. When it stood up and caught her gaze, this pale green and brown one offered the blossom to her. It seemed an innocent gesture, and it was kind of cute. She reminded herself, *It was designed to be cute.*

This one was different, though. Those bright green eyes held surprising depth behind them. There was no other way she could describe it. There was no indifference, no disdain, nor dismissive bearing in that face; there was interest and curiosity. There was friendliness in those eyes. Before it could approach any closer, Gina quickly stood up and walked away. Whoever owned it wouldn't want it approaching the likes of her.

She saw it again from the same bench, two days later. Only this time, it approached from the side. It wore a simple harness with a small pouch attached to it. There was a communication headset, complete with camera, attached to one ear. Before Gina could get up, the imp-lizard said, "Please, Miss. I am on a mission. I am my master's valet and have a trained eye for what makes an outfit pop. I can't help but notice that your outfit needs just a little something. Do I have your permission, Miss?"

It held in its hand a small flower. The stem of it was pierced by a large, decorative pin with a head shaped like a fanciful, pretty insect. She had never seen an insect like it.

Both flattered and little uncomfortable from the attention, Gina said, "I suppose so, just be careful with that pin."

The imp-lizard carefully reached up and grasped the threadbare lapel of Gina's dirty coat. It deftly slid the pin into the fabric of the lapel and said, "There. Now that this little change has been made, we'll just wait for the final touch."

"What's that?"

"That would be your smile, of course." Its eyes looked up at her, expectantly.

Was that a playful expression she saw? She couldn't help it; she found herself smiling down at the little guy.

It bowed its head slightly and said, "Thank you."

Confused, Gina asked, "For what?"

"For helping me complete my task; to steal a smile from someone who had no reason to offer one." The imp-lizard began to walk away. It stopped, put a hand to its ear and said, "Yes, Master. Right away."

It returned to her, pulled something from the pouch and placed it on the woman's knee. Gina picked it up. It was a small, heavy, yellow metal disc. The only thing stamped on it was, "24k" and a verification mark. She asked, "Gold?"

The lizard nodded then said, "Enough to get you off the streets for a few weeks. Master suggests you use it for that purpose. In any case, it's yours now. Master would also offer you an indentured position on his staff, as a house manager."

Shaken, and suddenly feeling cold, Gina said, "Tell your master, 'Thanks for the handout.' I like to believe that I'm still better off out in the world." She started to stand up from the bench.

"Please no, Miss, don't get up. I must be going. Master will be leaving his meeting soon." The lizard walked away, down the path along one boundary of the small, pocket park. It paused to pull down the only blossom on a tired, old rose bush to its nose. It stood there for a moment, then released the rose and walked out of sight.

She saw it two weeks later; on the last morning before The Roundup. It was standing next to a well-dressed, distinguished-looking old man. The man was sitting on her bench. The imp-lizard had just handed the man a sandwich from a basket. The man noticed Gina and said something to the servant. It reached into the basket and pulled out a paper-wrapped sandwich and a bottle. It scurried downhill, across the trampled grass to meet her.

"Here, from Master," it said as it held up the sandwich and the beer to her. "Consider it rent payment for your bench space."

Gina accepted the lunch offered to her and sat down at the bench at the bottom of the park. She pulled out a bottle opener from a pocket and opened up that beer. The first sip was always the best one, in her opinion, so she savored it. The roast beef sandwich was the first one that she had tasted in years; it was heavenly.

While she was so engrossed, the imp-lizard had joined her on the bench. "I'm glad you like it. The spread is a new recipe I'm trying. Not having a human palate, I only have Master's opinion to work from. I think sometimes he claims to like something I made, just to be kind."

Gina took another sip as she looked at this lizard sitting next to her. Its eyes held a look bordering on adoration. That didn't make sense. "Why are you here? I turned your master down."

"Master understands this. Master also gives his servant opportunities to make friends."

"Friends?! Maybe you haven't noticed; people like your master call me 'derelict'."

Still looking up at her, the imp-lizard replied, "Maybe you haven't noticed; I see a beautiful soul within this shell."

"Are you coming on to me?!" Gina then realized that her mother had been right. The AI cores that TechAlive had been installing for so many years, that made non-human servants so interactive and life-like, were something else entirely. "This position your master offers. It doesn't include cloning me a fresh, human body, does it?"

"Correct, Miss. All of Master's indentured staff are of non-human registry. The contract is for life."

Ignoring her sandwich, Gina gulped down the rest of her beer. She looked up at the old man on the bench, at the top of the small hill, and told the imp-lizard, "That's fucking nuts."

The lizard took the empty bottle from Gina's hand and set it aside before it said, "You are running out of time, Miss. Master and I want you for who you are. No one else involved can claim that. Please come with us. You need to get off the streets."

"For who I am?! I'm human and the daughter of humans. That's who I am! How much of me will die as you drain me into an imp-lizard body? Can you even tell me that?!" Gina took a moment to calm herself, then asked, "Involved? Who else is involved in what?"

"Since public media was shut down two years ago, news no longer spreads very evenly," replied the lizard. "A new law passed, a while back. As of midnight tonight, all unregistered persons will be summarily declared non-human. Any of those persons not holding proof of prior claim are free for the taking. Tonight begins open season on derelicts."

Stunned, Gina dropped her sandwich in her lap. Tonight there would be no moon. If they shut down all the city lighting, as has happened in the past, the hunters would have every advantage.

The imp-lizard slid off the bench, reached for and carefully re-wrapped the sandwich, then set it on the bench next to her. It said, "I know you can't believe me right now, but I care. I will protect you if you ask. Accept Master's offer."

"Go away. Please." Gina felt hollow inside. Assuming this lizard wasn't lying, she had only a few choices left to her; all of them felt wrong. One of which would result in her spending the rest of her life looking out through eyes like those big, green ones staring up at her. *Please let there be another option.*

The imp-lizard dropped its gaze and picked up the bottle. It again looked up at Gina and said, "Best of luck to you. Stay safe," before it turned and quickly ran up the hill to join its master.

Gina pocketed the remaining sandwich, got up and walked away to continue her rounds.

It was sunset and Gina had located a good spot to sleep for the night. She was in the process of gathering bed materials when she saw her friend Shay running up to her.

Out of breath, Shay managed to say, "Gina. . . I saw Mr. Clean. . . today. . . He said we're. . . all being hunted. . . starting tonight."

"I know," replied Gina. "Where is he?"

Breathing easier now, Shay said, "I don't know. . . He said to meet him at The Triangle. . . Be there by eleven. I gotta go." Shay quickly walked out of sight; watching everything around her like a prey animal would. It was then that Gina fully realized that she and her friend truly were now prey.

Gina left her quiet alleyway and sought out one of the plain, numberless clocks that were scattered throughout the city. She had only a couple of hours to get there. She started walking in the direction of The Triangle.

The last clock she passed by read about ten-forty. She would make it on time as long as The Crew didn't find her first. She heard the tell-tale call of one of the dog pack. She hoped they were on someone else's trail. She didn't believe that The Crew would honor the scheduled start up time of midnight.

Gina ran onto the the small concrete clearing know locally as The Triangle; the paved-over lot from one old, flatiron building that had burned down, decades earlier. No windows faced this ersatz plaza. Any cameras that the building owners might install were quickly brought down and salvaged. This was as private an outdoor meeting place as was possible in the city. It was bordered by a series of short, thick concrete bollards; offering the occupants of The Triangle some protection from any errant vehicles.

Up ahead was the little lizard, leaning against one of those bollards. It was again wearing its harness and pouch, along with a small, sheathed knife. It was also wearing the communication headset. Behind Gina and closing fast was The Cleanup Crew. Gina stopped running a few meters from the lizard, The Crew practically on her heels.

Her pursuers stopped at a respectable distance from Gina and held an even greater distance away from the little guy. She saw that the indentured-human boss and the three ca-mans wore knives on their belts and carried heavy sticks. The human also carried multiple sets of zip-tie handcuffs. The two canids were unarmed, save for their formidable teeth and jaws.

The Crew boss said, "Look, imp-lizard. We have the rights to her."

The lizard answered, "Master Martin Boardman holds prior claim. She wears the claim chit. The clasp seal is unbroken."

"What claim chit?!" asked Gina.

"Your necklace, would you please show it to us?" asked the imp-lizard. As Gina slowly and fearfully pulled it out from beneath her ragged sweater, the imp-lizard said to the cleanup boss, "Scan it, please."

Cautiously, The Crew boss slowly walked around to face her. He pointed the scanner at the pendant; nothing. "I get nothing," replied the boss.

While Gina still held out the pendant, the imp-lizard aimed a small laser pen at the gem and it illuminated. Gina had seen this effect before. A sudden, bright and unpredictable light that would shine from it, but never last long. Now she knew what was going on.

The scanner beeped. Gina read its upside-down display, "Claim number 73Y618 current and valid. Martin Boardman."

The Crew boss put away his scanner and said, "So what? She's rare. You know it and I know it. Right now, I don't see much keeping us from taking her."

Ears down and tail tucked away, one of the ca-mans leaned in toward the boss and half-whispered, "I've heard that when you think you have an imp-lizard cornered and alone, that's when you find yourself surrounded. If this is one of Martin Boardman's lizards, we're screwed."

A hint of a smile crept across the imp-lizard's face. "I've heard that too."

Having caused them momentary pause, the imp-lizard said, "Miss Gina, you have a lot to take in and not much time to act on it. You're among the last of the free-roaming potentials. You are also still fertile and likely the last of your blood type in the city. You are valuable to at least three factions."

Gina managed one word, "What?!"

The imp-lizard held up a hand, stopping the further advance of The Crew boss toward Gina. "Before I delve into details, I need to inform you that a representative of a third faction will be arriving shortly. Miss Gina, you will recognize him. There may be some shooting involved."

About that time, a distant roar was heard. The roaring changed in pitch, sometimes suddenly. When the sound rose in pitch, it became louder.

The imp-lizard continued, "He's coming to fulfill your fantasy, Miss. If you let him, he will whisk you away to a house on the edge of a small settlement somewhere off the grid. There you will farm, maybe learn a trade. You will most certainly be used to strengthen their gene pool."

Still terrified, Gina found the courage to say, "If you haven't noticed, I'm a little past my prime."

The sound was getting louder. Whatever it was, it was closing in on them.

"That doesn't matter," replied the imp-lizard. "They won't risk losing you to natural birth but your DNA is worth every attempt to pass on. The first thing they'll do is stimulate your ovaries and harvest your remaining eggs. Those are too precious to humanity to risk letting any more go to waste."

"The Cleanup Crew wants you for many of the same reasons. Only with them you'll be rendered down to select DNA segments and raw growing media."

"Master offers you the best food available, the best of living conditions, a rewarding job and a long, healthy life."

Gina could see the source of the noise, now. It was a rusty, dilapidated antique car. One like she'd only seen in those old, 1960s movies. One of the four headlights flickered randomly. Blue smoke rolled out from underneath it and trailed behind until it formed a filmy haze, illuminated by the street lights. Its engine snarled as the car approached. The two canids in The Crew almost bolted and ran. The hand signal and glowering look from their boss held them in place, whimpering in fear.

Raising her voice above the sound of the approaching car, Gina said, "I'd be a slave, like you!"

The imp-lizard nodded its head.

The car pulled up near them on miss-matched tires. Gina noticed that at least one of them was cracked and had lost some chunks from the rubber tread. All of the window glass was gone. The openings had been covered with crisscrossed steel bars and capped in heavy steel screening.

Noet opened the driver side door and got out. He was wearing ski goggles, carried an antique, pump shotgun and had two hand grenades on his belt. Using the car as a shield, he first pointed the shotgun at the imp-lizard, who ducked behind the nearest bollard. Noet then pointed the shotgun at The Crew boss and said, "Step away from her. She's coming with me."

"See, Miss Gina?" said the lizard from behind cover. "I suspect that this man is not as damaged as he pretended to be. He managed to gain the trust and sympathy of you and your homeless friends, all while gathering personal information and tissue samples from each of you. Right now he's playing on your fantasies."

"You lying piece of shit!" exclaimed Noet. "Martin had me kidnapped and stuffed me into a rider core. He put it into my next shell, against my will. He programmed me to be a headcase."

The imp-lizard said, "I find this all very doubtful. If you can provide me with dates and times and where these crimes may have occurred, I'll see how they line up against Master's journal."

Noet sneered. "As close as you two are, I'm thinking you knew all about it. You probably helped." He looked at Gina and said, "It took me years but I managed to fight free of the programming that Martin installed. It was terrible. I was lost for a while, then blocked from telling anyone anything that I thought important for them to know. I couldn't tell you how I felt about you." He glanced upward for a moment then locked his eyes on Gina's.

Gina shifted her eyes from his desperate, 'I risked everything' gaze and quickly looked around her. The streets were empty. All bystanders were gone. Clearly no one wanted to be spotted as a witness. The faint wail of sirens could just be heard.

The imp-lizard put a hand to its ear and said, "The police will be here soon, Noet."

To Gina, it said, "You must decide now, Miss Gina. If you ask me for help, I will take you from here and you will have the life-long support and protection of Master Martin. Otherwise I will not approach or interfere. I can't speak for the others, here."

Gina paused for just a moment. The car sat there with its engine idling. It played a steady tap, tap, tap note from a bad valve lifter; blue smoke oozed out from under its belly. The boss started toward Gina. The boom of the shotgun blast echoed against the buildings surrounding The Triangle as The Crew boss fell with a ragged, bleeding hole in his side.

Quickly, Noet climbed back into the car. He opened the passenger door wide and yelled, "Gina, get in!"

Gina looked back at the lizard, who had re-emerged from behind the bollard. She could find no ill will in those eyes. She found sadness. She found disappointment. She found concern. Was it afraid of losing her or was it afraid for her? Both?

She looked inside the car; partially illuminated by the nearby streetlights. The interior was bare, rusted steel. The gauges were gone. Some old blankets covered the bare metal seat springs. There were holes in the floor and some of the smoke oozed up through them. Old, spare tires, batteries, boxes, and jugs of liquid filled the space behind that seat. Gina saw excitement in Noet's gaze. He was high on adrenaline, for sure. She also found confidence and expectation.

As Gina turned and ran the short distance and climbed into the car, she heard the lizard shout, "The offer stands. Just ask me for help!"

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The police had not given chase. Though that seemed to suit Noet just fine, Gina feared that they had gotten away much too easily. She shouted over the drone from the rotten, open exhaust pipe, "Don't you think it's odd that no one's chasing us?! That we're alone on this side of the road?!"

"No! They're happy to let us take ourselves out of the city; less fuss, less damage! They think they can just shut us down at the boundary towers and pick us up there!" yelled Noet. "This thing is built from the oldest, most primitive internal combustion technology I could find; lead-acid batteries, wire-wrapped coils, and contact points! No electronics; the emp towers can't stop it!"

As the loud, rusty, smoking car approached the towers, it activated a sign that read, "Stop within the next 500 meters or risk catastrophic vehicle and electronics failure." It shined brightly as they passed it by.

"No sense taking too many chances! Shutting down in 300, 200, 100, now!" Noet pushed in the clutch pedal and switched off the ignition circuit. For a short time the car was blessedly quiet with just some gear whine, the wind and the sound of tires rolling on the pavement to break the silence. Then a siren sounded and a bright strobe light flashed at them; the final warning just before the invisible pulse washed over the car and surrounding area.

"Hope it starts," said Noet as he switched on the ignition and engaged the clutch. The familiar, loud drone resumed with a jerk as they continued beyond the city's jurisdiction. They were eventually rejoined by traffic; most of it rushing up from behind them to pass, as Noet nursed the old car along.

For a couple of hours they had been driving away from the city, occasionally turning onto lesser and lesser traveled roads. They stopped once to refill the makeshift fuel tank from the jugs stored behind the seat. Sometime later they came upon a tee in the road. To the left, the road followed along a small canyon. Noet steered the car to the right and soon illuminated an old, rickety bridge that spanned the canyon. To Gina, it looked too dangerous to walk on, let alone drive a hunk of rusty iron over it.

Noet put his hand on hers and said, "Relax. It's built to look like that. It's strong where it has to be."

They crossed slowly, straight over the faded center line, and soon were beyond sight of any highway travelers. After a few more kilometers, they arrived at an old, large, ranch-style home with a nearby barn that leaned to the left. They stopped in front of the barn. The car's headlights shined on old, fading paint and weathered wood.

"Help me open these doors," said Noet. He handed a headlamp to Gina, got out of the car and reached for one of the barn doors.

Gina donned the headlamp and turned it on. She got out of the car and closed the car door. As she reached to pull open the other barn door, she asked, "Is the barn built to look like this, too?"

She got her answer as she looked inside. Lit by the car's headlights and her headlamp, the barn's frame was braced in this position and appeared to be quite sturdy. Parts of old cars were piled in two corners. Tools lay scattered across a work bench. The concrete floor was dirty and oil stained. Everything was covered in reddish dust.

Noet got into the car and drove it inside the barn. He shut down the loud, smoking engine and the lights, climbed out again and said, "Let's close this up and get you into the house." He carried the shotgun with him. The grenades were still on his belt.

They stepped onto the wooden porch in front of the house. Noet opened up a secret panel and entered a seven digit code while Gina watched. He then opened the door and flipped a light switch, just inside. The inside was clean and decorated in an antique style that suited the place. Somewhere out of sight, a grandfather clock counted time. Apparently, it was 3am.

Gina's head throbbed from the hours of smoke and noise. She was tired.

Noet seemed excited to show her around. As he turned on lights he said, "Over this way is the kitchen. There's plenty of canned and dried goods. For a while, we'll have to trade with neighbors for fresh meat and produce." He guided her into the living room, with its beautiful clock. "If you'd like to make any changes, just let me know." He led Gina down a hallway, past a door and through another door. He turned on the light. "This is your room; washroom through the other door. You can do anything you want here, too."

Gina asked, "Where's your room?" She pulled the headlamp from her head and handed it back to Noet.

As he took it, Noet replied, "Last door, down the other hall."

Gina saw happiness in those eyes. Underneath that was not a sense of relief the he had rescued someone he cared about; more a sense of victory over an opponent. Chalking it up to what Noet had been through, she dropped the thought for now and asked, "What's in the room next to me?"

"That's my father's old study. After he died, everything I didn't want to look at got piled up in there. I remember it smelling like cigars." Noet walked the few steps over to the door and opened it. Before it cleared the jamb, the door clunked against something solid on the other side. He took a whiff. "Hmm, no cigars. It finally faded."

Noet turned to look at Gina. "Something fell down against the door and there's nothing in there I need, so I ignore it. If you want, we can clear it out together. Maybe you can make use of some of it." He closed the door.

"Didn't like your dad much, huh?" asked Gina.

"I liked him just fine, I suppose. I just never knew him very well," replied Noet as he stifled a yawn. "I should let you get to bed. Maybe you should take off those clothes and dump them outside before you go in."

He ducked into the room and brought out a robe for Gina to change into, then walked toward the other end of the house. "Water's hot. Goodnight."

Gina understood. She didn't want to bring any hitchhikers into that pretty bedroom anymore than Noet did. She undressed there in the hallway and put on the robe. She carried her clothes out on the front porch and dropped them on a chair.

She walked directly back into her washroom and opened up the shower valves. Gina drowned the robe in the water before she kicked it into a corner of the shower for the time being. She scrubbed until her skin was tender and until her scalp tingled. She got out and dried off with a fresh, fluffy towel from the rack, brushed her hair, then searched the large closet until she found the flannel pajamas.

Gina then raided the kitchen and came back to her room with a bowl filled with crackers, some cheese, a packet of dried apples and a partial bottle of red wine. She saw the screen against the wall. A place this old might have a private movie collection somewhere. She would ask Noet about it, tomorrow. Her hunger satisfied, and accompanied by a rare and pleasant buzz, she soon drifted off beneath the thick, warm comforter.

She woke just after dawn. She had heard the squeal of a door being slowly opened. It sounded like it was right next door. She quietly moved to her door and listened. Nothing. She opened her door and peered out, down the hallway. It was empty but the study door was open. She walked those few steps to the doorway and peered in. It was dark in there. The windows, seen from outside, were blocked. Gina found a switch and flipped it. Illuminated by the light, her face contorted in horror as she choked back a scream.

There was a laboratory in there; full of equipment. On one of the tables lay a body. Wires and tubes were attached to its head and limbs. It looked vaguely human but it was contorted, bent. It looked partially melted. It wasn't breathing. Gina turned off the light.

She rushed back into her room and frantically searched for something to wear. She soon found a tee shirt, some faded blue jeans, a matching denim jacket, and sturdy shoes; all in her size. This man knew her too well. Her terror building, she quickly dressed and quietly walked out of the house. Just as soon as she cleared that wooden porch, she ran to the barn. She expected to be caught at any second as she opened one door and rushed inside.

*How hard could it be?* She slid behind the steering wheel and shut the door. *The right pedal makes it go faster, the middle one stops it. The left one you use when you move this stick.*

Gina flipped on the switch, just as she had seen Noet do. She then pushed down and released the left pedal. Nothing happened. She tried it a few times more. Still nothing. If she couldn't make this car move, she was trapped here.

Next to the switch was a heavy button. Gina pushed it. Something growled and the car leapt forward to crash into the tool boxes in front of it. It stopped moving. Frantically, Gina looked at the stick and

selected the only position Noet had not used in front of her, marked 'R'. She pushed the button again. The engine roared to life and, tires spinning, the car backed out of the barn; shattering the one closed barn door in its path. Gina turned the wheel and the car violently spun around in the dirt driveway. Its engine quit again.

Noet was running from the house in nothing but his pants. "Gina, what happened? What's wrong? Please don't go!" His gaze conveyed confusion and anger.

Noet had almost reached the driver door when Gina stepped on the left pedal, shoved the stick in position 'I', pushed the button again, mashed the right pedal to the floor and released the left pedal. The tires peppered Noet with dirt and rocks as the car drew away from him in a cloud of smoke and dust. Further down that road, Gina found second gear.

Gina's escape seemed assured. She even managed to talk herself across the bridge and steer the car back onto the old highway. Shortly afterward, the engine lost power and began to sputter. Gina stopped the car in the road, where its engine quit. She searched behind the front seat for more alcohol; the fuel that Noet had distilled for the trip. She found only two full jugs. Based on their trip out, she knew that there was not near enough fuel to get her back to the city. *Still, it'll get me further from that madman than I am now.* She poured all but a little of the remaining alcohol into the makeshift fuel tank. She then poured the rest into a partially-emptied bottle of water and gave it a quick shake before taking a swig. It burned going down. Even then it tasted better than the home-shine that some of her friends used to make. The car started for her once more. She was beginning to get a feel for the clutch as she worked her way up into high gear.

Only a dozen or so kilometers further down the road, the car's engine quit for the last time. She had seen no one on this road but her. She might have missed her turn. Having just finished off the bottle she'd mixed earlier, she was feeling braver than usual. With no clear reason to stay put, she loaded some bottles of water into a ratty old pack and started walking.

The alcohol-induced bravery had worn off a few kilometers back. Gina was tired, sunburned and hungry. She had just finished drinking the last bottle of water in her pack. She was lost and the sun would soon be setting.

A sound from behind Gina startled her. A self-driving freight truck was pulling off to the side of the road, behind her. From its loudspeaker, "Freight unit 3449817c recorded a vehicle standing in the road behind you. Do you require assistance?"

"Yes," replied Gina. "I need a ride to the city."

"This unit carries no passengers but will relay a message for you. Ready."

Quickly, Gina said, "Seeking Martin Boardman. Gina wears Martin's claim number 73Y618 and asks for your servant's help. Will wait at current location."

Within a minute, the vehicle relayed, "From house of Martin Boardman: Will arrive by car to pick you up as soon as possible. You are now under Master Martin's protection. Look up."

Gina looked skyward and saw a small dot, moving in a triangle pattern. She was no longer alone but she felt more exposed than ever.

As the freight truck slowly accelerated down the road, Gina buttoned her new jacket closed and sat down on a rock. She hugged herself and waited.

When the modern, self-driving limousine turned into the flat spot on the side of the road, in front of her, Gina stood up. When the rear door opened and the imp-lizard stepped out to greet her, Gina hesitated for a moment. The cooling breeze reminded her again that she needed this. She had asked for help. All it would cost her was her freedom and this tired body. She had been free to be hungry, cold, scared, and lonely for far too long. She walked over to the car and let the lizard help her inside. She thought, *It's so warm in here.*

\* \* \*

She looked up at the ceiling. It looked like a meadow. *Who paints flowers on a ceiling?* Her head was strapped down as well as her arms and legs. She did not like this part at all.

The kindly old man, Martin, had finally talked her down and convinced her that it wouldn't hurt. He had explained to her that they just didn't want her to accidentally shake anything loose. Martin had just finished his preparations. Smiling, he stepped out of view to continue with the transfer checklist.

The lizard stepped up into view and moved an errant lock of hair from in front of one of her eyes. "Miss Gina, you will doze off here and wake up to a brand new life. It'll feel like only seconds have passed, I promise." There was genuine compassion in that gaze.

Attempting a smile, Gina said, "I don't even know your name."

"My name is Babe, Miss Gina." A small hint of a grin lit up its face.

Gina's smile no longer forced, she said, "You'll be there when I wake up?"

Babe's eyes sparkled with excitement and anticipation. "Of course! I so look forward to seeing your new smile for the first time. The family will love you."

Out of view, Martin said, "One last question, Gina. How would you describe your favorite outfit?"

Gina smiled. "The one I was wearing on my last drive through the country. You can never go wrong with denim."

End