

# A Kinder World (Dystopia TG Preg)

**By FoxFaceStories**

## **A Commission for AI**

*In the future, the world has become a quiet dystopia, where one's occupation is all that matters, and genuine human connection is almost entirely lost. Benjamin Barnes is one of those who has become just another cog in the grand machine, but his life is turned upside down when a young girl claiming to be his daughter from the future suddenly appears, and especially so when she uses future technology to turn him into a woman!*

## **A Kinder World**

### **Part One: A Less Caring World**

*Work is Kindness. Work is Good. Work Will Make You Earn Your Food.*

Benjamin Barnes gazed wearily at the slogan above the computer on his desk. It was one of many that required daily recital by all employees of DynaCo, the Corporation that all members of their new nation worked for, ever since the Great Corporate Wars had finally ended with the decisive splintering of what had once been called the United States of America. There were other slogans too, and with a sigh, he recited each of them in turn. The cameras were watching, after all. They were always watching.

“The Line Must Go Up.”

“Life is All About the Hustle.”

“Remember, Profit is a Prophet.”

And finally, the most important one of all: “Keep the Shareholders Happy.”

The camera above Benjamin's head whirred and clicked. A small light on his monitor turned tangerine orange, which made the young twenty four year old man frown. There were twenty seven colour gradients ranking the enthusiasm of employee recital of the company slogans. Tangerine orange was in the lower band of enthusiasm, though at least it wasn't *Rust* orange. Rust orange was just a step above medium red, and once you were in the red, most of your perks disappeared because otherwise you'd be in gunmetal grey and straight onto midnight black, which gave you a rating of one hundred percent employee dissatisfaction. If you were *that* dissatisfied, you were out of a job.

*Work Will Make You Your Earn Your Food.*

Ben swallowed, put on an insincere smile, and recited the words again, this time with false cheer.

“The Line Must Go Up!”

“Life is All About the Hustle!”

“Remember, Profit is a Prophet!”

“Keep the Shareholders Happy!”

Another white, another click. The light dinged again. Butter Yellow. An improvement, but still not green. It would have to do for now. An employee who wasted three attempts on recitation could be written up for *Wasting Valuable Company Time*. The Line, holiest of holies, *had* to go up. Shared needed improving, the C-Suite needed their bonuses, and always, always, *always*, the company needed to expand, though Ben was never quite sure how, after the Corporate Wars, a company that controlled the entire eastern seaboard could possibly expand further. Unless, as the whispering rumours carried, DynaCo planned to reignite them and begin dismantling the Alliance of Small Business to the west and Funtime Subscription State to the south. Donnie Leng claimed that Funtime was struggling; one could only build so many rollercoasters and charge so much on drinks before the economy needed to diversify.

Perhaps that explained why overtime was now mandatory, but overtime benefits slashed. The regular, ordinary working day of 8-7 had been slashed. Now it was 7-9, which just seemed too much in Benjamin’s estimation. But if all the trading they were doing, all the market research analytics, then perhaps DynaCo wasn’t just selling more mandatory merch to the populace, but a future *war* as well.

“Benny boy!” a voice cried, pulling Ben out of his thoughts and immediately turning his thoughts somehow darker. This was because Peter Harvey was strolling down the aisle, his direct superior and floor manager. He was a slightly fatter man, which was a sign of success, naturally. Apparently he even had enough of a salary to ensure that all of his DynaCo approved meals were *flavoured*, the lucky bastard. Some even whispered that he knew the taste of natural strawberries, instead of the DynaCo-Approved Strawberry-Flavoured Non-Specific Berry Smoothie, which was a reward purely for employees of the month. He was also a total asshole.

“Hello sir,” Benjamin answered submissively. “I was just getting started for the day.

“I see you’ve had to take two recitals of the Holy Slogans this morning. What would our Corporate Founders think, my boy?”

Ben made a fake cough. “Just a little under the weather, sir, that’s all.”

“We didn’t give up the waste of paid leave just to act as if we could take it *in* the office. Dynaco has big things coming, and we need everyone on Analytics to crunch the numbers.”

“It would be a little more helpful, sir, if we knew what the numbers were actually for.”

Peter gave a wide and very smug grin, and then proceeded to wag his finger for additional effect. “Now, now, Benny boy, you know that corporate non-disclosure applies even to our employees. We can’t be having our rival corporate states, especially not the Alliance of Small Business Owners, getting wind of our plans! We’ve got an entire catalogue of releases. We just need you to fine tune the planned obsolescence period for our latest phone release. We’re thinking that three months may be pushing it, but four months? Perhaps! Your research will help with that decision.”

Benjamin put on an even falser smile. He was certain he wasn’t fooling Peters, who hated his usual lack of enthusiasm.

“Sir, if I can inquire, if I do well on this assignment, perhaps you could recommend me for relationship approval? I’m . . . I’m hoping to be placed into the compatibility matrix.”

It was the dream of any worker to be placed into such. Corporate life was all most people knew; Benjamin was lucky that his mother, sadly now passed, had been older when she’d given birth to him, and so had passed on secret tales of what life used to be like before Work became sacred. It lived in his imagination at times, and he had to remind himself to kill it. It was just fairytales, after all; the idea that you could just *meet* someone and form a relationship! How would that even work?

But the compatibility matrix, *that* was something to truly aspire to. If one worked hard enough, took enough unpaid overtime, recited the slogans cheerfully enough, and showed full commitment to glorious profit, then the company would finally reward you by entering you into the compatibility matrix, which held the analytics on all employees across the entirety of the DynaCo corporate state. It would evaluate you down to your most basic habits, and then it would determine the perfect match for you from another who had earned matrix privileges. A man and a woman would then be paired, allowed to live with one another in a slightly larger DynaCo-Approved Offsite Cubicle, and produce future workers for more glorious Work. Ben had longed for this privilege for a long, long time. He wanted the perks of marriage, the larger Offsite Cubicle, the greater storage space. He also wanted some damn sex, and no doubt there was some aroused woman who would want the same. Marriage would give him promotion possibilities as well, and the pair of them could ignore each other outside of their bodily needs; it wasn’t like the matrix considered feelings so much as perfect traits for enhanced work ethic, after all.

So it was with hope that he looked up at Peter Harvey, his face still plastered with that fake smile. He could already tell his boss’s thoughts though, because Peter’s returning smile was genuine. And Peter *never* smiled about anything that wasn’t malicious.

“I’m afraid that someone whose recitals of the Holy Slogans only registers as *butter yellow* simply isn’t fit for compatibility yet, Benny boy. Work your way up to *at least* lemon

yellow, and I might consider it. In the meantime, add a few hours onto your day. I'm sure working till, say, eleven might help you?"

"But - but I was given a company peace plant last week!" Ben protested. "I need to water it at my offsite cubicle! I've not even used any credits for watching the entertainment feed lately because I've had so little time."

At this, Peter just smirked. "Sounds like *someone* needs to show more *company spirit*. I'll be checking your clock out time tomorrow, Benny boy. Hopefully, it says 11pm on it."

With that, he strolled further down the cubicle aisle, leaving Ben crestfallen. He would have to stay on late now, he just knew it. It was the only way to achieve some modicum of happiness. He turned back to his monitor and got to work on the analytics, breaking down reception points and planned obsolescent dates and even return rates from dissatisfied customers; not that many were brave enough to be so these days.

He was several hours into work when he heard a brief little 'Psst!'

"Hello Miriam," Ben said dryly, taking a sip from his coffee-substitute drink. One day he hoped to drink real coffee, if he were ever promoted.

"Ben!" the squeaky voice hissed. "How did the meeting with Peter go? I was in the bathroom for five minutes."

The maximum possible time before company payback started on the timer. Ben turned in his chair to look at his neighbour across the cubicle aisle. Miriam was his only friend at the office, for as much as one could be friends in this new world; they only knew one another at work, after all, and conversation was limited. Still, she was one of the only nice people here, and around his own age. She had beautiful dark skin and cute glasses, and her braided black hair was stylish, or at least as stylish as corporate office wear could get. And he couldn't deny that she had a nice body, especially her backside. There had been a time where the pair of them had naively hoped corporate would approve an Unexpected Merger; the local slang for a coworker affair that might be validated as a legitimate marriage. They had been told in no uncertain terms that their compatibility would decrease work ethic and selfishly increase their own personal time, and that their sex breaks in the nearby closet were crippling efficiency. As such, they had to go back to being associates. Still, they were fond of one another.

"It didn't go well, Miriam," he admitted. "Peter has it out for me. And I only got butter yellow today."

"Damn," she said, typing a little more on her own keyboard. "You gotta raise your game, man."

"I am well aware."

"I've managed to make my way up to heavenly tan. I'm thinking dark forest green is just around the corner. I've been pumping overtime like crazy lately."

“I had noticed the bags under your eyes, Miriam.”

“Oh, haha. It’ll be worth it, you’ll see. I’m gonna enter that compatibility matrix, and just you watch: I’ll have a larger offsite cubicle in no time, a promotion on the way, and I can finally make some little workers of my own and get that sweet, sweet, *sweet* two weeks paid maternity leave. It’ll all be worth it, I tell ya.”

Ben grimaced. “I wish I had your drive, Miriam. You’re a go-getter.”

“As the cat says, we’re all just hanging in there. You just gotta push yourself, Ben. I know I am. One day, I might even be Deputy Sub-Assistant Vice Manager, and just watch me get that sweet extra five minutes at the bathroom each day!”

Ben frowned. “Hey, Miriam, I’ve got a question for you. Do you ever miss what we had? I mean five years ago, when you and I were foolin’ around a little behind the company’s back.”

Miriam shot him a sympathetic look. “Ben, it was fun, and I liked the feelings we had, but looking back, it was a real waste of the company’s time. I could be in that compatibility matrix right now if I hadn’t been so foolish. No offence.”

He nodded sadly. “None taken.”

“Hey, you were good. I just . . . I really need to push myself. I really want a baby, Ben. I really want to have a family of little workers to call my own. I can only do that if I impress corporate enough by making up for my old mistakes, y’know? It’s nothing personal.”

“Nothing personal,” Ben muttered. “Perhaps . . . perhaps that’s a problem.”

He didn’t say anymore, but he did remember something his mother had said. She’d been an artist, once, back when art wasn’t something generated from an algorithm to increase employee performance. Once, she’d even showed him some of her hidden art; delightful and strange paintings that boy him couldn’t decipher, yet found endlessly fascinating.

“What do they mean, mommy?” he’d asked her. “What message are they telling?”

Corpo-Schooling was already suggesting that all art should have a distinct message.

She’d just shrugged. “No message.”

“What?”

“Yes, no message. They’re just for me. My own personal feelings.”

“Mr Baker at school says personal feelings are selfish, and that efficiency is what matters most.”

His mom had just grinned - she was such a beautiful woman. Cristin had been her name. “I’ll let you in on a secret: Mr Baker is a robot.”

“What? No way!”

“He is. Just one made of flesh and blood. But it means he doesn’t understand the true meaning of life.”

“And what’s that?”

His mother had cupped his cheek and kissed him on the forehead.

“That we work to live, not live to work. And that the world needs a whole lot more *personal*. When people say ‘nothing personal,’ they take a little bit of the soul out of this world. Never forget the personal, my little Benjie. It’s what makes you a *person*, not a cog.”

And yet he felt so, so very much like a cog.

## **Part Two: Change, Courtesy of the Future**

Ben continued to work, but that memory followed him, stifling his progress. Had his mother just been mad? Aberrant? Was she missing something, or did she understand something secret all along? Her words haunted him for the rest of the day, even as he worked into the late hours, even as he approached eleven o’clock and the entire floor of the building he was on was empty save for him and the occasional nightwatchman. Even Miriam had gone home, and he had watched her walk away, feeling that hint of attraction again, wishing things had gone another way.

“I’m never getting onto the compatibility matrix,” he murmured to himself, struggling to keep the work going even as tiredness hit him like a great wall, obstructing his progress. “How can the personal be anything good when it’s getting in the way of my goddamn *work day!*?”

He sighed, and after a moment’s hesitation, he recited the slogans once again, only this time with a general murmur that spoke to his lack of enthusiasm, no matter how hard he tried to truly muster it.

“The Line Must Go Up . . .”

“Life is All About the Hustle . . .”

“Remember, Profit is a Prophet . . .”

“Keep the Shareholders Happy . . .”

A whir. A click. A pause.

And a vicious shade of crimson *red*.

Ben jumped out of his chair, suddenly awake. Red. No. It couldn’t be. That would spark an investigation.

“Shit!” he exclaimed. He checked his brown hair in the reflection of the monitor, took in his expression, which was more haggard than usual. He looked like he was in his early thirties, not twenty four. “Fuck, okay, try again, Ben. Gotta get it on the second try.”

He repeated the slogans, this time with cheer.

Red again.

“Fuck! Shit! Goddamn it!”

A third time would be the death of him, he knew. Not literally; but it would see him demoted down to the worst of the levels, to a back-breaking manual position. One had to work for one's food, after all. Ben felt tears form in the corners of his eyes, and he did the unthinkable: he pushed the stalk of the camera down so that it looked at his keyboard, not him. It was a direct violation of protocol, he knew, but he needed it.

He needed a private and *personal* moment.

“I need a miracle,” he whispered.

And that's when, to his awe, one arrived. A sudden bright blue light nearly blinded his vision. Ben jolted to his feet a second time, only this time he fell backwards over his seat, tripped into the aisle, and landed flat on his back. He stared, gobsmacked, as a pillar of light with shifting luminescent halos of gold rose and fell around it, like some kind of portal. Was this an act of corporate espionage by Funtime? Perhaps even another attack by the Alliance of Small Business Owners? He looked around, waiting for security to arrive, to his shock no alarms were going off. The main cameras were all without their red lights. All of them were shut off. He could only slowly sit up, staring in shock as something manifested within the portal. It was a person. It was a short person. It was . . . a child!?

With a brief *WOOMPH* the portal disappeared. Ben scampered to the side, hiding in a cubicle, but watching the impossible arrival. It was indeed a child standing in the aisle. She looked Asian, with cute black hair with slight curls that reminded him of his own slightly curly hair. She couldn't have been older than thirteen or so years old, and looked pretty cute as far as kids went. But her clothes! Ben hadn't seen such colour and mishmash since he'd actually seen a C-suite member and his trophy wife at a corpo dinner party. They had colour privileges, and could wear designer clothing most could never dream of, the logos proudly displayed.

Only, this girl's bright yellow jacket and pink shirt beneath had no logos displayed, no DynaCo patches. The same was true of her long skirt and the pants she wore oddly underneath them, which were a navy blue in colour with red lining. There was no DynaCo symbology in sight, and it made Ben utterly confused: his standard white button shirt literally had the symbol of their corporate state on the front and back as well as the sleeves!

“Woah!” the girl said, turning around. “Mom wasn't kidding. This place is soooo lifeless! Where's all the colour? Oh, shoot, am I late!?”

She checked a chunky wrist device she had on. It was *definitely* not a DynaCo-approved wristech device, but something else, something silvery and sleek but with lots of brightly coloured stickers hastily applied to it.

“Nope, on time. Perfectly on time. Uh, hello! Mom!/? Whoops, I'm getting ahead of myself. Dad? No, that's too weird. Brianna!/? No, that's too far ahead. Stupid chronology

stuff. Lemme see . . . Benjamin? Benjamin Barnes? You there? Please be there, this place is kinda creepy to me!”

Ben was still weighing up the decision over whether to introduce himself and figure out what the hell was going on, or simply to flee and find the low-paid security nightwatchman, which made give him some credits for the arrest and help put him in the matrix. Unfortunately, he accidentally knocked the lamp on Miriam’s desk over, and it fell to the ground with a loud clatter.

“Damn it!” he hissed to himself.

But already the little girl was running down the hall. “Mom, is that you!? Ben! I’m looking for - whoa! There you are! Oh my God, it’s just like Mom said she’d be. Well, *you’d* be. Hiding under the desk like a little girl, haha!”

Ben frowned. He *was* hiding under Miriam’s desk, but he’d been hoping that it would prevent him from being seen. He tried to preserve his dignity as he got out, only to bang his head on the desk with an annoyed grunt. The girl giggled gleefully.

“Oh, just like Mom! She can be real clumsy too! But I guess that makes total sense, you know?”

“No, I don’t know!” Ben snapped, standing up to his full height. He looked at the young Asian girl and tried to be authoritative, hands on his hips and everything. “And just what the hell are you doing here? Are you some child agent of the Small Business Alliance? No, you look like a rollercoaster fanatic. Did Funtime send you? Is this corpo-espionage? Because I’m not afraid to pin down a girl! Work is sacred, and-”

“I have no idea what half of those words mean,” the girl said, looking up at him. “Um, wait, Mom told me some of this stuff, Dad too. This is when all the corporate states are at their full power, so it’s, like, all you know right?”

Ben blinked. “I - what? What are you talking about!?”

The girl sighed clicked a few buttons on her wristech. To his surprise, a very clear hologram - one that required no yearly subscription code and contained no mandatory thirty second ads - hovered into existence before him, revealing an image of . . . *him*. It was Benjamin Barnes, right down to the button white shirt, the slightly curly brown hair, and the dead look in his eyes.

“H-how do you have that?” he said. “Who are you?”

“I’m Caitlyn,” she replied in a know-it-all voice. “And I’m from the future. *Your* future. Benjamin Barnes, I’m your daughter.”

The man’s jaw hung low for a few moments. “That’s . . . impossible. Time travel isn’t real.”

“Not real yet. A way has been found, but it’s very limited. But this time loop existed before, so I have to be in it, that’s what Mom says. That’s you, by the way. I’m told I can give that away. You’re my Mom in the future.”

Ben frowned, then folded his arms as a new hologram appeared alongside the other one. It looked like the sister he never had, albeit one who looked far more attractive than he did. She had large, gorgeous brown eyes and lovely thick eyebrows, and spunky short brown hair that somehow suited her perfectly. She had a real cute-meet-sexy vibe, and her grin was positively infectious. Hell, Ben found *himself* grinning just at the sight of her, until he caught himself and bit his lip.

“That’s ridiculous,” he said. “This whole this is - why am I even talking to you? I’m getting security. They can sort you out, and I can earn some credits to help get a promotion.”

“No!” she cried. “You can’t do that! You need my help to find love!”

“That’s just a fairytale. I just need a bigger Offsite Cubicle.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Yeah, that much is clear, kid. Look, you stay here, and I’ll grab security.”

But she ran in front of him, stretching out her hands. “Wait! Just . . . just do one thing for me first, okay?”

Ben hesitated, but there was something in the girl’s eyes; a cute sorta pleading look, that made him consider that she was no corporate spy. No time traveller either; her story made no sense. Probably some CEO’s kid, one he had to be careful with.

“Okay, Caitlyn,” he said. “What did you want to show me?”

Caitlyn put on a pair of dark, futuristic-looking sunglasses, then held up the screen of her wristtech right in his face.

“This,” she said, and there was suddenly a powerful flash that was almost blinding. Instantly, Ben stepped back, blinking like mad to adjust his eyes.

“What the hell do you think . . . what the!?”

A small dark grey cloud of dust was releasing from the wristtech and floating directly across to him. Thanks to the distraction of the flash, it was already on his skin. Ben looked at Caitlyn, who had a guilty expression on her face, then back to his arm.

“What is this stuff!?”

“Nanites. They’re really cool. Dad worked on them. This part, he said, might make you a little angry at us.”

Ben was barely listening anymore; he was trying to brush the nanites off of his skin, and failing to do so. It continued to stretch and expand, however, the cloud grew, and now that it was connected to him, there was no getting rid of it. The young man made a series of terrified exhalations, desperately trying to remove the substance, and yet still it spread over

him. As it did so, he could feel the nanites burrowing into his skin, swarming through his body, connecting to every cell, every DNA strand he possessed.

“Oh God!” he cried. “Oh, Holy Slogans! What in DynaCo are you doing to me?”

“Eww, that is such a corpo saying, Mom!”

“Why the fuck are calling me your Mom!?”

“Woah, you were much swearier back in the days.”

The nanites spread further. They were now up his arm, and spreading over the other one. He tried to run, but they were on his ankles, making the muscles loose and causing him to stumble against Miriam’s desk a second time.

“JUST ANSWER THE FUCKING QUESTION, KID!!!”

Caitlyn was briefly shocked, but she tapped a few times on her wristtech, and suddenly a large reflective hologram showed Benjamin what was happening to him. The nanite robots were swarming up to his neck and over his face, but as they did so, it was like they were turning his skin to liquid. His muscles slimmed down, his limbs shortening in length. He grunted as ligaments in his spine similarly began to shrink, and again as the nanites reached his face. He looked like a man made of grey dust substance, but everywhere the endless nanites swarmed, they began to change him. The reflection showed him these changes in real time, letting him appreciate them from a third person perspective. Appreciate, or be horrified by.

“No! No, stop this! We’re on security cameras! DynaCo will sue you for this! You’ll never get discounts again!”

But the girl just shrugged happily. “Don’t worry, me arriving here shorted out security just by arriving, and I can turn off cameras remotely.”

“Then turn *this* off remotely! Nghh!”

His legs began to shrink, his calves becoming more defined. The same was true of his shoulders, which were pulling inwards, thinning considerably along with his waist and torso.

“I’m sorry, I would but I can’t! You have become her! You have to become Brianna Barnes, my mother!”

“You’re a crazy kid!”

“I’m not! I’m just from the future! You’re the crazy one, working in a place like this! I can’t believe the most amazing woman in the world used to be like this!”

“I don’t - ahhh - understand any of - ohhhh - thisssss!!!”

The changes were accelerating, the grey goo covering Benjamin Barnes almost completely by this point. He grunted as his hips widened, as his pelvis shifted, as the robots entered his junk and began to cause it to wither. His chest, too, began to expand, causing the man to shudder and fall to his knees, moaning as a pair of obvious breasts started to

develop. They grew and grew, thankfully not becoming too large, but not small either. The weight on his chest was obvious, and they pushed out his otherwise slim-fitting button shirt, to the point where he undid the top button, allowing his new bosom to breathe.

“I’ve got tits!? What the fuck!? This has got to be a violation of company code!”

“Company code, company schmode!” the girl proclaimed. “Besides, you’ve got way bigger boobs now, what are you complaining about?”

Ben wanted to scream at this girl that he had no idea what she was talking about, but the grey goo began to pour into his eyes, over his scalp, and even into every follicle of hair protruding from his head and face. He blinked in response to the strange experience of having his eyes change, becoming a little larger on his face. The reflective hologram shifted, following his transformation.

“Oh God, you’ve got to be kidding me!” he cried, but his voice went up to a lovely mid-tone female voice with just a little bit of unexpected attitude in it. He grasped at his Adam’s apple, but it had shrunk into his neck, leaving the surface smooth and feminine to the touch. The same was true of his face; the grey nanites were disappearing beneath his skin as they finished their work, but while they were doing it, Ben’s face became rounder, cuter, and certainly womanly. He looked a few years younger, perhaps no older than twenty, and his hair had become *exactly* like the woman in the hologram that Caitlyn had displayed moments ago.

“This - can’t - be - happening!” he cried. “OHhhhh, you can’t t-take my junk! Don’t take my cock!”

“Ewww, Mom! That’s super gross language! You taught me not to talk like that!”

“I haven’t taught you fucking shit, kid! I - aahhhh, it’s g-going innnn!”

There was no stopping it, despite the fact that he was cupping and holding his genitals, sticking his hands down his unzipped pants. He turned, not wanting a kid to see this sight. Ben whined pathetically, moaning in a huff as his penis withdrew back into his body, followed by the *plop plop* of two testicles. The discomfort turned to a foreign and *very* unwanted pleasure; the formation of a passage through him, the blooming of a new organ in his lower belly, the eruption of a clitoris into being along with sensitive labial lips; it was all too much for Benjamin Barnes, who started literally drooling and moaning, a mix of humiliation, discomfort, brief pangs of pain, and sheer, relentless bodily pleasure shooting through him.

“Don’t look at me!” he cried, rolling into a cubicle. “Don’t I-look at m-meee!”

His hips swelled a little more, leaving him with a cute hourglass shape. He’d lost nearly a foot in height, having gone from six foot one tall to five-three at best. Everything was wrong; from the jiggle of his new breasts to the absence between his thighs to even the

softer sound of his breathing. Everything was smooth, everything was wrong. The nanites pushed into the last of his skin, and then the changes were complete.

Ben rose very slowly, horrified at what had happened to him. His hands shook. His legs shook. His jaw shook, and it was a smaller, rounder, cuter jaw now, too. He looked over his body, at the thin line of cleavage he now possessed, at the way his hips flared out a little, at how his clothing was so baggy and unsuitable for his smaller form. The world seemed larger, and he smaller, and both were true; the hologram beside him showed him to now be a very, very pretty lady with wide brown eyes and a cute, slightly messy pixie cut.

“You - you turned me into a *woman!*?” the new feminised man snapped, turning on the little girl. He reached out to grab her, only to stumble and fall: his shoes were too big, and his arms too short compared to what he was used to. Caitlyn dodged out of the way.

“I had to! It's for the best, I promise!”

But Ben was too busy grappling with it all. He cupped his modest bust, blushing a brilliant red. None of his clothing fit, and it was only because of his expanded hips that his pants weren't falling down. And he didn't even want to *think* about the empty space between his now-soft thighs.

“Why!?” he whined, unused to his softer female tone, though it still had a surprising sharpness to it. “Why are you doing this?”

Caitlyn fidgeted. She was clearly nervous. “Um, well, like I said, I'm from the future, and in that future, you're my Mom.”

“What!?”

“You get pregnant with me. That's how most women become moms.”

“I know what motherhood is!” Ben snapped, getting back up and shaking the loose socks from his bare feet. “The production of a new line of workers is just not something I'll ever do! Not even for a larger Offsite Cubicle!”

Caitlyn made a pained expression. “She told me you'd talk like this at first. All corporate style.”

“Who did?”

“You. Mom. The you of the future.”

Ben groaned and got up. By the profit, he was so much shorter now. The world seemed bigger. More daunting.

“I'm getting security!”

Caitlyn grabbed the new woman's hand. “You can't!”

Ben tried to pull away, but his new female strength was minimal. He was too damn petite!

“Why not? No offence kid, but I'm not losing my employee credentials and landing in hot water with corporate is *not* worth letting some kid exist who doesn't even follow logo

protocol! If this story is even real! Now make me a man again! My profile gives me a thirteen percent advantage on interactions with upper management, provided they aren't Peter!"

But Caitlyn held firm. "It's not just about me, though I'd really, really, *really* like to exist, thank you! It's about the future! Ben, you become Brianna Barnes, the saviour of humanity! The woman who starts the Quiet Rebellion against the corporate world! I've seen it with my own eyes: people getting their lives back, falling in love, marrying who they want *when* they want, taking leave when they need it and stuff. Creating *art* and everything!"

*Art.*

The word caught in Ben's mind like a splash of colour upon an otherwise blank canvas. He remembered his mother's art, those expressions, those splotches of colour he would stare at for seemingly hours, unable to determine what they were about and yet endlessly fascinated by them regardless. When was the last time he saw art that was not pre-approved by corporate? When was the last time he expressed *himself* in any creative way? Didn't one need leave to do that?

"What do you mean by art?" he asked, his womanly body momentarily forgotten.

Caitlyn creased her brow. "I don't know, just . . . art. Like, pencils and paper and paintings on walls and murals and sculptures and all that!"

"Did corporate approve it? Is it a marketing shift?"

"I - what? No, don't be silly! Corporations are, like, being told to behave and stuff. Mom - you - just made a deal with the Alliance of Small Business owners not to force their employees into overtime. I don't understand it all because I'm, like, a kid, but it seemed like a big deal. Mom says America might come 'back from the brink,' and even be what it was. Or a better version of what it was. They think in a few years they won't start charging at hospitals anymore."

"They're moving to a subscription model?"

"No, don't be silly! It's, like, free for people! Well, sorta free. Do you know what taxes are?"

At this, Ben found himself laughing. His feminine voice made it sound almost whimsical. He blinked in disbelief, running his hands over his body, feeling his breasts, his waist, his hips. This was all too much.

"Look, kid, that sounds wonderful - but fanciful! I'm sure this future of yours, if it even exists, is wonderful, but you've clearly got the wrong person. So why don't you turn me back so I don't lose any credit points and I can maybe fix up my slogan recital tomorrow morning when-"

"Hey, who are you!?"

Both Benjamin and Caitlyn turned to see the worst sight imaginable, at least for Ben: the night security guard with his flashlight, illuminating the otherwise dark space of the

mostly empty cubicle floor. He was a large man, with dark features and a mean scowl. Ben knew him as Belfort, and had always tried to get along.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath, pulling his clothes more tightly around his petite female body. “Belfort! It’s me! It’s Benjamin Barnes! You’ve got to help me, man! This strange girl arrived using tech from the future or something and she’s changed me into a girl! You’ve gotta call corporate and tell them to help me! It’s in my employee insurance package, I swear!”

Belfort paused, a look of total disbelief coming across his face.

“Uh, I don’t think he believes you,” Caitlyn said. “Like, at all.”

“The little girl is right,” Belfort said in a booming voice, approaching closer. “And she’s also not meant to be here; underage future interns and employees are to be on the kinder floor. Ma’am, I’ll ask again; who are you?”

“I’m telling you the truth!” Ben said, inching back on his bare feet. His breasts jiggled a little on his chest, unsupported by anything, and it was an entirely odd feeling. Even his hips moved wrong; it was like his entire centre of gravity had shifted *down*.

“Yeah, right lady,” Belfort said. He held up a scanner, which made an audible *beep*. “Yeah, just like I thought. You’ve got Benjie’s name tag, but you aren’t Benjie at all. I’d say we got a corporate spy here, and a bad one at that. You’re comin’ with me, lady.”

“No, you’ve got to believe me!”

“I don’t have to do shit, lady. And if I turn you in, I might get a third of a percent payrise! Now put your hands up, you as well little girl, and you can come up with me.”

Benjamin’s heart beat in his petite chest. He could feel his breasts rise and fall, his fear growing. If Belfort didn’t believe that he was who he said he was, then what chance did he have with corporate, cold as they were? They’d fire his ass and then . . .

*Work Will Make You Earn Your Food.*

Benjamin gulped, grabbed Caitlyn’s hand, and *ran* in the opposite direction.

“Hey!” Belfort yelled. “Come back!”

But Benjamin only ran faster, uncaring that his sleeves were too long and his clothes sagging on his tiny form. His work pants got caught under foot, but he just quickly unbuckled the belt and ripped them off, leaving him in just droopy male underwear that held on only thanks to his rather lovely expanded hips. He sped along, his shirt thankfully covering much of his shame, and grabbed Caitlyn’s hand again.

“You better have a way of turning me back!” he screamed girlishly.

“Um, and if I don’t!?”

Ben turned a corner, ducking as a taser shot hit the wall just behind him. Belfort was chasing them, but thankfully wasn’t the quickest man thanks to his bulk.

“Then you better find a way to help me with this, you little shit!”

They ran down the stairs, Ben huffing and puffing, overcome by the insanity of what was happening. He was now a woman; a woman on the *run!* What the hell was he doing!? They exited the huge, monolithic DynaCo Analytics Center, out into the busy streets. Logos, uniforms, drone displays and holographic ads were everywhere, a kaleidoscope of colour that blocked out the sky.

“Whoa!” Caitlyn cried. “You can’t even see the stars!”

“The what?”

“Oh, I know where we’re supposed to go. There’s an alley nearby! Some kind of old safehouse! And - and Mom said there was a place we can break into!”

Benjamin’s jaw dropped. “We can’t do that! It could impinge upon profit!”

But Caitlyn was now the one tugging Ben along, the girl and the woman running together down the dark street, both completely out of place in this grey world plastered over with its artificial distractions. There was indeed a dark alley nearby, and they entered it just as the sirens of the Corporate Police sounded. Benjamin’s heart was in his throat. What the hell could possibly be happening? Why *him!*?

He was about to turn back, turn himself in and try to sort it all out, when he caught something on the back of Caitlyn’s backpack. It was a piece of artwork painted onto it; splotches of colour that seemed so very familiar to him. They were almost identical to his own mother’s artwork.

It was enough to make him swallow down his fear and follow after the girl.

He couldn’t even say exactly why.

### **Part Three: Offsite Cubicles**

The heat had died down. The pair were holed up in another employee’s offsite cubicle, occasionally checking the windows to ensure that no one was coming by. Evidently, the employee that owned this space was highly successful, perhaps even a higher tier floor manager; the space was huge! Enough to have perhaps three whole beds inside of it. More, if they were stacked. And according to Caitlyn’s own wristech when she plugged it into the wall, the owner had been granted a whole *three days* of break time, and given allowance to travel to a neighbouring city; a rare privilege.

“This place is amazing,” he whispered to himself.

But Caitlyn was less than impressed. “Man, this place sucks. It’s super tiny!”

“What? What are you talking about?”

"It's tiny! I can almost touch both walls if I lie down! And there's no colour! What kind of home is this?"

"It's not a home," Ben said, placing a finger in the air. "It's an Offsite Cubicle. Homes are old-fashioned and insufficient for the needs of the sacred economy."

"Well, it sucks. I prefer homes from my time. They're bigger, and warmer, and we call them homes because *that's what they are.*"

Ben frowned. "That's absurd. Corporate would never approve - ugh! Why am I explaining myself to the girl who turned me into a freakin' woman!? I'm a man! That's what I was born as and what I intend to die as, and you better find a way to turn me back."

"But you've gotta give birth to me!" Caitlyn said, insistent.

"Oh no, that means having sex."

"Ewww, gross!"

"Oh, so you don't know what sex is?"

"I know! And I know you've had it with Dad *loads*, because you keep getting pregnant!"

Benjamin paused. "Wait," he said, staring down at his petite body and sliding his hand over his stomach. "I get pregnant more than once? Are you telling me in the future I've given birth *multiple times*?"

Caitlyn giggled before putting her hands on her mouth in shock. "Oh, I don't think I was supposed to tell you that part! Or maybe Mom told me that so I *would* tell you, but then have this reaction. Ugh, time travel is so confusing."

"I'm getting that sense. Why did she send a little kid?"

"Hey, I'm not little! I'm twelve years old! I'm only a few days from thirteen, in fact."

Ben slumped against the wall of the dark apartment. "I just don't understand. It's all too much. What do you expect me to do, just hunt down this man you think is gonna be your father and, what, have unapproved sex with him? Make little future workers-

"Babies. Kids."

"-without consulting the compatibility matrix."

Caitlyn smiled and shrugged. "Pretty much, yeah! You've got to make sure I exist, and help save the future."

Ben folded his arms. He was sitting on the fold-down bed, while Caitlyn sat next to him. He accidentally pushed his boobs up a little from the gesture, and had to adjust his position; being a woman was already so strange. He wondered what Miriam would think.

"Oh, so I just save the future? Why would I do that? I'm already in bad with corporate. If I fix things tomorrow, I might be able to get a licence to reproduce. What's the point of jeopardising that?"

Caitlyn's jaw hung. It was a rather cute look, and to Ben's annoyance, he found his stupid female hormones lighting up a little at the sight of this girl. He knew women were generally more in touch with their emotions and able to express them more easily, but he had no idea of the *depth* of said emotions.

"What's the point!?" Caitlyn exclaimed, her little voice squeaking. "What's the point!? What about happiness? What about laughter? What about love and creativity and, like, all those things that have nothing to do with money and profit and work and lines going up and making your bosses happy and stuff?"

An image of his mother's art. Of her beautiful smile. The warmth of her tender, yet fierce love. Ben shied away from it; otherwise his new female body might start getting teary-eyed. Instead, he looked out the window of the offsite cubicle, watching the rain fall down upon the city with its endless ads, subscriptions, holographic slogans and reminders for work.

"See that?" he said, extending a finger out the window to the rain-soaked dystopia beyond. "That's the real world. Nothing can change it. What you're describing is a fantasy."

"It's not, I've seen it!"

"It's a fantasy," Ben reiterated. "And I've been caught up in it. Goddamn it, I've even got a pair of tits on my chest because of it! I'm missing my dick because of you!"

Caitlyn frowned, staring up at him. "You're nothing like I imagined."

"Well, I'm not your mom, kid. I'm just Benjamin Barnes; office worker at DynaCo. I'm not gonna change it."

Caitlyn's glare was surprisingly powerful. The little half-Asian girl kept her dark eyes trained on Ben in a way that unsettled the former man.

"Does it make you happy, then?"

It was like a dagger had been thrust into his chest.

"What?"

"I said, does it make you happy? Is that why you don't want to change it?"

Ben had no real answer for that. "I - I just don't want to get involved with a fantasy. And I certainly don't want to be a woman. Tomorrow, I need to turn up at work. I can't stay here forever. Happiness has got nothing to do with it."

Caitlyn wiped away some tears. "I'm gonna go sleep. Mom says I should sleep when my body tells me to, not when the clock does."

"Stupid advice. Corporate says-"

"Screw corporate. I'm taking the big bed. Since apparently you're such an obedient *worker*, I'll be the boss."

Benjamin didn't even fight the girl on this. In truth, he was still thinking on what she had said. The new woman sighed and rested 'her' head back against the wall. Tomorrow, if

he didn't change back, the company would notice. It *always* noticed. Just what the hell were they going to do?

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Benjamin woke the next morning, and to his surprise, someone had actually pulled a blanket over his form. He was nestled in comfortably in his bed, and it took him a moment to realise a few rather terrible things.

One: he had a woman's body. Last night *hadn't* been a terrible dream.

Two: he was in someone else's Offsite Cubicle. That *also* hadn't been a terrible dream.

And lastly, potentially the worst one, was Three: he had *slept* in. The sun was wafting in through the half-open blinds in the offsite cubicle, and no alarm had gone off.

"Oh no! By the sacred slogans! By profit! This can't be happening! Caitlyn? Caitlyn, where are you?"

He jumped out of bed, the unfamiliar jiggle in his oversized shirt still obvious and unsettling. Unfortunately, as he bounded out of the small room he practically collided with the small girl, who at the same time was proclaiming, "*Surprise! Breakfast in bed, just how you like it!*"

The end result was a plate smashing on the ground, and some spread toast with it. Benjamin gaped at the results: actual toast. Actual *jam*. Flavour galore, the type not given to workers.

"This - we've done a bad thing."

"Don't worry! I'll get it! I'm sorry for bumping into you! I heard you wake up; you had a much-deserved rest. Dad always says that Moms should get the best rest, but this one has got to take the cake!"

Caitlyn picked up the toast and improvised by setting them on the coffee-substitute table in the main room.

"Go on!" she said with a cheery voice. "I had to unlock some of the settings on the house computer. I don't think this guy is even authorised for jam. How weird is that? Seriously, this world is weird. I'm glad Dad's inventions help me hack it all."

It was far too many contravening articles of Corporate Goodwill for Benjamin to take, but the truth was his little stomach was starting to grumble, and it *was* jam.

"I'm not permitted for flavour," he noted, before picking up the toast. "But . . . just so it doesn't go to waste."

"And to get rid of the evidence!" Caitlyn exclaimed.

"Exactly!"

He took a bite, and then let loose the kind of moan that Miriam used to make during their closeted 'encounters' five whole years ago. It was . . . it was unbelievable. How had he never tasted this? It was the nectar of the gods!

"This is incredible!" he moaned, licking his fingers and for the first time uncaring about how female he sounded. "By the Board, this is magnificent. What is it?"

"Apricots!" Caitlyn declared. "Mom always says they're her favourite. Holy moly, did I just *start* your love of them? That's incredible! She has them all the time!"

"All . . . the time?"

"Yup! She grows them in her garden and everything."

Ben was amazed. "Grows like . . . trees? Fruit? She has permission for that?"

Caitlyn shrugged. "No one needs permission to have a beautiful garden."

That took Benjamin aback. "And . . . why are you giving me breakfast in bed? What's the catch here?"

"Mom once told me that no one needs permission to be kind."

It was strange; something in Ben's heart fluttered. The girl grabbed her own toast and sat on the bed with the new woman, and he didn't want to push her away for the first time.

"This is very good, but I have to be getting to work."

"How can you go to work as a girl?"

"I - huh. That's a good question. Shit! I mean, shoot? Darn, I'm not good at this. Look, I've never missed a day at work!"

"Then take a sick day."

"A . . . sick day?"

"Sure! You can rest up and feel better. And now that security isn't out there, I'm sure we can break into your home - sorry, *Offsite Cubicle* - and put you into the system as a new worker."

Benjamin paused. This was just crazy. You didn't just *skip* work on a *fake sickness for your own health*. And yet he couldn't deny how wonderful this unthinkable act sounded.

"I suppose it would be good to be in my own place and try to find something that might fit me."

Caitlyn grinned. "Let's steal the toast and jam while we're at it!"

It wasn't like the young girl had a place to go to if she was telling the truth; Benjamin would just have to take Caitlyn with him. Besides, she *was* a real cute kid. In for a penny, in for a pound, it seemed.

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Thankfully, Caitlyn's future tech allowed the pair of them to enter into Benjamin's offsite cubicle. It was strange, seeing it from his new, shorter perspective. The room almost seemed larger, more expansive, perhaps even *luxurious* and resplend-

"Woah, this place is *tiny*," Caitlyn said.

"What? You - what kind of future do you come from?"

"I told you, one where people work to live, not live to work."

Benjamin muttered some choice words under his breath. "Okay, so what now? You said you could do something for me? But *not* change me back yet, right?"

Caitlyn gave an awkward grin. "I can't change you back if I want to exist."

"Right. Well, that's an argument we'll keep having, because I *will* turn back. But in the meantime, I'll settle for just having a goddamn *identity*."

Caitlyn nodded enthusiastically and practically *danced* over to the offsite cubicle's central computing system, which largely existed so employees could work from home when they were allegedly sick. But instead of examining more of the analytics, she removed her wristech and plugged it in, which, much to Benjamin's shock, began infecting the main computer system.

"You can't do that! Corporate says this machine is unhackable!"

"To current tech, maybe. This thing is *future proof*, Mom!"

"Stop calling me Mom! What - what are you even doing?"

But Caitlyn just beamed, pointing at the screen. The answer soon revealed itself; *all* of Benjamin Barne's details were being rewritten to become *Brianna Barnes'* details. Everything from his reduced height, his gender, his appearance, his photographs, his birth forms, his employment record, *all of it* were being hacked and replaced.

"This is insane!" he cried, clutching his head and feeling his cute pixie cut. "You can't just overwrite the central DynaCo computer!"

"But I already am! Besides, we gotta get you a new identity, not to mention new clothes! This way you can go back to work and start spreading your revolution from within!"

"I'm not a revolutionary, I'm just-"

"I know," Caitlyn sighed, as if hearing this for the thousandth time. "You're an artist, mom, not a revolutionary. Revolution just happens to be inspired by art and understanding. You've told me this before, in the future."

Benjamin's mouth flapped like a goldfish. He was going to say he was 'just an analyst,' but to be compared to an artist, just like his mother . . . it touched something inside of him.

"Fine," he said. "So this wristech of yours is able to hack the computer, right?"

"Just your personal files from here, but they'll overwrite copies stored elsewhere. From now on, you're Brianna Barnes, just like you are in my timeline! And this means we

can finally track down Dad and you two can do the dirty and have me and then your other babies, all while changing the world.”

At this, Benjamin chuckled. “Yeah, I don’t think so. Look, kid, I didn’t ask for any of this. I’ll indulge your fantasy a little longer, but don’t rush me. Just . . . order me some new clothes, will you? I don’t have many credits left, but-”

“Oh, I gave you more of those, too.”

Ben blinked and looked at his credit account. Somehow, Caitlyn’s wristech had increased his bonuses. It was amazing! God, his new self even had a green score on all of her ratings, somehow, including her slogan recitals. This could even turn out advantageously, so long as he got to retain this while becoming a man again.

“Well done, Caitlyn,” he said, thinking about the possibilities of flourishing in this system. “I think I’m coming to like this!”

Caitlyn, to his shock, jumped forward and hugged him, pressing her head just below Ben’s new chest.

“I told you I’d make you proud, back in the future! It’s gonna work out, you’ll see!”

Ben just patted her back, a strange maternal feeling coming over him. He forced those feelings down, and instead focused his eyes on the wristech that was still connected to his computer. This was the device that had changed him. If he could find out how to use it, then he could get back to normal without Caitlyn being able to stop him. Then he’d drop her off at a care centre for future workers or something.

Not right away.

But soon, perhaps. He couldn’t stick with this madness forever.

## **Part Four: Becoming Brianna**

When Benjamin woke in his bed the next day, it was actually *her* waking up for the first time as *Brianna*. Until she could figure out fully what to do with Caitlyn and determine if this time travel shtick was real, not to mention come to understand that valuable wristech, then she would have to play along.

That meant becoming Brianna.

That meant being a *woman*.

That meant wearing a blouse and skirt and heels, the expected office wear for a beautiful woman such as herself, complete with the DynaCo logos displayed once again. A quick emergency order saw new clothing delivered the previous night, and while it was awkward having to put on women’s underwear and figuring out how to manage a bra, at least she wasn’t too large-breasts, though she was ample enough to have a bit of jiggling as

she struggled with it. A quick test of putting clothes on was good enough, but she knew that office expectation was some light lipstick and makeup, and so she had to consult Caitlyn, who helped her out.

“Can’t we do a bit more colour? And you love your dangly earrings as my Mom!”

“I’m not your Mom. You’ve got the wrong person there. So just . . . help me with the basics.”

To her credit, Caitlyn did so, and once more Brianna marvelled at herself in the mirror, shocked at how pretty she was with her dark pixie cut, her large and gorgeous brown eyes, her impish smile and slim figure. She was very cute, and it felt tonally opposite to the image she had catered for herself as a man for a long, long time.

“This is so freakin’ weird,” she noted. “God, Corporate will go nuts if they recognise me.”

“Don’t worry, they won’t,” Caitlyn had told her.

But still, Brianna had dreamed about it, her worries turning around in her head. In her sleep, DynaCo was experimenting on her, discovering future techniques from the wristech to consolidate their reach. She protested that she was innocent, that she wanted to serve the company, but her thoughts kept turning to her mother’s art, to colour, to beauty. She tried to plead to be added to the compatibility matrix, but everything was sterile and cold.

That was, until the dream turned. Alan was one of her coworkers, and she’d never thought much of him, to the point where he was a background character in her dreams as well. But as the dream continued, he became more prominent. She started to notice how muscular, how fit he was. The wide shoulders, the attractive musculature, the confident jawline. He began to undo his buttons, and she in turn pressed her body against him, marvelling at his height and strength, at how he could try and protect her from the big, bad organisation.

“Mhmmm,” she moaned, even as she woke. Caitlyn was sleeping out in the main area still, and it took Brianna some time to realise that she was still female, and that she had adopted a new female identity while she worked out what to do next. But even more than that, she realised she was feeling feminine arousal for the first time. Her perfect pink nipples were stiff and sensitive, and there was a heat in her loins, a need, like a muscle that needed stretching, a hole that needed *filling*.

“Ahhh,” she murmured lightly. Without thinking, she began to stroke her breasts and pinch her nipples, leading her to moan more. Her libido was growing, as was her desire to explore more of her new body. She’d spent so much time ignoring it, even blushing with embarrassment at having to pee sitting down previously, but now she was enjoying the sensitive state of her smooth skin, the pretty curves of her slim form. Brianna lowered a hand down to brush over her pubic hair, which was thick and shaped like the classic inverted

triangle. A shiver hit her as she rubbed the region around her labial lips. Her opening was wet, and she spread that wetness, feeling part of her throbbing clitoris.

“Mhmm, oh C-Corporate,” she murmured. “Oh, sh-shit. Alan . . .”

He slipped into her thoughts again, that man who had so little to do with her, and yet her body lusted after him now. To her own bewilderment, she imagined his body positioned over hers, his strength holding her, his member hard. It should have revolted her, but instead the taboo of it was intoxicating, spurring her to close her eyes and picture him even more clearly. She entered herself, slipping her fingers into her wet passage and massaging her most sensitive places, all as she imagined him thrusting into her. The pleasure grew, and so did her enthusiasm. Brianna had to bite her lip just to avoid from making much louder sounds, but her body could only take so much, and all of a sudden she was hit by a powerful orgasm that swept through her female body. Her breasts were also locus points of this energy, leaving her to cup them with her forearm, moaning as a second orgasm pressed down upon her.

“Ohhhhhhh,” she moaned. “Ohhhhh, by profit. Ohhhhh, by corporate. Ohhhhh, yesss.”

It was so, so very different from the male orgasm. It had taken much longer to build, but it had hit her like a DynaCo freight train with emergency shipping priority speed. The new woman lay back in her small bed, still curling her toes.

“I guess . . . I guess some parts of being a woman aren’t all bad.”

She cleaned herself up, feeling embarrassed at having masturbated to the thought of a man. Only after she’d had her brief five minute shower and changed into her new work clothes - a strange experience still - did she exit out and find Caitlyn waking up from her collection of blankets on the floor.

“Morning,” she said.

“Morning, sleepyhead.”

“That’s what you call me in the future!”

Brianna frowned. “You didn’t tell me that this body would be attracted to men.”

“Well, I’m twelve years old. I don’t know loads about that.”

“But I find men hot now! You did this!”

“I - well, I had a *little* to do with it. Mom - you - and Dad did most of the work. Why? What happened? We haven’t interacted with any men yet.”

Brianna blushed furiously. “Nothing! Just ignore me! I have to head to work. It’s a long day, and I still think this is going to be a disaster. You stay here and don’t go anywhere.”

Caitlyn pouted. “But I want to explore! We have to find Dad so you can fall in love and be together and inspire the whole world!”

“Or,” Brianna said, pushing lightly on Caitlyn’s head so she looked down at her own wristtech, “you *could* work out a way to change me back and ensure your future another way.”

“But-”

“Find me alternatives,” Brianna said authoritatively, as if she really was going to be a floor manager one day and upstage Peter. “Just . . . look into it, okay? And don’t. Go. Anywhere.”

She left without another word, heading out on her route to the DynaCo Analytics Building and feeling very, *very* self-aware of how female she now was.

“Shit,” she mumbled to herself, “I forgot to put on makeup. This sucks already.”

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Brianna’s heart beat nervously in her chest as she entered her regular cubicle floor. It didn’t help that she’d shared an elevator with Alan and had to try and overpower her desire to stare at his shoulder muscles. She’d given in and looked just once or twice, and he’d smirked at her.

“You on the matrix?” he asked.

“N-no! No, I’m not!” she exclaimed.

He winked at her, making her flesh crawl. “Real shame,” he said, and then got off.

“Wow, that dried me up,” she noted, giving herself some distance before she too entered her floor. Once again that utter self-awareness of her new womanly status rose up within her. At least her hair wasn’t long or her breasts too large, but she was struggling a little in her heels, and they weren’t even that high! Her chest bounced a little because she was rushing herself too much, and she forced herself to slow down and try not to stick out. Unfortunately, this just reminded her of how much her hips swayed now; her feet landed in front of each other in a more feminine-style of walking, almost as if by instinct. A few eyes looked her way with interest, more male ones than female, and when Alan took a seat she heard one of his compatriots chuckle and whisper something about “who’s the new hottie with the great ass?”

Wait, she had a great ass?” She looked back and whimpered a little in horror. Sure, she was more peachy back there, and it wasn’t like she was huge, but it *was* a great ass, pressing against her grey pencil skirt with its DynaCo logo. The fact that her swaying hips also, therefore, made said ass sway only added to the hypnotic effect.

“Damn you, Caitlyn,” she mumbled to herself, before finding her seat. It was at her old desk, right opposite Miriam. She sat down, clutching her bag nervously, and booted up

her computer. She couldn't help but look around, and sure enough, her friend and former lover across the aisle was staring at her quizzically.

"Uh, excuse me? I think you might be at the wrong desk. That's for my friend. His name is Ben."

"I, uh, am taking his place," Brianna said awkwardly. She felt smaller in her seat than she ever had.

"That can't be right," Miriam said.

"He got a red shift the other night," Brianna explained.

Miriam gave a little 'eep' sound. "Oh, by the profits, that's why he wasn't here yesterday. We were all talking about it. So . . . he's been . . . *demoted*?"

She whispered the last part; the very mention of demotion was practically like a curse word. Brianna responded with a brief tremble and bite of her lip. She had never been good at lying, not even to the monitors when she recited the Holy Slogans.

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"Oh, shit. Poor Benjie. He was trying for promotion, but he didn't seem happy lately."

"Are any of us happy?" Brianna said, the words escaping her mouth before she could really think about them.

Once again, that 'eep!' from Miriam, whose eyes went wide. She looked about, clearly worried that someone had heard, and then she leaned her head a little into the aisle.

"Look, lady, I don't know who you are, but you can't just say things like that! We're in the heart of DynaCo! It's not just our corporate state here, it's our *life*. This is our offsite cubicle more than our *actual* offsite cubicle. So take it from me, young rookie; you need to shape up and fall in line! I'm on the path to the compatibility matrix, and I won't be denied it."

Brianna felt intimidated, so she nodded slowly. "Sorry. I'm . . . this is a bad start. I'm Brianna Barnes."

"Wait, the same last name as Benjie?"

"I'm his . . . cousin."

"Figures. Replacing blood with blood. DynaCo must think you're of like mind enough to handle the data."

"I suppose so."

Miriam softened a little, then extended her own hand. "I'm Miriam. Miriam Zho."

Brianna shook it, Miriam's dark skin touching her light. Once, she had yearned to feel Miriam's skin like this again, but she was reminded once more that, despite the woman's clear beauty, she felt no actual attraction to her.

"I'll try my best here, Miriam," she said. "And I won't get in your way. I want you to be able to have your baby."

"Excuse me?"

“Oh, uh, sorry! I, um, just assumed you wanted one, from the matrix and all.”

Miriam arched an eyebrow, but then softened to a lighthearted chuckle. “You’ve got a good read on people, Brianna. I definitely do want a future worker. Time is ticking for gals like us, right?”

Brianna gave a sharp intake of breath, and her hand went straight to her stomach. She hadn’t even thought of it, but her new body could very likely make babies. Definitely so, if what Caitlyn had said was right.

“I - I guess it is,” she murmured.

“I see someone else is thinking about getting on the matrix as well,” Miriam said, smirking. “That’s why we can’t have you saying stuff like you said earlier. Need everyone on the same page, getting DynaCo’s profits and shares to new heights, baby.”

She went back to work, and Brianna did so too. She was shellshocked at the thought of the discussion point: her, pregnant! The thought of it, having sex with a man, having his baby, having it grow within her. And birth! She’d have to pay a high subscription fee, not to mention monthly insurance rates, plus an extra payment if she wished to avoid intrusive ads aimed at her pregnancy, even during labor. And *this* was what Caitlyn was asking her to do; to fall pregnant with another man and give birth to, well, *her* apparently. The her that would become the twelve year old Caitlyn in the future.

“No way,” she muttered to herself. “I’ll be Ben again, first.”

Her computer logged in properly, and when Peter Harvey walked by he simply tutted in satisfaction.

“Much better to have a new worker!” he said out loud. “Couldn’t stand that Ben. Such a dreamer! He could never understand the worth of being a DynaCo employee!”

And yet, that worth was already diminishing. Brianna had a higher employee score, and somehow she managed to muster enough enthusiasm to do better than her butter yellow the day before, though she wasn’t exactly green-coded either, but her thoughts were occupied by how . . . same it was. She tapped away at her keys for a number of hours, rejecting refund requests and siphoning through the analytics to determine the perfect marriage of addictability for consumers and acceptability in terms of credit pricing. It felt fouler, somehow, after talking to Caitlyn the last few days. All the products were so lifeless, colourless, their phones stuffed with ads and junk features and planned areas of obsolescence. In fact, for a time, she even forgot that she had changed at all, because it was Business. As. Usual.

She was a woman. She had breasts. She had a vagina. She now could make babies. People thought she was Brianna now, her own mysteriously appearing cousin. She wore a skirt and blouse instead of slacks and a shirt. Her emotions ran higher, her shape was different, her height reduced, and her walk was noticeably different.

And yet . . . *nothing had changed.*

“Holy shit,” she murmured to herself. “Nothing has changed.”

She raised her head up and looked around. Alan’s buddy What’sHisName was back at work, but winked at her, the pig. Peter was going up and down the aisle, being belligerent and judgy. Miriam was clicking away on her keys.

And here was Brianna, having experienced quite literally the change of a lifetime, a miraculous event that had changed her body, and at least a little in her soul, and was tied up with events of the future and time loops and apparently some kind of world that existed, impossibly, without total corporate dominance and control. It was unbelievable. It was unreal.

*And nothing had FUCKING CHANGED!?*

Brianna wheeled her chair over to Miriam, who looked up, startled.

“What are you doing? I don’t have five minutes talk allowance. We used it up!”

“Look, I just have a question,” Brianna asked, looking around a little. “About the matrix. About . . . babies.”

Miriam looked up, momentarily intrigued. “Okay, what is it?”

“It’s just . . . have you ever heard of anyone just . . . having a baby? Without the matrix, I mean?”

Miriam frowned. “What are you thinking about? You’re not planning on-”

“Oh, no! No way! It’s just . . . has it ever happened?”

“Well, of course it has,” Miriam said. “Office romances, pregnancy. It happens, but it’s foolish. It’ll bring your rating right down, and you’ll be demoted. Good luck supporting a future worker-”

“You mean a baby.”

Miriam opened her mouth for a moment. “Ye-es, you’re right. Baby. I *do* call them that, you know.”

“But we don’t always, do we?”

“I suppose not. Sorry, where is this going?”

Brianna wasn’t quite sure, but she found herself compelled to continue talking about it. “I guess I’m asking, can two people have a baby, you know, without the matrix, and still be happy together? You know, without relying on DynaCo and caring about demotion.”

Miriam looked around again. “This is the kind of stuff you should have stopped thinking about when you were young.”

“I’m only twenty four.”

“Younger, then. I know I did. Five years ago, your cousin Ben and I . . . anyway, the matrix is there for a reason.”

“DynaCo’s reasons. I just don’t - look, it’s possible, right? Two people find one another, and they can be together?”

“I don’t see how.”

“But it was, once, wasn’t it?”

“I’ve heard . . . stories.”

“Then it could be again. Just like I could come in tomorrow wearing colours. A bright yellow sweater, for instance. Or a blue skirt.”

“If you want to get demoted, Brianna! Work is Kindness. Work is Good. Work Will Make You-”

“Earn Your Food,” Brianna finished for her. “But is that all we are? I was talking to . . . someone, anyway. She said that people in the future might just marry for love and spend time away from work, making art-”

“Corporate art for marketing?”

“No, for themselves.”

Miriam swallowed, looked around. “I think we should stop talking about this.”

Wisely, Brianna did, returning to her desk. But the future Caitlyn had mentioned to her continued to rattle around inside the new woman’s mind. If being turned into a woman all of a sudden just made her a different cog, then had she really changed at all?

And what did that say about the world she lived in?

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When Brianna made her way back to her offsite cubicle at the end of the long, long day, she felt utterly confused about her place in the world. It was as if simply by existing, simply by being changed, she was setting how unchanging and stale the world around her was. A world in which the only colour was that of relentless, eye-catching advertisements. She had it on good insider authority courtesy of Peter Harvey that DynaCo would soon be able to beam advertisements directly into your brain while you slept. It would have been a standard progression to her that made sense just a few days ago. Now it seemed . . . wrong, somehow. When she wasn’t dreaming of men thanks to her horny new female body, she dreamed of her mother’s artwork. It was a sacred space, that sleep, away from DynaCo. Now that too would be fully colonised and taken over. Such understanding brought on a black and bitter mood for the former male, casting a grey cloud over her that was made worse by the sight of her tiny offsite cubicle. But when she stepped inside, she was in for a surprise.

Colour.

Loads of it, everywhere. Brianna’s jaw practically fell to the floor as she stared at the normally beige interior walls she had grown so accustomed to. Instead, they were now living murals. They depicted a landscape of greenery, beautiful trees and flocks of speckled birds

flying towards the setting sun, where the clouds turned pink and purple, bereft of any grey smog. A city was located on the left wall, but it looked so different to any city she recognised; the rooftops were covered in green bushes, the walls possessing trailing plants. There were no ads, but instead courts for young future workers - no, *children* - to play.

*Play.*

When was the last time she even thought of play or entertainment or leisure for its own sake except in terms of guilt and wasting efficiency?

“Oh, hello, Mo - I mean, Briana!” Caitlyn called, popping her head around the corner. “Sorry, I’d hoped to be finished by now. What do you think? Doesn’t it make the whole place simply *pop*?”

Perhaps Brianna might have been able to hold it in. Perhaps if she were still Benjamin, a man with a more stoic nature, capable of masking his powerful emotions behind a depressive mask, she could have achieved it. But not as Brianna. Not with just a few days under her belt as a woman, the estrogen flowing through her system and opening her soul to experience emotion openly.

Instead, she began to cry. A small cry at first, and then large, heaving sobs, tears flowing down her cheeks. She’d never felt like such a woman, and yet it brought a powerful catharsis as she took in this world of colour, of beauty, of *kindness*.

“M-Mom? Brianna? I’m sorry! I can get rid of it!”

Brianna tried to get hold of her feelings, but it was impossible. They flowed out of her, pouring like a river. It was like an entire lifetime of questioning what was missing in her world was suddenly displayed in this mural, which was so deeply talented that it could only have come from the child of an artist. When Caitlyn approached, Brianna actually reached out and gripped the girl into a hug. There was a moment’s pause, and Caitlyn returned the affection. Only after what felt like several minutes did Brianna manage to get the tears out of her system. It was strangely cathartic; as if she had started to purge something out of her, or perhaps let something lighter in.

“Do you like it?” Caitlyn asked, her face still pressed against Brianna’s.

“Who taught you to draw like that?”

“You did.”

Brianna choked back a sob and then raised her head up to take in the mural. “It’s beautiful,” she said. “It’s like another world.”

“It’s the one you help build,” Caitlyn said. “The one you’re *still* building. Isn’t that the kind of world you wish to create?”

Brianna said nothing, but kept her eyes on the mural.

It was indeed the kind of world she wished to *be* in. But create? As a woman? As a mother?

That still seemed so very impossible.

## **Part Five: Refund and Reform**

Brianna continued to turn these issues over in her mind across the following week. She was getting more used to being a woman, though to her frustration her libido was noticeably higher than it had been as a man, which was resulting in near-nightly pleasure sessions. Worse, all that talk of babies had put her brain in a damn curious mood. Now, she didn't just find herself masturbating to an attractive man making love to her body, but occasionally even the idea of one putting a baby in her. It was so taboo, so wrong, and it was clearly getting tangled up in the excitement of so many other anti-corporate taboos she was connected to which excited her also, albeit not so sexually. The thought of growing life in her new womb *without* permission, *with* someone she chose instead of being deemed 'compatible' with, it was rather enticing, at least when she was in the throes of arousal.

Unfortunately, such excitement didn't transfer to her work hours, which remained long and tortuous. She continued talking to Miriam, though such conversations could only be brief, and did her best to fool the scanners when she gave her recital of the Holy Slogans. Her new face had a natural optimism and beam to it, her smile huge, her eyes round and beautiful, and at least for now she stayed in the upper ranges of yellow. But the work was long, and whereas before it had been depressing in an ordinary way, hearing Caitlyn talk each day about *art* and *beauty* and *creativity* was making work all the more stifling. She'd already caught the girl sneaking out several times and chastised her, but she couldn't blame Caitlyn either: even by the standards of DynaCo, keeping a young girl locked up in an offsite cubicle alone for two weeks was too much. So, with Caitlyn's technological aid, the young woman was added to the Future Workers Program, but given strict instructions not to 'rock the boat.' So far, she hadn't.

So far.

It surprised Brianna, that her apparent future daughter, as she claimed, was able to keep her head down for four days straight. What was even more surprising, however, was that Brianna herself was the one to rock the boat *first*.

It began while attending to her refund work. DynaCo's official policy was to only allow less than one percent of all refund-applied items to actually be granted, in order to maximise profits. She was well aware that so many of DynaCo's product lines, including their new phones and wristechs, were completely faulty in order to require continual updates and mandatory engagement with its apps. Everyone knew this, of course. One didn't say out loud

how broken the system was; it was just how things went. The refunds put forward were far more often for tax purposes, or semi-autonomous DynaCo subsidiaries maintaining their claims forms to justify next year's increased spending. So when she received a message from a random customer, she was shocked at the tone.

*'Hey, I know I'm meant to be all polite and everything with these emails and pretend that the company is perfect and it's just a happenstance fault, but the Wristech 9 is, frankly, a piece of shit. It's garbage. It's trash. It barely works, keeps making me watch ads, includes subscription fees and hidden costs that weren't advertised, and the whole thing will be plastic, wiry junk in two months by how fragile it is!*

*I know no one will read this message. It probably just feeds into a gigantic computer somewhere so that an all-oppressive algorithm can suck out my soul and replace it with oh-so-glorious profit, but the fact is I'm fucking angry and I'm over it and I'm venting to the universe. This thing is garbage. This product, and the whole goddamn edifice holding it up. There, I said it. So if you can give me a refund, that would really be appreciated. It would be literally the least you can do.*

*Sincerely,*

*Jason Ling, who is very angry right now'*

Brianna paused. She'd not read many emails like this, not many at all. It was so frank, so truthful. It also made her chuckle a little at the clear frustration of the writer. Naturally, such a refund was to be immediately denied on the basis of not following the proper protocols, language, or respect for DynaCo as an all-loving, all-caring corporation. Except . . . that was bullshit, wasn't it? The new woman thought of Caitlyn's mural; the beauty of it, the freedom.

The expression.

She looked over at Miriam, hard at work with bags under her eyes. God, she looked so soulless these days, so intently focused on having a 'future worker' that all the things that made her vibrant were leeching out of her. Even her normally gorgeous dark skin seemed grey, somehow.

"Fuck it," Brianna whispered to herself. She began typing a reply.

*'Hello Jason Ling Who is Very Angry Right Now,*

*I'm very sorry to hear about your troubles with the Wristech 9. It is indeed a money-grubbing, time-wasting, plastic-polluting piece of shit, not that I'm allowed to write such things, but as you have been honest with me, so shall I be with you. If it's any consolation, I may be able to provide you with an unexpected refund because we at DynaCo are an all-loving company. The catch? You simply must buy the Wristech 10, which will be*

*announced as a major surprise in just a few weeks. I promise you that it will be an even bigger piece of shit than your current model, and if you are already tired of ads, just wait until they are beamed into your brain. That's coming too. What a wonderful world we live in, huh?*

*I have processed your refund and eagerly await your thoughts on the Wristech 10, or our society's nightmarish offsite cubicle policy, our horrific working hours, or any other part of this world that is just utterly, completely, fucking bullshit.*

*All the best and lots of (company mandated) love,*

*Brianna Barnes*

She clicked the email and sent it away. The former male was nervous for the rest of the day that Peter would tap her on the shoulder, but no one noticed. Nothing had changed. Everyone was stuck in their own little world, and she had slipped in a little bit of rebellion without a thought. Why had she done that? She knew the answer already, of course. A little girl had inspired her.

It kept a smile on her face for the rest of the torrid, boring day.

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When Brianna went to pick up her 'niece' Caitlyn from the Future Worker Training Centre, she immediately knew something had happened. Upon entering the building, it was clear the staff was agitated, as were other parents there to pick up their future workers. Brianna moved faster, heading to Creche 3 where Caitlyn had been placed. A staff member was outside the door, waving her arms frantically.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Barnes!" she cried. "I'm Emily! I - I've been working here for several years now, and I promise you I've never failed a future worker before. But your niece . . . I don't know *where* she got access to them, but-

"But what?" Brianna snapped.

The woman gulped. "But . . . well, you'll see."

She opened the door, letting Brianna through, and it was immediately obvious what Caitlyn had done. The grey learning room of the Future Worker Training Centre Creche 3 had been overturned with bright splashes of colour. Children were running about in excitement, throwing coloured dough at one another. The wall to the right had a gigantic mural of bright colour on it, displaying dragons, monsters, rainbows, sunflowers, and joyful figures with dubious limb proportions. Colour was whirring about the room, and a number of children were gathered around Caitlyn, oohing and aahing at the videos she was showing them: fields where children kicked play balls across the grass, riding bicycles along wild tracks, reading books that had nothing to do with DynaCo learning modules. Amusingly,

even a few of the employees were gaping it in wonder. Two of them, older, had tears in their eyes.

“Miss Leynard! I made you this dinosaur out of spare wristech parts to thank you for being our teacher!” It was a small child who had shouted this, and he brought his creation to Emily, who was still standing nervously beside Brinna. Emily took it nervously in her hands. She was only in her thirties, but something about her seemed old, as if life had beaten her down. And yet this simple act made her choke back a brief sob.

“Th-thank you, Thomas,” she managed. “But you should be on your learning modules right now.”

“But we’re having fun! And we’re learning new things! I’m gonna build a skateboard. I’m already learning the plans on how to do it. I just need to get the axles right!”

He ran off in excitement, leaving Brianna gobsmacked. It was like the children were running the asylum. The younger children were especially excited, overjoyed to have colour in their lives and information beyond how to be a good producer and consumer.

“I’m so very sorry!” Emily Leynard said. “Your niece Caitlyn, something is wrong with her wristech! But we don’t have permission to remove it; as soon as we tried to take it from her, we received a priority message from corporate to allow the child to do as she wished!”

Brianna arched an eyebrow as she observed Caitlyn giggling and taking requests on funny videos and strange wilderness sights to display for the children. They’d never have seen a forest, or an icy tundra, or even imagined a video without ads in their lives. Hell, Brianna couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen such.

“I suppose it’s a change from corporate,” Brianna said convincingly. “Clearly, they’re running an experiment that will make the future of these children more . . . prosperous. Profitable. Worthy.”

“Oh, of course! That makes perfect sense. I was so nervous, Miss Barnes!”

Brianna smirked out one side of her mouth. Even Emily was a little taken in by the colour of it all. Evidently, Caitlyn had been smuggled in some of the paint and brushes she’d illegally ordered from DynaCo with her hacking skills, and then let the kids run wild with it.

“You know, all this colour looks rather nice, don’t you think?” Brianna asked the caretaker.

Emily bit her lip, mulling those words over. “This isn’t a test, is it?”

“No, not in the least! It’s just . . . we don’t get much colour, do we?”

“Oh, in the adverts-”

“But in real life, I mean. Walking, talking, working, at home-”

“Home?”

“In our offsite cubicles, I mean,” Brianna continued. “We need more colour in the world, don’t you think?”

Emily nodded slowly. Something was igniting behind her eyes, a slight glimmer, a realisation that crept across her features and turned into the beginnings of a nervous smile, as if she were just now considering the possibility that the world could really be different. It was matched entirely by Brianna's own expression.

Perhaps it could be.

On the way home, Brianna noticed that Caitlyn was oddly quiet, her expression glum.

"What's wrong, kiddo?"

Caitlyn made a sound that Brianna recalled from her youth when her mother blew on her stomach. It was called a 'raspberry.' Then, it had been a moment of silliness, of joy. Now, it seemed more like frustration from Caitlyn, who was just blowing into the air.

"Those kids didn't know how to have fun, Mo - Brianna."

"Well, they were having fun at the end. I think even Miss Leynard was starting to choke up a bit. And you had a number of your teachers with you, totally absorbed in what you were showing off!"

"I know! But it's just . . . how much did I do? That was just one class, for one day. The world in this time is so grey. How do *you* do it?"

Brianna winced a little at this. "Look, Caitlyn, I'm still grappling with becoming a rulesbreaker, let alone becoming a woman, and let alone *times ten* being the fated saviour of humanity or whatever."

Caitlyn looked out the window. "You don't believe in yourself?"

"To do what?"

"To bring hope to people?"

"Caitlyn, as far as I can tell, you're the *only* one to bring hope to people so far, not me. And it *is* beautiful. It makes me think of my mother-

"Grandma?"

"Yes - I mean, no. I don't know. Do I talk about her in the future?"

Caitlyn turned her head back as they arrived at the offsite cubicle. "You say I have her eyes."

Brianna pierced into those dark orbs. "You know, I think you do. They're not the right colour, or the right shape."

"What? But in the future you say-

"*But*," Brianna continued, daring to poke her apparent future-child on the nose in a playful manner. "It's the same *look*. The love of creativity. The passion. The desire to make your mark upon the world."

Caitlyn beamed at this, all smiles again. The look faded quickly, though.

"What is it?" Brianna asked.

The young girl put her hand on Brianna's shoulder, stirring more of those warm maternal feelings again.

"It's just . . . if I have that look in my eyes, and grandma had that look too, then where's yours, Mom?"

It was like getting a hefty bill, or demoted, or *fired*, or simply having a sharp object cutting deep into the pit of one's stomach. Brianna considered again the effect that Caitlyn had had upon the future worker site.

"Maybe I just need time," she said. "Or help. Do you think you can use that fancy device of yours to help with something?"

And then Caitlyn was right back to beaming as Brianna told her the plan.

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Peter Harvey looked ready to have a heart attack as Brianna entered her workflow at DynaCo Analytics just a few days later. In her arms were large bunches of flowers, and in her satchel were numerous coloured printouts of what were normal *Classified Material*. Unlike Caitlyn's imaginings, these things were the real deal: gorgeous images of mountain vistas, low forest valleys, warm and inviting oceans. Importantly, each image had *people* in it: people of the past celebrating and laughing and posing before the camera on their adventures, enjoying free time and leisure and the wider, more colourful world. There was not an ad to be seen on the posters, or the photographic calendars, or any of the material she'd brought.

"What - what is this!?" Peter demanded, stomping his heavy form down the aisle straight towards her. Miriam was already gazing up in shock at Brianna, the woman's eyes wide with surprise and more than a little fear.

"I'm brightening up the office space," Brianna said. "I'll need you to sign these forms, sir," she continued, thrusting a clipboard at his beet-red face. "These flowers are decorative, but we'll need some vases for long-term display, and I know some would prefer Japanese peace lilies. We've also got some allowances here for longer bathroom breaks, longer maternity allowances, paternity as well. Hours are to go back to nine-to-five, naturally, though that can be instituted after this two week cycle, and there are numerous other worker-friendly reforms on the list, including questions of pay as well. There's also a special submission for office dating; naturally ethical considerations are to be made, but it should be above board now, provided both employees notify the office at the start of the relationship."

Peter was gobsmacked, his mouth flapping but no sounds coming out.

"Oh, and here's your flower, sir, and a poster to replace that one of the cat 'hanging in there.' I see you as the kind of man who would love a warm sunny beach, sir. Lots of colour,

lots of hope, lots of joy to get you through the day and remind us all that there's more to living than work, right?"

Peter finally found his voice. "And who in the damned Holy Work Slogans authorised this?"

She indicated the clipboard again, set the flowers down on Miriam's desk (the woman squeaked in surprise, but clearly appreciated the roses in particular) and then tapped her wristtech to bring up the approval that Caitlyn's magnificent device had been able to provide thanks to its innate hacking potential.

"As you can see, sir, this all comes from the highest levels of corporate. Consider it an experiment to focus on thanking employees and considering their welfare. It's *not* something to be discussed; not even all superiors know about it."

"I - I - this is all official! Why wasn't I informed!? Am I about to be demoted?"

Brianna placed her hand on his shoulder and smiled warmly. She was actually using a bit of her newfound feminine charm and confidence here, since she knew Peter rather liked the look of his newest female employee. He was no dog, at least, but she was well aware of how cute she was, and was now able to 'turn it on' a little.

"Oh, Peter, of *course* you're not being demoted. Who do you think gets to make the announcement for all of this? I was sent by corporate to assess changes for this program, and I've decided *you* are the perfect candidate for our new Work to Live program! Productivity will only go up when we take care of our employees, right?"

Peter blinked, then nodded rapidly. "Yes, yes, of course! If Corporate approves, then of course I do! The Line Must Go Up, after all!"

"Which reminds me, the last detail for our floor I forgot to mention: no more reciting of the Holy Slogans. Now, when people arrive to work, they can just . . . chat."

"Ch-chat?"

She smiled, and this time it was genuine. "Yeah, chat. To one another."

"About our DynaCo progress?"

"Nope! Just . . . chat. About whatever we want. It'll help morale. That's what, uh, the analytics say."

Peter was visibly sweating. Miriam's jaw was practically on the floor. Others, like Alan and his buddies were listening on this, whispering to one another, a ripple of excitement and disbelief spreading through the crowd. But Brianna had never felt so confident. She was a smaller, slimmer figure, a *woman*, and yet here she was, feeling like the tallest person around. Funny, what a change will do for you.

"Better get to announcing it, sir," she told Peter with a wink.

The man practically *dashed* back up the aisle to call a group meeting.

## Part Six: An Exchange of Emails

It was amazing how quickly a change in one's body normalised and yet . . . didn't. It had been several weeks now that Brianna had been, well, *Brianna*, and certain rituals and behaviours were now completely ordinary to her. The sway in her hips, the gentle bob of her breasts, the act of sitting down to pee or doing her makeup in the morning, though Caitlyn sometimes had to help her make a small correction. She had even decided to wear earrings, and Caitlyn had been most amused at Brianna's nervousness, clenching her eyes shut at the largely painless piercing, which allowed her to wear dangling jewellery in the shape of little white flying birds. It seemed *symbolic*, somehow.

She was a woman, and she accepted that, at least for now. It didn't make certain parts *not* strange. When Caitlyn had shown her footage from the future of people lounging on a beach, no work or office in sight, it had been a marvel. It had also been quite something else to see a tall, muscular, bronze-skinned man in little more than a pair of swimshorts, stretching and readying his body to play something called 'Beach Volleyball.' Brianna had watched the footage five times now, not telling Caitlyn why. The arousal followed her into the night, and so her acts of self-pleasuring continued, her body quaking with multiple orgasms as she imagined the man in the video penetrating her.

So yes, some things were strange. The male gaze upon her body was one of them. As was being so small and weak, and remembering to go to the women's bathroom at work. But small talk was becoming easier: Miriam was already experimenting with her makeup at work and had ordered a lovely purple work dress, and the two actually talked about fashion and interests *outside* of DynaCo. Hell, Miriam wanted to go *fishing* one day ever since seeing it in the new calendar, and Brianna never would have guessed *that* about the woman.

So her career was thriving, even if she was literally doing it by rebelling against the actual realities of DynaCo and its expectations. In just a week, her office space had transformed into a world of colour, to the point where the floors above and below were sending emails to see if they too could adopt these changes. Brianna had to borrow Caitlyn's wristech to actually instal a program to automatically reroute such emails straight to her instead, so that DynaCo's upper staff didn't catch on.

But it also provided an opportunity to study the device. For too long, she had been ignoring the necessity of unlocking the wristech and finding a way to revert herself. She could make a small difference, just for her floor or more of the office, but she couldn't change the world! That was too much, especially as a woman. This would have to do, and Caitlyn would . . .

She winced as she looked at the device while hiding in the bathroom. It wasn't even that hard to use; thanks to trusting Caitlyn, it responded automatically to her. She'd even linked her emails to it, so she could deal with any of their subterfuge even from her offsite cubicle.

"Fuck," she whispered to herself, slouching her slim little shoulders. "She can't be my daughter. She can't be. But if she is, and I turn back . . ."

Then what would happen? Would she cease to exist? Caitlyn seemed to think so. She was such a bright child. She was transforming the Future Worker Training Centre. Hell, she was even spreading cheer on the street: Caitlyn and her had started *walking* between the center and their 'home', as they now called it. On the way, Caitlyn loved the attention of her bright colours, complimented others on their hair, encouraged them to wear something that would work with their eye colour, and so forth.

"Lovely day!" she announced to a startled man. "Isn't it?"

"I really wish they didn't play those drone ads above us. It's look so much nicer if we could see the stars at this time, right?"

"Oh, you've got such lovely hair! I bet you could wear something red to go with it! You'd look amazing!"

From DynaCo's-knows-where she had even produced something called a 'basketball' and given it to a group of youths waiting to pick up shifts outside a nearby plastics factory. It had taken a long time to explain the rules, but by the end even Brianna was joining in, though she wished she'd had a more supportive bra after one too many jumps up against a makeshift iron hoop net.

These were all the images that stirred in her mind about the child, the one she now shared a smile with, not to mention those cute dimples and cute button nose.

"Shit," she muttered, sitting far too long in that bathroom stall. "What if she is my kid? I can't just . . ."

Her thoughts were terminated when a new email arrived, plinking up on the screen of the borrowed wristtech. To her surprise, it was from her customer over a week ago, the one who had sent the angry and amusing message: Jason Ling. Curious, Brianna opened the message and read it.

*'Hello Brianna Barnes,*

*Imagine my surprise when an actual, factual human being responded to my message! I must confess I hadn't even read my email from you until this morning. I had it put straight to the junk folder, in fact, until I realised I'd left it unread as I was clearing my cache this morning. I don't know who you are, Brianna, but thank you for the refund. Thank you even more for making my day! I'd almost given up hope of there being any actual human*

*face to DynaCo. I don't know if this is a sneak analytic just fooling me to buy that next model, but rest assured if it means I can receive another message from you to brighten my day, I will assuredly buy the next goddamn fucking corpo nightmare piece of bullshit that doesn't fucking goddamn freaking work. Even the Wristech 10.*

*All the best,*

*Jason Ling (a much LESS frustrated man that last time)*

Brianna giggled warmly upon reading the message. It was enough to get her some surprised attention; Miriam in particular was looking her way. She had her hair styled and her desk particularly decorated, though part of her was still reluctant over the whole 'work experiment' that Brianna had organised.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Oh, just a man I gave a refund to."

"You - you gave a refund to someone? Is it a senior member of the company?"

"No," Brianna said, shrugging. "He's just . . . some guy."

Miriam couldn't have looked more confused if she tried. "Brianna, I don't understand. These new experimental conditions, they're all very nice and everything, but the compatibility matrix still stands."

"You don't think you can just . . . find your special someone?"

Miriam scoffed at this. "There was a man I had an office romance with, once. Oh, to hell with it, I'll tell you. It was your cousin. Ben. It set us both back."

Brianna turned back to her email. "And whose fault is that?"

"Ours, obviously."

"No, we weren't wrong. I mean, you two weren't wrong. I'm starting to understand that now. It was the company. It was the system. It's always been the system. And now that there's a break, maybe there can be a flood, too."

Miriam turned back to her keyboard, further confused. But Brianna wasn't really talking to her anymore. She was composing a reply to Jason Ling. She felt compelled to; it was the first truly human connection she'd had with a customer in her entire life, from the creche to the centres to the training sites to the company office. It was small, and it was silly, but there was something precious about that, too. Like a peculiar uncovered from underground and placed upon one's shelf. Perhaps it was worth nothing, but to the one who found it, it could mean *everything*. She started to compose a reply.

*'Hello Jason!*

*I am very pleased that you aren't as frustrated as before, but I can tell you that I am very frustrated, because I was enjoying having another angry person around to vent with!*

*Your refund is processed, and this should be my last reply to you, confirming that all is well and you are satisfied with DynaCo's caring attitude. However, if you wish, I'd be more than happy to continue this conversation. Call me insane, if you wish, but I miss human connection like this. The world is so goddamn sterile, and I've had it up to my fucking ears with how commodified, consumerised, processed, marketed, advertised and artificialised everything has become. Maybe I'm just begging to be demoted, who knows?*

*With care,  
Brianna*

She went back to her work, as mind-numbing as it was, but when her lunch break came, she found herself at the watercooler, talking with Miriam and Alan, who thankfully wasn't staring so much at her ass anymore; not now that Sally Piper was wearing some slacks that did her backside quite a bit of surprise justice.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Oh, just about how we can regain some of the efficiency we're losing," Miriam said. "All of this is well and good, but what about the Line? It's not going up if we don't commit!"

There was a murmur of agreement.

"You're kidding," Brianna said flatly. "We're finally getting some breaks, some colour, some bloody *life* in here, and you want it to go back? What's wrong with you?"

There was a lull as they all processed this sudden outburst. Brianna grabbed a cup from the water cooler and filled it.

"That's it!" she declared. "New conversation! It can't be anything DynaCo related."

This caused a bit of a gasp, and possibly even the beginnings of a rumour. Brianna found herself barrelling ahead, practically speaking *treason*, and yet somehow desiring to get away with it anyway.

"I want us to talk about *holidays*," she said firmly. "Holidays, and hobbies. We've got more free time now, and the pay is going up, so let's get out from under the thumb of this goddamn dystopian routine and actually think about what *we* want. Not for the company, but for ourselves. Not even as workers, but as *people outside of work*."

"I - what?" someone said, probably Elizabeth from the sound of her.

Brianna buried her face in her hands for a moment.

"I know it sounds crazy, but I think this is how people *used* to be able to talk. Let me try it. Those calendars, I keep looking at the one with the picture of the great sunny meadow, with the grassy hill. I want to throw myself down that hill."

"Oh, it'd be a great photoshoot!" Fred exclaimed in his high voice. "We could pull off a marketing coup de grace with such a scene! Perhaps advertise our latest camera filters and-"

“SHHHH!” Brianna practically shouted, putting a finger on his lips. “Not for work, remember. I mean, for corporate’s sake - I mean, for the hell of it, I want to just roll down that hill for me! Alan, you’ve been looking at the beach scenes, haven’t you?”

Alan blushed a little, then scratched the back of his head. “I guess . . . would be nice to learn how to swim. Seems like something a man oughta know.”

“That’s great, that’s really great, Alan! Miriam, now it’s your turn.”

Miriam looked about, clearly feeling trapped. “We shouldn’t be talking about this.”

“Just answer the question. Corporate isn’t listening. This is *our* break. You have a right to hope! What is it you’d do?”

“I’d have a baby,” she said suddenly. “An actual baby. Not a future worker.”

“That’s the same thing, isn’t it?” Heather said.

“No, it’s not,” Brianna said. “Is it, Miriam? You want a baby for *you*.”

Miriam was hesitant, but continued. “I think my father once told me that babies were treasures. I thought . . . I thought he meant they had economical value for the company. But maybe . . . they could be fun to play with? I just want to hold a baby, and know it’s mine, and love it not for what it does.”

“Exactly!” Brianna exclaimed. “Babies are adorable, aren’t they? I could imagine myself with one after that description.”

She paused, realising what she had said, and felt a blush in her cheeks. She managed to avoid touching her own stomach at the thought, and instead turned on Fred.

“And you, Fred?”

His eyes went down and he shuffled his feet. “I thought about, well, how interesting it would be . . . no, it’s blasphemous.”

“Go on,” Brianna said, feeling her female intuition rising to the compassionate occasion. “Tell us, Fred.”

“Yeah, tell us,” Elizabeth said.

“I thought . . . fishing would be nice. I saw a picture once, of people like my ancestors fishing. It was for themselves. For fun, I think. It’s a stupid thought.”

“It isn’t!” Brianna exclaimed. “Not at all. Someone else go now!”

The conversation continued like that, slowly growing in passion, and soon such lively debate and chatter was becoming commonplace. It was so utterly bizarre, to see people talking about things *other* than DynaCo. Even Peter joined in, though the boss was clearly struggling to define himself outside of work, he really was trying.

“I’d like . . . to knit,” he finally admitted.

Miriam struggled to contain her laughter, but Elizabeth actually widened her eyes at this. “I used to knit!” she proclaimed. “Back when . . . I think it was my grandmother who taught me.”

“Did you monetise it?” Peter asked her.

“N-no, the analytics didn’t support it as profitable enough. But I think I remember it giving me peace. I could . . . we could do it together, if you like? During a break, obviously.”

Brianna marvelled. She couldn’t *stand* Peter. He was paternalistic, condescending, and more than a little arrogantly obsessed with efficiency and slogans. And now, here he was, showing a totally different side of himself as he scratched at his balding hair and went rosy in the cheeks.

“Oh, that would be very nice, Lizzie,” he said.

*Lizzie!?* And yet, Elizabeth smiled at this affectation, and soon the two were eagerly discussing knitting of all things, while the rest of them were thinking of what they could cook together using their DynaCo-approved pre-readied ingredients to produce - and this was the real catch - something with actual *taste*. Flavour! And this wasn’t even in the allowances Brianna and Caitlyn had managed to hack into the database; now, these people were making their own quiet rebellions. Hell, even Miriam was talking to Alan, giving him shit about his stupid comments, but standing . . . oddly *close* to him at times, laughing at his jokes a little too much. Maybe it was just that she was a woman now, but Brianna couldn’t help but feel a little overwhelmed by this, and deeply proud of herself to boot.

She became even more excited when she saw the reply in her email.

*Dear Brianna (and I hope the ‘dear’ isn’t too much?),*

*I would absolutely love to keep on talking! This is basically my only regular human contact in a world of drones, to be honest with you! And if it means being demoted, well, it’s not like I can be demoted much further! At the risk of outing myself as a bit of a low-level employee (the HORROR, I know!), I basically help with programming for DynaCo’s relentless, never-ending marketing campaigns. It was how I was able to open up the wristech and see what a colossal piece of shit it was; the programming is hella bugged! But hey, it let me talk to you, Brie. Do you mind if I call you Brie, or is that presumptuous?*

*Well, if I am being presumptuous, you can know a bit more about me. I’m Jason Ling. I work in DynaCo Programming in the sub-floors (yeah, depressing, I know). I like computers, I like tech, but one thing I really, truly miss is hiking. My Dad used to take me before the Corporate Wars were settled, and I find I miss nature a lot. Call me sentimental I guess, huh?*

*Anyway, I’ve stupidly enclosed a photo of me for you to see. I figure we might as well put a human face to a human experience, right?*

*Sincerely,*

*Jason (feeling pretty self-conscious now).*

Brianna had work to get back to, but she found a warmth flooding her body as she read the email. It wasn't just human connection, either. There was something more to it, and she was able to identify what it was once she opened the photo and stared at the photo of Jason Ling.

He was . . . rather cute, actually. He wore glasses, and his black hair was short and slightly spiky, as if he'd just gotten out of bed, but in a handsome way. His ears were a little too big for his head, and he had a kind of geeky look to him, but he was smiling in the image, and it was a *nice* smile. The kind of smile that could light up a woman's world. She knew he wasn't staring at her - how could he be? - and yet it felt like he was. It didn't hurt that he was surprisingly fit looking. Not jacked or anything - who could be except for DynaCo-paid influencers and advertisement-featured actors? But he didn't look out of shape, and he wore a handsome blue button shirt, one he was rather cheekily covering the DynaCo logo on with one hand.

"Oh," Brianna said out loud, realising her own feelings. "He's . . . oh, wow. He's good looking. Shit. Fuck. Stupid female body."

She whispered this under her breath, knowing that Miriam had her own distractions, laughing at something Alan had sent her. The liveliness of the office now hid her own reactions, but she saved the photo and sent it to her own wristtech, hoping DynaCo wouldn't notice. Then, she quickly took a photo of herself.

Then deleted it.

Then fixed up her hair a little, and opened up her draw to reapply her lipstick.

Then took another photo.

Then became immediately dissatisfied, and opened up the top button of her dress to let herself look a bit more relaxed, and possibly a bit more cute and attractive.

*That* picture was more successful. With a smile, she attached it to her follow up email.

*'Dear Jason (and I do like the 'dear', don't worry)*

*I don't think less of you for your work, I think it sounds fascinating! I too would love to go on walks! I miss nature; can't remember the last time I saw it actually. Instead, boring fucking office stuff. Though I'm also attaching some images of what we're doing in the workplace: it's livening the place up and we're actually talking about things other than work here. Call it a quiet revolution.*

*As for me? I want to do art again. To paint and create, and make something that reflects me and my soul. I want to find out who I am, and paint just like my mother once did. She told me once that it was an act of rebellion, so perhaps it's time to rebel.*

*By the way, you look very cute in your picture. Handsome, actually. I've attached a photo of myself. I hope I look alright.*

*With care,*

*Brie (who is smiling as she reads your messages, and rather likes the name 'Brie')*

She sent the email off before she could stop herself, before her racing heart could tell her otherwise. And then the former male buried herself in her work, trying not to think of this man who was increasingly less of a stranger to her. Still, she brought up his photo every so often and sighed a little. It was just her female hormones, she knew. And yet . . .

. . . and yet perhaps it was something more. A connection that went beyond her physical change, all the way to changes that went much deeper than skin and flesh.

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When she went back home - and yes, she was thinking of it as *home*, now - she practically burst through the door to tell Caitlyn the news. Her future daughter had already sent a message that she had gone home early about something and not to worry, and so Brianna stormed in, full of excitement.

"Caitlyn!" she declared. "You won't believe it! The new contract is working! Not only are people actually talking about things other than DynaCo, but there's office romance, and people organising workarounds for the food policy, and I'm pretty sure Peter is okaying the floors above and below us to have some leniency just like our new contract, just to improve morale, at least so he claims. It's wonderful! And - and I've been talking with this man over the computer and-"

She stopped immediately when she saw Caitlyn. Usually, the girl was so buoyant, but now her arms were crossed, and she had an angry expression on her face as she sat in the small kitchen/living room/dining area of the small offsite cubicle. Her yellow jacket hung over the seat, but her pink shirt was bright, matching the mural behind her.

"You were trying to program my wristech," she said in a flat voice.

Brianna stopped mid-excited outburst. She dropped her bag and purse to the floor.

"Caitlyn, I was just trying to use it to see how I could expand upon the work we've done," she said. "We've already done so much, I thought if I could use it further to-"

"You were trying to change back," Caitlyn said. She tapped on the wristech's screen, and a week's worth of history showed up, including what Brianna had been trying to do with the firewalls. "You were looking for a way to lock me out and make yourself a man again, and then keep on using my wristech to make life better for you."

Brianna considered formulating another lie, but something in Caitlyn's expression made her look away, amplifying her obvious guilt.

"Look, can you blame me, Caitlyn? You come into my life, turn me into a woman against my permission—"

"Because that's what you're meant to be!"

"I don't know that! I still don't!"

"But you're enjoying it! You're even wearing a dress today!"

Brianna looked down and blushed a little. It was indeed her first day wearing an actual dress, albeit one that was work-friendly. It was burgundy in colour, going down to her ankles but fitting her body well without being too tight. It looked professional and stylish, and coupled with her jewellery and light makeup, she felt more confident as a nice-looking lady in the office.

"Look, I'm trying to adapt," she said. "But you changed me without permission. You didn't even warn me, Caitlyn! You came into my life and made all these changes, transforming me against my will, and then made me see all this beauty! And I'm thankful for that, but did you honestly not see this coming? This is a world in which people do anything to get ahead and clamber over one another for promotion. I figure I can make my life better and those I care about, carve out my little niche, and things will be okay. How bad is that, really?"

Caitlyn frowned. Tears were forming in her eyes. "And I wouldn't exist."

"You don't know that. I still don't believe we're even related fully. At least, not always."

Caitlyn sniffed, clearly choking back more of the tears. "After all this, you don't believe? Well, I don't know how you can be my Mom, either! You're so different from her! She's so loving and artistic and caring and passionate and kind, and you keep reaching out to be like her and then snatching your hand back! You're so afraid in this time that I barely recognise you! You're like a shadow of her!"

Brianna looked away again. Her own hormones were making her own eyes a bit teary. "We're all shadows, kid. It's just the way of the world. I'm trying to do my bit, but you're asking too much of me. I mean, what am I even supposed to do about all of this?"

"Find Dad!" Caitlyn shouted. "Mom couldn't give me all the details, and she said some might change because the past isn't totally set, or the future, but we need, like, to find Dad already! So you two can meet and fall in love and then what you do spreads out to everything and the world starts to heal and get better again!"

She was fully crying at this point, and it twisted Brianna's intestines up in knots just to see it. That maternal feeling inside of her was desperately struggling for her to follow her instincts, to drop all the arguments and run over and *hug* this girl with all the love she had. All the love she'd come to *realise* she had.

But she held back. The male part of her still screamed, needing to return. The fear of DynaCo was stronger than the love she had for Caitlyn, and it was *love*, however nascent.

“Look,” she said, moving closer and placing a hand on Caitlyn’s shoulder. “I’m not ready for that, kid. I probably never will be. We’ll find some other way to make sure you exist. There’s probably been a mistake somewhere.”

“Yeah,” Caitlyn said. “A mistake.”

She got out of her seat and headed out of the home, though it felt more like an offsite cubicle once more.

“Where are you going?” Brianna said.

“To go play basketball with the kids down the street. At least *they* want to see a better future.”

“DynaCo security won’t like that.”

Caitlyn shot her a glare as she put on her yellow jacket. “I’m not scared of DynaCo. And you shouldn’t be either.”

She walked out the door before Brianna could stop her. The former male sat on the warm kitchen seat that Caitlyn had just exited and cried a little, wiping her tears away and not truly understanding them.

“What is wrong with me?” she asked. “What am I going to do?”

It was so much easier when there were just slogans and work and no thought, so much easier . . . and so much worse.

There were no easy answers.

## **Part Seven: AWOL**

Brianna’s uneasy situation continued at work. The workplace was livelier than ever, and people were actually looking refreshed each morning now that the hours were only nine-to-five. Rather than being run down, people arrived with jokes, good cheer, and mocking comments about that damn cat who was always hanging in there. Peter Harvey was struggling a little to adapt to it all, but the workers had a shared, unspoken agreement to butter him up with compliments, which slowly made him more enthusiastic for the program. It didn’t hurt that they had a coffee machine now, courtesy of ‘Lizzie.’ The pair took their lunch break around it, comparing the dull flavours and trying to source better ones with actual coffee grain, and also knitting. Peter was a disaster at it, yet every time Brianna passed him, he looked rosy-cheeked in the presence of Lizzie.

“I can’t believe how much this place has changed,” Miriam said, gazing around.

“Maybe DynaCo actually does care about us? There’s a rumour going around that they’re

going to dismantle the compatibility matrix and let people, well, go with who they want to go with. Isn't that crazy?"

Brianna blinked. "Yeah, that *is* crazy. Would be kinda nice though, wouldn't it?"

Miriam blushed, looking briefly back at where Alan was, several cubicle rows down.

"Yeah, kinda crazy," she said, biting her lip so as not to smile so obviously. "But I like to imagine it. It could really happen, what with all the changes happening."

Brianna put on a false smile, but part of her shuddered. This was *not* exactly being covered in her reforms. She'd managed to downplay the matrix a little, allow a little office romance, but Caitlyn's tech could only go so far with just one future wristtech available. So where were the rumours coming from? Clearly, the hope she'd allowed to dawn across the office was now spreading beyond the source. Already, she'd seen an employee argue with Harvey about allowing after-work drink gatherings to return, and he was starting to capitulate. It gave her the uneasy sense that things were starting to very much slide out of control, and so she kept her head down.

"What about you, Brianna?" Miriam said.

"Huh?" Brie said - she was thinking of herself as 'Brie' now, thanks to Jason's email.

"If you were able to be with someone and share an offsite cubicle - a sort of 'home', I guess - with them, then who would you do it with?"

Brianna was stunned by the question. "Well, I hadn't thought of that much. I've been working-

"Please, you're the one who helped start all of this! I mean, God, how different are things here? I've been trying to get in contact with your cousin, Ben. Benjie would have loved all of this. I don't think we were right for each other, but he deserved to see this. Please tell him what's happening, please. I've sent records to other departments across the city so they can find out, particularly since he might work in some."

Brie's heart caught. This really *was* spreading. "Oh, well, I'll tell him. You don't need to do all that."

"I know. I shouldn't have. I'm meant to be responsible. Eyes on the prize and all that. But sometimes . . . I think there are other ways of getting the prize. But you're evading the question: any romantic interest?"

Brie saw that a new email had arrived from Jason. Her heart skipped a beat.

"M-maybe," she said.

*Dear Brie,*

*Are you sure you aren't in advertising? No, that's not right. You're far too real for that. It's just that I had this image of you in my head and somehow you matched it exactly, only more beautiful than I thought you were! Please ignore me if I'm gushing or being awkward,*

*but I love your hair. I've always thought a pixie cut looked very pretty on the right woman, and it fits you perfectly.*

*As for art, I never much caught on to it. But I'd like to know more about it. Did you mother have a particular style? Do you? I imagine you working with paints, for some reason. Paints, perhaps working on a great canvas until it was perfect. I don't know why, but I have this image of you in my head, and I can't get it out. It makes me want to meet you in person, because I wish now that I knew what you sounded like.*

*With good cheer,  
Jason'*

Brianna could barely keep her mouth from smiling, to the point where it hurt a little. She thought of Caitlyn's daring, of Miriam's growing excitement, of the blossoming romances in the normally despondent office, and then she opened her recording program.

"Hello Jason," she said, adding a small purr to her tone. "I hope the sound of my voice is what you imagined. I'd love to hear yours someday, maybe even in person . . ."

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When she arrived home, it was a true struggle for Brie not to break out into endless giggles and smiles. A number of ordinary DynaCo citizens looked her way with confusion, especially since her dress sense was so colourful compared to theirs, but she didn't care; she revelled in it, and encouraged them to be the same, in much the way Caitlyn had. Like daughter, like mother, she supposed.

"Don't worry about me!" she announced to a confused teen girl walking past. "I'm just happy! There's nothing wrong with it!"

"I know it's purple, don't worry," she said to an older man who was silently judging her. "And yes, it still feels weird to wear, but I'm sure you can find a way to wear something colourful too! Trust me, it'll change your whole perspective!"

One man in his early twenties stared at her, mouth hanging open.

"Is everything okay there?" Brie asked him.

"It's just . . . you look pretty rad. I saw a picture once of a chick with shorter hair like that, only it was with a mohawk. Looks fuckin' sweet."

Brie chuckled. "Hell yeah. I'd bet you'd look fuckin' sweet in it as well, right?"

The young man blushed. He was in grey coveralls and clearly worked in the Censor Department, to judge by his badge. The exact kind of person you'd want to help foment change and get a little more freedom and humanity in the world, since he could let a few

things slip by the upper censors, like breadcrumbs from a now-heavily monetised fairytale book.

“You really think so? I mean, they’d never go for it anyway.”

“I’m sure there’d be ways of hiding it. But then again, if you found others like you . . . safety in numbers, right?”

The man grinned. “Fuck yeah.”

“Fuck yeah indeed,” Brie said, holding out her fist. “It’s a fistbump. You gotta knock it.”

The man did so and nodded, self-satisfied. “Yeah, I like that. I think that carries.”

“Damn right it does. Hope to see a mohawk soon!”

“Wait, what’s your name?”

Brie considered withholding it, but she knew she couldn’t, not really. People had to put a face to a name. That was literally the revelation she’d had.

“Brianna,” she said. “Brianna Barnes. But you can call me Brie Barnes if you want.”

“Douglas,” he said. “But . . . I kinda like Dougie more, not that they let me be called that.”

“Well, maybe it’s time we start making them, right? See ya round, Dougie. Make some changes. I know I am.”

She waved goodbye to him and headed down the street, practically skipping down it. The reason was obvious: not only was there better cheer at work, but she was getting better at spreading a quiet rebellion in the street. And more than that was the sound of Jason’s voice in the reply she’d received just before she’d clocked out:

*“I’ve never sent a voice recording before. I hope I don’t sound ridiculous. I loved hearing your voice Brie, by the way. It’s a beautiful voice. Do you sing? I like to sing. I can’t sing for shit, I don’t think, but that’s the point of singing, I think; you feel it even if you aren’t good at it. It doesn’t have to be something marketable. You know, I have some old records stashed away in my cubicle-office. Don’t tell anyone, but sometimes I play them at low-volume and just listen to these sounds from another age. Took forever to get a system working that could do it, but I’m good with tech, as I’ve said. Sorry, I’m rambling. I’d like to talk more. Can we make this a regular thing? It’s nice having a friend. Yeah, I said it, I consider you my friend. I hope you see me as a friend, too.”*

She did. Her body perhaps more than that.

It also meant another tense meeting with Caitlyn, and perhaps . . . an apology. It was wrong to have tried to hack the wristtech, she knew that. And for all that Caitlyn was also in the wrong, she was just a kid, one terrified of not existing and clearly lost in this new world. Brie didn’t want to make her anymore uncomfortable than she already was. The girl was a spot of colour in a whole world canvas of grey, and where she truly was Brie’s future

daughter from the future or not, Brianna knew that if she was to have a daughter like Caitlyn, she'd be immensely proud of her.

"So damn proud," she whispered to herself as she reached the Future Worker Training Centre. But when she stepped inside, a look of confusion came over Emily Leynard's face. "Miss Barnes," she said. "Did Caitlyn leave something here?"

"No, I'm just here to pick her up."

Further confusion, enough to send a warning right down Brie's spine.

"I'm not sure I understand. You called us six hours ago to say that Caitlyn was to be released at midday; she had a corporate internship assignment to get on with."

Brianna cursed under her breath. Caitlyn must have mimicked her voice somehow, probably using her future wristtech. "I - oh course, silly me. I must be getting home."

"Home?" Emily said. "You mean your offsite cubicle?"

Brie smiled warmly. "Not at all. My home. It's like a cubicle, only with more colour and a whole lot more love. Like your new Creches seem to have a bit of."

Emily Leynard blushed a little, her eyes wandering to the rooms where one could see through the glass windows to the murals and colourful creations of the children within.

"Yes, well, it spread a little from Caitlyn. We hope we aren't displeasing DynaCo."

Brie narrowed her eyes. "Who fucking cares if we are? Kids deserve to be happy."

With that, she turned on the spot and headed out straight to her car, then drove on home, a nervousness in the pit of her stomach. She reached her home. Yes, her *home*, small and cubicle-like as it was. Perhaps *their* home was a better way to put it; it was as much Caitlyn's as her own.

"Caitlyn!" she announced as she stepped through the door. "You shouldn't be signing out from the Training Centre! Look, I know you're eager to ensure your future, but can't we just take small steps on this? I think I'm making progress, especially with this, well, this man I've been talking to. He's sort of a kindred spirit and - Caitlyn?"

There was no sign of her. Brie's anxiousness rose in her heart, and she did a double-sweep despite her apparent future daughter obviously being absent.

"Caitlyn!?" she called, leaning her head out the door. "Where are you? Caitlyn?"

The worst possibilities filled Brianna's mind. Images of Caitlyn being found out by the corporate state and dragged away by its private police mercenaries. Of her being assigned to a much crueler creche, forced to toil endlessly upon numbers on a screen or sorting bits of plastic in a machine factory somewhere.

"Caitlyn!? CAITLYN!? Come out and -"

The former male paused as she caught sight of the folded note on the dining table, the one just in her right periphery. Slowly, hesitantly, her heart quaking in her chest, Brianna approached the table and carefully unfolded the note. Caitlyn had, rather predictably, a

flowing and flowery script as her handwriting, but her words were anything but her usual cheer and cheekiness. Instead, they made Brianna's heart drop.

*Dear Brianna,*

*I love you so much, but you aren't the Mom I know. I knew you would be different, but I had no idea how much. I thought you would fill this world with colour and light, but something went wrong and I failed you. So I'm going with Plan B. I'm going to go find Dad. I don't know where he is, but I'll find him. He loves you so much in my time, just like you love me and your children. You're meant to find one another, so I'll just have to make sure it happens. And when it does, everything will be okay. It has to be. I promise I'll be safe, and I'm sorry I couldn't make you believe in me.*

*Love,*

*Your daughter Caitlyn*

Tears fell down Brianna's face, and she found herself sniffing in order to prevent herself from outright sobbing. She crunched the note in her hand, shaking a little. She'd had no idea how much she'd shaken the girl's confidence in a better world. Had she been pushing her away the whole time? Had she really left it up to Caitlyn to make sure that better world came about? Or was she just being realistic?

"No," she told herself. "If I'm being realistic, then *fuck* realism. I want that better world. And I want that girl back. I want . . . my daughter back."

*Daughter.* It was the first time she'd used that simple, yet oh-so-powerful word in reference to Caitlyn. And yet, perhaps for the first time, it felt truly real. Those maternal feelings were rising to the surface and transferring seemingly through time, aching for this girl to be okay.

"I'll find you, Caitlyn," she told herself. "I'll find you and make everything right. This doesn't have to be on your shoulders alone."

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Unfortunately, tracking down a girl who technically didn't exist fully was a lot harder than Brianna had assumed. The Future Working Training Centre and its Creche 3 only had the relevant documents that Caitlyn's wristtech had conjured up in order to be enrolled, but all other details were effectively missing - not created because they were effectively unnecessary. This left Brianna worrying more and more. She asked the teen boys that Caitlyn had taught basketball, but they could only provide a direction the 'girl in yellow' had walked, nothing more. She'd asked for any hints from Miss Leynard, but the woman could

offer nothing, and Caitlyn didn't want to reveal that she was actually missing; if the state knew this, things would get a whole lot worse. She tried to use her own wristech and work computer to try and track the lonely girl down, but she wasn't a programmer; she had no idea what she was doing, and any attempt to re-establish a connection between her tech and Caitlyn's from her own end failed.

A whole two days passed. Things in the office were spiralling out of control; another two floors were gaining further worker rights and good deals, and apparently other major offices across the city and beyond were following what was becoming known as the 'Barnes Deal', which made her nervous indeed. It would only be a matter of time before Corporate caught on and overwhelmed the digital filters that Caitlyn had put in place. Others were starting to figure out that this situation might not last as well: Brianna had tried to go to a private closet to make another hacking attempt upon Caitlyn's wristech to locate her position, only to hear Miriam moaning within, and grunts that sounded suspiciously like they had come from Alan.

*"Ohhhh, yesss! Put a b-baby in me! I want you to knock me up before it's - ahhh - too late!"*

It would have been a little arousing to Brianna - the thought of pregnancy seemed so much more real now that she was starting to worry about 'her little girl' - but her fear for her daughter was paramount above all else.

It was only when she got back to her computer and saw another playful email from Jason Ling that she realised what she needed to do. The man was a hacker, after all.

*'Dear Jason,*

*It's time we meet. I really want to see you in person. And I've got a huge, huge, huge favour to ask . . .'*

## **Part Eight: Meeting the Man**

Brianna exited work early. Even by the standards of what was happening at work, this was a clear overreach. Things were breaking down though; some files and inquiries were starting to get past Caitlyn's firewall, and it was clear that other departments could not be as well shielded; there was confusion all across DynaCo, and it seemed to cover a larger and larger section of the eastern seaboard. Brianna could barely believe what she and Caitlyn had started to put in motion, but for now it gave her the cover she needed to get out of work with a flurry of excuses about the situation, and quickly get to her car. Jason had given her his

address: it was just across town in a more smog-ridden and industrial area. Brie felt oddly unsafe moving through it, but she had to check herself again and again; people here were still human, not Demoted. That was just DynaCo's dehumanising way of putting it, and she wasn't falling for their bullshit any longer. So instead she waved to those she passed on the street and smiled at them while walking straight towards the mega-offsite cubicle complex where Jason lived. He was on level six, room twenty-three. She was wearing a surprisingly feminine and colourful light-blue dress, one that contrasted against her lovely dark brown hair and her huge brown eyes. She wrapped upon the door, a nervousness still filling her, a need to be acting *now* to find Caitlyn.

The door opened almost immediately, and there was Jason, dressed in the beige tones of a company shirt. No, that wasn't quite right; he was sporting a coloured tie, which was supposed to be only a C-suite level privilege or for certain managers, and he'd actually scratched the DynaCo logo off of the clothing and sewed it back together.

"Jason?" she said.

"Brianna?" he replied, adjusting his glasses, a hopeful smile upon his features.

"Oh, thank goodness!"

She jumped forward into his arms without a second thought. The handsome Asian man made a brief startled noise and then caught her, holding her firmly but professionally as she wept a little into his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry!" she said, letting it all out. "I didn't know who else to ask for help! I need to find her. She's my everything."

He patted her back awkwardly. "There, there. We'll find her. Come in. But close the door. I've got some tissues here among the junk, but . . . be warned, the place is a bit messy."

'Messy' was an overstatement. The place was filled with electronic junk and exposed wires and discarded wristechs and computer monitors.

"What on Earth is all of this?" Brianna asked, stepping carefully past it and accepting the tissue he'd offered. "Are you doing repair work for DynaCo in your spare time?"

"Not . . . exactly," he answered, adjusting his glasses by habit. "I told you I like programming in my spare time. Well, certain events recently have inspired me to get more involved. You've heard about the Barnes Deal, right? It's sweeping across the corporation, and the upper management are struggling to figure out who it came from, or why it's been allowed, and even their directives to end all the worker rights it has granted keep coming up against a firewall. Crazy stuff, right?"

Brianna blushed. She almost wished her hair was long, so she could hide behind it. "I didn't mean for it to go this far, I swear! It was just an opportunity, and my daught - er, I mean my *niece* was teaching me so much about the colour and life the world could have again, the

free time and the leisure and the love and - and *all of it!* It was just meant to be my floor and-

Jason stopped her, placing both his hands on her upper arms. It was a soft touch. A tender touch, one that made her nearly shiver from the lovely sensation of it.

"Wait a moment," he said, examining her closely. It didn't feel so bad, to be subjected to his gaze. "I know your last name is Barnes, but I assumed this was a coincidence. You're not - are you saying that this all started with *you!*?"

Profit, she hated how red her cheeks were getting, how much her blood was rising to the surface. Brie tried to maintain the stare of this handsome, clearly intelligent man, and found herself wanting him, and in more ways than one at that.

"I don't think you'd even believe me. My niece . . . she's a genius with tech. She helped build the firewall. I barely understand it, but it allowed me to claim that corporate was easing off on worker control, to stop the goddamn slogans, to give us some fucking free time again! To remember what it was like to be *human*, not just in our own lives but to one another. To be *kind*. And I just . . . never stopped it. But the firewall has started breaking down and-

"I know," Jason said, amazement on his face. "I've been doing my best to plug the holes. To keep it going and to spread the message."

Brianna's jaw dropped. She looked around at the bits and pieces around her, the parts of the puzzle clicking into place. "You've been salvaging old bits. That's why you hated the new wristech . . . it's incompatible."

"Also the bloody ads," he said, grinning. "I wasn't lying in my email. God, and I was talking to the woman who invented the Barnes Deal! I could - I mean, hell, I could kiss you!"

Her jaw dropped and she had to snap it back up quickly. A moment of silence and sheer, unrivalled tension passed between them. She brushed her short hair and looked away, as did he.

"Look, you're my only real friend other than Miriam at work, and the only one who is willing to tell corporate to go to hell," she said quietly. "I . . . I trust you. I've only just met you and I trust you. Please, will you help me? I can pay you, I can do something to help you, maybe I can shore up the Barnes Deal and-

To her surprise, Jason held up one finger to silence her, then smiled so warmly it seemed like the sun was rising, finally revealing itself beyond the endless layers of ads and holograms that continually blocked its sight from the city sky.

"Brie, I'd help you even if you had nothing to do with the Barnes Deal. You're my friend. Maybe my only friend in a world like this, too. And if I can be as bold as I was in my email - you're frustratingly cute, too."

At this, she found herself beaming. “Thank you,” she said, pressing her body against him, holding Jason in a hug. He was surprisingly tall.

She rather liked that.

“Don’t thank me until we’ve found her,” he said. “I might need your help, though. How good are you at analytics?”

Brinna smirked and folded her arms beneath her pert breasts, unintentionally showing off more of their shape to the good-looking Jason.

“Pretty damn good,” she boasted.

“Right on.”

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The pair worked hard over the following hours. Unfortunately, it meant disconnecting some protective parts of Jason’s firewall booster, but there was little time to try and shore it up, not when Caitlyn’s very existence was at stake, and in more ways than one: it was obvious that DynaCo’s C-suite was trying to sort things out, because more than once the sight of a private contractor armoured police vehicle zoomed across the street six floors down, their lights flashing. More and more people were appearing on the street - not a crowd, at least not yet, but enough to be a presence, which just didn’t *happen*. Brianna winced at this.

“Things are ramping up,” she said, brushing her hair with her feminine nails. “I didn’t mean to start all of this.”

“It’s good that you did.”

“It was just . . . she was inspiring me.”

“And you inspired me, and so many others. Brie, I went for a walk the other day. A walk! I didn’t get out of the city, but I was imagining a hiking trail . . . and you with me.”

She looked away from the window and back to Jason, who was inputting another part of his search program, Brianna’s own wristtech connected by wires to try and get a further connection to Caitlyn’s advanced version. He had a genuine look upon his face; all serious, all encouraging.

“You said you wanted to hike again,” she said. “In our emails.”

“And you wanted to do art. Have you done any?”

Something small broke away in Brianna’s heart. “I haven’t. I . . . guess I was too busy with everything else.”

“Then why don’t you make something?”

She chuckled lightly, wiping some sweat from her forehead; all the electronics humming away made the offsite cubicle quite hot.

“What? Right now?”

Jason grinned. Fuck, he was good looking. Was she into cute, nerdy men now? It seemed she was.

“Why not?”

“Because!” she exclaimed, extending her hands out. “All the chaos! And we’re making a program to find my niece! And I don’t have anything to paint with!”

Jason raised three fingers. “One, the chaos isn’t in this room. Two, the program is finished. It’s running now, and it will take maybe fifteen or more hours to complete its search. It’s the shortest I can do. And three . . .”

He reached forward into a cupboard and pulled out a small, gift-wrapped present. It was just brown paper, but the ribbon was green. Brianna gasped, then gingerly took the package. She couldn’t remember getting a present since she was a child.

“I couldn’t get more than just the basic DynaCo paper, but I pulled some strings and, inspired by you, broke some regulations to get these. I wanted to send them to you as a present, but now that you’re here, well . . . thanks for being you, Brianna. And I hope you like it.”

She swallowed, then undid the ribbon and opened the package. What followed was a gasp, and Brianna realised she had been the one to make it. Inside were a series of paint brushes and oil paints. It was not an immense amount, but it was a start. Tears bubbled up in her eyes, and this time she didn’t fight them.

“Jason . . . I didn’t get you anything.”

“You’ve already given me so much. Do you like it?”

“I love it. Oh dear . . . I love it so much. Fuck, I’m crying.”

“A good cry?”

She giggled through the tears. “Yes. Oh, I feel so guilty. I shouldn’t be feeling like this while Caitlyn is out there.”

“Hey, she sounds resourceful from what you’ve told me, right? So you need to trust her. Take some time for yourself, that’s the Barnes Deal, right? So why don’t you paint? I’ve got some canvas sheets you can use, and some gear we can improv for an easel. This place is full of DynaCo shit. You can help me make it a lot brighter.”

Brianna bit her lip, struggling with the torrent of feelings within her.

“The program is running?” she asked him, her voice cracking a little.

“Yes, I promise. This is as much as we can do.”

“Then I’ll paint something. I don’t know what . . . but I’ll paint it.”

Jason’s smile was everything. “I can’t wait to see it.”

He retrieved a canvas for her, and a makeshift easel he’d constructed for her. As he continued to finetune his programming and try to cut off some of the runtime for the search which had just begun for Caitlyn’s signal, Brianna painted. She wasn’t entirely sure of what

she was doing, but as she dipped her brush into the paints, the lessons of her mother returned to her, the way she'd moved so elegantly and languidly, applying the brush and paint just so, expressing her feelings as if they were the very rhythms of her soul. Her mother had been right; the mere act was all personal, all real. It was something DynaCo could never touch, and certainly never understand. The abstraction of feeling upon canvas, one that was purely for her, and made sense to her alone.

And that was the beauty of it.

She painted her transformation, her awakening. Her acceptance of her own femininity, her desire to break free of the system she had slaved at for so long. She painted warm tones to represent Caitlyn, and blended those tones into her own colours to show how the pair had influenced one another. And then Jason entered, deeper reds that were full of danger, passion, connection, even . . . dare she think of romance? His strokes were long and arching, and soon she was overlapping her previous applications, swirling new colours and connections into being, allowing the paint to thicken where her needs and desires were deepest. It allowed her to understand herself.

She was Brianna.

Not Benjamin. Not a worker. Not a cog in a machine.

She was Brianna, mother to a future daughter she was determined to find, and creator of a future she knew had to unfold for the good of all.

She wasn't even sure of how much time had passed by the time she finished, only that it was dark, and that Jason was sitting closely behind her, looking over her shoulder with intense interest. She finished the last dashes of paint and lowered the brush. It was abstract, just like her mother's work, but it contained all the vibrancy and kindness she'd come to hold dear; from her mother, to Caitlyn, to her friends at work, to Jason right near her.

"What does it mean?" he asked her after several long seconds of appreciation.

"*Everything*," she said, and she shifted in her seat, her eyes upon him, and then rested her hand in his. "*It's everything.*"

They moved slowly, the pair of them. This was not an act of spontaneity, but a slow and nervous coming together. Their eyes were upon one another, locking gazes only to break away and linger upon the body of the other. Jason's eyes fell to her breasts; she hadn't realised she'd allowed the v-neck of her dress to fall so far. Her own eyes fell on his bare arms. It was so warm in his space that he'd stripped down to just a tank top, and his fit figure showed beneath. She bit her lip, the arousal causing her nipples to tense.

Not a word was exchanged between them. Not a word needed to be. It was as if they understood one another, and all that had already been said was enough. Trembling, her lips met his, and then they stopped trembling at once from the very moment he kissed her. He placed a hand gently upon her arm, then thought better of it and cradled her cheek instead.

Brie moaned a little into his mouth, kissing him further as she began to touch thighs. Her body was warm and desirous, and despite all her worries, her connection to this man felt pure and absolute.

So they kissed.

So she let him hold her, and she in turn placed her hands on his chest, feeling his muscles. The two continued to make out, or perhaps even make *love*, because soon she was helping him out of his shirt, and in turn he was aiding her out of her dress, sliding it over her head and discarding it among the mess.

“Wow,” Jason said, looking her body up and down, appreciating her petite figure, her lovely breasts. In response, Brianna partly covered herself, momentarily ashamed of her womanly body, knowing she was meant to be a man.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” Jason said. “You’re beautiful, Brie.”

“I - I like the look of you, too.”

They kissed once more, and his touch invigorated that warmth, that *need*. It inflamed her, melting away any lingering embarrassment over her form. Instead, she embraced being a woman once more, pressing her body against him. He lifted her with surprising ease, pulling her onto her lab so that she was straddling him on the chair.

Which turned out to be a big mistake, because said office chair had a recline function, causing it to immediately topple over and the pair of them to collapse through a pile of disused plastic wristtech covers.

“Shit!” Jason cried. “Are you okay?”

Brianna clutched her head, wincing. “Y-yeah. Just a small bump.”

“Oh, fuck, I didn’t mean to-”

She crawled on top of him, sweeping away the wristtech junk and resuming their session. The pair locked lips again, and this time nothing could stop the passion that followed. Jason caressed her form, and as she made out with him she noticed the hardness against her belly. It made her further aroused, and even more when he removed her bra, undoing the clasp. She removed it, sitting up to give him a good look at her lovely breasts. In turn, she unbuckled his trousers even as she enjoyed the way he was hypnotised by her breasts. He pulled at her underwear, and the pair swept away more junk from the carpeted floor, making room for her to ride him. Brianna kicked her underwear off not long after Jason had gotten rid of his, and then paused, staring at his dick. It was hard, it was long, and it was making her surprisingly excited. She expected further uncertainty, but instead she just wanted him all the more.

“Brie,” he said. “You’re incredible.”

“Jason,” she said. “I never - I want you now!”

She crawled on top of him again, spreading her thighs to either side and sliding her hand up and down his dick even as she slid her tongue down his throat. She'd had sex many times before, and she took her lessons from Miriam, doing her best to excite her lover. It certainly worked, because he in turn shifted her back so he could kiss her breasts and suck on her nipples, driving her crazy. She gripped his hard cock and pressed it against the wet folds of her entrance, gasping a little from the sensations.

"I should w-warn you!" Jason blurted out. "I've been, uh, a long, long time since I've, well, since I've done this, and never with a woman as fucking beautiful as-"

"Shhh," she said, beaming at him. "I don't care if you last ten minutes or ten seconds, Jason. I just fucking want *you*."

She lowered herself on him, and the pair groaned together, relishing the sensations that followed. It was so alien, yet so *right*, being penetrated by a man. Jason's length slid within her, and her vaginal walls gripped him, already desperate to milk her lover of all he had. She rested herself down on him, then began to work her way upon his cock, sliding with the aid of his hands on her hips. She moaned, thrust out her chest, lowering herself so that he could feel it, kiss it, lick her nipples and suck upon them.

"Ohhhhhh," she moaned. "That f-feels so wonderful! Don't stop!"

"You're doing - ahh - all the work! But sure! I'll keep it g-going!"

She giggled, and he laughed with her. It made the sex even better, that they were sharing laughter and pleasure, the hope of a brighter, more personal future emblematic in this very moment. She began to work herself faster, and he in turn lifted his hips, and the effect was that her body was rising in heat and pleasure. It was bubbling and churning within her, aided by his work upon her sensitive breasts and the sensation of his fingers gripping her soft ass. She fucked him, riding him eagerly, her voice becoming a high, thin moan that only grew with the ecstasy of her body. They thrust together, working in perfect concert, and then before Brianna even realised what was happening her climax was rising up within her.

"Oh f-fuck!" she cried. "I'm going to cum! Jason, I'm g-going to cum already!"

"Me too! You're t-too much! You're too perfect!"

"I want to cum with you! I need you to cum inside meeee! Ahhhh!"

Yessss!"

She gripped him with her thighs, arching her back as the moment came. There was no holding it back; it was like she was exploding with light and heavenly substance too powerful to contain within her form. It was beyond the dopamine rushes of any DynaCo sale or employee of the month award. This was true beauty. This was *art*. The former man wailed and cried out, shaking herself and then falling upon her lover. Her made a bestial sound that was so unlike him, like she had awakened something primal from long before the corporate states ever existed. His dick pumped within her, torrents of his seed flooding her, warming

her from within even more. Brianna spread a wide smile, relaxing against him, gripping him, ensuring none of his seed left her. It was too perfect, and so another orgasm rocked her at the very moment she kissed Jason, and this left her moaning into his mouth.

It took minutes for either of them to say something, so lost in the after-glow of sex were they.

“So . . . that was incredible,” Jason said.

She giggled, rubbing his chest. “It was.”

“You know, if this is just a way for me to take back my refund on the Wristech 9 . . .”

This caused her to raise herself up and put on a mock look of shock.

“Jason Ling!”

“Kidding, kidding!”

She kissed him again, then settled, enjoying the warmth of him. She thought it might feel strange, after. Instead, it just felt like everything was as it should be. Still, her gaze went to his complex network of computers.

“They’re still working, right? Still looking for her?”

“If we can find her, they will. We just have to wait.”

She allowed herself to be enveloped by his arms.

“I need some water soon,” she said. “And to get your, uh, gunk out of me.”

“My gunk? I thought you worked in marketing?”

Another giggle. “I’m rebelling, remember?”

“Ah, of course.”

“But seriously, I need to shower. Can I use yours?”

“Of course,” he said, kissing her softly on the cheek.

“Cool. Cool. Because the sooner I clean myself up . . . the sooner I want you to distract me again. In the same way. Perhaps with a different position.”

This time, Jason giggled, just like a schoolboy. Soon, the pair of them were laughing like maniacs, and then they were all over one another.

The shower would have to wait.

## **Part Nine: A Kinder World**

Brianna woke up to the sensation of a warm body holding her protectively. It took her a moment to remember the events of the previous night, but when she did, she smiled deliciously. Jason’s right hand was cupping her breast, and she could feel a hardening sensation between her cheeks. Both were naked, and both were cramped into the small bed of his offsite cubicle. His home.

But Caitlyn was still missing. She felt immediately guilty for indulging in pleasure like this when her daughter - yes, her *daughter* - was out there in the world, trying to find the man who was meant to be her father. And here, Brianna had now made a mess of things. She began to rise out of bed but a hand rubbed her flank.

"I've been waiting for you to wake up," Jason said suggestively.

"Caitlyn. I've got to find Caitlyn."

"Thirty five minutes," Jason said. "I refined it in the night while you were sleeping. In just thirty five minutes we'll know."

Brianna nodded, comforted by that, and yet utterly nervous nonetheless. She turned to Jason, placing a hand on his chest. It was only lightly haired, but she loved the sensation of it. They held one another, exchanging only a light kiss following their sleep.

"It's too long," she said. "What if something's happened to her?"

"You told me how resourceful she is. We'll find her."

Brie nodded. Jason stroked her hair, and that brought further relief. A need was rising in her again, but it wasn't the same kind of need as the previous night. This arousal wasn't the desperate, lustful yearning. Instead, it was something far deeper, born of an intimacy she'd never imagined she'd ever have.

"Please," she said. "I want you. I want you do keep my mind off of it. Comfort me. Please."

Jason cupped her cheek and looked at her so tenderly she thought that her heart might explode from the sheer heat that now burned within it.

"Of course," he said.

This was a slow act of making love. It was romantic. It was intimate. It was two people bringing comfort in a time of tension. Brie gasped as he kissed her breasts and stroked her sensitive skin, and she in turn gripped his shoulders and lowered her hand down to rub his crotch. They teased one another, their foreplay a dance of affection and compassion, and when she was finally ready, Jason lowered her back onto the bed and crawled atop her.

"Thank you," she said, spreading her legs. "I feel like I've known you my whole life."

"And I feel like . . . I love you," he responded. "I didn't even know love existed until you came into my life. Just a marketing technique. But already I know it, Brie. I love you."

She sniffled. "I love you too," she said, and Brie knew she meant it completely. She'd known this man so briefly, but he'd managed to pierce through the walls of DynaCo's dystopia and upend her life almost as much as Caitlyn had.

Jason smiled, and then he entered her. Brianna moaned, gripping his rear and pushing him further into her. The sensation was still spectacular, still so foreign, but she wanted this man to continue doing it until it was wonderfully ordinary. The compatibility

matrix was a great evil; how could anyone follow it, when *this* existed. This love, this passion, this *pleasure* of knowing one you cared about could connect with you so deeply.

“Ohhhh,” she moaned. “Yesssss. I want th-this.”

“We’ll find her,” Jason said, slowly working inside of her, pumping away and gaining speed. “We’ll find her. I love you, Brie. I’ll do everything for you.”

“S-same!” she cried. “I’m so glad you emailed me! I’m so - ohhh! No more talking!”

He continued to thrust away, and she submitted herself to him entirely. And yet this was a meeting of equals, two people who knew the world needed to change, to become more connected, kinder. And this was a demonstration of those ideals, their own coming together. When they climaxed, she held him, pulling him against her and locking her legs around him. The bliss was somehow even greater than the previous night, because it demolished her fears for the moment. It made her feel whole. His seed rushed into her, and she shivered from the lovely sensation of it.

“Mhmmmm,” she moaned, closing her eyes and taking a ‘photo’ of this moment in her mind. She wanted to paint it later. She wanted to express this part of herself she’d never known she could even possess.

“Do you feel better?” Jason asked her.

She patted his back and smiled. “Much better. God, much better. Now . . . let’s get showered and dressed for this scan. It’s nearly time to go find Caitlyn.”

They did so, and then had a very quick flavourless DynaCo breakfast that made Brie yearned for a better world. They still had five minutes to spare, and those were nail-biting minutes indeed. Jason rubbed her back and shoulders, helping her relax.

Finally, the main console went green. A connection to the future tech was fully established, and all that was left was to execute it. Brie reached out to hit the ENTER key, but Jason took her hand.

“Wait,” he said. “If we do this . . . your niece’s firewall goes down.”

“What?”

“I’ve done what I can to bolster it, but this will take all of the processing power of what I’ve salvaged. DynaCo will know what’s happening in full. People across the entirety of the corporate state will have their newfound privileges revoked. They’ll be angry.”

Brie considered this. What right did she have to take that all away? But then again, maybe that was the *point*.

“They should be angry,” she whispered. “They should be angry that they got a taste of freedom only for DynaCo and its greed to rip it away. They should be full of rage like I am, like you are. And they should be full of *hope* too, hope that they can keep on fighting and make a better, kinder world. We need to do this, Jason. We need to rip the bandaid off and

let them all know where each side stands. Only then can people start to *fight* for their kindness.”

Jason slowly nodded. She could tell he understood.

“Okay then,” he said. “Press it.”

The program executed. The bar began to fill to one hundred percent. Outside, far away in some DynaCo C-Suite headquarters, a flood of anomalous reports were already coming in, signalling disaster and coming chaos, but for now, all Brie cared about was the location of her daughter.

“C’mon,” she whispered, holding her lover’s hand. “C’mon!”

The bar reached full, and then a geolocation was provided. The pair of them gasped.

“Oh no,” Brie said. “We’ve got to go. Fast!”

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The streets were already chaos. Armoured private police vehicles were roaming, and some kind of corporate martial law was being established. Except it was clear they did not have the forces they were meant to; people were out in crowds, yelling and chanting at the state’s enforcers. Clearly, DynaCo hadn’t re-established all of their networks, and Brie suspected a few of them were demanding better pay and conditions, not to mention leave time, before they helped resume *any* attempt to normalise things. Private police members were clashing on the streets, shouting at one another, and from what Brianna could tell, even *they* were swept up in this.

“What do you *mean* you got to choose your girlfriend!? That’s fucked! We don’t have that right!”

“Well, why do *you* get paid paternity leave?”

“They’re talking about some mountain or park. Do we have travel visas now or not?”

And so on. It made Brianna worried. People were going to get hurt, and she was partially responsible. But as horrible as it was to know; this *needed* to happen. If DynaCo was going to fall like Caitlyn said it was, then the people needed to know what they were missing all along. There were even slogans along the apartment complexes:

*HOMES, NOT CUBICLES!*

*DOWN WITH SLOGANS! UP WITH LOVE!*

Just how much had she radicalised this? Just how much was Jason’s doing? And Caitlyn’s? It was a tapestry of compassion woven together unexpectedly; she drew strength from it as they made it to their destination.

DynaCo’s Central Corporate Plaza was usually accessible to only C-suite members and above. High level internal permits were needed to get here, and yet with all the chaos, it

was hopelessly undermanned. The C-suites were panicking, running towards the plaza and not even checking in with the understaffed enforcers. And with her colourful and rather illegal dress, Brianna was shocked to find that she could slip right through, clutching Jason's hand and looking as confident as she could.

"Who is this, miss?"

"He's my programmer! He's going to fix all of this!"

And because it was truthful, in a way, the scanners didn't pick up a thing, and she was let through the lines. It wasn't like their facial ID checks were working right now. Someone clearly was refusing to help DynaCo repair it.

"Holy shit," she said as they entered the resplendent plaza. Yes, it was chaos, filled with a gentrified gathering of crusty older men and some women, all fleeing to their bunkers and bank accounts. But it was also amazing: huge buildings and glorious fountains and the only grass she'd seen in years in person.

And it was all fake.

"C'mon," she said, tugging Jason's hand.

"Wait," he said. "We don't know where she is. We can only pinpoint a general location."

But Brianna shook her head. "I know where she's going." She pointed to the tall DynaCo Digital building. "There."

"Why?"

"Because that's where the Compatibility Matrix computer is stored."

She raced across the plaza. Jason worked his magic upon his own modified wristech, setting up a fake emergency that caused more enforcers to trickle away from the area. With so much confusion they were able to enter the building.

"Excuse me, you can't be here!" a female secretary called out.

"Go find somewhere safe!" Brianna shouted. "And find something that makes you happy! Oh, and sorry, I'll be needing this!"

She tore the swipe card from the women's lanyard and kept on running. The secretary gasped.

"Someone, stop them! They shouldn't be here!"

But they were already descending down the stairs. Jason worked quickly, locking the heavy door behind them with his modified wristech. Caitlyn's signal was returning, getting stronger, and so they made their way through the building.

"I'm here to bugfix this!" Jason yelled. "This executive is escorting me!"

It was enough for any enforcers, who were already getting mixed messages. Brianna ordered them to head out into the plaza and beyond to help any families and keep people safe. That was important, not *profit*.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Jason said as they raced down another flight of stairs, down towards the shielded chamber below the foundations.

"I can't believe we didn't do this years ago," Brianna replied. "She was right all along."

They passed through the last set of doors into a cool room. It was expansive, with numerous computers and stacks of hard drives mounted along the walls. But in the centre was a glass chamber, one that contained a spherical computer that looked far more advanced than anything else. It rotated slowly, glowing in places where numerous matches were made, all for the purpose of making future workers.

And there was Caitlyn, staring up at it, a fireaxe in her hands. Where had she even gotten that? Oh, from the wall, where she'd smashed the glass.

"Fuck!" she cried. "Caitlyn!"

The twelve year old girl looked her way, and her eyes went suddenly wide.

"M-Mom?"

Brianna rushed to her, almost smashing through the glass door on the way to reach her child. She lifted her up and spun her around, the fireaxe dropping to the ground with a heavy clunk as the pair embraced. The tears flowed immediately.

"I'm sorry," Caitlyn said. "I snuck in using my future tech. I couldn't find Dad! The online records are too garbled. I thought . . . I thought if I destroyed the matrix, you might be able to find him, but I knew I'd be caught or have to return without knowing, and then I might not exist, and I didn't know what to do!"

"Hush," Brie said, hugging her daughter. "It's okay. I'm here. Your mommy's here."

Caitlyn lifted her head, her eyes shimmering with tears, her face expressing the most wonderful surprise. "You called me yourself mommy."

"Because I am. Because I accept it, and because I want to be, Caitlyn. I want to have you, so I can know the amazing, uplifting, hopeful and brilliant girl you become."

Caitlyn choked back a sob. "You'll find Dad?"

"Of course. I promise I will. And I'll keep you safe. And I'll do everything I can to save this world so that *your* world comes to be."

Her daughter hugged her again, gripping her so tightly it hurt from all the love that was expressed. Brie let the tears flow, and then she kissed her daughter's forehead gently.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but what is going on? I thought she was your niece?"

Brie turned. "Sorry, Jason. There's a lot I haven't told you because you might think I was crazy, but-

"DAD!"

Caitlyn ran forward and leapt into the man's arms. To his credit, he did catch the girl.

"You found him! Mom, you found him! You found Dad!"

Brianna's jaw hung. Oh, but it was so obvious. Oh, but it made so much sense. Jason was Caitlyn's father. How did she not notice the resemblance? But things were so chaotic and uncertain, and her passion was so powerful, and they'd had sex and-

She lowered a hand down to her stomach, another realisation forming.

"Caitlyn," she murmured. "How far in the future do you come from?"

"Twelve years," her daughter said, still gripping her confused future father. "Why?"

Brianna blinked. "N-nothing."

Caitlyn lowered herself down out of Jason's arms.

"I'm so confused," he said.

"I'm your daughter," the girl explained cheerfully, smile wide again. "From the future. Your first daughter. That's Mom. She used to be a man but I used future tech to change her and close the time loop. I came back in time because Mom - future Mom, that is - needed me to make sure you guys meet and that the world ends up nice again."

Jason blinked several times. "I - look, no offence, but I really don't believe you."

She removed her wristech and passed it to him. "Have a look, Nerd Dad."

Jason frowned, then looked over the device. Brianna was about to explain to her future daughter that this definitely wouldn't work, when suddenly-

"Oh, okay. Yeah, I believe you. Wow. Woah. Holy shit. Yeah, I believe you."

"What? Just like that?" Brie asked.

He held up the wristech. "This is definitely future tech. And no ads. No DynaCo bullshit. And . . . and she looks like me. And you. This is . . . a lot to take in."

Brie moved over and took his hand, kissing him on the cheek. "We can take it in together. Trust me, I've had a wild ride, too. But it's true, Jason. This is our daughter. Our Caitlyn, from the future."

Caitlyn hugged them, and to Brie's surprise, after just a moment's hesitation, Jason hugged her back too.

"You do seem pretty amazing, kid," he said.

"I get it half from you, Dad. The programming bits especially."

This caused him to laugh, but the moment became serious again as something beeped on Caitlyn's wristech. She took it back and looked at it, and her eyes went wide as she looked at Brianna. The former man smiled giddily, sheepishly, and joyously, her hand moving to her stomach. She nodded, just slightly, at Caitlyn.

"Mom! You - you've got me! In there! You're growing me!"

Brianna bit her lip. "I think I am. Just the start. The very start."

Jason was going through a wild ride. He looked at Brianna. "You're pregnant?"

She nodded. "It wasn't intentional. I wasn't thinking. It just . . . happened. I'm sorry if this is far too much and I totally understand if-

He grabbed her face and pulled her in for a long, loving kiss.

"It's way too much," he said as he parted. "And I'm here for this wild ride anyway, Brie."

"Yes!" Caitlyn cried. "YES! Oh, shit!"

"*Language*," both future parents said.

"Aww, c'mon! But I need to go! My job is done, and the device is gonna activate in sixty seconds."

Brianna was startled. "You're not sticking around?"

"I want to. I want to see it all. But I have to go back to my time, Mom. To when you make things better."

"I just . . . I thought we might have more time."

At this, Caitlyn took her hand, and Brianna lowered herself to the girl's level.

"We will have more time, Mom. Twelve years and counting. And you get to experience all of it with me, okay?"

Brianna choked back another sob, and hugged her daughter one last time. At least, until in nine months she could hug her again.

"Your mommy loves you already," she whispered.

"I know, Mom. I love you too. And go easy on me when I smash that vase in six years okay?"

She laughed. "I will."

Catlyn looked up. "Bye Dad! Trust me, you're gonna be *such* a dad. Your jokes are terrible and I love them."

"Well, how could I not want to be a father?" he said. "Look, I've only just met you, but . . . I promise to love you."

"You will! And you'll save the world together! What you do next, you do for us all! I love you both, Mom and Dad! Make sure you use the-"

A pillar of blue light. Brianna gasped, falling back a little. Her daughter flashed, her body disappearing back into the future. They'd said their goodbyes and yet . . . it seemed far too quick. She had to fight the return of the tears, and Jason's arms around her body helped her.

"Holy shit," he said.

"Yeah," she replied.

"That was our daughter. I have so many questions, but she's gone."

"We've got her right here," Brianna said. She'd never imagined she would fall pregnant, but now her world was full of excitement. Life born of love, not a desire for profits and lines and charts and analytics. And she would help usher it all in.

"What did Caitlyn mean, with that last thing she tried to say? Use what?"

Brianna looked down at the fireaxe upon the floor, and then up at the Compatibility Matrix, this cold, mechanical orb that was a symbol of everything that had torn away kindness and replaced it with clinical efficiency devoid of human love. Slowly, she stepped over to the axe, picked it up, and raised it behind her, staring at the computer.

“I think I have an idea,” she said.

And then she swung with all the force she could muster in the world, along with the kinder world she wanted to create with her Jason.

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Caitlyn re-appeared in the chamber her father had helped build. Straight away, she tore away her wristech and unlocked the door, rushing out to ensure that nothing had changed, that she wasn't going to suddenly disappear out of time, erased from existence.

“Dad!” she cried. “Dad! Did I do it!?”

A pair of hands seized her up and lifted her into a mighty hug. She instantly recognised her father's embrace, and giggled mightily at it.

“You did it, kiddo,” he told her. “Well done. You closed the loop.”

“Have I been gone long?”

“Just a minute on our end.”

“Thank goodness.” Caitlyn brushed her father's hair. “You didn't have these little grey bits in the past.”

“Woah, kiddo,” he laughed. “Way to make a man feel self-conscious. Did it all turn out alright?”

“It did. You were sooooo surprised.”

He laughed. “I remember it! I still get surprised some days. C'mon. I'll shut down the chamber. We can talk business about everything soon. But first, go tell your Mom. She's out in the garden, and she's nervous.”

Caitlyn nodded. She ran out of the lab room her father had established. She passed her siblings in the main living space. Abigail was reading in the corner like always, and the twins Matthew and Carter were fighting over some toy. She flew through the backdoor and out into the gorgeous garden her mother had created. She already knew what Mom would be doing. She had been so stressed about sending Caitlyn back that she was indulging in what brought her peace: painting her abstractions onto canvas in the garden. Caitlyn's younger siblings were rolling about in the grass, little toddler Sasha - her youngest sibling of six - was chasing the dog, babbling away excitedly.

And there was her mother, painting with intensity, sparing an occasional loving look for her children, but clearly taking a moment to herself. She was wearing a gorgeous white

dress that flowed around her form, her pregnant bump on clear display. It was twins again, and Caitlyn thought it was *fantastic*. Her mother and father clearly loved one another, because ever since the compatibility matrix had been destroyed, they'd led the charge on showing the world the magic of children born of love. This was her mother's seventh pregnancy, and while she always claimed that the current one was her last, Caitlyn doubted it. She didn't mind it at all; the more the merrier, as far as she was concerned. A new generation to keep making the world better. DynaCo was gone, but the Alliance of Small Business Owners was still putting up a fight even as the revolution spread west, and the rollercoaster dystopias down south were crumbling, albeit more slowly. The more joy to spread, the swifter a kinder world would come.

"Mom?" Caitlyn whispered, drawing close to her mother.

Brianna stopped painting. She was older now, but still had her hair in a brunette pixie cut, and still wore those earrings with the white doves soaring. Her bosom had grown after so many years breastfeeding, and her slim figure was swollen with six months of pregnancy. But the woman of the past had been her Mom, she knew that totally now. And now Caitlyn appreciated her mother in the present all the more.

"Caitlyn!" Brianna said. Despite her swollen belly, she grabbed her daughter and lifted her up into her arms. It was a sensation that Caitlyn had missed dearly.

"I'm proud of you," she told her daughter. "I'm so very proud."

But Caitlyn just held her mother tighter.

"No Mom," she said. "I'm proud of *you*."

**The End**