



## AN ADVENTURE IN BABYSITTING

*An Action Figures short story*

By

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For the benefit of those who may have come in late...

My name's Carrie Hauser. I live in the seaside town of Kingsport, Massachusetts with my mom and grandfather, I'm coming up on my sixteenth birthday (woo!), and I am the proud owner of crazy powerful alien weapons given to me by a dying extraterrestrial.

Mind blown yet? Hey, I'm just getting started.

When I'm not engaged in normal teenager behavior (school, hanging out with friends, *et cetera*), I'm a super-hero by the name of Lightstorm, of the teen super-team known as the Hero Squad. Yes, I know, our team name sucks. You can thank my friend Matt for naming us. The kid thinks his super-hero name, Captain Trenchcoat, is the height of cleverness, so, yeah.

I'm not alone in my shame of our team identity; my friends Sara, Stuart, Missy – Psyche, Superbeast, and Kunoichi, respectively – and I have our own little support group going. Hi, I'm Lightstorm, and I belong to a super-team with a stupid name (hi, Lightstorm).

We've only been at the super-hero thing for a few months, but they've been highly eventful months. We've fought ginormous armored battlesuits under the control of a sentient artificial intelligence, a super-powered mercenary and his cadre of thematically

matching goons, insane sorcerers, honest-to-God demons, and — not to brag — I personally saved Boston from getting blown up by a small nuke. Kind of a shame I can't put all that on my college applications as a community service credit. That'd go over way better than cleaning up parks or volunteering at a soup kitchen.

Anyway...

Today is a non-super-hero day, and we're spending our Monday afternoon at a corner table in the Coffee Experience, home of the finest overpriced caffeine in town. Normally, we'd be gaming at someone's home, but we're all feeling a keen need to get away from our families. In my case, I need to get away from Mom and her new boyfriend. I mean, he seems okay, but Mom and Dad have been separated all of six months; I am so not ready to see Mom with someone else. It stirs in me red-hot girlrage.

Speaking of rage, it looks like Sara's getting ready to serve up a fresh order now. Let's watch.

"I'm going to tap four of my forests to turn these other four forests into one-one creatures," Sara says. "Now I'm going to tap these five forests to add a three-three bonus and trample to my four forest creatures, and to all my elves. Now, Matt, I am going to crush you like a horde of crazed shoppers at a mall on Black Friday."

Matt checks his cards. He has on the table two rinky-dink goblins; several mountains, all of which have been tapped; and one lonely card in his hand.

"Tell me what I want to hear," Sara says, grinning.

"You suck so much," Matt says, laying his un-played card on the table, facedown, in silent surrender.

"Dude, that deck is hardcore," Stuart says. "I thought your zombie deck was a pain in the ass..."

"I like to think I can destroy you all in any color of the *Magic: The Gathering* rainbow."

"I hope a killer deck is the only reason I'm losing so bad," Matt says, and that totally uncalled-for low blow takes all the wind out of Sara's sails.

"You think I'm using my powers?"

"All I'm saying is, you always seemed to know what I was going to do."

"I'm not cheating, you big jerk, and I don't need to read your mind to predict what you're going to do," Sara says. "Your strategy is always the same: get your cheap creatures out fast, attack in the early rounds while we're defenseless, hope you can wear us down before we can get our good cards out, then trot out your big gun creatures so they can finish us off unopposed."

"That is *not* what I —" Matt says, but we cut him off with a well-orchestrated yet totally unrehearsed group groan.

"Matt, that's *exactly* how you play," I say. "I picked up on your strategy after, like, three games."

"You've been playing that way since we were kids, man," Stuart says.

"Oh, yeah? If I'm so predictable, why aren't the rest of you beating me all the time?" Matt says.

"Because Sara makes wicked obnoxious decks that totally smoke us before we

can get our good cards out," Missy says, "and then she goes after you and by that point I don't care if I win anymore because you're entertaining when you lose."

"I'm so happy my misery brings you such joy."

"What kind of friends would we be if we didn't mock your pain?" Stuarts says.

"Yeah, okay, fair point," Matt says, pushing away from the table. "I'm getting a refill. Anyone need their drinks freshened? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? Bueller?"

"You buying?" I say.

"Pft. No."

"Then I'm good." No one else takes Matt up on his offer, which I suspect is nothing but an excuse to go flirt with Jill, Coffee E's crack barista and resident hottie. She plays along, as always — not because she's remotely interested in a guy ten years her junior but because it boosts her tip. She's no fool. Matt by his lonesome has probably paid off half her student loans.

"Carrie, your phone's going off," Missy says.

"I don't hear anything," I say. I reach into my jacket, and sure enough, my phone, which I'd put on silent mode (because I'm respectful of my fellow customers) is vibrating away. I tend to forget how sharp Missy's hearing is.

It's actually easy to forget how very not normal all my friends are. Sara is my introverted best friend, not a telepath-slash-telekinetic. Missy is an adorable motor-mouthed Muppet in human form, not a mini-ninja. Stuart is an easy-going old-school metalhead and certainly isn't capable of bench-pressing an SUV. And Matt...okay, I would never consider Matt normal, even if he didn't own a pair of magic gloves.

Anyway, phone call. The screen says DR Q. "Huh. It's Dr. Quentin."

"Doc Quantum?" Sara says, lowering her voice. "Why would she be calling?"

Dr. Gwendolyn Quentin, better known to the world at large as Doc Quantum, is one of the most intelligent people in the world — possibly *the* most intelligent person in the world. She's also the leader of the Quantum Quintet, one of the nation's top super-teams, and one of several local super-heroes who have my cell phone number.

Have I mentioned I live a strange life?

"Knowing my luck, she wants to experiment on me some more," I say, recalling (not at all fondly) my last visit to the Quantum Compound when Dr. Quentin spent a good hour poking and prodding me, hoping to learn how my powers work. "Hi, Dr. Quentin."

"Hello, Carrie," Dr. Quentin says. "Do you have any experience babysitting?"

Wow, curve ball. "Um, some, yeah. I haven't sat for anyone in a while, but I have some experience."

"Would you happen to be available next Friday evening?"

"Why? You need me to watch Farley?"

"I do. MIT is hosting an alumni fundraiser, and I'm rather obligated to attend. It would be poor form to bow out, considering they named an entire wing of a building after me."

For the record, she's not joking. Hey, it was the least MIT could do, considering she paid for its construction. Of course, that was the least Dr. Quentin could do, consid-

ering she was in charge of the lab experiment that gave her and her husband Joe their powers (and destroyed the upper two floors of the building, so, you know, full circle).

"Farley's not much for fundraising dinners, huh?"

"Farley is five years old. His tolerance for tedious philanthropic functions is equal to mine," the doc says. "I simply do not express my boredom to my fellow guests in the shrillest possible terms."

"Gotcha."

"Are you available, then?"

Well, let's see. I might be partaking in on our weekly group dinner-and-movie outing. Better yet, I might be spending the night in the company of one Mister Malcolm Forth, who has expressed an interest in spending more quality time with one Miss Caroline Hauser.

He would have to actually ask me out, though.

Sigh.

"What time should I be there?"

Due to my (ahem) extracurricular activities, I often have to lie to Mom about my whereabouts. Call me crazy, but I don't expect *Hey, Mom, I have to go risk my life fighting a super-powered whackadoo* would go over well. This time around, I got to tell her the truth — mostly. I left out the part about sitting for the Quantum Quintet's youngest member.

I know, a lie of omission is still a lie. Cut me some slack, huh?

There's a patch of woods near my house, which I use as a secret landing pad. Once I get far enough into the woods, far enough that no one can see me from the street, I slip on the high-tech headset I got from Concorde, Kingsport's hometown super-hero. At a glance, it looks like a pair of sleek, fancy sunglasses, but don't be fooled by the aesthetics: the headset patches me in to all kinds of communications systems (military, first responders, civilian, *et cetera*), comes standard with a handy GPS function, and has a transponder that identifies me to air traffic control as an authorized flyer. That last part is very important. It keeps the Air National Guard from scrambling jets to shoot me down.

No lie. It happened once.

Getting this headset was a huge deal. Concorde was less than thrilled when the Hero Squad made its public debut, and when I say "less than thrilled," I mean he chewed us out hard and did everything he could to discourage us. He hated hated *hated* that a bunch of kids were out playing super-heroes. We never learned exactly why he had such a bug up his butt, but he's since eased up on us a little, and for some reason, he's taken a particular interest in me — thus the fancy eyewear.

The headset boots up. I lay in my course to the Quantum Compound then power up. The alien thingies in my hands, through the manipulation of light and gravity, allow me to fire devastating energy blasts and fly at insane speeds — and that is only scratching the surface of my potential, according to Doc Quantum.

For now, all I need is the flying thing. If I wanted to, I could cover the sixty-odd

miles between Kingsport and Sturbridge in five minutes easy, but I choose to fly at a more leisurely one hundred fifty miles per hour.

Upon approach, I make radio contact with the compound. "Quantum Compound, this is Lightstorm. ETA two minutes."

Joe "Rockjaw" Quentin replies. "Roger that, Lightstorm. I'll meet you on the pad."

Joe is a startling sight the first time around, and I think he's the main reason the Quentins don't go in for the whole secret identity thing. He's seven feet tall, for starters, and almost as wide, and his skin is the color of desert sandstone and the texture of polished marble. I once described him as one of those Easter Island heads with a body attached. Usually, that body is not clad in a tuxedo.

"Evening, Joe," I say as I touch down. "Wow, check you out, all fancied up."

"And off-the-rack, too," he jokes.

"Well, you look very dapper."

"Thanks. Come on in." I follow Joe into the compound, into the family's common room, which boasts one of the largest TV screens in the northern hemisphere — which, at present, is filled with the hi-res mayhem of a heated first-person shooter deathmatch between Joe's towheaded twins, Kilroy "Kilowatt" Quentin and Meg "Megawatt" Quentin.

"Hey, Carrie!" Meg says over the din of simulated machine gun fire.

The greeting is more than a nicety; it's a clever distraction. Kilroy, dumb ol' teenage boy that he is, suddenly loses all interest in the game because, oh, hey, pretty girl in the room, at which point Meg blasts his avatar into pixilated red goo.

"Hey!" he protests. "No fair!"

"All's fair in love and war, Monkeywrench," Meg says, abandoning her controller to greet me properly. She's wearing an absolutely adorable vintage cocktail dress, formal yet fun.

"Would it be bad form on my part to rifle through your closet while you're out," I say, "because that dress is totally theft-worthy."

"Thanks! I found it at the vintage clothing store in town, along with the shoes," she says, beveling to show off the matching pumps. "You and Sara and Missy should come over sometime, we can have a girly day."

"Definitely."

"And how do I look?" Kilroy says, doing a little catwalk strut for me. Meg rolls her eyes on my behalf. Thanks, Meg.

"You look very nice," I say, and yes, Kilroy wears a tux quite well, but I don't want to encourage his rampant flirting — but, as I said, he's a teenage boy, so the blandest of compliments is as good as me gushing all over him. He's probably planning our wedding even now.

"Oh, good, you're here," Dr. Quentin says, and the only reason I recognize her is because she's carrying Farley. Dr. Quentin's default mode is somewhere between dowdy lab rat and hot librarian: lab coat, clunky glasses, hair up in a bun, conservative skirt, sensible shoes. Tonight, her hair is arranged in a loose updo, and she's traded the scien-

tist-mom look for a sleek strapless evening gown — black, with just a hint of sparkle.

“Now I *really* don’t want to go to this thing,” Joe says, eyeing his wife appreciatively. The twins squirm as kids are wont to do whenever their parents hint they might be human beings with natural desires.

(For the record, I do not begrudge them their reaction. In my reality, my parents are both virgins, and they made me out of Legos.)

“You be good,” Dr. Quentin says, trying (and failing) to hide a smile. “That goes for you too, my little man,” she says, depositing Farley on the floor. “Carrie is a guest in our house, so treat her appropriately.”

“Okay!” Farley says, and he dashes over to give me a big smile and hello wave. “Hi, Carrie!”

“Hi, Farley,” I say. “Ready to have a fun night?”

“Yeah!”

“Should you two feel the need to get out of the house for a little while,” Dr. Quentin says, “there’s a small ice cream shop at the bottom of the hill. Farley may have one small ice cream cone,” she says, directing this more to Farley than to me.

“One small ice cream cone,” Farley confirms.

“We should be home by eleven. I’ll call if we run late.” Dr. Quentin starts to herd her family out of the common room. “Oh, yes, there’s a panic room two floors down, accessible by stairs, elevator, and an emergency chute in that wall,” she says, pointing out a panel that looks like the door to a laundry chute.

“Oh. Okay,” I say. Panic room? “That’s in case of a super-villain attack?”

“Or if Farley has a tantrum.”

Right, I forgot: Farley has super-powers too. The twins tried to describe his powers to me once, and all I know for sure is that when Farley gets angry or frightened, something really scary happens to him — so scary it necessitates his family installing a Farley-proof panic room.

I should have asked for my money in advance.

“All right, Farley,” I say, settling in on the couch. “What would you like to do? Play a game? Read a story?”

“Read with me!” Farley races out of the room, returning a couple minutes later with (be still my heart) a well-read copy of *The Hobbit*.

“You’re my kind of kid, Farley. Come on, sit next to me.” Farley climbs up onto the couch. I do most of the reading, while Farley recites, in a more than passable British accent, Bilbo’s dialog. I don’t care if I’m not even sixteen, this kid is pushing my maternal instincts button something fierce.

We blow through the first four chapters, and then Farley says to me, with the affected thoughtfulness and gravitas only young children are capable of, “I am feeling the need to get out of the house.”

“Oh, you are, are you?”

“I am.”

“And where, pray tell, might we go?” He shrugs. “Perhaps to a certain ice cream

shop?" Yes, ice cream in February. It's a New Englander thing.

He shrugs again. "Mmmmmmmaaaaaaybe."

Real smooth, Farley. "Go get your coat."

The compound sits near the top of a large hill overlooking the town of Sturbridge. The Quentins own the entire hill, so they've thoughtfully installed a convenient concrete stairway leading all the way down to the main road. A series of overhead lights pumps out an impressive amount of heat, which means we stay nice and toasty warm. Farley, in his comically bulky winter coat, works up a light sweat during the walk.

The ice cream shop is a little mom-and-pop deal, with a take-out window and a small indoor seating area. Looks like we aren't the only ones indulging an ice cream craving this evening; the parking lot is about half-full.

We head inside, and the girl working the counter greets Farley by name. "How's my favorite guy?" she says, peering down at the boy.

"Hi, June. I'm good. This is Carrie," he says. "We're getting out of the house."

"Hi, Carrie. What can I get you two?"

The menu boasts a staggering fifty flavors of ice cream, twenty of those available in soft-serve or frozen yogurt. It's an overwhelming selection, yet I immediately zone in on mocha swirl. Mocha detection is my other super-power.

"Mocha swirl cone for me, double scoop. Farley?"

He pretends to ponder his options. "Mocha swirl cone for me," he says, "one scoop, please."

"Kid's a charmer," June says to me, and then she's off to grab our snacks.

We sit inside with our cones and talk about *The Hobbit*, which Farley has read almost as many times as I have. He definitely inherited his mom's brains because he remembers *everything* about the story: he can name all twelve of the dwarves, knows *The Song of the Lonely Mountain* by heart, knows every riddle Bilbo trades with Gollum. I don't think I've ever had a more engaging discussion about *The Hobbit* with anyone except my dad. It's a perfectly delightful little outing.

...So, of course, some ass has to go and ruin it by crash-landing in the middle of the parking lot.

When things like this happen, people react in one of two ways: they run screaming in the opposite direction, or they whip out their cell phones and start taking video. This shop's clientele is an intelligent bunch: they choose to make themselves scarce. June, with admirable aplomb, shoos everyone out through a rear exit.

"You call the police," I tell her, "I'll run up to the compound and see if I can get hold of the Quantums."

"Right," she says. I let June guide me outside, and then Farley and I get the hell out of Dodge — rather, we run far enough up the hill to make a good show of it.

"Farley, you listen to me," I say. "You run home and lock yourself in. Let me take care of this, all right?"

"Okay," Farley says. He's young, but growing up in a super-hero family means he knows exactly what's going on, so I don't have to worry about him staying out of the

way.

I slip on my headset, power up, and shoot into the sky. I swoop around, and my heart leaps into my throat when I see a monstrous mech rising from the wreckage of several cars. At first glance, it looks like a Thrasher – a flight-capable battlesuit powered by nuclear micro-cells, armed with high-velocity railguns, and armored like a tank. I've gone toe-to-toe with them before. They're no fun.

Once I get a better look, I realize it's not a Thrasher but some second-rate, low-budget cousin. It looks like it's been cobbled together from scavenged parts; I swear its chest plate is the hood from a school bus. There are exposed hydraulics and crude welds and, no lie, pump-action shotguns bolted to its arms. It's a Transformer filtered through Larry the Cable Guy. I'd laugh if it hadn't just caused several thousand dollars in damage simply by landing.

The mech sways on wobbly legs, its hydraulics hissing like an old radiator. The man inside, his head encased in a football helmet and surrounded by a dented roll cage of thick steel pipes, swears under his breath.

"Excuse me! You, in the suit!" I shout. The pilot's eyes pop when he sees me. "Hi. Could you do me a favor and deactivate your, uh...this thing, before you cause any more damage?"

"I didn't do anything wrong!" the man says. "And you're not a cop, so you can't arrest me!"

What the huh? Okay, the guy is on edge, but I suppose that's understandable, what with the crash landing and all.

"I didn't plan to arrest you, sir," I say in my most soothing tone. This is what police call de-escalation, an effort to put a jittery suspect at ease so he doesn't do something stupid and potentially harmful, to himself or others. "I do want you to power down your suit, though. I don't want anyone getting hurt here."

He eyes me, more than a little suspiciously. "I don't want to go to jail," he says. Nervous sweat rolls out from beneath his helmet.

"Then I think you should deactivate your suit and come on out. I'm thinking this was some sort of accident, yeah?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I didn't – the fuel mixture in the rockets – I didn't think..."

Oh, no kidding. "It's all right. No one got hurt, and that's the important thing, right?"

He nods. Okay, Carrie, he's calming down. Seal the deal, get him out of the suit before –

A trio of police cruisers screams into the parking lot. The cars skid to a halt, and the drivers jump out. Please, *please* do not pull your guns and scream at the guy.

"DOWN ON THE GROUND! NOW!"

Well, crap.

Whatever Zen we'd established goes right out the window. Mech-man swings his suit around to unload his shotguns on the cruisers. The cops dive for cover. Windshields shatter. Tires blow out.

A headshot would take him out fast, but that would require a degree of control

over my powers I don't have yet; I'm more likely to blast his head clean off his neck, and one thing I am not is a killer. I go for the legs instead, hoping to take out a knee joint.

Have I mentioned that my aim is not spectacular?

My blast goes a little high, connecting with the mech's thigh. It reels from the impact. Some kind of reddish fluid spurts from the limb, but it doesn't go down. Worse, it reminds the pilot I'm still here; the mech pivots to face me again.

When I'm powered up, I generate an aura that is solid enough protection against energy-based attacks, but I have no clue whether it could stand up to buckshot. Rather than find out the hard way, I zip around behind the mech, easily avoiding his shot. I blast him in the back — nice, wide target that it is — and the mech stumbles, throwing its hands out to catch itself. Some poor dope's SUV cushions its fall.

Aesthetically, the thing looks like a lumbering hulk, clumsy and slow. In reality, it's clumsy and fast; the mech whips around, hurling the SUV at me. I fire instinctively, expecting to deflect the makeshift missile.

Instead, I blow up the gas tank. *D'oh.*

It's not a big, flamey Hollywood explosion. It's more like a giant camera flash going off, bright and quick, but the fact remains: a gas tank exploded in my face. The fireball cascades over me harmlessly (thank you, glowy aura), but the noise and the shockwave rattle my teeth. I spiral out of the air and land hard on the roof of a minivan.

I roll onto my back to see a blurry gray mass stomping my way. I'm too dizzy to properly take aim. My best bet — my *only* bet is to fire wide and pray I nail him.

"HEY!"

Oh, God, no.

The mech stops, turns. My vision clears enough to make out a small object standing at the far edge of the parking lot, bundled up like Ralphie's little brother in *A Christmas Story*. I yell at Farley, tell him to run, to get away, but instead, he charges the mech.

When I first met the Quantum Quintet, Meg and Kilroy introduced Farley to me as Final Boss. I never got the connection between adorable little Farley and the nickname, which refers to the biggest, ugliest, nastiest monster at the end of a video game.

I get it now. Oh, boy, do I get it.

With each step, Farley doubles in size. He rips out of his clothing as his skin turns into scaly armor, like a crocodile's hide. Claws like butcher knives spring from his fingers, and horns, curled like a ram's, sprout from a head that no longer bears any resemblance to anything human. He roars, revealing a mouthful of jagged fangs, and I swear I can hear Mr. Mech losing control of his every bodily function. I can't blame him.

The transformation complete, Final Boss plows into the mech with the force of an avalanche, lifting the machine off its feet before body-slammng it into the asphalt, cratering the thing. It's not getting back up any time this decade.

I stand up on the minivan as Final Boss faces me, his blood-red eyes level with mine. I now understand why the Quentins have a panic room in their house. I wish I was there.

“Farley?” I squeak.

He — it — he glances back at the mech then flashes a monstrous grin.

“Smooched him good,” Final Boss says, his voice the deep rumble of an approaching thunderstorm.

“Yeah, buddy,” I say, “you smooched him real good.”

*Real* good; it took paramedics, armed with hydraulic cutters and the Jaws of Life, an hour and a half to extricate the man from his suit. He was a mess, but he’ll live to see his arraignment as well as the countless civil lawsuits that will no doubt be filed against him.

As it turns out, our troublemaker is a local resident well-known to police — although it wouldn’t quite be accurate to call him a criminal (well, until today). Marvin Belcher, owner of Belcher’s Scrap Yard and Used Auto Parts, likes to spend his spare time making experimental vehicles, everything from rocket-powered roller skates to motorized barstools (I swear, I am not making that up) to personal hovercrafts powered by lawnmower engines. Sturbridge police regularly catch him testing his unlicensed creations on public roads, which typically results in the confiscation of his latest toy and maybe a citation for some minor motor vehicle violations.

He won’t get off that easy this time around and not just because of the rampant destruction of public property; during the extraction, the first responders discovered the suit’s power source: a pair of nuclear micro-cells. They’re strictly regulated by the federal government (because, duh, *nuclear*), which means there is no way an average guy like Marvin could get his hands on them legally. He’s in neck-deep doo-doo, as is whoever was stupid enough to sell that kind of tech to a civilian for use in his giant robo-suit.

That, however, is a mystery for another time and not my most immediate concern because there’s a naked little boy sitting in the back of a police cruiser I need to get home.

I don’t think the Quentins are going to ask me to babysit again.

The Quentins return, as promised, at eleven on the nose, and the first words out of Dr. Quentin’s mouth are, “Carrie, do you know what happened at the ice cream shop?”

I slide out from underneath Farley, who fell asleep in my lap as Bilbo and the dwarves arrived in Lake-town in their barrels. There’s no sense in trying to cover it up, so I lay out the sequence of events in detail then brace for the fallout.

The conversation does not go as I expected. “You mean Farley didn’t try to eat you?” Kilroy says.

“Eat me?” I say.

“Kilroy. Farley has never eaten anyone,” Dr. Quentin says. “My son is not a cannibal.”

“What about that one time he —?” Kilroy begins.

“You know bloody well Farley only bit him...and he spit him right back out.”

They're messing with me. They have to be.

"As long as both of you are okay," Joe says, moving past me to scoop Farley up in his hands. The boy never stirs. "Why don't you settle up with Carrie, hon, I'll get Farley to bed."

"I think bedtime is in order all around," Dr. Quentin says. Taking the hint, Kilroy and Meg wish me goodnight and shuffle off to bed.

"G'night, Carrie," Joe says on his way out. "Thanks for everything."

"Yes, thank you, Carrie, we appreciate your time – as do the police, I'm sure," Dr. Quentin says. "Would a check be all right? Or do you use PayPal?"

"Uh, check's fine," I say. Dr. Quentin fishes her checkbook out of her purse. I know I'm tempting fate by asking, but, "You're not upset about what happened to-night?"

"Why would I be upset? It was hardly your fault some imbecile nearly destroyed the ice cream shop with his experimental battlesuit," she says with a complete lack of interest, as though such things were normal, everyday occurrences...which, in our world, I suppose they are. "If I'm to reprimand anyone, it will be Farley. You told him to go home, he disobeyed you..."

"Don't be too hard on him. He did save my butt, after all."

"Nevertheless, he will be spoken to. Children need to know that rules cannot be broken without consequences, regardless of whatever noble intentions drove their decision." She rips off a check and hands it to me. "Again, thank you for caring for Farley this evening. I hope I can call on you again in the future."

"Absolutely. Farley was a total delight. Maybe next time we can get through the rest of *The Hobbit*."

"Oh, he had you read *The Hobbit* with him? He *does* like you," Dr. Quentin says. "Normally he makes his babysitters read *The Silmarillion*."

She *has* to be messing with me.

Dr. Quentin escorts me out to the landing pad. I lift off, and for the return trip, I decide to break the sound barrier a few times over in the name of getting home quickly. The evening's catching up to me, and I want nothing more than to crawl into bed.

Mom is still up when I get home. She asks me how things went. I gloss over ninety percent of the night and simply tell her things went very well. You know what the funny part is? I really have had worse babysitting jobs.

I trudge up to my room, the last of my energy draining out of me, and I fish my check out of my pocket. Maybe I'll treat myself to something – you know, a just reward for surviving the night. There's that Bruce Springsteen import box set I've had my eye on for a while...

I finally look at the check. Holy crap.

Screw the box set. I'm hiring Bruce to play at my birthday party.