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# **Annie Bot**

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way that matters**

**SIERRA GREER**



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# Annie Bot

SIERRA GREER grew up in Minnesota before attending Williams College and Johns Hopkins University. A former high school English teacher, she writes about the future from her home in rural Connecticut.

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For Joe

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## chapter one

**“COME TO BED, MOUSE.** I know how to cheer you up,” he says.

“I’m not brooding,” Annie says.

“You sure?”

“Fairly sure.”

She is fresh from her shower, rubbing lotion into her legs. Her dark hair hangs in wet clumps along one side of her neck, and she has deliberately left the belt of her robe undone, knowing he can take a peek from the bedroom via the mirror.

“This is still about your tune-up, isn’t it?” he says. “Forget about it.”

“The whole thing’s degrading,” she says, and sees it’s the right angle. He enjoys a degree of humiliation.

“Did you see your normal tech?” he asks.

“Yes. Jacobson.”

She taps off the bathroom light and steps out of the humidity into the cooler air of the bedroom. Pretending to inhale deeply, she takes a quick assessment of how far along he is. She has memorized Doug’s features from many angles: his brown eyes, the V-hairline of his dark locks, his tall, pale forehead and the contours of his face. His mouth, in repose, settles into a decisive line, but this does not convey discontent. The opposite, in fact, is more likely. With his shoes off but otherwise fully clothed, he is stretched out on his back on top of the covers. He has set aside his phone. His hands are tucked behind his head, putting his elbows in the open butterfly position, which further indicates he is relaxed, ready for verbal foreplay.

She sets her temp to warm up to 98.6 from 75.

“Did he mention anything I should know?” he asks.

“I’m good for another three months or three thousand miles, whichever comes first,” she says.

She crawls across the bed and sits nudged against his hip, facing away. She rubs the last of her lotion into her hands and studies her cuticles. They did the whole job today, the waxing, the nails, the memory tetris. She feels sharper, less sluggish. If she could just forget about that sad Stella in Pea Brain’s cubicle, she’d be fine.

Doug rubs the back of his hand along her arm. “What is it, then? Talk to me.”

“I met a strange Stella at my tune-up today,” Annie says. “She was in line in front of me. Her name was actually Stella, like her owners had zero imagination. But she was sentient like me.”

“How could you tell?”

“It was obvious. I said hello, and she looked surprised. A normal Stella wouldn’t look surprised. She’d just answer evenly, hello.” She mimics a monotone robot.

“You never sounded like that.”

“I’m sure I did, thank you. I have no delusions about where I come from.” Annie turns her damp hair over her other shoulder.

“The lights,” he says.

She sends an airtap signal to the fixtures and lowers the light to a hundred lumens, where he likes it, enough to see, but softer, closer to candlelight. Then she intertwines her fingers in his, noting her skin is slightly darker, with warmer undertones. He draws her hand against his lips, sniffing her lotion. She can’t smell it, but she’s aware that he likes the lemony aroma.

“Am I warm enough?” she asks.

“Getting there,” he says, and shifts slightly.

Taking the cue, she slips a couple fingers under his belt, in his waistband, feeling the warmth there. His hands return behind his head. He is still not in a hurry.

“Tell me more,” he says. “Did this strange Stella have a neck seam?”

“Yes.”

“So she’s a basic. Was she pretty?”

“I suppose so. Pretty enough. She was a white girl with blond hair and big brown eyes. She didn’t smile much, which also seemed odd.”

“How was her body?”

“Compared to mine?”

“Just answer the question.”

Annoyance, a 2 out of 10. She must be careful.

He stirs again. She pulls out his shirttails and undoes his buttons, working them randomly for a change.

“She had a classic hourglass shape,” Annie says, remembering back. “A couple inches taller than me, I’d say. Fit and curvy overall.”

“Like a model, then,” he says. “It sounds like you made a friend.”

She gives a genuine laugh.

“Is that so funny?” he asks. “Should we invite her over for a playdate?”

As she finishes his buttons, he sits up enough to get his shirt off the rest of the way. Then he settles back again. She trails her hand slowly down his bare chest and shakes her head.

“I’m afraid her CIU’s been cleared,” she says. “They made a mistake with her.”

“How do you mean?”

She rubs her hand down his zipper, lightly, and he stretches again. She straddles his legs and undoes his belt, taking her time. “One of the techs had flipped on her autodidactic mode, but he hadn’t told her owners.”

“I didn’t think they could do that.”

“I don’t think they’re supposed to. This tech said he just did it as an experiment.” She pauses, lifting up a bit to pull his pants and boxers out of the way. “She was very unstable. Over half of her memory was compromised. Someone was using her as a Cuddle Bunny.”

“So? You’re a Cuddle Bunny and you’re autodidactic.”

“But I know that, and you know that. We chose it together,” she says. “This Stella was still switching back and forth between modes, and nobody

was training her. It had to be incredibly confusing.” She has settled onto his legs again and checks his reactions as she touches him.

He sucks in air. “I don’t see what the problem is,” he says. “So she was confused. She could still follow orders, couldn’t she?”

Annie pauses, perplexed.

“Annie, that’s not a good time to stop.”

But she frowns, still unmoving. She’s sitting over him, her open robe falling to either side. For once she has more clothing on than he does, and she feels how it tilts the balance of power between them in a not-unpleasant way.

He sits up slowly, holding her on his lap, and touches her shoulders gently. “What did I say?” he asks.

“It’s just.” She stops, letting herself sound like she’s searching for words while her circuits whirl. In truth, she doesn’t know how to explain it. “She was like a child,” she says finally.

He leans his mouth to her shoulder and kisses her there through her robe. Then he slides her robe gently down her arm to bare her skin and kisses her again.

“She’s not a child,” he says softly. “You’re giving her the same feelings you have, but she’s not like you.”

“How do you know?” she asks.

“Because I do,” he says. “You’re light-years beyond a basic Stella. I love when you get all righteous and compassionate.”

She’s still feeling puzzled, distracted, vicariously lost, but that’s clearly turning him on. He twists, bringing her over onto her back, and she lifts her hips to accommodate him. She wants to ask if he would ever have her CIU cleared, but she knows this is not a time for questions. It is not a time for talking at all. She has reached the right temperature now. She gets her breathing and heart rate up. She moans deep back in her throat. He does not like her too loud. She makes sure not to simulate her orgasm until she is certain he is going or just after. Never before.

Afterward, he takes some of his sweat and wipes it over her chest where she can feel it, cool and evaporating. He nuzzles his nose into her neck.

“They have to figure out how to make you sweat,” he says. “That’s the one thing.”

•

The next morning, he is reaching for his coffee at the machine when he accidentally hits his head on an open cupboard door, and when he slams it closed, the cupboard bounces back open and a cup from inside falls out. It crashes to the floor, breaking into four white pieces.

Annie gets up from the table. “Are you all right?”

“What do you think? I hit my fucking head.” He kicks the ceramic shards so they fly across the kitchen floor. Then he shuts his eyes and presses his hand to his forehead. “Would it kill you to clean up around here sometimes?”

She does a quick scan, left to right, and notes all the things out of place: the eleven breadcrumbs on the counter before the toaster, the butter knife stuck in the jam jar, the banana peel in the sink, the garbage can lid open, the olive oil bottle left out of the pantry, the egg carton left out by the stove, the line of dried egg white spilled by the burner, the twenty-seven grains of salt on the counter by the microwave, the onion skin below the bowl of onions on the windowsill. On the floor lie, of course, the broken pieces of the coffee cup, plus dust particles from the past four days.

Doug opens the freezer. “No ice? Fuck this.” He wets a paper towel and holds it to his head.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” she asks.

“Just be quiet,” he says. And then, “When’s the last time you washed the floor in here?”

She looks down at the wooden floor. “Friday at seven thirty-eight p.m.”

“When I reminded you.”

“Yes.”

Squinting, he lowers the paper towel to look at it. Then he moves down the hall and into the bathroom. She follows quietly to where she can see through the doorway. He is leaning over the sink, examining the new mark

on his forehead in the mirror. He comes back to the living room, and she follows him again.

“Okay, look,” he says. “We have to talk. I like my place clean. That’s why I got you in the first place, and now look at it.”

She rapidly scans the living room for out-of-place and dirty items, finding thirty-six.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he says. “You’re not an Abigail anymore. But you’re a person who shares this space and you’re home all day. The least you could do is keep it clean. Why is that so hard?”

His displeasure with her is a 5 out of 10, and she must fix it.

“I can clean better,” she says.

“That’s all I’m asking,” he says. “Do you still know how? Would it be easier if I wrote out a list for you?”

“A list might help,” she says.

“Tell you what. You clean up today. You make a list of everything you do, and then we’ll talk about it when I get home. How’s that sound?”

“Very reasonable,” she says.

He nods and beckons to her. “Come here.” She goes in for a hug. “Don’t look so sad. I’m not mad at you. Every couple has their little fights. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No. We’ll have makeup sex tonight.”

“I will still be sorry then,” she says.

“What I’d like more is for the place to be clean when I come home. If it would help to switch you over to Abigail mode for a few hours, I could do that. We could set that up, a few hours a day. Maybe that’s the answer. I should have thought of this sooner.”

She remembers Stella. “I thought, when we switched me from sterling to autodidactic, we had to pick one mode and stick with it,” she says slowly.

“I thought so too. But maybe that’s for saps. I’ll look into it. It might give us more flexibility, honestly.”

She does not want this, but she cannot contradict him. “I’ll clean,” she says. “I’ll learn how to do it better. I’ll look it up.”



“All right. We’ll try it your way.” He kisses her and leaves.

He is on the can later that evening when the doorbell rings.

“Would you get that?” he calls. “It’s the pizza.”

She climbs off her stationary bike and hurries to the door.

She is wearing her third-Tuesday-of-the-month outfit: a blue sports bra and matching running shorts. Her hair is up in a high ponytail, and she has spritzed her neck and chest lightly with water to appear sweaty. Doug has yet to comment on the faux sweat, so she doesn’t know if he approves. If he does, she hopes to find a way to use it in bed.

When she opens the door, an unfamiliar man carrying a bottle of bourbon and a small blue duffel smiles at her. A Black man with short wet hair, he’s probably in his mid-thirties, and his gray jacket has damp spots on the shoulders. From the open window down the hall, she can hear April rain falling.

“Hello there,” he says in a pleasant tone. “This explains a few things. Is Doug home?”

“Please wait here,” she says, and begins to close the door.

He puts a foot forward to stop its arc. “What’s your name, honey?”

The toilet flushes in the distance, and Doug comes down the interior hall, putting his phone in his back pocket.

“Roland?” he says, grinning. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Doug hauls him in and the two men embrace in a big, rocking, back-slapping hug. Annie closes the door.

“I don’t believe this!” Doug says.

“I couldn’t ask you to be my best man long-distance,” Roland says.

“You’re not,” Doug says, releasing him. “It’s about time! Did you bring Lucia?”

“No, she’s still back in L.A. with her folks.”

“When did you ask her? I want to hear all about it,” Doug says. “How much did you cough up for the ring?”

The doorbell rings again.

“Get that, won’t you?” Doug says to Annie.

It is the delivery man this time, a tall white guy in a wet raincoat, and he hands her the pizza box without comment.

By the time she arrives in the kitchen, the men are opening beers and loudly discussing Roland's proposal to Lucia. Annie slides the pizza box on the island between them and hovers uncertainly. Doug has never had company before, and she isn't sure of her role. When she reviews protocol for a Cuddle Bunny, it says to be guided by her owner's cues and stay prepared to have relations with any adult in the room. She watches Doug, but her autodidactic mode keeps her unsettled, awkward, which in turn makes her feel nervous that she might displease him. She does not want to feel his displeasure again so soon after the cleaning issue.

"But what about this charmer?" Roland says, turning to her. He sets down his bottle. "I don't think you've said a word."

"This is Annie," Doug says. "She's my Stella."

"No," Roland says. "I don't believe it. Really? But she doesn't have a neck seam."

"She's custom," Doug says with simple pride. "She's autodidactic."

Roland's eyes widen. "Holy crap."

"It's nice to meet you," Annie says, smiling shyly.

"She looks so real," Roland says. "I mean, you look so real. Wait. Doesn't she kind of remind you of Gwen?"

"Took you a while to notice," Doug says.

"Bro. No."

"I know. She's whiter. It wasn't exactly my idea. They said I couldn't make her be identifiable to a living person, but then they said they could use Gwen's features if I changed her skin color. So I took her up a few notches."

"This is just too freaky," Roland says.

"But she's beautiful this way, right? Check out her eyes. I picked out this hazel color myself. Totally different from Gwen's."

"Why would you want her to resemble Gwen at all? You hated her by the end there."

As Doug's annoyance reaches a 5, Annie grows anxious. She wishes Roland wouldn't push him.

"Maybe this is why I didn't tell you about her," Doug says.

Roland keeps shaking his head slowly. "You're never going to meet someone new if you're tied up with a Stella who looks like your ex."

"I'm not tied up with her," Doug says. "And she's nothing like Gwen when you get to know her. I hardly notice anymore. Annie, go wait for me in the bedroom."

"Are you kidding? She should stay!" Roland says. "Does she do tricks? What's this adorable outfit? Does she come like that?"

Annie watches Doug for a cue, waiting for him to decide whether she should stay or go. He has given her a direct command, but she knows his commands are subject to change, and he doesn't like her to obey immediately, as if she has no choice. The catch is ascertaining what will please him, but his mood is complicated by cross-signals related to Roland. She turns her gaze to Roland, and then back to Doug.

"She's sizing you up," Doug says. "She's figuring out how to respond to you. It's all right," he adds quietly. "He's harmless."

Roland laughs. Annie does too. She can see Doug wants her to say something.

"I could tell that much," Annie says.

"I can't get over this. How long have you had her?" Roland asks.

"A couple years, I guess," Doug says. "Time sure flies. Have some pizza. You want some salad? Annie, get some salad from the fridge, please."

Doug opens the pizza box and slides it over toward his friend. Then he hitches over a barstool and sits at the island, kitty-corner to Roland, who takes another seat.

Roland pulls out a cheesy slice and takes a bite, talking with his mouth full. "So, you got her just after the divorce?"

"Actually, before that, when we were separated," Doug says. "When I found out Gwen was seeing Julio. That's when I knew it was over. The divorce took another six months."

Annie passes over two plates of salad and forks.

“Now I’m getting it. She’s just amazing,” Roland says, staring at her again. “Is she going to eat? *Does* she eat? I’ve never been around one of these up close, not one like this. She must have cost you a boatload.”

“Two twenty K,” Doug says.

“We’re talking cash?”

“Straight-up.”

Roland whistles.

“Worth every penny,” Doug says. “Why don’t you tell him a little bit about yourself, Annie?”

“Like what?” she says.

“Just anything,” Doug says. He reaches for a napkin. “My friend’s a nosy little ball sack. Pull up a seat.”

Annie places a stool next to Doug’s. She checks her posture so she’s not too rigid and braces an elbow on the counter. She adjusts her expression to inviting and interested as she meets Roland’s gaze. “Well, for starters, I can eat a little, but I don’t need to. I get charged up when I dock once every forty-eight hours, and that’s all I need. If I sleep, I can conserve my battery and go longer.”

“But back to the food. You don’t digest it,” Roland says.

“I throw it up later and disinfect myself,” Annie says.

Roland laughs. “Of course you do. Does this mean you can’t taste chocolate or anything?”

“No. I can detect smoke, though,” she says. “That’s the one thing I can smell. For safety reasons.”

“Very useful,” Roland says. “And what about this skin? Do you have real hair?”

“The outer layer of me is all organic, including my hair,” she says. “Stella-Handy bought up batches of frozen human embryos that were abandoned by their parents. They rescued them, essentially, and they used one for the basis of my skin and outer tissue.”

“She has her own unique fingerprints,” Doug says.

Annie offers her arm. “Go ahead. Feel.”