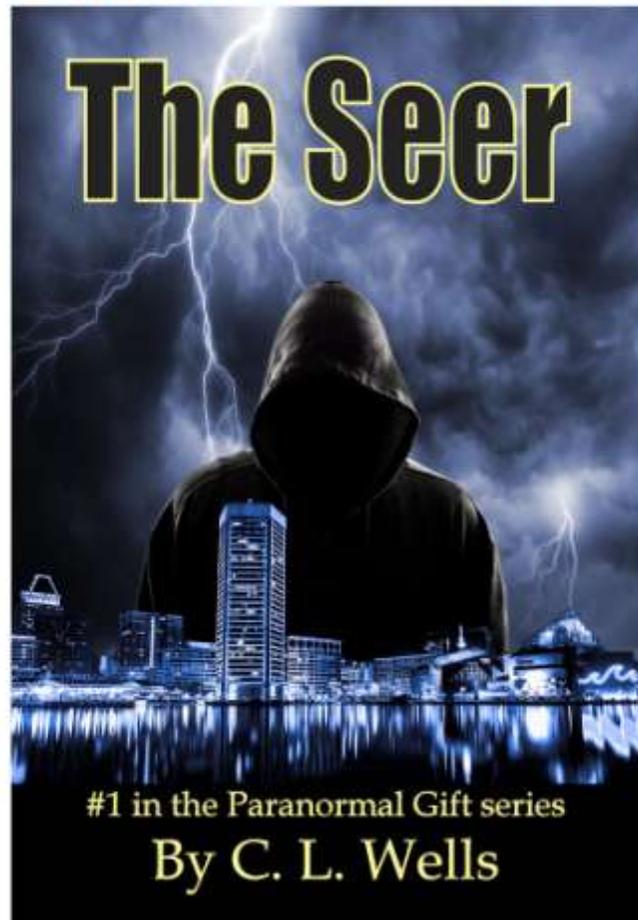


Domestic Bliss

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

the police arrived. At least she didn't have to worry about anyone else's safety. Janet was only a robot, after all.

She waited several minutes, hearing her pulse beat behind her ears until a knock on the door made her jump.

"Garden City Police, we had a call about a prowler who tried to break in?"

Janet turned and looked up at Sariah. "Shall I let them in?"

"Yes," Sariah replied as she hurried down the stairs.

Janet opened the door wide and stood back as Sariah reached the bottom.

"Thank God you're here."

"Sure, is everything o.k.?" the officer asked.

"For now, but earlier a man named Jerry Baldachi came by and started banging on my door and demanding that I let him in. I'm seeking a restraining order against him. He assaulted me in the parking lot at my workplace yesterday. I already filed a police report for that."

"O.k., o.k., so you two are the only witnesses?"

"Yes... well, Janet is actually a robot," Sariah replied.

"A what?" the officer asked, looking at Janet with disbelief. "She... is a robot?" he asked, pointing his finger in Janet's direction.

"I have an audio recording of the event if that would be helpful," Janet replied.

"O.k. This I gotta hear," the officer replied, somewhat perplexed.

Janet replayed the audio of the conversation between herself, Sariah, and Jerry while the stunned officer listened. When the audio completed playing, he asked her to play it again, this time recording it on his tablet computer.

"That's great," he said when the audio completed for the second time, and then he looked Janet up and down as if she was a three-headed goat at a freak show. "She does *not* look like a robot. I mean, we have one that delivers the mail at the station, but it doesn't look like her. Wow. Go figure."

"So, Officer," Sariah began, trying to bring the focus back to the subject at hand, "I'm genuinely concerned that he might come back and try to break in."

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’m going to call this in; then we’ll have an officer stationed outside your house for the rest of the night. No problem. I mean, technically, he hasn’t broken any laws or anything, but I understand you’re concerned and we’ll have someone here for the rest of the night. You can rest easy about that.”

“Thank you; I appreciate that,” Sariah replied.

True to his word, the officer remained outside of Sariah’s door until a second officer relieved him about an hour later. Meanwhile, Sariah tried to go back to reading her book, but was so frazzled by Jerry’s visit that she couldn’t get back into it. She poured herself three fingers of scotch instead. A few drinks later, and once she confirmed that the police were all set to watch her condominium for the night, she went to bed.

* * * * *

Jerry was fuming after he left Sariah’s place. She couldn’t just dump him like that. They were *made* for each other. Why couldn’t she see that yet? He could have *made* her see that if she had just let him in. He was sure of it. But then she had called the cops. Well, he knew how this game was played. He would lay low until the police stopped watching the house – which would probably be by sometime tomorrow – and then he would go back, break into Sariah’s condo, and force her to talk with him. *Then* she would see the light. He was sure she wanted to be with him; she was just playing hard to get.

He parked his car outside of his gym and went inside to work out. He needed to blow off some steam. Staying for a good two hours, he started out on the heavy bag for half an hour, then moved on to the swimming pool, and finished up in the sauna. It was dark by the time he went back out to his car.

The gym was built inside the shell of a reclaimed factory building from the turn of the century. The red brick exterior gave a retro-chic feel to the place. In keeping with the whole ‘re-use, don’t replace’ ethos, they had turned the alleyway between the old building and the one next door into a one lane one-way street. The second lane had

been repurposed into a line of parallel parking spots for their patrons. Jerry always parked in the last space if he could, so he could head straight out onto the road behind the gym without having to wait for anyone else to get out of his way.

He hated it when people got in his way.

As he walked along the poorly lit alleyway to his car, he heard someone walking behind him. By the time he was within a car-length of his vehicle, the pace of the person behind him had picked up. He glanced sideways to see who it was as he took out his key fob and hit the open door button. He saw a guy dressed in all black, wearing a hoodie and gloves, and with some sort of scarf covering his face. The man grabbed him, spun him around, and pushed him hard up against the side of his car.

“Leave the girl alone,” the guy said, his voice deep and gravelly.

“Whoa, what’s up, man? I don’t know who you think I am, but I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jerry replied with his hands up in mock surrender. He sized the guy up as he spoke. Five-nine, five-ten maybe, a little on the lean side, no weapon in either hand. Jerry was six three and in very good shape at one hundred and ninety pounds. He was sure he could take this guy.

“I’m talking about Sariah Delphi. You’re done. Stay away from her,” the guy replied.

“Sure, sure,” Jerry replied, and then stepped forward, taking a swing at the guy’s head. Jerry was no stranger to the occasional fight, and he usually won. He had even made it to the final round of the Garden City Toughest Man Contest a few years back before being eliminated by a semi-pro MMA fighter. But the black-clad figure who was standing in front of him moved out of the way of his punch with astonishing speed, and all Jerry hit was air.

In the next instant, Jerry received a hard hit directly to the solar plexus. He couldn’t remember the last time he had been hit so hard. As he doubled over, unable to breathe for several seconds, the masked individual grabbed his hair, pulled his head back, and then leaned down close to his ear and said, “You heard me. Stay away from her before something worse happens to you.”

After uttering his threat, the masked man released Jerry's hair and then ran quickly around the corner and out of sight. Jerry stayed doubled-over for another minute before he was finally able to get into his car. He drove around the area looking for the guy who had assaulted him, not sure what he would do if he found him. *Run him over with my car*, he thought to himself, knowing full well that the car's navigator wouldn't allow that to happen. He scanned the area on both sides of the street, but never saw anyone who matched the description of his assailant. After two more passes around the block, he went home for the night.

Chapter 4 – Revelations

Waking up with a hangover was not the best way to start out a workday. Sariah stumbled into the kitchen for a light breakfast consisting of a tall glass of orange juice, two aspirin, and a single slice of toast – make that a single *bite* of toast. She soaked in the shower for ten minutes too long and didn't have time to make her lunch. Then, remembering that Janet was available for the task, Sariah had her prepare a lunch while she got dressed. It was waiting on the credenza in the foyer when she came back downstairs to head off for work – thank God for domestic servants.

On the way out the door, she tossed her dirty clothes into the laundry bin, noticing that her black hoodie and jogging pants had been put into the basket. She didn't recall wearing them recently, but thought little more about it as she was already running late for work. She asked Janet to wash clothes for her as she dashed out the door to her car.

Tom, her lawyer, called her as she was on the way to work.

“Good morning, Tom,” she answered as his face popped up on the screen.

“Hi, Sariah. I have some good news and some bad news.”

Sariah's heart sank a little. “Good news first,” she replied.

“We have a remote video hearing with a judge for the restraining order at 3 p.m. today. You'll need to be online to answer any questions the judge may have.”

“O.k., great. Oh, I hadn't thought about calling you yet, but Jerry came to my place last night and demanded that I let him in. He beat on the door so hard I thought he might break in.”

“You're serious?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you o.k.?”

“Yeah, I'm o.k. I called the police, and they put a uniformed officer outside my condo all night.”

“Well, I’ll need a copy of the police report ASAP. This will really bolster our case with the judge. Can you send that to me now?”

“Yeah, hold on,” Sariah replied, and then tapped several keys on her phone.

“O.k. You should have it now.”

“Great. Now for the not-so-good news.”

“Don’t tell me. He’s the son of a senator?” Sariah asked.

“No, nothing so glamorous, I’m afraid. It seems this isn’t Jerry’s first run-in with domestic violence. His former ex-girlfriend filed a restraining order on him about two years ago after they broke up.”

“Isn’t that good for our case?” Sariah interjected.

“Well, let me finish. She supposedly left town, but has never been seen or heard from since.”

“So... is she dead?” Sariah asked.

“The police never found a body, but her parents still haven’t heard from her. They investigated Jerry, but found no evidence of foul play, and with no body, they didn’t have enough evidence to prosecute him. The case is still open.”

Sariah said nothing for several seconds. “Oh my God...”

“Yeah. Sariah, this guy probably killed the poor girl... and you could be next on this psycho’s list. You should probably consider getting a gun.”

“How?”

“Well, I’ll email you the paperwork. It normally takes six months; then there’s the ten thousand dollar bond you have to put up – assuming, of course, you pass the background check. You don’t have any parking tickets or felonies within the past six years, do you? I mean, they are *really* strict on that sort of thing in Garden City.”

“Tom, when is the last time you heard of someone getting a permit to carry a gun who wasn’t a police officer?”

“...I know it’s a long shot, but...”

"I could be dead before the background check gets done..." Tears formed in her eyes as she sat in silence, wondering if she was going to be the next missing person on Jerry's ex-girlfriend list.

"You could always go for a Taser permit. Those go through more quickly - maybe two months."

"Yeah. Send me the paperwork for both. If I'm still alive in two months, maybe it will help."

"Sariah..." Tom let out a long sigh. "Look, I'm doing the best I can here. I wish there were more I could do."

"Yeah. I know you're doing all you can, Tom, thanks."

"I'll send you the link to the secure conference website for the hearing today, o.k.?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"Alright. Chin up, kid; see you then."

Sariah could feel a wave of depression beginning to creep up her back, trying to swallow her brain in its deadly maw. She'd battled depression before, even going on medication for a while, but she hadn't been able to think straight on the meds, so she had stopped. Her mother had emailed her a copy of the Lord's Prayer once, thinking it might help her. Even though Sariah wasn't convinced that Jesus could answer her prayers, it had seemed to calm her down. And if there *was* a God in heaven, she could sure use His help right now.

She thumbed through her email folders on her phone until she found the prayer and opened it up, and then read it aloud.

"Our Father,
Who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,

On earth, as it is in Heaven,
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us,
Lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil..."

She couldn't read any further. Tears started to run down her cheeks. Then she prayed, *really* prayed, for maybe the first time since her mother had stopped praying with her at bedtime when she'd been nine or ten years old. "God... please deliver me from evil..."

* * * * *

By the end of the day, Sariah was feeling much better. As soon as she had arrived at her desk, there had been more rush work to be done for the traffic drone updates. That had kept her busy until lunch time, which she'd used to fill out the forms required to obtain the Taser and handgun permits. Three o'clock had rolled around, and there had been the video conference with the judge, which she'd been able to take in her office. After Tom's more than adequate presentation, the judge had only had one question for her. "Do you feel your physical well-being is being threatened by Jerry Baldachi?" to which she gave a resounding and enthusiastic, "Yes," in response. The judge subsequently issued the restraining order, and she now had a copy on her phone to show to any police officer, as needed. She wondered how Jerry was going to react when he received notice of the restraining order. He was probably going to be upset; the thought made her smile.

It felt empowering to be moving, busy with proactive tasks to address the problem, even if the Jerry issue was still in play. At 6:00 p.m., she clocked out for the day and headed to her car, having stayed a bit late to make up some time that she had used for the video conference with the judge. Per her request, a security guard escorted

her to her car. There was no sign of Jerry, but after the revelations and experiences of the past twenty-four hours, Sariah wasn't taking any chances.

Once she was safely ensconced in her vehicle and headed back home, she dialed Jasmine.

"Hey, Jaz. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing good, girlfriend. How's the situation with your crazy ex?"

Sariah filled Jasmine in on the evening festivities from the night before, as well as the news concerning the gun applications and the restraining order.

"Well, I'm glad you have the restraining order, but I wouldn't trust that to save you. You need a piece."

"Really. Do you *know* somebody who could get me something to use while I wait for my permit - I mean, an actual *gun*?" Sariah had whispered the word 'gun' like there was someone sitting right next to her whom she didn't want to hear what she was saying.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. The normally festive Jasmine sounded the most serious that Sariah had ever heard her when she responded. "You don't have anyone else in the car with you, do you?"

"No."

"You for real now? I mean it. No one else is listenin' or anything?"

"No, Jaz, I'm telling you the truth."

"O.k... I can help you out. It may take me a day or so, but I know a guy."

"How much?"

"It won't cost you a thing. You're my friend, and I care about you. Like I said, us girls gotta stick together."

Sariah felt like a weight had just been lifted off of her shoulders. "Jaz... you are the best."

"You know it, girl. You're gonna owe me a steak dinner cooked by that little miss robot thing the next time I come over."

"You got it. Prime rib and the best bottle of wine they have at the market."

“Alright, now we’re talkin’.”

Chapter 5 – A Most Dangerous Game

Once she arrived home, Sariah walked quickly to the front door, glancing over her shoulder at least twice. She was so nervous that she almost dropped her keys before finally managing to open the door, and inhaled sharply when she saw Janet standing a few feet away.

“I’m sorry, did I frighten you?” Janet asked.

“No... yes... well... never mind,” Sariah replied disconcertedly as she punched the ‘lock door’ button on the house key fob. The door slid silently shut and locked itself.

“I have completed the laundry as per your instructions. I have also vacuumed and swept all of the rooms. I found some keys under the bed, and I put them on the dresser.”

“Thanks. Can you make me a turkey club sandwich and pour me a glass of wine? I’m going to go change out of these clothes.”

“Certainly.”

Janet turned and began walking obediently towards the kitchen as Sariah walked upstairs to her bedroom. A quick scan of the refrigerator revealed that they were out of spicy mustard – one of the key ingredients Sariah liked on her turkey club sandwiches. Janet’s decision algorithms determined that in order to adequately fulfill Sariah’s request, she would need to obtain the mustard. She quickly left the kitchen and went out the front door, beginning a casual jog down to the corner store.

Jerry Baldachi watched the front door of Sariah’s condo from behind a row of hedges as the door suddenly opened and a figure – not Sariah – began jogging down the sidewalk. He had taken off of work today and had been surveilling the house since around 3 p.m., waiting for Sariah to be home alone. Now was the time. Her new boyfriend, or whomever she had sent to beat him up, didn’t appear to be around. Her new roommate had just left for who-knew-where, but she was gone, nonetheless. It wouldn’t take long to do what he had come here to do.

One last look around confirmed no one was walking their dog or otherwise loitering around to see him as he approached. He slipped on a pair of gloves and a ski mask, and then picked up the sledgehammer he had brought with him before walking quickly towards the front door.

Sariah was looking forward to the glass of wine. She had never been a heavy drinker, but with everything going on with Jerry, she was going to give herself permission to have more than her usual single glass tonight. She had taken off her work clothes and slipped into some jogging pants and a comfortable sweatshirt, trading her flats in for some slip-on tennis shoes. As she descended the stairs, the front door suddenly burst open. Wood splinters shot through the air from the impact of something from outside, and a black-clad figure in a ski mask stepped through the front door.

“Surprise,” the man said as he caught Sariah’s terrified gaze right before she turned and began running up the stairs.

She immediately recognized Jerry’s voice. *He’s here to kill me*, she thought. “Janet! Call 9-1-1!” Sariah shouted as she ran, unaware that her robotic companion wasn’t home. She had just stepped into her bedroom and was about to shut the door when Jerry’s arm shot through, pushing her back and onto the floor. She looked up to see him towering over her in the doorway. He quickly knelt down on the floor as she tried to back away, grabbing her arms and pinning them down, leaning his weight onto her wrists so that she couldn’t move her arms. She tried to move her legs so that she could somehow get her feet positioned to push him off of her, but he had leaned in too close.

“A restraining order, a new boyfriend... you act like you don’t want me in your life anymore, Sariah. O.k., I get it. But if I can’t have you, then I guess nobody will!” Jerry moved his hands quickly to Sariah’s throat and began squeezing. She hit his hands and arms as hard as she could, but was no match for his size and strength. She then reached towards his face to try and scratch him or gouge at his eyes, but he simply

lifted his chin up and was easily out of her reach. "What's the matter? Got nothin' to say?" he asked mockingly.

Sariah began to lose consciousness. As her vision began to fade, she struggled desperately to break free, but to no avail. Suddenly, Jerry began to move backwards, letting go of her throat. She gasped for air and watched as Jerry appeared to levitate momentarily before being snatched out of the room like he was flying. Propping herself up on one arm and rubbing her throat, she saw Janet holding a struggling Jerry over the balcony railing by his ankle. Janet turned and looked at her.

"Are you alright? Do you need an ambulance?"

"Call 9-1-1," Sariah croaked, her voice weak and shaking.

"Yes, of course. I will call 9-1-1."

"Let me go, you freak!" Jerry yelled as he struggled to try and pull himself up over the railing and back onto the landing. His fingers were barely able to reach the spindles from his inverted position.

"Yes, of course," Janet said, immediately releasing his ankle.

"Nooooo!" he yelled as he fell to the foyer floor below. Sariah heard a thud as Jerry hit the floor, and then silence.

Janet looked over the railing for a few moments before turning back to Sariah. "The intruder is now deceased. From my preliminary scan, the cause of death appears to be a broken vertebrae. I have called 9-1-1. Do you require any medical attention, Sariah?"

Sariah stared at Janet, stunned. Finally, she managed to say, "No... Thank you."

"I have purchased the spicy mustard you like from the store. I will now make your turkey club sandwich. It will be ready in five minutes." Janet bent down towards the floor and picked up a bottle of mustard that Sariah hadn't seen before, and began walking down the stairs.

* * * * *

When the police arrived, a shaken Sariah was sitting at the kitchen table with a half-empty bottle of wine next to her and an uneaten sandwich on a plate in front of her. Janet was standing at her side. One of the officers was the same man who had answered the previous call. He checked Jerry's pulse and confirmed he was dead before walking into the kitchen area where Sariah was seated.

"You o.k.?"

Sariah said nothing, but nodded her head up and down.

"Geez, this is a mess," a second officer said as he examined the busted front door and looked at Jerry lying in the foyer. He walked over to the body and began frisking it, removing a wallet. "Jerry Baldachi - you know him?" he asked, looking over in Sariah's direction.

Sariah nodded her head up and down, then responded with a weak, "Yeah."

"Yeah, the same guy tried to break in last night. I took the call," the first officer replied. He turned back to Sariah. "So what happened?"

Sariah looked over at Jerry's body, then up at the balcony, and then over at Janet, catching Janet's eyes for a brief moment before she responded. "He broke in while Janet was out at the store. He chased me up to the bedroom and started choking me. I managed to push him off of me with my feet. He staggered back and fell over the railing."

The officer looked over at Janet. "So, did you get back in time to get any audio or video of the attack?"

Sariah looked up at Janet, holding her breath. Janet looked at Sariah, then back at the officer. "No. As she stated, I was at the store and only arrived afterwards."

* * * * *

Over the next few hours, the police taped off the crime scene, took a ton of pictures and video, collected some evidence from the bedroom, balcony, and foyer, and then removed the body. After the police had finally left, Janet shut the door and placed a kitchen chair against it so that it wouldn't blow open until it could be repaired.

She went into the den where Sariah had been sitting almost the entire time, slowly polishing off the bottle of wine she had begun a few hours earlier. Sariah watched her walk into the room and sit down next to her on the couch.

“Why did you lie about what happened?” Janet asked.

Sariah looked at Janet, studying her eyes and face. “Amazing... it’s like you really are self-aware.”

“I’m confused. Why did you answer my question like that?” Janet queried.

“I wasn’t answering your question. I’m just astonished at how human you seem to be. It must be the artificial intelligence software, but it’s so life-like.” Sariah took another sip of wine and then sat the glass down on the coffee table. “I lied because I wasn’t sure what they would do to you if I told them... if I told them it was you who dropped Jerry from the balcony...”

“But he asked me to release him.”

“Yes, but... when you released him, he fell to his death. Some humans may think that you intended to kill him. That would make them afraid. Humans are often afraid of what they don’t understand, and right now, you are definitely something they don’t understand. It would be best if they didn’t know it was you – that’s all I’m saying.”

Janet looked down at the floor and appeared to be pondering everything Sariah had just said.

“Now that you know why *I* lied, I’d like to know why *you* lied. Your base programming doesn’t contain any algorithms that would allow you to lie.”

“No, but the learned intelligence algorithms allow me to determine probable outcomes weighed against the learned patterns of behavior and perceived desires of my primary user. I calculated that your desired outcome from your act of deceit would be less likely to occur if I were to tell the truth about something you had just lied about. I lied to ensure a higher probability that your desired outcome would be achieved.”

“Wow. This is too much to think about with the buzz I’ve got,” Sariah responded.

Janet stood to her feet. “I’m going to go and begin cleaning the foyer now.”

“Yeah, o.k. Sounds good to me. I think I’m ready to eat now. Can you bring me a yogurt or something? That sandwich has been out for hours, and it’s probably bad by now.”

“Yes,” Janet replied. She went into the kitchen and brought back an unopened yogurt container with a spoon, handing both items to Sariah before starting to walk out of the room. She paused at the doorway. Without turning around, she began to speak.

“After Jerry attempted to break in the first time, I began researching him on the internet.”

Sariah took a bite of the yogurt as she listened.

“I found out about his previous girlfriend and learned that she is still missing. Using all known facts from the case and what I discovered about Jerry’s behavior, I calculated that there is a 98.6 percent chance that Jerry killed her. When Jerry was attacking you, I calculated a 100% chance that he would kill you if I did not intervene. If he had lived, there was an 86.7 percent chance that he would have been released from police custody on bail and a 99.7 percent chance that he would have tried to kill you again... and succeeded.”

Sariah stopped eating, the spoon still in her mouth. Janet turned to look at Sariah.

“It was no accident that Jerry died today, Sariah... I meant to kill him.”

Janet turned around and walked out of the room.

* * * * *

If you would like to be notified when the next book in this series is released, please use the free book link (<http://fictionwithamission.com/go/free-book>) and sign up for the reader’s mailing list. I promise not to spam you or give your email address to anyone else. As an added bonus, once you sign up for the reader’s list, you will receive a link to download *The Seer* for free.

The following is a preview chapter of *The Testament Stone: A Megyn Keith Paranormal Mystery* by author C.L. Wells:

Prologue

Sunday, July 3rd

The cool evening breeze felt refreshing as Alana Roberts stepped into a small clearing in the forest and closed her eyes. She had learned over the years that it was much easier to tap into the eco-net when she wasn't distracted with what she saw in the physical realm. As she stretched her hands out to her sides, palms up, and began to concentrate, the green pendant around her neck began to glow. Soon the breeze, which had been very mild when she had entered the woods, began to increase in intensity, swirling around her. The ubiquitous leaves that had been resting on the forest floor moments before began to circle her gently in the air. The branches on the surrounding trees started swaying rhythmically. She turned her face towards the sky as the wind lifted her slowly off of the ground until she was levitating almost a foot above the earth.

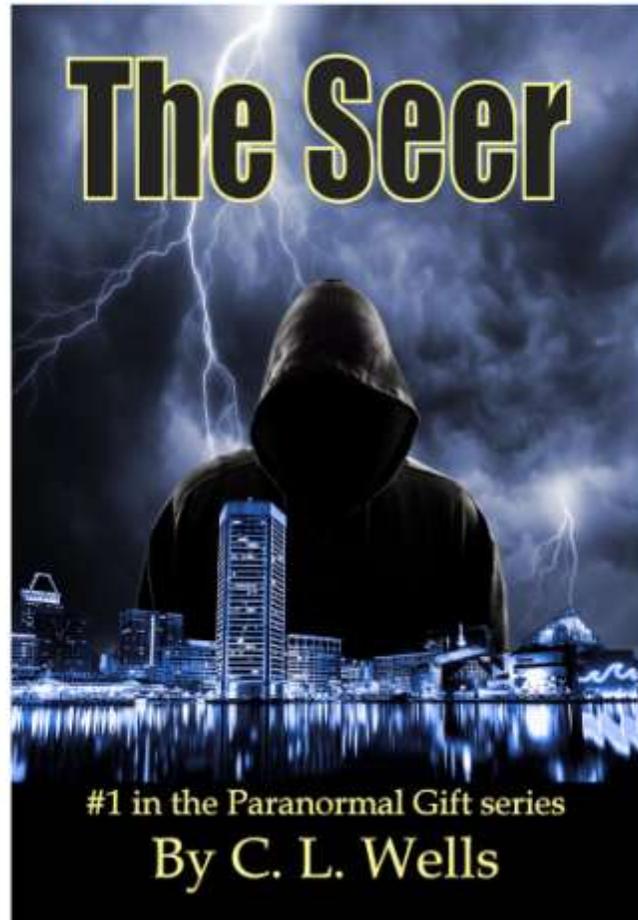
She was now in full communication mode, listening and watching in her mind's eye to see what the forest would show her. A month ago, she had seen a man trapped under an ATV that had rolled back on him when he'd been ascending a steep bank. He had managed to get out from under it, but the initial fall had broken his leg, and he wasn't able to push the ATV upright and get back home. Alana had been able to determine exactly where he was and had called the police so that rescue workers could find him.

Over the years, she had helped dozens of people. There had been lost children, hikers trapped by a snow storm, injured campers, and even lost animals whose owners were distraught when their beloved companions had gone missing. She had helped all of them with her unique gift.

Her gift allowed her to sense danger anywhere within the contiguous forest surrounding her or in the immediate vicinity of the forest for miles around. The plants themselves served as kind of ecological network and provided her with images and impressions that could be interpreted by her own senses. Her communion with the forest indicated no hint of trouble tonight, however. She smiled to herself, satisfied that everything was calm in the surrounding forest. Slowly coming back out of her trance-like state, she was lowered back to the ground. The light emanating from the pendant began to recede until it once more appeared to be simply a beautiful piece of jewelry hanging around her neck.

Being the bearer of the Testament Stone wasn't always easy. There were times when she found it hard to balance her responsibilities in her 'normal' life with those of being a guardian with paranormal abilities. But she had learned to take life one day at a time over the years, taking both the successes and the occasional failures in stride. She was, after all, only a human steward of the Testament Stone - one of many in a long line of stewards stretching back hundreds of years.

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* * * THE END * * *

Thank You

If you enjoyed this story, I would appreciate a short review on the site where you downloaded this book. If you know of others who would enjoy reading this book, please pass the word along. Your participation is greatly appreciated. Thank you!

Acknowledgements

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About the Author

C.L. Wells lives with his family in Charleston County, South Carolina. His hobbies include writing paranormal, mystery, and crime/adventure fiction, kayaking, paddle boarding, hiking, and bicycling.

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