

For the Naughty Boys and Girls...

"Shame on you! What are you doing reading this filth?" The voice echoed in her ears as she put away the novel. It wasn't filth; it was good literature. She couldn't study all the time. She was top in her class. And it was Christmas vacation, for crying out loud! What did he want from her?

She knew what he wanted. He wanted her to escape. Escape their family; escape this broken, old, cheapest-rent-they-could-find house. He wanted her to escape the poverty that had clutched at their family for generations. His recommended route to do that was school. Which was why he worked an extra job just to send her to the best school they could afford. She felt guilty about being away at school so much of the year, but she couldn't deny it was nice to have all the food she could want sitting on a table three times a day. Not to mention having friends, and a boyfriend.

Jessica shouldered her backpack and headed for the basement. The boiler supplied heat for the whole building, and was the only room where she didn't shiver from time to time. The hissing and crackling of the boiler was a reassuring sound to her, and the flickering light made her smile. She sat on a wooden box, leaned back against one of the air grates, and pulled out her history book. There were some good stories in there, too. In minutes, she was engrossed in the retelling of the lives of people that had long since been dead.

"Martin, Lexis starts school next year. We have to figure this out."

"I know how old our daughter is, Georgia. And I know what our bank account looks like!"

Jessica sat up straight. Those were her parents' voices!

"Honey, I'm not trying to criticize you. I just don't know how we're going to be able to pay for both Lexis *and* Jess to go to that school and still make ends meet. You already work harder than any three men I know."

"I'll have to find a way. We can't send Jess and not Lexis."

"Maybe we should look at changing schools. If we can find one that's half the price, we can send both without costing more."

Jessica turned and pressed her ear to the grate, suddenly not wanting to risk missing a single word.

"No. I don't want them stuck here because I couldn't afford to give them a good education. I'll just have to find a way. Maybe I can get a couple of extra hours somewhere."

"Martin, even if there are extra hours out there somewhere, which there aren't, you don't have any extra hours to give. With Lexis in school, I should be able to get some work. I just worry that it won't be enough. There isn't much out there these days, especially without the right degrees."

"Which is why it is so important the girls get their education."

The conversation shifted from planning for the future to juggling the monthly bills, and Jessica tuned out into her own thoughts. Move schools? Or worse, Lexis might have to go to the local public school? If half the stories she'd heard about that place were true, she'd be better off in jail for kindergarten. Jessica closed her textbook. She would have to do something.

An hour later found her walking downtown checking windows for Help Wanted signs.

Surely stores needed extra help during the busy holiday rush. She could be that extra help. It wouldn't be much, she knew, but it would help, and each time she came home on break, she could work more. She could look for a job up at campus, too. There was a happy light in her eyes as she saw herself as the family's rescuer. How proud her dad would be of her. She was so busy enjoying her triumphant daydream, she almost missed the first sign. In the window of Indentured Robotics, Inc., was a sign that read Applicants Welcome.

She checked her hair in the window before walking in, head held high, beaming brightly. She was walking into her future as Family Rescuer. The thick, green carpet was so soft, she could imagine she were walking in freshly mown grass. She followed the light blue runner as it wound its way through the showroom, taking her past showroom robots, frozen in place around the wood-paneled room; many held baskets of flowers or carried a plastic loaf of freshly-baked bread. This, she thought, would be a wonderful place to work.

She found the manager and got his attention. She held her back straight and put on her most winning smile. The kind that made the teachers want to give her a hundred before they'd even graded an assignment.

"Hello, sir. I am inquiring about the job position."

"Job position?" The manager, taken by her smile, looked startled nonetheless. "I hope you don't mean mine!" He laughed gently, and she joined him, though she didn't think that would be a funny thing to have happen. "I don't believe we have any positions available at the moment." His moustache twitched as he smiled back at her.

"The sign in your window said 'Applicants Welcome.'"

Understanding dawned suddenly on the manager. "Oh! That's for our Indenture Program. It pays quite well, I admit, but I don't think that's what you are looking for, my dear. It's a ten year contract of full time service." He showed her a brochure. After reading the brochure, she looked with different eyes on the still robots positioned around the room. With a shudder, she continued her search.

Window after empty window began to get her down. She began going in and asking, just in case they hadn't put out a sign. Most stores had already hired their holiday help. No one had room for a kid's first job that would only last a few weeks. The elves running Santa's picture booth had no time to talk to her about getting work. They had jobs to do.

Finally, there was a sign in another window. It read "girls wanted, easy money." The building looked shabby and rundown. There was a dirty man snoring against the corner with a brown bagged bottle in his hand. The paint was peeling off the door, and there was graffiti on the wall beside it. It reminded her of home.

She took a breath, lifted her chin and braved herself to go in. It was just a job. A job her family needed her to have. The unshaven man on the couch smiled broadly as she opened the door.

"Well, hello, pretty. How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for work. Your sign said-"

"Easy money. I know; I wrote it. Turn around."

Jessica paused, momentarily confused by the odd request, but she slowly turned on her heel and stood looking away from the man. The calendar hung on the back of the door still said October, and bore a picture of a pretty witch wearing far less than she had ever seen as a

Halloween costume. She looked elsewhere. She heard him get up, walk behind her.

“Turn back around, honey.” She turned, feeling far less brave than she had on the other side of the door. “How old are you?”

“I turned sixteen in August, but I’m a hard worker and I learn fast.” She’d practiced the canned response all the way down 4th Street and halfway up Elm Avenue.

The man chuckled and shook his head. “I’m sure you are, but I can’t hire you unless you are 18. Come see me in a couple of years, and we’ll make some movies.” He pulled a crumpled five dollar bill from his pocket and pressed it into her hand. “Merry Christmas, sweetie.”

She blinked but realized that her interview was over. She wasn’t sure whether to be disappointed or relieved. She silently made her way back out to the street, and headed for home. It was dark before she made it off the streets.

Lexis was sitting at the table, finishing her dinner. Jessica was always hungry when she came home from school. She wondered if Lexis was even aware that you could leave a table and not still be hungry. Dad would already be gone. She had never really figured out when the man slept. He seemed to go from workday to workday, stopping at home to shower and kiss his family hello and goodbye.

She found her mother sitting on her bed, crying.

“Mom?”

She gasped and turned around, wiping the tears from her eyes. “Jess. Where have you been?”

Suddenly, for some reason, Jessica felt embarrassed. She wasn’t used to seeing her parents cry. “I, uhm, I was looking for work. I figured I could get a job while I’m home for the holidays, and then maybe a part time something at school. I know it wouldn’t be much, but I figured if I could help at all...” She trailed off as her mother’s tears flowed openly again. Jessica fell into her mother’s open arms and hugged back tightly. “But I didn’t find anything. No one wants to hire me such a short time.” She held out the five dollar bill. “One guy gave me some money, even though he couldn’t hire me. It’s not much, but...”

Her mother cried openly for several moments, holding Jessica close. Finally, she held her out at arms length, and wiped her tears on her sleeve.

“You are the most amazing daughter. What made you go do this?”

“I heard you and Dad talking about money. I wanted to help, so Lexis could go to a good school. Is that what you were crying about?”

Her mother’s eyes teared up again as she shook her head.

“Don’t say anything to your father; he doesn’t know yet.” She took a deep, shuddering breath and closed her red eyes. “I’m pregnant.” Speaking it aloud seemed to have been too much for her. She collapsed on the bed, face down, soaking the comforter with her tears.

Jessica rubbed her back for a few minutes, letting the news soak in. This wasn’t supposed to be bad news. Her mother cried herself to sleep and Jessica went to her own room.

She sat down at the old wooden desk in her room. Her father had found it, broken, on the side of the road one Christmas a few years ago. He’d brought it home and fixed it up as one of Jessica’s few Christmas presents they’d ever been able to afford to give her. Neatly on one side was the stationary her boyfriend had given her this year, with stamps included, so she could write him.

She pulled the folded brochure out of her pocket and opened it out on the desk. Contract prices varied according to levels of skill and experience, but started at a number that made Jessica's head swim. It added up to a decent salary over a ten year period, but paid all at once. It seemed like a treasure. Based on the conversations she had overheard, it would equal perhaps fifteen years worth of her father's earnings. Enough to pay for all of Lexis's school years, with more left over for their new little brother or sister. Her body would be cryogenically frozen, and her mind placed into the robot body. She wouldn't even age physically.

She wiped a tear from her eye and pulled a sheet of stationery from her package.

Dear Mom & Dad,

I love you very much. I'm doing this for all of us...