

THE QUARRY

ALPHA

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‘Lucas?’ Tabby called down the hallway to me as I closed the back door. ‘Hey, babe, come in here for a minute!’

I walked into the lounge room, wiping my dirty hands on a wet cloth. Living on a farm meant dirt and dust was just part of our existence. I had just got back from laying out fresh hay in the barn. Our pregnant alpacas were ready to give birth at any moment.

‘What’s up?’

‘Shh, listen,’ she replied, gesturing towards the TV. The news was on.

I shrugged my shoulders at Tabby, not really seeing why this was so important. On the screen, there was a man helping an elderly woman out of bed. The man looked a little strange though. I couldn’t figure out why, but something was just ... off.

‘It’s one of those flash new robots that have been getting rolled out by those big tech companies.’

Well, that explained why the man, or thing, looked so odd. Tabby turned up the volume just as some dorky-looking guy with glasses that looked two-inches thick started speaking into a microphone.

‘We at Dalton-Friends have completed our trials for our Friendly Artificial Intelligence and are proud to announce that they are coming to the public in the very near future.’ He looked like he was about to burst with pride. Or ego. ‘Our trials have resulted in decreases in mental disorders, and increases in both productivity as well as overall health.’

Robots helping old people, babies and socially-retarded people have a friend. That was nice. All the same, I let out a yawn. Science was boring to me. Always had been, even in high school.

Tabby nudged me in the ribs to shut me up again. I looked out the window to the paddock closest to the house. This was where our girls were so we could keep an eye on them. Our chocolate-brown girl, Sheila, was standing by herself near the fence. This was out of character for her, usually she would be in the middle of the rest of the girls. She liked company.

‘Shit. Look!’ I just pointed out the window. It was going to be our first birth for the year. The sun was setting and we’d be in pitch black, not to mention the freezing temperatures and the winter winds. ‘Grab the pack, quick!’

We scrambled around, getting towels, hot water bottles and torches. The news program continued to buzz around us. Another guy with what seemed like even thicker glasses was now talking. I was too distracted to listen, but I picked up on certain things.

‘Highly questionable ... lack emotional intelligence,’ I heard him say before being drowned out by Tabby yelling for the vet’s number. I called it out, knowing it by heart. The man on the TV continued to drone on. ‘Dangerous path.’

‘You’re telling me, mate,’ I muttered under my breath before switching the TV off and running for the paddock.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ Tabby said.

‘Hmm?’ I hummed in response, closing my eyes again. It was early afternoon the next day and we were still in bed. Sheila had kick-started some chain reaction because by the time the sun began to break on the horizon we had five healthy babies and five healthy mamas. Fred had come in early this morning and said he would keep an eye on things while we caught up

on some sleep. We were exhausted from being in the freezing temperatures all night. Our bodies were numb by the time we returned.

‘That friendly robot thing on the news. I think we should get one.’ Tabby rolled over in bed to face me, pulling the blankets around her. ‘It’s only us two on the farm. I mean, Fred helps you with building fences and stuff, but other than him, we’re by ourselves. If we got one, it could help me with cleaning and cooking. Spring is coming soon, and we’ll be even more busy with shearing, as well as all the newborns we’re going to be dealing with.’

She made a fair point. I didn’t like that she had to do so much housework. It made me feel like I was pushing her into a typical wife role, and I hated that. It would ease the pressure on her and let her do things she wanted to do, including helping out with the alpacas because I knew she loved being around them as much as I did.

‘I’ll think about it, okay?’ I kissed her on the forehead.

Two months went by and the weather started warming up. Little flowers were beginning to blossom, trees were growing new leaves, and little shoots of grass were covering our paddocks, making the farm come alive after the cold winter. I was in the paddock with the babies. They were running around, chasing each other, curious about the world.

A delivery truck was parked outside the house by the time I rolled up on the quad bike. Who knew how long they’d been there? It was a miracle that any delivery person would drive out of town that far, let alone drive to our house. That was the guarantee by Dalton-Friends though- they would deliver their robot and set it up too. I couldn’t find Tabby when I walked inside, but there was a man standing by the island in the kitchen.

‘Hey, mate,’ I said, resting my hat on a chair.

‘Hello.’ The man turned around and tilted his head. He had the same look that the thing on the news did.

‘Oh,’ I said. It was our new robot friend. How was I meant to greet a robot? Almost as if he read my mind, he stretched out his hand. I shook it, surprised at how realistic his skin felt.

At a glance, I would've been convinced this was some guy I would casually meet in a pub. It made my skin crawl a little.

'I am Alpha.' His voice also had a weird hybrid human/robot thing about it. He wasn't human, but it was almost like he wasn't fully robot either.

'Lucas,' I said, letting go of his hand and unconsciously wiping it on my pants. Tabby walked into the room with a man behind her carrying some papers.

'You must be Lucas. I'm Andrew,' the man said. He nodded at the robot. 'I see you've gotten to meet it already.'

'Yeah, I was just about to offer him a drink before remembering he'd probably go a bit haywire.'

Andrew laughed. Alpha also laughed, except his sounded a lot faker, like he was programmed to laugh whenever someone else laughed. 'They're meant to be waterproof with cleaning and stuff, but I don't know.'

'Why is that?' I asked. 'What abo—'

'Look, I just deliver them.' He picked something out of his teeth and flicked it across the room. 'It'll probably tell you in the manual.'

Later on, when he had left and we were finished with everything outside for the day, we came back home to the hearty smell of a roast baking in the oven. Alpha had taken it upon himself to cook dinner for us, and I won't lie, it tasted pretty damn good. Even better was that we didn't have to worry about cleaning anything because Alpha had quietly done so while we ate.

The next morning, I woke up and got ready to head out and move the boys into a different paddock for them to have more grass to graze on. Although when I walked through the kitchen, Alpha was standing still and grinning, expecting me. There was a coffee on the bench with a plate of eggs and bacon.

'You have to eat before you work,' Alpha said, gesturing to a chair. 'Breakfast starts your day off on the right foot.'

I sat down and let Alpha serve the food to me before he returned to the kitchen to pack away the already cleaned frying pan. Oh yeah, I could get used to this.

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One coffee. That's all that was needed to make Alpha go completely batshit insane. One coffee and he lost his mind. One coffee and he destroyed my life.

The morning had started out as many of the others did. Alpha had been with us for nearly a year, and the year had gone easier than any other one we had. Our alpacas were healthy, our business had seen a good amount of profits, and Alpha had made home life a breeze. The only thing that did seem to go south was my relationship with Tabby.

We had talked about kids in the past, but that was always a future thing. Having Alpha meant that a family could actually become a possibility for us. Or so we thought. No matter how hard we tried though, a baby just would not come. We'd been trying for a couple of months. The only thing that did come was anger and frustration that began manifesting between us.

Tabby had bumped me while I was taking a sip of coffee, and I spilt it all down my front. That's all it took. It wasn't even the fact I was covered in burning coffee as much as it was that she hadn't said anything. She just kept walking.

'Are you fucking kidding me?' I said, making her stop and turn.

'What?'

'What do you mean what? You just bumped me and now I'm covered in burning coffee!'

'So?' she shrugged, throwing me a rag. 'Clean it up and change your shirt then.'

'I can clean it!' Alpha said as he walked into the room. His voice had that fake emotion in it. It was never real. A robot couldn't show real emotion. What a fucking joke. 'I am happy to cle—'

'Alpha, shut up!' I yelled at him. He took a step back and tilted his head at me like he always did. His mouth dropped open in a mock gasp except he didn't close his mouth. He just looked like a stunned fish.

'Don't take out your shitty mood on him,' Tabby said. 'It's not his fault you're clumsy. Leave him alone.'

I know it was a stupid thing to do. God, it was the stupidest thing I'd ever done because he was a damn robot, but in that moment of being completely irrational, the concern that Tabby had for Alpha had outweighed the missing concern for me and I snapped.

'Every single time something happens around here, it's my fault. It's never anyone else's fault – not his or yours, just mine. Poor, old Lucas being a clumsy motherfucker as usual. I've had it, Tabby. I've fucking had it.' The words streamed out of my mouth so fast that I barely even heard them. Tabby went to speak but I cut her off. 'No, you're going to listen to me for once. It sucks to feel like I'm second-best next to a robot that doesn't even feel emotion. It sucks that my damn alpacas pay more attention to me than my own wife does. And it sucks that I'm stuck on this farm with the both of you!'

Tabby was stunned into silence. It was like I'd hit her with a pole. With tears welling up in her eyes, she turned and walked out of the room.

The guilt hit me immediately, brewing with my anger. It was a dangerous mix, only worsened by the surrounding silence in the room. I could hear my heartbeat pounding in my ears. My face tingled as it flushed red.

'I can help you clean that up,' Alpha said quietly, his face returning to the fake-shock, mouth open wide again. I couldn't handle it anymore.

'I said shut the fuck up!' I launched my mug at him and it shattered against his face, covering him with coffee.

'Warning: system malfunction. Immediate reboot initiated.' The voice boomed from Alpha but his face didn't move. It was an automated voice.

'Whatever.' Breathing heavily, I made to leave from the room, but Alpha grabbed me by the arm and launched me across the room. I crashed into a bookshelf, the wood breaking from the impact.

I glanced up as Tabby ran back into the room. She looked at me with an incredulous face, confused as to how I had ended up smashing myself into a bookcase when Alpha grabbed her by the neck. He looked seriously angry; not that fake robot trying to pretend it had emotion. I stood up too fast and, feeling dizzy, I lost my footing and fell back to one knee.

'Alpha!' Tabby spluttered, spit spraying out of her mouth. I could see the veins in her neck pulsating, her skin tinging red from the blood rushing to her head. Her breath was a strained whistle as she struggled to get oxygen. Her arms flailed around, her hands clawing at

Alpha's, trying to wrench him off. I was scared her head would literally pop off from her shoulders.

'I said I would clean it!' Alpha screamed and launched Tabby into the kitchen. Her head banged against the edge of the counter and I heard the crunch of her skull. She fell to the floor and didn't move.

Adrenaline raced through my veins. I jumped up and ran for Alpha, tackling him into the wall. A sharp pain jolted down my arm as my shoulder slammed into his abdomen and then into whatever metal framing was underneath the skin. I leaned back, and Alpha was glaring at me. I could've sworn his eyes had turned red. He reached for me before his eyes went blank. His arms fell limply to his sides and his head nodded, eyes closing. He emitted a faint hum.

I crawled over to her on one arm. Blood was pooling around her head and her chest wasn't moving. I lifted her head gently and rested it against my thigh. Warm blood began to seep through my pants, but I didn't care. I breathed hard and fast, squeezing my eyes shut. Hot tears streamed down my face. I kissed her on the head and rocked her back and forth. I couldn't think straight, and my head was spinning.

I sat in silence for hours. It wasn't until the sun had started setting that I moved. The babies had been bleating since midday. They needed to eat otherwise they would die too. I left Tabby and drove to the paddock, my body aching. Once the babies were fed and locked up in their shed—which took a lot longer than it usually did; they didn't trust me because I was covered in crusty, dried-up blood—I headed back.

It was dark as I rolled up to the house. The lights shone through the window, but I hadn't switched them on when I left. I jumped out of the truck and ran to the door, wincing as I tried to ignore the pain. I got to the kitchen, but there was nothing there. No Tabby. No blood. The bookshelf was still broken but nothing was on the floor.

'Tabby?' I yelled out. My heart was thumping again, and my adrenaline picked up. I ran from room to room, slamming doors open. 'Baby, where are you!'

Suddenly, I could hear water running in the laundry. I flung the door open but stopped dead in my tracks.

Alpha was folding Tabby's bloodstained clothes as he turned around. 'Hello Lucas.'